
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Staging Marrakech: Theatricality, Exoticism and the Colonial Gaze

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| ABSTRACT

This article critically examines how orientalist discourse informs the representation and promotion of Marrakech in travel guides. Through selective language, Marrakech is staged as a site of mystery and exoticism, a portrayal which is inextricably linked to the commodification of culture. By approaching promotional discourse as a discursive medium, the study reveals how cultural otherness is not only represented but also objectified and commercialized within the tourism industry.

| KEYWORDS

tourism, discourse, culture commodification, marketing strategies, exoticism

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 10 September 2024

PUBLISHED: 04 October 2025

DOI: 10.32996/jpda.2025.4.3.1

1. Introduction

The leading path of this research connects the notion of language as an interface for meaning-making as well as a tool for communication and interaction in the context of tourism advertising. The contextualization of language in the field of tourism advertising lies in identifying the power relations exerted by Western advertisers in their conceptualization on the non-western Moroccan society. This cognitive processing involves the ideological structures of orientalism which are based on a number of doctrines which are projected onto the advertisers' promotional discourse of the advertising destination of Marrakech. Our interest lies in uncovering the ideological structure of orientalism as a cognitive composition which tends to get projected onto the promotional discourse of non-Western tourism destinations. Moreover, our inquisitiveness is geared towards uncovering how the ideological discourse of orientalism participates in promoting the city of Marrakech to Western tourists through travel guides. Travel guides serve as powerful mediators of experience; they do not merely inform but also instruct and direct the tourist gaze. Through stylized discourse, these guides participate in staging Marrakech as a site of mystic, and adventure. This staging is intimately tied to commodification, whereby Moroccan culture, and daily life are reduced to consumable experiences.

2. Methodology

The foundational grounds of our methodology and rationale are constituted of a model inspired by two Scholars, van Dijk and Edward Said. Van Dijk's (2000), (2001) way of doing critical discourse analysis follows a multidisciplinary framework composed of the following structures: discourse, cognition and society. Discourse is perceived as language, either, written or spoken, cognition as an ideological perspective or dimension of shared belief systems and ideologies, and society as an interpersonal medium which combines group relations and societal structures rooted in inequalities and power relations. The incorporation of Edward Said's model of analysis will elaborate on van Dijk's methods of practicing critical discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a framework which examines how power is produced and reproduced through discourse, particularly focusing on domination and power relations within language. As van Dijk (2001) explains, CDA is not a straightforward method of addressing social issues; rather, it is a multimodal approach constituted of various sub-fields, each with its own theories, methodologies, and analytical tools. Consequently, CDA does not offer a fixed model for analyzing social phenomena. Instead, it emphasizes the instantiation of conceptual understandings of social issues to determine which discursive or social elements should be implemented or rejected. In order to evaluate the power dynamics in discourse using CDA, it is essential to identify how language connects to social inequalities. This connection is established through a contextual model. In discourse, context is understood as the cognitive structures individuals construct, influenced by an ideational framework rooted in both cognitive and social structures. These factors play a key role in shaping context within discourse.

The tools which will enable us to define the context of a communicative event in discourse are as follows, time or setting, participants, identities, roles, goals and interpersonal relations. The evaluation of these properties depends on who produces the discourse, and to whom it is addressed. This means that the contents of discourse vary and depend on the cognitive models of the addresser and addressee of the communicative event. In tourism advertising, advertisers produce a promotional discourse built on marketing strategies which render discourse more appealing to target audiences. We may consider these strategies as a power move which influences the audience's response in the favor of the advertiser. This type of persuasion focuses on an emotion-driven advertising approach which aims to influence the consumer's feelings rather than relying on strong logical arguments (Fennis & Stroebe, 2010). In this study, we are interested in evaluating the tourists' search for exoticism and peculiarity in their travels. This feature is part of Iso-Aholas' (1980), (1982), (1983), (1989) psychological model for tourism motivation. Its connection with the push features lies in its conceptualization as another label for the tourists need of escapism and experiencing the strange and unknown. Likewise, Crompton (1979) came up with his own model featuring a plethora of labels which make up the foundation for the theory behind the tourists' motivational forces (as cited in Morrison, 2019). These concepts expand on the notion of escapism by describing it as driving force which encourages tourists to leave their everyday, familiar surroundings in search of new, unusual, and exotic experiences. To elaborate on the concept of exoticism in this study, we will link it to Horner and Swarbrooke's (2021) understanding of tourism motivation. This aspect revolves around the tourists' search for experiencing the fantastic, romantic, mystic and imaginary aspects of their tourism destination of choice. Moreover, the notion of exoticism in this article is contextualized within the West's perception and constructed idea of the Orient in which the West perceives Morocco, or more specifically Marrakech, as a representation of mythical exoticism.

The analysis of our study is divided into two main segments, the socio-cognitive context, and the linguistic context model. The first segment evaluates the cognitive model of the advertising entities of our data. Moreover, this section offers an analysis of the broader context of the communicative event found in our data by positioning the participants' cognitive models. It also establishes the contextual basis for the theoretical motivations behind tourism advertising, particularly through the marketing strategies employed by advertisers.

The linguistic context model is composed of van Dijk's (2001) discourse properties, as well as their sub-categories. First, we will tackle the meaning category. The latter is explained as a representation of ideological discourse. Since the concept of meaning holds a complex nature, we will elaborate on it through the following sub-category:

- *Implication*: implication in discourse refers to the inferred information or knowledge that remains implicit in discourse. Indeed, implication may also extend to hide the negative information about in-groups' motives and actions. Accordingly, advertising entities may use their promotional discourse to convey information in an indirect way, either to communicate negative information concerning out-groups or to hide the hostility of in-groups.

As part of the analysis organization, the style tool now falls under the second category. This component is expressed by language users through the use of lexical concepts such as words.

Evidently, participants may opt for certain words instead of others to describe or make statements about different groups. In this case, this category is portrayed through the following sub-section:

- *Lexicalization*: this sub-category represents the general ideological beliefs of language users when referring to others. To be more specific, this sub-category represents the local level of analysis as it directs the analysis to words which express underlying meanings depending on the position of the addressee. In this case, the type of lexicalization present in the discourse of our data is meant to portray Moroccans in a negative way.

We will elaborate on the western advertising entities viewpoint using Said's (1979) category of discourse analysis labelled: "Popular Images and Science Representation" (p. 285). This category shows the way Arabs are represented by Europeans. This representation includes all the stereotypical patterns which are associated with Arabs (camel and donkey rider, illiterate vagabond, etc.) These associations extend from wardrobe items (sandals, headscarves, turbans and long garments) to body language (head tilted down, shoulders in, hunched backs, hands above the head). This viewpoint depicts Arabs as extremely violent individuals who show aspects of lechery, strive for bloodshed, use cleverly devious ruses and intrigues to get their way. Furthermore, the western viewpoint on Arabs also represents non-westerners as treacherous people who deal in slave trade, drive camels and lack institutional and cultural assets, thus associating Arabs with characterizations of degeneracy and immorality.

3. Data Collection

Our data is composed of promotional materials or travel guides used to promote the city of Marrakech located in the kingdom of Morocco. The city of Marrakech had been subjected to colonial rule by the French protectorate for forty-four years (1912-1956). The city of Marrakech at that period was mainly composed of two districts: the old town and the new town. The old town or the Medina, the city's original walled district is home to the famous historical sight Jamaa el Fna. The latter is a large place where storytellers used to gather to narrate their tales and where locals (Moroccans) and travelers (tourists) used to trade goods and services. Our research approach follows a qualitative strategy which demonstrates ideological power abuse in discourse emanating from orientalist dogmas. Naturally, this approach is meant to locate the way advertising entities use discourse to implement certain societal structures or to reinforce ideological belief systems. In this case, advertising entities exert power through discourse to affect two entities: the target audience and the Moroccan society. Firstly, the power discourse aimed at consumers or the target audience is based on the advertising strategy meant to attract potential tourists through a discourse of exoticism and peculiarity to entice feelings of curiosity.

Our data sourcing is composed of primary data taken from the following travel guide:

- Insight Guides Experience Marrakech (2017).

Our data is composed of textual instances which make the object of our analysis. The travel guide is written by foreign authors. The reasoning behind this data collection is elaborated by an understanding of the West's views on the Orient and their projection onto promotional discourse. Our data has been selected to answer our statement of the problem which revolves around situating and demonstrating orientalism-based discourse in tourism advertising and its effects on consumers and the Moroccan society.

4. Analysis

The tourists' need to experience peculiar events in their travels is a crucial aspect in the context of tourism advertising. The meaning of peculiarity may be elaborated by the tourists' interest in experiencing something completely different based on strange and exotic aspects of the tourism destination. This theme features the second need: strangeness. We link this latter to the notion of exoticism found in the promoted peculiar aspects of the city of Marrakech.

The setting of the communicative situation takes place in Marrakech's ancient district: the Medina. The participants include the advertising entity who takes the role of the writer/author, the second participant features the audience of the advertisers, namely the tourists, who also happen to be the readers. The communicative role of the first participant is that of an addresser, and the second participant, the tourist takes the role of the addressee. The national identity of our two participants (the advertiser and the tourist) is of Western origins given the fact that the advertiser is promoting the city of Marrakech to Western tourists. The social identity of the addresser is that of an advertising entity and the addressee is that of a tourist. The relations between participants feature a dynamism of power relations initiated by the addresser, and held over the addressee through persuasion techniques based on the advertising strategy of strangeness and peculiarity, or more precisely exoticism, which conjures feelings of curiosity within the reader. Moreover, the first participant (the advertiser) is also exerting power over the Moroccan society in an implicit manner by reinforcing orientalist dogmas on Moroccans through the promotional discourse of our data. The overall action of the advertiser is about promoting Jamaa el Fna through a staged lens.

The following analysis evaluates the way advertisers portray Marrakech as an object of desire which holds mystical properties and entices the Western tourist to live in imaginary fantasy.

In the following excerpt, Marrakech is portrayed as a spectacle. This idea reinforces the fact that advertisers play a major role in objectifying the city of Marrakech by displaying it as a show with hosts as actors and performers. "The whole city of Marrakech is a spectacle and just walking through the medina can throw up a kaleidoscope of experiences. But the soul of the city's theatrical life is the square of Jemaa el Fna, where a thrilling thousand-year-old nightly show (some call it the greatest on earth) unfolds like a magic carpet at sunset. There are acrobats and magicians, storytellers and snake charmers, and all manner of spontaneous entertainment in between. By day, it is the preserve of Gnaoua musicians, dentists, witch doctors, juice sellers, and dancing monkeys. This is also the place to visit a fortune-teller – an ancient practice still thriving in a country where concepts of superstition and baraka (luck) are threaded through society." (Insight Guides Experience Marrakech, 2017, p. 20).

Jamaa el Fna is depicted as an area which showcases a lifestyle relating to theaters, stages and even plays which promise new and exciting experiences for the curious and inquisitive. This discourse displays a theatrical setting which emphasizes the imaginary aspects of the magical Orient. This theatrical setting is highlighted by Marrakech's description as a spectacle, the theatrical life at the Jamaa el Fna square with its unchanged exciting show including the various actors illustrated as performers in this show. Some of these actors display fictional attributes to their names such as: magicians, storytellers, snake charmers, witch doctors and fortune tellers. These actors also display a sort of mysticism and occultism which leads us to believe that the advertiser is indirectly depicting Moroccans as superstitious people who believe in witchcraft and soothsaying. This viewpoint is compatible with Bruhl's (1910/1966) account on non-western groups who are thought to live within a mystical reality. This means that westerners view Orientals as people who live in a different reality than them, a reality ruled by occultism and magic, opposing a reality founded on logic and sound reasoning. Following on this observation we can argue that Moroccans are believed to live a reality founded on the supernatural and the occult. This observation may lead us to understand that this discourse serves as a differentiating gap between westerners and Moroccans. This analysis reveals that the negative 'them' discourse strategy linked with Moroccans is displayed in the author's opinion on the Moroccan society which is depicted as an all-time believer in occultism.

In the following paragraph, the advertiser describes Jamaa el Fna as an ancient, almost primitive and medieval place, while simultaneously hinting to notions of occultism. "Jemaa el Fna, the iconic physical and cultural heart of Marrakech, is a primal, ancient, intangible space that has been referred to as, 'an inland, tideless sea'. Gathering place for a thousand years, this is where the great Saharan caravans, laden with spices, slaves, and salt would arrive from Timbuktu. Today, the goods may have changed, but not the sense that here Africa and Arabia converge. At once circus, open-air food festival, and living museum, it is the distillation of Marrakech's mystique and magic." (Insight Guides Experience Marrakech, 2017, p. 45). The antiquated aspects of the square are noticeable in the promotional discourse of this area. The detailed description of Jamaa el Fna reveals that the advertiser is promoting the ancient square of Jamaa el Fna with its ancient practices regardless of their authenticity. Moreover, Jamaa el Fna's depiction as a circus which features the magical and mysterious side of Marrakech accomplishes two goals. Firstly, it objectifies the Moroccan heritage by presenting it as a commodity. Secondly, it promises the western tourist unprecedented experiences which materialize their imaginary representations of the Orient.

The advertisers' aim to ignite the tourist's imagination is fulfilled through the portrayal of weird and unusual items to the western tourist. The use of the word 'primal' as a descriptive terminology for the Jamaa el Fna square highlights the implication of the savage and barbaric side of ancient Marrakech. Moreover, the exclusionary discourse framing Moroccans is further reinforced by referenced to the morbid activities in which local communities were historically involved. Certain historical accounts of slave trading in the Medina depict non-Western populations as morally inferior, often using racialized narratives which attribute their actions to inherent biological traits. Such representations reflect broader ideological frameworks rooted in colonial discourse.

5. Conclusion

This article examines how advertising representations in our travel guide construct Jamaa el Fna as a performative spectacle, framing it as a circus-like space that offers tourists an exclusive encounter with the fantastical and extraordinary. The discourse which highlights Moroccans' involvement in slave trading, camel riding, and witchcraft recalls a mysterious and exotic world which dazzles, shocks and enchants the Western audience. In this study, we find that the advertiser promotes this viewpoint as a commodity featuring real individuals as characters straight out of an oriental fairytale. By promoting Marrakech's Jamaa el Fna as a circus involving Moroccan traditions for sale, the advertiser objectifies both the tangible and intangible Moroccan heritage. Moreover, the commodified aspect of Marrakech is mostly apparent in the promotion of Jamaa el Fna as a show or circus where lifelong practices and traditions (some of them extinct by now) are promoted as objects for sale through their representation as

practices from a play, and located within a grand circus-like atmosphere. From an advertising perspective, the analysis of the discourse in this article reveals that the advertising entities use the advertising strategy of exoticism with the purpose of encouraging

feelings of curiosity within the Western tourist vis-à-vis the portrayed peculiar and exotic promotional discourse of Jamaa el Fna.

The linguistic tools of this study reveal that the Western advertiser holds negative conjectures on Moroccans through a promotional discourse which aims to highlight all the negative actions performed by Arabs in general, through the history of their portrayed barbaric traditions. This last observation leads us to determine that the advertising entities use a discourse strategy which highlights the out-group's (Moroccans) negative deeds while simultaneously attenuating from the negative deeds of Westerners, also known as the advertisers' in-group.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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