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The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Challenges on Social Issues
COVID-19: crisi e sfide nella società

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Navigating Uncertainty

Social Media Narratives of Tourism during COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the travelling restrictions put in place by governments had an unprecedented effect on tourism in South Tyrol, with stays from the main markets experiencing a loss ranging from -36.3% to -73.4%. The present study explores the English-language social media communication of tourist destinations in South Tyrol during the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak. To do so, a combined methodological approach is adopted, based on ethnographic interviews with practitioners of the tourism sector and corpus-assisted discourse analysis. The findings reveal that the deployment of future-oriented and corrective linguistic approaches to envision a post-crisis scenario is crucial in conveying hope and possibility. These findings not only enhance our understanding of tourism discourse in the context of communication crisis management but also have implications for the resilience of tourism industry during challenging periods.

Keywords: COVID-19; discourse analysis; ESP; social media; tourism communication.

1. Introduction

Tourism communication during the COVID-19 pandemic played a crucial role in keeping travellers informed, ensuring their safety, and managing the impact on the tourism industry. As the pandemic severely

restricted travel and physical interactions, various digital tools and platforms became fundamental to facilitate communication between tourists and tourism-related businesses (Gretzel *et al.* 2020), including local travel agencies, hotels, attractions, as well as public agencies for business location development, destination marketing and internationalisation (Pachucki *et al.* 2022).

It is widely recognised that social media became one of the most effective tools for the tourism industry in COVID-19 times providing key ways for the dissemination of accurate and timely information (Erdem 2021), such as acting as vital instruments for crisis management (Antony and Jacobs 2019), offering a platform for virtual travel experiences (Blaer 2023) and different meaningful ways to engage with customers (Kwok, Lee, and Ha 2021), facilitating community support (Mele, Filieri, and De Carlo 2023) and providing functional visual spaces for collaboration and partnership between tourism businesses, influencers, and content creators (Femenia-Serra, Gretzel, and Alzua-Sorzabal 2022).

While the significant role of social media in destination marketing is widely acknowledged (Zeng and Gerritsen 2014; Ryden *et al.* 2019; Lalicic *et al.* 2020), little attention has been paid so far to how social media discourse can respond to the uncertainties of a global community as regards issues such as maintaining customer relationships and addressing the concerns of potential visitors (Gretzel *et al.* 2020). Taking the call for dedicated research endeavours in the complex field of social media discourse for tourism destinations (Pachucki, Grohs, and Scholl-Grissemann 2022), this study aims to give an insight into the strategies deployed by the tourism organisations of one of the main international tourism destinations included in UNESCO's World Heritage List to address international visitors in English during the pandemic.

The autonomous Province of Trentino-South Tyrol is world-renowned for the uniqueness of its natural landscapes, a quarter of which classified as protected natural areas. It comes as no surprise that the tourism industry is one of the most developed sectors of the local economy, generating up to the 11.4%[1] of the local GDP (ISTAT 2022). In 2019 alone, more than 7.7 million arrivals and 33.7 million overnight stays were recorded in the region. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the travelling restrictions put in place by governments had an unprecedented impact on the local tourism, with stays from the main markets (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Benelux) experiencing

[1] http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCN_SQCT [03/10/2023].

a loss ranging from -36.3% to -54.8%, while stays from other countries dropped by -73.4% (ASTAT 2021).

As part of a wider research project on English as an international language for tourism in South Tyrol, this study investigates how social media re-shaped their content for tourism communication in English during the first phase of the pandemic. Specifically, it explores the discursive strategies adopted by local tourism professionals to transcend the barriers of physical distance and travel constraints while fostering interest and enhancing reach among international travellers. Two research questions are addressed by this study:

> RQ1. What was the impact of the pandemic on the English-language social media communication of tourist destinations in South Tyrol?
> RQ2. What discursive strategies were used to engage international tourists online during the first lockdown?

The present paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides an overview of the theoretical background adopted for this study, while section 3 illustrates the data and the methodology used to collect them; section 4 illustrates and discusses the empirical results; section 5 is dedicated to the concluding remarks and implications for further research efforts.

2. Theoretical framework

Research on digital tourism communication has shown that the travel and tourism industry has effectively embraced the internet and harnessed its diverse range of opportunities to enhance their operations and engage with customers. The utilisation and maximation of these opportunities have been instrumental in transforming the industry and improving the overall travel experience for consumers. In fact, travel businesses have leveraged platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to connect with their target audience, build brand awareness, and promote their offerings. What makes social media highly attractive is their real-time interaction capabilities, enabling travel companies to engage with potential customers in a direct way. Global surveys[2] indicate that this direct engagement has helped foster a sense of trust and authenticity, influencing travellers'

[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/222698/consumer-trust-in-different-types-of-advertising/#statisticContainer [12/07/2023].

decisions and generating word-of-mouth recommendations (Liasidou 2018). Moreover, information technology has enabled the development of online booking systems, which has streamlined the booking process and empowered consumers, thus fostering a more independent approach to travel organization (Maci 2018). Yet, in order to optimise their marketing efforts, promote their value and attract more visitors, tourist organisations need to adopt "adequate and convincing linguistic ways" (Maci 2020, 69).

Over the years, the tourism industry has developed its own discourse, characterised by a high degree of persuasiveness. According to Virtaen and Halmari (2005), persuasion can be defined as a set of linguistic behaviours that seek to either modify the thinking or behaviour of an audience or reinforce their existing beliefs. This is particularly true for tourism discourse, considering that its ultimate purpose is to sell a product, the idea of something "off-the-beaten-track" (Maci 2020, 61). When persuasive strategies are successfully implemented on tourist websites, they have the potential to induce behavioural changes among tourists and visitors, and significantly influence their decision-making process. To achieve this goal, destination advertisements must attract the attention of potential tourists, stimulate their interest, make the product appealing, and ultimately convince them to commit in choosing a destination (Manca 2016).

Linguistic resources, particularly words and phrases, can play a crucial role in promoting destinations. For instance, it can create different feelings in travellers and help them finalise their decisions (Maci 2013, 2018; Zakharova 2021). *Ego-targeting* is a specific technique of the language of tourism aimed at making the readers targeted by the promotional text singled out from the crowd and transformed into individuals, thus evoking a sense of uniqueness or privilege (Dann 1996; Manca 2016; Maci 2020). This technique is realised with the deployment of specific linguistic strategies, such as direct forms of address, the use of an informal tone and the imperative mood, which are commonly adopted to shorten the distance between the author and the addressee creating "an illusion of informality and familiarity" (Maci 2007). For instance, through imperative verbs, the author explicitly and directly encourages the readers to join and immerse themselves in experiencing a destination (Sulaiman 2014). Ego-targeting is also employed to reduce tourists' anxiety about travel, thus protecting them from the hazards associated with unknown places and people (Dann 1996). This is particularly true in relation to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which generated the disruption of the entire tourism sector.

As the pandemic was rapidly spreading, tourism professionals were facing the challenge of persuading their target audience to stay home while striving to secure the future potential tourist target and to keep the destination alive in their thoughts. In times of crisis, the public-facing concerns about safety represents one of the main threats for tourism destinations, and failing to address this issue may have a detrimental impact on their decision-making (Karl 2018). Therefore, tourism professionals must acknowledge and tackle this concern, by adopting communication strategies aimed at persuading their target audience that all necessary safety measures are duly adopted, and that the destination will be indeed secure for visitation after the crisis (Ketter and Avraham 2021). In conclusion, tourism operators ought to mitigate the negative effects of a crisis by implementing communication strategies aimed at rebuilding trust and projecting confidence towards the future outcome.

Fuoli and Paradis (2014, 66) propose "a novel conceptual framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse" which is particularly relevant to this study and entails two fundamental discourse strategies available to organisations to respond to crises and repair trust: (1) the *neutralise-the-negative strategy*, aiming at engaging with and acting upon the discourses that represent a potential source of distrust, and (2) the *emphasise-the-positive strategy*, used to convey a trustworthy discourse identity. Strategies (1) and (2) are realised in discourse using dialogic engagement and evaluative/affective language, respectively. The ultimate communicative goal of these strategies is that of promoting the addressees' positive reassessment of the speaker's ability, integrity and benevolence.

The concept of dialogic engagement encompasses various tools that speakers employ to express their perspective on a topic, including epistemic modals (such as *believe*, *think*, and *be certain that*), markers of evidentiality (like *see*, *hear*, and *show that*), expressions of attribution (such as *say*, *claim*, and *argue*), adversative discourse markers (like *yet* and *but*), and negation/denial. An example of the use of one of these resources in the tourism communication of South-Tyrol, namely adversative discourse markers, to confront and neutralise an unfavourable discourse about the pandemic, is the following:

(1) As we start Easter week, we are in for a few days that are very different from what we are used to... *But* we will make the most of it and make preparations nevertheless. (Siusi IG 050420)

Through the use of the adversative *but*, speakers emphasise the intention to react constructively to the situation, i.e. to the impossibility of

involving tourists in Easter-related events in person, stressing that they do not want to give up the traditional preparations. In doing so, they try to neutralise this unfavourable discourse and protect themselves from the negative effects that a possible attitude of resignation or inaction might produce.

The emphasise-the-positive strategy is closely linked to the linguistic tools that speakers utilise to express evaluation and affect (Hunston and Thompson 2000; Martin and White 2005). Both can be either positive or negative and can be realised through a wide range of language resources, including adjectives (e.g. *happy*, *sad*), verbs (e.g. *want*, *fear*), nouns (e.g. *fight*, *passion*) and adverbs (e.g. *regrettably*, *hopefully*). In communication, evaluation and affect hold a crucial position in creating understanding and establishing a sense of closeness with the listener. In this context, they serve as a crucial tool for implementing the emphasise-the-positive approach, as demonstrated in example (2).

(2) *Sadly* for many, this is *not an easy time* and many find it *difficult* to maintain optimism for the future. [...] Especially in times of crisis, even *small rays of light* can help, and *wonderful sunny days* ensure that spring comes to our valley.

By using emotionally loaded words, speakers empathise with the audience, demonstrating sensitivity and understanding. Furthermore, evaluation associated with images of light and spring is used to express solidarity and optimism. The example above therefore counts as an instance of emphasise-the-positive strategy.

In the frame of the present study, it appears interesting to ascertain how tourism professionals' social media communication approach during the first critical months of the pandemic fit the paradigm of tourism and crisis discourse strategies, specifically the typical ego-targeting technique and trust-repair discourse model.

3. Materials and methods

The present study draws on a combined methodology, where data collected through interviews with key informants working in South Tyrolean tourism marketing agencies are triangulated with a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of social media posts in English language published on tourism sites during the first Italian lockdown.

3.1. *Semi-structured interviewing*

The ethnographic part of the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews about tourism communication in English with a member of the PR Team and the coordinator of the Social Media Management Team of IDM South Tyrol, the major marketing agency supporting the development of small and medium-sized tourism organisations in South Tyrol. The vision and mission of the agency is "to promote the internationalisation and innovation of the South Tyrolean tourism industry" [3]. To achieve this, IDM offers support to all local tourism organisations by designing targeted marketing campaigns and providing communication guidelines. In order to be able to develop a keen understanding of the various themes related with the topic addressed, we opted for a semi-structured interview format as it allows informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Fylan 2005). The interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams on November 25th, 2022, recorded, digitally archived, and transcribed for future reference.

The primary aim of the interviews was to gain insights into IDM's approach to social media communication during the initial stage of the pandemic, alongside exploring the role of the English language within that context. More specifically, the interviews intended to shed light on the digital communication objectives and strategies used to attract international tourists, as well as investigate to what extent these practices had evolved in response to the challenges posed by the public health crisis.

3.2. *Corpus design and composition*

The corpus comprises 544 posts written in English (25,020 tokens) manually retrieved between November 18th-21st, 2022 from the Facebook and Instagram accounts of a selection of South Tyrolean tourism organisations. As is characteristic of social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram facilitate interactions where users share horizontally flowing conversations, fostering new forms of interpersonal relationships. However, due to our focus on analysing communicators' discourse strategies rather than user reception, our analysis exclusively encompasses the textual content within the posts. Comment threads associated with the posts were intentionally omitted from our corpus. Furthermore,

[3] https://www.idm-suedtirol.com/it/noi-siamo-idm [12/07/2023].

despite the multimodal nature of Facebook and Instagram, we chose to concentrate on verbal language because the present study intended to find evidence and point out the discursive strategies adopted by South Tyrolean tourism organisations. Further steps in the research might shift towards the adoption of a multimodal perspective given the role of visual elements for meaning-making on social media platforms.

The selection of the organisations was based on the data reported by ASTAT concerning the number of arrivals and occupancy rates per origin and territorial unit in 2020, as well as on the posting frequency in English on social media platforms. The ASTAT tool allows filtering by tourism organisations, which made possible to elaborate a list of the most popular destinations in South Tyrol. At first, only the ones with an occupancy rate above 800,000 per year were taken into consideration, but the low number of social media posts in English made it necessary to lower the occupancy rate criterion to 200,000 (*Tab. 1*).

Table 1. – Number of social media posts.

Tourism Association	Facebook Posts	Instagram Posts	Total number of Posts
Alta Badia Cooperative	57	40	97
Bolzano Tourist Board	65	53	118
Selva Val Gardena	22	29	51
Tourist Office Merano	19	24	43
Brunico Plan de Corones Turismo	60	22	82
Alpe di Siusi	35	34	69
Südtirol Alto Adige South Tyrol	25	59	84
Total	283	261	544
Total number of tokens	9,314	15,706	25,020

Regarding the legal nature of organizations, the sample includes both public entities, like Bolzano Tourist Board and Tourist Office Merano, and private consortia (Alta Badia Cooperative, Selva Val Gardena, Brunico Plan de Corones Turismo, Alpe di Siusi, and Südtirol Alto Adige South Tyrol).

The posts collected were generated between March 8th, 2020 and June 9th, 2020, dates that respectively mark the beginning of the first Italian lockdown and the re-opening of the national borders.

All posts were selected by scrolling the social media accounts of the tourism associations listed above (*Tab. 1*) and manually saved in .txt format. Despite the limited size of the corpus, due to the brevity of the identified period and the restricted availability of material in English, our dataset can nevertheless offer a particularly useful insight given the peculiarity of the period, the sharp focus, the specificity of the cultural context explored and that it provides empirical evidence (McCarthy and Carter 1995; Flowerdew 2001; Sinclair 2004; Köster 2010).

3.3. *Corpus analysis*

All texts contained in the corpus were uploaded to the AntConc linguistic analysis toolkit (Anthony 2022) for corpus-assisted text analysis. A wordlist was generated to single out the most frequently used words and phrases which were thought to be indicative of the writers' linguistic preferences and communicative goals. Then their concordances were plotted and analysed to identify the most frequent textual patterns and discursive strategies in use within the theoretical frameworks on trust-repair discourse and ego-targeting technique specific of tourism discourse. It is important to note that at this stage of the project the corpus analysis did not entail a manual tagging process.

4. Results

This section will illustrate the findings that emerged from the interviews conducted with the communication professionals from IDM as well as the results obtained from the corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

4.1. *IDM's communication strategy*

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic confined everyone between the walls of their houses, and all social gatherings slowly became a distant memory. In this unusual context, social media acquired an even greater importance as a way to stay connected with family and friends and quickly became the place for meeting up with friends and loved ones. In response to the larger use of social media platforms, South Tyrolean tour-

ism organisations had to increase their presence online by generating more content and by investing in technical developments to respond to their stakeholders' demands and needs, "for example, a lot of digital after-work drinks, gatherings with friends at home, there were a lot of live cooking sessions and so on [...]" (IDM Südtirol, interview, November 25th, 2022).

Not only did the pandemic trigger an increase in the use of social media platforms, but also a need to re-think digital communication goals and strategies. Not surprisingly but still worthy of notice, the interview revealed that English was not the first linguistic choice. Generating content in English seems not to be a priority at the moment due to the majority of South Tyrol tourist visitors coming from Italy and the DACH region (Germany, Austria and Switzerland). In fact, when generating content on social media platforms, Italian and German are typically the primary options. Nevertheless, English prevails in interactions on Instagram. This peculiar trend stems from the absence of segmentation based on the recipients' L1 within this particular social media platform. The case is different for Facebook, as it provides an automatic translation service, making it unnecessary to generate content in languages other than Italian and German.

Moreover, quite interestingly we observed that the communication strategy adopted during the first phase of the pandemic focused on the notions of unity and care. The analysis of the data shows a tendency to adopt a single voice representing the South Tyrolean tourism community as a whole, to both boost cohesion among tourism professionals in a time of uncertainty and convey a sense of reassurance to the online community. Creating content about what locals love about their land and traditions thus became a way to foster a sense of vicinity and shared passions. This approach stemmed from the need to face a new reality of isolation and restrictions as well as longing for meaningful experiences and human connection, which led to a transition to a different underlying notion. In fact, *dream now, travel later* was the new overall picture behind all digital communication initiatives launched during the first phase of COVID-19 pandemic. In a time of unprecedented travelling restrictions, dreams came to be the only means for disconnecting from the reality of the crisis, and for travelling through memories of past experiences. Promotional campaigns inviting tourists to visit South Tyrol turned inappropriate to the circumstances and seemed no longer strategic. As one of IDM's informants stated, "[...] we could no longer say 'come to us and have a beautiful holiday', we had to find new content themes [...]" (IDM South Tyrol, interview, November 25th, 2022).

Consequently, the conventional promotional tone of tourism communication, based on an overwhelming use of linguistic markers positively evaluating tourism destinations, was set aside in favour of a warmer and more familiar tone to foster a feeling of emotional proximity in a time of physical distance. This new approach to digital communication strategies could be read as a shift from appraisal strategies based on appreciation, that is on the aesthetic evaluation of contents, to those based on affect, or expressions of emotional states (Martin 1997; Martin and White 2005).

To meet the new communicative needs, IDM provided a set of guidelines to the local tourism organisations in the form of 5 checkpoints:

1. Racconta alle persone di te stesso. Le tue passioni e i tuoi hobby
   (Tell people about yourself. Your passions and your hobbies)
2. Racconta perché fai qualcosa invece che dire cosa fai
   (Say why you do something instead of saying what you do)
3. Condividi le tue convinzioni
   (Share your viewpoints)
4. Condividi i tuoi sentimenti – ad esempio che ti mancano i tuoi ospiti
   (Share your feelings – e.g. that you miss your guests)
5. Comunica sempre come se fossi un amico che parla a un suo amico
   (Always communicate as if you were a friend talking to his friend)

(IDM *Re-Start* Campaign Guidelines 2021; our translation)

The most interesting innovation in IDM's communication strategy was the focus shift from *what* to say to the audience to *how* to convey a message instead. The attention moved to the tone of the message and to stressing the central role of feelings, passions, and friendliness in creating empathy and vicinity, with the primary objective of keeping the community engaged. IDM believed that the online community needed reassurance in a time of uncertainty as well as to feel close to who and what they love. Hence, during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, local tourism organisations started creating content regarding what people love about South Tyrol as part of the *#everythingwelove* campaign. The campaign, launched by the local tourist authority, invited visitors to share everything they loved about South Tyrol by posting photos and stories that evoked emotions and memories, thus engaging tourists through the exhortation "to appreciate the little things in life"[4]. By

[4] https://www.bolzanosurroundings.info/en/holiday-region/south-tyrol/-everything-we-love.html [12/07/2023].

appealing to the cognitive-affective component and adopting a warmer and more familiar tone, social media posts aimed at operationalising the bond with the guests, implicitly catering for the construction of the overall tourist image and its great potential for online communications (Marine-Roig and Clavé 2016).

In addition, interview data showed a tendency to minimise content directly related to the pandemic. Posts that made explicit reference to the pandemic were only shared when new regulations were put in place to keep the online community updated. It was preferred to focus on memories and the hope of soon being reunited with those and things one loves. As one of the informants stated during the interview, "[...] it was our decision not to share on our channels only content related to the pandemic, because all the media were only talking about the situation [...]" (IDM South Tyrol, interview, November 25th, 2022). This approach could be considered a reflection of the local tendency to minimise the repercussions of the pandemic. In fact, during the coronavirus pandemic, South Tyrol had the lowest vaccination rate and the highest incidence rates in the country, even though the quality of public health care is considered above average (GIMBE 2021).

4.2. *Corpus-assisted linguistic analysis findings*

As a first step, a list of the most frequent terms in the corpus of social media posts was derived (*Tab. 2*). The choice was to focus on items most likely to convey the stance of communicators, and in particular on personal pronouns (*we*, *you*), possessive adjectives (*our*, *us*, *your*), modal verbs (*will*, *can*) and adversatives (*but*). Thematic words about the environment and for identifying places (*nature*, *Dolomites*, *South*, *Tyrol*, *mountain*) were not deemed relevant for the analysis, even if ranked among the 50 most frequently used words in the corpus under scrutiny. This choice was motivated by what IDM's communicators pointed out to us during interviews: the pandemic marked a shift from *what* to *how*, i.e. from advertising products, or services, to sharing feelings and ideas, being the stance of the speaker more important than the content itself (see section 4.1). Thus, instead of focusing on the 'aboutness' of the corpus and on content words, which, in the present case, are merely characteristic of a specific geographic area and not indicative of any underlying linguistic preference or strategy, special attention was paid to discourse markers that may be reflective of the trend indicated by professionals.

Table 2. – Top 50 words in the corpus.

N	Word	Freq.	%	N	Word	Freq.	%
1	the	1,418	5.19	26	at	132	0.48
2	and	814	2.98	27	be	127	0.47
3	to	647	2.37	28	nature	99	0.36
4	of	538	1.97	29	have	94	0.34
5	in	493	1.81	30	Dolomites	94	0.34
6	a	407	1.49	31	South	90	0.33
7	we	370	1.35	32	can	83	0.3
8	you	350	1.28	33	bolzanobozen	79	0.29
9	for	267	0.98	34	but	78	0.29
10	are	252	0.92	35	time	74	0.27
11	is	248	0.91	36	do	70	0.26
12	our	223	0.82	37	good	69	0.25
13	with	216	0.79	38	by	69	0.25
14	this	189	0.69	39	summer	64	0.23
15	everythingwelove	160	0.59	40	mountain	64	0.23
16	us	158	0.58	41	as	64	0.23
17	it	158	0.58	42	Tyrol	63	0.23
18	your	152	0.56	43	or	61	0.22
19	all	150	0.55	44	about	58	0.21
20	on	142	0.52	45	again	56	0.21
21	from	140	0.51	46	what	55	0.2
22	alleswaswirlieben	137	0.5	47	its	55	0.2
23	will	136	0.5	48	has	54	0.2
24	that	134	0.49	49	these	52	0.19
25	quellocheamo	134	0.49	50	see	52	0.19

From the preliminary observation of the wordlist, it was interesting to notice that the words *COVID* and *pandemic* were not ranked among the first 50 most frequent words in the corpus. This is significant with reference to the local reaction to the sanitary crisis and in line with the local scepticism regarding the crisis (GIMBE 2021). Furthermore, it is validating evidence of the remark of IDM's informants regarding the preference for keeping COVID-19 related content to the minimum.

The corpus-assisted linguistic analysis revealed a frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun *we* (370 occurrences), ranking seventh among the most frequently used words in the corpus (*Tab. 2*). As a metadiscoursive device, the first-person pronoun could serve writers with its inclusive and exclusive forms (Scheibman 2004). The inclusive *we* functions as an engagement marker, denoting the connection between the writer and the potential reader. Conversely, the exclusive *we* serves as a self-mention device, indicating the writers themselves as the agents. By examining concordance lines, it was possible to determine that most occurrences of *we* and *our* – two out of three – are receiver-excluding, i.e. they only encompass the writer's identity, specifically the South Tyrolean tourism community. As stated by IDM's informants, one of the key points of the communicative strategy adopted during the initial phase of the pandemic was to convey a sense of unity among the local tourism community by "speaking with one voice" (IDM South Tyrol, interview, November 25th, 2022).

The selection of adjectives used in combination with the phrase *we are* (36 occurrences) is representative of the stance adopted by communicators, which is one of resilience and emotional participation.

(3) *We are confident* that all of us, together 💪, will overcome this health crisis [...]. (Gardena FB 090320)
(4) [...] Because *we are convinced* that after this crazy time, a little clean air, a little oxygen and a little beauty are the best possible cure. [...]. (Badia IG 070620)
(5) *We are so happy* to share with you again this infinite playground that the Dolomites offer us! (Gardena IG 300520)
(6) With a heavy heart we have to cancel the Seiser Alm Half Marathon 😪 *we are very sad*, but the health and safety of the runners is the most important thing for us 🙏 [...]. (Siusi IG 140420)

From the standpoint of trust-repair discourse theory, the strategic use of adjectives such as *confident* (3) and *convinced* (4) convey a sense of certainty and determination. These two instances can be regarded as manifestations of affect that align with the emphasise-the-positive strategy, as they contribute to promoting an image of commitment and trustworthiness. Similarly, the employment of emotional adjectives like *happy* (5) and *sad* (6) exemplify further instances of affect, albeit with the intention of establishing empathy and bridging the gap between the writers and the audience by expressing their emotions.

Interestingly, an instance of stance-taking was observed wherein the epistemic verb *know* (7) was employed. Although this is a single occur-

rence, its significance lies in its representativeness of how authors cultivate empathy and endeavour to establish trust with readers by recognising their viewpoint and expressing concurrence.

(7) Close your eyes and let your mind free to travel... 😍 *We know*, it's not the same, but currently traveling is not possible - #stayathome. (South Tyrol IG 250320)

You is the second personal pronoun in the frequency list (350 occurrences). The analysis of its collocates reveals the use of direct forms of address to directly engage with readers and through which web-readers are singled out from the crowd and emotionally involved according to the ego-targeting function conceptualised by Dann (1996).

(8) Greetings from Merano! Today we wish *you* a good weekend, different from the usual: *you* cannot be here, but it is as *you* are always with us! 😊💚 (Merano IG 170420)

The provided example (8) showcases the writer's effort to bridge the physical gap by emphasising a feeling of proximity, thereby neutralising any negative connotations. Additionally, the direct address to the reader fosters a sense of exclusivity, akin to conversing with a family member. This exemplifies the emotional and familiar tone consistently adopted by the South Tyrolean tourism industry during the initial phase of the pandemic, as suggested by our interviewees.

Ego-targeting is also achieved using imperative forms, which mitigate the perceived distance between communicators and readership.

(9) *Smile* 😁 do *you* recognise the mountain in the background? (Bolzano IG 260320)

(10) *Imagine you* are hiking on a steep trail. Despite the sunshine, it's still cold at these heights. [...]. (South Tyrol IG 030520)

The writers encourage readers to *smile* (9) and *imagine* (10), employing verbs that evoke emotions, with the intent of providing solace amidst the challenges of the pandemic. Based on this observation, it seems that both instances align with the emphasise-the-positive strategy, by employing verbs that appeal to emotions, and evoking memories and dreams through the act of imagining.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from the corpus-assisted analysis is the frequent utilisation of the positive form of the epistemic modal *can* (83), particularly in conjunction with the second-person pronoun *you*. Within the corpus, *can* stands as the sole modal verb conveying

the notion of possibility, with no evidence of the usage of other epistemic markers. Building upon the previous discussion, the authors directly address their readers and, through the use of *can*, highlight activities that can still be done comfortably from home despite the pandemic-driven restrictions, such as cooking or virtually visiting a museum. The readers are portrayed as the main actors, being reminded of the various possibilities they still have in spite of the requirement to stay at home.

(11) [...] There's no need to leave your house... you *can* do it comfortably from your sofa. (Badia FB 240320)
(12) [...] If you want to try cooking a South Tyrolean lunch or dinner you *can* find all the recipes on the website http://www.redrooster.it/en/farm-bars/recipes/ (Bolzano FB 240520)
(13) [...] You *can* visit the museum in 45 minutes thanks to two apps with audio guide in Italian, German and English, one for adults and one for children. (Bolzano FB 270320)

In this regard, all three examples above show how feelings of isolation and idleness are mitigated by emphasising the positive, i.e. the numerous ways in which one can make the most of their time indoors. Furthermore, examples (12) and (13) demonstrate tourism organisations' desire to maintain a sense of connection between the community and the region, whether through references to local cuisine or by offering the opportunity to explore local museums via dedicated applications.

The considerable number of forward-looking statements identified within the corpus, realised through the use of *will* and the present continuous verbal forms, can also be ascribed to the emphasising-the-positive strategy, as they are used to express epistemic prediction of positively evaluated events in the future (*the intensity of nature*, *the magnificent Dolomites*, *the best experience possible*), as shown in examples (14-17).

(14) [...] *We will now work* to be ready for the summer, to contemplate the intensity of nature and welcome the world. (Badia FB 090320)
(15) In the coming days *we will try to do* our part in this, and virtually take you to the magnificent Dolomites [...]. (Badia IG 120320)
(16) [...] *We are preparing* for the summer season and *we are waiting* for you! (Bolzano FB 200520)
(17) [...] *We are all working* to make your holiday the best experience possible, to let you forget the difficulties and to give you the deserved relax and adventures! [...]. (South Tyrol IG 080520)

The common thread among the overall collocates of *will* (136) and forms employing the present continuous tense (40) is the overarching inten-

tion to demonstrate commitment to visitors regarding the actions and initiatives planned for the upcoming season. The audience is specifically addressed through the use of expressions such as *for you* and *to make your holiday*, while the level of commitment is emphasised by phrases such as *to be ready* and *to do our part*. These findings affirm the strategic choice of tourism organisations to refrain from solely sharing pandemic-related content on social media and instead convey a message of hope, redirecting attention towards the positive experiences that lie ahead, thus corroborating the statements of IDM interviewees.

Another noteworthy finding that emerged from the corpus-assisted analysis is the substantial use of the adversative marker *but* (78 occurrences). It has been previously acknowledged that *but* is frequently employed as a linguistic device to counterbalance the negative (Martin and White 2005). The examples observed in the corpus of social media posts provide further support to this theory, as the adversative marker is used to introduce a positive statement that counteracts a preceding negative one. In most cases identified, a *negative first-positive after* structure is observed. The use of the adversative marker serves a dual function. On one hand, it redirects attention towards the positive aspect of a situation (see examples 18 and 19), and on the other hand, it serves as a means of taking a stance (20 and 21).

(18) [...] We may be far apart, *but* we are not alone. We're distant, *but* united. (Badia FB 090420)
(19) Maybe something has changed, *but* we are always the same. South Tyrol is always the same. We can't wait to see you this summer ❤ (South Tyrol FB 250520)
(20) Life could seem dreary, dark and lonely. *But* at the same time, we all feel this touching solidarity, the massive support and the heart-warming helpfulness. (South Tyrol IG 130320)
(21) Winter season is now over, *but* how many beautiful memories this winter has given us! 😊 (South Tyrol FB 160320)

In all four examples above, the first part of the sentence presents a widely shared idea, such as the perception of life being dreary or the winter season coming to an end. However, in the second part, the authors express their position in relation to the preceding statement. For instance, while acknowledging that winter is over, the writer highlights the beautiful memories it has provided. Similarly, though recognising that life may seem lonely due to everyone being at home, the author conveys a sense of solidarity and support. This trend further confirms the prevailing prefer-

ence among South Tyrolean tourism organisations to emphasise the positive aspects of the situation, particularly memories and positive emotions, with the aim of minimising the repercussions of the pandemic.

5. Final remarks

The present study has examined the linguistic strategies deployed by South Tyrolean tourism organisations to address visitors on social media platforms during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic adopting a combined methodological approach based on ethnographic interviews with practitioners of the tourism sector and corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

The preliminary results collected through the interviews highlighted some shared recommendations for writers, which can be summarised in the following points: (a) adopt a single voice, capable of reflecting a collective identity associated with South Tyrol; (b) prefer an emotional style of communication, based on the expression of affect rather than on the conventional appreciation of what South Tyrol has to offer; (c) minimise explicit references to the pandemic.

In light of Fuoli and Paradis' (2014) framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse, the last suggestion (c) seems to clearly reflect the strategy of neutralising the negative, as it acts on discourses that could potentially undermine visitors' trust. Furthermore, the recommendation to ignore COVID-19 in social media communication seems in line with the general scepticism towards the pandemic and the widespread rejection of vaccines that characterised South Tyrol (GIMBE 2021). On the contrary, suggestions (a) and (b) seem to reflect the strategy of emphasising the positive, even though they involve a more nuanced viewpoint on the crisis, which emphasises the all-round expression of feelings, without necessarily excluding the negative ones from the messaging, such as, for instance, the sense of nostalgia for the past and the feeling of loneliness generated by the lack of visitors. These expressions of mixed affect were actually encouraged by communicators.

A significant finding of the present study is that the corpus-based analysis of social media posts largely confirmed the scenarios outlined in the interviews with practitioners. In particular, the prominent usage of the *we* pronoun as receiver-excluding in the messaging points to the aim of sounding as one, as suggested by point (a) of the interviews, strengthening community bonds and reinforcing a shared sense of belonging.

The we-pronoun seems to serve two distinct functions simultaneously: at the micro level, *we* assumes a reader-exclusive role, while at the macro level, *we* is representative of the local community, forming a cohesive unit that emphasises a collective identity.

Similarly, the aim of establishing an emotional relationship with visitors, corresponding to point (b) of the interviews, is efficiently harnessed by ego-targeting techniques based on the frequent usage of the you-pronoun, which shorten the distance between the communicator and the addressee and create an illusion of proximity (Maci 2007). Quoting from the dataset, this attitude seems to be reflected by the statement "*you* cannot be here, but it is as *you* are always with us" (Merano IG 170420). Lastly, the absence of COVID-related terminology from the wordlist of the most frequent lexical items in the corpus, confirms the remark of IDM's informants regarding the preference for keeping COVID-19 related content to the minimum, as highlighted in point (c) of the interviews.

Findings also show a consistent use of the corrective *but* signalling an oppositive relation. The deployment of corrective coordination minimises the negative social and economic impacts of the pandemic and optimises the benefits for the local communities and the environment. Tourism organisations acknowledge the challenges posed by the pandemic and the associated crisis. However, they also convey a sense of resilience and determination by emphasising the actions and measures taken to address these challenges and their commitment to overcoming obstacles and finding opportunities for growth and improvement in the face of adversity. By highlighting the efforts made to mitigate the negative impacts and prioritise the well-being of the local communities and the environment, these organisations aim to instil confidence and trust among potential visitors and stakeholders. This linguistic phenomenon contributes to the overall communication efforts aimed at promoting the region as a desirable destination, even in the face of challenging circumstances.

Despite the restrictions and limitations imposed by the pandemic, the deployment of future-oriented linguistic strategies becomes crucial in conveying a sense of hope and possibility. By employing future-oriented statements, as observed in the present dataset, tourism communicators can paint a vivid picture of the future travel experience. They can highlight the anticipation of venturing beyond current boundaries and immersing oneself in new and exciting destinations. The use of such linguistic devices not only serves to inspire and motivate potential travel-

lers but also serves as a reminder that the challenging circumstances are temporary. Therefore, the importance of adopting a forward-looking perspective can be recognised. While acknowledging the difficulties triggered by the pandemic, it is essential to utilise linguistic tools to project a vision of the post-pandemic travel landscape. This approach allows to tap into the enduring human desire for exploration, ultimately paving the way for a revitalised and resilient tourism industry.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strategies described above were employed to restore *normality*, a concept that forms a key part of scholars' response to the pandemic. Tourism is in fact a key mediator of normality, for example in considering the juxtaposition of "home" and "away" (Maci, Sala, and Vičič 2018). This is especially true during a crisis, where a return to normality is widely considered desirable. However, the search for *normality*, new or otherwise, in the form of a foreign place and/or time (Shim and Santos 2014), projects a certain gaze on the situation in view. A gaze that privileges *normality* frames the crisis as something other than the way people usually live; and similarly separate from the situations that are described as crises. Scholars maintain that tourism discourse rests on the notion of *otherness* realised in text through the deployment and intertwining of deictic forms of spatial referencing, e.g. here/now vs. somewhere else (Maci, Sala, and Vičič 2018). This observation becomes particularly relevant when considering the opposition between the COVID-19 crisis and the post-pandemic future. In the context of the first wave of the pandemic, it is possible to envision a future where travel and exploration regain their significance.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the linguistic strategies utilised by South Tyrolean tourism organisations, shedding light on the significance of employing future-oriented and corrective linguistic approaches to envision a post-crisis scenario. These findings not only enhance our understanding of tourism discourse in the context of communication crisis management but also have implications for the resilience of the tourism industry during challenging periods.

Further steps for future research could potentially move in the direction of exploring the concept of the *new normal*. How can a more sensitive and responsible approach be embraced in tourism discourse? This question calls for a critical examination of practices and a commitment to align with principles of sustainability and social responsibility (Eichelberger *et al.* 2021). Another key consideration for further inquiries lies in exploring the transformations of the tourism industry through the enactment of discursive transition strategies (Feola and Jaworska 2019).

Additionally, further investigation could focus on the role of *otherness* (Filimonova 2005) in shaping tourism discourse by examining the interplay of action verbs, emotional elements, active agents of change, and spatio-temporalities.

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