

A multimodal discourse analysis of the Philippine Department of Tourism's *New Normal Travel* videos*

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Abstract: While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic can be felt in several industries in the Philippines, perhaps one of the most negatively affected is tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges related to health and safety concerns that crippled leisure travel in the country. Given this, the study investigates *New Normal Travel*, the Philippines' Department of Tourism's (DOT) promotional video series and the ways in which these represent pandemic travel during the global pandemic. Using multimodal discourse analysis and stance, the study examines how the DOT employs linguistic and visual resources in reimagining tourism while living with the pandemic. That is, the DOT utilizes multimodal strategies that entangle discourses of health and safety with tourism discourses. The videos convey information that makes explicit expected and acceptable tourist behavior (e.g., wearing masks and social distancing). At the same time, strategies in the videos convey stances that stimulate positive affects, which minimizes the threat of the pandemic and maximizes the desirability of travel. The study argues that the DOT's videos exhibit instances of crisis commodification, wherein the COVID-19 pandemic and the management of it is made to align with a capitalist lifestyle and forms of capitalist consumption. As such, the prevention of COVID-19 within the context of the videos is framed as the responsibility of individuals while encouraging touristic consumption.

Keywords: tourism, crisis commodification, stance, multimodality; COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to the Philippine tourism industry. Border closures and restrictions to air and land travel limited the number of tourists traveling domestically, while health and safety measures imposed costly travel requirements (e.g., pre- and post-travel COVID-19 tests) that deter locals from making travel plans. The resulting decline of tourist activities has had a negative economic impact on the country. Westerman (2021) reports that in 2021, the Philippines lost an estimated \$8 billion in tourism revenue, which is crucial as the industry comprises 12% of the national GDP. In addition, COVID-19 has stimulated mixed feelings about travel. Based on the EON group's survey of Filipino sentiments regarding travel in 2021, Filipinos indicated their ambivalence regarding touristic travel with 31% of respondents noting feelings of fear in traveling during the pandemic; however, when asked if they felt safe, 70% responded positively (Llarena 2021). In an attempt to restart the tourism economy and generate confidence in the industry, the Philippine Department of Tourism (DOT) launched the campaign "New Normal for Traveling" in 2020 to educate tourists and stakeholders regarding standard safety and healthy protocols of the

industry as it "transitions to the new normal" while supporting the promotion of domestic tourism (Tourism Promotions Board 2020). This campaign offers an entry point into understanding changes in promotional tourism discourse brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic that are enacted through linguistic, visual, and discursive strategies. This study examines the video series *Travel in the New Normal* produced by the campaign and investigates the ways in which the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic is constructed alongside touristic consumption and mobility.

A growing number of critical scholarly works in tourism examine the role of mediated and mediatizing practices in the construction and selling of places. Urry (2005) notes that globalizing forces and mediascapes represent tourist areas as places of consumption and mobility by defining them in terms of abstract characteristics which are similar and different to other places. Flowerdew (2004) focuses on institutional practices in the marketing of a place, using the Hong Kong government as a case study to illustrate how top-down bureaucratic practices such as public consultation control the planning efforts that discursively construct Hong Kong as a world city. Such practices related to tourism, according to Thurlow and Jaworski (2011) are fundamentally

semiotic since what tourists consume during their travels are images and lifestyles that are also prefigured in mediated forms such as travel vlogs, advertisements, and online videos. However, while the promotion of particular destinations, events, and activities have received scholarly attention, the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic is represented in discourses of travel remain underexplored due to its relative currency. As a way of addressing this gap, the study mobilizes the notion of crisis commodification (Starr et al. 2020) which refers to “a metasemiotic practice that imbues goods with novel sign values, reformulating life under the crisis as a commodity register with an associated set of material consumption practices” (p. 3).

The study further explores crisis commodification through its examination of how the DOT multimodally creates alignments between existing notions of travel and subscription to mandated health and safety protocols, thereby positioning pandemic leisure travel as desirable while downplaying its negative aspects. Thurlow and Jaworski (2011) note that tourism is largely a “communicative business” where language and its realization and enactment are fundamental to the tourist experience (p. 287). As such, the study seeks to explore the role of language in the DOT’s discursive and semiotic practice which integrates the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the tourist experience, thereby reconstituting notions of travel.

2. METHODOLOGY

As mentioned, videos from the DOT’s “Travel in the New Normal” campaign are used as the data for analysis. The videos represent the DOT’s efforts not just to convey information about health and safety protocols that are in effect vis-à-vis domestic travel, but also to encourage Filipinos to actively travel amidst the pandemic. The videos used for this study were collected from the DOT’s official YouTube channel. We focus our analysis on 4 videos from the *New Normal Travel* series. Details of the videos are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The DOT’s *New Normal Travel* series

Video Name	Video Title	Length	URL
Video 1	New Normal Travel: Dive In	1:59	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41WjsT72j0U
Video 2	New Normal Travel: Dine In	2:03	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98SDRC-oyWk

Video 3	New Normal Travel: Stay In	1:26	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCvaUJW ezcc
Video 4	New Normal Travel: Ride On	1:59	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv553hbd QD4

The data was chosen as it was one of the earliest attempts of the DOT to restart local tourism. Given the constraints of space and length, the study follows Rose (2016) in performing a qualitative analysis of frames that were selected based on their potential to raise key analytical points rather than a quantitative content analysis of actors, actions, and objects represented in the videos. The study does not attempt to provide a generalizable claim about the commodification of tourism during the pandemic in the Philippines, but rather to illustrate discursive practices and processes involved in calibrating the pandemic as part of existing consumerist behavior.

The study adopts a multimodal discourse analytic approach in analyzing the videos. In brief, multimodal discourse analysis studies the “various methods used by humans to communicate” (Chan 2013, p. 70), which extends “the study of language in combination with other resources such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, [and] action” (O’Halloran 2011, p. 120). In our analysis, we selected key frames that appeared to highlight entanglement of the COVID-19 pandemic with touristic consumption. The visual analysis draws from Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) social semiotic framework. Particular attention is given to shot distance, information value (i.e., organization of information in a given frame), and camera angles for the visual aspects of the video. Meanwhile, strategies in Resigl and Wodak’s (2009) Discourse Historical Approach are utilized as complementary analytical tools: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivation, and intensification/mitigation (p. 94; see also Wodak 2001). We provide a brief explanation of these discursive strategies in the analysis section below and explore how they are deployed through language and images. A focus on the cohesion of multimodal resources can demystify how capitalist investments are made compatible with discourses of health and safety brought by the pandemic.

3. ANALYSIS

This section presents analysis of the *New Normal Travel* videos following Resigl and Wodak’s (2009) five types of discourse strategies and Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) social semiotic framework. The section is organized according to the types of discursive strategies, with key frames

being utilized to illustrate how such strategies are deployed multimodally.

3.1 Nomination

The referential strategy or nomination concerns the creation of in-groups and outgroups vis-a-vis represented social actors and phenomena (Wodak 2009). In the context of the videos, several figures are prominently constructed: tourists, service establishments, and workers in the tourism industry. Fig. 1, which shows a tourism marshal calling the attention of tourists who were playing beach volleyball to remind them to maintain social distance, mobilizes nomination through membership categorization. The marshal utters “*ma’am, sir, marshall po ako bawal po sa beach yung hindi nag P-PDA*” (“*ma’am, sir, I’m a marshal, and you are required to socially distance on the beach*”). By using conventionalized terms of address and identifying his social position, the marshal constructs his addressees as guests, differentiating them from those in the tourism sector. This differentiation is also visually accomplished to include the viewer. The camera angle shows high involvement, with the tourist police directly looking at the camera and by extension the viewer. Moreover, the camera distance utilizes a long shot, conveying relative objectivity. The combination of these modalities reinforces the differentiation of tourists and tourism workers.

Through these differentiated roles, the video also integrates health protocols (i.e., social distancing) with tourist activities (i.e., beach volleyball) (Fig. 2). The imposition of the health protocol communicated through the text is mitigated through the polysemy of PDA (which may be interpreted locally as a ‘public display of affection’) and a life-sized cardboard cutout of NBA player LeBron James, serving as a metric for social distancing. Through these elements, the urgency of the pandemic is managed through humorous enforcement of the protocols, thereby making it compatible with existing notions of leisure travel (i.e., “it must be fun”) while at the same time emphasizing how travel has changed due to the pandemic.



Fig. 1. Tourist police approaching tourists (Video 1; 00:40)

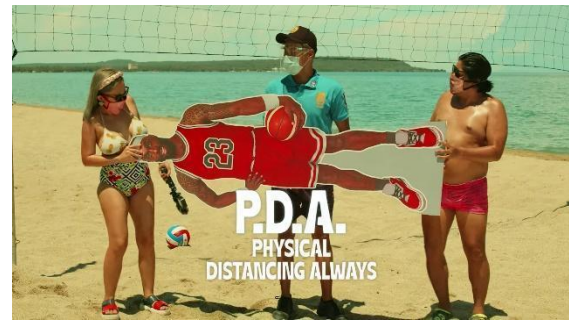


Fig. 2. Tourist police and tourists with cardboard cutout (Video 1; 00:47)

3.2 Predication

Predication involves the attribution of traits, characteristics, and qualities to social actors, objects, and phenomena through discursive qualifications (e.g., adjectives, relative clauses, metaphors) (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). The most dominant strategy in the videos is using adjectives that emphasize the symbolic facets of travel (i.e., luxury, comfort, exclusivity), which are invoked alongside health and safety protocols which draws a semblance of commensurability. For instance, Fig. 3 shows dining procedures in establishments that follow health protocols. The scene is accompanied by a voice-over (i.e., “Kindly put your reservations in advance. Our limited seating is extremely exclusive”). The choice of describing dining capacity in terms of exclusivity pragmatically accomplishes at least two things: (1) it reinforces a degree of eliteness by constructing pandemic dining as exclusive, which in the context of the video relates to avoiding crowds, and (2) simultaneously emphasize convenience and comfort for travelers. A presupposition of these points is that it is due to the pandemic that such exclusivity is made possible. The limited number of seating due to the health protocols brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic is discursively made to align with qualities that are valued by elite forms of consumption. This discourse is complemented visually. For instance, the photographs of food, more than conveying informational content, resemble carefully curated food photography that emphasizes not just taste but the aesthetic desirability of the food (Portmann 2020). The visual attributes of the food and the restaurant’s relative emptiness strengthens discursive ties that are made between eliteness, exclusivity, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cleanliness is also hailed as a desirable attribute of traveling during the pandemic. Fig. 4 shows a cleaning staff while hotel guests pass by the lobby. This scene is followed by a voiceover: “Accommodations are by reservation only. Walk-ins will not be entertained. Meanwhile, we will do what we can to keep the hotel spotless.” The linguistic and visual modalities of this frame reflect a resemiotization of public displays of sanitation of cleanliness, which is referred to as “hygiene theater”

(Dickey 2021). The statement takes a deontic mood that conveys commitment to maintaining cleanliness at an impeccable level. While hotels are supposed to regularly clean their establishments, foregrounding this practice through language and images enables the DOT to imply that establishments have a degree of control over the spread of the virus within such environments. By increasing the salience of cleanliness and sanitation in travel, establishments semiotically construct an alternative safety measure that aids in the promotion of tourism.



Fig. 3. Tourists lining up while on their phones (Video 2; 00:45)



Fig. 4. Cleaning staff and tourist (Video 3; 00:44)

3.3. Argumentation

Argumentation refers to the “validity of specific claims of truth and normative rightness” (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 94) to persuade audiences. The nomination and predication strategies contribute to the overall argumentation scheme of the videos. Figs. 5 and 6 specifically illustrate instances of predication contributing to the implicit argument about the new normal of travel—i.e., that traveling is possible, if not desirable, during the pandemic. The voice-over that accompanies the image draws relations between travel discourse and health protocols. While a tourist is shown to be undergoing a temperature check in Fig. 5, the voice-over mentions that “the hottest hot spots are popping.” Fig. 6 shows a close-up shot of a bottle of hand sanitizer dispensing alcohol to a hand while the voice-over announces that “the bottles of alcohol are flowing.” The utterances of the voice-over could be easily ascribed to tourism promotion discourse that highlights interaction and pleasure (Dann 1996, p. 11). The voice-over explicitly identifying hot spots and

predicating it with “popping” (which is youth vernacular that suggests coolness) foregrounds social activities that may be directed at feelings of isolation brought on by the pandemic (Smirnov & Lam 2019, p. 309). The predication strategy in the second voice-over communicates indulgence and gratification, indicating temporary reprieve through consumption.

Moreover, the use of the present perfect tense constructs activities in such establishments as ongoing and that commodities are in no short supply, thereby intensifying the liveliness of travel and enticing audiences who seek immediate enjoyment and temporary liberation from the drudges of living in the pandemic. The combination of both modalities; however, creates an ambivalent message. For one, utilizing language that conveys heightened positive affects and juxtaposing these with images that invoke the pandemic mitigates ideas of escape. In this view, language use lessens the negative impact of the pandemic on travel. For another, it is also possible to read the linguistic and visual modes as complementary. The humor that results from the combination of upbeat discourse and the humorous images (Fig. 5) effects positive feelings about tourist consumption taking a different form in the pandemic as it may lead to new and exciting perspectives on touristic travel (albeit taking a different form) which contributes to new and exciting forms of capitalist consumption.



Fig. 5. Tourist doing a body temperature check (Video 3; 00:12)



Fig. 6. Tourist sanitizing their hands (Video 3; 00:14)

3.4. Perspectivization

Perspectivization relates to the positionality of the writers/speakers through

expressions of involvement or distance. These may be realized through deictics (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). The most common manifestation of this strategy in the videos is through the use of pronouns. Fig. 7 opens with the voice-over “Welcome back. Vloggers, Jetsetters, Wanderlusters, We’ve missed you. This is the new normal of traveling. A privilege to be at your service.” Within the context of the utterance, “you” anaphorically refers to specific groups of privileged travelers, which may construct travel during a pandemic as an exclusive activity. At the same time, however, in invoking these figures, the voice-over also reinforces the aspirational aspect of travel in terms of mobility associated with such figures. Meanwhile, the use of “we” is ambiguous. Given that the video is a promotion by the DOT, “we” could possibly mean the government agency. At the same time, “we” may also refer to establishments that remain open during the pandemic. This ambiguity is visually mitigated as the tourists in the video are picked up by a shuttle bus. Moreover, the use of the pronouns reinforce a cordial customer service relationship where prospective travelers, signalled by “you,” are positioned to gain benefit from traveling.



Fig. 7. Tourists at the pick-up point (Video 4; 00: 18)

3.5. Intensification

Intensification strategies pertain to the modification of the force of utterances (Reisigl and Wodak 2009). One way in which intensification is deployed is through verb tense. The voice-over in Fig. 8, for instance, narrates “spectacular beach fronts are your own private island” while in Fig. 9 it mentions “our approach to dining is simple: just you and your food, so you can savor every flavor.” The use of the simple present tense (i.e., “are,” “is”) highlights absolute truth claims and enforces the commitment of the voice-over, which possibly represents tourism establishments, to their assertion of delivering an ideal service and is characterized by exclusivity. Visual modes also are utilized to intensify such claims about such amenities and services. Fig. 8 for instance shows a wide shot of the beach not only emphasizes the vastness of the space, but also its emptiness, which resonates with the linguistic mode. The composition of the shot also invokes the notion that the landscape is uninhabited except for the tourist. As Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) note, this imagery of emptiness

functions to create landscapes of elite destinations through demonstrations of rarity and exclusivity. In a similar vein, Fig. 9 shows a tourist eating his meal alone. The use of a medium shot draws attention to the tourist and the environment, which also shows other tourists dining alone. Through this, the video similarly achieves a sense of exclusivity, but less romanticized than in Fig. 8. It can be seen, then, that intensification discursively and visually reformulates the pandemic as desirable. A sparsely populated beach and a restaurant with patrons dining solo are not necessary safety measures. Instead, these are instances of luxury made possible by the pandemic.



Fig. 8. An empty beachfront (Video 1; 00:28)



Fig. 9. A tourist enjoying a solo meal (Video 2; 00:52)

4. CONCLUSION

Challenges to the tourism industry brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted governments and establishments to adapt tourism promotions that mitigate the threat of the pandemic while negotiating changes that it has caused in the industry. The study showed how the crisis that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic is commodified in the DOT’s *New Normal Travel* video series. Through a multimodal discourse analysis informed by a discourse historical approach and social semiotics, the study illustrated how different resources are mobilized to integrate the COVID-19 into the desirable sphere of tourism. Through language use and visuals, the videos position the pandemic as a challenge and as a resource aligned with existing modes of capitalist consumption by endowing pandemic tourism with features of eliteness (e.g., exclusivity) while managing its undesirable aspects.

To commodify COVID-19 vis-à-vis travel, the videos stimulate positive affects through humor that may assuage the hesitance of domestic travelers. The use of humor also speaks to Filipino sensibilities, who are largely the target audience of the videos. The videos demonstrate that humor is a way of discursively managing the material and tangible difficulties, disasters, and horrors that the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted in the lives of the Filipino people. Moreover, as the discussion shows, negative aspects and the threat of the pandemic are minimized and notions of fun, comfort, and safety are highlighted instead. Invoking these feelings vis-à-vis pandemic travel contributes to the building of a consumption logic that rationalizes these measures as necessary and this brand of traveling as the “new normal.” This approach effectively makes the effects of the pandemic on the tourism industry compatible with neoliberal and capitalist imperatives that place responsibility on individuals and their consumption to cope with the pandemic by managing themselves through and during travel.

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