

Rhetoric and sense of place: Implications for tourist destination management

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Researchers using interpretive methods to study sense of place and place attachment in outdoor recreation and tourism contexts typically derive place meanings by applying content and thematic analyses to interview-based textual data. In such cases, data are collected using personal interviews which are subsequently transcribed and analyzed for expressions of subjects' senses of place. Such content-based approaches, however, tend to ignore other kinds of communicative data (spoken, written or non-verbal) in outdoor recreation and tourism settings, and fail to utilize other types of discourse analysis methods that might reveal new aspects of place meanings. This paper aims to extend traditional approaches to place attachment and sense of place research in the context of community tourism development by offering a rhetorical analysis of comments freely written by respondents on return-mail questionnaires. These data – commonly available, but rarely studied for their discursive qualities – may offer new opportunities for researchers to more fully analyze respondents' place meanings so as to better plan and manage tourism destinations.

Data for this interpretive study were obtained from a mail survey of permanent and seasonal residents in four Vermont (USA) tourism towns. The overall goal of the original survey project was to assess people's ties to community and to natural and built environments in their Vermont towns. As is common in survey research, respondents were invited to share additional comments in any unprinted spaces on the questionnaire form. The freely-written comments provided on the front and back covers and on pages inside the questionnaire (excluding written comments associated with specific questions, such as those with "other" categories, or open-ended questions) form the corpus of writing used in this rhetorical analysis. These textual data include written comments on 147 questionnaires (27% of 544 returned), and represent nearly 500 separate entries. Comments ranged from single words or phrases to short stories and short essays. About one-fifth of the comments were lengthy (multiple sentences to multiple paragraphs), and many comments seemed intended to provide clarifying information or to express personal opinions. Lengthy stories tended to be written on the back cover of the questionnaires, while elaborations and opinions tended to be written inside.

Comments written by respondents were copied from the questionnaires into word files. Associated data related to personal characteristics of the respondent (male/female, age, educational experience, seasonal or permanent resident, town of residence) were also included to facilitate comparisons. Initial analysis of the text files (by two researchers using iterative processes) revealed that a notable feature of the entire corpus of written comments was that respondents made assertive presentations of opinions and

viewpoints about meaningful aspects of place in discussing their community and its environment. Thus, rhetorical analysis – the study of persuasive communication – was used to study the ways that respondents used language to argue their relations to place and the meanings of place. Following approaches suggested by other researchers (Gill and Whedbee 1997; Condit and Bates 2009; Feldman and Almquist 2012), the rhetorical analysis was guided by three primary questions: How does context help shape and influence the written comments? What rhetorical features are observable in the texts? What features of the texts are significant?

Rhetorical analysis proceeds by asking questions of data and by marshaling evidence to support generalizations about how communicative behavior is used by respondents to accomplish social goals. In studying *rhetorical context*, we asked about how sense of place was exhibited in the texts, which audiences might be inferred by authors, and how authors established credibility. In studying characteristics of the *text*, we analyzed the ways that community and place were described, the ways that stories were used to explain local ways of life, and the different kinds of logic used to express and support ties to place. To assess the significance of texts, we evaluated forms of argumentation used by writers, and considered how specific features of the text (such as metaphors and imagery) were used strategically to justify particular perspectives about place.

The rhetorical analysis revealed patterns and consistencies in the forms, styles, and claims of the written communications about place. In terms of form, written comments were structured primarily as either small stories or informational claims; the stories were notably historical in nature, though they were not always linguistically complete. In terms of style, rhetors used a variety of iconic and ordinary images to describe their communities and environment, and to comment on the qualities of others living there seasonally or permanently. In terms of rhetorical claims, respondents used five primary techniques to argue their relations to and senses of place: claims based on nostalgic appreciation, generational ties, place comparisons, personal emotion, and beliefs about how society should work.

In its attention to discursive and linguistic aspects of interpersonal communication, the study of persuasive communication has utility for sense of place research. We are currently comparing the findings from this study across towns, personal characteristics, and residential status in an effort to develop hypotheses for future research. The results presented in this study show how persuasive messages exhibiting meanings about place share particular forms, styles, and rhetorical claims. This research can aid in tourism monitoring and impact management programs by identifying important aspects of sense of place beyond content-based

analytic approaches. The results will also help community leaders and destination planners to develop communicative opportunities that foster authentic experiences of place, while enhancing sense of place for residents and visitors.

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