'A TRUE FEELING OF AUTHENTIC PORTUGUESE GOLF'? THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ALGARVE REGION IN PORTUGUESE GOLF WEBSITES

Rosária Pereira
PhD student, Lecturer, University of the Algarve
rpereira@ualg.pt

Filipa Perdigão Ribeiro
PhD, Lecturer, University of the Algarve
fperdig@ualg.pt

Kate Torkington
PhD, Lecturer, University of the Algarve
ktorking@ualg.pt

Joana Afonso Dias
PhD student, INUAF – Instituto Superior Afonso III (Loulé)
joanadia@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly competitive global marketplace, the need for golf destinations to differentiate themselves from competitors has become more critical than ever. This paper raises questions about the promotional strategies employed by the golf sector in the Algarve, focusing on internet communication strategies, since this medium has become the biggest driving force towards the commoditisation of all aspects of the tourism experience. By offering a complementary perspective to the field of (critical) tourism studies, and drawing on a qualitative, multi-modal discourse analysis, this work-in-progress looks at the particular ways that representations and images presented on the Algarve golf websites constitute and frame identities (of people and places) and socio-spatial relationships. This paper analyses a corpus of 45 texts collected from official websites of the 40 Algarve golf courses and from five entities which promote the Algarve as a golf destination, along with the golf images that are displayed alongside them. Findings point to salient discursive and visual representations of a global setting enjoyed by the global elite. Whereas the courses' positioning in relation to their regional competitors draws on similar discursive strategies which reflect those used in tourism advertising discourses in general – e.g. reiteration of explicit comparisons, superlatives and hyperbolic statements -, representations of local emplacedness are not salient; in some cases local place seems to have been almost intentionally suppressed.

KEYWORDS

Branding, Algarve Golf Websites, Multi-Modal Discourse Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

Golf is considered to be one of the top ten strategic products for the development of tourism in Portugal, generating revenue of around €1.3 million in 2009 (Delloite, 2010). The Algarve is, today, the

main golf destination in Portugal with 40 golf courses from the 84 in the country (EGA, 2010). One of the major objectives included in the National Strategic Plan for Tourism Development [PENT] (*Turismo de Portugal*, 2008) is to maintain the Algarve as a preferential and high quality golf destination. The golf sector has grown steadily, based mainly on the British and Irish markets, and despite an almost total lack of involvement of locals in the sport (FPG, 2010). However, the emergence of new golf destinations such as Turkey, Tunisia and Morocco has contributed to the recent decrease in demand for the Algarve's golf courses. On the other hand, the profile of golfers has changed and nowadays, the Algarve as a golf destination can be considered to be very much a mass market, catering to a range of different types of visitors and players. Bearing all this in mind, our paper raises some questions about the current promotional strategies employed by the golf sector in the Algarve. We focus on internet communication strategies, since the internet has become the biggest driving force towards the commoditisation of all aspects of the tourism experience, yet it has also increased competition and made it harder than ever for destinations to differentiate themselves from a "homogeneous mass of generic […] destinations" (Morgan, 2010: 222).

Following in the footsteps of Fairclough (2009), Lash and Urry (1994) and Thurlow and Jaworski (2010), we will argue that as a major service industry, tourism has undergone (and helped perpetuate) the major shift by which service-oriented economies render goods more discursively mediated. Tourism exemplifies a "semiotically embedded service […] because a key part of what is actually produced and consumed in tourism is the semiotic context of the service" (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2010: 7-8). The ultimate 'goods' purchased by tourists during their travels include images, lifestyles, memories, emotions, sensory experiences, self-identities and their narrative enactments; in other words, tourism is a major player in the "experience economy" (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). By offering a complementary perspective to the field of (critical) tourism studies, one of our concerns in this paper is with the particular ways that representations and images presented on the Algarve golf websites constitute and frame identities (of people and places) and socio-spatial relationships, in the context of tourism.

Discursive practices such as place branding reinforce collective representations of the place among specifically targeted groups of people. Brands can impact on social identities by providing membership in imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). A potential pitfall in place branding is, however, the very fact that it has become such a global and globalizing force. Although there is a clear tendency towards the global homogeneity of brands and the practices (including discursive practices) surrounding them, there is also a noticeable recent increase in heterogeneous local adaptations and meanings of brand values and discourses (Koller, 2008). Architectural and spatial organisation practices related to tourism destinations are tending towards this kind of 'glocalisation'. Brand managers are certainly aware that a key factor in branding is differentiation, particularly in mass tourism environments where most destinations can (and do) make the same claims (Morgan and Pritchard, 2004). One of the questions we aim to address is to what extent Algarve golf courses are differentiated in terms of the promotional effort. We consider whether differentiation occurs among the various courses in the Algarve, and whether there is a collective effort to brand the Algarve as a whole as a golf destination that is distinct from other golf destinations. In order to address this, we look at the discursive and visual strategies used to represent Algarvian golf courses on the internet.

2. METHODOLOGY

A corpus of 45 short texts was collected from the official websites of the 40 Algarve golf courses and from five entities which promote the Algarve as a golf destination, along with the golf images that are

displayed alongside them. We proceeded with a qualitative, multi-modal discourse analysis of the corpus, looking at the strategies employed to promote the individual golf courses and the Algarve as a golf destination. We paid close attention to the following: How is the Algarve region represented? How do these websites convey representations of local emplacedeness? Which global discourses of tourism (and specifically golf) are drawn upon? How is the visitor / golf player / tourist represented? Which voices are given prominence (e.g. architect, professional golfers, players)? Are there distinctions amongst courses in terms of their discursive strategies? Finally, data from interviews conducted with golf course managers and directors, and directors of tourism official entities are included in order to contextualize the analysis.

3. MAIN FINDINGS

Discursive and visual representations of a global setting enjoyed by the global elite are very salient. These representations are evident in the combination of the predominant use of English language as a means of communication, the placing of the Algarve in a global context (its position in relation to Europe and to the world), the foregrounding of international architects, even (in some cases) in the very names of the golf courses. Most of the descriptions and images of the golf courses are so similar as to feel almost generic, therefore providing very little sense of place, but at the same time they are evocative in terms of the emotional and sensorial parts of tourism experience. The courses' positioning in relation to their regional /Algarvian competitors draws on similar and repeated discursive strategies which reflect those used in tourism advertising discourses in general, such as the reiteration of explicit comparisons, superlatives and hyperbolic statements. This further emphasizes the global aspect of the message. At the same time, by framing the representations in global discourses, the overall effect is to signal exclusivity, superiority and quality which can then be used as an identity resource for the imagined community of practice of golfers, predicated on the "mythology of super-elite, freedom and mobility, global citizenship and cosmopolitanism" (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2010: 29).

Representations of local emplacedness, on the other hand, are not salient; in some cases (mainly the Western Algarve golf course websites), local place seems to have been almost intentionally suppressed. In such cases, both texts and images focus entirely on the golf courses themselves, giving an impression of a bounded, exclusive space with no room for local meaning. On the other hand, the majority of golf courses in the Eastern Algarve make some attempt to emplace the courses in their local setting, at least in terms of the natural landscape and its unique features. This lends a kind of 'glocal' identity to these courses, and at the same time differentiates them from the standardised, almost *non-place* (Augé, 1995) landscapes of the Western Algarve golf courses.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In an increasingly competitive global marketplace, the need for golf destinations to create a unique identity – to differentiate themselves from competitors – has become more critical than ever (Hudson and Hudson, 2010). Golf courses in general are a good case of standardised landscapes, although their striking visual similarity is, of course, mainly due to their nature (as venues for a highly regulated sport/leisure activity). Yet there is clearly room for manoeuvre in terms of making each course distinctive. This is what golf course architects try to do, obviously, but what we question in this study is whether promoters are paying enough attention to the 'distinctive' characteristics in terms other than the technicalities of the course. The discursive foregrounding of the 'unique', 'exotic' or 'authentic'

local characteristics of the Algarve region may be a fruitful strategy to address the embedded tension in the need to create global appeal and identity and the need for sufficient heterogeneity to ensure differentiation and distinction among both golf courses and golf destinations.

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