

The social construction of touristic imagination

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This paper examines the construction of Turkey as a tourist haven by Israeli travel media. Examining 594 articles published between 2002 and 2023, we apply cultural critical discourse analysis to reveal nuanced discourse strategies like biblical metaphors, authenticity narratives, and fantasy references used to craft Turkey's image. The findings show how Turkey is depicted as a multifaceted destination that offers both enchantment and 'otherness', reflecting the intricate dynamics of Israeli-Turkish relations. These findings offer insight into how Western media frames Muslim-majority nations as tourist destinations, with Israel's perspective adding depth due to its complex political relations with Turkey under Erdoğan's rule. The study enriches our understanding of how travel media shapes touristic imagination and contributes to the broader discourse on cultural representations in tourism.

Keywords: *touristic imagination, geographical imagination, social production, travel media, Turkey, Israel*

1 INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of international relations often take root in the shared narratives, images, and perceptions that run through the media discourse of nations (Freistein et al., 2025). These narratives, rich in symbolism and rhetoric, markedly influence the public's collective imagination of foreign lands (Ryan et al., 2016). In the realm of tourism, travel media serves as a primary producer of these symbolic texts, providing the cognitive and cultural resources through which potential travellers 'know' and desire a destination long before they set foot there. While scholarship has explored how such imaginations are practised in touristic space (Law et al., 2007; Dung & Reijnders, 2013), less is known about the 'supply-side' of the imagination, in terms of

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discourse and representations provided by media. Textual analysis is uniquely suited to tracing these recurrent representational patterns, rhetorical devices, and long-term shifts in framing across a large corpus. This paper explores the delicate interaction between media discourse, geopolitical relations, and the construction of tourist destinations, focusing on Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership as perceived through the lens of Israeli travel media, between 2002 and 2023.

Turkey occupies a multifaceted international role, shifting between East and West, straddling a historical crossroads between cultures, and serving as a bridge between continents (Nyadera & Ceter, 2024). Over the past two decades, Turkey's image in Israeli media has undergone substantial shifts, fluctuating between idealism, bleak realism, and finally a more complex outlook. The transformation of Turkey into an enchanting tourist haven or a politically estranged entity for the Israeli tourist is a testament to the delicate choreography between media, diplomacy, and public sentiment (Shmuel & Cohen, 2020).

This paper examines how Turkey is portrayed in Israeli travel media and argues that this portrayal is largely positive. However, during crises in the two countries' diplomatic relations, the idealised tone dissipates, giving way to historical grievances, political discord, and a sense of disillusionment, which appear in the political press and not in travel media, and are thus left out in the current paper (but see Shmuel & Cohen, 2020). Daye (2005) and Hanusch and Fürsich (2014, pp. 9-10) maintain that tourism media tend to minimise negative reporting due to their reliance on travel sponsorship and advertising, resulting in biased, overly positive coverage. We contend that this reflects a 'geopolitical softening' strategy, in which travel discourse actively reconfigures a politically 'hostile other' into a familiar and consumable destination by 'beautifying' reality to maintain its appeal even amid regional instability.

The paper explores the mediated touristic imagination – the perception of a destination's culture and landscape as constructed through stories, fairytales, and imagery. By examining the depiction of Turkey as a tourist destination in the Israeli travel media, we aim to uncover the discourse strategies that shape Turkey's imaginary vacation landscapes. We argue that the powerful usage of discourse maintains the destination's appeal for the Israeli traveller despite the conflictual and unstable diplomacy between the two countries (Goren & Lindenstrauss, 2024). This resilience suggests that the mediated imagination is so deeply embedded in the Israeli psyche that political upturns serve as an immediate 'green light' to restore Turkey as a primary travel favourite. We must, however, distinguish between these mediated constructions and actual tourist practice. This research investigates how media narratives manage the emotional tension between Turkey's charm as a travel destination and the recurring diplomatic rifts in the Israeli-Turkish relationship.

This study makes several contributions to scholarly literature. First, unlike studies that examine the immediate effects of geopolitical events on fluctuations in tourism flows (Lee et al., 2021; Grudtsyn, 2024), we focus on the long-term, largely positive discursive representations that unfold even during declines in bilateral relations. Second, we show how Israeli media uses specific discourse strategies to reframe Turkey as a consumable destination, thereby bridging geopolitical rifts for a Western-identifying public. We offer a unique perspective on how travel media can weaken geopolitical antagonism by activating touristic imaginations associated with shared Mediterranean lifestyle and openness, while minimising the associations of a distraught 'Middle Eastern' space. Finally, the study offers insights for policymakers by identifying cultural points of connection that attract tourism flows, even when political channels are strained.

Methodologically, the study employs the Cultural Critical Discourse Analysis (CCDA) approach (Gavriely-Nuri, 2012), a framework that remains relatively uncommon within tourism research. By introducing this approach to the field, the paper contributes a novel analytical lens for examining tourism through the socio-cultural codes reflected in dominant media narratives. CCDA is rooted in the core premise that ‘texts have no meaning outside a specific cultural context’ (Gavriely-Nuri, 2017, p. 24); it seeks to decode cultural meanings by identifying discourse strategies: rhetorical devices intended to influence the target audience to achieve specific social or political objectives. This structured approach enables an interpretive deconstruction of how cultural representations are produced and commodified.

The paper begins with a literature review on geographical and touristic imaginations and the role of discourse in shaping them. After a brief discussion of Israeli-Turkish relations during Erdoğan’s rule and a detailed account of our methodology, we turn to explore our findings on the idealised discourse in Israeli travel media. We focus on three specific discourse strategies: biblicalisation, authenticity, and fantasy. We conclude with a discussion that synthesises these findings, addresses the study’s limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Touristic imagination

Touristic imagination serves as a foundational element in the construction of travel experiences, acting as the cognitive and cultural bridge between the traveller and the destination. Daniel Boorstin (1961) originally introduced the concept to describe the creative process by which landscapes, attractions, and entire nations are represented and perceived by individuals, independent of whether they have visited these sites (Di Giovine, 2014; Salazar & Graburn, 2014). While the literature has recently explored how these imaginations are negotiated in everyday touristic space (Law et al., 2007; Dung & Reijnders, 2013), this study focuses on the discourse that informs such practices.

The concept of touristic imagination recognises that our sense of global mobility is deeply affected by the daily consumption of cultural products, including films, books, television, newspapers, and photography, which precede and often supersede the actual activities of travelling and exploring (Crouch et al., 2005; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017). Crucially, the touristic imagination is not a monolithic construct but varies significantly across traveller categories and motivations. Cohen and Noy’s (2005) work on Israeli backpackers illustrates this, showing how touristic experiences can evolve into profound rites of passage. This suggests that different travellers, such as backpackers or leisure tourists, engage with and ‘imagine’ destinations based on varying psychological motivations and socio-cultural expectations.

The social production of this imagination is heavily mediated by marketing and deliberate image-building strategies. According to Le et al. (2019), marketing shapes tourists’ perceptions by creating media-driven spectacles that define what a destination ‘should’ be. These strategies are often employed to improve a country’s international image (Avraham, 2013). To this end, travel media may project romanticised imagery to counteract negative geopolitical reporting (Avraham, 2016). And yet, travel media’s role in destination marketing is gradually changing, making way for more bottom-up mechanisms such as social media platforms, blogs, vlogs, and user-generated content,

which marketers perceive as more effective in generating trends (Cocking, 2020; Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021). The reason lies in Daye's (2005) argument about the importance of the source of information. Daye noted that a destination's image is often perceived more positively when the information originates from a non-touristic source, though this image is significantly reinforced when a destination simultaneously appears in formal advertisements and campaigns. In that sense, perceived bottom-up knowledge can generate greater trust and a sense of authenticity. As for advertisements, Suvantola (2017) cautions that their often-exotic portrayals may present distorted impressions. Once formed, these mediated stereotypes, whether derived from political press, cultural products, travel media, or social media, become ingrained in travellers' perceptions (Theodossopoulos, 2014; Suvantola, 2017), creating a persistent lens through which all future touristic expectations and actual experiences are filtered.

2.2 Geographical and touristic imaginations

Geographical imagination is a concept widely explored in geographical literature (Gregory, 1994; Harvey, 2009). It refers to how people perceive and understand the world around them, and how they navigate and interact with their environment. The concept encompasses the construction of mental maps and the use of imagination to explore and understand unfamiliar places (Daniels, 2011; Giesecking, 2017). Scholars emphasise its profound ties to social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. For example, Cosgrove (2008) stresses the role of visual representation and cultural narratives in forming collective understandings of distant places, ultimately influencing travel decisions. Said (1978) highlights the role of imagination in shaping Western perceptions like 'Orientalism'. Geopolitics also plays an important role in shaping geographical imaginations, impacting a nation's perception of other regions (Dalby & O Tuathail, 2002; Güney, 2013; Sharp, 2011).

Derived from the idea of geographical imagination, the concept of touristic imagination refers to the imagined ideas tourists hold about destinations. The literature shows that touristic imagination refers differently to developed and underdeveloped places due to preconceptions (Theodossopoulos, 2014). Additionally, descriptions, imagery, and word choices are highly influential in shaping potential tourists' perceptions (Tucker, 2003). For instance, Huggan (2014) shows how the 2013 *Lonely Planet* travel guide portrayed Afghanistan as a 'rewarding' and 'addictive' destination, contrary to geographical imagination in literature and travel narratives, which primarily depicted Afghanistan negatively as a war-torn land.

Imaginary information and experiences join into narratives that constitute tourist discourse (Suvantola, 2017). This discourse includes notions of 'exoticism' (Ahmad, 2011; Putra et al., 2021), orientalist perceptions, and a sense of 'otherness'. Yang (2020), for example, explores international tourism in Israel/Palestine, revealing how geopolitical dimensions influence touristic imagination. Israel is often viewed as familiar, with Tel Aviv seen as liberal and cosmopolitan. In contrast, the West Bank is often depicted through an orientalist lens, as a place of insecurity and exotic otherness.

Tourists from developed countries often harbour contrasting perceptions about underdeveloped places and their populations, moving between contempt and idealisation (Suvantola, 2017; Theodossopoulos, 2014). New media technologies and their time-space compression greatly intensify the touristic and geopolitical imaginaries of places (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016), without necessarily changing the conflicting

attitudes toward them. These attitudes stem from deep-seated orientalist perspectives (Salazar & Graburn, 2014), reflecting a judgmental, colonialist, and binary discourse (Jazeel, 2012). Research on the Middle East frequently highlights unflattering outlooks, emphasising aspects such as terrorism, chaos, insecurity, violence, corruption, and oppression (e.g., Goldschmidt & Davidson, 2018). The ‘Western’ world often perceives the Middle East as ‘Eastern’, ‘Oriental’, or ‘Islamic’, reinforcing stereotypes of a conservative, uncultured, and violent region (Göl, 2015). Touristic imagination of Muslim Middle Eastern countries often includes concerns about cultural differences, restrictions, and negative stereotypes. For instance, female European tourists travelling to Oman expressed concerns about adhering to local customs or interacting with locals, despite later acknowledging Oman as a welcoming and safe destination (Al Riyami, 2021). But how are geographical and touristic imaginations produced?

2.3 The social production of geographically situated touristic imagination

Geographically situated touristic imagination is shaped by discourse, socially produced through metaphors, images, stories, myths, fairytales, and films. These elements have a substantial influence on people’s perceptions and actions, moulding their expectations of tourist destinations across various cultural, social, historical, and political contexts (Chronis et al., 2012; Cresswell, 2006; Farnum et al., 2005; Warf, 2010). Metaphors, for instance, are potent tools employed by marketers to sway opinions (Jaworska, 2017). Stories infuse imagined landscapes with emotional associations, symbolically defining the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ in the tourist experience (Reijnders, 2016). Myths and legends serve as narratives to distinguish regions in tourist communication and lead to coherent place branding (Pérez Aranda et al., 2015).

Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse, introduced in his 1969 work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 2013), functions as a system of knowledge and language that shapes what can be expressed, thought, and understood within specific cultural and historical contexts. Therefore, critically analysing touristic imagination provides a powerful tool for deconstructing ideological, political, and sociocultural stereotypes (Hannam & Knox, 2005). Hall (1997, quoted in Tribe, 2006, p. 367) explains discourse as ‘a group of statements which provide a language for talking about... a particular topic at a particular historical moment’. Tribe (2006, p. 367) argues that discourse can therefore ‘construct tourism’, and, crucially, ‘sustain a regime of truth about tourism irrespective of any absolute truth’. Discourse can, therefore, shape what we know about tourist destinations, with these ‘truths’ being amplified and produced by the media. Moreover, media coverage can significantly influence perceptions of destinations, perpetuating misunderstandings and stereotypes (Hashem, 1995; Kamalipour, 1997; Wilkins, 1995).

Narratives are central to the creation of touristic imagination, as they involve a collection of events intentionally selected to convey specific meanings (Gavriely-Nuri, 2017; Gray, 1992; Spector-Mersel, 2008). Narratives represent contemporary social discourse, sometimes extending beyond reality, that can either faithfully represent or distort specific locations. They imbue events with ideological messages that reflect and shape social relationships (Poppi et al., 2018). Furthermore, narratives have the potential to shape imaginaries of ‘abstract’ foreign destinations through storytelling.

Chronis (2012) demonstrates how this process unfolds in the Gettysburg National Military Park, where tourism imaginaries are formed through collective narratives that become embedded in the tangible characteristics of the destination, including its

landscapes, built environment, monuments, and heritage sites, such that the boundaries between reality and imagination become blurred. He further shows how destinations are marketed as ‘narrative places’, where the narrative itself becomes a tourism commodity rather than merely a representation of place.

According to Salazar (2012), shared understanding of people and places relies on images and discourses, which often perpetuate colonial narratives and collective fantasies. Scrutinising visual images and media discourse is key to understanding these mechanisms. Noy and Kohn (2010) illustrate this by examining Israeli media coverage of travel warnings for Sinai, Egypt. Their analysis reveals a layered representation combining textual warnings of potential terror attacks with images of Israelis enjoying peaceful times there, constructing and reflecting a complex Israeli collective imagination. This finding echoes the situation with Turkey, which used to be a popular destination among Israelis due to its proximity, affordability, and familiarity, despite occasional safety concerns and political turmoil. Tourists form perceptions before, during, and after their travels, influenced by potentially biased sources. Cognitive frameworks then filter this information, subtly shaping expectations (Wattanacharoensil & La-ornual, 2019). Overall, the perception of a destination is not necessarily tied to objective reality and can evolve with changing discourse, particularly in response to political shifts.

3 THE EVOLUTION OF ISRAEL-TURKEY DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS 2003–2023

Turkey was among the first nations to recognise the State of Israel in March 1949, just a year after the United Nations’ approval (Akgün et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the bilateral relations have experienced significant fluctuations over the decades. The rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in November 2002, a conservative party with Islamic roots led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, raised initial concerns in Israel, though relations did not immediately deteriorate; notably, Israeli President Moshe Katsav’s 2003 visit to Turkey received a warm welcome (Inbar, 2008). However, by 2004, several incidents began to strain the relationship. Reports of Israeli support for the Kurdish minority led Turkey to recall its ambassador, while Israel’s assassination of Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and his successor, Dr Rantisi, prompted Erdoğan to accuse Israel of ‘state terrorism’ (Inbar, 2008; Liel, 2017). A temporary improvement followed in 2005 when Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül and Erdoğan visited Israel to discuss the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, which briefly restored trust (Uzer, 2013). This stability was short-lived; the 2006 Second Lebanon War sparked anti-Semitic reactions from Turkey’s extreme left, and the subsequent victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections held in Gaza – followed by the Turkish government welcoming Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, which many viewed as recognition of Hamas as a legitimate political actor – further alarmed both Israel and the United States (Akgün et al., 2014; Altunisik & Çuhadar, 2010).

Despite these frictions, 2007 and 2008 marked a period of high-level engagement. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visited Turkey, and Israeli President Shimon Peres addressed the Turkish parliament in 2008 (Nisan, 2010). During this peak, trade reached \$3.4 billion, and approximately 600,000 Israeli tourists visited Turkey (Inbar, 2008; Laskier & Yitzhak, 2012; Nisan, 2010). This cooperation fractured in December 2008 following Operation Cast Lead, an Israeli military campaign in Gaza. Erdoğan, feeling betrayed by Olmert’s lack of transparency regarding the operation, famously

confronted Peres at the 2009 Davos World Economic Forum before storming out (Akgün et al., 2014; Nasi, 2017; Nisan, 2010). Tensions were further inflamed in early 2010, when Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon summoned the Turkish ambassador to his office to discuss Israel's portrayal in the Turkish media. Ayalon insulted the Turkish ambassador by intentionally placing him in a lower chair than the other participants. The incident inflamed the tensions and fuelled anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiments throughout Turkey (Nasi, 2017).

The relationship hit rock bottom on 31 May 2010 during the Mavi Marmara incident, when nine Turkish citizens died during an Israeli military operation against a Gaza-bound flotilla (Akgün et al., 2014). The victims were later linked to the IHH (İnsani Yardım Vakfı), a Turkish humanitarian foundation with extremist Islamic leanings, supporting radical groups like Hamas and the Global Jihad (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre, 2011). Years of difficult negotiations followed, including a 2013 apology from Prime Minister Netanyahu to Erdoğan and the drafting of a reconciliation agreement (Goren, 2012; Nasi, 2017).

Although a 2014 announcement suggested relations had normalised, they soured again due to Erdoğan's insistence – now serving as President of Turkey – on lifting the Gaza blockade and due to the outbreak of Operation Protective Edge (Akgün et al., 2014; Chalikol, 2016).

A formal reconciliation agreement was signed in June 2016, facilitating the exchange of ambassadors (Mitchell, 2019). However, this was again disrupted in May 2018 when Turkey recalled its ambassador following clashes at the Gaza border and the opening of the United States Embassy in Jerusalem (Mitchell, 2019). A degree of normalisation returned by August 2022, leading to record trade volumes of \$8 billion and an all-time high of 800,000 Israeli tourists (Lindenstrauss & Daniel, 2023). This resurgence was halted by the Hamas massacre of 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent war, marking an unprecedented new crisis that remains unresolved at the time of writing (June 2026).

4 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, analysing a corpus of 594 Hebrew travel articles and news items published between 2002 and 2023. Data collection, spanning 2014–2023, focused on content discussing Israeli tourism in Turkey. We retrieved 90 articles from print newspapers and 504 from online platforms, authored by both professional tourism and amateur guest reporters. This dataset encompasses daily newspapers, online platforms, and specialised magazines catering to niche interests such as hiking or cycling, as well as independent reports by travel experts specialising in Turkey. Consequently, the studied imaginations reflect a cross-section of institutionalised travel media and personal travelogues. We chose to focus on textual sources alone, as this method is especially well-suited to tracing recurrent representational patterns, rhetorical devices, and symbolic repertoires that form the 'supply side' of imagination. Unlike ethnography or interviews, which capture individual practice, textual analysis of a large corpus allows us to systematically trace long-term shifts over a twenty-year period.

The research is grounded in Cultural Critical Discourse Analysis (CCDA), an extension of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that views social discourse as a reflection of complex cultural behaviour patterns (Fairclough et al., 2013). This framework is particularly well-suited to this study, as it involves both factual and

fictional discourses that shape geographical and touristic imaginations. A fundamental premise of CCDA is that ‘the text only has meaning in a specific cultural context’ (Gavriely-Nuri, 2017, p. 24). Researchers utilising this method aim to decode cultural codes and unveil how texts manipulate or construct partial realities to sway readers’ perspectives. Consequently, the analysis focuses on identifying discourse strategies, defined as rhetorical devices such as metaphors, narratives, and framings intended to influence the audience to achieve specific objectives (Gavriely-Nuri, 2012; 2017, p. 144).

To move beyond description toward interpretive depth, we applied a structured, multi-stage procedure. Initially, all texts underwent iterative reading to identify recurring linguistic and thematic patterns. This was followed by an open coding process to extract metaphors, narrative structures, and representations of places, people, and experiences. The analysis then transitioned from descriptive coding to interpretive categorisation, allowing us to identify broader patterns across the dataset. In this stage, data were mapped and sorted into discourse clusters – recurring narratives displaying thematic repetition across multiple texts (Gavriely-Nuri, 2012). Finally, these clusters were synthesised into three higher-level discourse strategies: rhetorical devices used to achieve specific cultural objectives (Gavriely-Nuri, 2017). These strategies – biblicalisation, authenticity, and fantasy – form the structure of our findings.

To ensure analytical consistency and transparency, all relevant data were compiled into a single 305,119-word Microsoft Word file. This document allowed for systematic cross-referencing and coding according to technical aspects (dates, media source) and content indicators (discourse clusters, code words). This procedure enabled systematic comparison across texts and supported the validation of emerging discourse patterns about Turkey, irrespective of geopolitical shifts.

Finally, we conducted targeted searches for specific lexical items identified during coding as central to the Israeli cultural context. These included terms denoting ‘biblicalisation’ (e.g., ‘Genesis’, ‘Garden of Eden’, ‘Abraham our Father’), ‘authenticity’ (e.g., ‘real’, ‘traditional clothing’), or ‘fantasy’ (e.g., ‘stories’, ‘fairytale’, ‘movies’). This step provided both the frequency and the specific context of these markers within the corpus. Taken together, this context-sensitive procedure provides an empirically grounded analysis of how mediated touristic imaginaries are constructed and maintained over time.

5 FINDINGS

The analysis reveals that Turkey is socially constructed within Israeli media as a place of enchantment – simultaneously legendary and familiar – through a discursive process that systematically bridges cultural and geopolitical distance. This construction draws upon the Israeli reader’s multifaceted cultural world, specifically activating Jewish heritage and Western culture to reframe a Muslim-majority nation as a safe, idealised, and consumable landscape. By adopting a Westernised perspective, the discourse effectively filters Turkey through a Mediterranean (rather than Middle Eastern) lens, translating perceived ‘otherness’ into recognisable cultural codes that resonate with the Israeli (self)-perception of being part of the West. This dynamic discursive model, illustrated in Figure 1, demonstrates how the discourse functions in a cyclical manner to produce and reproduce the touristic imagination of Turkey as an enduringly attractive destination, even amid regional volatility.

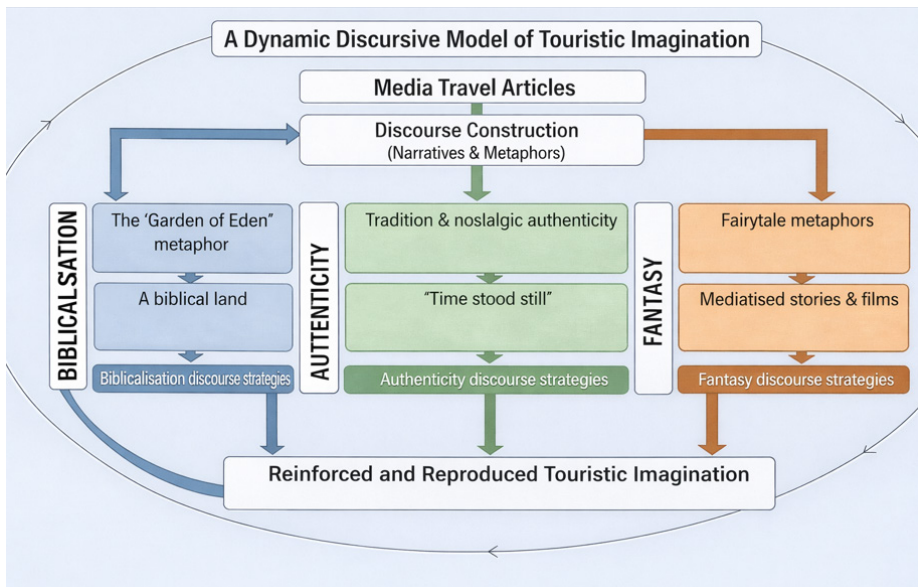


Figure 1 A dynamic discursive model of touristic imagination

5.1 Discourse strategy 1: Biblicalisation

Israeli travel media frequently depict Turkey with biblical metaphors that allude to the 'Garden of Eden' myth. Furthermore, Turkey is depicted by Israeli media as a land where renowned biblical narratives unfolded, beckoning Israeli tourists to discover these places and witness these storied sites firsthand. This 'biblicalisation' serves as a discursive bridge, re-conceptualising a Muslim-majority nation as a socially and historically familiar landscape.

5.1.1 The 'Garden of Eden' metaphor

The concept of the Garden of Eden – denoting 'paradise' or 'heaven' in Hebrew – recurs throughout the texts, evoking a yearning for idyllic surroundings and an expectation of extraordinary experiences. Indeed, the concept of paradise is a well-known metaphor in tourism marketing and literature (Waade, 2010), serving a clear marketing function. This 'mediatised enchantment' allows travel journalism to maintain a positive veneer even amidst diplomatic volatility. One writer describes a park near Antalya: 'Indeed, I had the privilege of visiting a Garden of Eden on Earth' (Harush, 2008). In the Lycia area, the 'heavenly' experience is more commercialised: 'This place has everything you would hope to see in paradise: cheap huts, grape arbours, waterfalls, fishponds... If only they could market the place as a stress relief tablet' (Cohen, 2007).

References to paradise extend to specific audiences who might discover unique 'spaces of paradise' (Noy & Kohn, 2010) in Turkey. These designations range from 'paradise for nightlife lovers' to 'children's paradise', 'holidaymakers' paradise', 'archaeologists' paradise', 'shoppers' paradise', 'cyclers' paradise', or 'foodies'

paradise'. The notion of heavenly experiences reflects a strategic use of digital marketing tools to transform a complex geopolitical space into a series of commodified niches. This is particularly prominent in the context of Turkey's luxurious hotels. As expressed by an Israeli guest at a hotel in Antalya: 'it is truly heaven, while I am still among the living!!!' (*Erev Erev in Eilat*, 2007).

Prominent references to the 'Garden of Eden' often revolve around orchards and serene seashores. The reference to fruit trees is explicit, as the biblical Garden of Eden was renowned for its abundance of fruit-bearing trees. Even when the texts do not explicitly mention this connection, the allusion to Adam and Eve remains culturally evident:

In almost every village (in the Taurus Mountains), the simple stone houses have grape arbour huts, and throughout the village, characteristic fruit trees like mulberries, figs, walnuts, and pomegranates are scattered. When the fruits are ripe, the hiking experience is wonderful – everywhere you stop, just reach out and pluck fruits straight from the tree (Mashal, 2006).

Descriptions of coastal leisure activities and maritime locations evoke notions of relaxation, tranquillity, and Nirvana (Gerald, 2003). For instance: 'Ölüdeniz is a Garden of Eden on Earth. The pristine beaches with their blue waters, white sands, and the surrounding mountains and forests make it an ideal vacation spot' (Abergel, 2021). Overall, the recurring motif of 'Garden of Eden' in Israeli discourse speaks to a profound longing for paradisiacal experiences, portraying Turkey as offering diverse forms of bliss under the umbrella of the fabled Garden of Eden, which neutralises geopolitical tension.

5.1.2 A biblical land

This strategy is further established in the narratives by linking Turkish sites to Jewish religious tradition. For instance, the Bosphorus Strait is linked to the biblical Flood narrative, with claims that a massive flood that submerged the area around 5,600 BCE was the historical basis for the biblical story (Niv, 2007). Texts about Urfa point out that local traditions associate it with figures such as Abraham, Noah, and Moses (Avitov, 2006; Dagan, 2006). These sites rely on the visitor's socio-cultural codes to re-conceptualise international politics as a social landscape of 'familiar' people (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016). Tourists can follow in the footsteps of biblical characters and visit the places they travelled to in the Bible (Fleischer, 2000). These textual references may ignite the geographical imagination of Jewish-Israeli visitors, particularly those with religious affiliations. As one article observes regarding Harran:

Every child knows the biblical verse when our forefather Abraham was told 'Go forth to a land that I will show you', but it's not quite so simple to answer from where. The common identification is present-day Iraq, but according to another tradition, the place Abraham hailed from is in Harran (Altınbasak), Turkey... Harran is not visited by pilgrims. Urfa, about forty kilometres north of Harran, took on the sanctity of the former (Jacobson, 2006).

Numerous texts vividly describe Harran and Urfa, highlighting their archaeological and historical significance. These descriptions incorporate local myths and biblical references:

Harran is mentioned in the Book of Genesis as the place where Abraham stayed on his journey from Ur of the Chaldeans (in present-day Iraq) to the land of Canaan. It

was here that Abraham received the word of God and formed his connection with God (Kalev, 2007).

By evoking the imagination of prospective tourists, these narratives draw upon cultural familiarity with biblical stories to reconfigure geopolitical space through a biblical gaze. This demonstrates what Feldman (2016), following Orsi's concept of 'abundant events', refers to as 'abundant sites' – places whose significance relies on visitors' socio-cultural codes. Lovell (2021) further examined 'imaginative authentication', a process facilitated by legends that employ a 'magical gaze' to reinterpret historical sites. By reconstructing the past through visitors' collective imagination, this discursive strategy provides a safe, prototypical space for consumption that effectively bypasses contemporary geopolitical complexities.

5.2 Discourse strategy 2: Authenticity

A prominent theme in our analysis is the discourse on 'authenticity', often framed around showcasing Turkish culture, traditions, foods, and physical characteristics. Media discourses not only reflect social practices but also help identify certain phenomena and shape public opinions and behaviours (Li et al., 2018). In this context, the Israeli perspective on the 'traditional Turk' is filtered through lenses of nostalgia and exoticism, evoking a longing for a way of life seemingly forgotten in the modern age (Boaron, 2009). While terms like 'true' or 'authentic' are occasionally explicit, authenticity is frequently conveyed indirectly through the enthusiastic presentation of ethnic Turkish elements (Jackson, 2011).

These texts deliver a picture of curious tourists peering into a mentally and culturally intriguing distant world, though they do not discuss whether these displays of 'authenticity' are integral to locals' daily lives or staged for tourists. Such media representations are constitutive, as they produce ideological meanings and reflect power relations between the observer and the observed (Ramanathan & Hoon, 2015). Food is a primary area where this strategy emerges; meals are described as authentic and exquisite (Kochan, 2006), served in 'authentic dishes' (Harush, 2008), or in restaurants where 'you can see three generations of women working together in preparing the dishes' (Ben-Zur, 2008). Kedar (2003) describes 'folk' restaurants located near bus stations throughout Turkey as places where one can eat 'fresh, real, authentic Turkish food without all the "hype".'

This cultural-traditional framing is a deliberate marketing strategy; as digital technologies have transformed how destinations are promoted, they nonetheless enhance the presentation of destinations in 'prototypical' forms (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021; Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016). Jacobson (2008), for example, unveils regions geographically close to Israel yet culturally distant: 'One can still find authentic life there (in Bodrum)... skilled artisans crafting grape syrup, or dyeing wool in giant vats'. Similarly, encountering local musicians sparks Israeli enthusiasm for Turkish spontaneity, as Sagi and Dimand (2009) recount: 'The village had one main street running its length, and in the middle of the street, we saw villagers dancing a traditional dance to the sound of a local flute'.

5.2.1 'Time stood still'

A distinct discursive mechanism within the strategy of authenticity is the 'time stood still' narrative, which portrays populations as frozen in time and underdeveloped. This

resonates with Said's (1978) Orientalist ideas, contrasting a rational and active West with a passive and underdeveloped Eastern 'other' (Macfie, 2013). Geopolitical perspectives shed analytical light on how such tourism narratives can both constitute and reflect political discourse (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016). By intensifying the sense of difference between what is near and far, this discourse spatialises international politics, creating a view of Turkey as worlds apart from Israel in terms of development and modernisation.

While descriptions of traditional lifestyles reinforce notions of difference and distance, they simultaneously convey a romanticised view that serves to neutralise geopolitical friction. Phrases like 'time stood still' frequently appear, accompanying descriptions of a nostalgic atmosphere: Kfir (2007) writes of a village 'seemingly untouched by time for centuries... This beautiful and unique place carefully preserves its ancient charm'. Safranbolu is described as 'a picturesque Turkish town that appears to be lifted from an old painting' (Shkolnik, no date), and Erzurum is noted as an 'ancient, vibrant, and unique city that has retained much of its centuries-old character' (Gueta, 2004). These texts evoke a sense of 'time travel', emphasising traditional occupations such as farming, sheepherding, and ancient crafts. This type of discourse reflects how tourism and geopolitical imaginaries influence each other, framing a place as safe and comprehensible (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016).

The descriptions of Turkish communities upholding traditional lifestyles underscore an image of a country resisting modernisation. Poverty receives a non-threatening and inviting representation. Accounts like 'sitting in a warmly lit hut as the afternoon sun fades' (Sarig, 2005) create a captivating atmosphere, enchanting readers rather than eliciting rejection. Stalled progress is associated with the use of animals for various purposes, such as work, trade, mobility, food, and clothing. For example, Bar-Tal (2009) recounts an encounter in the Taurus Mountains with an elderly woman leading a donkey, who invited them 'to the village centre to taste local herbal tea and homemade pita'. The author shares that 'we felt that we had arrived in a pastoral village where time had stood still'.

A central theme of 'kindness' is evident in expressions like 'the nice boy who operates the stall' (Elkariv, 2008); 'kind women sitting and weaving flowers on wooden carts' (Ramot, 2008); and 'kind and cheerful people engaged in growing vegetables, tea, and fruit' (Kropach, 2006), portraying an unsophisticated population. Moreover, beyond characterising Turks as 'kind' and 'nice', the texts also portray them as 'cute'. While 'kind' and 'nice' relate to overall sympathetic conduct, 'cute' is typically used for pets or babies. Referring to adult Turks as 'cute' carries a somewhat condescending tone that aligns with the concept of Orientalism. Orientalist attitude and imagery are found in other contexts, such as Tangiers, where culture is commodified to provide a 'Lawrence of Arabia' experience (Ouassini & Ouassini, 2021). Ultimately, the 'time stood still' narrative reflects the enduring influence of Orientalist ideas, emphasising a perceived contrast between 'Western' and 'Eastern' worlds, with Israelis presenting themselves as the former.

5.3 Discourse strategy 3: Fantasy

Fairytales, metaphors, and cinematic narratives play a foundational role in our corpus, enriching the touristic imagination and connecting Turkey to the realm of fantasy.

The term ‘fairytale’ frequently appears in descriptions such as ‘world of fairytales’ or ‘scenic vistas from fairytales’, transporting readers into an imaginary world.

Cappadocia stands out as a region most deserving of the ‘as if from a fairytale’ praise. The region’s unique rock formations enabled the creation of underground homes, monasteries, and churches: ‘Nature, the most talented architect, has crafted this “land of fairytales” over millions of years... The landscape, resembling something from another planet, leaves viewers in awe’ (Halevi, 2022). Such descriptions transport readers into a storybook world, evoking wonder and excitement.

Beyond fairytales, ‘stories’ offer a mediatised narrative imaginary. Texts direct readers to classic Western children’s stories, such as *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Robin Hood*, *Heidi of the Mountains*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. For example: ‘Like Phileas Fogg and Passepartout (*Around the World in Eighty Days* characters), we hopped inside the air balloon basket, and the real magic began’ (Rosenberg, 2008). References to Eastern tales like *One Thousand and One Nights* also appear, invoking childhood memories: ‘A visit to Topkapi Palace, the residence of the Ottoman Sultans for 400 years, leaves a taste of *One Thousand and One Nights* stories’ (Sarig, 2006).

Similarly, references and allusions to movies and cinematic heroes enhance the perception of Turkey as a destination where fantasy and reality merge. Mentions of specific movies include *Indiana Jones*, *The Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Sound of Music*, *The Smurfs*, and *Troy*. For instance: ‘If the Smurfs weren’t merely animated characters, one could confidently assert that they would forsake their mushrooms and move their dwellings to Cappadocia’ (Schmidberg, 2008). These cinematic connections evoke familiarity and excitement, demonstrating how media discourse profoundly affects tourists’ perceptions and fuels interest in specific locales (Butler, 1990; Mercille, 2005; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017).

A more complex cinematic association involves the film adaptation of *Midnight Express*, which tells the story of a young Western man arrested in Turkey on suspicion of drug trafficking. This reference highlights the power of historical associations when travellers encounter local authorities: ‘While driving towards Taksim Square in Istanbul, the police stopped us. Before the uncomfortable feeling began (“Midnight Express”, really?!), two officers bent towards us and handed us... chocolates and perfume’ (Argaman-Barnea, 2007). This reference underscores the fragility of the positive imaginary; indeed, the 2021 arrest of an Israeli couple for photographing Erdoğan’s palace revitalised these negative tropes, adding a layer of complexity to the cinematic association and demonstrating how tourism and international politics are intertwined (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016).

These findings point to the underlying drivers that shape the observed discourse strategies. The emergence of these patterns can be explained through the interaction between cultural, media, and geopolitical forces. Culturally, the discourse on Turkey in Israeli travel media draws on a Mediterranean imaginary that enables readers to construct symbolic familiarity while downplaying associations with the conflict-laden Middle East. From a media perspective, travel journalism tends to emphasise pleasurable, familiar, and consumable experiences, favouring narratives that neutralise political tensions. Geopolitically, fluctuating relations between Israel and Turkey require the authors to symbolically manage ambivalence, which they perform through discursive strategies that reframe Turkey as both attractive and safe ‘other’. This process demonstrates how specific discourses are essential aspects in framing the tourism-peace nexus within complex geopolitical scenarios (Shmuel & Mura, 2025).

6 DISCUSSION

The paper explored the mechanisms by which touristic imagination is produced and sustained through media discourse and narratives, focusing on Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as perceived through the lens of Israeli travel media between 2002 and 2023. The analysis unveiled a complex and ever-evolving portrayal of Turkey as a tourist destination, shedding light on the influential roles of discourse, imagination, and geopolitics in shaping these perceptions. We critically analysed the mediated narratives and associated touristic imagination surrounding Turkey, deconstructing stereotypes and revealing deep-seated cultural appreciation. Our exploration illuminated how Israeli travel media transformed Turkey into a captivating tourist haven, even as broader news outlets often portrayed it as a politically estranged entity (Shmuel & Cohen, 2020). This metamorphosis underscores the intricate choreography between media, diplomacy, and public sentiment. Despite recurring diplomatic tensions, Turkey was depicted as an enchanting dreamland, overflowing with extraordinary geographical and cultural treasures, profoundly shaping the Israeli imagination.

Our analysis examined the power of narratives. Media discourse in this context is not merely a mirror of reality, but a powerful system of knowledge and language. It moulds what can be expressed, thought, and understood within specific cultural, historical, and political contexts, perpetuating stereotypes and collective fantasies. Our work follows other scholars who have focused on the influential role of discourse, narratives, and the media in shaping touristic imagination and preferences (Butler, 1990; Chronis, 2012; Månsson, 2011; Reijnders, 2016; Salazar, 2012; Tribe, 2006; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017). We expand this knowledge by highlighting the critical role of travel media in the social production of touristic imagination and the idealisation of destinations through specific discursive strategies. In this regard, media representation is a powerful tool; it is constitutive, as it produces ideological meanings, reflects power relations, and shapes public perception (Ramanathan & Hoon, 2015). Media discourses contribute to the construction of destination images and affect tourist behaviours (Li et al., 2018). While some scholarship examines how such imaginations are practised in actual touristic activities (Law et al., 2007; Dung & Reijnders, 2013), our focus remains on the ‘supply-side’ of the imagination, through the examination of media discourse rather than its materialisation. This distinction is vital; travel media, burdened by its reliance on travel sponsorship and advertising, tends to minimise negative reporting, leading to a biased and overly positive portrayal (Daye, 2005; Hanusch & Fürsich, 2014). This commercial and editorial constraint serves as the foundation for the idealisation we observed, whereas testing these idealised imaginings in real life is a different line of research.

The portrayal of Turkey in Israeli travel media utilises discourse strategies of biblicalisation, authenticity, and fantasy. The ‘Garden of Eden’ metaphor, repeatedly appearing in Israeli discourse about Turkey, evokes images of paradise and extraordinary experiences. The connection between Turkish locations and Jewish religious tradition through biblical references further ignites the geographical imagination of the Jewish-Israeli visitor. Biblicalisation thus serves as a discursive bridge that encourages the reader to re-conceptualise a Muslim-majority nation as a socially and historically familiar landscape. It goes hand in hand with an emphasis on authenticity, presenting the ‘traditional Turk’ through a lens of nostalgia and exoticism to stir a longing for a way of life seemingly untouched by modernisation. By presenting destinations this way, such a discourse reflects the relationship between tourism and geopolitical imaginaries, framing destinations as safe and comprehensible (Mostafanezhad &

Norum, 2016). Lastly, the infusion of fairytale themes, enriched with myths, metaphors, stories, and cinematic references, portrays Turkey as a tempting destination where dreams come to life.

We argue that travel media often beautifies reality by presenting the positive sides of a phenomenon to serve a specific interest (Avraham, 2016). In a tourism context, branding destinations in a positive light becomes essential following crises such as terror events or political instability (Avraham, 2015). Beautification helps maintain a destination's appeal despite political fluctuations, reflecting the adaptability of collective memory and the enduring magnetism some places possess. Our study's contribution lies in exploring this nexus between political relations and touristic imagination. In Western contexts, portrayals of Muslim-majority states as tourist destinations often lead to exoticism or stereotypical perceptions of danger. We offer a unique vantage point from Israel, where international relations with Turkey, specifically under Erdoğan's rule, have been marked by significant turbulence. During tense periods, Turkish portrayals in Israeli media become cautionary, as seen during the escalation that began following 7 October 2023 and continues at the time of writing (June 2026), when heightened tensions between the two states penetrated travel media. As the editor of a media outlet's tourism section put it: 'Israelis cannot go to Turkey! It's a matter of life and death! For those who want a "Midnight Express" experience, fine, but don't expect Israel to rescue you... It's time to put Turkey on "hold". It's no longer safe for Israelis to visit this destination' (Reinstein, 2024). Yet, as history shows, Turkey retains its allure for Israelis – both Arab and Jewish, who return as soon as relations stabilise. This pattern is a strong indicator of the power of touristic imagination and the role of discourse in shaping it.

The discursive strategies we identified can be interpreted through the tension between two imaginaries – a Mediterranean one and a Middle Eastern one (Shmuel, 2021). Although Turkey is geographically located across both regions, the tourism discourse analysed in this study consistently activates symbolic components associated with 'Mediterraneanness'. In the Israeli context, Mediterranean identity is a positive, culturally proximate category associated with openness and shared everyday life. This stands in contrast to the Middle East, which is often represented as homogeneous, conflict-laden, and culturally distant. This distinction is evident across all three discursive strategies: authenticity emphasises a 'timeless' pace of life aligned with Mediterranean cultural practices; biblicalisation shifts Turkey away from a Muslim–Middle Eastern framework toward a familiar Judeo-Christian cultural space; and fantasy transforms difference into aesthetic, romantic, and nostalgic imagery. Taken together, these strategies do not merely soften Turkey's 'otherness', but actively frame it as a Mediterranean 'close other' rather than a Middle Eastern 'distant other'. This process of geopolitical softening allows travel media to bridge rifts by presenting a potentially hostile space as exciting, inviting, and non-threatening (Shmuel & Mura, 2025). It shows how Muslim-majority destinations are made consumable through tropes that 'tame' the destination for a Western-identifying public.

Beyond the specific case of Turkey and Israel, this study demonstrates how travel media can suspend or soften geopolitical antagonisms. By selectively activating cultural codes, the media resolves the tension between attraction and political difference. This helps explain why Turkey is presented as an attractive destination yet is not fully assimilated into the Israeli 'self', maintaining a controlled and consumable cultural distance instead. The study further suggests that travel journalism, through its focus on 'mediatised enchantment', acts as a powerful tool for predicting future tourism trends (Li et al., 2018). By identifying cultural points of connection, policymakers

can find ways to drive tourism flows even when political channels are strained. This research also contributes to broader debates on Orientalism by showing that the ‘Other’ is not always rejected; rather, through touristic imagination, the ‘Other’ can be romanticised, commodified, and safely consumed.

Despite these insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, our study is confined to textual and media-based sources. While this choice is well-suited to tracing long-term representational patterns across a large corpus, it cannot account for how tourists themselves practice or resist these imaginaries on the ground. Future research should combine textual analysis with ethnographic methods, such as interviews, focus groups, or participant observation, to explore the gap between media construction and lived experience. Second, our analysis is situated within a specific Jewish-Israeli cultural context. Future studies could explore how the same destination is framed by Arab-Israeli media or by Western nations with different geopolitical stakes in the region. Furthermore, the role of social media and user-generated content, such as travel blogs and vlogs, is increasingly central to how destinations are promoted (Cocking, 2020), and future work should examine how these informal platforms interact with institutionalised travel media. In conclusion, touristic imagination is a resilient social construction that acts as a cognitive bridge over troubled geopolitical waters. While inconceivable in the immediate wake of crisis, we anticipate Turkey’s resurgence as a coveted destination for Israelis once current tensions subside, driven by the enduring power of mediatised imaginaries that prioritise cultural enchantment over political discord.

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