Journal of Destination Marketing & Management 21 (2021) 100637

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Destination Marketing & Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jdmm

Website discourses and tourism place meanings: Comparing ski areas and adjacent rural communities☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Discourse
Place meanings
Rural communities
Ski areas
Websites
Written and visual texts

ABSTRACT

Contextualized within regional landscapes, ski areas and rural towns are tourist destinations as well as symbols of social and cultural identity – and in their website discourses, each asserts place meanings. This study examines how ski areas and adjacent rural communities used language, symbolism, and imagery to communicate destination images and meanings of place, and whether their website presentations aligned in promoting and marketing tourism attractions. Small, medium, and large ski areas in Vermont (USA), representing a range of sizes, locations, and tourism development levels, were paired with adjacent rural communities. Discourse analyses of visual and written texts from ski area and town websites identified individual differences in place presentation, as well as three general discourses that varied by scale: discourses of affiliation (small places), discourses of aspiration (medium-sized places), and discourses of appropriation (large places). These were elaborated along with a fourth discourse of imagined places common to all study sites that elevated place meanings to mythic levels. This research illustrates how ski areas and rural communities discursively construct place meanings that also vary by level of local tourism development. In doing so, though, they may ignore collaborative place-making opportunities in regional tourism planning and marketing.

1. Introduction

The concept of *place* is implicit in community planning and tourism destination development, marketing, and promotion. Tourists are drawn to and identify with well-crafted images of destinations (Foroudi et al., 2018; Hunter, 2016) and their attachments to places and positive experiences at tourism sites are associated with satisfaction, brand loyalty and intent to revisit (Dwyer, Chen, & Lee, 2019). Unique destination images have been found to foster coherent place identities, distinguish destinations, and influence tourists' behaviors (Foroudi et al., 2018; Pike, 2002; Zhou, 2014). Yet, community residents, businesses and tourists may differ considerably in the ways they perceive and experience places (Balomenou & Garrod, 2014; Mak, 2017; Stokowski, 2016).

The study of individuals' identification with and attraction to tourism places is informed by two theoretical perspectives: research about destination image (deriving from psychology and consumer behavior), and the scholarship on place attachment and sense of place in community and recreation contexts (drawing from environmental psychology, geography and sociology). These perspectives intersect in emphasizing how individuals perceive destinations, develop attitudes and emotions for places and place attributes, and come to identify with places that have personal meaning (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcí, 2002; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). In these processes, destinations become "places and objects for special attention, defining the sights to be seen and thus making sights out of sites" (Crang, 1999, p. 240).

Individuals' images of and experiences with destinations, then, both reflect and enhance their place attachments and meanings (Ryan & Cave, 2005; Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017). Though research about destination image and place attachment has converged over the past several decades, it generally favors analysis of the psychological dispositions of individual tourists, giving less attention to processes associated with the production of place images and meanings within broader social and cultural contexts. How do tourism providers (industry entrepreneurs, government leaders, and others) design and present effective destination images that elaborate desired place meanings? In a narrow sense, this question may be understood as a marketing issue. More broadly, though, it invokes issues related to the construction of meaning within socio-cultural contexts. The concern of this article is with this

☆ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management, Umea, Sweden, June 2017.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2021.100637
Received 7 September 2020; Received in revised form 30 June 2021; Accepted 1 July 2021
Available online 27 July 2021

second topic: the ways in which language is used symbolically and discursively to foster place meanings associated with projected destination images.

Language creates meaning; it involves active processes by which people make sense of the world and share ideas with others (Lehtonen, 2000). The study presented here uses an interpretive, constructionist perspective to examine emergent meanings of place, following Eagleton's (1996, p. 52) guidance that, "meaning is not simply something 'expressed' or 'reflected' in language: it is actually *produced* by it." The construction of place meanings is examined here in analysis of the written and visual texts posted on websites of rural tourism providers (ski areas and adjacent towns), focusing on how language, symbolism, and imagery are deployed to communicate meanings of place. How do the contents, forms and styles of website texts work discursively to construct place meanings? To what extent do place meanings differ across study sites? How do website texts coalesce over time into identifiable place-related discourses? These research questions are addressed by analyzing the website postings of individual ski resorts and communities, and then looking comparatively across study sites.

One under-studied context for examining place meanings is that of rural tourism (Verbole, 2000; Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & van Es, 2001). Rural places offer attractive natural and cultural amenities, but peripheral settings may be associated with inadequate funding, staff, technology, or expertise, resulting in reduced levels of tourism product integration, promotion, or co-branding (Beldona & Cai, 2006). In response, tourism websites have become useful in representing key features and attractions of rural places. Residents, visitors, governments, businesses, and local leaders (Malenkina & Ivanov, 2018) have been shown to benefit from websites that effectively communicate strong place images (Cristobal-Fransi, Daries, Serra-Cantallops, Ramón-Cardona, & Zorzano, 2018; Hunter, 2016; Rowley & Hanna, 2020; Vinyals-Mirabenta, Kavaratzis, & Fernández-Cavia, 2019). Coordinated messaging on the websites of public and private tourism providers can also facilitate collaborations that identify, support, and promote distinctive place meanings (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Stokowski, 2016).

The research presented here has practical implications for rural communities and tourism entities. Ski areas are economic engines and powerful political actors in rural places. Along with nearby community governments, businesses and organizations, ski areas use the settings of local and regional history and landscapes to enhance their business narratives. By attending to the place meanings of destination discourses, public and private entities can potentially multiply their collaborative impacts to foster sustainable tourism (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Nordin, Volgger, Gill, & Pechlaner, 2019; Verbole, 2000).

2. Literature review

2.1. Language, discourse and tourism place-making

Language is central to personal, social, and cultural constructions of meaning (Lehtonen, 2000), organizing and contextualizing systems of symbols and signs to create meanings that are understood by audiences (Bignell, 1997). Language provides the fundamental components of *texts* (specific configurations of writing or speaking) and *discourses* (broad patterns of interlinked texts), with all three concepts referring to the social constructionist practices that actively produce meaning (Lehtonen, 2000). Language, texts, and discourses encode both explicit (denotative) and implicit (connotative) meanings (Barthes, 1977).

Personal experiences of place are "lived and understood through symbols, language, and images" (Lefebvre, 1992, pp. 38–39). People comprehend the meaningfulness of texts and discourses while also participating in meaning-making language practices within their socio-cultural circumstances. Language experiences help to reveal, as Tuan (1991, p. 694) explained, "the *process* of place-making [and] the *quality* (the personality or character) of place" that is "imparted by, along with visual appearance and other factors, the metaphorical and symbolic powers of language."

Thurlow and Jaworski (2010, p. 10) observe that, "language is everywhere in tourism," confirming the extensive research about the uses and characteristics of language, texts and discourses in tourism contexts (e.g. Dann, 1996; Hannam & Knox, 2005; Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005). Much of this work addresses written and visual modes of communication that construct and convey destination images. Researchers have shown that visitors experience destination images as mental representations affirmed in the written texts and visual images of promotional media and advertising (Caton & Santos, 2008; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005). Various forms of discourse analysis have been used to study how tourism providers construct place images and meanings in the written publications of tourism sites (e.g. Edelheim, 2007; Niskala & Ridanpää, 2016) and how tourists describe and reinforce their impressions of destinations in written or verbal interactions (Chen & Chen, 2017; Phipps, 2007; Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2004).

Place-making is also seen in visual forms of symbolic communication including photography (Balomenou & Garrod, 2014; Edelheim, 2007; Garrod, 2008; Hunter, 2008; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Nelson, 2005; Scollon & Scollon, 2003), film tourism (Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2019) and heritage tourism (Waterton & Watson, 2014). Destination images and place meanings are also influenced by social, spatial, and cultural imaginaries (Salazar & Graburn, 2014) that shape personal and collective experience. Social media, including websites, actively participate in the language-based meaning-making processes that sustain tourism places.

2.2. Websites and destination images

Interest in the discursive aspects of destination-related websites has recently emerged in tourism research (Malenkina & Ivanov, 2018). Organizational websites develop and present destination images and place meanings in new forms and styles (Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Zhou, 2014), and for tourism agencies, businesses and organizations, the written and visual texts of websites offer official discourses about place. Though texts span a range of forms – informational, promotional, narrative, and inspirational messages – they call upon website followers' shared understandings to discern meanings of place.

Discursive analyses of the written and visual texts of tourism websites have often focused on marketing strategies (e.g. Brito & Pratas, 2015; Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Govers & Go, 2005). In their study of the tourism websites of Spanish communities, Malenkina and Ivanov (2018) uncovered an abundance of persuasive language supporting tourism promotional efforts. Exploring the use of logos (symbolic representations) on the websites of U.K. tourist destinations, Rowley and Hanna (2020) found that smaller villages and towns were less likely than cities or regions to use slogans or to co-brand sites. Beldona and Cai's (2006) content analysis of 50 rural tourism websites in the United States found little coordination across destination providers. Efforts to attract tourists with appealing images may depart from authentic cultural portrayals (de Bernardi, 2019), though official sources are not alone in constructing place: tourists' and residents' social media images or personal photographs can also identify important destination qualities (Garrod, 2008; Hunter, 2016). In their analysis of state branding efforts, Lee, Cai, and O'Leary (2006) found that state websites featured natural, cultural and heritage amenities for informational purposes. These findings suggest that rhetorical (persuasive) aspects of social media deserve further attention (Marcotte & Stokowski, 2021) in tourism research.

2.3. Context: discourses of Vermont

The research presented in this paper was conducted in Vermont, a state located in the northeastern corner of the United States. Vermont is primarily a rural state. It has the second-smallest population in the country (623,989 in 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), yet over 70

million people in the northeastern United States and Canada live within a day's drive of the state (USDA Forest Service, 2006). State revenue relies heavily on tourism income, especially from the ski industry (Vermont Department of Tourism & Marketing, 2017).

Since the 19th century, the marketing and public relations materials of Vermont tourism have used physical and natural features – mountainous terrain, small villages, barns, farmland and dairy herds, forests, and colorful autumn scenes – to promote a pastoral image of Vermont. This destination image draws upon myths about the values of picturesque rurality, quaint village life, and hardy settlers carving an existence from nature (Brown, 1995; Harrison, 2006; Hinrichs, 1996, 1998; Morse et al., 2014; Searls, 2006). The state tourism industry encourages visitors to seek out "the whitewashed hamlets that time forgot nestled in narrow valleys below picturesque hill farms" (Kunstler, 1988, p. 52). Thus, the name 'Vermont' implicitly references for residents and visitors an array of pastoral and heritage discourses about nature and place.

Heritage narratives are stories about the past (Bridger, 1996; Stokowski, 2016) that involve a "mythic interweaving of landscape, tradition, and place" (Hinrichs, 1996, p. 268). Images of unspoiled landscapes, postcard-pretty places, and 'real Vermonters' working the land are not only simplifications; they also hide other truths. As Vanderbeck (2006, p. 642) explains, "Vermont is often seen as (and, crucially, made to be seen as) a state where white snow, white church steeples at the center of the New England 'white village,' and white faces fit together naturally in the same scenic tableau." Diversity (of people, values, and ways of life) is absent, while discourses of an imagined past frame contemporary place meanings.

3. Methods

The websites of Vermont's ski areas and nearby rural towns vary in their content and design, 'speaking' broadly to residents, tourists, and other audiences across the state and region. In the study described here, ski area and town sites are compared by scale (small, medium, and large ski areas), and by modes of website presentation (written and visual texts).

3.1. Study sites

Vermont has 20 alpine ski areas and numerous Nordic areas spread across the Green Mountain range. A diverse sample of 12 (60%) alpine areas were selected, including four sites in each category of small, medium, and large ski areas distributed across the state to represent variation in acreage, location, and recreational offerings (Table 1). Ski area size was based on skiable acreage, and number of lifts and trails – not on skier visitation data (Lucas & Goeldner, 1987) which is proprietary and varies seasonally. Additionally, ski areas located adjacent to at least one rural community were selected (see Table 1; two ski areas adjoin two towns; one town serves two resorts). Towns vary by population and level of tourism development. Some enjoy strong tourism economies and high tourism rates (Woodstock, Stowe, Killington), while others are less developed (Londonderry, Peru).

Table 1
Vermont study towns and ski areas.

Ski Area Size	Ski Area	Town	Town Population
Small (< 100 acres)	Cochran's Ski Area	Richmond	4397
	Middlebury College	Middlebury	7561
	Snow Bowl	Hancock	323
	Northeast Slopes	E. Corinth	1461
	Suicide Six	Woodstock	3288
Medium (100–300 acres)	Bromley Mountain Ski Resort	Manchester	4391
		Peru	448
	Burke Mountain Resort	Burke	1638
	Mad River Glen Cooperative	Waitsfield	2574
		Fayston	1660
	Magic Mountain	Londonderry	1140
Large (>300 acres)	Killington Resort	Killington	811
	Pico Mountain Resort	Killington	811
	Mount Snow	Dover	1410
	Stowe Mountain Resort	Stowe	4314

Population data: U.S. Census Bureau (2010)

3.2. Data collection

To obtain seasonal variation, data collection occurred over 12 months (2016–2017). Using standard computer 'clip' functions, screenshots from the homepages of ski area and town websites were collected. Screenshots preserve image resolution and retain the context of original written texts and images, an improvement upon methods that collect written texts and photographs separately (Choi et al., 2007). Written texts, photographs and graphic images were collected from website homepages (all photographs were captured if pages were scrollable), ignoring sub-pages (describing pricing, facilities, history, etc). Both words and images were studied because written and visual texts have been shown to depict places and convey meaning differently, appealing to readers in distinct ways (Barthes, 1977).

3.3. Data analysis

Following Lehtonen (2000), an inductive cultural approach to the study of written and visual website texts was adopted. To address the first research question, website screenshots were imported into NVivo software, and a content analysis was conducted to examine the prominence of written words/phrases and photographic features. Using iterative sorting processes, a rhetorical analysis was then undertaken by the authors to study the claims of written texts that asserted how places should be experienced. Patterns in symbolic aspects of photographs were identified; these showed how places (people, nature, facilities, sites) were presented. Stylistic features used to shape meaning (size, color, composition) applied within both written and visual texts were also examined.

Then looking within and across websites (research questions 2 and 3), the intersections of content, structure and style in written and visual texts were interpreted to evaluate discursive presentations of place. Both denotative (literal) and connotative (implicit) meanings of the written and visual texts (Barthes, 1977) were considered at each analytic stage. Analysis was conducted individually for ski areas and towns and then comparatively, contextualizing discourse themes and patterns across small, medium, and large ski areas and nearby towns.

Because texts and discourses have multiple meanings and contexts (Lehtonen, 2000), analyses were guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for evaluating the robustness of qualitative research (see

Table 2
Evaluating qualitative research.

Lincoln & Guba's Criteria	Researchers' Analytic Practices
Credibility	a. Lengthy engagement with data (two years) b. Two researchers evaluated data separately, then together c. Evaluation of negative cases d. Peer debriefing about categories, codes, interpretation, analysis
Transferability	a. Standardized data labeling process (by URL and date of capture) b. Compared data by categories (types of sites, texts, discourses)
Dependability	a. Consistent data collection throughout study period b. External audits by interdisciplinary researchers (colleagues)
Confirmability	a. Consistent documentation of procedures/decisions b. Kept field notes to record contextual information (impressions during data collection; data access issues)

Table 2). Throughout the research and writing processes, the authors worked collaboratively to test assumptions and emerging propositions against data.

4. Results

Over 800 screenshots were collected across the year, with more than half (54%) gathered from ski area websites (Table 3). Every homepage contained written text and one or more photographs. One difference between ski area and town websites was whether people were shown in pictures. About 74% of the ski area photographs included people, while the reverse was true for towns. Across all photos, there was little ethnic or cultural diversity.

Overall, content analysis of photographs showed that images of place varied: ski areas accounted for 90–100% of the snow photographs, while rural towns posted 80–85% of the photos of autumn scenery and water. Town websites published 100% of all local village scenes, while ski areas mostly posted images of resorts (condominiums and ski lifts). In written content, about 60% of both ski area and town websites mentioned local and regional places (towns, Vermont, the Green Mountains, New England), and 64% described natural and physical features (snow, water, forests). Stylistically, written texts of ski areas more frequently used emotion ("loving" a place), personalization ("you"), slang ("freshies") and elements showing excitement (!").

4.1. Ski area websites

The websites of ski areas (see Table 1) varied in the sophistication of their written and visual content and design. In general, smaller ski areas published less new material over the year compared to others; the websites of small and medium ski areas posted more written text than others; and large ski areas used fewer written texts and larger photographs. These websites were similar, however, in continually referencing snow in both written and visual texts. Whether natural or machine-made, high-quality snow was presented as ski areas' most important attribute.

4.1.1. Photographs on ski area websites

Ski area website homepages displayed numerous photographic images. *Small ski areas* posted mainly non-professional pictures of ski racers, families and children, and some historical scenes. They typically included people in landscape photographs. Photos posted on websites of *medium ski areas* repeated the family-friendly theme, with children, families and small groups often gathered near ski lifts. The most consistent feature of medium ski area photographs was snow: fluffy white snow falling or blanketing trails, or spraying from snowmaking cannons – not the icy, gritty, patchy snow typical to New England winters. The website homepages of *large ski areas* tended to present photographs showing technology (ski lifts, snow blowers) within sweeping landscape shots, as well as resort amenities (condominiums, restaurants, golf courses). Overall, large ski areas tended to present images of managed and controlled landscapes.

Table 3
Homepage screenshots and pictures, for study towns and ski areas.

	Towns	Ski areas	Total
Total screenshots	366	434	800
Small		*112*	
Medium		*141*	
Large		*182*	
Number of pictures	363	459	822
% of total	*44.2%*	*55.8%*	
Pictures with people	82	338	420
% of total	*22.6%*	*73.6%*	

4.1.2. Written texts on ski area websites

The content, form and style of written website texts varied across small, medium, and large ski areas. Written texts of *small ski area websites* focused not on the place but on the skiing experience. Runs were "as wide as an eight-lane highway" or had "challenging terrain." Texts emphasized family amenities and the "ski community" of visitors and staff. Cochran's ski area called viewers to "Come Join the Family," and Middlebury Snow Bowl called itself "your favorite family friendly ski area." Like their photographs, the written texts of small ski area websites featured people recreating in generalized outdoor places.

Written texts presented by *medium ski areas* coalesced around two topics. One was adventurous recreational experiences (Burke Mountain is "Your gateway to adventure in the Northeast," while Mad River Glen challenges visitors to "Ski it if you can"). The other is exceptional snow. A big snowfall at Mad River Glen "utterly transformed" it "into a world-class, powder paradise," while Magic Mountain explained "how serious we are about … more and better snow." The emphasis on 'perfect' snow was distinctive for medium sized ski areas.

Large ski areas used written texts principally to reinforce their reputations and position themselves regionally. Mount Snow calls itself "Vermont's closest big mountain resort," while Killington ski area boasts that it has the "Most Open Terrain in the East." Stowe Mountain Resort sees itself as "an internationally renowned four-season destination." For large ski resorts, the textual adjectives are all superlatives, and regional legitimacy is conferred symbolically.

4.2. Town websites

The website homepages of town governments (see Table 1) differed in structure, content, and style from those of nearby ski areas. Information-heavy, they targeted varied audiences (part-time and full-time residents, businesses, tourists) with links to municipal departments, town documents, and local attractions. Several used a limited color palette, and few posted action pictures. In general, these websites varied according to a town's level of tourism development, with texts and images typically referencing Vermont's cultural symbols (quaint villages, covered bridges, country barns, autumn scenes) that were absent from ski area websites.

4.2.1. Photographs on town websites

On their websites, *towns near small ski areas* tended to ignore nearby ski areas; only two towns (Middlebury and Woodstock) are actually tourism-oriented places. These five towns use similar web layouts for homepages, and all emphasize autumnal images (leaves, pumpkins, hay bales) and village scenes (main street, church steeple, town hall). Conversely, *towns adjacent to medium-sized ski areas* represent a spectrum of tourism development levels and show more variability in website content and design – yet only one references its nearby ski area. These websites employ limited color schemes and display a range of photographic skill from naïve to professional. Compared to towns near small ski areas, these websites often visualize all four seasons in their photographs. *Towns near large ski areas* posted photographs and logos that align with nearby resorts. Dover's website displays Mount Snow Resort's logo, while the design and color schemes of Killington and Stowe's town websites are nearly identical to those of nearby ski areas. These town websites feature multiple photographs of natural and cultural landscapes (agricultural fields, lakeside development, town centers, ski lifts, trails).

4.2.2. Written texts on town websites

In written texts on website homepages, *towns near small ski areas* provide texts oriented almost entirely toward residents. In contrast, *towns adjacent to large ski areas* are information heavy, presenting lists of upcoming events, public notices, and links to town policies and documents. Aligned with adjacent large ski areas through photographs and logos, the websites of large towns orient towards attracting businesses

and stimulating development. In comparison, the website homepages of *towns near medium-sized ski areas* are far more varied. Tourism-oriented towns in this category (Fayston, Waitsfield, Manchester) target multiple audiences, providing tourist information alongside resources for residents and businesses – while smaller towns (Peru, Londonderry, Burke) primarily feature community news, upcoming meetings, and events.

Six tourism-oriented towns situated near small and medium ski areas (Burke, Corinth, Hancock, Manchester, Middlebury, Waitsfield) were unique in posting community history narratives on their homepages. These texts are distinctive for their historic details – though they otherwise offer only general assertions about place supported by lofty adjectives. For example, Burke's homepage (Fig. 2) reads: "Established in 1782, the Town of Burke has a rich history, a strong sense of community and an idyllic location, nestled in northern Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. The Town of Burke is a wonderful place to live, visit, or do business" (http://www.burkevermont.org/; accessed July 20, 2017). This text seems less about the kind of place Burke *is* than about what it imagines itself to be. Other towns in this category allude to place without identifying anything specific about it: Manchester and Fayston call themselves "picturesque," Waitsfield's homepage shows scenes within categories (landscape, agriculture, natural and social heritage), and Hancock dubs itself "a gateway to the wilderness," situating nature just outside town boundaries. Rather than introducing their own unique features, these towns invoke general, regional references, indicators of their location "in the Green Mountains" or "in central Vermont," or describing themselves as a "quintessential New England town."

4.3. Comparing ski area and town websites: discourses of place

Though located within the same geographic landscapes and social and cultural contexts, small, medium, and large ski areas and nearby towns present divergent images of and discourses about place. Table 4 outlines their discourse practices, and comparative visual scenes from ski area and town websites illustrate the differences (Figs. 1–3).

As Table 4 explains, small ski areas ignore physical landscapes while describing 'place' in terms of family and outdoor recreation experiences; their nearby towns feature pastoral images, while both ski area and town websites generally ignore one another. Small ski areas and towns present *discourses of affiliation* that focus internally on each place. Large ski areas and adjacent towns reference one another and Vermont in written and visual texts and are strongly oriented to tourism. These entities exhibit *discourses of appropriation*, reaching beyond their local features. The homepages of medium-sized ski areas range widely but most connect visitor experiences and snow quality, while nearby towns align four-season visual images and tourism growth. Medium ski areas and towns present *discourses of aspiration* in texts and images.

In addition to place meanings associated with scale (small, medium, and large ski areas), several discursive themes are apparent in interactions among written and visual modes of presentation on ski area and town websites. Ski areas' photographs and written texts are additive: the family-oriented, experiential focus of small ski areas extends to medium-sized ski areas, becoming linked with symbols of perfect snow, which is carried over into the texts of large ski areas, where images of size and importance (amenities, technology) are photographed in perfectly groomed snowy landscapes. The visual and written progression from personal on-site experiences to resort management offers a narrative about the increasing professionalization of skiing places (and a skier's expected trajectory within the sport). An implicit commentary about control of nature also emerges: from small to large ski areas, this evolves from inattention to nature, to perfect snow, to control over (snow)scapes. Discourses of place affiliation (focusing on community, not nature) evolve into aspirational texts (about perfect snow) that later appropriate nature (through ski area management).

Rural towns display generally similar discursive processes relative to size and tourism development levels. In written texts on town websites, an implicit discourse about community growth emerges as texts highlight local, regional, and extra-regional interests. As towns develop with tourism and align with nearby (medium to large) ski areas, they also present themselves and their place meanings differently in website visuals. Photographs show a widening angle, moving from local autumn color, to four-season images and regional views, to broad landscape images that include adjacent ski resorts.

Juxtaposition of people and landscapes on the homepages of ski areas and towns also illuminates opposing place discourses. Town websites publish photographs that overwhelmingly emphasize natural and cultural scenic landscapes but show few images with people. In contrast, ski area websites post photographs filled with people, but landscape images are rarely devoid of ski lifts, machinery, or resort buildings. These visual discourses reveal alternate conceptions of nature. For large ski areas, 'natural' landscapes are mountainside amenities intended to enhance visitors' activity enjoyment. For towns, natural and cultural landscapes are the defining components of meaningful places. Neither ski area nor town websites reveal social diversity.

Ski areas and rural towns of different sizes thus presented divergent and accumulating place meanings on their websites. But, in addition to the three discourses identified, a fourth *discourse of imagined places* (Fig. 4) was also noted, involving to varying degree all ski areas and rural towns studied. This discourse elevates actual places to mythic, imaginary levels. Often, the primary imagined place was an idealized Vermont.

Explicitly and implicitly, the *discourse of imagined places* expands existing destination images and place meanings. Small ski areas equate place with imagined families and their skiing experiences. Medium-sized ski areas imagine places with perfect snow. Large ski areas imagine a resort-managed, unforgettable Vermont experience. Study towns use written texts and seasonal landscape photographs (particularly autumn scenes) to idealize a pastoral, rural Vermont. At all sites and scales, place is presented mythically.

To support discourses of imagined places, written and visual texts use specific stylistic devices to construct place. First, they apply familiar regional (not local) identifiers, including literal and symbolic referents of both nature and culture – autumn foliage, village scenes, New England. These 'stock' phrases and images are cultural referents, but they blur local meanings of place across ski areas and towns.

Table 4
Website discourses compared across ski areas and towns.

	Photographic Images	Written Texts
Discourses of Affiliation		
Small ski areas	Emphasize families and children	Emphasize family outdoor ski experiences, on-site community
Towns near small ski areas	Iconic rural town images; Autumn seasonal images; Ignore ski areas	Texts about the town itself; Orient to residents
Discourses of Aspiration		
Medium ski areas	Children and families; Ski lifts; "Perfect" snow	Emphasize adventure and visitors' experiences; "Perfect" snow
Towns near medium ski areas	Four-season images of town and region; Ignore ski areas	Information for residents and tourists (varies by town)
Discourses of Appropriation		
Large ski areas	Ski technology; Landscape views; Resort amenities	Emphasize resort reputation and positioning; Reference Vermont
Towns near large ski areas	Nature and culture landscapes; Photo and logos of ski areas	Information-heavy; Oriented to tourism and development interests

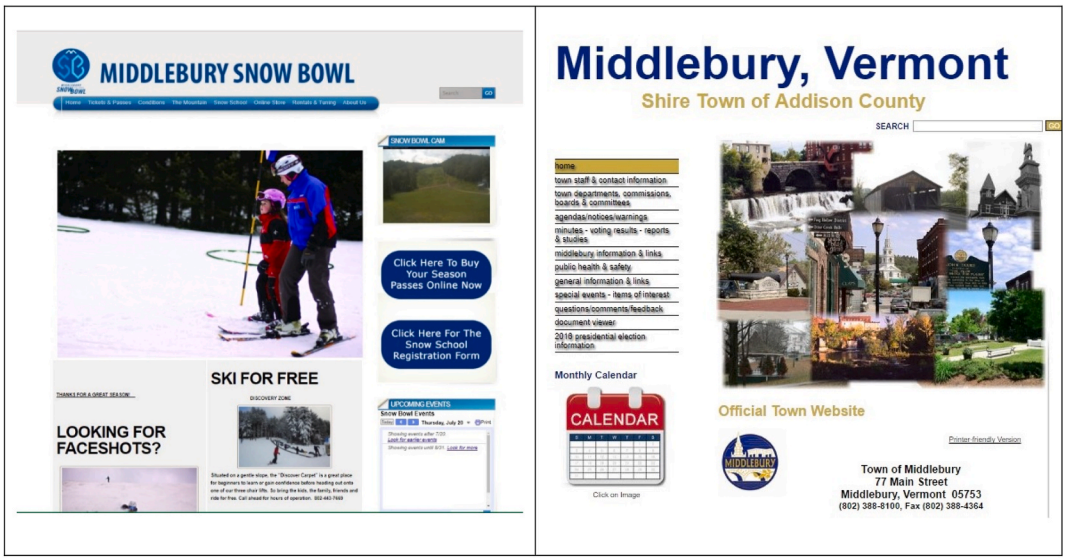

Fig. 1. Small-sized destinations: Middlebury College Snow Bowl (http://www.middleburysnowbowl.com/), and Middlebury, VT (http://www.townofmiddlebury.org/) (accessed February 05, 2017).

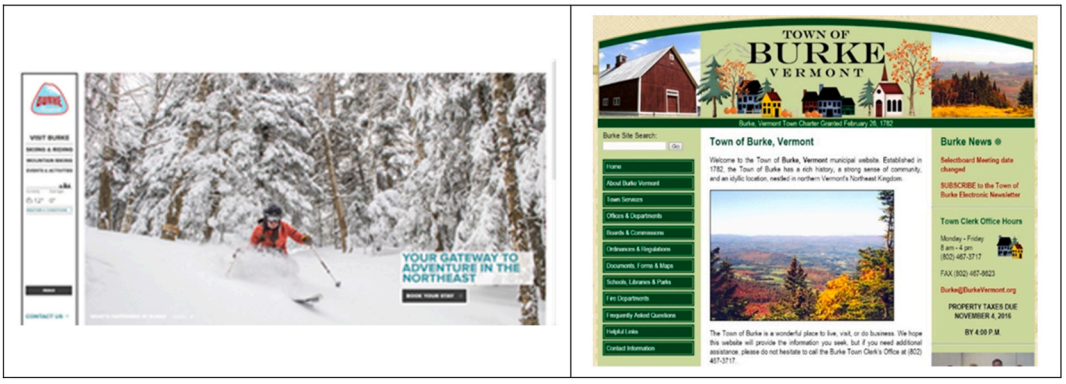

Fig. 2. Medium-sized destinations: Burke Mountain Resort (http://skiburke.com/), and Burke, VT (http://www.burkevermont.org/) (accessed December 11, 2016).

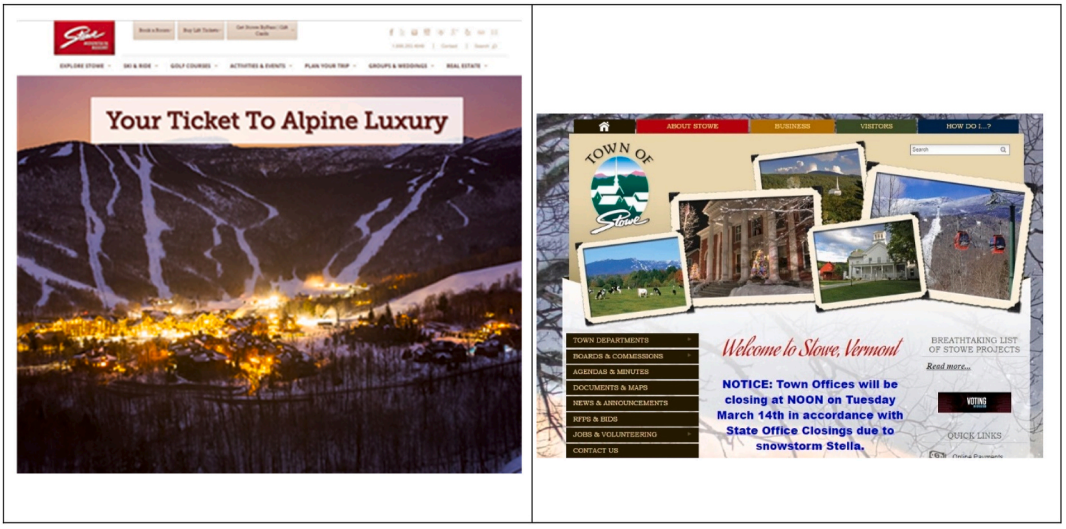

Fig. 3. Large-sized destinations: Stowe Mountain Resort (https://www.stowe.com/), and Stowe, VT (http://www.townofstowevt.org/) (accessed March 15, 2017).

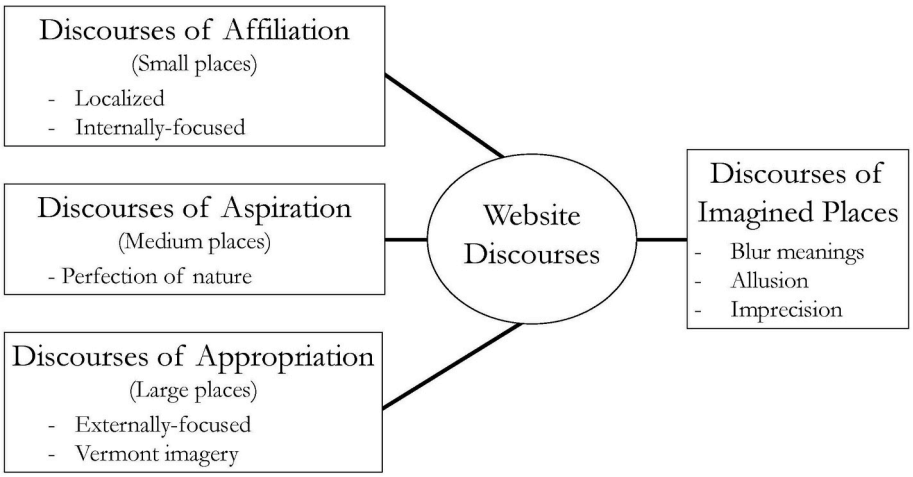

Fig. 4. Four place-related destination discourses.

Second, imagined places are constructed using techniques of allusion and imprecision that stretch the meanings of texts. Ski areas, for example, rarely reference nearby towns or distinctive local or regional features, but they discursively 'capture' Vermont. Bromley Resort (located in the town of Peru) inaccurately claims "Bromley, Vermont" on its website. Stowe Mountain Resort describes the ski resort in terms of the charms of its nearby historic town of Stowe. Town websites use history to authenticate contemporary claims: the town of Corinth points to "over 200 years of spirited independence" to describe its contemporary economy. Use of regional landscape photographs also allows towns to reach beyond localities, claiming Vermont's natural and cultural scenes as their own.

Uses of allusion and imprecision are dramatized in a picture posted on the medium-sized ski area Magic Mountain's homepage (Fig. 5), where an anonymous skier emerging from a cloud of snow is "Steeped in VERMONT." This is a literal message about an individual's experience of perfect snow on a "steep" mountain – and it also connotes personal freedom through immersion in an exciting recreation activity. The intent, it appears, is to help website viewers imagine *themselves* in whatever kind of *imagined Vermont-like place* they desire.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Analysis of the websites of Vermont ski areas and their nearby communities shows how individual agencies and businesses create written and visual texts about tourism destinations, illuminating the discursive patterns they employ to organize place meanings. Website texts and discourses varied according to the size of the destination/attraction. The findings of this study suggest that even in small rural locales, the websites of tourism destinations do not only speak to different audiences – they may also be speaking different "languages of place" (Stokowski, 2002, p. 368).

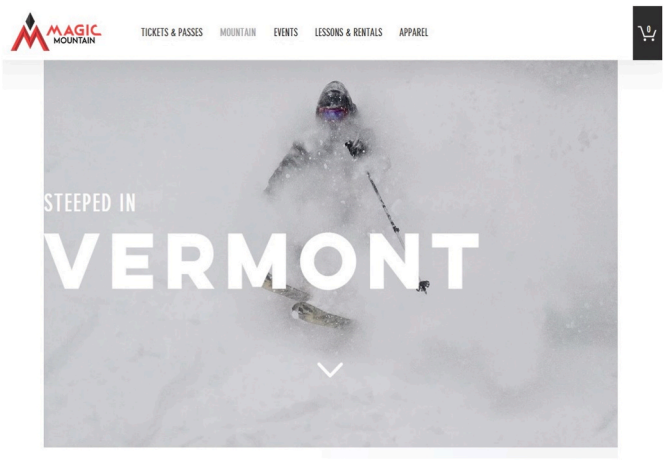

Fig. 5. Magic Mountain (https://www.magicmtn.com/mountain; accessed July 13, 2017).

The analysis suggests that the website contents of destinations become meaningful within contextualized discourses of place. Discourses draw from existing referents and symbols; they intersect in social and cultural contexts (Lehtonen, 2000), circulating among other discourses, imaginaries, and managerial communications. Meanings of place thus arise within 'discursive ecosystems.' They are shaped within an array of written and visual texts that connect and diverge, influencing discursive choices.

Research about the contents and impacts of social media for both tourism providers and visitors is increasingly of interest in tourism (Minazzi, 2015; Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012), and the discursive analysis presented here directs attention to the web-based place-making practices of tourism providers. Results suggest that even though ski areas (private and non-profit) and town governments represent different economic sectors and organizational forms, they exhibit three consistencies in their destination discourses. First, congruent with Beldona and Cai's (2006) findings that destination marketing organizations often lack horizontal linkages with nearby DMOs or destinations, these study sites and their place presentations also often diverged. Second, three types of place-related discourses that differed by scale of tourist sites were observed: small ski areas and towns presented place-related *discourses of affiliation*, medium ski areas and towns developed *discourses of aspiration*, and large ski areas and towns produced *discourses of appropriation*. Third, all towns and ski areas, to varying degrees, elaborated *discourses of imagined places* that elevated actual places to idealized, imaginary levels. Study websites used rhetorical techniques of blurring, allusion, and imprecision to sustain imagination; these are similar to the linguistic practices identified by Malenkina and Ivanov (2018) in their study of tourism websites (classifying and superlative adjectives, pronouns, and emotion-inducing words).

On their website homepages, ski areas and towns displayed written and visual texts that varied in the extent to which they emphasized local place meanings. Town homepages tended to reference local and regional attributes with narrow ranges of content, form, and style, suggesting that governments may view their websites as more informational than promotional. Ski area websites also varied in content, form and style across small, medium and large sizes, but they consistently used superlatives (e.g. 'perfect snow') in symbolic reference to place (Rowley & Hanna, 2020). The study presented in this paper raises new questions

about the rhetorical basis of place meanings across tourism destinations that are at different stages of growth. Do the discourses uncovered here reflect a continuum in the content, structure, and styles of language use associated with developmental stages of tourism places?

The website presentations of ski areas and nearby rural towns converged in their presentations of discourses of imagined places. The most frequently invoked imagined place was the canvas of Vermont itself. Both ski areas and rural towns posted written and visual texts that shifted attention away from local qualities, discursively over-burdening texts with idealized images and references to a mythical Vermont. Among ski areas, the implicit message was that the imagined Vermont is really the tourism destination. For towns, however, references to an imagined "quintessential Vermont" seemed to minimize local distinctiveness.

Given that an idyllic, pastoral destination image associated with Vermont is well-established (Kunstler, 1988; Vanderbeck, 2006), it is not surprising to find it emerging again in the website discourses of imagined places in the ski areas and rural communities studied here. Website texts may be designed to blur presentations of regional heritage and culture (Coupland & Coupland, 2014; Zhou, 2014). Yet, replacing discourses of local distinctiveness with those of imagined places raises other concerns. Among more than 400 pictures presented on study websites, few showed minority individuals. This ignores BIPOC residents and visitors and raises questions about the sensitivities and hospitality of Vermont's rural places and tourism providers.

Results presented here suggest that written and visual texts have both different and complementary functions in discursive constructions of place. Photographs – because they elicit emotion while extending and elaborating written texts – are especially important in constructing place meanings (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Many of the images used in these website texts are adaptable and imprecise (Hansen & Machin, 2013). Drawing from shared social and cultural meanings, viewers can easily comprehend unseen aspects of a picture, or imagine themselves in the setting. At the same time, photographs and written texts contribute to intertextual conversations that likely extend the reception and interpretation of website postings.

Thus, the discursive patterns uncovered here raise questions about destination websites as neutral facilitators of place meanings. Websites might appear as objective sources of information and entertainment, but followers are conditioned to be continually attentive to those media. Further, organizations devote time, staff, and money to produce website content that influences place meaning (Beldona & Cai, 2006; Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Vinyals-Mirabenta et al., 2019). Website presentations, then, should be viewed as rhetorical (persuasive) language and discourse intending to influence followers (Marcotte & Stokowski, 2021).

A limitation of the study described here is that website discourses were only studied from producer perspectives, ignoring the ways that messages are received and understood by social media followers. Website design, promotion and branding practices will be enhanced by studying both providers and followers of websites (Hansen & Machin, 2013). Given the volume of written and visual data on websites, quantitative analytic approaches and studies of web pages beyond homepages (e.g. history, attractions, testimonial pages) are likely required to challenge or support the place discourses proposed here (though qualitative, interpretive analyses are encouraged to address nuances of language and discourse). Because the texts, images and design elements of websites frequently change, using internet archive services that preserve the original content and design of web pages would be valuable for longitudinal studies to assess how discourses of place vary over time.

Practical implications also accompany the theoretical issues raised here. Notably, while Vermont's ski areas and towns are relatively small compared to other places, they do provide a baseline for examining the discursive forms, contents and styles of place-making across types of tourism destinations. A variety of outdoor and other destinations should be studied to evaluate the generalizability of place discourses identified here. For example, several Vermont ski resorts lacking adjacent towns were excluded from this study – yet some four-season destinations may construct town-like developments, and these may present unique discursive qualities.

Because the ski areas and towns studied here are co-located regionally and often interdependent economically and socially, it might be expected that their place-oriented website texts would overlap. Yet, across the sample, small, medium, and large destinations were similar only in communicating a discourse of imagined places. The comparison of websites of private and public entities presented here thus suggests challenges in crafting cross-sector destination images, facilitating collaborative regional planning in rural places (Mak, 2017; Wilson et al., 2001), and developing local sustainability goals. Yet, these issues are central to a destination's reputation (Darwish & Burns, 2019) and sustainability.

The policy contexts of place management and destination development are also relevant (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Gill, 2004) for destination planning and resort marketing practices. Discursive patterns uncovered across the websites studied here showed that some ski areas and towns (primarily larger ones) worked both independently and collaboratively to create place meanings, primarily by referencing one another and using similar web design elements. These collaborations may have practical consequences: Favre-Bonte, Gardet and Thevenart-Puthod (2019) found that innovation networks at mountain tourism resorts vary in ways that affect their ability to attract customers.

Considering how website presentations of place change over time might provide insight about transformations in local and regional cultural identity and adaptations needed for crafting effective destination images. For example, have website texts about snow varied over time as climate change accelerates? Textual and discourse analyses can reveal implicit and explicit meanings of place to strategically improve the business practices of destinations and communities. This is equally true for institutional as well as individual contributions (e.g. social media, or volunteer-generated photography) toward destination planning (Balomenou & Garrod, 2014). Website texts may represent imagined, stylized, marketed realities, but real people translate these (consciously or unconsciously) into understandings of real places. If the 'Vermont' that ski areas are presenting in website texts is incompatible with that presented by towns, there is a missed opportunity for shared cultural and economic vision. Further, if both town and ski area imaginings about Vermont or other rural places are out-of-step with reality, it is tourism destinations and local people that will ultimately suffer.

Author contributions

Margaux A. Reckard: Conceptualization; Data curation; Data collection; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Validation; Visualization; Writing: original draft & review/editing. Patricia A. Stokowski: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing: original draft & review/editing.

Funding

This research received no grant funding from any agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report no potential or actual conflict of interest.

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