

# Mitigating Overtourism in Miami Beach Through Sustainable Destination Branding: A Tourism Discourse Analysis of the Anti-Spring Break Marketing Campaign

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## Abstract

Spring break presents both opportunities and challenges for destinations, particularly in Florida, United States, where various cities have been experiencing significant economic benefits alongside negative impacts, such as overcrowding, increased crime and violence, and strained local resources. In response, Miami Beach has launched an anti-spring break marketing campaign aimed at rebranding the city as a safer and more tranquil destination. The campaign's narrative is characterized by a breakup metaphor to communicate a strong stance against spring break disorderly behavior, emphasizing the enforcement of laws and promoting sustainable tourism. The study explores how Miami Beach strategically utilizes tourism discourse in destination branding to reshape the destination brand and influence visitor behavior. By integrating Critical Discourse Studies and Speech Act Theory, the research examines the ideological underpinnings and power dynamics embedded in the campaign's messaging. Furthermore, speech acts are analyzed to uncover how the city's narrative constructs a new identity and position itself against the hedonistic behavior traditionally associated with spring break. Preliminary findings indicate that the campaign effectively communicates the city's commitment to sustainability and safety, potentially reshaping the destination image and influencing the behavior of prospective visitors. The study offers insights into strategic communication in destination marketing, particularly addressing overtourism and promoting responsible tourism practices.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism, sustainable marketing, strategic communication, rebranding, critical discourse studies, speech act theory

## Introduction

Spring break has evolved into a significant business opportunity for many destinations, with Florida being one of the most popular choices. Nevertheless, the dangerous and illegal conduct of many spring breakers have negatively impacted some destinations, as evidenced by the situation in Miami Beach. In 2023, for the third consecutive year, the city declared the state of emergency to address the adverse effects of spring break, including overcrowding, increased crime and violence rates, and strain on local resources, which have tarnished the destination's appeal. In response, the city government has developed a comprehensive strategy for the 2024 spring break season, in collaboration with the local destination marketing organization (DMO)—Greater

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Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (GMCVB) (Hudak, 2024). The strategy includes a marketing campaign aimed at informing potential spring breakers that disorderly behavior will no longer be tolerated, emphasizing the strict enforcement of existing laws and regulations. The campaign seeks to rebrand Miami Beach as a safer and more tranquil destination, promoting a more sustainable form of tourism. As part of this effort, a public service announcement (PSA) video (City of Miami Beach, 2024) has been released on the city's official website and social media, featuring residents engaging in a breakup dialogue addressed to spring breakers, which has generated significant online discussion and engagement.

The aim of this research is to explore how Miami Beach strategically leverages destination branding in the anti-spring break campaign. By analyzing tourism discourse in the PSA, this study sheds light on the destination's efforts to promote sustainable tourism, aiming to rebrand the destination and reshape visitor behavior in alignment with the city's long-term goal for a safer and more sustainable tourist environment.

The study is part of a broader research project that examines digital branding from a discourse perspective, specifically within the hospitality and tourism industry. The project involves collaboration among the University of Palermo (Italy), Florida International University (USA), and the GMCVB (USA).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Overtourism*

Overtourism has been defined as “the excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where residents suffer the consequences of temporary and seasonal tourism peaks, which have caused permanent changes to their lifestyles, denied access to amenities, and damaged their general well-being” (Milano et al., 2019, p. 1). This phenomenon encompasses not just the high number of visitors saturating a destination but also the adverse effects that uncontrolled tourism can impose, such as environmental degradation, cultural homogenization, and social disruption (Koens et al., 2018). Recently, the challenges posed by overtourism have fostered the shift toward *sustainable-responsible tourism* (SRT). This concept emphasizes the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental pillars of sustainable tourism (Mihalic, 2016), as well as “the implementation of sustainable tourism through sustainable actions or behaviors” (Mihalic, 2020, p. 5).

### *Destination Branding and Tourism Discourse*

Destination branding includes three core components: identity, image, and positioning (Pike, 2021). Brand identity represents how the destination aims to be perceived in the market, with an internal focus guiding the marketing efforts of the DMO and its stakeholders. Brand image is the actual destination image held by consumers, which may or may not align with the intended brand identity. Brand positioning involves identification and differentiation through effective communication efforts.

Tourism discourse plays a crucial role in each component of destination branding, employing rhetorical strategies to influence and guide visitor behavior (Dann, 1996; Manca, 2016). Digital technologies have significantly reshaped the role of tourism discourse in marketing, transforming communication from a one-to-many model to a

many-to-many framework (Maci, 2020). As a result, destination branding has become a co-creation process, requiring DMOs to incorporate online user-generated content into their destination branding strategy (Confetto et al., 2023; Siano et al., 2022).

### **Methodology**

The study synergizes Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Fairclough, 2015) and Speech Act Theory (SAT) (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1976) to examine the strategic use of tourism discourse in sustainable destination branding, within the anti-spring break campaign of Miami Beach.

CDS focuses on how discourse enacts ideologies and power relations, encompassing a variety of approaches to the critical investigation of discourse. For this study, Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional approach has been applied, which involves: (i) the *description* of text, (ii) the *interpretation* of the relationship between text and interaction, and (iii) the *explanation* of the relationship between interaction and social context. CDS is particularly suited to investigate the ideological underpinnings of destination branding, as well as the ways in which power relations are enacted, reinforced, and challenged through discourse.

With regard to SAT, Austin (1962) identifies three levels of action in the performance of an utterance: (i) *locution* (i.e., the act of saying something with a specific meaning), (ii) *illocution* (i.e., the act performed in saying something), and (iii) *perlocution* (i.e., the effect the speech act has on the addressee). Building on Austin's work, Searle (1976) classifies illocutionary speech acts into five broad categories: (i) *declarations* (i.e., speech acts that bring about a change in the external world simply by being uttered), (ii) *representatives* (i.e., statements that describe or represent the world as the addresser believes it to be), (iii) *commissives* (i.e., commitments by the addresser to a future course of action), (iv) *directives* (i.e., attempts by the addresser to get the addressee to do something), (v) *expressives* (i.e., expressions of the addresser's attitudes or emotions). Utterances in the PSA are categorized according to Searle's classification. The identified speech acts are then analyzed within the context of the campaign to understand their intended illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects, focusing on how they might influence the attitudes and behaviors of the target audience.

### **Preliminary Findings and Discussion**

#### *CDS: Persuasion, Power, and Ideology*

The PSA adopts a breakup metaphor to convey its message, using a personal and emotional tone. The metaphor serves to personify Miami Beach as a partner in a failing relationship with spring breakers. Furthermore, it is designed to elicit an emotional response, making the message more impactful by appealing to the audience's personal experiences with relationships. This framing creates an intimate yet firm narrative that emphasizes disappointment and a need for change. The language is informal yet direct, with statements like "this isn't working anymore" and "we're done," which are common in breakup conversations. The use of "us" versus "you" constructs a clear division between the city (and its residents) and spring breakers, portraying the latter as the source of the problem. The combination of firm language and the listing of specific enforcement measures strengthens the city's position and increases the

likelihood of compliance or deterrence. The video distribution across digital platforms ensures that it reaches a broad audience, including both residents and potential visitors. The choice of social media, specifically, where the target demographic of young spring breakers is highly active, maximizes the campaign's visibility and impact. The use of a common metaphor and tone across these platforms ensures a consistent narrative. The PSA reflects the power dynamics between the city authorities and spring breakers. By asserting control over space and setting strict rules, the city reasserts its authority and attempts to reshape the behavior of visitors. This reflects broader societal concerns about public safety and sustainable tourism, positioning the city as a responsible destination, guardian of both its residents' and visitors' well-being. The campaign promotes an ideology of responsible tourism, where the destination seeks to attract visitors who align with its values of safety, tranquility, and sustainability. It implicitly criticizes the hedonistic, lawless behavior associated with spring break, positioning such behavior as incompatible with the destination identity.

#### *SAT: Identification of Speech Acts, Illocutionary Force, and Perlocutionary Effects*

A range of illocutionary speech acts are used in the PSA. Declarations are used to formally announce the end of the relationship between Miami Beach and spring breakers, marking a shift in the city's stance and implementing new measures that redefine the interaction. Representatives express the city's evaluation of the current situation, describing the behavior of spring breakers and the resulting negative impact on the destination. Commissives further reinforce the commitment of Miami Beach to take action, emphasizing the city's determination to implement strict measures and uphold the decision to break up with spring break behaviors. Directives are strategically employed to guide the behavior of spring breakers, warning them of the consequences if they do not adhere to the new rules. Expressives reveal the city's attitudes and emotions, communicating dissatisfaction with the current situation and a strong desire for change. Together, these speech acts work synergistically to convey the city's message, aiming to reshape visitor behavior and rebrand Miami Beach as a more sustainable and safe destination.

The illocutionary force of the PSA is to discourage undesirable behavior by communicating the city's disapproval and the consequences of such behavior. The breakup metaphor adds weight to the message, signaling that this is not merely a warning but a definitive stance that the city is taking.

The intended perlocutionary effect is to dissuade spring breakers from visiting Miami Beach unless they are willing to adhere to the city's rules and expectations. The speech acts within the PSA might provoke a range of reactions, from acceptance to defiance. The city's commitment to enforcement is crucial to ensuring that the intended perlocutionary effects are realized.

#### **Conclusions**

By focusing on the case study of Miami Beach, this research highlights the role of destination branding in managing the challenges of spring break tourism. The city's anti-spring break campaign strategically uses tourism discourse to alter visitor behavior while rebranding the destination around safety and sustainability.

The study aims to offer valuable insights for DMOs and city authorities facing similar challenges, highlighting the necessity of integrating both traditional and digital marketing strategies to effectively communicate brand identity and reshape visitor behavior. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of aligning marketing campaigns with broader social and environmental goals, ensuring the attractiveness and viability of the destination in the long term.

As digital media increasingly foster consumer engagement in activism and sustainable discourse (Romenti et al., 2024), future research should investigate the social media impact of the campaign by analyzing user-generated content in response to the PSA.

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