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“IN FAIR VERONA, WHERE WE LAY OUR SCENE” A multimodal analysis of the tourist gaze on Verona in travel blogs

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Abstract – The increasing presence and popularity of online travel blogs has recently added another layer to tourism discourse studies and to destination marketing, eliciting interest in research on user-generated content in tourism. Such blogs have been recognized as valuable sources of information as they are based on actual travel experiences; as a consequence, they can generate digital word-of-mouth communication to prospective visitors, potentially influencing their destination choices. This paper aims to investigate tourist perceptions and representations of Verona from a multimodal perspective, in order to explore the tourist gaze (Urry 1990) on the city, with an additional focus on its relation to the popular imagery of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. To this purpose, a number of blog entries about Verona from two travel blog platforms (TravelBlog, Travellerspoint) and individual non-professional blogs were analyzed, for a total of 100 entries published from 2010 to 2018. A quantitative-qualitative mixed approach will be adopted to analyze the language used in the blogs as well as the accompanying images, also drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar model (2006).

Keywords: language of tourism; blogging; multimodal analysis; tourist gaze; Verona.

1. Introduction

The experience of traveling for pleasure is one that involves looking at, or ‘gazing’ at the world that tourists encounter outside the limits of their daily lives. However, according to Urry and Larsen, this gaze is not neutral: “[p]eople gaze upon the world through a particular filter of ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education.” (2011, p. 2). Originally theorized by Urry in 1990, the tourist gaze is a means of framing and understanding the experience of tourism, involving professionally produced material as well as tourist perceptions and accounts. The study of the tourist gaze also provides a way of identifying and clarifying the reasons why certain destinations and locations acquire a favored status with tourists (D’Egidio 2014b, p. 59).

MacCannell, also concerned with the connection between society and tourist attractions, developed a theory of ‘sight sacralization’ illustrating how given locations and attractions become famous and must-see destinations¹ (MacCannell 1999 [1976], p.43). MacCannell’s “central argument is that the potency of an object offered to the tourist gaze depends upon a sequential ‘marking’ process, by which it is made meaningful, through progressive semiotic separation and differentiation from others, in a way which results in its ‘sight sacralization’ as a quasi-holy object in the eyes of the pilgrim-tourist.” (Seaton 1999, p. 140). The stage that primarily induces tourists to take a trip to see “The Real Thing” is the fourth stage, that is, mechanical reproduction, by which “prints, photographs,

¹ The stages of sight sacralization include five stages: naming, framing and elevating, enshrinement, mechanical reproduction and social reproduction (McCannell 1976, p. 43-45).

models or effigies of the object” are created (MacCannell 1999 [1976]: 45); alongside graphic images, the printed word can also accounts for the “sustained reproduction” of the attraction (Seaton 1999, p. 146).

Indeed, the tourist gaze is filtered through the tourists’ previous experiences of the destination and is “media-mediated” (Urry, Larsen 2011, p. 116); places are perceived and interpreted through the lenses of “texts and images – books, magazines, paintings, postcards, ads, soap operas, movies, video games, music videos and so on” (Urry, Larsen 2011, p. 116) that tourists encounter in their everyday life.

‘Gazing’ therefore does not merely reflect the world, but “orders, shapes and classifies” it (Urry, Larsen 2011, p. 2).

Sight has of course a central role in the tourist gaze, often perceived as the dominant sense in the tourist experience; therefore, the visual elements, such as postcards and pictures, are considered an integrating aspect of tourism and its language (Dann, Parrinello 2007, p. 26), with certain places becoming not-to-be-missed “Kodak moments” (Urry, Larsen 2011, p. 178). Urry and Larsen highlight that “[p]hotographs extend the tourist gaze in time and space. Studies show that tourists regard their tourist photos as precious belongings destined for a long life” (2011, p. 180). The spread of the Internet and of picture-taking technology has made it easier for travelers to share their ‘gaze’ of a given destination through pictures, leading to an increasing presence of traveling accounts that combine both a verbal and visual aspect.

2. Study aims

This study aims at exploring how tourists gaze at the northern Italian city of Verona through a multimodal analysis of blog entries dedicated to the city, in order to determine what kind of gaze is reproduced and shared with the traveling community. According to Statista,² tourists in the Verona province³ in 2018 reached 4,960,000 people, about half the visitors to the much more popular Venice province. More specifically, ISTAT⁴ placed Verona at 22nd place among the most visited cities in 2017, with 2,317,359 presences in the city. As this second figure is limited to tourists spending at least one night in the city’s tourist accommodation,⁵ we can assume the number would be higher considering people stopping in Verona on their way to Milan or Venice, or taking day trips from towns around neighboring lake Garda, another popular destination with international travelers. In this investigation, specific attention will be paid to the strong connection of the city with Shakespeare and his works, more specifically the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, famously set in Verona.

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/704696/-tourists-arrivals-in-veneto-by-province-italy/> (29.08.2019).

³ A province is an administrative division of Italy, the data reported are therefore not only related to the Verona and Venice individual municipalities, but also include the area and municipalities that are part of the respective province.

⁴ <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2018/11/report-movimento-turistico-anno-2017.pdf> (02.07.2019).

⁵ <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2018/11/report-movimento-turistico-anno-2017.pdf> (02.07.2019).

3. Blogs as electronic word of mouth

Internet access has provided users with a plethora of new ways to share information and content online, including opinions on products, services, and also travel destinations, so that people can learn about their places of interest directly from customers who have had a first-hand experience of those same destinations. Thanks to the participatory nature of the Web 2.0, travelers can share that experience through multiple online channels, from individual e-mails to comments on social media platforms and dedicated forums communities, or again, as will be seen, detailed entries on personal blogs (Pan *et al.* 2007, p. 35).

User-generated content in tourism has indeed become increasingly popular, thanks to the proliferation of review websites such as TripAdvisor, social media platforms, blogs and micro-blogs, and media-sharing websites, such as Flickr and Instagram for pictures and YouTube for videos. The rise of such tools has shifted consumer-to-consumer exchanges from familiar sources (family, friends, etc.) to a worldwide network of travelers (Wenger 2008, p. 171), leading to an electronic word of mouth (eWOW) that can influence travelers' decisions when it comes to destination and travel planning (Xiang *et al.* 2015, Francesconi 2012), helping them to "save decision making time and make better decisions" (Pan, *et al.* 2007, p. 36; Hennig-Thurau, Walsh 2003).

Travel blogs have become a very popular form of content and opinion sharing (Wenger 2018, p. 171). According to Dann (1996, 2007), they are part of the *on-trip* stage of the tourist experience, as most bloggers write and share their posts while still on their trip.

Bloggers "become opinion leaders, and their followers opinion seekers who rely on their expert opinions for their purchase decisions" (Denti 2015, p. 65). Indeed, they "act as living testimonials to the quality of a destination" (Cappelli 2008, p. 10). Travel blogs can take the form of diaries or guides, providing subjective opinions on the author's travel experience and/or advice and tips for potential travelers to a given destination. Puhlinger and Taylor define travel blogs as "forums and individual entries which relate to planned, current or past travel" (2008, p. 179). Francesconi (2012) suggests that travel blogs may be seen as displaying characteristics of other, established textual types, such as the travel book, the travel guide, and the reportage, extending on these texts and, as anticipated, performing electronic word-of-mouth. Bloggers therefore do not only consume material produced by the tourist industry, but in a certain sense they become active agents within the industry, helping shape how destinations are perceived and represented (Larsen 2006, p. 79 in Bergmeister 2015, p. 204). The personal nature of the descriptions establishes an informal relationship with the readers (Denti 2015, p. 65) and can influence and shape both consumer decisions and destination image (Bosangit *et al.* 2012, p. 208); in D'Egidio's words, "freedom and spontaneity in the act of writing may make travel blogs and trip reports a more reliable source of information on real travel experiences" (2014a, p. 147), providing an unmediated view of the destination (Dann 2007; Francesconi 2012). As it was mentioned in the previous section, the visual aspect has a central role in the tourism experience, which has easily carried over into the online environment of blogs. Indeed, blog posts are often multimodal in nature, as the text is often accompanied by pictures, maps, and more recently, embedded videos (Francesconi 2012), thanks to the increased, easier access to digital photography and videomaking during the past fifteen years or so. Blog entries therefore often include multiple pictures of the destination, depicting its sights, people and cultural details.

Studies on travel blogs are not uncommon, and a range of methodologies have been adopted for different purposes within different disciplines, as blogs express the writer's own interpretation, perception, and feelings regarding the tourist experience they have had (Banyai, Glover 2012, p. 268). In addition to language-oriented investigations on the specialized discourse of tourism, such studies can also be carried out to explore construction and manifestation of identities (Zhang, Hitchcock 2017; Berger, Greenspan 2008), and to investigate their effects, alongside those of other social media, on destination marketing (Lange-Faria, Elliot 2012; Andrić, De Alwis 2016).

4. Methodology and data selection

100 blog entries were selected from two travel blogging platforms, TravelBlog⁶ (50 entries) and Travellerspoint⁷ (38 entries), as well as individual blogs (12 entries), for a total of 72,189 running words. Individual blog entries will be identified with a code indicating the platform (TB) for TravelBlog, (TP) for Travelerspoint and (IN) for individual blogs, followed by a number. The blog entries were selected on the basis that the entire entry, or a significant majority of the entry, was about Verona. This city is a popular day trip or quick stop *en route* to other bigger cities, so it occurred often that a few lines about Verona were embedded in a longer post spanning multiple cities; those entries were not taken into consideration for the corpus. 100 entries do not correspond to 100 different bloggers, as some travel accounts are split into two entries.

Going back to travel blogging platforms, it should be noted that nowadays this type of travel blogging platform is no longer as popular with the online community, to the benefit of individual blogs on non-dedicated blogging sites, review writing and forum participation on platforms such as TripAdvisor, or more visually-oriented microblogging on Instagram, etc. However, it was chosen to use these two still existing platforms, as individual travel bloggers nowadays are often either professionals or semi-professionals whose income comes partly or entirely from activities related to their traveling. Such people may write sponsored articles or paid reviews of destinations, and are often experts in communication, which may result in promotional texts not much unlikely institutional or official material. The goal of this study, on the other hand, is to capture the authentic "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990), the actual perceptions of vacationers. The few individual blogs that are part of this study therefore were not professional at the time of the blogger's visit to Verona, they clearly marked paid or sponsored entries where present, and received income through banner advertising rather than through their writing.

The analysis followed two main stages: a) the linguistic analysis, with a mixed quantitative/qualitative approach, and b) the visual analysis, focusing instead on the pictures accompanying the written texts. The linguistic analysis focused on the identification of main themes and the analysis of selected keywords and their context.

The entries include 714 pictures, out of which 595 were taken into consideration: one entry contained a high number of pictures of specific architectural details, shared for a specific member of the audience – this entry was therefore considered an outlier and the pictures not included in the investigation. Other pictures were excluded as they were not

⁶ <https://www.travelblog.org/> (29.08.2019)

⁷ <https://www.travellerspoint.com/> (29.08.2019)

taken in Verona. Not all entries included pictures: 17 were text-only. The remaining pictures were then categorized according to the subject depicted.

5. Linguistic analysis

5.1 Personal pronouns

The first linguistic observations that were made regarding the use of personal pronouns as an indicator of the genre and purpose of the blog. 1274 instances of *I* were identified, against 438 instances of *you*. The attention is overwhelmingly on the narrator, highlighting the monologic nature of the blog, which also include other first-person pronouns (*me, we, us*). The blogs have a very strong personal component, suggesting that these entries act as personal travel diaries, focusing on telling an account of personal experiences. It should also be important to note that about 185 of these instances were found in the 12 individual blog entries, suggesting that even though they are not professional, a conscious attempt is made to engage with the readership. This is confirmed by the significantly lower presence of the pronoun *I* in individual blog entries -139 tokens out of the 1274 identified, as may be seen in Table 1.

Personal pronouns	Platform blogs	Individual blogs	Total
<i>I</i>	1135	139	1274
<i>You</i>	253	185	438

Table 1
Use of personal pronouns in blogs.

Even though an attempt was made to have data as homogeneous as possible, it may be said that many individual blogs, hosted on their own websites rather than on dedicated blogging platforms, may have the purpose of attracting audience and readers, potentially to make revenue from their own traveling. The individual blogs may be therefore classified as more audience-oriented, attempting to provide travel tips and advice, whereas the platform blogs may be more self-oriented, focusing instead on providing a detailed account of their personal experience, perceptions and feelings. In both types of blog, the imagined audience (Litt 2012) is still addressed, although with a different frequency and a different purpose. *You* can appear as an impersonal pronoun, as in the example below:

- (1) The entrance to this courtyard is free but you'd have to pay to get up to the balcony (IN11)

Here, rather than describing their personal experience, the blogger makes a non-referential or impersonal use of *you*, in a way that Wilson (1990: 56) has named "situational insertion", that is, "the conversion of one's own personal experience into experiences which might be, or can be, shared by the addressee." Other uses of the pronouns are made where the audience is addressed directly:

- (2) I hope you enjoyed this pictorial stroll through Verona! (IN10)
 (3) I can assure you not many tourists visit this ancient burial ground (TB24)

While, as we will see in more detail in the following sections, the tourist gaze is primarily conveyed through the bloggers' descriptions of their own perceptions, and therefore through first-person pronouns, it also emerges from the advice they give the prospective travelers in their audience:

(4) let me highly suggest Verona. You'll fall in love — with it, and maybe someone else! (IN1)

In this example, the recommendation for a trip to Verona also exploits the association between Verona and love, built upon Romeo and Juliet's story. That same story is referenced in example (5) below, where readers are given travel advice to save money on their trip by not visiting the entirety of Juliet's house, as no ticket is needed to access the popular sights.

(5) Don't bother to pay the entrance fee you can see the famous balcony and alleyway for free (TP19)

Occasionally, individual members of the audience may be addressed directly:

(6) [name1], [name2], and [name3] if you are reading this... (TB13)

(7) Dad, [name1] had fillet mignon... (TB18)

This is an uncommon occurrence that was documented in only 7 entries and, while in a couple of cases direct references to the ongoing trip are made, as in example (7) above, the other cases refer to events in the readers' personal lives.

While pronoun use differs in self-oriented and audience-oriented blogs, it is possible to identify a number of recurring topics that pertain to different, common aspects of the traveling experience, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

5.2 Semantic fields and Shakespearean references

The texts analyzed converged in terms of a number of recurring topics, which may be grouped in four key broad semantic fields: traveling, Italian cuisine, locations and attractions, Shakespearean references.

As Verona often constitutes a stop on a longer trip, or a side-trip (usually from Venice or Milan), blogs often include details on how to get to the city and how to navigate the city in terms of transportation, and information on what tourist activities can be undertaken in the city (e.g. walking tours, etc.).

Italian cuisine is renown world-wide, and many bloggers make detailed descriptions of their culinary experiences, using both generic words and expressions as well as terms referring specifically to the local context, thus switching into Italian to describe places and dishes (e.g. *osteria*,⁸ *gelato*,⁹ *spritz*,¹⁰ *tiramisu*).

The category of locations and attractions contains mentions and descriptions of the various places of interests in the city (e.g. *Arena*, *Castelvecchio*, *Roman amphitheater*), including their features and characteristics, including the bloggers' own opinion.

⁸ Casual restaurant where local food is eaten and where you can find different types of wine.

⁹ Ice cream

¹⁰ Typical local drink made with white wine (usually prosecco) and seltz. A popular variety also adds Aperol or Campari bitter.

The last category includes explicit references to Shakespeare and his works set in Verona, which will be the focus of this study. The references pertain especially to *Romeo and Juliet* and the popular culture works stemming from the original text.

The pervasiveness of the Shakespearean influence on tourist interpretations of Verona is noticeable as references to *Romeo and Juliet* are found in the majority of entries. Second to *Romeo and Juliet*, we see the popularity of the *Arena*, a roman amphitheater dating back to the 1st century AD and still used in the summer for the opera season, concerts and shows. Other points of interest are not mentioned as extensively in the data, although they appeared to be fairly popular, such as *Castelvecchio*, *Castel San Pietro*, *Ponte Pietra*, *Piazza Erbe*, *Torre dei Lamberti*, *Teatro Romano*, which are other historical sites in Verona.

As orthographic inaccuracies are often common in unedited, non-professional texts such as the blog entries under investigation, further searches were made with the queries *jul*, *guil*, and *giul* to identify potential additional instances of references to Juliet. Indeed, the search was positive. In the end, a total 298 instances of Juliet/Giulietta and their variations were identified in 81 different entries, confirming the popularity of the reference and the strong ties between the city and the Shakespearean play. A similar search for alternative terms to refer to the Arena was run (*coliseum*, *theater/theatre*, *stadium*, *amphitheater/re*), and the outcome revealed that the Arena is mentioned 264 times in 79 entries (plus 71 instances of *opera*), almost on par with Juliet. Not as common as the previous two, the word *castel* (indicating both Castelvecchio and Castel San Pietro) appears 48 times in 24 entries.

Focusing on Shakespeare, there are 69 mentions of either *Shakespeare* or *Shakespearean* in 36 different entries. Direct or indirect quotes from *Romeo and Juliet* are present in 24 entries, including these three quotes in different lengths and variations: ("In fair Verona, where we lay our scene" (I, prologue); "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?" (II, 2); "There is no world without Verona walls" (III, 3)). Six additional entries describe Verona as "fair" (fair Verona, the fair city of Verona) without making any explicit reference to the origin of the collocation.

The blogs often include description of the locations in Verona related to the story, that is, Juliet's house and Juliet's tomb. The former, a popular destination described as "the tourist sensation of Verona" (IN11), visited by "hordes of tourists" (TB9) involves a curious tradition that is often mentioned by the bloggers: "one can also touch Juliets boob on a statue outside her home for good luck" (TP35). Both the statue and especially the balcony appeared to be described as popular attractions:

- (8) Of course the most famous site is Juliet's balcony and thousands of people visit each year (TP5)
- (9) You can actually walk inside the house and stand on the fabled balcony itself (IN2)

Some entries reference the habit of writing letters to Juliet¹¹ or of writing on the walls that lead to the courtyard at Juliet's House.

- (10) I did write a letter to Juliet though (TP27)
- (11) 'Giulietta' also receives letters from people across the world who write to her for relationship advice (TB19)

¹¹ The Juliet Club is a nonprofit cultural association. Among its activities, a team of volunteers answer letters sent to Juliet by people all over the world <http://www.julietclub.com/en/storia-del-club/> (26.09.2019).

Ten references are also made to the movie *Letters to Juliet*, which was shot in Verona and released in 2010.

While many writers were enthusiastic about visiting the alleged location of the famous balcony scene in the tragedy, and the setting of the movie, few visitors were more critical of the attention paid to a fictional place dedicated to two fictional characters:

- (12) Nevermind [sic] that she is actually a fictional character, there still seems to be a tomb for her (TB45)
- (13) The city fathers obviously know how to make a few Euro out of this work of fiction (TP12)

This criticism may be related to the dimension of authenticity (Cohen 1972), one of the aspects that influence and inform tourist activity. In their travels, many tourists look for authenticity, or what they interpret as a representation of reality (Dann 1996, p. 19) with regard to the experiences they have and the objects they encounter and interact with: “*authentic* means typical, original, actual, real, true” (Denti 2015, p. 49). As the locations (Juliet’s house and tomb) of the play that can be visited in Verona are not actually related to the story, tourists who give importance to authenticity may not appreciate this type of attraction even though they may still consider it sight-worthy or a ‘must-see’ due to the perception of the place as a ‘sacred’ sight; others, deterred by the crowds at what they recognize as a fictional place, may opt to leave such destinations for more authentic, typical ones of historical and artistic value:

- (14) Because it's a fake but everyone goes, we saw the entrance, the balcony, and the statue but didn't go far enough in to touch the statue or bother to get a kiss on the balcony. It was crazy and we just weren't interested. (TP3)

The strong connection between the city of Verona and Shakespeare is visible also in general descriptions of Verona as a city. Verona is described in overwhelmingly positive terms, as can be seen by the qualitative adjectives scattered throughout the entries, such as “magical” (TB34) and “enchanted” (TP26).

As mentioned earlier, Verona is often described as fair, quoting the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* where the setting is established: “in fair Verona, where we lay our scene”.

Shakespeare and his works are indeed mentioned as one of the main attractors for the city, triggering an immediate mental association, as exemplified in the excerpts below:

- (15) For many English speakers, Verona is familiar because of Shakespeare. (IN5)
- (16) Most people visit Verona because of its relation to the romantic tragedy (IN8)
- (17) Verona is of course the setting for that most famous story of the two star crossed lovers (TP12)

Verona being the location of one of the most renowned romantic tragedies creates an additional association with the concept of love in general. Verona is therefore seen as a romantic destination, “the ‘City of Romance’” (IN11) where “romance oozes from every inch” (TB40) and is also compared to another city which is known globally as the city of love, namely Paris.

- (18) a) Verona is the “city of love” (I mean, I guess Paris is, technically, but this is the Italian version) (IN1)
- b) Although Paris is called the city of love, it seems like Verona should have that appellation. (TB47)

The data contains a total of 99 instances of the word ‘love’ as a noun, found in 44 different texts, plus 9 instances of the word ‘romance’, suggesting that the connection of love and romance with the city of Verona via Romeo and Juliet is well-recognized and considered to be worth mentioning by a relevant number of bloggers in the corpus. This connection with Shakespeare’s tragedy and, by extension, the underlying theme of love is the result of a gaze on the city that is mediatized by the visitors’ previous cultural experiences. Their gaze is shaped by the knowledge of the literary work and the plethora of adaptations that have followed the original play, including the more recent movie *Letters to Juliet*, that immerse viewers in a romanticized Verona seen through an American filter. The movie has added another layer of popularity to certain locations as movie locations and further reinforced the link between the city and the play.

The city is also perceived as a destination that is not given enough credit for what it offers. Verona is described as being “too-often overlooked” (IN1), or as “underrated” (IN11). Some visitors explicitly point out that while the city is known for its connection to *Romeo and Juliet* and the presence of an ancient Roman amphitheater, the Arena, there are many other places of interests in the city that are of valuable interest.

- (19) Though most of us know Verona from Shakespeare’s tragic story of “Romeo and Juliet,” the city is more than its fame of the star-crossed lovers. (IN3)
- (20) There’s much more to Verona than just the Arena and Shakespeare (IN5)

These visitors do not necessarily go off the beaten tracks, but they do distance themselves from a pre-existing perception of the city rooted in their socio-cultural experiences, that is, the cultural and literary references and the mainstream tourism discourse they might have been exposed to (brochures, tour operator websites, etc.). Their gaze is re-shaped by their contingent experience in the city, going beyond the ‘must-see’ and ‘must photograph’ locations; visitors deviate from the collective, mediatized gaze (Urry, Larsen 2011) to enjoy less renown places of interest “which could confer authenticity and distinction on travel” (Francesconi 2007, p. 100).

6. Images

The 595 pictures taken under consideration were categorized according to the subject depicted, as illustrated in figure 1 below:

- Monuments or places of interest
- People with monuments or places of interest
- People
- Food and drinks
- Other subjects (streets, details, etc.)

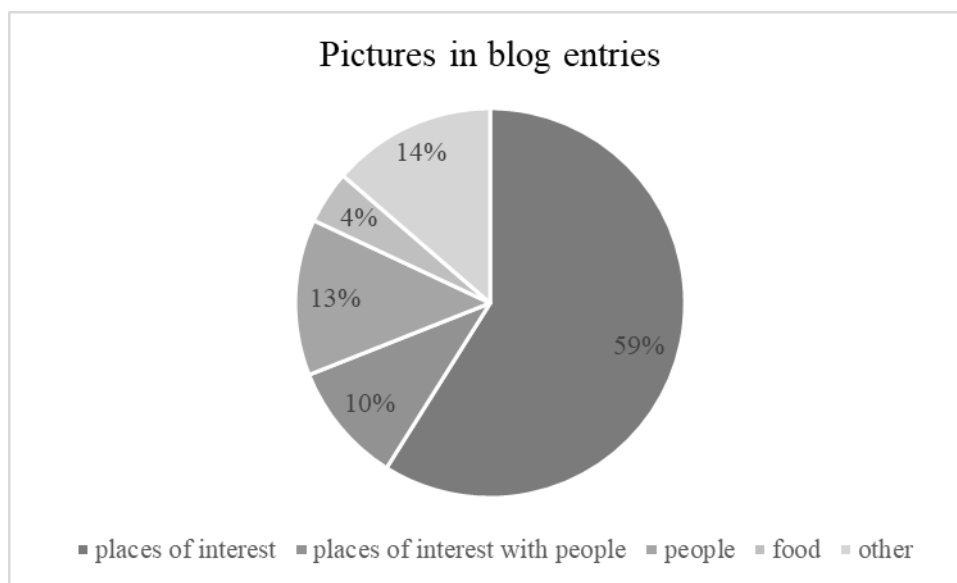


Figure 1
Pictures in blog entries according to subject.

Categorization was not always straightforward, as subjects sometimes overlap, as it can be noted in the category combining places of interest and people. In this category, the family gaze (Haldrup, Larsen 2003) is represented, with visitors “producing loving family photographs set within distinct visual environments” (Urry, Larsen 2011, p. 20) within which they “enjoy longed-for family happiness” (Urry, Larsen 2011, p. 180). This type of gaze is also represented in the ‘people’ category, where bloggers and the people traveling with them are often depicted. Other tourists may also be shown to illustrate crowdedness, or sometimes the locals, who are usually shown “undertaking traditional, real, routine activities” (Denti 2015, p. 57), representing in this case their immersion in authentic local life. This type of picture is also found in the ‘other’ category, where pictures of old shop fronts, small cars, bicycles in narrow cobblestone streets, paint a romantic, ‘nostalgic’ view of Italy that retains “the authenticity of simple lifestyles” (Francesconi 2007, p. 75). As Italy is famous for its cuisine, pictures of food are also found within blogs: these are often taken from a perspective which puts viewers in the place of the subject, looking at the dishes as if they were sitting in front of them, involving them in the experience (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006, p. 134). People are sometimes shown enjoying local food in the pictures, sitting at a restaurant or holding a *gelato* in their hands: these represent evidence of having experienced something they perceive as typical and authentic.

However, the ‘kodak moments’, the places of interest, photographed from a variety of angles and in their details, are the most frequent type of picture in the data. The majority of these pictures engage the audience indirectly: the image “offers’ the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case” (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006, p. 119), which is in line with other studies on the visual aspect of tourist blogs (Denti 2015). Out of the places of interest, the most photographed are predictably the Arena and the two places tied to Romeo and Juliet’s story, that is, Juliet’s house and Juliet’s tomb, although the former is much more popular than the latter due to the presence of Juliet’s statue and of the famous balcony, as mentioned in the previous section and visible in figure 2 below.



Figure 2
Juliet's balcony. Picture by AdamandLouise (TB20).

The statue is sometimes depicted in pictures with a narrative structure, involving an action process (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006, p. 63), with a tourist touching Juliet's statue's breast for good luck in love. This is a tradition that many tourists abide to and that raised curiosity and bewilderment in several bloggers who took pictures of themselves or others performing the action. Here, the tourist has the role of Actor, whereas Juliet's statue, upon which the action is performed, is the Goal (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006, p. 64).

In addition to the balcony and the statue, another popular object of tourist photography is the wall of the entrance that leads from the street to the courtyard where the statue and balcony are located, which is covered by graffiti and pieces of paper – often stuck to the wall with chewing gum - where visitors write their name and that of their lover. In more recent times, couples have started to write their names on colored padlocks and to put them on or in the area around the gate to the courtyard.¹²



Figure 3
Lovers' names on the wall in Juliet's house. Picture by Deborah Lynn Guber (IN12).

¹² This tradition, which symbolizes eternal love, has been popularized by the book and subsequent movie adaptation *Ho voglia di te* by Federico Moccia, where lovers put a padlock off Ponte Milvio in Rome.

The close-up of the papers in figure 3 highlights the popularity of this tradition and the number of people who leave their names in Juliet's house in the hope that their love will last forever – or simply as a marker of their visit. This may be seen as a ‘tourist rite’ whereby visitors can “establish a symbolic and inextricable relationship with the visited places” (Francesconi 2007, p. 72). A wider angle might have better highlighted the number of participants, but this perspective allows viewers to read names and initials and clearly see the hearts and writings on the papers and padlocks. The common choice to represent close-up pictures of the wall and padlocks also provides viewers with a more romanticized perspective of this practice. Zooming-in on these tokens of love and romantic hope indeed erases the visual clash between the old building and the tourist-made wall.

The visual connection between Verona and romantic love does not only rely on *Romeo and Juliet* locations or on the representation of other visitors' testimonies. Blogger *Beachbuddies* represented this link symbolically by creating a picture collage using five different architectural elements - windows, decorations, a rosette, a castle merlon. Put next to one another, the individual elements form the word *love* preceded by a heart shape, as may be seen in figure 4 below:



Figure 4
A heart and the word love. Picture by *Beachbuddies* (TP9).

While not all bloggers embedded pictures in their entries, the images selected for publication seem to reflect some of the key semantic fields discussed above, namely Italian cuisine, and locations and attractions. Only 4% of pictures include food, a low percentage if compared to the many references made to Italian and local cuisine in the posts. Instead, the lion's share of the pictures includes the location and attractions, depicted on their own or with people posing.

The interest in Shakespeare and his work is of course mirrored in the number of pictures showing Juliet's house and tomb, including close-up pictures of the balcony and of Juliet's statue, or again of the love messages in the entryway, as illustrated above. As with references in the written text, pictures of Juliet's house and tomb and of the Arena are found in much bigger numbers than other places of interest in the city. Taken together, places related to *Romeo and Juliet* (Juliet's house, Juliet's tomb) were represented in 79 pictures, whereas the Arena was represented in 82 pictures. These numbers also take into consideration pictures of details (walls, seats, etc.) where the location itself may not be recognizable. As the Arena is located in Piazza Bra, categorizing pictures in one or the other category was not always straightforward. Piazza Erbe, the third most represented location in the pictures, comes third with about half the number of pictures of the Arena and Juliet-related places, reinforcing the dominant role of opera and Shakespeare also from a visual perspective.

7. Institutional discourse

In contemporary times, professional tourist material such as tour operator websites and brochures as well as institutional websites, with their sustained reproduction of ‘sacralized’ attractions may also contribute to the shaping of the tourist gaze on destinations, as tourists may tend to re-duplicate the visuals they are exposed to (Garrod 2008, p. 356), and indeed, the relationship with Shakespeare is an integrating part of the tourist offer in Verona (Lipovšek, Kesić 2014, p. 54).

If we look at institutional websites, for example, Cesiri (2019) notes that “[t]he website of the province of Verona (*Provincia di Verona*) showed a full screen picture of Juliet’s statue” in addition to other visual elements promoting the territory outside the city, signifying an established identity “that create[s], in turn, specific expectations in the prospective visitors” (162). Cesiri’s keyword analysis showed no mention of Shakespeare or *Romeo and Juliet*; however, Juliet’s picture was the first contact visitors to the website¹³ had to the city, hence immediately establishing an association between the city and the play. This may be ascribed to MacCannell’s stage of mechanical reproduction (1999 [1976]: 45); the sight, is reproduced on pictures, postcards and brochures, and we find one of Juliet in a prominent, eye-catching position.

Looking at the tourist office website for the city,¹⁴ the site header displays a reference to the love theme: a logo bearing the slogan “if you love someone take them to Verona”, accompanied by a red heart, which highlights the importance of love to the city. The website also contains a dedicated page on “the city of love” which links to external websites (Marry me in Verona,¹⁵ Juliet’s club¹⁶). Again, the theme of love appears prominent, promoting Verona as a destination for couples through the association with the love story. However, while the Shakespearean connection acts as a first, eye-catching and attention-drawing device, if we look more closely at the travel advice provided in the website, it can be seen that the Romeo and Juliet locations are not featured as overtly as it may be expected.

Indeed, the tourist office suggests a number of different itineraries for tourists, based on different historical periods, lengths of stay and transportation means. Out of 25 itineraries, 8 mention Juliet’s house and 7 the Arena, confirming their popular status as tourist attractions. However, the itineraries also suggested a number of other, less known places of interests. Three itineraries were suggested by the *Verona Minor Hierusalem*¹⁷ project, which focuses on local churches. While the tourist office website does not focus heavily on Juliet and love, the theme still appears prominent in institutional promotional material.

It would be interesting to continue this line of research by looking at the discourse employed by tour operators (Italian and international) marketing tours in Italy that include Verona as a destination, to investigate how Shakespearean references feature in the promotion of the city.

¹³ The website <http://www.tourism.verona.it> (Provincia di Verona) is no longer accessible (Cesiri 2019, p. 162)

¹⁴ http://www.turismoverona.eu/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=35298&lang=en (3.07.2019)

¹⁵ http://www.sposamiaverona.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=42244&lang=en (19.09.2019)

¹⁶ <http://www.julietclub.com/en/> (19.09.2019)

¹⁷ <http://www.veronaminorhierusalem.it/?lang=en> (19.09.2019)

8. Concluding remarks

The analysis of blog entries in their written and visual aspects has shown that international travelers to Verona paint a positive portrait of the city, appreciating the locations and experiences it has to offer. However, the analysis of recurring themes and of the frequency of the subjects depicted in the pictures show that the bloggers' gaze has been shaped by multiple layers: the experience of the city via Shakespeare's story, the common perception of that story as one of the greatest love stories in literature, and the media products that have stemmed from the original play, including the 2010 movie *Letters to Juliet*. The gaze that emerges from this analysis appears to be mediatized, that is, a "collective gaze where particular sites famous for their 'mediated' nature are viewed" (Urry, Larsen 2011, p. 20). Indeed, travelers visit locations "that were first imaginatively constructed as archetypes of love, death, life, wisdom, good and evil and they are consequently sought and found in reality independently from the factual or historical truth" (Lipovšek, Kesić 2014, p. 59).

The connection between visiting Verona and literary tourism is however not necessarily a recent development. As Webb points out, most American visitors in the 19th and early 20th centuries were especially interested in locations connected to *Romeo and Juliet* (2016). People may have different reasons to visit literary places, and one of them, according to Herbert, is the pull towards the destination as the setting of a literary work: "[f]iction may be set in locations that writers knew and there is a merging of the real and the imagined that gives such places a special meaning. Fictional characters and events often generate the strongest imagery" (2001: 314). As the data seems to show, more modern tourists are not only drawn to the original work, but also to subsequent derivative works such as *Letters to Juliet*:

(21) A week ago I watched Letters to Juliet [...] and that's what actually made me eager to see Verona and Juliets [sic] balcony....simply because I knew I was so close to that movie scene. (TB10)

References to Romeo and Juliet in both text and visuals indicate that both the play and the idea of love permeate the way tourists gaze at the city. Tourists place particular importance on those locations tied to the play through visual representation and linguistic references, from direct quotes to qualitative adjectives and to the description of tourist rites that engage the tourist with the location and its underlying myth. Data show that Juliet's house's popularity as a location was shared by the Roman amphitheater, the Arena, that is also known world-wide for hosting an opera festival in the summer. This split popularity is also found elsewhere in the tourist community. If we look to other platforms of user-generated content, such as TripAdvisor, we can find that tourist rankings put the Arena amphitheater in first place, while Juliet's house slides at 52nd place, probably due to lukewarm reviews related to crowds and the 'artificial' feeling of the location. Still, Juliet's house is still solidly in second place for number of reviews on the website (11,067), while the Arena has 16,600.¹⁸ An Instagram search, on the other hand reveals 4,2 million posts for the tag #verona. The tag #arenadiverona had 329,000 uses, although many of those may refer to pop music concerts and other events. The hashtag #julietshouse has comparatively few instances, 12,100. However, the tag #veronainlove appeared in 87,200 posts.

While Juliet's house remains popular and is often referred to in terms of a must-see location in Verona, the analysis also highlighted that some bloggers pointed out the lack of

¹⁸ Data collected 03.07.2019.

authenticity and the crowds at Juliet’s place, recognizing instead the value of other locations that had not been classified as sightseeing ‘must’. Bloggers in the data shift beyond the mediatized gaze that they have been exposed to, therefore constructing a different perspective and gaze on the city.

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