

Sustainability in Cruise Marketing:

Discourse Perspectives on Coastal and Marine Destinations



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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study is part of an ongoing research aiming to analyze—through the lens of **Multimodal Discourse Studies (MDS)**—13 webpages on Royal Caribbean’s website that promote the Caribbean as a cruise destination. Specifically, this presentation shows **preliminary findings** from the *Bahamas* webpage.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Investigating how the Caribbean is **discursively constructed** in cruise tourism marketing
2. Assessing whether **sustainability is meaningfully incorporated** or merely symbolically referenced in cruise marketing discourse

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

- Cruise marketing plays a crucial role in **shaping perceptions** of marine and coastal destinations.
- Royal Caribbean serves as a strategic case study due to its **market leadership and brand visibility**.
- The cruise industry increasingly references **sustainability**, but its **discursive representation** remains underexplored.
- Website content offers a rich site to study how **sustainability is framed in digital promotion**.

CRUISE TOURISM AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

Global Growth and Economic Significance

- 31.7 million cruise passengers in 2023; projected **40 million by 2027** (CLIA, 2024)
- Up to **20% of GDP** from cruise tourism in the **Caribbean** (CTO, 2024)
- Supports **315,000+ jobs in Europe** (CLIA, 2023)

Environmental Costs

- Major contributor to **marine pollution**: waste, emissions, noise
- High fossil fuel dependency → emissions of **SOx, NOx, PM, CO₂** (Comer, 2022)
- **Methane leaks** from LNG ships = potent greenhouse gas

CRUISE TOURISM AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

Air & Water Pollution

- +**3.8% NO₂** per cruise ship in **Barcelona** (Oxford Economics, 2023)
- Scrubbers discharge **PAHs** into marine ecosystems
- Issues with **solid waste**: plastics, food, incineration byproducts
- **Underwater noise** disrupts marine life (EC, 2023)
- Anchoring & dredging damage **coral reefs** and **seagrass beds** (Burke & Maidens, 2004)

Socio-Cultural Strains

- Boosts **jobs** and **spending**, but...
- Strains infrastructure, increases cost of living (e.g., **Venice**)
- **Short stays** = limited local economic retention + **seasonal jobs** (Seidl et al., 2006)

TOURISM DISCOURSE

- Tourism discourse refers to **how language and visuals construct destinations** (Dann, 1996; Francesconi, 2014).
- It is **persuasive, performative, and ideological** (Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005; Manca, 2016).
- Constructs **ideal tourist experiences and consumer roles** (Cappelli, 2023).
- Shapes both **how places are imagined** and how they are consumed (Maci, 2020).
- Often reinforces **existing stereotypes and power asymmetries** (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010).

MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE STUDIES (MDS)

This study, grounded at the intersection of discourse studies and tourism studies, draws on **Dann's (1996)** framework for the analysis of tourism discourse, which categorizes persuasive techniques into three main dimensions:

- **Verbal techniques**—including *lexical choices, grammatical patterns, metaphors, and narrative voice*
- **Visual techniques**—including *image composition, color, and the representation of landscapes, people, and activities*
- **Combined techniques**—referring to the interplay between text and visuals that together construct a coherent and compelling destination image



VERBAL ANALYSIS



- The webpage uses **directive language** (e.g., “*relax*,” “*explore*,” “*kick back*,” “*upgrade*”) to position the tourist as an empowered subject.
- **Evaluative adjectives** like “*ultimate*,” “*exclusive*,” “*magical*” frame the Bahamas as a site of leisure, indulgence, and curated pleasure.
- Recurring abstractions (e.g., “*perfect day*,” “*your ultimate beach day*”) **commodify** the destination into branded, consumable experiences.
- **Sustainability-related terms** (e.g., “ecotourism,” “conservation,” “responsibility”) are **entirely absent** from the text.
- Nature is framed not as an ecological system, but as a **visual and experiential asset**—a backdrop to enjoyment rather than a focus of stewardship.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

- Dominant **color palette** (blue, turquoise, white) emphasizes purity, leisure, and luxury—classic tropes of tropical tourism.
- **Image composition** centers around tourist experiences. Featured visuals highlight resort infrastructure, water-based fun, and group leisure scenes, reinforcing the narrative of effortless escape.
- **Natural elements** (marine wildlife, beaches) appear only in relation to **recreational use** (e.g., snorkeling and scuba diving)—not as vulnerable ecosystems.
- There are **no visual indicators of sustainability**—no protected areas, environmental messaging, or cues about responsible behavior.



MULTIMODAL SYNERGY



- Modes work in harmony to center the **tourist as an active consumer**.
- Language constructs agency through **imperatives**; visuals reinforce this with **curated, action-filled imagery**.
- The **tourist gaze is positioned as both natural and authoritative**, framing the destination through pleasure and control.
- Abstractions like “*perfect day*” are visually grounded in **idealized scenes of leisure and tropical excess**.
- The multimodal ensemble functions as a **persuasive mechanism** that simplifies complexity and aestheticizes ideology.

CONCLUSION

- Royal Caribbean's Bahamas webpage **does not incorporate sustainability** as a discursive or visual priority.
- The destination is presented as a **passive, pleasure-oriented space**, where nature and culture are commodified for cruise consumption.
- Multimodal promotional strategies work to **aestheticize and normalize a leisure-centric narrative**, erasing ecological or social complexity.
- The analysis reveals a missed opportunity for engaging with sustainability narratives in one of the world's most tourism-impacted marine regions.

RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

- Demonstrates how sustainability can be **marginalized through multimodal tourism discourse**.
- Applies and extends **Dann's (1996) framework** to analyze digital cruise marketing from a sustainability perspective.
- Contributes to the emerging field of **sustainable tourism communication** in high-impact travel sectors.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

- Cruise brands may benefit from **integrating environmental messaging** into promotional content.
- Addressing sustainability more explicitly can **enhance transparency**, meet the expectations of environmentally aware travelers, and support destination stewardship.
- Aligning branding with sustainability goals can **add depth and credibility** to destination narratives.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- Expand analysis to include **all 13 Caribbean-themed webpages** on Royal Caribbean's website:
 - Bermuda
 - Jamaica
 - Puerto Rico
 - Belize
 - Etc.

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THANK YOU!



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