

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Overtourism Narratives in English Travel Journalism

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines how overtourism is discursively constructed in English-language travel journalism. Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research investigates the linguistic and rhetorical strategies used to represent overtourism, tourism actors, and affected communities. Specifically, it analyzes discursive features such as lexical choices, representations of agency, evaluative language, modality, and ideological positioning that shape readers' perceptions of overtourism. Employing a qualitative descriptive methodology, the study draws on a corpus of travel journalism articles addressing overtourism published in international media outlets. The findings reveal that overtourism is predominantly framed as a global and systemic phenomenon through neutralized agency, passive constructions, and expert-oriented voices. Tourists are discursively positioned in ambiguous roles, portrayed simultaneously as contributors to and victims of overtourism. These strategies produce a balanced yet depersonalized narrative that foregrounds sustainability, responsibility, and policy-oriented solutions. The study contributes theoretically to discourse studies and offers practical implications for tourism communication and English language pedagogy, particularly in the areas of critical reading and media literacy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

International tourism has returned to near pre-pandemic intensity, with global arrivals reaching an estimated 1.4 billion in 2024 (virtual recovery at 99% of 2019 levels) (UN Tourism, 2025). This rebound has renewed pressure on popular destinations and reactivated debates about how tourism growth is governed, justified, and narrated. In this context, overtourism is commonly understood as a condition in which tourism intensity generates costs social, environmental, cultural, and infrastructural that begin to outweigh benefits for residents and visitors. Recent syntheses show that overtourism has evolved into a multi-scalar governance problem, shaped by uneven mobility, urban policy choices, and market logics rather than by visitor volume alone (Back et al., 2025; Chaney & Séraphin, 2023; Santos-Rojo et al., 2023).

While overtourism is often discussed as an economic or planning issue, it is also a discursive phenomenon: the way the problem is named, explained, and moralised influences which actors are seen as responsible and which interventions appear legitimate. Studies mapping overtourism scholarship note that public awareness of the concept has been strongly mediated through communication channels, including news

and travel media, before becoming consolidated in academic agendas (Santos-Rojo et al., 2023). Consequently, investigating the language of overtourism is not merely a stylistic exercise; it is a means to identify how power relations and ideologies become “common sense” in tourism debates (Machin & Mayr, 2023).

Travel journalism is a particularly consequential site for this inquiry. Unlike promotional branding, travel journalism is commonly framed as explanatory and service-oriented, and it targets audiences who are potential travellers. Yet journalistic routines, commercial dependencies, and genre expectations can constrain criticality and normalize “solution” frames that remain compatible with industry priorities. Contemporary discussions in travel journalism emphasize the tension between inspiring travel and acknowledging its harms, including the pressure to remain upbeat and the structural incentives that discourage negative storytelling (Mercer, 2024). At the same time, travel writers increasingly face calls to integrate climate and sustainability concerns into reporting without losing the narrative appeal that makes travel journalism persuasive (Mylne, 2024).

Despite growing interest in overtourism, fewer studies focus specifically on how English-language travel journalism constructs overtourism through linguistic and rhetorical choices. This gap matters because English travel media circulates globally and can shape what readers take to be the “problem” (crowds, behaviour, governance failure, or global mobility culture), who is blamed (tourists, platforms, residents, or governments), and what kinds of solutions are presented as realistic (restrictions, pricing, quotas, or behavioural nudges) (Back et al., 2025; Chaney & Séraphin, 2023).

Accordingly, this study aimed to critically examine overtourism narratives in English travel journalism using critical discourse analysis. The analysis addressed three linked questions: (1) Drawing on tourism discourse studies that conceptualize overtourism as a *crisis-framed phenomenon* in media and policy narratives (Seraphin, Zaman, & Olver, 2021–2024), this study examines how overtourism is lexically and evaluatively represented as a condition of crisis, normalization, and inevitability in English-language travel journalism. Building on Critical Discourse Analysis, the analysis further investigates how social actors are positioned through agency patterns such as passivation, nominalization, and institutional labeling, which function to redistribute or obscure responsibility for overtourism impacts. In addition, the study explores how proposed solutions are discursively framed and which governance ideologies are implicitly endorsed, particularly through managerial and technocratic discourses that prioritize policy expertise over community participation. Methodologically, the study adopts a three-layer CDA framework that links textual features to discursive framing and broader social meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Empirically, the findings indicate that overtourism is frequently constructed as a systemic and urgent problem, while accountability is softened through grammatical choices that background agency; solutions are predominantly articulated in technocratic terms, with local communities more often positioned as affected stakeholders rather than active decision-makers.

The study contributed to tourism communication scholarship by demonstrating how journalistic discourse can simultaneously raise awareness and reproduce dominant governance assumptions, and it offers implications for critical reading and ESP/media literacy pedagogy (Ayomi et al., 2023).

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to interpret meanings, representations, and ideological tendencies rather than quantify linguistic features. CDA is used as the main analytical framework to examine how language functions within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

The data consisted of selected English-language travel journalism articles that discuss overtourism as a central theme. These articles were published in internationally recognized media outlets such as travel magazines and digital journalism platforms. The texts were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) the article explicitly addresses overtourism or excessive tourism impacts; (2) the text adopts an analytical or explanatory journalistic style rather than purely promotional content; and (3) the article targets an international English-speaking readership.

The data collection process involved close reading of the selected articles to identify relevant excerpts, sentences, and paragraphs that represent overtourism narratives. The focus was placed on sections describing causes, impacts, responsible actors, and proposed solutions. These textual segments were then compiled as qualitative data for analysis.

The analysis is guided by principles of Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly those proposed by Fairclough, which emphasize three interconnected dimensions: (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice. At the textual level, the study examines lexical choices, transitivity patterns, modality,

evaluative language, and agency representation. At the discursive level, attention is given to voice, intertextuality, and framing strategies. At the social level, the analysis interprets how discourse reflects broader ideologies related to sustainability, globalization, and tourism governance.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the texts were examined to identify recurring linguistic patterns related to overtourism representation. Second, these patterns were categorized into discursive themes such as agency, responsibility, evaluation, and solution framing. Third, the findings were interpreted critically to explain how overtourism narratives contribute to particular ideological constructions within tourism discourse.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Overtourism

The analysis reveals that overtourism is predominantly represented as a global and systemic phenomenon. Lexical items such as *crisis*, *pressure*, *strain*, and *growing concern* are frequently used to frame overtourism as an urgent yet normalized issue. This representation positions overtourism as an inevitable outcome of modern travel culture rather than the result of specific policy or corporate decisions.

Agency and Responsibility

Agency in overtourism narratives is often obscured through the use of passive constructions and nominalization. Actions such as restrictions, regulations, and environmental degradation are described without explicit agents, which minimizes direct attribution of responsibility. Tourists are commonly portrayed as collective actors, while governments and tourism industries are referenced through institutionalized terms, reducing individual accountability.

Evaluative Language and Modality

Evaluative language in the texts tends to be cautiously balanced. Modal verbs such as *may*, *could*, and *need to* are frequently employed to suggest solutions without imposing obligation. This modulation creates a tone of advisory discourse rather than directive instruction, aligning with the journalistic norm of neutrality while subtly promoting sustainable tourism ideologies.

Framing of Solutions

Proposed solutions to overtourism are framed in technocratic and managerial terms, emphasizing policies, regulations, and strategic planning. Local communities are often mentioned as affected parties but are less frequently positioned as active decision-makers. This framing reinforces top-down approaches to tourism management and marginalizes grassroots perspectives.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that English travel journalism constructs overtourism through discursive strategies that emphasize systemic causation, neutralized agency, and sustainability-oriented solutions. Through lexical choices, grammatical patterns, and evaluative language, overtourism is framed as a shared global challenge requiring collective responsibility rather than individual accountability.

The findings suggested that while travel journalism raises awareness of overtourism, it also reproduces dominant ideologies that privilege institutional voices and managerial solutions. From a pedagogical perspective, these insights highlight the importance of integrating critical reading and discourse analysis into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and media literacy education. Future research may expand the data set across different cultural contexts or compare overtourism narratives in promotional and journalistic genres to further explore ideological variation in tourism discourse.

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