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"If I was going to die I should at least be having fun": Travel blogs, meaning and tourist experience

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ABSTRACT

Travel blogs are an under-utilised resource for researchers of tourism experiences. They can provide rich insights on how tourists express the transformational effects of their experiences for the self. This study of travel blogs by nineteen British bloggers reveals how elements of the narrative relating to self-reflection and emotions are central to the process of transforming their travel experiences into personally meaningful experiences. Bloggers implicitly and explicitly express how travel contributes to self-identity, signalling self-development. The study contributes to knowledge about the lasting impact of long term travel on people, adding meaning symbolic of an evolving self.

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Introduction

The tourism industry is in the business of selling experiences (Kim, 2010). The tourist experience includes everything a tourist goes through at a destination as experience, including behaviour and perception, cognition and emotions; either expressed or implied (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Experiences represent a distinct economic offering to commodities, goods and services, on the grounds that they are unique, memorable and personal (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Early research on the

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experience economy adopted a managerialist stance, with attention centred on ways in which firms create experiences, and largely conceived of consumers as passive recipients. But more contemporary work embraces a consumer-centric view of experience as reflective of a consumer's emotional (Johnston & Kong, 2011) and subjective responses to direct or indirect contact with a company (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). This view acknowledges that consumers not only play an active, co-creative role in generating the experience, but are self-directed, self-expressive and firmly in the driving seat, with organisations playing a facilitating role (European Centre of Experience Economy, 2007; Piet, 2004).

This shift in emphasis has not diminished the managerial significance of experience scholarship, rather Boswijk, Peelen, and Thijssen (2005) argue that to be able to facilitate experience, it is vital to understand what motivates people, the ways in which they give meaning to their lives and when meaningful experiences touch them and transform them. Accordingly, there is growing advocacy of socio-cultural perspectives that can provide insight into the processes by which people give meaning to their experiences (Schmitt, 1999). This is important in the context of tourism since there remains insufficient research into the qualities of tourism experiences that stimulate reflection (Tung & Ritchie, 2011) and the processes by which people transform and personalise events into something personally meaningful at different stages of consumption (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Dolnicar & Ring, 2014). Thus, whilst it is widely acknowledged that consumer experiences are co-creative and meaningful, and that tourist experiences epitomise self-expressive consumption, we have little knowledge of just how experiences are selected, organised and constitutive of meaning-making, which provides the impetus for this study.

One way in which these processes are revealed is through the stories that people tell about their tourism experiences (McGregor & Holmes, 1999), especially once-in-a-life-time trips such as back-packing, which might be considered amongst the most intense and meaningful consumption experiences in a person's life (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Story telling is principally a post-consumption activity. Consumers present stories to others to relay memories of events and activities as well as their significance in terms of identity (Moscardo, 2010). With the continued development and uptake of social media platforms, tourism stories are increasingly presented in public domains through travel blogs. Blogs have been described as *unleashed* consumers' narratives (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Pace, 2008). The way stories are told within travel blogs can reveal features of experiences that provoke reflection and the processes by which consumers attribute specific meaning that is personally relevant (Caru & Cova, 2006). Examination of these naturally occurring narratives promises insights that may prove elusive when applying more commonly used researcher-led approaches such as direct interviewing techniques.

Travel blogs are potentially powerful artefacts, but remain under-utilised as data sources. They can reveal consumer-centric perspectives on tourism experiences that can have implications for management and marketing, but they are becoming ever more influential in shaping the expectations of other consumers who turn to online user-generated content for reviews of what destinations have to offer (Zehrer, Crotts, & Magnini, 2011). Extant literature has examined information content within travel blogs that is relevant to destination image, evaluation of destinations and tourist behaviour (e.g., general description of destinations such as climate, cuisine, transport, attractions or regional specific stereotypes) (Carson, 2008; Pan, Maclaurin, & Crotts, 2007). However, the self-expressive function of travel blogs has been neglected.

In this paper we address this gap, focusing upon the tourism experiences of backpackers. Backpacking experiences have been found to "affect and challenge the ways in which we experience ourselves, others and places over time" (Cohen, 2011, p.1536). We examine the stories in travel blogs with the aim of identifying and understanding the processes by which events and activities are transformed into personally meaningful experiences.

Tourism experience

The importance of understanding tourism experiences has long been recognised (Cohen, 1979) but the urgency has been intensified by the emergence of recent marketing theory and practice which has

highlighted the economic value of consumers *experiences* with brands, goods and tourism destinations and services (Volo, 2010). The study of experience has become one of the most significant areas of tourism research. Extant literature has examined phases of experiences, modes, the role of authenticity, its relationship with self-identity, dimensions of specific types of tourist experiences, roles of narratives, sacredness and spirituality, skill, information and learning, place and mobility, social relationships, the role of imagery, influential elements of experience and conceptual research (Cutler, 2010). The diversity of perspectives adopted has made theorising tourist experiences both a richly stimulating and highly problematic endeavour as multitudinous perspectives have simultaneously strengthened understanding of the dimensions of tourist experience but have rendered the concept somewhat opaque (Larsen & Mossberg, 2007), and a universal definition remains elusive.

Characteristics commonly associated with consumption experiences are that they are unique, memorable and personal (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). They have also been framed as extraordinary (LaSalle & Britton, 2003), multi-sensory (Schmitt, 1999), emotional (Johnston & Kong, 2011) and transformational (Hackley & Tiwasakul, 2006). Emotions have emerged as a pivotal response, despite the fact that research illustrates various interconnections amongst these concepts and points to other psychological processes – knowledge, memory, perception, identity – that determine subjective experience (Cutler, 2010). This is perhaps explained by the dominance of a supply perspective on experience that was influenced by the experiential consumption literature (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), and which recognised the important role that emotions play as markers, mediators and moderators of consumption experiences (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999).

It was further fuelled by conceptualisations of experience marketing (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999), which emphasised consumers' concerns with achieving pleasurable experiences and proposed frameworks to enable marketing practitioners to elicit emotions and create emotional attachments to garner customer loyalty and satisfaction (McCole, 2004). In tourism, it was recognised that destinations, which are rich in experiential attributes, have great potential to evoke emotional responses (Otto & Ritchie, 1996). Research has demonstrated that positive emotions can be engineered to create enjoyable and memorable experiences (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). Emotions have been shown to influence decision making, tourist intentions and behavioural outcomes such as satisfaction, loyalty and intentions to recommend (Bigne & Andreu, 2004).

The importance of emotions for consumption experiences remains unchallenged. However, as research on the experience economy has evolved, the view of experiences as created by marketers through brands, services, physical and social environments (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) has receded, superseded by the idea they are instead a conduit for personalised meaning created by consumers (Uriely, 2005). There is growing interest in the subjectivity of experiences as psychological phenomena that are based in and originate from individuals (Larsen, 2007) or what has been labelled transformational experiences (Hackley & Tiwasakul, 2006; Johnston & Kong, 2011). Self-identity is central to consumers' creation of meaningful experiences (Solomon, Bamossy, & Askegaard, 2002). Caru and Cova (2006) assert that consumers are able to live a differed identity when immersed in a consumption experience, but in order to transform and personalise it they need to engage in 'operations of appropriation' (Ladwein, 2003), that is, enact a psychological system of action to reduce the distance between the experience and the reflective stage of consumption.

There are three aspects of such operations of appropriation; *nesting* (whereby individuals come to feel comfortable because they are familiar with the experience); *investigating* (when individuals begin to explore and identify new activities in order to enhance their knowledge of the context and progressively extending their territory); and *stamping* (which involves individuals attributing specific meaning to an experience, not one that is commonly ascribed to it but of a personal nature linked to the individual's own referents and biography). Indeed, stamping can facilitate a deeper understanding of how individuals value the experience beyond its core consumption and people use considerable creativity to adjust the experience's context subjectivity and imbue it with personal meaning (the process of meaning making) (Caru & Cova, 2006).

Tourism, especially extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime travel, is a rich context in which to explore ways in which consumers construct meaningful experiences. Tourists do not simply seek the experience of place, but the experience of self in place (Cutler, 2010) and they invest a great deal of energy,

motivation and emotional commitment into these consumption events, that are reflected upon over many years and built into an enduring personal sense of self identity (Noy, 2004). Writing stories about their experiences is an important activity through which people act upon their experiences to connect them with the self. Individuals draw upon their memories to construct stories that they present to others (Woodside, 2010). When they do not simply tell about objects, places and events but interweave accounts of self-relevance, their stories become tools for understanding the self and even play a role in shaping memories of experience over time (McGregor & Holmes, 1999). As such, stories developed in contexts that are free from researcher intervention, afford unique research data on the transformative nature of experience. There is growing interest in the potential of consumer narratives to reveal the meanings that people attach to events and experiences (Shankar, Elliot, & Goulding, 2001). In this research we turn to travel blogs, as a modern form of consumer narrative, to shed light onto the ways in which tourists appropriate experiences and transform them into something that is personally meaningful.

The role of narratives in tourism experience

Narratives are fundamental in the construction of tourism experiences (McCabe & Foster, 2006). Tourists are storytellers, writers of introspective accounts of their own experiences and feelings (Pace, 2008). Storytelling is critical in understanding tourism experiences since stories shape memories and impressions of events over time (McGregor & Holmes, 1999); they are presented as stories to others as a way to relive memories of their trip (Moscardo, 2010); are stored in and retrieved from one's episodic memory, and specific indices of stories (location and individuals involved in experience) are not only the touch points of narratives (Woodside, 2010), they are also the event-specific knowledge of episodic memories which are the basic elements of memory formation (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Moscardo, 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

Travel narratives are not only reflective of travel experiences but also of the self. Travel writing strives to understand the self as much as the foreign (Schulz-Forberg, 2005) and it engages the author in making sense of her/his experience and negotiating "new identities" (Roberson, 2007). As Bruner notes, "telling about oneself is like making up a story about who we are and what we are, what's happened, and why we are doing it" (Bruner, 2002, p. 64). Haldrup and Larsen (2003) argue that although touristic autobiographical narratives are constrained by spatial and temporal limitations of the tourism experience, they incorporate selective memories and experiences of our everyday lives. Indeed, stories can be considered an *emic* interpretation of how, why, when and where events unfold, with what immediate and long term-consequences (Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007).

Moreover, stories contain relational structures and temporal dimensions, which are enabling factors of meaning creation (Escalas, 2004). A narrative is the natural mode through which human beings make sense of their lives (McAdams, 1996), crucial for exploration and understanding of how meanings have been constructed and used across the totality of human experience, including tourism experiences (Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005). In the experience economy, experience is seen as a quest for meaning for individuals (Ter Borg, 2003); hence, understanding when a meaningful experience touches individuals, transforms them and brings about a turning point, or behaviour change, is crucial (Boswijk et al., 2005).

Travel experiences contain many opportunities for transformational moments which have potential for meaning making (Boswijk et al., 2005) and accounts are inflected with biographical markers of place and identity (McCabe & Stokoe, 2004); which may lead to perceived transformations in self (Noy, 2004). Communication is a key factor in this strand of research as it is the process of talking about tourism experiences that provides a means to construct and represent identity (Desforges, 2000), and particularly to recount transformations in self or to express a rite of passage (White & White, 2004). Tourist experiences have become narrative resources used to perform and (re)establish identity (Noy, 2007) as talk about experiences can include talk about social worlds, sometimes achieving an iconic status in everyday lives; communicated through stories into lived identities (McCabe & Foster, 2006, p. 194).

Travel blogging as a modern form of travel writing, is more than reportage about places, people and culture; it is also about the self and the author's world or how they see others (Bohls & Duncan, 2005).

Blogging provides evidence for and a tool of, reflective thinking skills in the eyes of an audience (Hiemstra, 2001). Indeed, bloggers are self-reflexive individuals who tell their stories and explain their actions using their own words, which are useful in understanding the hedonic and subjective dimensions of experience; a way of understanding non-visible and rarely stated elements in experiences (Carù & Cova, 2008). Hence, travel blogs can assist in the conceptualisation of tourist experiences.

Methods

Having established the link between narratives and tourist experiences we suggest that travel blogs have considerable potential as resources to address how tourist experiences are constituted and to explicate how meaning is constructed and imbued through narratives. Narrative approaches have been widely used to gain insights into experiential consumption (Stern, Thompson, & Arnold, 1998). Blogs are increasingly drawn upon as naturally occurring introspective accounts, which are not subject to the reflexive *interference* that may result from interviews (Keng & Ting, 2009). Stories told in blogs are often rich, subjective accounts, replete in personal thoughts and feelings that may not be forthcoming in face-to-face interviews led by researchers.

Our approach to the analysis of blogs is social constructionist, based on the assumption that narrative accounts in blogs of travel experiences construct social reality for the individual and are reflective of self-identity. The importance of language to convey personal meanings in subjective descriptions of actions and to express identity cannot be overstated and it is through social constructionism that researchers can access meanings from such accounts. As Gergen notes; *"The degree to which a given account of the world of self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitudes of social processes"* (Gergen, 1994, p. 94). Language, through discourse and texts, creates reality, rather than reflects it, producing a version of events that is constitutive of social reality (Burr, 2003).

Blogs can be understood as a form of mimesis, the representation of worlds (Ricouer, 1984). Individuals, when writing blogs are engaged in assimilating their experiences via mimetic processes, which as Flick argues; *"making it possible to step out of themselves, to draw the outer world into their inner world, and to lend expression to their interiority"* (Flick, 2004, p. 92). The act of blogging is a process of construction; marking the intersection of the world of the text and readers in the second form of mimesis; and as the pre-understanding of the travel experience as part of a life story. Thus travel experiences are constructed into versions of the world in blogs, which are interpreted by readers thereby the texts themselves play a significant role in representing the world of experience.

For this study, purposive sampling (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) was used to select blogs written by backpackers as these tend to be the most comprehensive, detailed and intensive accounts (Enoch & Grossman, 2010). The blogs were selected from a pool of 1214 blogs whose authors participated in an earlier survey of blogger profiles, motives and practices. This survey revealed that the majority of bloggers were backpackers who wrote about multiple destinations and long-haul trips of more than three weeks and that they blogged while they were travelling. Each respondent was asked if they consented to the use of their blog postings for further analysis. 285 bloggers of various nationalities replied positively.

The following criteria were applied: first, blogs should be written entirely in English; second, bloggers should have blogged about long-haul and multiple destination trips longer than three weeks which was used as a proxy for backpacking experience; and third, bloggers should have produced between 25 and 50 blog posts to indicate an interest and commitment to blogging. A total of 40 bloggers met these criteria. However, following close inspection of their blog posts; 21 bloggers were dropped from the list because some blog posts were less than 100 words long or contained more pictures than text. A final sample of 19 bloggers was retained for the analysis. Table 1 provides the profiles of these bloggers, based on information from their profile pages and blog posts.

All blog posts by these bloggers were downloaded, producing a dataset of 674,008 words in total. In order to manage the volume of data the researchers initially focused on five blogger's postings to gain familiarity with the material and develop initial codes before moving on to analyse the full dataset using Nvivo software (Gill, 1996). These five bloggers were chosen from an initial inspection as

Table 1
Profile of bloggers.

Name	Blog ownership (Sole or Joint)	Countries visited	Word count	Blog posts	Length of trip (in months)
Astrid	J	Laos, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand	9344	38	4
Barry	S	Chile, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia	54,988	36	3
Chrissie	J	Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador	71,713	90	7
Claire	S	Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia	56,029	35	4
Dave	J	Thailand, Vietnam, Fiji, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand	60,967	53	7.5
Dawn	S	Argentina, England	5689	10	2
Derek	S	USA, France, Italy, Croatia, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia	60,363	24	3
Dylan	S	Spain, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Tokyo, Thailand	51,568	53	5.5
Gareth	S	India, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, Indonesia, Cambodia	31,200	42	18
Gary & Emma	J	Hongkong, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia , Singapore, China	38,149	41	3
Geoff	S	USA (multiple cities)	25,656	5	1
Leanne	S	Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina	9686	18	11
Luke	S	Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina Uruguay, USA	22,420	31	3
Meltem	S	Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia	10,831	12	4
Michael	S	Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, Philippines, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam	56,064	25	11
Nicchi	J	Singapore, Australia, New Zealand	16,539	20	5.5
Nick & Sally	J	India, Nepal	9271	7	2.5
Sally	S	South Africa, Tanzania, Bostwana, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya	24,396	33	1
Tim	S	Thailand, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Tibet	59,135	22	11

representing blog posts on different places (for example, one blogger who travelled to Southeast Asia and a blogger who was in South America) and their style and length of writing (first person perspective; concise vs. lengthy and level of detail) to explore patterns in the content and style of blogging. The authors worked independently to develop codes based on these first five transcripts then met to discuss the definition of the coding categories, resolve coding problems and agree a coding frame. Codes were developed by moving between deductive and inductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was followed by two phases of coding. In the first phase we concentrated on identifying themes around actions and events that were the subject of the bloggers' stories. This phase allowed us to identify the different types of stories that emerged from the data. In the second phase we examined the actions behind their stories (for example, identity work, meaning making); which allowed us to examine how bloggers personalise their experiences and in some instances, narrate the meaning of an experience. For both phases, themes were also formed and refined inductively.

Findings

Backpackers blogged about both their explicit (general facts and knowledge) and episodic memories of their trips, but the latter generally constituted the richest accounts. Our analysis revealed three elements of experience – risk, challenge and novelty/learning – to be memorable and a common focus for storytelling within the blogs. Within these stories, the narrative features that were central to the

process of transforming what travellers went through into personally meaningful experiences related to self-reflection and emotions. The following sections reveal how such elements of narrative feature within each type of story.

Stories of risk

Risky activities are distinguished by their (uncertain) potential for negative outcomes. The travel blogs were abundant with stories of voluntary risk-taking behaviours (e.g., skydiving, rafting, bungee jumping, motorbike riding and hiking) where individuals deliberately participate in perceived dangerous activities (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002), and involuntary tourist risk (e.g., long dangerous bus rides, being scammed, being attacked by an animal) (Lepp & Gibson, 2003).

In the accounts of voluntary participation in risky activities, emotional dimensions of the experience and self-identity work are central processes by which bloggers transform activities at destinations into meaningful experiences. Bloggers indicate that these experiences are extraordinary by framing them in extreme terms as 'death defying', the 'deadly waters', and 'pure madness'. Bloggers personalise the extraordinariness of events with reference to their past experience, for instance, 'I've never been so scared in my life' and 'it is the scariest thing I have ever done', by describing how they cope, overcome fear, achieve mastery, and by explaining the significance for the self. Their stories are infused with emotional references; they describe their felt emotions and deploy affective adverbs and adjectives to characterise events, activities and physical aspects of the experience. Extracts from Dylan's blog on his skydiving in New Zealand illustrates the heavy use of emotional terms to convey the individual's experience of risky activities and events through each stage of the process.

> We pack quickly and quietly in a nervous silence that was only briefly broken by a lame comment about fatality and fear that was followed by a nervous laugh... We moved across to the doorway and I swung my legs out of the plane looking down once more to the earth a terrifying distance away. I have never been so scared in all my life... I was obedient and completely compliant with this stranger in who's hands my life I had placed. A moment later we were out of the plane and falling. I screamed for a good few seconds then shouted a few expletives... The rush of air was incredibly powerful, there was a loud roaring turbulence that seemed to be holding us up as we pushed against it... The intensity of colours were heightened infact every sense seemed to tingle, heightened and more alert than ever, I felt like I was flying... My brain was scrambling to make sense of what was happening unable to process the experience but at the same time I was ecstatic in the pure and clear moment. The experience was entirely uncluttered by any past or future. I was free of everything, falling and flying, screaming through the sky enjoying the greatest thrill of my life. It lasted only forty five seconds but seemed like a mini eternity...

> Taff asked me how I felt about experience. I think 'The most f***ing amazing and exhilarating thing that I have ever done' was as eloquent as I could manage. Quite honestly the feeling is almost impossible to describe. He helped me up and I started to thank him shaking his hand the grabbing him and hugging him like a long lost brother... I felt like he had shown me something so special, he had taken my body and brain places they had never been before and for that I will be eternally great full to him.

Dylan's blog illustrates that while fear is the predominant emotion in anticipation of risky activities, the actual experience combines negative and positive emotions (e.g., fear, terror, exhilaration, ecstasy). The terms used refer to highly aroused states (Yik, Russell, & Steiger, 2011) and the physical sensation of these emotional experiences is palpable. Affective adverbs and adjectives – 'a nervous laugh', 'a terrifying distance away' – similarly convey the heightened state of arousal that characterises these events. As fear turns to exhilaration, Dylan once again frames the experience by self-referencing but now it is emphatically positive: 'the greatest thrill of my life', 'The most f***ing amazing and exhilarating thing that I have ever done'. Dylan is clear that this emotional and physical experience is 'special', a cherished and valuable extension to his identity. Towards the end of his story he writes of his gratitude to the instructor expressing awe at his way of life: 'He is so calm, his brain

regularly flushed free of stress with huge quantities of adrenaline. He does up to fifteen jumps a day, what a way to live your life!' These other-praising emotions of gratitude and awe (Haidt, 2003) indicate that Dylan recognises the crucial role of other people at the destination, people quite different from himself, in enabling his experience. In contrast, other bloggers referred to self-praising emotions, especially pride, emphasising that their own courage was vital to be able to experience the extraordinary things that were available to them:

> No lie this was one of the scariest things I have done in my life definitely more so then a bungee. I am proud of myself for doing it and even more proud to be telling the story... Another achievement to add to the list ☺. (Meltem)

An important aspect of these stories is that bloggers attribute a specific meaning to an experience by linking it to their own referents and biography (Caru & Cova, 2006; Ladwein, 2003). The combination of emotions that the bloggers recount as their stories of risk unfold and the links to their self-identity as they (re)construct their episodic memories are central to the process of personalising the experience. The self-reflective references in the blogs also indicate that these experiences and constructing memories of them engenders identity work. These travel blogs strongly resonate with Giddens' (1991) view of such experiences "fear produces thrill, then redirected to the form of mastery and the mastery of such dangers is an act of self-vindication and a demonstration to the self and others, that under difficult circumstances one can come through" (p. 133). The blogs illustrate that mastery of voluntary-risk taking activities while travelling are integrated into the repertoire of abilities that people connect with the self and the self-relevant outcomes of their travel experience are integrated into their life stories (Csikszenthmihalyi, 1993). Such experiences become profoundly meaningful through this sense of mastery and in the way they have the capacity to illuminate hitherto undiscovered aspects of the self.

Stories of challenge

These narratives relate to events and activities that create hardship or test the narrator's limits. These types of stories typically focused on adversity experienced due to some element of the travelling or the destination visited (Howard, 2009) or activities for which bloggers set difficult goals. Stories of challenge across the blogs include examples as simple as facing a childhood food nemesis, enduring an arduous journey and adjusting to a different lifestyle while travelling and, as difficult as taking on a treacherous mountain climb. Many of the stories of challenge that are difficult and in pursuit of ambitious personal goals involve danger and, as such, are also stories of risk.

Mark and Chrissie recount their experience of facing adversity in their journey from Chile to Peru during which they endure many different challenges associated with the physical and social conditions at the destination (e.g., being swamped by a mob of taxi drivers eager to swindle them, riot blockades on the road, encountering angry locals, and securing seats in an overcrowded bus followed by a long and bumpy journey). Such situations primarily present psychological challenges and tourists' stories are peppered with phrases highlighting the unexpected elements of events which are contrasted with their 'normal' realms of experience. This framing allows narrators to demonstrate that their experiences are exceptional and to reveal their ability to adapt to and cope with adversity. Mark and Chrissie indicate that their travel plans are thwarted by unexpected events: 'we thought we'd be able to get this [collective taxi] all the way through... we found we could only get as far as the Chilean border', and they use emotional and dramatic adjectives (e.g., 'angry locals', 'came to another screeching halt') to convey the tension in the situations they encounter. However, their story concludes by highlighting how they coped with the extraordinary experiences of the day and recast them as positive memories:

> After an epic day throughout all the problems we encountered and unexpected issues we had taken it all in our stride and laughed even more than ever. From what could have been a nightmare, we looked back with nothing but positive memories.

A second type of story focused on challenges related to activities travellers undertake to achieve a personal goal. This is illustrated below by the extract from Barry's blog that recount his ascents of Cerro Toco in Chile and Cerro Chachani in Peru with his wife. Barry's blog repeatedly referred to his goal to improve his mountain climbing skills as he travelled across South America, and much identity work centres on him being an experienced mountain climber. He personalises the experiences by setting the climbs against previous conquests, 'One of the aims of our trip has been to hike to higher altitudes than we've reached before…' Many such stories recount ambitions that are physically challenging and bloggers often stressed the difficulties and dangers they faced, with reference to the physiological, emotional and psychological dimensions. Some of these stories demonstrate the blogger's resilience and capabilities that enable them to overcome the challenge, but there are many instances which are marked by failure. In Barry's blog, the adversity and celebration of success are briefly explained when he is successful: 'it's certainly not easy doing anything at that height', 'we had a celebratory drink that evening'. However, when he is unsuccessful he elaborates at length on the personal experience of hiking at altitude. He emphasises that high altitude destinations constitute an extraordinary context (for a British tourist) and records the unpleasant physical reactions that he recognises to be symptoms of altitude sickness. Within this story of challenge, Barry refers to his climber identity by conveying his disappointment that his ambitious personal goal of reaching 6000 metres was not achieved and also by demonstrating his knowledge about altitude sickness and safety.

> On Cerro Toco: Reaching Toco's summit was the highlight of our time in San Pedro. One of the aims of our trip has been to hike to higher altitudes than we've reached before and by reaching the 5604 metre peak of Cerro Toco, we beat our previous record (Jebel Toubkal in Morocco) by over 1400 metres. While Toco is seen as one of the easier 5000 peaks in South America, it's certainly not easy to do anything at that height. Even talking at rest tires you out! Going felt fine back at 2500 metres in SP and I remember thinking, as we had a celebratory drink that evening, that 6000 metres was our next goal!

> On Cerro Chachani: When we reached the top of the pass at 5600 metres, we all just threw off bags, lay down and tried to breathe. The guides made us some coca tea which helped a little but I didn't feel good. I had lost my appetite, plus I felt nauseous; two definite signs of altitude sickness… After crossing the Falls, I was shattered and needed a long break. We had a quick breakfast/brunch but I couldn't eat anything, again a bad sign. I made it another 50 metres to a final height of 5650 metres before giving up. Stephanie gave up soon after; Ruth went on to 5850, while Pepo climbed a 5950 summit, Cerro Fatima. So none of us made the top of Cerro Chachani. It was very disappointing to give up like that but it would have been even more foolish to go on given how bad I felt. The others had left me at a pass while they continued and soon after they left I was vomiting badly. There was little consolation in beating my previous climbing record by 10 metres!

Challenging one's limits is important for an evolving self (Csikszenthmihalyi, 1993). In our analysis of backpackers' travel blogs, the ways in which bloggers construct their accounts of success and failure in and through challenging experiences indicates that the personalisation of the experience – through reference to one's realm of experience, personal goals and physical and emotional states – renders the experience meaningful. It is indicative of a reflective sense of self, and the act of narration is expressive of a transformational self-identity through travel (Noy, 2004; White & White, 2004).

Accounts of novelty and learning

These stories were prevalent within the blogs, indicating the importance of new encounters and learning in tourist experiences (Cutler, 2010; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008). New knowledge and understanding of places, people and events are central to these stories. Accounts of novelty are cued by words such as 'first time', 'new', 'surreal, 'weird', 'strange' and 'interesting' which reflect the four components of novelty: thrill, change from routine, boredom alleviation and surprise (Tse & Crotts, 2005). Stories highlighting novelty indicate experiences are subjective and personal, framed with reference to an individual's prior knowledge and experience. Experiences that are framed as novel include a therapeutic dip in the mud pools at the Volcan de Lodo El Tutomo, playing pool with a lady

boy in a Vietnamese bar in Nha Trang and playing football with the Indians in the Andes in Cusco. In part, the value of such experiences is that they expand the self by having done things that are unusual, for instance, Dylan says of his game with the locals: "as a tick in a newly created box of things I wanted to do before I die" and Sally explains that she did not like the nyama choma (spit roasted goat) but concludes "I can now say I have eaten it". Other bloggers more explicitly link their novel experiences to learning and development of the self.

Some stories of learning are primarily descriptive observations, while others are long, detailed accounts in which there is much greater investment in meaning making and exploring the meaning of the experience for the self (Kunnen & Bosma, 2000). Bloggers' accounts of learning about places typically relay descriptive information, demonstrating their own newly acquired knowledge. Beyond this, they do little to construct their learning as personally meaningful. By contrast, considerable meaning making is evident in accounts of learning about people and events. The blogs illustrate that learning about the destination's people and culture are personalised by reference both to the self and to cultural contexts and social structures which are emblematic of the familiar social worlds and norms of home. Whereas some bloggers accept differences between their own culture and those they learn about on their travels, others express judgements on the virtues or flaws in contrast to their cultural norms and values. The former is illustrated by the extract from Meltem's blog on her visit to the Ganges:

> I was saddened to witness several cremations as well as babies' body being thrown directly in the river. Such intimate rituals of life and death take place in public which is a shock to me but merely the crossing between the physical and spiritual world in the Hindu culture

When Leanne describes locals' livelihoods she compares to the more fortunate norm for her peers in Britain and highlights the value of the experience in provoking self-reflection.

> Men walk into the volcano twice a day and collect a big bag of sulphur and get paid only 600 rupiah per bag! to put that into context, 16,000 rupiah = 1 pound so they are getting about 10 pence for risking their lives! makes you think about when we moan about our jobs. Most hotel workers out here earn 20,000 rp a day working 6am til 11ish thats not even a quid 50! Anyway now I've made you all appreciate england im off.

Claire's blog about the Khmer Rouge provokes more critical reflection on herself and her home culture. Claire writes about the tyranny of the Khmer Rouge, referring to her young self, her parents, the education system in England and elements of British cultural life in the 1970s to illustrate the contrast of human experience in Cambodia and Britain. She criticises the neglect of Cambodians' plight in Britain, and her own ignorance as a child but distances herself from this identity by inferring that her adult self is more aware and empathetic.

> Sadly, when the Khmer rouge... took control back in 1975 and were busy killing over 1.2 two million of its citizens in cold blooded murder, purposely causing its people to suffer severe malnutrition which lead to wide spread disease and even more death and devastation for years to come, I was already alive, some would say 'fortunately' living in the north of England (I disagree). At the time I was only eight years old, ignorant and truly helpless to this heart breaking Cambodian cause. I now realise that my junior school had declined to teach me all about Cambodian politics and the evil ways of one Mr. Pol Pot, I believe this was because absorbing our own 1st and 2nd world war horrors of fifty years ago was far more important and maybe less shocking to our tiny systems and the spongy minds of an eight year old modern day child to take in, than something currently happening around the world right there and then, here and now... My parents were not interested in a lot of things either...

The portraits of people that tourists encounter on their travels are a form of what Jasinski (2001) calls 'rhetorics of othering'. Othering, is the imaginary construction of different people by external individuals who remain marginal (yet powerful) in their encounters with the exotic 'others' (Hollinshead, 2000, p. 420). The way in which the bloggers interweave accounts of their own enlightenment into the narratives of novelty and learning about other cultures indicates that the experiences become a means of self-development (McAdams, 1993). Meltem concluded that what she witnessed

on the Ganges was an 'eye opening experience', implying that this expanded her view of the world, and Leanne uses the phrase 'now I've made you think', advocating that she and her audience should think differently about their own lives and that they should act differently (little to 'moan' [complain] about with their own lives). While there are differences in how bloggers interpolate themselves into stories of learning about other people and cultures, their identity work is clearly central to constructing their experiences as personally meaningful.

Emotions in these stories are less prevalent than in stories of risk and challenge. Nonetheless, they are still used to illustrate the personal significance of an experience. Emotions are prominent in accounts of visiting sites of tragic events for the local population. For instance, Emma and Gary's account of the Killing Fields and the Tuol Sleng Museums describes these sites with phrases such as 'most disturbing' and how they feel afterwards as 'pretty depressed' and 'very deflated'. We found fewer references to positive emotions in the stories of novelty and learning. However, positive emotions were used to convey that visiting impressive sites is an exciting experience, for example, Michael reports that 'the excitement only occurs once you take to the air. Stretched across 500sq km of the plains are the spectacular Nazca lines'.

Conclusions

Tourism experience has become a focal concept for academics and practitioners alike. There is particular interest in the post-consumption stage of experience, when tourists store artefacts, enrich, evaluate and reflect upon their experiences (Aho, 2001). Yet there remains considerable ambiguity about the processes by which tourists transform their actions and perceptions of events at destinations into memorable experiences that are personally meaningful (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013). In this article we systematically examined backpackers' travel blogs to reveal the processes of transformation of experiences into meaningful life events for consumers. Such accounts offer access to experiences originating with consumers, in contrast to the more common researcher-led approaches. Travel blogging is an act of appropriation and analysis of blogs provides a novel opportunity to interrogate the reflective stage of consumption experience, to identify the types and qualities of experience that are chosen as a focus for reflection and which reveal the processes through which people ascribe personal meanings linked to consumer's own referents.

Our analysis revealed that the richest accounts tended to centre on episodic memories (personally experienced events), rather than explicit memories (general facts and knowledge) (Larsen, 2007). We examined three elements of experience that are a common focus for backpackers' blogs: stories of risk, challenge and, novelty and learning. Events characterised by these elements have previously been found to be amongst the more memorable experiences for tourists (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Our analysis of travel blogs reveals that features of narrative through which people personalise these elements of experience relate to the tourist's emotions and self-reflection. By contrast to interview-based research, for which informants recall only positive emotions in relation to tourism experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011), we find that bloggers refer to an array of emotions as they construct different types of stories. Amongst them are emotive themes that marketers typically deploy to sell experiences to tourists (e.g., thrilling, pleasurable, dark/sombre) (Bigné, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2005). But tourists mention a wide range, and unexpected combinations, of emotions as they construct memories of their experiences; they write about sacred moments, awe inspiring people, personal pride as well as being scared, disappointed, disturbed and depressed.

These findings challenge the rather narrow view that tourists are predominantly concerned with pleasurable experiences and personal happiness (Piet, 2004). In addition, the findings demonstrate that emotional processes are inherent to the construction of meaningful experiences. As such this study responds to calls for research that affords a consumer centric view of tourist experiences (Backstrom & Johansson, 2006; Tung & Ritchie, 2011) and, more specifically, builds understanding of the role of emotions in the process of personalising experience. Gaining a nuanced understanding how emotions feature within meaning-making processes will be essential for organisations that seek to create emotional bonds between themselves and their customers, which has hitherto remained a challenge (McCole, 2004).

Our work also illustrates that self-reflection is an important process in attributing specific meaning to tourism experiences and, as such, contributes to the growing literature concerned with life experience and experiential consumption that "lasts in memory and is significant for the individual for personal development and growth" (Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarantonello, 2015, p. 167). The findings confirm the idea that experience is phenomenologically determined (Larsen, 2007) and reveals that the process of narration is a critical activity through which individuals construct personalised meaning. The analysis shows that bloggers frame experiences in relation to their life worlds – their personal history, realm of experience, everyday norms, personal goals and aspirations – and draws contrasts with the activities and events, people and cultures that they encounter on their travels. The way in which bloggers draw upon the extraordinary experiences of travelling to lend expression to and develop their self-identities is illustrative of a mimetic process (Flick, 2004; Ricouer, 1984). The travel blogs, then, reveal ways in which consumers relate to and savour memories of enjoyable and meaningful experiences (Alba & Williams, 2013) and are also are constitutive of subjective meanings. This corresponds with Schmitt et al.'s (2015) contention that meaning-based happiness (happiness arising from the fulfilment of meaningful goals) is an important dimension of experience alongside hedonic pleasure or happiness, although our findings suggest that the two are not inextricably linked and meaning-based gratification can equally arise from events that provoke negative emotions. Further, the meaning of travel experiences to individuals and the contribution to an evolving sense of self extends (Ritchie & Hudson's, 2009) evolution of tourism experiences to include the implications of experience for identity in the longer term.

Through the production of blogs, tourists express the transformational effects of their experiences for the self. To apply this understanding to destination management, and to be able to communicate with tourists in meaningful ways, before, during and after their visits, requires acknowledgement of the importance of tourists' episodic memories and efforts to identify the characteristics of place and people, activities and events that are drawn upon to express and transform self-identity. Our findings on the dimensions of experiences that are selected for storytelling, and the ways in which the stories are told, contributes practical knowledge that will help marketers to create and dramatize experiences as story-able events.

As with all research, this study has a number of limitations. First, it concentrates only on the blogs of British backpackers undertaking long trips and the findings cannot be assumed to be generalizable to other types of travel and other populations. Secondly, the analysis reported here focuses on three common types of travel story, and additional insight will undoubtedly emerge by examining a wider range of stories. Further, this paper centres on emotions and self-reflection processes, which were prominent elements of bloggers' meaning making processes. However, discourse analytic techniques can be applied to draw out a variety of other narrative features to provide a more comprehensive view. Blogging is now a well-established tourist practice, as it is in other consumer domains, yet relatively little research has harnessed this rich source of data to interrogate consumption experiences and consumer-centric views of their subjective meaning. There is considerable potential for new research involving bloggers to inform tourism management, of both positive and negative features (e.g., crime and violence) of destinations, but also to stimulate critical reflection on evolving trends in tourism (e.g., eco-tourism, expedition vacations and educational tourism - cooking/art/wine tasting).

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