## Cultural Mediation in Tourism: Online Promotional Travel Guides as a Case Study

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*In tourism, mediation refers to the assistance of tourists in their journey. In other words, mediation occurs when the mediator presents the culture of a place to potential tourists while making sure that the cultural elements are clear enough for the tourists to grasp. Culture is an embedded element in tourism promotion. Hence, the mediator must be well grounded in the culture in order to adequately transmit it to the tourists discovering it for the first time. The study relies on excerpts extracted from online travel guides, which have become a widely used means of promotion in "post-pandemic" travel due to their innovative promotional approaches, i.e., considering safety measures. Following a qualitative approach, a comparative study is conducted to explore how culture is "mediated" through four international online travel guides. The focus is on the element of Moroccan culture and the tools employed when it is presented to the English readership.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aspect of mediation has been studied from different angles in tourism literature, namely tour guides (Feldman & Skinner, 2018); tourism translations (Duran Muñoz, 2011); travel videos (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009), travel journalists (McKinnon, 2019), etc. Nowadays, due to the advances in the internet and social networks, many tourism promotional materials (TPMs) can be found online. These materials are becoming widely popular; especially among young people (Polyakova et al., 2015, p.333). Online travel has also gained a lot of attention after the pandemic, and the services it offers are becoming more in demand (Orîndaru et al., 2021, p.5) due to various reasons including the availability of places, the focus on safety measures, etc.

People needed fast access to information, especially when it comes to travel safety. Hygiene and health precautions have also started to be taken more seriously in the "post-pandemic" world. Such measures have become determining factors when it comes to the choice of a

destination  (Serra & Seabra, 2023; Rahman et al., 2021). In this regard, many travel websites and online guides have become the 'go-to' tools.

The present study focuses on online travel guides to highlight the linguistic techniques adopted when introducing Morocco as a destination. This process requires the mediator, the travel writer, in this case, to be well-grounded in the culture presented to the tourists. In other words, the mediator must adequately introduce various cultural aspects to potential tourists who are in the 'decisive state' of choosing a destination.

The travel guides selected for analysis in the study at hand are online travel guides provided by international travel information websites. Hence, many of the guides are written by non-natives. The study thus seeks to explore how Moroccan culture is introduced to English-speaking tourists from an international point of view. The objective of this study is to analyze and deduce the techniques adopted by the writers in the process of cultural mediation. Learning.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Cultural Tourism:

According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), tourism is defined as a "social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes" (UNWTO , 2008). In other words, tourism refers to the movement from one place to another for various purposes either domestically or internationally. In another definition provided by the World Tourism Office, tourism is described as the type of travel that varies between a minimum of one night and less than a year at most (As cited in Franklin, 2003, p.27).

The tourism sector is one of the most prominent job-generating sources in Morocco.

550 000 direct jobs were generated in 2018; constituting 5% of total employment (OECD Tourism Trends and Policies, 2020). In the past few years, because of the pandemic, the tourism sector suffered many losses worldwide. However, the situation is now gradually improving. According to the Moroccan Directorate of Studies and Financial Forecasts, tourist arrivals rose to 34% at the end of 2021 after the record low registered during the pandemic (MCMRE, 2022), and the GDP growth increased to 7.4% the same year (World Bank, 2022).

Each place has a culture to present to the world, and this culture is advertised and promoted through tourism. According to Richards (2009), culture and tourism share a complementary relationship that reinforces "the attractiveness and competitiveness of places, regions and countries" (p.3).  Tourists are captivated by the novelties brought by different cultures. They tend to look for something new, i.e., "the otherness" (Maci et al., 2018) in contrast to what is familiar.

While some tourists travel to a place for leisure or adventure, others seek to engross themselves in a new culture. This type of tourism is known as "cultural tourism". The statistics provided by UNWTO state that cultural tourism amounts to 40% of global tourism and is considered one of the most flourishing sectors in the tourism industry (UNESCO, 2021). Due to its significant percentage, cultural tourism has a huge role in making people more open to different cultures around the world. When people travel, they are bound to encounter a culture different than their own, which makes the latter a "motive" (Artal-Tur & Kozak, 2018) for many travelers.

In Morocco, this type of tourism constitutes 80% of the activities promoted (Seyfi, 2020). Morocco is renowned for its rich cultural heritage. There are many archaeological sites, cultural assets, and historical monuments all over the country which draw tourists from different corners of the world. It is also to be noted that Morocco ranks second among the African countries with the largest number of UNESCO World Heritage sites (UNESCO, n.d.). In order to promote the Moroccan culture, diverse tourism promotional materials are used in which different parties act as mediators.

## 2.2 Cultural Mediation:

In tourism studies, mediation refers to a person's endeavor to guide and assist tourists in their "tourism experience" (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009, p.25). In other words, this process involves assistance, which can be "personal", "non-personal", or "technology-based" (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009, p.25). The latter includes the different online materials available such as online travel guides.

The people involved, referred to as the cultural mediators or cultural brokers (Cohen, 1985; Salazar, 2015), are the "interveners" in the journey of tourists. Mediation has a principal role in tourism experiences (Ooi, 2002, as cited in Rabot, 2009, p.6). The mediators are the facilitators of the "tourist experience" (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010, p.1). In other words, they are considered the linking points between different cultures. The cultural mediators must therefore be well-grounded in the culture in order to transmit the cultural references, which require "the right adaptation strategy" (Aleksandrova & Afanaseva, 2019, p.4).

Cultural mediators do not just coordinate between the tourists and the tourism product. They are referred to as "brokers" because they help profit the country's economy (Salazar, 2015, p.2). They rely on various aspects when introducing the destination such as "culture, authenticity, and branding" (Hejlsvig, 2010). These correlated elements all play a pivotal role in the challenging process of mediation.

## 2.3 Cultural Challenges:

When it comes to mediating culture and transmitting cultural references to tourists, the mediators involved may face challenges of all sorts. First of all, the mediator must be aware of the concept of 'the Tourist Gaze' coined by Urry (2002). Tourists tend to have their personal prenotions about the place that they intend to visit, and these pre-existing ideas may clash with how the place is framed and branded by the tourist industry.

The mediator must also understand that the tourists come from different cultural backgrounds. The cultural mediator's awareness of the intercultural communication process involved is crucial as the tourists "negotiate their cultural identities, rules of meaning, perception, effects" (Şerbănescu, 2007, as cited in Albu, 2015, p.8). The misunderstandings which may arise when tourists come into contact with a new culture are referred to as "cultural shocks" (Oberg, 1960) or "cultural bumps" (Leppihalme, 1997). The mediators must therefore opt for the most adequate techniques in order to transmit culture while taking into consideration all the intricate factors involved.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The present paper is a comparative exploratory analysis that focuses on how the Moroccan culture is introduced to English-speaking tourists. This approach will be applied to online tourism promotional materials, especially travel guides. The study seeks to explore the approaches used by travel guide writers when promoting a destination and its culture.

The study follows a content analysis approach, in which culture-specific elements were extracted from four online travel guides (Lonely Planet, Rough Guides, Culture Trip, and Trip Advisor). The cultural references extracted from the guides were then analyzed to deduce the techniques opted for by the writers in the process of mediation.

### 3.1 Data

The data were selected through non-random sampling by applying the following criteria: Two of the travel guides selected are pioneers in the travel industry. They started as travel guidebooks publishers and launched their websites later, namely: Lonely Planet and Rough Guides . The other two guides selected started as travel websites namely: Trip Advisor and Culture Trip. They provide other services such as booking, reviews, etc.

This particular selection was opted for to compare renowned 'traditional' travel guides with relatively modern ones. The comparison concerns the techniques opted for by the writers and their frequency of use. The travel destinations selected for analysis consist of cities with renowned heritage sites and cultural assets, namely Marrakesh, Fez, Meknes, Essaouira, and El Jadida.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After conducting the analysis, four techniques were identified as being the most prominent when it comes to cultural mediation. The techniques include the integration of local terms without explanation, the use of local terms in context (with explanation), the use of French loanwords, and the neutralization of cultural terms. Some of these techniques have a specific denomination in the literature, such as the tourism discourse techniques introduced by Dan Graham (1996). Each technique will be explained through examples from the selected guides as follows:

**Technique 1: Languaging**

Languaging is a verbal tourism discourse technique introduced by Dann Graham in his prominent work The Language of Tourism: A Sociolinguistic Perspective (1996). This technique refers to "the use of foreign and invented words in tourist texts to induce a sense of exotic feeling in the tourist; and the use of cultural references, called realia (chiringuito, gazpacho, etc.)" (Duran Muñoz, 2011, p.34).

This technique is used when the mediator wants to highlight the 'foreign' elements and put them in the foreground to add 'local flavor'. It is also similar to an approach referred to in the tourism literature as exoticism, which is about "the aestheticizing perception of the Other" (Huggan, 2001, as cited in Berdychevsky, 2015, p.1).

**Examples from the guides:**

- Places:

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|----------|-------|---------------|
| Souk | El Jadida | Culture Trip |
| Kasbah | Essaouira | Trip Advisor |
| Zaouia | Fez | Rough Guides |
| Mellah | Marrakesh | Lonely Planet |

In these examples, the names of some places are integrated into the text without being explained to the readers. Some terms are solely found in the Moroccan context such as "Mellah", which refers to Jewish quarters in Morocco . Other terms such as "Souk", "Kasbah" , and "Zaouia"  can be used in other countries around North Africa and the Middle East. The culture-specificity of the terms thus differs. Some terms may be familiar to the readers while others may not.

This notion of familiarity has been raised by Cohen (1972), who believes that although tourists seek 'change' and 'novelty', they need to feel some sense of familiarity. The 'experience' of familiarity; however, differs from one tourist to another (pp.166-167). As stated before, the degree of the cultural specificity of the examples above also varies greatly. In this regard, the impact of 'languaging' as a technique depends on the tourists and their knowledge of the cultural concept.

**- Food:**

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|----------|-------|---------------|
| Chabakiya | Fez | Trip Advisor |
| Tajine | Marrakesh | Lonely Planet |
| Couscous | Meknes | Culture Trip |
| Harira | Marrakesh | Rough Guides |

In these examples, some famous Moroccan delicacies are introduced to the readers. In tourism discourse, the technique of 'languaging' is said to be mostly used within the gastronomy field (Dann, 1996, p.183).  One of the reasons behind including famous dishes in tourism promotional texts without further explanation is that tourists could be familiar with some representative local dishes, e.g., couscous, tajine, etc. The widespread of local restaurants around the world means that cultural exposure has transcended boundaries. This technique is also used to "flatter the pseudo-linguistic abilities of the reader" (Boyer &

Viallon, 1994, as cited in Cappelli, 2013), who may feel some familiarity with the terms included.

**Technique 2: Explanation**

The technique of explanation is used in this paper to refer to the technique in which the terms rendered by 'languaging' are explained to the English readership either in one or multiple words. Baker (1992) notes that the use of additional information when rendering a culture-specific element is important for comprehension (p.34).

This technique is prominent in such texts due to the informative aspect of tourism discourse. Katan (2012), by adopting Greimas' typology, lists three functions of tourism discourse, namely: the promotional, informative, and performative functions (As cited in Agorni, 2018, p.70). Besides their persuasive nature, tourism texts tend to be rich in information. In online travel guides, the information bulk differs based on the nature of the guides (the length). The informative aspect of the guides also helps provide information "on how a destination is gazed at", which is considered a strong factor in the destination selection process (Salim et al., 2012, p.139).

**Examples from the guides:**

**- Places:**

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|---|---|---|
| Gate (*bab* in Arabic) | Meknes | Culture Trip |
| Hammam – the Middle East's answer to a thermal spa | Essaouira | Culture Trip |

The examples provided in this section were explained to the readers either by providing the English equivalent or by explaining the term contextually. This technique makes the foreign concept easier to conceptualize and envision. Through using this technique, the writer includes the tourists within the cultural scene while also presenting them with something familiar.

The use of both the explanations "Bab in Arabic" and "The Middle East's answer to a thermal spa" makes it easier for the tourist to understand the cultural term without the need to search for its meaning in a dictionary or online. This technique can also be an effective means to help the tourists remember the term used by the locals as it has been clarified.

**-Food:**

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|---|---|---|
| Spicy galangal drink (Khoudenjal) | Marrakech | Rough Guides |

| Tanjia, or jugged meat | Marrakech | Lonely Planet |

The two concepts introduced in this section refer to "Marrakchi" delicacies (originating from Marrakech). As mentioned before, the use of languaging is a distinctive feature of gastronomic concepts. However, since these dishes in particular are more specific and popular in the city of Marrakech, they were explained to the English readers.

For example, it is less common for a tourist to find a 'Khoudenjal' drink in a restaurant outside of Morocco. This type of drink is usually prepared by street vendors in Jamaa El Fna Square. In contrast to common meals such as Tajine and Couscous, the cuisine described in the examples are typical regional specialties. In a way, the writers assume that the readers are unfamiliar with these notions, and hence an explanation is thought necessary.

**- Artefacts/Artistic Concepts:**

| **Example:** | **City:** | **Online Guide:** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Mashrabiyat (lattice screens) | Fez | Culture Trip |
| *Zellij* (mosaic) | Fez | Culture Trip |
| Darj w ktaf ("Cheek and shoulder") | Marrakech | Rough Guides |

The terms chosen for analysis in these examples refer to Moroccan/ Islamic architectural patterns and styles. These examples were first introduced in their Arabic/Moroccan Darija forms and then explained by their equivalents in English. These architectural motifs are more than just decorative elements. They have a symbolic significance that requires explanation. In both the first and the second examples, the terms are explained using a generic term. In the third example, however, the cultural term is translated from Moroccan Darija literally. A more accurate translation would be "step and shoulder" as it refers to the type of line variation used to create the motifs.

**Technique 3: French Loanwords**

Many terms found in the travel guides are borrowed from the French language. Turin (1971) notes that the French colonization had a strong influence on the cultural ground of Moroccan society, in which language is a salient component (as cited in Boulahnane, 2018, p.121). A loanword, as defined by Hoffer (2005), refers to the act of "adopting" the concept as well as the term used to refer to it from another language (p.53). In the following examples, many terms were retained in French despite the guides being intended for English readers.

**Examples from the guides:**

-**Places:**

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|---|---|---|
| **Mosquée** de Mazagan | El Jadida | Lonely Planet |
| **Jardin** Jnan Sbil | Fez | Culture Trip |
| **Île** de Mogador | Essaouira | Rough Guides |

A large number of the places introduced in the guides are kept in the French language. Though the promotional texts are meant for English readers, most of the names are not introduced in their English translation such as 'Mosque' for Mosquée, 'Garden' for Jardin, and 'Île' for Island. It is to be noted that Morocco was colonized by the French. Therefore, it is more common to find the names of some attractions in French.

-**Clothing:**

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|---|---|---|
| **Babouche** (leather slippers) | Fez | Lonely Planet |

In this first example, the term "babouche" was used to introduce a type of Moroccan traditional footwear. The term that is generally used in the Moroccan context is "balgha" / "belgha". The term was explained to the readers in English, but the name of the footwear as it is common in Moroccan Darija was not included in the guide.

-**Transport:**

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|---|---|---|
| Calleche | Meknes | Culture Trip |

Similar to the previous term, "Calleche" or "Calèche" is also not the term used in the Moroccan context. The term that is generally used by the locals is "Kutchi", derived from the Hungarian word Kocs, which is the village where these types of vehicles were first used (Harper, n.d).

**Technique 4: Neutralising**

In this technique, the cultural load of the term is discarded; making the culture-specific element a culture-neutral one. This technique was introduced by Sanning (2010) as "neutralizing". This technique falls between domestication and foreignizing and seeks to make the cultural reference comprehensible for the target reader (p.131). The use of culture-neutral terms is the opposite of the first technique, i.e., languaging. While 'languaging' foregrounds the cultural elements, 'neutralizing' prioritizes the reader's comprehensive abilities by introducing a generic term.

**Examples from the guides:**

- **Food**:

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|---|---|---|
| Pudding | Meknes | Culture Trip |
| Slow-cooked lamb | Marrakech | Culture Trip |

In the first example, the writer describes a cooking class offered to tourists
coming to Meknes. The class offers a "three courses menu" of traditional Moroccan Meknasi
food.
The use of "pudding" here is generalizing as it could be any dessert and not just a
"Meknasi" one (originating from Meknes).
 In the second example, "slow-cooked lamb" was used to refer to the dish of "tanjia". The
equivalent used is culture neutral. Slow-cooked meals are a common type of cuisine.
However, what makes 'tanjia' different is the typical amphora in which it is cooked. Opting
for 'slow-cooked lamb' as a description is explanatory but it omits the nuances embedded in
the term.

- **Transport:**

| Example: | City: | Online Guide: |
|---|---|---|
| Horse-drawn carriage | Marrakech | Lonely Planet |

Similar to the "calèche" example referred to previously, the term used to refer to the local
mode of transportation in Marrakech is generalized. The use of "Horse-drawn carriage" is
descriptive in a broad sense. As mentioned before, a more culture-specific approach would
have been the use of "Kutchi" as it is the term that is widely used by the locals.
Collins Dictionary has compiled a list of vehicles that can be classified as "horse-drawn
carriages," including the barouche, cariole, coach, and others . There are therefore various
vehicles, originating from different countries, that can be categorized under the umbrella term
'horse-drawn carriage'. The use of a generic term is a neutralizing technique but it can help
tourists envision the cultural term better, especially if it is common, as the one in this
example.

 **Frequency of use:**

Languaging is the predominant technique in the four guides. This technique is primarily used
in tourism texts due to various reasons. Tourism promotion seeks to "lure" (Dann, 1996, p. 2)
the readers and turn them into potential tourists. The use of foreign words helps in making the
destination more desirable and eye-catching. Moreover, tourists generally look for something
different from what they have in their home countries. Maci et al., (2018) introduce a
taxonomy that depicts the notion of "otherness" in tourism discourse such as "here/now vs.

somewhere else, private vs. exotic", etc. (p.2). The writers thus foreground the culture by adding cultural flavor to the texts.

Explanation is the second most used technique in both the guides "Lonely Planet" and "Rough Guides". These guides are more exhaustive and comprehensive than the others due to the length of the guides. The explanation technique used in these guides provides the reader with the cultural context. In the two other guides, i.e., Culture Trip and Trip Advisor, explanation is not as prominent because the guides are less detailed.

French Loanwords come third in classification in both the traditional guides while they rank similarly to explanation in "Culture Trip" and higher in "Trip Advisor." The loanwords found in the last two guides from the chart are words that could have been used in English, e.g., "plage", "Jardin", etc. Lastly, the use of culture-neutral equivalents is more prominent in "Culture Trip" while it ranks fourth in the other guides.

The process of cultural mediation in online guides includes the amalgamation of these four main techniques. Some of the techniques, such as 'languaging', rank higher than the others due to the advertising and promotional aspects that are inherent in tourism. By combining the aforementioned techniques, the guide writers as médiators, attempt to bring the cultural nuances closer to the tourists to help them feel more immersed in the culture.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A tourism text is more than just a text that introduces a certain destination to potential tourists. It largely promotes a destination through the use of various verbal and non-verbal techniques. Mediating a culture and conveying its intricacies to people who have never experienced it before is a challenging process, especially if one does not belong to the culture itself. For the mediation process to be adequate, the techniques used must be well-balanced. Focusing only on technique can lead to "overkill" (Dann, 1996, p.184) or make the text less appealing to the readers.

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