

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Cultural Representation in the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide

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Abstract

*In today's visual society, tourism discourse significantly impacts the perception of cultures, identities, and destinations. This research considers cultural representation of Japan through multimodal resources in the **National Geographic Japan Travel Guide**. The study uses qualitative methodology in order to investigate a set of 15 images including both visual and textual components within the theoretical concept of Visual Grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). This paper investigates representational, interpersonal, and compositional visual meta functions, along with other aspects of multimodality such as color semantics, framing, gaze, modality, image-text relationships, and viewer positioning. It is found that the travel guide provides an accurate cultural representation of Japan as a harmonious and tranquil destination, rich in culture, traditions, and aesthetics. Through the usage of natural scenery, historic buildings, cultural symbols, and emotionally captivating visuals, the brochure provides a representation of Japan as an experience rather than just as a location. Moreover, the analysis showed that viewers are positioned as spectators and encouraged to experience Japanese culture through an ideal tourist gaze. While the guide emphasizes heritage, spirituality, and authenticity, it at the same time neglects certain elements of current social complexity, urban diversity, and reality of daily life in Japan. This research adds to the field of multimodal discourse analysis and tourism discourse studies by showing how visual and linguistic means combine to create cultural meaning. The research shows that media representations of travel do not just depict locations but rather take part in their construction.*

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Tourism Discourse; Cultural Representation; Visual Grammar; National Geographic; Japan; Semiotics

Introduction

The modern globalized and visualized world requires more forms of communication than simply written or spoken language. Today, such elements as images, colors, space organization, typography, etc., have gained an additional role in meaning making. The significance of MDA (Multimodal Discourse Analysis) is increased by such a transformation since MDA explores how multiple semiotic modes interact in order to produce various meanings, social identities, and ideologies. The sphere of tourism discourse may be referred to as one of the most significant spheres when it comes to multimodal communication as tourism discourse is one of the means through which the world around us gets its meanings. Tourism guides, brochures, and websites do

not only provide information but also create a certain perspective on places and cultures of different countries. Thus, tourism texts should be considered as ideological multimodal products. One of the numerous types of tourism media that affects global perceptions of cultures and landscapes is National Geographic. The Japan Travel Guide by National Geographic introduces Japan to its readers through various visual and textual sources of information such as the pictures of cultural landmarks, landscapes, foods, buildings, and ways of life in Japan. Japan is not merely described in this book as a geographical location, but it also has a constructed cultural interpretation of its identity, history, and experience. The current study will focus on the multimodal representation of Japan in the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide. The investigation is based on the principles of the Visual Grammar methodology developed by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), which considers three main aspects of meaning-making in visuals. Namely, these include the representation, interpersonal, and compositional dimensions of meaning making in visuals.

A great deal of significance of multimodal discourse analysis can be found in Japan since it involves the collision of conflicting concepts within the framework of global representation of this country, including tradition and modernity, spirituality and technology, authenticity and tourism consumption. Travel media tends to select some parts of Japanese culture and create an image which is memorable for foreign spectators.

However, the representation of one's culture might overlook some parts of it, thus presenting only one identity of the country. The main goal of this research paper is to investigate how the selection of visuals and texts creates a particular image of Japan. In other words, the research is intended to examine the role of tourism media in constructing cultural meanings and identities.

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze how multimodal elements including images, colors, text, layout, and composition are used to construct cultural representations of Japan in the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide.
2. To examine the narrative and conceptual meanings embedded in the selected images and how they influence viewers' perceptions of Japan as a tourist destination.
3. To explore how visual and textual elements position readers as potential tourists, observers, or participants in the experiences represented in the travel guide.

Research Questions:

1. How are multimodal elements including images, colors, text, layout, and composition used to construct cultural representations of Japan in the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide?
2. What narrative and conceptual meanings are embedded in the selected images, and how do they influence viewers' perceptions of Japan as a tourist destination?
3. How do visual and textual elements position readers as potential tourists, observers, or participants in the experiences represented in the travel guide?

Literature Review

Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Visual Meaning

The predominance of visual communication has led to the broadening of discourse analysis to include non-verbal communication. Multimodal Discourse Analysis involves the examination of various semiotic resources such as images, colors, typography, layout, and spatial configurations as ways in which meaning is constructed. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), Visual Grammar involves the construction of meaning through three meta functions. The representational meta function involves the study of how people, places, and things are represented in the images. Interpersonal meta function entails the examination of the interplay between the image and the viewer through means such as gaze, distance, and perspective. On the other hand, the compositional meta function concerns itself with how the visual elements are organized in order to construct meaning and create emphasis. Visual Grammar has proved to be a valuable tool in the analysis of how the social realities are constructed in images and how they are laden with ideological meaning.

Tourism Discourse and Cultural Representation

The tourism discourse is a very effective communicative practice that constructs destinations and cultures in people's imagination. As Dann (1996) notes, "tourism language and representation do not only depict but also construct certain imaginations of the destination." In the same way, Jaworski & Pritchard (2005) stress that "tourism texts are cultural narratives in which destinations become experiences for tourists from around the world. Brochures and tourist guides use selective representation quite often. Thus, beautiful landscapes and traditions are represented, whereas complex realities of social life are not considered. According to Thurlow and Jaworski (2010), tourism discourse represents unique, authentic and exotic places through selective representation.

Image-Text Interaction in Tourism Media

The relation between visuals and the text is vital in tourism discourse. According to Barthes (1977), the image is open to various interpretations, whereas text accompanying it helps define its limits. In the realm of travel, captions, headlines, and descriptions direct interpretation of the image. Also Bateman (2014) points out that the structure, typeface, and arrangement of multimodal texts affect their reading process. Therefore, meaning in the context of tourism brochures appears not as a result of images or words but of their interrelation.

Gaze, Framing, and Viewer Positioning

Visual elements like gaze, camera angles, distances, and framing are significant for establishing the relationship between the audience and the subject being represented. As Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) put it, direct gaze establishes the demand relationship, while indirect gaze establishes the offer relationship in which viewers watch without engaging directly. Visual techniques of this kind are very important in tourism discourse in that they make the audience tourists or cultural observers. In the process of framing and composition, the media of tourism decides what is going to be seen and made meaningful. Thus, visual representation entails inclusion and exclusion.

Color Semiotics and Emotional Appeal

Color is an important component in terms of emotional and cultural significations in the visual text. According to Machin (2007), "visual features such as color, form and composition have social and ideological meanings." In tourism-related images, color is often employed to produce certain atmospheres like tranquility, aesthetic quality, authenticity, and culture.

The use of natural colors and well-balanced compositions could help bring about certain emotions in the viewer.

Cultural Representation and Ideology

Representation is an inherently biased process. According to Hall (1997), the media does not just mirror reality but rather plays an active role in creating meanings related to people and places. In the same way, the idea of Orientalism, put forward by Said (1978), demonstrates how representation of Eastern cultures in Western media could have some features such as mystery, tradition and timelessness.

It means that one should pay attention both to what the media shows and how it represents them when examining tourism media.

Research Gap

Whereas other researchers have previously investigated the topic of tourism discourse and its multimodal representation, very little attention has been paid to the international production of travel guides with visual representation of Asian cultures. Most often, previous studies consider ads and posters, whereas rich images travel guides are somewhat less studied. The current study aims at filling this gap and analyzes National Geographic Japan Travel Guide in terms of multimodal discourse analysis. The object of analysis consists of 15 images analyzed in terms of Visual Grammar and its semiotic dimensions.

Methodology

The research methodology used for this research project is the qualitative descriptive-interpretative method using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). This type of methodology is ideal for this study because it attempts to understand how cultural meaning is produced by the interaction of visual and textual resources rather than the production of statistical patterns.

Corpus Selection

The corpus for this research comprises 15 images which have been chosen from the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide. This set of images comprises one header image along with 14 more images that showcase various aspects of Japan. These images have been chosen because they have multiple semiotic resources in them, which makes it feasible to conduct a multimodal analysis of the same. This set of images has been chosen from National Geographic because of its worldwide reputation for travel and culture.



“Japan Travel Guide; National Geographic’s latest travel stories about Japan”

Data Collection

These images have been sourced from the official travel guide on the website of National Geographic Japan. These images have been selected in their original format without any alteration or cropping of images. Along with the images, there have also been other textual elements like heading, caption and descriptions, which have also been included in the analysis.

Analytical Framework

The research uses the Visual Grammar approach of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which defines how the visual communication creates meaning using three meta functions:

Representational meta function:

This involves studying what is being represented in the image, and includes both narrative and conceptual meaning.

Interpersonal meta function:

This involves studying the interaction between the image and the audience, using such components as gaze, distance, perspective, and positioning of the viewer.

Compositional meta function:

This is concerned with how the visual components are organized using such factors as framing, salience, information value, and arrangement.

To perform a more in-depth analysis of the chosen images, other multimodal dimensions included:

- Visual and textual description
- Narrative representation
- Conceptual representation
- Modality
- Image-text-color-layout relationship
- Composition and framing
- Materiality and meaning
- Reader-to-user shift
- Sensory appeal
- Three-dimensional composition
- Representation and interaction

These analytical categories enabled a systematic examination of how the travel guide constructs cultural meanings and positions viewers in relation to Japan.

Data Analysis Procedure

All images underwent detailed analyses to uncover patterns of representation that emerged. Visual and textual components were considered in the process to establish how meaning is constructed in relation to Japanese culture and identity as well as tourism experiences. The findings were further interpreted in order to understand their ideological significance.

Findings and Discussion

Constructing Japan as a Spiritual and Traditional Destination

Some of the prominent patterns in the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide include that of Japan being portrayed as a country full of spirituality, culture, and heritage. The chosen pictures

have consistently depicted traditional architecture, places of reverence, landmarks, and natural environment to portray Japan in a manner true to its culture and authenticity.



“Japan Travel Guide; National Geographic’s latest travel stories about Japan”

The picture of Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion) presents an example of how different visual factors can form the symbolic representation of the country. Being situated among snowy trees and reflecting in still waters, this temple creates a feeling of harmony, tranquility, and eternal beauty. Following the ideas of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) of representational meta function, the picture serves as a conceptual representation, where the temple serves as a symbol of the heritage, spirituality, and artistic perfection of Japan rather than the object of tourism.

The lack of people creates an offer image, and the audience becomes a mere spectator of the cultural phenomenon. People are welcome to enjoy the culture from the respectful distance. Realistic character of photography, natural light, and textures add to the high level of modality of the experience presented in the picture.

Using gold, white, and gentle blue colors allows the picture to enhance its emotional value. Gold stands for the value and historical significance, and snow as well as nature landscapes provide the connotations of purity, serenity, and harmony. Thus, the visual construction does not only represent a place but also creates the idealized cultural story of Japan as the country of peace and spirituality.



PAID CONTENT

Your next adventure: Tokyo, Japan

≡ READ

“Your Next Adventure; Tokyo to Japan”

Likewise, the use of the Torii gate image supports the representation of Japan as the land where nature and spirituality converge. This symbol is a cultural one, representing the Shinto culture and the concept of spirituality. Symmetry and centering create a sense of harmony and stability in the image.

The phrase “Your Next Adventure” implies that the viewer becomes a participant in an adventure by engaging with the image, thus making the communication interpersonal. As a result, the viewer is positioned as a person who can visit the cultural space. Nevertheless, the indirect relationship created by the lack of people supports the idea of observation without full access to the culture. In general, these representations reflect Japan in the light of its traditional and spiritual symbols. In particular, the brochure presents a cultural and visually appealing Japan in which heritage is an important element of tourism.

Romanticization of Nature and Aesthetic Beauty

One other notable pattern that is identified in the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide is the portrayal of Japan as a place of visual beauty and emotional appeal through the depiction of nature. Nature in the form of natural landscapes, seasons, water bodies, mountains, and serene environments features prominently in all the images selected. Through this, the guide creates an ideal image of Japan as a harmonious place for human and nature coexistence.



TRAVEL

By land or by sea? Here are 2 ways to see Japan

≡ READ

“By Land or By Sea – Here Are Two Ways to See Japan”

"By Land or By Sea," the representation of two perspectives for experiencing Japan, shows how multimodal means make a narrative about exploring the place. The contrast between land and sea is a separation of two alternative travel possibilities of the viewer. The train symbolizes dynamism, connection, and development of infrastructure, while the sea implies freedom and calmness. Through the compositional meta function, the balance in presentation of both parts makes the viewer realize the equal value of travel experiences. Not being presented with only one identity of the country, the picture offers an amalgamation of technological progress and natural scenery. Nevertheless, both aspects are presented in a very controlled manner within the frame of appealing touristic context, where travel is seen as an enjoyable activity. The natural palette of colors, including shades of green and blue, helps to build the emotion of the image. As Machin (2007) states, colors have a role of semiotic resources, shaping interpretation. Here, the chosen colors create emotions of relaxation, authenticity. The realistic approach of photography helps to emphasize modality of the picture.

The aesthetic effect of the depiction of these visuals helps to engage the viewer further. Depiction of water, light, seasonality, and open spaces allows viewers to mentally feel the ambiance of the site. This is not just about viewing Japan, but also about feeling Japan with the help of one's imagination.

Thus, the depiction of nature in this travel guide becomes an element of the process of constructing Japan as a place of beauty and peace, a place of escape from everyday reality. While this depiction makes Japan more attractive for tourists, it also shows the selective character of the tourism discourse.

Tourist Gaze and Viewer Positioning: From Observer to Potential Traveler

An important aspect of this study is the relationship established between the viewer and the destination through the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide. The brochure makes use of visual elements including the gaze, the distance, the camera angles, and the composition of images to place the viewer in an observing role rather than that of a participant to imagining themselves as future travelers.



TRAVEL

8 family-friendly things to do in Tokyo

≡ READ

“8 Family Friendly Things to Do in Tokyo”

In accordance with the interpersonal meta function suggested by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), visual communication develops relationships between the subjects represented and the viewer. In the images under analysis, the absence of people results in the formation of the offer relationship, when the viewer is invited to observe the represented cultural spaces instead of engaging with them. Medium and long-distance shots enable viewers to feel the magnitude and the beauty of the Japanese landscapes and cultural sites and stay outside observers. The images do not show usual human communication but represent places, objects and symbols that make Japan a kind of aesthetic object. Nevertheless, the textual elements tend to move the viewer from the role of a passive observer to that of the future traveler. The slogans such as “Your Next Adventure” and “Here Are Two Ways to See Japan” involve the audience. Using the second person pronoun, the brochure makes its readers visualize themselves traveling through these places. This transition from ‘reader’ to ‘user’ can be understood through the inherently persuasive character of the language of tourism. It does not merely give information on Japan but it constructs the desire of participation in the experience being constructed. Moreover, this positioning of the viewers can be seen as indicating the inherent tourist gaze. This allows the viewers to appreciate certain elements of Japanese culture that include beauty, tradition and harmony. Although this constructs an ideal image of Japan, at the same time this indicates the process of selecting perspectives through tourism representation.

Selective Representation and Cultural Ideology

Even though the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide portrays Japan through its positive and attractive portrayals, there is also the aspect of selecting certain elements in tourism media that is shown by this analysis. There are certain cultural elements that stand out through the images while other aspects of Japanese society are left out. Through this, it becomes clear that tourism media constructs reality as opposed to merely representing reality.



TRAVEL

Don't leave Tokyo without these must-do experiences

≡ READ

“Don't leave Tokyo without these must-do experiences”

The brochure highlights traditional architecture, historic places, natural scenery, food, and cultural traditions. Together these factors create the image of Japan as a peaceful, genuine, sophisticated, and associated with heritage country. Nevertheless, modern cities, social diversity, complexity of technologies, and Japanese people's daily routines are not paid much attention to. The idea behind such representations can be explained using the idea by Hall (1997) of representation which claims that mass media creates meaning, rather than reproduces already existing reality. In other words, the Japan portrayed in the brochure becomes a carefully constructed story about culture which is created by means of selection of particular images, texts, and composition of visuals.

In addition, the theory of Orientalism by Said (1978) gives an interesting framework for analysis of the way Eastern cultures are sometimes depicted using certain concepts related to tradition, beauty, and eternity. In this particular case, Japan is presented positively, however, it might become a simplified version of the identity of Japanese people.

These multimodal means employed in the brochure help to achieve this idealized representation. For example, high modality photos, well-balanced images, soft illumination, and selected colors enhance the realism of the represented image thus increasing the persuasion effect produced by the guide. In this way, the idealized picture of Japan presented in the travel guide looks real and coherent. Accordingly, the results prove that tourism media is a culturally meaning-making mechanism. The National Geographic Japan Travel Guide is not just an advertisement of the destination but a particular cultural imagining of Japan aimed at global audiences. This representation is attractive and meaningful, though selective as all visual representations are.

Conclusion

In this research, construction of meanings related to Japan in terms of cultural aspects was analyzed in relation to the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide. Applying Visual Grammar approach developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the study looked into the construction of certain representations of Japan using various multimodal resources like images, text, color, composition, framing, and positioning of the viewer.

According to the results, the National Geographic Japan Travel Guide portrays Japan as a traditional and spiritual place that is characterized by its beautiful landscapes and unique cultural heritage. By using carefully chosen images of historical places, landscapes, and cultural symbols, the brochure creates an image of a peaceful country that has much to offer. Moreover, the interaction between textual and visual elements in the brochure increases this representation through certain guidelines that help readers understand the meaning behind Japanese culture. Finally, it has been established that viewers are mostly portrayed as observers who can enjoy Japanese cultural spaces from a certain distance.

However, the analysis shows that there is always selection involved in the representation of tourism. While the brochure gives a very positive and respectful account of Japan, it tends to focus on some features of Japanese culture while leaving behind others, which include issues of present-day socio-cultural conditions, urban complexity, and diversity. This shows how the representation of places in tourism media involves construction of the cultural narrative through multimodality. In using a multimodal discourse approach for the analysis of travel media, this study makes its contribution to the knowledge of how visual discourse influences global views about places and identities. The importance of developing visual literacy in an increasingly image-dominated world becomes obvious in the context of the research.

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