NEW MEDIA AND AUTHENTICATION OF SPORT TOURISM PLACE: SOCIAL (RE)PRODUCTION OF ALPE D'HUEZ AS A SACRED TOUR DE FRANCE SITE

Introduction

Interrelationships between mass media and sport tourism have long been noted (e.g., Gibson, 1998; Slak Valek, 2018). However, the media’s role in transforming relatively obscure sites and objects into well-known sport tourism attractions is less well-understood. Little is known regarding the media’s influence in (re)producing the ‘myth’ of culturally and historically significant sporting sites and objects as catalysts for sport tourism. Such issues dovetail with an emerging stream of research in broader tourism studies concerned with authentication, drawing scholars’ focus to social processes underpinning the endowment of objects, sites, or events with authenticity, and relatedly, touristic significance (Cohen & Cohen, 2012, 2019).

Recent advancements have seen the rise of new media technologies aided by proliferation in Internet usage and advancements in digital communications (Ross & Rivers, 2020). The integration of new media technologies into everyday sporting participation and consumption (both amateur and professional) has had considerable impacts that are yet to be widely explored. The influence on sport tourism attributable to these evolutions in new media technologies are no exception. There is now widespread engagement with new media, including major platforms such as Instagram (Lamont & Ross, 2020; Ross & Zappavigna, 2020) and Facebook, which integrate into many dimensions of late-modern society, inclusive of sport and tourism. This paper focuses on new media platforms intended to facilitate mass distribution of content, including YouTube and podcast streaming platforms such as Apple podcasts and Spotify (Perks & Turner, 2019). These platforms have disrupted global power structures previously enjoyed by
traditional, commercial mass media corporations, and have democratised media supply chains by enabling amateur and quasi-professional media producers to distribute bespoke content catering to niche interests that may not be otherwise of interest to, or commercially viable for traditional broadcast media outlets.

We contend that new media has considerable potential to influence demand for sport tourism. In particular, we argue that new media is a powerful vehicle through which authenticity of sporting sites and objects may be (re)produced as catalysts for sport tourism visitation. To substantiate this thesis, in this paper we explore the manner in which four established cycling media producers have utilised YouTube to implicitly influence members of the global cycling world. Our overarching aim is to apply multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; O’Halloran, 2011) to analyse how the mediated, discursive practices of these respected cycling media outlets (re)produces ‘hot’ authentication of Alpe d’Huez, a mountain top ski resort in the French Alps, as an authentic, culturally and historically significant site of the Tour de France professional cycling race, and by extension, positions Alpe d’Huez as a ‘must see’ attraction for cycling enthusiasts.

**Research Context**

The Pyrenees and the French Alps have provided spectacular backdrops for the Tour de France (hereafter, *Le Tour*) since 1910 and 1911, respectively. Imagery of pioneering *Le Tour* cyclists winching their way up narrow, unpaved roads aboard primitive machines quickly became legendary amongst the French public, cementing the two mountain ranges as inextricably linked with *Le Tour*. The sheer length and steep gradients of the Pyrenean and Alpine passes, coupled with asphyxiating reductions in ambient oxygen as roads climb past
2000m altitude, strike fear into professional and amateur cyclists alike. Two of Le Tour’s legendary passes, Col du Tourmalet (Pyrenees) and Col du Galibier (French Alps) have been described as ‘devine and pitiless’ backdrops (Gaboriau, 2003, p. 69), spanning 18-19 km of road and reaching 2115m and 2642m altitude, respectively.

In the early 1950s civic leaders in the Oisans Valley pooled money to bid for a Le Tour stage finish atop a mountain featuring a primitive ski resort village to encourage tourism to the region. The name of that ski resort village was Alpe d’Huez (McGann Publishing, N.D.). In 1952, Alpe d’Huez was announced as Le Tour’s Stage 10 finish location. Won by Italian champion Fausto Coppi, the stage did not generate the ‘fireworks’ local advocates had hoped for in terms of tourism visitation or spectacular performances by the riders. Alpe d’Huez did not appear again on Le Tour’s itinerary until 1976 when Dutchman Joop Zoetemelk and (eventual Le Tour winner) Lucien Van Impe battled on ‘the Alpe’ with Zoetemelk taking the sprint finish (Wynn, 2018). Thereafter, crowd numbers snowballed each time a stage finish atop Alpe d’Huez was scheduled on Le Tour’s route. Recent estimates put crowd numbers on the mountain road side at around 1 million (Hughes, 2018).

The climb begins in the village of Le Bourg D’Oisans, 60 km from the French city of Grenoble. The climb is 13.2 km long, has a steep average gradient of 8.1% and has a net altitude gain of 1135m to the summit at 1860m (Cycling Locations, 2020). The road is characterised by its now trademark 21 hairpin bends evoking imagery of a shoelace zigzagging vertically out of the Oisans Valley. Each hairpin bend features a numbered interpretive sign paying homage to one or more Le Tour stage winners at Alpe d’Huez, counting down from Bend 21 to Bend Zero at the summit. In 2018 Alpe d’Huez hosted its 30th Le Tour stage finish (Wynn, 2018). The mountain has established a fearsome reputation etched into cycling folklore. Many editions of Le
Tour have been won and lost on these slopes. Cycling journalists have anointed Alpe d’Huez as hallowed ground, such as Hughes’ (2018) superlative account: ‘WITH its iconic hairpin bends, punishing gradients and roadsides crammed ten-deep with fans, Alpe d’Huez has become a true legend of the Tour de France’ (unpaginated, original emphasis).

Cycling Le Tour’s fabled Alpine and Pyrenean mountain climbs has become a lucrative segment for the French visitor economy. Alpe d’Huez has become enshrined within the global cycling social world as a ‘bucket list’ climb for amateur cyclists (McCullough & Ferro, 2014; Wynn, 2018). Myriad tourism operators offer premium packaged tours showcasing Le Tour’s iconic Pyrenean and Alpine ascents and integrating French cuisine. An unquantified, though arguably significant volume of independent tourists may be observed criss-crossing Le Tour’s giants to collect cherished summit ‘selfies’ on any given summer day (Lamont, 2020).

**Literature Review**

**Authentication in tourism**

Originating from the writings of Boorstin (1964) and MacCannell (1976), these theorists initially linked authenticity with tourism to critique the rise of mass tourism and means through which mass tourists are duped by inauthentic, staged experiences proffered by their hosts. Since then, authenticity has become a vexed issue within tourism studies, often stimulating discussions around the authenticity of toured objects, and/or the authenticity of the tourist’s self (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). These debates formed the basis of Wang’s (1999) influential typology of authenticity: objective, constructive, and existential. Cohen and Cohen (2012) proposed that tourism studies would benefit by paying greater attention to the production of authenticity as opposed to perpetuating conceptual debates of defining authenticity in tourism. Whilst not the first to speak of ‘authentication’ (e.g., Wall & Xie, 2005) Cohen and Cohen
(2012) sought to shift tourism scholars’ focus to questioning how touristic objects, sites, or events become endowed with authenticity; that is, how places or objects become endowed with touristic significance. Researching authentication therefore draws attention to the intertwined issues of politics, power, social constructionism, discursive practices, and mediation (Cohen & Cohen, 2019; Lamont, 2014; Lugosi, 2016; Mkono, 2013).

Cohen and Cohen (2012) propose two interrelated modes of authentication: ‘hot’ and ‘cool.’ Cool authentication encapsulates the endowment of authenticity through politicised processes as real or fake. Cool authentication is achieved through formal acts conducted by a mandated agent declaring the authenticity of an object, place, or event. For example, instalment of official embellishment such as banners and flags in sporting venues by the International Olympic Committee would constitute cool authentication of such spaces as legitimate, authentic, Olympic sites. In contrast, hot authentication is pursued through grassroots, democratic, participatory processes to socially construct authenticity around an object, site, or event as touristically significant. There is no authorised agent of authentication as is associated with cool authentication. Hot authentication may create, preserve, reinforce, or amplify an object, site, or event’s (subjective and contestable) authenticity over time through performative acts laden with individuals’ beliefs and emotions, and/or the culturally-prescribed values and beliefs of particular groups, such as members of social worlds (Unruh, 1980). Hot authentication may take place through performative practices incorporating worshipping, venerating, paying obeisance, and making offerings which symbolically anoint, preserve, and/or intensify the authenticity of touristic objects and places (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Hot authentication may also occur through spontaneous and/or serendipitous witnessing of phenomena which may facilitate tourists experiencing feelings of existential authenticity.
Although scholars seem to heed Cohen and Cohen’s (2012) position that understanding processes of authentication is worthwhile, criticisms of their hot and cool authentication framework have emerged. Frisvoll (2013) argues that the basis of certification (i.e., expert/participatory; formal/informal) privileged within Cohen and Cohen’s framework is limited in explaining how actors’ perceptions of authenticity are (re)produced, destabilised, and/or perpetuated. Accordingly, Lugosi (2016) elaborates upon Cohen and Cohen’s (2012) work by adopting a socio-technological perspective to diversify understandings of authentication processes. Lugosi (2016) argues that the authenticity of tourism ‘goods’ (places, practices, artefacts) are subject to market-based value claims which are debated against the backdrop of ‘technology-saturated society’ (p. 100) marked by unequal power structures. In this sense, the authenticity value assigned to tourism goods is subjectively evaluated through technology-enabled interactions among networks of human and non-human actors.

Drawing upon Turkle’s (2008) notion of the ‘tethered self,’ reflecting constant connectivity to and through internet-enabled devices producing hybrid human/non-human subjects, Lugosi (2016) singles out social media as a particularly powerful vehicle through which actors may lay value claims, thereby shaping authenticity of tourism goods. Support for Lugosi’s (2016) position is provided by Lamont (2014) who observed repertoires of spontaneous, performative acts of hot authentication among cycling tourists, which served to (re)produce notions of the French Alps as an authentic backdrop for Le Tour. These tourists mediated their performative acts via social media, thereby engaging in ‘mediated acts of sharing digitally captured encounters with place’ (p. 15), thus drawing attention to the central role social media practices might play in hot authentication within contemporary sport tourism.
**Sport heritage, social worlds, and sport tourism**

Although a link between sport happenings of the past and tourism has long been acknowledged (e.g., Gibson, 1998), scholarly discourse points towards the role nostalgia and sport heritage surrounding particular sports can play as drivers of contemporary sport tourism (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2017). There has reportedly been growth in travel among avid sport enthusiasts to visit places enshrined with sport heritage, practices akin to ‘pilgrimages,’ such as avid golfers travelling to play at the fabled St. Andrews course in Scotland (Ramshaw & Bottelberghe, 2014), and as Pinson (2017) notes, travel to participate in heritage sport events which are constructed around territorial resources, ‘sites of memories’ (p. 136), and long-standing historical processes, such as the Tour of Flanders Cyclo event (Derom & Ramshaw, 2016). Debates exist as to whether sport tourism stimulated by happenings in the past are instructively framed theoretically by nostalgia or heritage. Fairley and Gammon (2005) conceptualise nostalgia through a cognitive lens, ‘a yearning to return to or relive a past period’ (p. 183), through which an individual may construct meaning and identity. However, Ramshaw and Gammon (2005) advocate ‘heritage’ as a broader concept encompassing remembrance, celebration, veneration, and teaching contemporary audiences about achievements from the past. In the context of sport, heritage hones in on ‘history, nostalgia, memory, myth and tradition in order to meet the demands of the present’ (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005, p. 232). More recently Ramshaw (2020) defined sport heritage as, ‘the recognition and use of the sporting past as a means of addressing or illuminating a variety of contemporary social, cultural, and economic processes and practices’ (p. 4).

Heritage sport tourism has been discussed in light of social worlds, ‘amorphous and diffuse constellations of actors, organizations, events, and practices which have coalesced into
spheres of interest and involvement for participants’ (Unruh, 1980, p. 277). In this sense, members of social worlds bound together by an interest in a particular sport, may be socialised into, and thus develop knowledge of their sport’s heritage. In turn, such knowledge may instill a desire to visit venerated sites holding cultural and/or historical significance among members of a social world, enabling accrual of cultural capital to underpin a social identity constructed around nuanced interests (Fairley et al., 2018; Lamont, 2014, 2020; Shipway et al., 2016).

Germane to this paper, heritage sport tourism has been previously linked with authenticity through debates around staged authenticity of ‘stage-managed’ sport objects and sites created to satisfy tourist demand (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005). Ramshaw and Gammon (2017) identify ‘tangible immovable sport heritage’ (p. 115) as encompassing buildings or places that cannot be moved, and may with time become associated with particular sporting teams, events, and/or feats. Ramshaw (2020) contends that such sporting venues can, over time, accumulate historical value and are, ‘considered witnesses to the sporting past and repositories of collective memory’ (p. 11) underpinning the heritage of particular sports. However, Ramshaw and Gammon (2017) lament that, ‘how a site has become heritagized - that is to say, how and why a particular sporting venues considered heritage - has been overlooked’ (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2017, p. 118). We contend that the transformation of ordinary places through processes of social construction into authentic sport heritage places among members of particular sporting social worlds, is also not well understood.

Connecting the preceding theoretical discussions around heritage sport tourism to Le Tour, the ‘stadia’ in which Le Tour is produced starkly contrasts with other spaces hosting professional sport in which athletes and fans are spatially segregated. Authorative sport geographer Bale (2003) argues that, ‘Some landscapes have become sportscapes, so momentous
has been the impact of sport’ (p. 4), proposing the concept of ‘sportscapes’ to explain the social transformation of pre-existing landscapes into places synonymous with sport, such as the conversion of woodlands into golf courses. Palmer (2010) elaborates upon Bale’s sportscape concept by explaining how civic space is temporarily reordered to create sportscapes accommodative of professional cycling. Civic parks, roads and other open space are reconfigured and embellished by *Le Tour*’s organisation and thus ‘recast as the space of the Tour de France in ways that are largely uncontested’ (Palmer, 2010, p. 875). Consequently, for sport tourists visiting *Le Tour* places, the frontstage-backstage binary (MacCannell, 1973) becomes both reduced and blurred. In contrast to the heavily guarded turf of Twickenham or Lord’s, the fabled mountain roads of *Le Tour* are freely accessible to amateur cyclists whenever those spaces are not configured as ‘Tour space’ (Palmer, 2010). As Ramshaw and Bottelberghe (2014) note, ‘The link between the heritage of the Tour de France and cycling tourism can also be seen through the numerous ‘fantasy camp’ type of experiences, which provide tourists the opportunity to cycle parts of the Tour route’ (p. 26). Such experiences provide opportunities for amateur cyclists to kinaesthetically engage with the mountainous landscapes, and by extension, embody the duress endured by *Le Tour* cyclists from the past, experiences which are said to be predominately stimulated by previous exposure to mediatised representations of *Le Tour* (Lamont, 2014, 2020; Spinney, 2006). Relatedly, Derom and Ramshaw (2016) argue that the rise of participatory sport events now underpin widespread travel through which active sport tourists may, ‘construct either personal heritage or nostalgia narratives, or attach their participation to broader regional or national sport heritages’ (p. 267), social processes which to date have gone under-researched.
New media and sport

As new media continues to evolve, so too does the scope for its integration into social worlds bound together by sport. The range of new media platforms now available facilitate mediated participation in these social worlds and enable people to come together with like-minded others to an extent irreparable by face-to-face interactions (Smith & Treem, 2016). Although much research has focused on relationships and interactions between sport fans, managers, and the media (e.g., Ross & Rivers, 2020), the range of research focusing on actual sporting sites continues to evolve. However, new media is adding a new dimension to such research, with vicarious experiences of places and sites of sporting significance able to be communicated and depicted through the affordances of various platforms (e.g., Caldwell, 2020; Ross & Zappavigna, 2020). Information can be communicated, sights and sounds related to the place can be projected, and through curated discourse, viewers can be offered interpretive historical context related to particular places.

A prime example of a new media platform equipped to deliver such affordances is the video-sharing platform, YouTube. A simple search on YouTube for any given sport would instantly identify content ranging from professional fixture highlights, to amateur coaching videos, to insights into athletes’ lives both during and outside of competition, to name a few. Kiernan (2018) has alluded to the potential YouTube offers for creators to transition from amateur videographers to professional content producers, where the affordances of the platform offer specialised organisations, ‘the opportunity to build a business and communicate with a global audience’ (p. 274). In relation to sport, this is significant, as many sports have fans who live in countries far away from where those sports actually take place. For example, the English
Premier League has a large global following, as does the NBA. Van Reeth (2019) estimates that a global audience of 25 million tune into each stage of *Le Tour*.

Prior to the advent of YouTube, means of providing mediatised insights into particular sports events, places or objects were limited. YouTube enables content producers to contextualise, in an audio-visual manner, a vicarious sense of co-presence with significant sporting sites and objects. Previous research has alluded to the potential influence of mass media representations in stimulating tourism to experience objects and sites imbued with sport heritage (Fairley et al., 2018), however this issue is yet to be explored empirically. Accordingly, this research is timely and warranted as it contributes empirical insights into how content producers leverage a mode of new media, YouTube, draw upon *Le Tour*’s heritage to (re)produce the myth of *Alpe d’Huez* as an authentic *Le Tour* place, and by extension, stimulate visitation to this fabled sporting site.

**Methods**

*Research design: Multimodal discourse analysis*

Researching new media environments necessitates an analytical approach capable of capturing multiple modes of meaning making, that is, synergistic combinations of semiotic resources including imagery, sound, music, gesture, and both written and spoken text in order to interpret discourses embedded within digital content (O’Halloran, 2011). Applied to the new media platform, YouTube, interrelatedness of a range of semiotic resources may be observed such as imagery, audio (potentially music, sound effects and spoken language), and written text. Analysing discourse embedded within YouTube content necessitates a research design aligning with the broad principles of *multimodal discourse analysis* (MDA) (e.g. Jewitt et al., 2016; Kress, 2010). Discourse may be considered multimodal when, ‘its meaning is realized through
more than one semiotic code’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177) and when the manner in which the different modes interact with, and affect each other, is observable.

MDA is therefore situated as a paradigm within studies of discourse that ‘extends the study of language per se to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music and sound’ (O’Halloran, 2011, p. 120). There are various streams of MDA, though most germane to our study is the social semiotic stream which seeks to, ‘understand the social dimensions of meaning … how processes of meaning making … shape individuals and societies’ (Jewitt et al., 2016, p. 58). We adopted the social semiotic MDA perspective to examine combinations of modalities embedded within selected YouTube content which serve to socially construct the myth of Alpe d’Huez within the global cycling social world. As we shall demonstrate, MDA is powerful in revealing how various semiotic resources are blended by content producers to construct multidimensional, nuanced discourse designed to provide viewers with a vicarious experience of climbing Alpe d’Huez by bicycle, and by extension, (re)produce hot authentication of Alpe d’Huez as a sport tourism site inextricably linked with Le Tour.

**Sampling and data collection**

Initially, we sought to identify suitable YouTube content producer accounts on which to focus our analysis. A purposive approach to sampling was adopted (Neuman, 2011), driven by three selection criteria:

1. The account must be commercial in nature that seeks to monetise its content; that is, in contrast to an amateur or personal YouTube channel;

2. The account must have a minimum 50,000 subscribers; and
3. The account must be a cycling-specific content producer and have produced a series of YouTube videos focusing on mountain climbs associated with *Le Tour*, with at least one video focusing on *Alpe d’Huez*.

The first criterion is underpinned by our desire to examine multimodal production techniques used to depict *Alpe d’Huez*; amateur producers tend to be constrained in their production repertoires, hence our focus was on professional content producers. The second criterion was important in confirming the status of the content producer within the global cycling social world; having a large following reflects the producer’s social authority and legitimacy among social world members. Our third criterion was crucial to this research to ensure we only selected content producers that had produced videos focusing explicitly on individual mountain climbs associated with *Le Tour*, specifically *Alpe d’Huez*, due to its fabled status within the global cycling social world. Consequently, we identified four suitable content producers to focus our analysis on (Table 1). Due to their focus on micro-level observational analysis, social semiotic MDA studies tend to engage with only a small range of empirical artefacts (Jewitt et al., 2016), hence we deemed this sample of four videos acceptable to satisfy our research aim.

As we intended to include screenshots from the selected videos to augment our analysis, we sought permission from each of the account holders / organisations involved and as a result, permission was granted for all images presented.

*Insert Table 1 here.*
Data analysis

MDA builds upon analysis protocols associated with discourse analysis as applied to spoken and/or written text (e.g., Burck, 2005), to enable researchers to interpret visual and aural semiotic resources, and in doing so interpret meaning implied by the sign-maker, as produced through interrelationships between those resources (Jewitt et al., 2016). Data analysis involved an iterative process unfolding in three phases. Firstly, both researchers independently engaged in a process of open coding wherein the four videos were viewed carefully. During these initial viewings each researcher made detailed, chronological notes to identify overarching themes with which each video engaged with, and to identify modalities utilised to articulate information and discourse pertaining to Alpe d’Huez as a site of Le Tour. We recorded our observations in Word documents, taking time to transcribe key spoken text and taking screenshots of important imagery. We then convened to discuss our respective findings and to agree upon a set of broad organising codes encapsulating the shared functional essence of the four videos, which underpinned more detailed, subsequent analysis.

In the second phase each video was viewed again, independently by each researcher, at a more granular level. We leveraged the advantage of video as a multimodal artefact in order to pause, rewind and replay content, thereby enabling ‘different levels of analytical gaze’ (Jewitt et al., 2016, p. 141). Our purpose here was to construct an inventory of the various modalities operating within the videos. Particular attention was paid to the different ways in which the modalities manifested and operated together. For example, a close-up shot of a pained expression on a cyclist’s face accompanied by an audio overlay of laboured breathing was interpreted as discourse framing the strenuous, embodied nature of cycling Alpe d’Huez, emphasising the intense physical exertion required to overcome steep, relentless road gradients on this climb. The
particular modalities observed included visual imagery (e.g., shot type, image augmentations, 
perspective, image subject) and aural (music style and tempo, sound effects/overlays and verbal 
elements such as the presenter’s voice), and linguistic (spoken narratives, written text, language 
function, language features).

The third stage of analysis involved matching our inventory of modalities and multimodal 
combinations to each organising theme identified in the first analysis phase, to construct an 
analytical narrative which we present in the ensuing Findings section. In constructing our 
analytical narrative, we filtered our inductively-derived findings through theorisations of 
authentication in tourism (in particular, Cohen & Cohen, 2012, 2019; Lugosi, 2016) in order to 
document empirical representations of hot authentication processes linking Alpe d’Huez as a site 
of Le Tour.

Findings

Our analysis identified three prominent organising themes: (i) Alpe d’Huez as a 
metaphorical ‘stage’ for the Tour de France; (ii) attributes of the Alpe d’Huez climb; and (iii) the 
embodied and socially-constructed aspects of the climbing Alpe d’Huez by bicycle. Below, we 
unpack the underlying structure of each theme and demonstrate how the use of multimodal 
media elements within the four videos constructs each theme’s embedded discourse.

*Alpe d’Huez as a metaphorical ‘stage’ for Le Tour*

Each video leveraged the historical role Alpe d’Huez has played as a metaphorical stage 
for the Tour de France. The videos emphasised and nostalgically reflected upon feats of Le Tour 
cyclists from the past that have played out on the slopes of Alpe d’Huez, exemplified by the 
following excerpt:
Alpe d’Huez was first used in the Tour de France WAY BACK in 1952, when, 6 km from the top, Fausto Coppi attacked leaving behind his breakaway compatriot Jean Robic for a very famous victory, which was actually televised for the first ever time. (GCN)

Similarly, The Col Collective video summated:

… just to think about all the battles and stories that have played out on these slopes …

… just to think about all the battles and stories that have played out on these slopes …

It’s unbelievable really just think that, you know, it’s not just legendary for the pros, but it’s legendary for everyone.

Stemming from the feats of past Le Tour cyclists, the videos conveyed the fearsome reputation Alpe d’Huez has developed within the global cycling social world. Since 1952, many of professional cycling’s revered champions have claimed victories on the climb. As Bike Radar reflected, ‘The official historian of the Tour, Jacques Augendre, dubbed it “the Hollywood climb”… And not everyone thought that was a compliment,’ later adding that, ‘most cyclists are happy to have conquered cycling’s equivalent of the Walk of Fame.’ Imagery reinforced this symbiosis between Alpe d’Huez and Le Tour. For example, each video at some point honed in on the fabled signs adorning each of the climb’s trademark 21 hairpin bends. These interpretive signs pay tribute to one or more previous champions to have won at Alpe d’Huez and count down the number of corners remaining to the summit (Figure 1).

\[Insert \text{Figure 1 here}\]

Alpe d’Huez is also inextricably linked with Le Tour for its reputation as a raucous party site when the climb is scheduled on the race’s itinerary: ‘Nowhere else does the arrival of the Tour inspire such festivity, bring out such numbers, cause such electricity’ (Bike Radar). All four
videos drew specific attention to Bend 7, otherwise known as ‘Dutch Corner’ (Figure 2) a site recognised within the cycling social world as the epicentre for partying Dutch tourists visiting Alpe d’Huez on Le Tour race days. Cycling Weekly drew attention to Dutch Corner by displaying side-on views of the two presenters cycling past the St Ferreol church, with the mountain summit visible in the upper right-hand corner, and a spoken narrative explaining the significance of Dutch Corner:

One of the most significant checkpoints on the climb, and perhaps one of the most famous hairpins of all is Corner number 7, also known as Dutch Corner. Located next to the St Ferreol church, the Corner has become infamous for masses of Dutch fans turning the corner orange during the Tour de France.

Insert Figure 2 here

Climb attributes of Alpe d’Huez

The four videos paid considerable attention to articulating the attributes of Alpe d’Huez through the lens of the mountain as a cycling space. Considerable attention was paid to conveying the mountain’s ‘vital statistics’ including length, gradient and altitude gain. These characteristics were typically conveyed through a combination of verbal commentary augmented by graphic overlays designed to evoke a vicarious sense of the mountain’s difficulty when tackled by bicycle (Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 here
The climb’s macro-level aesthetics were typically framed with reference to the trademark 21 hairpin bends, which Cycling Weekly described as, ‘constant switchbacks zigzag their way up the mountain like a shoelace.’ This emphasis on the climb’s physical appearance may be interpreted as the video producers (re)producing an air of magnitude, coupled with a sense of aura or mystique surrounding Alpe d’Huez achieved through combinations of imagery such as mist rolling off the mountainside and commentary spoken in an ominous tone. For example, Bike Radar used an ominous narrative tone in describing ‘The 21 hairpins coiling out of the Oisans Valley to Alpe d’Huez have long since taken their place among the icons of the Tour,’ spoken over the top of imagery captured within Figure 4.

An interrelated sense of magnitude, aura, and mystique is evoked through heterogeneous combinations of multimodal discourse throughout the four videos. For example, combinations of imagery casting the cyclist presenters as minuscule subjects juxtaposed against the backdrop of gargantuan, snow-capped mountains in the distance coupled with slow, evocative music emphasises the scale and grandeur of the French Alps. Imagery characterised by mountainous backdrops, swirling mist and low light further serve to cast the Alps as mystical, intimidating places for cyclists.

An instructional discourse suggests that the videos serve a further functional purpose of facilitating wayfinding. The videos feature abstract maps of the climb’s location within France along with maps of the zigzagging summit road itself. Advice is provided to prospective visitors as to where they may find food and water along the way. Some videos point out nuances of the route of interest to cyclists, compounding the notion of adventure embedded in the videos; that
is, there are many things to learn and discover at the same time as completing this renowned cycling challenge. The Cycling Weekly video, for instance, draws attention to a quirk of *Alpe d’Huez*, in that despite there being a ‘finish line’ painted on the road at the entry to the lower village, the presenters point out that this is not where *Le Tour*’s official stage finish line is:

Despite showcasing the finish line as such within the village, this isn’t where the professional riders of the Tour de France complete their ascent. If you carry on through the tunnel and up towards the additional Bend Zero, you just have a few more metres of ascent to go before a short sweeping descent to a roundabout signals the last short drag to the Tour de France finish line.

*The climbing experience*

Clearly, a core objective of the four videos was to produce a vicarious experience aimed at amateur cyclists to simulate the experience of riding one of professional cycling’s most venerated mountain climbs. In doing so, the videos convey both embodied and socially-constructed aspects of this experience.

*The embodied climbing experience.* The embodied nature of cycling *Alpe d’Huez* is conveyed through discourse embedded within the four videos overtly adopting an intimidatory demeanour through projections of physical discomfort, painful exertion, and suffering. GCN declares that *Alpe d’Huez*, ‘really is a climb you need to respect. It is very very hard.’ The Col Collective conveys the difficulty of *Alpe d’Huez* through a multimodal combination of verbal narration and imagery of the presenter labouring up the climb. In various scenes, his lean, muscular legs can be seen flexing under the strain of exertion. The video utilises graphical representations of the climb’s gradient variations to augment this discourse of physical exertion. In other examples, Bike Radar overlay audio of laboured breathing to project the pictured
cyclist’s embodied, kinaesthetic engagement with Alpe d’Huez. Imagery alone is occasionally used to convey aspects of the Alpe d’Huez cycling experience, exemplified by Figure 5 showing a pained expression by the main presenter, without verbal augmentation, to symbolise intense kinaesthetic responses.

*Insert Figure 5 here*

Although the videos frame kinaesthetic dimensions of cycling Alpe d’Huez as unpleasant, the videos do engage with other sensory aspects of the experience. Much emphasis is placed on pleasurable visual perspectives attributable to the spectacular mountainous backdrops. In Figure 6, the Col Collective video pauses to project pleasurable visual perspectives offered by cycling through the mountains at low speeds, augmented by this spoken narrative: ‘Today we are really blessed, the mountain is evolving and changing right before us, climbing up through the clouds, you know swirls of mist down there … it looks absolutely amazing.’

*Insert Figure 6 here*

The four videos are, in part, offered as an instructional resource for those interested in tackling the climbs themselves. Therefore, viewers are offered multi-pronged strategic advice for reducing the burden inflicted upon the cycling body. The videos are replete with cautionary discourse such as, ‘pace yourself … make sure you don’t go into the red’ (GCN). At times graphics containing embedded text offer similar advice (Figure 7).
The socially-constructed climbing experience. The videos convey an array of socially-constructed elements in attempting to vicariously embed viewers within spaces historically and culturally synonymous with *Le Tour*. Figure 8 pictures a presenter cycling past a monument honouring the late Portuguese champion Joaquim Agostinho, victorious at *Alpe d’Huez* during *Le Tour* 1979. Doing so reinforces the accessibility of this sporting space to non-elite members of the cycling social world; it is not a space exclusively accessible by *Le Tour* professionals.

Cycling *Alpe d’Huez* is further framed as an opportunity for viewers to engage in vicarious ‘games’ of approximation, comparing their own performances with times recorded by *Le Tour* professional cyclists. Bike Radar, for example, contrasts between the abilities of amateur cyclists versus the record ascent time set by the late Italian champion Marco Pantani:

13.9 km with an average gradient of 8.2% and a maximum of 12 … No amateur ever comes close to the rocket-fuelled 37 minutes and 35 seconds set by Marco Pantani in 1997.

A central socially-constructed element of cycling *Alpe d’Huez* projected by the videos is experiencing co-presence with sites synonymous with *Le Tour*. These include the infamous ‘kilometre zero’ sign signifying the official beginning of the climb’s timed segment; Dutch Corner; and the official *Le Tour* stage finish line at the climb’s summit.
A separate dimension of the socially-constructed elements of cycling Alpe d’Huez taps notions of personal challenge, celebration, and a sense of achievement. ‘Summiting’ revered Le Tour mountain climbs such as the Col du Galibier, Col du Toumalet, Mont Ventoux, and Alpe d’Huez is considered a significant marker of achievement within the global cycling social world. The framing of cycling Alpe d’Huez as a personal challenge is achieved through narrative discourse, such as when the GCN presenters cycle across the kilometre zero marker, exclaiming ‘This is it … Kilometre Zero … Wish us all the best!’ The four videos also adopt a chronological approach in following their respective presenters along their journeys from the base to the summit. As the presenters near the summit, each of the videos exhibit a noticeable transition from an ominous, almost intimidatory discourse, towards that of celebration, triumph and achievement. This is achieved through combined multimodal alterations to music tempo, imagery, and presenters’ discursive practices, such as that illustrated by Figure 9 in which the presenter gives an inflatable mascot a ‘high-five’ to celebrate his effort of reaching the summit.

Discussion

**Hot authentication: Venerating Alpe d’Huez**

We contend that these videos contribute to hot authentication of Alpe d’Huez as a touristically significant cycling space (Cohen & Cohen, 2012), and as a sportscape for Le Tour (Bale, 2003). These audio-visual productions serve to (re)produce and showcase the tangible and intangible symbols that interplay with narratives and myths to socially construct an Alpe d’Huez – Le Tour – global cycling social world triad that makes Alpe d’Huez a sport heritage ‘good’
(Pinson, 2017). Each of the four videos overtly paid obeisance to Alpe d’Huez for the role it has played as a metaphorical stage upon which the exploits of generations of Le Tour cyclists have played out since its inception in 1952 (McCullough & Ferro, 2014; Wynn, 2018). Widespread provocative superlatives framing Alpe d’Huez as ‘the Hollywood climb’ and ‘cycling’s Hall of Fame’ position the mountain as a fabled place within the global cycling social world. Numerous studies have pointed towards the emergence of places which, through processes of social construction, can become significant among members of nuanced social worlds (Fairley et al., 2018; Lamont, 2014, 2020; Ramshaw, 2020; Shipway et al., 2016). Our findings suggest that dissemination of specialised content via new media platforms such as YouTube could constitute powerful vehicles through which hot authentication processes inform and educate members of sport-centric social worlds about sites and events that are historically significant to particular sports. However, the ways through which the four videos contribute towards hot authentication of Alpe d’Huez were considerably more nuanced than mere superlative discourse, as we shall elaborate upon below.

Fundamentally, we argue that the four videos constitute mediatised representations of the presenters’ mobile cycling bodies which project ‘performative practices by and between visitors [which] help to generate, safeguard and amplify the authenticity’ (Cohen & Cohen, 2012, p. 1300) of Alpe d’Huez as a culturally and historically significant backdrop for Le Tour. These professional productions fuse myriad combinations of imagery, spoken and implied discourse to form ‘experiential objects,’ ‘the [digital] delineation and packaging of information or knowledge about tourism-related “things” in a moment in space and time’ (Lugosi, 2016, p. 105). Key to hot authentication of Alpe d’Huez as a sport tourism place was the videos’ mediatisation of the presenters’ performative acts, that is, distributing the video productions to interested global
audiences via YouTube. By sharing the videos on YouTube, the four media outlets enrolled their value claims regarding the revered status of *Alpe d’Huez* into ‘global valuing infrastructures’ (Lugosi, 2016, p. 105), thereby leveraging profoundly powerful reach into the global cycling social world which the YouTube platform provides.

The discussion above provides a useful segue into the notion of power, as is emphasised within theorisations of authentication in tourism (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Frisvoll, 2013; Lugosi, 2016). By virtue of their legitimacy as authoritative media outlets within the global cycling social world, we contend that the four video producers possess significant power in in shaping hot authentication of *Alpe d’Huez*. Whilst YouTube is replete with many hundreds of videos produced by amateur cyclists equipped with GoPro cameras capturing their exploits ascending *Alpe d’Huez*, none of the amateur footage attracts the number of views as the productions by the four professional cycling media outlets which we have analysed. As Lugosi (2016) points out, ‘[social media] Organisations deploy vast socio-technological sorting systems, utilising algorithms to calculate where and how information is presented to users,’ (p. 106) thus the potential reach into social worlds of these four media outlets is noteworthy. The reach of their cycling-specific content is compounded by the capabilities of new media platforms to present curated content to users based on their Internet search and viewing history. Accordingly, this powerful reach enhances the media outlets’ ability to inform and influence members of the cycling social world. Therefore, the accessible nature of YouTube reflects both a democratisation of media power, and absence of ‘a well-recognized authenticating agent’ (Cohen & Cohen, 2012, p. 1300) in participatory, hot authentication processes.

Relatedly, the power and legitimacy of the four cycling media outlets raises potential questions around the binary conceptualisation of hot and cool authentication. Mkono (2013) has
previously raised similar questions around the legitimacy of authenticating agents, by asking ‘Who makes the judgement about the “expertness” of an expert?’ (p. 218). In doing so, Mkono hone in on ambiguities around the legitimacy of actors who might be considered certifying agents with power to anoint tourism goods and places with cool authentication. We must bear in mind that the four cycling media outlets are commercial entities. It is not known whether these media outlets have commercial relationships with Le Tour’s organisers. We contend that any presence of a revenue-producing, commercial relationship with the organisers of Le Tour could blur the boundaries of those actors’ practices between hot and cool authentication. Such commercial relationships could be perceived as a transfer of power from Le Tour’s organisers to the media outlets, thereby giving them status as a ‘mandated’ agent (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Consequently, these cycling media outlets exist within an ambiguous space between hot and cool authentication, giving rise to the possibility of a continuum relationship between these two polar opposites as opposed to existing binary thinking.

Authenticity value is a further point of ambiguity identified in this study. Frisvoll (2013) reminds us that the authenticity of tourist sites is contestable and negotiable. Likewise, Lugosi (2016) contends that the authenticity value of tourism goods is negotiated through the presentation of value judgements by actors participating in hot authentication processes. Accordingly, discourse was evident within the four videos in which the presenters debated the pedigree of Alpe d’Huez against other Le Tour ‘giants’ such as the feared Col du Galibier (French Alps) and Col du Tourmalet (Pyrenees) passes, each of which have considerably longer chronological associations with Le Tour and are longer and higher than Alpe d’Huez. The presenters offered personal value judgements punctuated by narratives of heroic performances by Le Tour cyclists of the past which had significant impacts on the race’s overall outcomes. They
also drew extensive reference to *Alpe d’Huez*’s physical attributes (length, gradient, climatic conditions) in substantiating value claims that *Alpe d’Huez* is worthy of recognition as one of cycling’s most revered places. Their discourse further implants *Alpe d’Huez* as a pinnacle achievement amongst amateur cyclists, engaging with notions of ‘bucket list’ tourism in which the middle classes pursue a narrative of life achievements (Thurnell-Read, 2017). These arguments reflect Cohen and Cohen’s (2012) contention that hot authentication processes are shaped by subjectively-constructed emotional attachments to touristic phenomena as opposed to ‘expert’ validation under cool authentication. We contend actors’ rational arguments produced under a constructivist ontology, as evident within these four videos, underpins hot authentication processes promulgated via new media platforms. These rational arguments (re)produce emotive, subjectively-constructed value claims offered by powerful, wide-reaching media actors as to why *Alpe d’Huez* deserves recognition within the upper echelon of hallowed cycling places.

**Stimulating sport tourism: An invitation to ride Alpe d’Huez**

We contend that the four videos constitute an invitation to ride *Alpe d’Huez*. Multimodal discourse paying obeisance to *Alpe d’Huez* as a cycling place acts as a springboard to encourage visitation among amateur cyclists to embody the climb for themselves. This was achieved through multimodal discourse spanning various combinations of visual, aural, and linguistic modalities to frame *Alpe d’Huez* through numerous perspectives. Such perspectives included framing cycling *Alpe d’Huez* as, (i) a means through which amateur cyclists may vicariously obtain a kinaesthetically embodied understanding of the assault upon the body’s senses which professional *Le Tour* cyclists experience as they ascend *Alpe d’Huez*; (ii) cycling *Alpe d’Huez* as
an intimidatory physical challenge; and (iii) framing summiting Alpe d’Huez by bicycle as a pinnacle career achievement marker for amateur cyclists.

Cycling is a embodied human mobility practice in which cyclists engage with surrounding material environments through the body’s senses (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007; Spinney, 2006). Cycling uphill requires human beings to expend considerable metabolic energy to overcome the interrelated nemeses of every cyclist: gradient and gravity (Lamont, 2020; Larsen, 2014). Discourse embedded within the four videos unashamedly adopts an intimidatory demeanour by framing the experience of cycling Alpe d’Huez as marked by physical discomfort, pain and suffering. The videos attempt to (re)produce a socially-constructed sense of aura or mystique surrounding the mountain achieved through intimidatory discourse personifying Alpe d’Huez as a supernatural environment overtly hostile to cyclists who ‘dare’ to attempt the ascent. We contend that this intimidatory discourse underscores an ironic contradiction which crystallises the appeal of Alpe d’Huez as a sport tourism attraction. By framing the mountain as a quasi-impossible challenge, it is possible that such discourse is capable of triggering a provocative response among prospective sport tourists who, as a result of exposure to the videos, elect to subject themselves to the challenge that the mountain presents. This proposition meshes with personal challenge discourse that previous studies of amateur endurance athletes have highlighted in explaining participation in arduous physical challenges and endurance-based sport events (e.g., Atkinson, 2008; Lamont & Kennelly, 2019).

The videos suggest that mediatised representations of Alpe d’Huez do not do the mountain justice if one is to understand its true character and magnitude – its authenticity as a hallowed cycling place. The videos draw on hierarchies of cultural capital possessed by members of social worlds, those who ‘have’ and those who ‘have not’ ridden Alpe d’Huez for themselves.
The videos imply that ascending Alpe d’Huez is an act of paying homage to one of cycling’s mythical places, performative acts of hot authentication reflective of what Cohen and Cohen (2012, p. 1300) describe as, ‘emotional expressions of commitment, devotion or identification with the venerated object, site or event,’ dovetailing with discourse of career markers and identity construction achieved through tourism and leisure practices (Fairley & Gammon, 2005; Lamont, 2014, 2020). Further, as Lugosi (2016, p. 106) contends, ‘social media sites are performative spaces through which different actors seek to exercise power and assert their authority over value claims’. Being authoritative cycling media outlets, the power these four outlets possess arguably enhances the value of cultural capital achieved by summiting the mountain as a career achievement through their value-laden endorsements of Alpe d’Huez. Their reverential discourse reflects an overt value claim advocating the esteem in which Alpe d’Huez is regarded as a cycling place, and as a pinnacle physical challenge for amateur cyclists.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the influence that professional Le Tour cyclists, the likes of Fausto Coppi, Miguel Indurain, Marco Pantani, Lance Armstrong and many others have played in making Alpe d’Huez a household name within the global cycling social world. Ramshaw (2020) notes the capacity of ‘tangible immovable’ sport heritage places to offer visitor experiences which transcend elements able to be seen and touched, to integrate intangible elements, ‘including tradition, memory, and ritual’ (p. 12). Our analysis noted such intangible experiential elements, particularly widespread genuflection made within each of the video productions to the performances of cycling ‘legends’ upon the slopes of Alpe d’Huez. Indeed, it is this association between the feats of champions past and Alpe d’Huez that forms a crucial element of the videos’ implicit invitation to cycle the mountain – an opportunity to re-enact feats from the past that have gone on to enshrine themselves within the annals of professional cycle
racing’s heritage-laden folklore. As we have suggested, the magnitude of cycling Alpe d’Huez is framed through intimidatory discourse as quasi-impossible, yet the videos juxtapose this imposition by providing informative knowledge and advice which ‘humanise’ the challenge as achievable by any reasonably fit person. In this sense, viewers are invited to visit Alpe d’Huez and vicariously ‘approximate’ their own physical abilities with Pantani, Armstrong et al. by performing on the very sportscape where those champions have trodden in the past. Indeed, amateur cyclists are encouraged through the videos’ discourse to pit themselves against Marco Pantani’s benchmark time of 37 minutes 35 seconds, and we suggest that such notions of ‘approximation’ are a worthwhile future research topic for understanding the travel behaviours and practices of active sport tourists visiting heritage-laden sportscapes.

Conclusions

This study augments conceptual discussions of authentication in tourism broadly by empirically examining processes of hot authentication via new media in a sport tourism context. We have contributed empirical insights into linkages between a geographical site’s socially-constructed authenticity as a place of sporting significance and (re)production of that authenticity through a particular new media platform, YouTube. Our analysis has demonstrated how sport heritage is leveraged by the producers of four professional cycling video productions disseminated via YouTube, to (re)produce hot authentication of Alpe d’Huez as a culturally and historically significant site of the Tour de France, and by extension, perpetuate Alpe d’Huez as a venerated site among members of the global cycling social world.

Our study has assisted with crystallising conceptual discussions of authentication in tourism, particularly Cohen and Cohen’s (2012, 2019) conceptualisation of hot authentication as performative, participatory practices enacted by tourists in the absence of an authorised,
legitimate certifying actor. Our study also provides empirical support for Lugosi’s (2016) socio-technological perspective on authentication in tourism by demonstrating how powerful social actors harness the profound reach of the Internet to influence members of a particular social world. Lugosi argues that that new media users contribute to authentication of tourism places and goods by subjecting their value claims to global audiences via social media for evaluation and verification. Accordingly, we have demonstrated how new media content disseminated via YouTube contributes to hot authentication of Alpe d’Huez as a significant cycling place by projecting the producers’ discursive practices which serves to educate viewers of historically significant, key moments in cycling’s history, thereby contributing to socialising newcomers into the global cycling social world. Moreover, we have shown how the four videos leverage the heritage-laden authenticity of the mountain as a cycling place to stimulate sport tourism to Alpe d’Huez.

Further, our multimodal discourse analysis has demonstrated how the video producers deployed combinations of visual, aural, and linguistic modalities to produce new media content primarily aimed at providing viewers with a vicarious experience of cycling Alpe d’Huez. Our analysis has shown how strategic modality combinations, such as macro and micro-perspective imagery, ominous musical genre, tempo, and sound effects, coupled with curated spoken and textual discursive elements produces a vicarious immersion in the aesthetics of Alpe d’Huez as a sport tourism place. In doing so, the videos simultaneously approximate the embodied, kinaesthetically distressing experience that the length and gradient of Alpe d’Huez inflict upon the cycling body.

Whilst our overarching objective in this study was both interpretive and exploratory, our findings provide prima facie evidence that the four videos analysed were produced, at least in
part, to stimulate visitation among amateur cyclists to Alpe d’Huez. Examining the persuasive influence of these videos on prospective sport tourists was beyond the scope of this study. We therefore suggest that future research might utilise experimental methods to examine pre-and post-exposure visitation intentions among prospective sport tourists. Discourse analysis applied to YouTube viewers’ comments attached to the videos may shed light on the impact of video content on travel intentions and/or how such content influences viewers’ perceptions of Alpe d’Huez as a cycling sportscape. From a more pragmatic perspective, we suggest that there is significant potential to further examine the socio-technological perspective of authentication in tourism. In particular, this perspective may be instructive in better understanding the power and influence of both traditional and new media in opening up previously unknown destinations to tourism, and by association, tourism impacts. Indeed, the emerging discourse of ‘over tourism’ in particular jurisdictions (e.g., Seraphin, Sheeran, & Pilato, 2018) raises legitimate questions around the media’s role in promoting, and thereby authenticating, previously obscure places as touristically significant.

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