

‘Energising’ English to promote Central Java as a Popular Tourism Destination

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines critically the formulation of online promotional messages in the hospitality industry in Central Java. A total of 22 online promotional texts of tourism destinations in Central Java were analysed critically using the analytical paradigm introduced by van Dijk (1998) and Kress (2010). Results of the study revealed that these online promotional texts developed by Indonesian web developers were brief, simple and written in compound sentences. Complex sentences and ‘gimmicks’ were absent found, and the persuasive value of the texts remain basic. Therefore, the messages lack motivation in triggering a favourable outcome. Conceptually, the messages were constructed based on history, philosophy, and myths and highlighted Central Java’s panoramic views, its unique geographical location and culinary specialties. Ethnographically though, the texts lacked of comprehensive information, events and latest activities.

Keywords: Central Java, conceptual, ethnography, promotional message, tourism

INTRODUCTION

‘Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder’ is a very well-known expression coined by Margaret Wolfe Hugerford whose

pseudonym is ‘the Duchess’ that appeared in Molly Brown in 1878. That saying points to the role of perception influenced by the presentation of text in producing visual images to the reader. In the context of online promotion of tourism destination, the written and visual go hand in hand in persuading the readers of the message which ideally should be precise and concise to attract potential tourists. Visually appealing photographs and images of the tourist destinations must be

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accompanied by effective messages which tell their own story to lure tourists.

This paper examines critically the impact of selected online tourism promotional messages which advertises Central Java as an interesting tourism destination. The researchers scrutinised the lexico-grammatical, syntactical, generic and discursual issues as well as ethnographically embedded nuances of the tourism promotional online texts.

Online Promotion of Destination

Destinations refer to places with actual or perceived boundaries and they may mean political and physical boundaries. Since most tourism products are intangible rather than physical goods, these products rely heavily on image and reputation. Reputation is 'the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you'.

In order to promote a good reputation, a Destination Management Organisation (DMO) needs to create trust and credibility. According to Kristina (2011a), creating trust and credibility is called an image building effort. As an image-building advertisement, an online tourism promotion relies heavily on establishing credentials as its main source of persuasion (Bhatia, 2004).

Additionally, online promotional texts can create positive image of the destination. Image of the tourism destination is constructed by the DMO using verbal and visual presentation of the destination. Verbally, image building is done through describing and claiming for excellence on

a product or service, a state of being and an achievement (Kristina, 2011b) of which the medium may take the form of brochures, pictures or internet. Internet is a particularly effective communication medium for persuading people.

Internet technology is one of the most persuasive media for marketing travel destinations. It is widely acknowledged that online media is very influential in the image promotion because of its ability to reach large crowds. Any image the DMO creates uses language to provide information, to motivate and to persuade prospective visitors to come to the places advertised online.

The previous study on the role of Tourism promotion by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Bandung District is considered relevant to the present study. However, this work did not discuss the function of language to promote tourism destinations. With regard to persuasiveness of the destination websites, the work of might be relevant to this study but not the formulation of the message because their work focuses on consumers' first impression and spontaneous evaluation of online texts. Additionally, Michaelidou, Siamagka, Morees and Micuski (2013) in their findings showed the image of Taiwan the visitors had were based on use of key adjectives such as 'unique', 'authentic', 'ancient' and 'exotic'. However, this study does not explore the entire expressions that the web developers use in their promotional texts. The focus is on five web developers which are considered familiar to tourists planning to visit the site.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is descriptive, qualitative and ethnographical in nature. It means that the researchers describe and explains the objective representation of a phenomenon. The English expressions and their persuasive elements used in the online tourism promotion of Central Java are scrutinised. In order to assess the effectiveness of the online promotion texts, in-depth interviews with the informants as users were also conducted.

The sources of data for the study were five tourism promotional websites: Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia, TripAdvisor, www.eastjava.com, Budhanet and Lonely Planet. A total of 22 online promotional texts that promote Central Java were examined. After validation, 12 online tourism promotional texts were selected and four other online tourism promotional texts developed by Malaysian and Singaporean web developers were used as cross-checkers.

In addition, focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted on September 22, 2015 with tourism stake-holders, such as the government, tour operators, and members of tourism communities. This is done to validate the results and conclusions, a first step in a process through which this study hopefully reflects scientific thinking into promoting tourism destinations.

The present study uses primary and secondary data; the former are words, phrases, clauses and sentences in the promotional texts while the latter are observations and results of in-depth interview with four foreign visitors from USA (two males), Australia (one female)

and Chile (one female). The informants were professionals between 35 and 50 years old. Additional interviews with much younger groups were also conducted as different age group is believed to have distinct expectations on the way online promotional texts of tourism should be.

Data collecting technique is as follows:

1. Data was collected from five domestic tourism websites.
2. Reliable and comprehensive information was obtained using semi structured in-depth interviews.
3. Informal observations and talks were conducted with members of the freelance tourism community who upload the destinations regularly using Instagram.

Data was later analysed using the theoretical perspective advocated by van Dijk (1998) in terms of macro, super structure and micro levels of analysis and multimodal perspectives proposed by Kress (2010).

Face validity was conducted via Google search engine using relevant keywords related to online tourism destination in Central Java. The reliability however is gained by making sure that 'the findings obtained are consistent with the data collected' (Merriam, 1998, p. 206).

Formulation of Messages

This section discusses the formulation of tourism promotional messages that cover lexico-grammatical, syntactical, generic and discoursal issues as well as

ethnographical areas. In terms of lexicogrammar, the Indonesian online tourism promotional texts mostly employ *standard* adjectives from factual perceptions, such as ‘greatest’, ‘spiritual’, ‘highest’, ‘famous’, ‘honoured’, ‘visible’, ‘enormous’, ‘fertile’, ‘rich’, ‘cool’, ‘beautiful’, ‘extensive’, ‘natural’, ‘traditional’ as constructed by three web developers, namely the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism on www.indonesia.travel, the budhanet.com and eastjava.com. In contrast, reviews made by tripadvisor.com describing similar object of Borobudur Temple uses more provocative phrases, such as ‘It’s must visit place’, ‘one of the world wonders’, ‘once in a lifetime experience’, ‘Amazing place’ and ‘will blow your mind’. Lexically, the web developer makes use of more positive-image building adjectives, such as ‘awesome’, ‘impressive’, ‘spectacular’, ‘superfluous’. Additionally, www.lonelyplanet.com uses ‘energising’ adjectives and thought-provoking words such as ‘bombastic’, ‘intriguing’, and ‘stunning’ that belong to more individual perceptive words. More perceptive words like these are believed to be drawn from real experience of the visitors. This is in line with Hall’s recommendation (2000) who states that the tourism products and services should be offered as an integrated experience to consumers and that their presence on the web should be an engaging experience for the users.

Syntactically, there were 51 (71%) simple, 15 (21%) compound and 6 (8%) complex sentences constructed by the 4 web developers (Indonesian Ministry of

Tourism, Budhanet, Eastjava.com and [lonely planet](http://lonelyplanet.com)). Those sentences use a limited number of imperative construction, a typical form of advertising language or casually named ‘gimmick’ and modalities showing obligation. For example, ‘**be sure** to visit...’ (7); ‘**Try** the lumpia...’ (8), ‘If you like religious objects, you **should** visit...’ (10), “You **could** trace...” (10).

The tripadvisor.com however, created a completely different format of presentation in the form of reviews. In terms of style of the language, the sentences were constructed informally with a more direct and intimate positioning of viewers equal to writers: ‘If you want to get information on each temple philosophy, make sure to have a guide...’, ‘They tell really nice stories and histories, you will not regret...’

The descriptive texts were based on a conceptual framework of integrating history, culture, tradition and panoramic views; these were the key points to attract tourists. Those texts however, did not engage with the online viewers as they were too descriptive and informative. This is clear from the absence of rhetorical questions such as ‘Do you know?’, ‘Have you ever imagined?’ etc. Additionally, the limited number of *gimmicks* used may mark the inability of the texts to reach out to their audience.

Ethnographically, the researchers found the texts substantially lacking in information sought by foreign tourists. One of the informants from the United States complained the texts provide ‘little useful information’ (Sunday, June, 2015). Besides,

the online developers seem to employ *bibliographical information* which are already familiar to online users. Visually, the photographs are unattractive and uninspiring and does not show a picturesque destination.

The second informant however, had a more sympathetic view of online tourism promotion, for example, 'the photo of Borobudur temple creates a 'mystical feel because it helps viewers to enjoy the atmosphere of some sanitised place that facilitates an escape from routines' (Kristina, 2015, p. 118). A biologist from Chile added the colourful pictures used in the promotional message bring attention to the beauty of the place.

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted on September 22, 2015 with tourism stakeholders showed interesting findings which pointed to the importance of language competency in online promotion of a tourist site.

There was consensus among the members that:

1. There is a strong need to increase language competency of tourism stakeholders.
2. A draft model of persuasive online promotion in English of Central Java tourism destination should be developed and disseminated.
3. A persuasive model of tourism online promotion should be highlighted tourism stake-holders.

Meanwhile the second in depth interview conducted with a much younger group

(mostly teenagers) pointed to the importance of language (easy to understand), and its expressiveness:

'It's interesting but it is sometimes for me (...) sometimes I think that the comment is very bad or not good but it can do interesting point of the culture for travel. But we don't use that.'

One interviewee pointed out the messages were: 'easy to understand, not too difficult,' adding information related to transport and logistics are important. Visitors most likely will rely on online information to in order to prepare for their travels and therefore, updated and accurate information should be considered a priority by these promoters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With regard to English competence of the web developers, generally they are good at providing descriptive and informative text but which are lacking in creative nuances. As their exposure to English is minimal, producing an engaging content is a tall order for them. This finding is supported by Terrauchi and Araki (2016) who focused on Japan. Noguchi (2012) emphasised that in professional setting, communicators need to be able to express their ideas very clearly. She further added that 'the speech may not need be native-like but it does need to be understandable; it may not be grammatically perfect, but it does need to be grammatically for effective communication; it may not be unique and creative but it does need to be rhetorically accessible for the audience' (p. 2).

Reputation according to Institute of Public Relations (1991) deals with ‘the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you’ (as cited in Harrison, 2002, p. 2), and language is believed to reflect what the developers of tourism online promotion do and say. Therefore, testimony from tourists who have already visited the sites and captured in the online promotion are important to attract potential tourists.

One of the most interesting findings has been the tendency of the Central Java tourism online promoters to provide content that resembles the encyclopaedic language exposing facts about the destinations. This is redundant especially when this information can be obtained from Google search. One of the challenges observed during the FGD conducted in September 2016 with the representatives of four local government institutions and private tourist operators is showcasing the uniqueness of their products and services by presenting a new perspective as captured by [http:// www.exploresolo.com](http://www.exploresolo.com) below.

‘Candi Borobudur is the biggest Buddhist temple in the world, which was constructed in the 9th century by Syailendra Dynasty. Its architecture and three main levels of the temple reflect Buddhist cosmology: Kamadhatu, the phenomenal world, the world of desire; Rupadhatu, the transitional sphere where human beings are released from their corporeal form and worldly concerns; and Arupadhatu, the sphere of Gods, the sphere of perfection and enlightenment. Thousands of relief carving depict

mysterious and majestic atmosphere of Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and death, as well as Buddha’s way to achieve Nirvana.’

The above text has obviously made use of the angle of spirituality as an entry to reach out to prospective tourists, of which the government-developed tourism online promotion puts the issue of spirituality far behind the geographical information of the destination. According to Tasci and Gartner (2009), both the visual and verbal presentation of the online tourism destination can create positive image of the respective destination and the one responsible for this is the DMO (Destination Management Organization).

The FGD members agreed that English training is vital for tourism web developers to come up with persuasive messages to attract potential tourists

CONCLUSION

This study has discussed challenges of developing effective online promotion of Central Java Tourism destinations. It suggested lack of creative writing skills in coming up with persuasive messages to boost online tourism promotional messages. Competency in English is vital to create positive image of the tourist destination and this language skill is urgently needed by website developers and online tour promoters. English training workshops are vital in improving language efficiency.

Future research can benefit from examining how images and pictures related

to online tourism promotion of Central Java can boost its attractiveness.

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