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From 'It's Not Safe!' to 'Saving Tourism': A Critical Discourse Analysis of Travel in Canadian News Media During COVID-19

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Authors	McClinchey, Kelley A
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From 'It's Not Safe!' to 'Saving Tourism': A Critical Discourse Analysis of Travel in Canadian News Media During COVID-19

Introduction

The reporting of the first case of the coronavirus (Grant & Stone, 2020) began a tumultuous ride for Canadians with media narratives playing a role in impacting travel risk perception and demand (Dangerfield, 2021; Smieja, 2020; Canadian Travel and Tourism Roundtable, 2021; Reddy et al, 2021). Discourses in news media are not new (Mathieson, 2005) especially in the context of mobility and disease (McKercher & Chon, 2004; Reddy et al, 2021; Qian, Wei & Law, 2018). Because travel and the pandemic are intertwined with multiple facets involving broader social contexts, discourse analysis can assist with the processing of media narratives furthering our understanding of their role in influencing tourism demand (Qian, Wei & Law, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been used in tourism research in a wide variety of applications (Qian et al, 2018) but there has yet to be a focus on media, Canadian travel and Covid-19. This study explored the way Canadian media has framed travel during the pandemic giving a better understanding of the mediatization and politicization of Canadian tourism during this time. In so doing the study applied qualitative textual analysis in order to identify themes embedded within the socio-political context of the pandemic. Implications for Canadian tourism research as well as power dynamics between media, government and the citizens it serves were discussed.

Literature Review

Covid-19 impacts on tourism and the hospitality sector are extensively examined in tourism research and the volume of work currently exceeds that which covered previous risks to travel and mobility such as SARS, MER, H1N1 and 9/11 (Johnson Tew et al, 2008; McKercher & Chon, 2004). Travel risk, vulnerability and sustainability are important topics explored (Foo, Chin, Tan & Phuah, 2020; Hoque, Shikha, Hasanat, Arif, & Hamid, 2020; Perez-Laborda, Turrion-Prats & Fernandez-Fernandez, 2021), while other work has underscored the drastic impacts to niche- and sector-specific tourism (Dube, 2021; Nepal, 2020; Prayag, 2020; Spenceley et al, 2021; Yeh, 2021). Resiliency strategies along with calls for a re-envisioning and resetting of tourism to build back local economies are examined (Haywood, 2020; Lapointe, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Swaikoski, 2020). Although most research has covered the impacts of Covid-19, risks, responses, and recovery, less attention has been paid to the impact of media on the travel and tourism sector (Seyfi et al, 2021).

Methodology

Discourse analysis within the tourism context has grown steadily since 2011 with peaks that coincide with a more established critical turn within the discipline (Alderman & Modlin Jr, 2013; Canally & Carmichael, 2011; Caruana & Crane, 2011; Griffin, 2013; Hannam & Knox, 2005; Metro-Roland, 2009; Ong, Ryan & McIntosh, 2014; Pan, Tse & Lee, 2011; Wang & Morais, 2014; Xiang, Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2009; Yan & Santos, 2009). Geographical foci of work in Britain and Europe with a few notable applications in the Canadian context, leaves room for additional analyses (Pludwinski & Grimwood, 2021; Qian et al, 2018; Yudina & Grimwood, 2016). Newspapers, websites, travel blogs and commercials are common media applications (Caruana & Crane, 2011; Conradie, 2013; McWha, Frost & Laing, 2016; Wang & Morais, 2012, 2014) with socio-political issues being discussed within specific areas of tourism (Feughery, 2011; Heller & Pujular, 2010; Keskitalo & Schilar, 2017; Lee, Lawton & Weaver, 2013; Schweinsberg, Darcy & Cheng, 2017). As an extension to these analyses, this study emphasized Canadian online news content in order to conceptualize the discourses present within travel and tourism during Covid-19; critical discourse analysis being a practical tool in analyzing the power constructions involved in such socio-cultural activities (Fairclough, 2013; Foucault, 1972; Oswick, Keenay & Grant, 2000; Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Wait, 2005; Wylie, 2006; Yan & Santos, 2009). Textual analysis, applied here, interprets texts including words, phrases and syntax considering their wider scale socio-political formations. It is a constructivist approach that induces fluid and subjective meanings in texts (Hardy, Harley & Phillips, 2004; Qian et al, 2018). A web search using phrases such as 'Covid-19 Travel in Canadian News', 'Canadian Travel during the Pandemic' and several others brought forward more than 35 online Canadian news articles between February 2020 and July 2021. A reading of media texts highlighting phrases, ideas, and expressions noting the socio-cultural and political context within which they were written was performed. Frames that emerged ranged from *Is it Safe?*, *Trust(?) the Science*, *Anti-travel* and *Save Canadian Tourism*.

Results and Discussion

Is it Safe?

Fear and safety framed within media texts at the outset of the pandemic intensified as governments regulated international and inter-provincial travel as well as ordered quarantine polices under the Quarantine Act (MacGregor, 2020; McGuigge, 2020; McKercher & Chon, 2004; Seyfi, Rastegar, Rasoolimanesh & Hall, 2021). It drove anxiety and concern in citizens who deemed many tourism activities too risky during the pandemic (Brearton, 2020; Levitz, 2020). Generating fear and anxiety of travel during Covid-19 mirrored that of previous viral diseases (SARS, MER and H1N1) but was amplified because of the sheer scale of the disease (Fennell, 2017; McEvoy, Kulesh & Cooper, 2021; McKercher, 2004). Mixed messaging in the media on whether travel is safe as well as a lack of consistency in public health policy, has contributed to concerns over safety when it comes to traveling.

Trust (?) the Science

On January 7, 2020, the Public Health Agency of Canada issued only minor global travel warnings, yet that same evening the coronavirus made its debut in Canada. From February 2020 through July 2021, media reported on Canada's ever-changing travel restrictions giving unpredictable information (Chang & Park, 2020; Daily News, 2020; Grant, 2020). News media flipfopped between stories blaming travel (Gordon, 2021) to those stating that there was little travel risk (Neustaeter, 2020). Moreover, the inconsistencies in how Canada initiated its airline travel restrictions and mask policies confused Canadians (Chung, 2020; Dangerfield, 2021; Kalvapalle, 2020). Many public health experts believed COVID-19 could be managed like previous threats whose media attention provoked anxiety before being suppressed (Gossling, Soctt & Hall, 2020; James, Alonzo & Holmes, 2020). But the scale of Covid-19 along with media's offhand scientific reporting, created confusion on what to believe and which governing body to trust (Devine et al, 2020).

Anti-travel

As global travel bans became prevalent and border policies enacted, those who chose to go ahead with vacation plans were highlighted throughout media with ridicule and shame (CBC News, 2021; Mowers, 2020). News articles bombarded readers with statistics on the demise of Canada's tourism sector yet those who were mobile were often being interrogated (Nagy, 2020). Canadians were advised to avoid non-essential travel, but the definition of 'essential' was open for interpretation and personal judgment (McLeod, 2020). Even as destinations reopened and Canada's air carriers increased service, media emphasised shame for those indulging in non-essential travel during the pandemic (Baker, 2021), power being centralized and in support of regional travel restrictions by governments.

Save Canadian Tourism

Media were looking to Canadians to help with recovery and boost domestic travel with the aim of limiting losses within the tourism sector (Canadian Press, 2020; Cordasco, 2021; Parkinson, 2021). Media texts relied upon blunt statistics of pre-pandemic tourism to woo Canadians into helping the cause. Experts reported in news media called on individual Canadians to help spread the word that the tourism and hospitality sectors are safe (Victor, 2021). Many DMOs reported, urged Canadians to explore their own country with media texts stating that it is up to Canadians to save tourism (Jarvie, 2021; Rolfe, 2021). Silenced within this discourse are the limited government resiliency and management strategies and the authentic stories of suffering by Canadian hospitality and tourism businesses (Yan & Santos, 2009).

Conclusion

Canadian media has framed travel and tourism during Covid-19 in several ways thus requiring citizens to be engaged, mindful and critical media consumers (Devine et al, 2020; Flew, 2021; McEvoy, Kulesh & Cooper, 2019). News media gave contradicting information with discourses instilling fear, anxiety, confusion and a lack of trust, yet simultaneously promoted regional and interprovincial travel in order to save the sector (Devine et al, 2020; Flew, 2021; Xue & Kerstetter, 2017). The evolving discourses of travel and tourism within news media is what Altheide (1997) calls a "problem frame" that promotes messages that resonate fear. Power reverberates within media discourses that support travel restrictions resulting in ambiguous travel demand (Muldoon & Mair, 2017). While previous research on the pandemic has covered topics relating to resiliency, transformation, and recovery (Haywood, 2020; Gossling et al, 2020; Prayag, 2000; Sigala, 2020), it is important that researchers realize the impact news media have on travel risk perception, motivation and demand (Seyfi et al, 2021). This calls for a 'coming together' and accountability of all stakeholders; a role that academics are urged to embrace, especially through participatory action research (Flew, 2021; Haywood, 2020). In order to *travel towards tomorrow together* as scholars and practitioners, we need to critically

engage with media messaging in order to promote trust in travel and tourism in Canada throughout Covid-19 and beyond.

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