Discourse Analysis of Blogs: Analyzing Language to Maximize the Value of Consumption-Oriented Blogs as Data Source

Abstract. Over the past decade blogging has gained popularity and there is no sign of slowing down as it becomes important to both businesses and consumers. The value of blogs to consumer research has been established; however, its full potential is still to be realized as empirical analyses into their use have been dominated by quantitative studies. There is a fundamental research gap in the range of methods adopted by researchers which has limited blogs as a source of valuable insights. This paper asserts the importance of language and the rhetorical functions of blogs as social interaction contexts where meanings are created and channeled; thus, offering a route to develop better understandings of authors and their narratives. Based in discursive psychology, one of the approaches for discourse analysis, the paper demonstrates how a focus on language can provide rich insights to understand consumption experiences.

Keywords: blogs, discourse analysis, consumer narratives, travel stories

1 Introduction

Extant literature on consumption-oriented blogs has provided evidence on how blogging has empowered consumers to self-publish their experiences and marketers and researchers have recognized the opportunities for these naturally occurring data as a data source (See work of Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015; a systematic review of user-generated content applications in tourism and hospitality research [1]). Consumption oriented blogs are valuable to marketers because they are accounts of products and experiences that relate to consumers' lives and which allow them to internalize the symbolic meanings embedded in their experiences [2]. Although there is an increase in empirical work demonstrating the potential of blogs in marketing these are dominantly quantitative in nature. This has also been observed in existing literature on travel blogs. According to Banyai and Havitz (2012), content of travel blogs has commonly been reduced to statistical data and mere categories [3]. Indeed, there are only a few studies on travel blogs using qualitative research methods such as narrative analysis, qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis [4, 5, 6, 7, 8]. Most empirical work mining travel blog content has been quantitative content analysis focused on specific destinations and extracting common themes related to destination image, tourist evaluation of the destination and actual tourist behavior [7].On the other hand, netnography has been used to analyse consumption-oriented blogs in different consumption contexts [2,9]. One reason for the use of more quantitative techniques could be the huge amount of data that is available, and the fact that the data is in a digital format at source. Thus researchers may feel tempted into more technologically driven methods of data cleaning, manipulation and analysis. Yet we argue that much valuable interpretive analysis is omitted from such a myopic approach to these rich, naturally occurring datasets.

Using quantitative research methods limits the potentials of blogs for understanding the writers/narrators and how they reconstruct their consumption experiences. There is a missed opportunity because blogs are personal and deeply subjective in nature and represent fruitful opportunities for qualitative researchers because they offer investigators a publicly available conduit to backstage thoughts and feelings of others [10]. Bosangit, McCabe and Hibbert (2009) call for researchers to explore other frameworks that are appropriate to maximizing the use of blogs in understanding rapid and continuously changing consumption experiences such as tourism [7]. Banyai and Havitz (2012), suggest that a realist evaluation approach could maximize the potential of travel blogs by using qualitative techniques alongside quantitative methods [3].

Blogs represent a vast, diverse and idiosyncratic range of content which presents challenges for qualitative researchers. There are however some useful guides to using qualitative approaches to blog data collection and analysis [11, 12, 13]. However, researchers and marketers may need more guidance and persuasion to adopt qualitative approaches. There is scant empirical work using qualitative techniques for the analysis of blogs both in the general field of marketing and tourism marketing. This paper therefore contributes to this research gap by demonstrating how discourse analysis can be used to understand consumption experiences. Focusing on travel blogs and on the language used by bloggers, this paper outlines the research process of using discourse analysis from identifying the research objectives, selecting the samples; gathering data and conducting the discourse analysis.
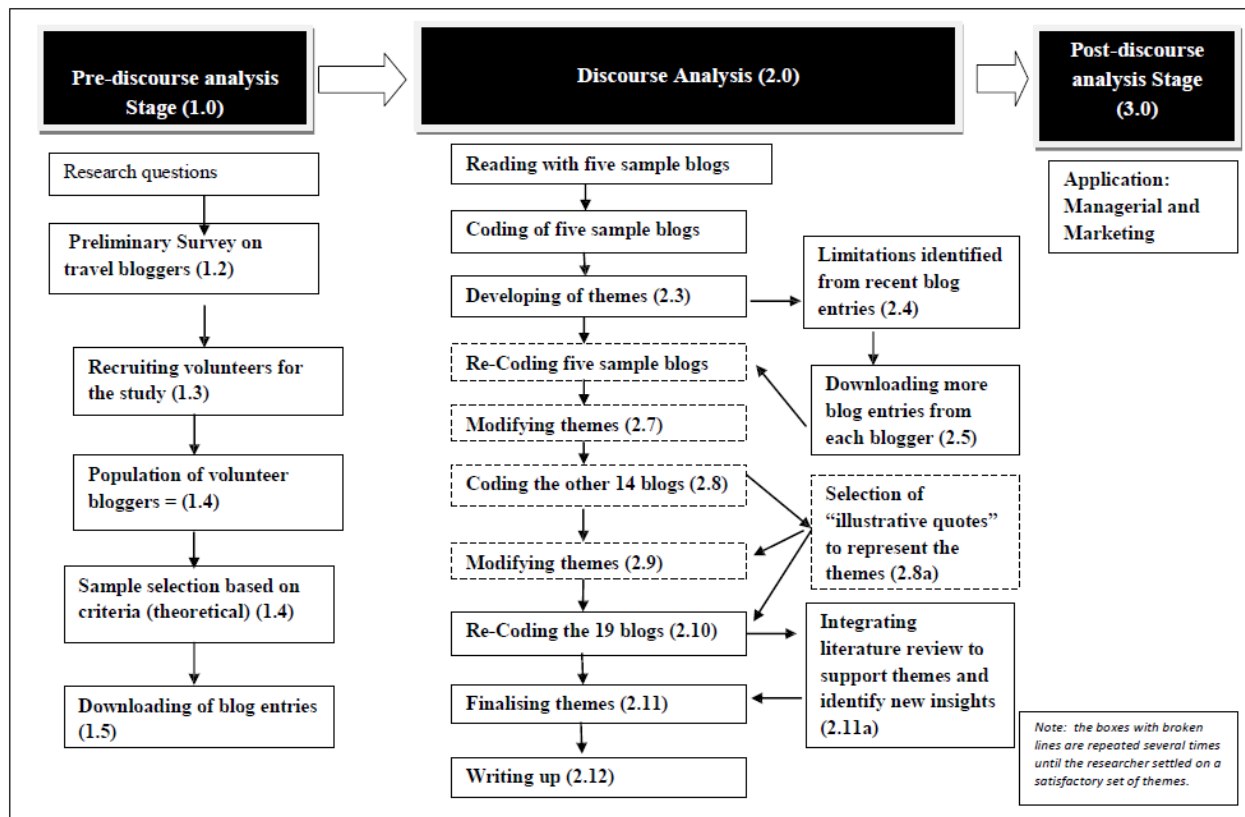

2   Discourse Analysis of Blogs

Discourse analysis (DA) is appropriate for studying blogs because it is concerned with the way texts are constructed, the functions they serve in different contexts and the contractions that run through them [14]. There are several different approaches to social constructionist discourse analysis such as discourse theory, Foucauldian perspectives, critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology (see Jorgensen and Philipps, 2002 for the differences among these approaches)[15]. This paper draws on discursive psychology (DP) as it will allow an examination of how blogs are constructed [16, 17] and how texts are socially organized to achieve local actions such as identity management [18]. DP favors the analysis of records of natural interaction or textual materials produced as part of life's activities rather than using experiments, surveys and interviews to generate research data, because of its emphasis on how both "reality" and "mind" are constructed by people conceptually, in language, in the course of their performance of practical tasks. Blogs are one form of this textual material.

In the tourism context, discourse analysis is a rarely used method. Jaworski and Pritchard (2005) had noted how discourse and communication scholars historically have little dialogue with scholars in tourism [19]. According to McCabe and Foster (2006: 195), in the context of tourism language [20], the work of Dann (1996) remains the cornerstone for researchers interested in socio-linguistic interpretation of discourses of tourism [21]. Compared to other popular methods for analysing travel blogs such as content analysis and narrative analysis [8], DA can provide a deeper understanding of travel blogs beyond a mere listing of destination attributes. Willig (2008) described DA as a particular way of reading – reading for action orientation (what is the text doing?), rather than simply reading for meaning (what is this text saying) [22]. Potter and

Wetherell (1987) confirmed that there is no mechanical procedure for producing findings from an archive of transcript [23,24]. However, several discourse analysts have suggested guidelines for doing DA such as Potter and Wetherell's (1987) 10 stages in the analysis of discourse [23]; Billig's (1991) procedural guide for DA [25]; Wiggins and Potter's (2008) detailed and comprehensive guidance on the practicalities of DP research [26], and Antaki et al's (2003) evaluating DP research [27].

For this paper, Potter and Wetherell's (1987) 10 stages for a discursive psychological analysis was adopted [23]. The stages include: 1) research questions; 2) sample selection 3) collection of records and documents; 4) interviews; 5) transcription; 6) coding; 7) analysis; 8) validation, 9) the report and 10) application. Stages 4 and 5 were replaced with downloading of blogs for the analysis. These stages are grouped into three phases of the study: pre-discourse analysis, discourse analysis and post-discourse analysis. Figure 1 below illustrates these three stages in detail.

Figure 1. Discourse analysis process

The pre-discourse analysis involved setting of the research objectives and a survey among travel bloggers as there was no available data on travel bloggers during the research period. The survey was conducted to gain an understanding of blogger's profiles, motivation and practices which facilitated the identification of sample of bloggers and blogs that would be appropriate for addressing the research questions. From the survey also, volunteers for the discourse analysis were also recruited. 19 travel bloggers met the following criteria set:

bloggers have blogged about long-haul and multiple destination trips that are longer than three weeks; have written between 25 and 50 blogs; blogs should have more text than pictures and written in English. With their consent, blogs were downloaded for the next stage. The second stage which formed the discourse analysis was comprised of reading and a reiterative process of coding to identify the themes from the data set. During the initial stages of coding five blogs (steps 2.2 and 2.5), important extracts were put into a matrix against each blogger to clearly show variability and consistency among these bloggers. However, as coding reached steps 2.8 and 2.10. NVivo, qualitative software, was used to deal with the huge amount of data and categorised it into five established themes. After coding the data into four categories, another round of coding produced a better selection of illustrative quotes which best represent a theme. This stage ended with the writing up of the findings which fed into the third stage; the post-discourse stage where management and marketing implications were identified.

3 Discourses of Travel

3.1 Stories of Risk and Challenges

Stories of voluntary or unexpected risks are typical to of long-haul and multiple destination travels and they are part of travellers' narrative identity and reflect self-development or self-change [28, 29, 30]. According to Wickens (1997:151), risk-taking behaviours are expected of tourists because tourists perceive their holiday as a "license for thrill" [31]. Hence, there are many stories constructed as risky situations such as activities of skydiving, rafting, bungee jumping, and trekking, hiking and mountain climbing, just to name a few. However, there are also stories that were constructed by bloggers as risky such as long, dangerous bus rides, being scammed, and being attacked by an animal or being close to a dangerous animal. These are "tourist risk" that Tsaur et al (1997) describe as the possibility of various misfortunes that might befall travellers in the process of travelling or at their destination [32].

Stories of challenges stood out because of the use of strong emotional language and detailed narratives of hardships and testing one's limit; with the element of risk missing from these stories but fear may still be present. The term "challenge" is used loosely by bloggers. The challenges are personal and it could be range from simple task to a more difficult one: facing a childhood food nemesis; difficult and scary such as snorkeling; or climbing popular trekking trails for backpackers. The construct of challenge is less explored well in the tourism literature on its own as it is always associated with risk, adventure and frontier travel [33]; however, the analysis revealed that challenges are not limited to those particular types of experience. Challenge comes in various forms of physical and mental challenges or any form of activity and situation that test someone's capability of dealing with them during their travels. For these bloggers, the duration of the travel alone and arranging every aspect of their trips in every destination is a challenge by itself already. The dominant forms of challenges retold by bloggers to their readers are experiences of a) physical challenges; b) conquering a specific fear (snorkeling, heights) and c) challenging practices and norms of a long-haul and multiple destination traveller. These stories highlight hardships; how they let their body and mind endure various situations such as long bus rides, long flights, long walk, etc.; getting to remote destinations. On the other hand, bloggers also shared accounts of failures of achieving their set goals, which is retold with strong emotions, detailed account of hardships and self-presentation

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technique such as self-handicapping [34] where the blogger produces obstacles to success with the purpose of preventing observers from making dispositional references about one's failure. In their stories, outcome can either be positive or negative but what was important was to challenge one's limit as it is important for an evolving self [35]. These stories are integrated in the life story of the blogger and contribute to their identity work. Moreover, these stories prove that challenges are central to any type of tourist experience and not only present with risk where it is mostly associated to frontier and adventure experiences.

3.2 Accounts of Learning and Reflections

Generally, these stories cover things about the place (history, important events, myths and stories; attractions, any interesting information they consider worth sharing with their readers) and the people (their characteristics, their lifestyle, and culture-traditional and contemporary). The analysis showed the bloggers sharing what they learn about the places, people and culture and how they personalised them as they integrate their reflections on what they have seen within their personal, previous experience or even existing knowledge prior to the visit. Learning experiences are more enjoyable when they can take their own personal meaning, i.e. understanding what is in front of them in the context of their own experiences [36]. How they construct their stories of learning and reflections may also indicate an aspect of their identity as a "learner" or their interests.

Bloggers differ in their use of linguistic techniques, style of writing, use of emotional words and integrating their comments and opinions with facts and stories about the places. They filter and expand on their stories as they want to share to their readers. For example, blogs on the Golden Gate Bridge is the complete opposite of a very concise entry on the Kama Sutra stone carvings that Indians used for sex education "apparently they came to the temple and just copied the drawings – most enlightening!". Travel blogs indeed provide a good access to the learning and reflections of the travelers which are less explored in the tourist studies literature. Pearce (2005) posited that what tourists learn is seen to have limited commercial interest [37]. However, the analysis has shown how bloggers value this aspect of their experiences. These stories represent as informal learning that is predominantly unstructured, experiential and non-institutional [38]. These are narrative resources for reconstructing their travel experiences to their readers. In fact, Laing and Grouch (2005) posited that frontier travel experiences allow travelers to be seen as if they "discovered" the place before their readers and gave them some authority to talk about it because they have been there [33]. This provides benefits of travel for social status as well with the hope of getting recognition from their readers for such endeavor.

3.3 Accounts of Novelty and Differences

As the blogs are written by long-haul and multiple destination travelers who are exposed to places, people and cultures which are very different from those of their home culture and environment, it is not surprising how accounts of novelty and differences are crucial part of their travel experiences. Novelty and strangeness are essential elements in the tourism experience and vary from one individual to another [39]. Concepts are based on the perception of what the individual knows or is familiar with; hence stories of experiencing new and unique things are varied and very personal. There are stories of novelty in activities they engaged in enhanced by its location and with whom they engaged it with. The stories that bloggers tell of their encounters with the locals which also included their observations (highlighting differences,

uniqueness and strangeness at most times) can be equivalent to what Jasinki (2001) call as "rhetorics of othering" [40]. Few examples playing pool with a lady boy in a Vietnamese bar and playing football with the Indians in the Andes in Cusco, Peru. Some bloggers pay closer attention to how the locals live and allowed them to appreciate their home culture and enhances their identity as they use the differences to know the self. The construct of novelty is very vague but personal and subjective, it can cover anything that a blogger writes about and points out to their readers as something that is strange, unique and bizarre or interesting and has produced emotions of surprise, shock, amazement. The analysis confirm that the element of novelty is still crucial in creating memorable experiences [41,42].

3.4 Accounts of self-expansion

Social interaction with other fellow tourists is both an integral and functional aspect of backpacking [43]. But the analysis reveals that there is more to the social interaction of travellers, these interactions have helped them with their self-expansion. Self-expansion is achieved when an individual enters into a close relationship with another person, in which they include the other in their concept of self in the sense that they feel as if the other's perspectives, resources and identities are to some extent similar to their own [44:218]. The self-expansion model was developed to understand the motivation of people to enter into and maintain close relationships [44]; recognising the basic desire of people to explore, to expand the self and to enhance potential self-efficacy by gaining or increasing their access to material and social resources, perspectives, and identities [45]. Developing a relationship expands the self [46], as the relationship created was for attainment of resources (such as knowledge, social status and community, possessions and wealth and physical strength and health) to enable achievement of goals instead of the actual achievement of goals [46].

For bloggers, interaction with fellow tourists gave them specific resources such as knowledge, status and a sense of belonging to a community by particularly identify themselves with these people. Striking up conversation with other travelers is a common practice among travelers; and some do it more often than others to meet new people and establish friendships. Knowledge or the sharing of information is the most common resource gained from other travelers which ranges from prices of accommodation, how to get to certain place, best accommodation and additional tips. These practices are common features of backpacking [29, 30, 47, 48]; where questions on prices which are rather awkward in normal everyday have become normal. In fact, being able to pay "local prices, getting the best deal; travelling off the beaten track, long-term travel, diseases, dangerous experiences are few of the various ways of gaining road status [48] which is facilitated by exchange of information or knowledge gain from other travellers which consequently allow them to achieve the goal of enhancing their identity as a backpacker or traveller.

Some bloggers talk about other travellers they meet in their travels and associate themselves to them. For example, a blogger used phrases to refer to her friends as "great minded travellers" and sharing the same passion (travelling) which enhances her identity to her readers. Moreover, there are some bloggers who clearly identify themselves with people who they think are exceptional. A blogger's high regard for a man is seen in how she described him as an angel and super hero and later on identified herself with as somebody really experiencing the world and

seeing the more finer details, questioning, which definitely enhances her identity as she was able to present an aspect of herself as a travel blogger and formalise her belonging to that group. In the tourism literature, this self-expansion model or self-other inclusion concept is not explored. This is one of the main contributions of this study to explore this concept of self-expansion as one of the benefits of travelling.

3.5 Stories of escape

This is the least dominant theme; however they represent an important part of their tourist experience as it covers moments when bloggers take a break from activities of risk and challenges, learning, seeking novelty and differences and establishing relationships. According to Cohen and Taylor (1992) escape depends on a reality that individuals escape from [49]. Hence, these stories of escape are unique from the construct of escape established in the literature which is usually an escape from boredom or everyday routine. As these blogs are written by long-term, long haul and multiple destination travelers, their reality over the period they have been travelling have changed. Their everyday life is now filled with work of travelling and hence they cannot find escape anymore from travel itself. Their daily routine may be full of different activities, and their "occupational" career is travelling and domestic routines are replaced with travel related routines.

Escape comes in various forms. First, it can take the form of rest and relaxation or at least a less active day for some bloggers. Stories of escape are usually short, with some bloggers even saying there is not much to post in the blog because they "just chilled out for the day". First, chilling out, relaxing, and rest are common cues for these moments of escape from travel. Emailing people, chatting or even laundry are escape for some bloggers. Second, the beach paradise as an escape has been a dominant feature in their escape stories. These travel bloggers are in different parts of the world, visiting different types of destinations and with varying motivation for their travel, and yet the beach is one of the places they consumed commonly. Third, sleep is one of the most mentioned words in travel accounts albeit in varying contexts such as letting their bodies recuperate from any strain they subjected them to, in preparation for a strenuous activity or simply because they want a lazy morning and to get up late. It was an everyday routine that they cannot escape from; while travelling sleep seems to be more needed as they subject their bodies to various hardships and challenges. In some cases, sleep also becomes an indulgence when they sleep longer than their usual wake up time.

Despite its importance to travellers, sleep in tourism literature has not been well explored. In fact, only the work of Valtonen and Veijola (2011) has emphasised the importance of sleep, recognising the theoretical and industry-related insights of the tourist experience of the embodied state and practice of sleeping [50]. They argued that tourism studies have focused mainly on experiences gained with eyes wide open with the insights from works such as Urry's (1990) tourist gaze [51]. They emphasised that sleep has always been seen as an indicator of development and success in tourism in terms of overnight stays; but sleep itself has been left untouched.

4   Conclusion

Focusing on the language used by bloggers, five dominant types of travel stories emerged through the discourse analysis of blogs written by19 British travel bloggers. These themes

reflect the wide variety of experiences which constitute a tourist experience that bloggers felt worth sharing with their readers. Embedded within these stories are memorable experiences of the bloggers, which also provide insights on their self-presentation strategies and techniques used as well as the value and meaning of these travel experiences to them. In terms of marketing implications, this research has provided empirical evidence on how blogs can reveal core consumption experiences as remembered and reconstructed by the consumers. Blogs have provided their readers access to their feelings, thought processes and reflections. Further, the research confirms that travel experience remains to be used for identity construction [20, 28, 30]. Therefore, marketers in their formulation of a destination brand should pay particular attention on offering experiences that will give tourists opportunities to present or enhance their identities through the stories they tell.

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