SEM37. Tourism and digital communication in online spaces

37A **12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 4**
37B **12 September h. 16:30-19:00, PN 4**

Convenors
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Abstract
The digital turn has significantly reshaped the tourism industry, with social media, websites, and AI-driven platforms playing central roles in framing how destinations are represented, marketed and experienced. These digital spaces not only facilitate the dissemination of information but also actively influence tourist expectations, decision-making, and experiences, often blurring the lines between reality and digitally constructed narratives (Can et al., 2025).

Web 2.0 has democratized access to information by fostering participation, interactivity, and user-generated content (Herring, 2013). Websites, social media, blogs, and review apps serve multifaceted functions in tourism communication, acting as tools for information retrieval, consumer engagement, and destination promotion (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). These platforms amplify individual voices and potentially challenge traditional destination imageries, allowing tourists to construct, negotiate and challenge the image of a destination (Van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021). At the same time, these platforms shape linguistic and multimodal representations of destinations, influencing perceptions of authenticity, cultural identity and heritage (Federici 2018); and offer new possibilities for accessibility, leveraging multimodal features such as videos, subtitles, and interactive content to reach diverse audiences (Domínguez Vila et al., 2024; Katan & Fina, 2024).

Drawing on this theoretical background, the panel explores how language, multimodal strategies, and translation practices shape digital tourism communication. Specifically, we aim to foster discussion among scholars on key issues related to digital storytelling of tourist destinations (Katan, 2022), tourism discourse in digital media (e.g., social media, websites, blogs, etc.), human interaction with digital platforms, digital humanities approaches to tourism communication, and the role of AI and emerging technologies in tourism communication. As to new insights we will investigate how AI can be used by linguists to analyse tourism discourse, and in particular we will focus on new and evolving technologies to analyse the semiotic interplay between text and image both intra and interlingually.

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SEM37. Papers

37A   12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 4
- *"Hello, I'm Emma, an AI travel companion!:" AI-powered travel assistants and slow tourism discourse* (Silvia Cavalieri, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia / Annalisa Sezzi, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia / Jessica Jane Nocella, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia)
- *What AI can reveal about the tourist gaze* (David Katan, Università del Salento)
- *"Be a Guest, not a Tourist". Tourism discourse in digital media* (Franca Poppi, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia / Ilaria Iori, Università degli Studi di Ferrara)

37B   12 September h. 16:30-19:00, PN 4
- *Reframing heritage: Multilingual storytelling and translation in UNESCO World Heritage Promotion* (Cinzia Spinzi, Università degli Studi di Bergamo)
- *Building (in/ex)clusion in (un)sustainable tourism: A corpus-supported and multimodal approach to digital human vs. AI-generated tourism discourse* (Federico Zaupa, Università degli Studi di Modena and Reggio Emilia)
- *"This is space tourism rather than space exploration": Multimodal representations of space tourism in Instagram reels on Blue Origin's April 2025 Mission* (Valentina Di Francesco, Università degli Studi di Ferrara)

SEM37. Abstracts

"Hello, I'm Emma, an AI travel companion!:" AI-powered travel assistants and slow tourism discourse
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Artificial intelligence (AI) is significantly reshaping the tourism industry. The increasing adoption of AI technologies "can enhance the overall travel experience, making it more accessible, personalized, and sustainable. This shift can lead to greater inclusivity, allowing more individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in tourism through easier access to information, tailored services, and reduced costs" (Siddik et al., 2025).

While a substantial body of research has examined AI-generated texts in academic writing and healthcare contexts, the domain of tourism discourse remains comparatively under-researched. Although recent studies have highlighted AI's potential to deliver personalized and efficient travel-related services (Kırtıl & Aşkun, 2021), empirical analyses of AI-generated tourism discourse are still limited. Moreover, despite the extensive attention to tourism discourse (e.g., Dann, 1996; Maci, 2017), investigations specifically addressing sustainable and inclusive tourism communication are relatively scarce (Malavasi, 2017; Caimotto, 2020; Lazzeretti, 2021; Pato et al., 2021; Pasquini, 2018; Cappelli & Masi, 2019).

This paper aims to fill the existing research gaps by analysing a corpus of tourism-related texts generated by AI-driven travel assistants, such as GuideGeek or Google Gemini AI, among other AI-based tools designed for destination discovery. These systems produce a variety of tourism discourse forms, encompassing both real-time travel assistance and personalized itinerary creation. Based on tourism discourse analysis, this study investigates whether AI-generated prompts in tourist assistance contexts can surpass the "homo narrans" paradigm (Katan, 2022), engaging users in more participatory and multimodal communicative experiences in the attempt "to persuade, lure, woo and seduce millions of human beings, and, in doing so, convert them from potential into actual clients" (Dann, 1996, p. 2).

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"This is space tourism rather than space exploration": Multimodal representations of space tourism in Instagram reels on Blue Origin's April 2025 Mission

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The rise of private spaceflight as a form of "space tourism" has reshaped the representation, commercialisation and experience of space. On April 14th 2025, *BBC* correspondent Victoria Gill remarked through the *BBC* Instagram account, just after the *Blue Origin-New Shepard 31* launch: "This is space tourism, rather than space exploration". 'Branded' as the Blue Origin's first all-women flight crew, the mission involved six female celebrities and raises questions about how space travel communication is framed.

This study investigates how this spaceflight is represented through Instagram reels, short 'digital video postcards' for user engagement. Given the highly multimodal content, this analysis focuses on the interplay between language, visuals, sound and narrative modes (i.e., voice-over and captioning) to understand how this mission is communicated and the meanings it constructs.

The main research question explores how space tourism involving celebrities is constructed through multimodal representation. Other connected questions are:
-   How is celebrity participation framed linguistically, visually and aurally (i.e., elitism or legitimisation discourses)?
-   How do users challenge the authenticity of the mission?
-   Is elitism masked by inclusive and inspirational language?
-   How do non-professional participants such as celebrities express legitimacy when participating in a space mission?

The analysis follows a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin, 2013) and tourism discourse studies. Thematic analysis (Walters, 2016) is used to identify patterns and emergent categories in users' comments, focusing on reception and resistance. Data are collected through hashtag-based sampling (Zappavigna, 2015) (i.e., #BlueOrigin, #spacetourism, #spacetravel), supplemented with the celebrities' public accounts (i.e., Katy Perry's). To ensure relevance, the reels that do not show clear multimodal narration or celebrity participation are excluded from selection. Data collection is conducted using a private window without personal login to minimise potential algorithmic bias; I include reels posted from April 14th 2025, until data saturation is reached. The dataset is further manually screened. As for users' engagement, users' comments are considered in the study.

Preliminary observations suggest that space tourism is constructed as a glamorous, risk-free experience; videos show faces with flawless makeup and high-fashion spacesuits. As for users' reception, while some questioned the authenticity of the mission, public personalities, such as the model Emily Ratajkowski, openly criticised it as an exclusive form of tourism. Instagram reels seem to render space tourism spectacular, consumer-friendly and an object of elite discourse (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2024).

Since it draws on a multimodal analytical perspective, this paper contributes to the critical debate on tourism communication and the digital representation of promotional narratives beyond terrestrial destinations. A future research direction can be the exploration of Italian-language reels and comments to provide preliminary insights into how space tourism is locally and culturally received and perceived, with or without making cross-cultural generalisations or comparisons, according to the perspective adopted.

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What AI can reveal about the tourist gaze
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This paper presents three pilot studies exploring how AI can be used to analyze the concept of the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Katan & Taibi, 2021) in tourism discourse, with a focus on the semantic interplay between text and image. The studies investigate the effectiveness of prompt-based analysis, compare AI-generated sentiment and topic classifications with those derived from a priori taxonomies, and evaluate the performance of two AI platforms—Claude Anthropic and OpenAI.

The corpus comprises recent (2020s) blog posts about Salento, Puglia, written by two groups: ten prominent local bloggers (writing in Italian, with 27,000 to over 260,000 followers) and ten international bloggers (writing in English, with 16,000 to 78,000 followers). The aim is to assess whether AI can distinguish between insider and outsider perspectives, building on previous research (e.g., D'Egidio, 2009).

All texts and accompanying images were processed using AI-based automatic description tools. Image features were extracted using ResNet50, and both image features and text topics were clustered using k-means to identify dominant thematic groupings. Kernel Density Estimation was then applied to visualize the distribution of image clusters, helping to reveal patterns in the representation of the tourist gaze.

The results showed clear distinctions between insider and outsider perspectives. For example, local bloggers predominantly focused on themes related to 'the beach,' while international bloggers emphasized 'towns,' 'culture,' 'planning,' and 'activities.' Despite these thematic differences, both groups demonstrated similar patterns in aligning text with images. Claude Anthropic generally produced more detailed and coherent image descriptions than OpenAI, though further refinement is needed in cluster generation and interpretation.

These pilot studies demonstrate the potential of AI for scalable, non-subjective analysis of multimodal tourism discourse and support earlier findings on the divergence between insider and outsider gazes.

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"Be a guest, not a tourist". Tourism discourse in digital media
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The Tuscan-Emilian Apennine, designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in June 2015, was once a sought-after skiing destination. However, the region has ever since experienced a decline due to factors such as urbanization, competition from the Alps (Danzi & Figini, 2023), geographical and socio-economic marginalization and agricultural abandonment. Initiatives are being implemented to revitalize the area by leveraging its natural heritage through tourism as a means to stimulate the local economy. However, while mountain tourism has a well-established history (Araújo et al., 2019), there remains a notable lack of research on the linguistic representation of the Emilia-Romagna Apennines within tourism promotion.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing promotional texts with a view to establishing the role of metaphors (Jaworska, 2017) in shaping online tourism narratives. The analysis investigates a corpus of institutional web pages written in English that promote UNESCO-designated Man and the Biosphere (MAB) reserves located in the Apennine regions of Italy, specifically: *Appennino Tosco-Emiliano*, *Collemeluccio-Montedimezzo Alto Molise*, and *Sila*. Language is crucial in tourism promotion: narratives, myths, and metaphors not only create destination images but also influence visitor perceptions (Federici, 2011; Maci, 2018, 2020). However, traditional tourism models often contribute to environmental degradation, emphasizing the need for a transition to sustainable tourism, particularly in marginalized areas like the Apennines (Rocio et al., 2023; Rafiq et al., 2022).

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate whether local stakeholders are successfully meeting the promotional challenge of the digital age, by adopting strategies that prioritize sustainable tourism over mass tourism. Preliminary results show that local stakeholders are increasingly promoting these destinations in accordance with sustainable tourism values. This shift is reflected in both the language and metaphors used in the dataset, which emphasize experiential tourism and authentic experiences closely related to the biodiversity of the place, indicating a potential preference for a more ethical and environmentally conscious model over mass tourism.

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Reframing heritage: Multilingual storytelling and translation in UNESCO World Heritage promotion
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Digital storytelling plays a pivotal role in shaping tourism experiences by constructing destination narratives, enhancing emotional engagement, and fostering visitor participation. As noticed in the literature (Campos & Almeida, 2022), storytelling is positioned not merely as a marketing technique but as a strategic framework for designing immersive and meaningful experiences. In heritage tourism, storytelling bridges tangible and intangible cultural elements, often facilitated by digital tools such as mobile applications, virtual reality, and 3D reconstructions. The co-creative potential of storytelling in enabling tourists and communities to collaboratively construct meaning and identity has also been emphasised (Moscardo, 2020). Furthermore, digital storytelling supports accessibility and inclusion, allowing personalized and multi-sensory engagement across diverse publics.

This paper investigates how storytelling and translation practices intersect in the multilingual promotion of UNESCO World Heritage sites, with particular attention to linguistic shifts and cultural reframing across language versions. UNESCO and affiliated tourism boards often publish heritage narratives in multiple languages, positioning these texts as both cultural representations and promotional tools. By examining parallel descriptions of select Italian World Heritage Sites (e.g., Matera, Cinque Terre, and the Amalfi Coast) in English and Italian, the study explores how translated storytelling reflects and reshapes the semiotic construction of place.

Drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and translation theory (Federici, 2018; Katan, 2022; Maci & Spinzi, 2025), the analysis reveals notable variations in metaphor use, tone, and terminology between source and target texts. For instance, while the Italian versions often emphasize cultural intimacy and historical continuity through evocative metaphors, the English texts tend to adopt a more universalizing and touristic framing. These shifts are not merely

linguistic but ideological, encoding different assumptions about target audiences, narrative authority, and cultural authenticity. Furthermore, the study highlights how translation in heritage storytelling acts as a site of negotiation between global and local imaginaries. Translated narratives do not simply reproduce original meanings; they re-narrate destinations in culturally salient ways, often adapting or omitting references to contested histories, religious symbolism, or regional identities.

This contribution advances current debates on tourism discourse by framing translation as a constitutive element of destination storytelling. It also calls for a more nuanced understanding of multilingual tourism communication as a form of cultural mediation shaped by institutional, commercial, and semiotic dynamics. In doing so, it bridges translation studies, discourse analysis, and heritage tourism research, offering new insights into the discursive production of place across languages and audiences.

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Building (in/ex)clusion in (un)sustainable tourism: a corpus-supported and multimodal approach to digital human vs. AI-generated tourism discourse

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Tourism discourse has emerged as a dynamic field of linguistic research, offering insights into the features of its main genres and the strategies through which destinations and experiences are constructed and communicated. More recently, increasing attention has been paid to the communication of sustainable and inclusive tourism (e.g., Malavasi, 2017; Cappelli & Masi, 2019). In addition, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) in digital content creation has made it possible to provide personalized travel solutions to diverse users (Kırtıl & Aşkun, 2021). However, little research has explored whether and how AI-generated tourism texts compare to human-authored ones in their capacity to effectively promote inclusion.

This study attempts to fill this gap through a comparative analysis of two sub-corpora of tourism texts: the first comprises human-authored content from institutional websites of local authorities and tour operators, along with social media posts (e.g., Instagram, Facebook); the second includes texts created by AI generators such as ChatGPT and Gemini. The selected texts describe some of Europe's most renowned walking trails. This form of travel was chosen for this study on inclusion due to its environmental sustainability, affordability, and appeal to both secular and religious travellers. Methodologically, the data is analysed relying on the 'framework for integrated corpus-supported and critical analysis to identities' discursive representations' (Zaupa, forthcoming), an ad hoc framework that considers simultaneously the tools of corpus-assisted discourse studies (e.g., Partington & Marchi, 2015) and critical discourse analysis (e.g., Van Leeuwen, 2008). The aim is to explore how tourists and local communities are discursively represented, and consequently the extent to which human- and AI-generated texts employ an inclusive approach for diverse audiences, such as children, elderly, religious, and disabled people. Multimodal resources, such as images, are also examined to assess whether their choice supports the linguistic findings. The study offers recommendations, including prompt strategies for generating tourism texts aligning with sustainable development goals, thereby helping institutions and content creators use AI effectively while ensuring linguistic quality and accessibility for diverse users.

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