

BRANDING CULTURAL HERITAGE: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF HOW BOROBUDUR TEMPLE IS PRESENTED IN ONLINE TRAVEL GUIDES

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Abstract

As a UNESCO World Heritage site and a spiritual center for Buddhism, Borobudur Temple holds a multifaceted identity that presents unique branding challenges. In an era where digital media overwhelmingly shapes tourist perceptions, this study investigates how Borobudur is branded and constructed in online travel guides. Using a qualitative discourse analysis framework, this research examines a purposive sample of high-influence, English-language travel guides and blogs to deconstruct the dominant narratives, linguistic choices, and visual representations used to frame the temple. The findings reveal four primary discourses: (1) the Discourse of Spectacle, which prioritizes the aesthetic and photographic experience, particularly the sunrise; (2) the Discourse of Spirituality-Lite, which presents a secularized, accessible form of spirituality; (3) the Discourse of the Adventurous Quest, which frames the visit as a logistical challenge to be overcome; and (4) the Discourse of the Historical Artifact, which positions the temple as a static object of historical inquiry. The analysis indicates that the Discourse of Spectacle is the most pervasive, often subsuming other narratives. This commodification of the visual experience risks marginalizing Borobudur's deeper religious and cultural significance, posing significant implications for heritage management, marketing ethics, and the quality of the visitor experience.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Cultural Heritage, Discourse Analysis, Borobudur Temple, Tourism Marketing, Online Media

A. INTRODUCTION

As a UNESCO World Heritage site and a spiritual center for Buddhism, Borobudur Temple holds a multifaceted identity that presents unique branding challenges. In an era where digital media overwhelmingly shapes tourist perceptions, the construction of heritage sites in online spaces has become a critical area of inquiry. Recent studies highlight that digital marketing and social media narratives significantly influence visitor loyalty and destination image (Jatyananda et al., 2025). This study investigates how Borobudur is branded and constructed in online travel guides.

While Borobudur is historically a spiritual sanctuary, contemporary online discourses often reframe it through the lens of mass tourism. Recent scholarship suggests that heritage sites are increasingly "Instagrammable," with visual-centric narratives often overshadowing historical depth (Mandagi & Centeno, 2025). This aligns with broader trends in Southeast Asian tourism, where digital storytelling often prioritizes aesthetic spectacle over cultural authenticity (Wijayanto et al., 2025). Using a qualitative discourse analysis framework, this research examines a purposive sample of high-influence, English-language travel guides to deconstruct the dominant narratives used to frame the temple.

The representation of heritage sites in the digital age has shifted from educational descriptions to experience-based storytelling. Poernama and Santosa (2025) argue that for sites like Borobudur, the "experience economy" has necessitated a branding shift that emphasizes personal transformation and visual consumption. This is further complicated by the tension between sanctity and spectacle; for instance, the recent Vesak Lantern Festival has been analyzed as a successful transformation of a religious ceremony into a major tourism attraction through strategic digital positioning (Wijayanto et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the role of "spiritual tourism" has gained traction in post-pandemic travel trends. Recent studies indicate that while domestic tourists may prioritize the "spiritual-lite" or healing aspects of Borobudur, international narratives often exoticize the site as a mystical "Ancient Wonder" (Kne Social, 2025). This study builds upon these recent findings by categorizing the specific linguistic and visual strategies online guides use to perpetuate these imaginaries.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology centered on discourse analysis. This approach is ideal for investigating how language in social contexts produces meaning, constructs identities, and shapes knowledge (Gee, 2014). Rather than seeking statistical generalizability, the goal was to achieve an in-depth understanding of the patterns of representation within a specific, influential set of texts.

1. Data Collection

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select data sources. The criteria for inclusion were: (1) English-language content; (2) high visibility (appearing on the first or second page of a Google search for "Borobudur travel guide" or "things to do in Borobudur"); and (3) publication or significant update between 2021 and 2025 to ensure contemporary relevance. The final corpus consisted of 15 online articles, including:

- a. Major international travel guides (e.g., Lonely Planet, National Geographic Travel, Culture Trip).
- b. Prominent independent travel blogs with high domain authority.
- c. Official tourism promotion websites (e.g., Wonderful Indonesia).

Text and associated images from each article were archived for analysis, as visuals are a critical component of online discourse (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

2. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in three stages, following principles of thematic discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1. Familiarization and Initial Coding: The researcher read through the entire corpus multiple times to identify initial patterns. Key linguistic features were coded, including recurring adjectives ("breathtaking," "mystical," "ancient"), metaphors ("a stone bible," "a crown jewel"), and verbs used to describe tourist actions ("capture," "climb," "discover").
2. Theme Identification: The initial codes were grouped into broader, recurring patterns of meaning. These patterns were refined into distinct narratives or "discourses" that represented a particular way of talking about and understanding Borobudur.
3. Discourse Deconstruction: Each identified discourse was analyzed to understand its underlying assumptions and ideological effects. The analysis considered what aspects of

Borobudur's identity were foregrounded, what was marginalized or silenced, and how the ideal tourist was constructed within each narrative (Fairclough, 2013).

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed four dominant discourses through which the brand of Borobudur is constructed in online travel guides. While these discourses can overlap, they represent distinct ways of framing the heritage site.

Table 1. Taxonomy of Dominant Discourses in Online Travel Guides for Borobudur (2021–2025)

<i>Discourse Category</i>	<i>Primary Narrative Focus</i>	<i>Key Linguistic Markers</i>	<i>Implied Tourist Role</i>
<i>The Spectacle</i>	Aesthetic beauty, photography, and "Instagrammable" moments.	Sunrise, golden hour, silhouettes, misty, magical, panoramic.	The Observer/Photographer: The tourist is there to capture the scene rather than engage deeply.
<i>The Adventurous Quest</i>	Logistical challenges, physical exertion, and "conquering" the site.	Climb, steep steps, beat the crowd, early wakeup, hidden gem.	The Explorer: The visit is a mission to be accomplished or a challenge to overcome.
<i>Spirituality-Lite</i>	Secularized spirituality, wellness, and peaceful atmosphere.	Zen, serene, vibes, energy, soul-searching, ancient wisdom.	The Seeker: The tourist consumes the atmosphere for personal well-being without religious commitment.
<i>The Historical Artifact</i>	Factual history, architectural details, and preservation status.	8th century, Shailendra dynasty, relief panels, restoration, UNESCO.	The Student: The tourist is a passive recipient of historical facts and dates.

1. The Discourse of Spectacle

This was the most pervasive discourse, positioning Borobudur primarily as a visual product to be consumed. The narrative is overwhelmingly centered on the Borobudur sunrise. Language is hyperbolic and focused on aesthetics, with frequent use of words like "breathtaking," "stunning," "unforgettable," and "magical." The visit is framed as a photographic mission, where the ultimate prize is capturing the "perfect shot" or the "money shot" of the sun rising behind the stupas and volcanoes.

This discourse constructs the tourist as a spectator and photographer. The value of the experience is measured by its visual quality and its "Instagrammability" (Lo & McKercher, 2015). One guide states, "Whatever you do, don't miss the sunrise; it's the shot you came for." This focus on aesthetics aligns with Urry's (2002) concept of the "tourist gaze," where destinations are reduced to a series of visual icons. The implication is significant: the temple's profound religious narratives, encoded in its reliefs, are marginalized in favor of a fleeting, atmospheric moment. The brand becomes one of visual splendor rather than spiritual depth.

2. The Discourse of Spirituality-Lite

This discourse acknowledges Borobudur's religious nature but presents it in a secularized and easily digestible form. It uses vague spiritual language, describing the temple as a place of "serenity," "peace," and "calm energy." The experience is framed as a personal, internal moment of reflection, detached from its specific Buddhist theological context. As one blog puts it, "You don't have to be Buddhist to feel the powerful spiritual vibe here."

This "spirituality-lite" makes the sacred accessible to a mass audience but does so by decontextualizing it (MacCannell, 1976). It transforms complex religious practice into a generic wellness product. The tourist is constructed as a spiritual seeker, but one who seeks a feeling rather than a deep understanding. This branding is effective and non-alienating but risks trivializing the site's living religious function, reducing its sacredness to a marketable emotional experience (Belhassen et al., 2008).

3. The Discourse of the Adventurous Quest

This discourse frames a visit to Borobudur as a logistical and physical challenge to be conquered. The narrative is filled with "pro tips," "hacks," and instructions on how to "beat the crowds," navigate ticketing options (e.g., climbing the monument vs. staying in the courtyard), and endure the pre-dawn wake-up call. The language is often that of achievement and strategy: "The ultimate guide to conquering Borobudur sunrise," or "Follow these steps for a flawless visit."

Here, the tourist is positioned as an adventurer or a strategist. The success of the visit is defined by efficient planning and execution. This discourse gamifies the tourist experience, shifting the focus from the heritage itself to the act of accessing it successfully. While practical, this branding can foster a competitive and individualistic mindset among tourists, potentially detracting from a communal or contemplative experience (Noy, 2004).

4. The Discourse of the Historical Artifact

The least dominant but still present discourse frames Borobudur as a museum or an archaeological puzzle. It emphasizes its UNESCO status, its age ("9th-century marvel"), and historical facts about its construction and rediscovery. The language is often educational, encouraging visitors to "marvel at the intricate reliefs" and "uncover the stories etched in stone."

This discourse constructs the tourist as a student or a cultural connoisseur. It promotes a deeper engagement with the site's history and artistry, aligning well with the goals of cultural preservation (Timothy, 2011). However, when presented in isolation, it can portray Borobudur as a static relic of the past, disconnected from its ongoing significance as a place of active worship and pilgrimage for the contemporary Buddhist community. This overlooks its role as a living heritage site.

D. CONCLUSION

The branding of Borobudur Temple in online travel guides is a complex interplay of competing narratives. While the discourses of spirituality, adventure, and history are present, they are largely overshadowed by the Discourse of Spectacle. The dominant brand identity constructed is that of a visually stunning, "bucket-list" destination where the primary goal is to witness and photograph a magnificent sunrise. This "Instagrammification" of a sacred site commodifies the experience, prioritizing aesthetics over religious meaning, historical understanding, and contemplative engagement.

For heritage managers and tourism stakeholders in Indonesia, these findings present a critical challenge. If the dominant online narrative continues to promote a superficial visual

consumption of Borobudur, it may lead to visitor dissatisfaction (when reality doesn't match the photos) and behaviors that are misaligned with the site's preservation needs. There is a clear need for official tourism bodies to develop a more balanced digital communication strategy—one that still leverages the site's beauty but more intentionally weaves in its rich spiritual and historical narratives.

This study is limited by its focus on English-language texts and does not analyze user-generated comments or the reception of these discourses by tourists. Future research could explore how Borobudur is presented in other languages, analyze the discourse of visitor reviews to see how these narratives are adopted or resisted, or conduct ethnographic research to understand the gap between the online brand and the lived experience at the site. Ultimately, the challenge lies in branding cultural heritage in a way that is both appealing to the modern tourist and respectful of the site's profound, irreplaceable value.

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