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BEYOND REVIEWING: UNCOVERING THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF TOURISM SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

ABSTRACT

Existing research on tourism social media users rarely extends beyond their role as appraisers of tourism and hospitality products. Such research fails to identify the different modes of experience and behavior which these users assume in their cyberspace interactions. This paper demonstrates that user interactions entail much more than evaluating products. Using data from Tripadvisor it identifies five additional user roles which define their experience and comportment online: troll; activist; social critic; information seeker; and socialite. Adopting a netnographic approach these categories are interrogated to provide a more nuanced understanding of the online user experience in tourism social media space. Further, for each role, we glean the implicit uses and gratifications users seek from using the media. It is argued that the combined enactment of these roles creates a rich repository of experiential narratives which tourism businesses and destination managers can tap into for insights into the modern tourism consumer.

Keywords: online communities, user roles, tourism social media, netnography, Tripadvisor

INTRODUCTION

The rationale for this article is that it fills a significant gap in research on social media in tourism. This arises since existing research does not focus beyond users' role as evaluators of tourism and hospitality products. Specifically, the research gap lies in a failure to identify different modes of experience and behavior which users assume in their cyberspace interactions. Without a scholarship that recognizes the full capacity of social media as an interactive and self-expression conduit, tourism studies cannot produce a research agenda that sufficiently comprehends what virtual communities bring to the tourism system and the world in which it operates.

The central research question tackled by this paper therefore is to identify and understand what roles individual users of tourism social media perform in their online interactions, beyond appraising tourism and hospitality products. Further, what could be learned about the uses and gratifications attached to tourism social media, from analysing these roles in greater depth? In an era when tourism social media increasingly mediate tourism consumption and discourse, such a study is highly expedient. Moreover, as each form of social media has its own biases in relation to the kinds of communication it facilitates, as well as the social consequences and rewards that accrue to its users, a study that focuses on tourism social media in its own right is needed (Quan-Haase and Young 2010). Thus, adopting a netnographic approach, these user roles are interrogated to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the online user experience in tourism social media space.

The structure of the article is as follows. The main section starts with a review of the relevant theoretical background as well as an explanation of the study context. The research method - an interpretive netnographic approach which taps into online user interactions - is then presented. Next the findings reveal that tourism social media user interactions entail much more than product reviewing. Five additional user roles or modes are identified within

exchanges on Tripadvisor which define their interactive experiences. The roles are troll; activist; socialite, social critic; and information seeker. The characteristics of these user categories and their associated uses and gratifications sought from the media are discussed and illustrated with examples. Finally conclusions are offered along with a consideration of limitations, implications and suggestions for further research.

BEYOND REVIEWING

TOURISM SOCIAL MEDIA

Dedicated tourism and hospitality social media have grown tremendously in the last decade, with the advent of interactive Web 2.0 technologies (Hays, Page, and Buhalis 2013; Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013; Xiang and Gretzel 2010). Examples of such media include Tripadvisor.com, Virtualtourist.com, Cruisecritic, and Thorntree. The interactive capacity of these platforms enables users from virtually all over the globe to engage in a range of communicative activities such as information searches, rating products and services, and initiating and participating in tourism-related discussions (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan 2008; O'Connor 2010).

Among tourism media sites, Tripadvisor has emerged as the clear leader (Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013; O'Connor 2010). As of February 26 2015, Tripadvisor is, as stated on its website www.tripadvisor.com, the world's largest travel site with more than 60 million emailable members worldwide, and over 200 million reviews and opinions covering more than 4.4 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions; and more than 19 million traveller photos. In addition, it states, more than 90 new contributions are posted every minute. With this scale of user content, Tripadvisor offered the most comprehensive platform for investigating tourism social media communities.

Tripadvisor's architecture allows two main forms of user interactive platforms, namely, reviews and discussion forums. In relation to the latter, Tripadvisor's factsheet (http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/PressCenter-c4-Fact_Sheet.html) provides that on average, nearly 2,800 new topics are posted every day to the TripAdvisor forums, and, further, more than 90 percent of questions posted to TripAdvisor's English-speaking forums are replied to by other travellers within 24 hours. Tripadvisor's factsheet explains that forums enable members to ask for and share their opinions, advice and experiences in interactive discussions with the community. Many of the forums feature "Destination Experts", regular contributors who are passionate about the destinations they represent (http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/PressCenter-c4-Fact_Sheet.html). While most user content can be attributed to individual traveller accounts, Tripadvisor also allows tourism and hospitality businesses to respond to reviews on the site. The site can therefore be seen as a multidimensional interactive space where different players in the tourism community can access information and interact. There is however limited research on the nature and scope of this interaction. In particular, there is a lack of research in tourism studies on the roles that users perform in their interactions, beyond functional appraisal of products and services.

In relation to reviewer content, related existing studies have covered topics such as the handling of 'fake' reviews (Malbon 2013); the role of electronic word-of-mouth in purchase decisions (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan 2008); managerial implications and responses to reviews (Jeong and Mindy Jeon 2008; Levy, Duan, and Boo 2013); managing a hotel's online image (O'Connor 2010); and the profile of helpful reviewers (Lee, Law, and Murphy 2011). Such studies focus primarily on the review role, while overlooking other forms of user experience which are evident in tourism social media spaces.

Another strand of the research has focused on quantifying variables associated with review behavior, such as age and gender, and understanding relationships between them (for

example Levy et al. 2013). On the other hand, existing interpretive research largely describes how users review tourism and hospitality products, and attempts to explain how these reviews impact businesses. There is limited acknowledgement that even though sites such as Tripadvisor are branded as review sites, what occurs within user interactions is much more than ‘reviewing’. It is the overlooked wider space of user interaction which is the main focus of this study. Thus we position the paper as a base which will allow future researchers to tap into tourism social media for more focused strands of research on users.

USERS: ROLES AND GRATIFICATIONS

Social media user roles can be understood as patterned characteristics of communication between network members; each role is a combination of particular sets of behavioural, meaningful attributes which shape social structural relations online (Wesler et al. 2007). Outside of the tourism domain, several studies have examined online user roles, many of which focus only on users of generic social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. For example, Bechmann and Lomborg’s (2012) review of existing studies identifies actor roles within Facebook, which include users as information seeker, self-presenter, and content creator.

Li’s (2007) analysis is much broader, covering social computing behaviours, including but not limited to social media, and identifies six increasing levels of participation, namely, creators, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators, and inactives. Similarly, Kozinets (1999 2002) categorises online message posters based on their level of involvement with the online community as well as their consumption interests. He identifies ‘tourists’, who lack strong social ties to the community and often post casual questions; ‘minglers’ who have strong social ties but have minimal interest in consumption activity; ‘devotees’ who have strong consumption interests, but minimal connection to the online community; and, finally,

‘insiders’ who are highly engaged with the consumption activity and with building connections with other users.

The simplest typology of social media users is the poster-lurker dichotomy (Heinonen 2011), which also categorises users based on how actively or passively they behave online.

However, such a categorisation does not relate to the actual nature and content of the postings. Nonetheless, the diverse categories which have resulted from the different studies illustrate that different media satisfy different user needs and wants. This variation can be understood in terms of Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G), which, in the context of Internet and social media usage, posits that users choose and use media in response to specific needs and desired gratifications (Quan-Haase and Young 2010). Thus, it can be suggested that users of tourism social media will inhabit different roles depending on the uses and gratifications they seek from a particular social media experience.

Stafford et al.(2004) categorise gratifications sought from Internet use into three types, namely, content gratification (self-documentation and information sharing), process gratification (entertainment, passing time, and self-expression), and social gratification (interactive relationships). Xu et al (2012) distinguish utilitarian and hedonic gratifications. Other studies of Internet and social media uses and gratifications focus on more specific outcomes sought by users, such as entertainment seeking, status seeking, affinity seeking, and socialising (for example, Lee and Ma 2012; Mo and Leung 2015). However, as different media have different capacities for meeting these varied uses and gratifications, findings that relate to one particular form of social media cannot be extrapolated to another. Thus, a study focusing on tourism social media in particular is warranted. Therefore, the present study not only permits an exploration of the different user roles, but also an understanding of the range of uses and gratifications that are particularly relevant to tourism social media sites.

METHODOLOGY

A netnographic approach, formulated by Kozinets (1997, 1999, 2002), was adopted.

Netnography is an adaptation of ethnographic research methods to suit online spaces as fieldwork sites. It seeks to understand online cultures by gleaning insights from user communicative texts such as blogs, discussion forums, customer reviews, wikis, posts, chats, tweets, podcasting, pins, digital images, and video. By tapping into online communities, the methodology encapsulates a new web-based epistemological turn in tourism studies which Liburd (2012) terms ‘tourism research 2.0’.

There are however significant differences between ethnography and netnography, and it would be an oversimplification to characterise netnography as ‘online ethnography’. While both methods are immersive, netnography lacks the physical context that ethnographers have access to in real world fields. Further, it is virtually impossible to verify the identity of netnographic participants, who often upload content anonymously or pseudonymously. This contrasts sharply with ethnography where researchers are able to conduct face-to-face data collection. However, netnography has significant strengths. Kozinets (2002) argues that compared to ethnography, netnography is far less obtrusive, time consuming and elaborate. In addition, netnography’s strength is ‘its particularistic ties to specific online consumer groups and the revelatory depth of their online communications’ (Kozinets 2002, 6).

For the present study, the data set comprised 550 reviews of four tourism destinations/attractions, as well as 230 postings within five discussion forums. The forums and destinations/attractions were selected judgementally to ensure that a range of tourism and hospitality experiences and geographical regions were represented. It was also important to include both cultural and nature-based attractions, in each case choosing cases with a high volume of postings. Such a sampling approach is more likely to create a suitably pluralistic and nuanced corpus of data. As Kozinets (2002) recommends, data collection continued until

no new insights were being generated. Therefore, netnography does not prescribe specific rules about sample size or how much data is required. Indeed, insightful and useful conclusions can be drawn from a small number of individual postings, which are the units of analysis (Kozinets 2002). Further, he adds, data collection and analysis occur concomitantly. The four destinations/attractions analysed are:

a) Ayothaya, Elephant Village http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Attraction_Review-g303897-d3218778-Reviews-Ayothaya_Elephant_Village-Ayutthaya_Ayutthaya_Province.html

b) Night Safari http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowUserReviews-g294265-d324761-r125229548-Night_Safari-Singapore.html

c) The Carlyle, A Rosewood Hotel http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowUserReviews-g60763-d93419-r255460215-The_Carlyle_A_Rosewood_Hotel-New_York_City_New_York.html

d) Reality Tours and Travel - Day Tours http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Attraction_Review-g304554-d1931951-Reviews-Reality_Tours_and_Travel_Day_Tours-Mumbai_Bombay_Maharashtra.html

The discussion forums included in the analysis are

a) Reykjavik Travel Forum http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowTopic-g189970-i594-k4550257-Most_boring_capital_of_the_world-Reykjavik_Capital_Region.html

b) Australia Travel Forum <http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowTopic-g255055-i120-k4529220-Scam-Australia.html>

c) Mumbai (Bombay) Travel Forum http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowTopic-g304554-i4228-k736146-Slum_Tour-Mumbai_Bombay_Maharashtra.html

d)Rio de Janeiro Travel Forum http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowTopic-g303506-i1199-k3844929-Slum_tourism-Rio_de_Janeiro_State_of_Rio_de_Janeiro.html

e)Zimbabwe Travel Forum http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowTopic-g293759-i9323-k7740273-Zimbabwe_s_new_e_visa_process_how_quick_is_it-Zimbabwe.html

The analysis process involved coding the data manually by reading it through twice over while making interpretive field notes about user roles which were emerging, and then determining a term for each user role description. Each individual posting (the unit of analysis), was read in its entirety. Following that, to gain a more complete understanding of user interactions, the context in which it arose was examined, by reading preceding posts and responses to it, where available. Thus, for instance, the ‘troll’ category was discerned when it was flagged by other user as such.

Other codes were generated by inferring what the posting was intended to achieve within the interaction (for example, a request for specific information on a destination would be coded with ‘information seeking’). Thus, the analytical process went beyond literal text, and sought underlying, latent and implied meanings. Following the coding process, sections of data which could be useful for illustration were marked out. Data analysis concluded when no new roles could be discerned. Five roles were discerned thus. For each identified role, the implied uses and gratifications sought were then interpretively deduced. Again, it must be stressed, these roles are over and above the basic role of informational appraisal of tourism and hospitality establishments which previous studies have already explored, as shown in the literature review.

From a research ethics standpoint, the nature of Tripadvisor as a public domain whose users largely remain anonymous or pseudonymous meant that no informed consent was required to access and use postings. Further, the topic of investigation, ‘user roles’, is not of a highly

personal or sensitive nature, and therefore, it was also not ethically necessary to reveal research activity to potential participants before extracting and using their postings.

Several strategies were implemented to ensure methodological rigour. For accuracy in representing user interactions, the quotes provided are copied directly from Tripadvisor and are not edited for syntax and other errors. This prevents the alteration of users' original meanings, and provides a more authentic representation of the nature of online interactions, which, because of their informal nature, are commonly written in colloquial or slang style, and are often fraught with typographical errors. For additional rigour, two researchers were involved in the interpretation and contextualisation of identified roles. Furthermore, peer debriefing at every stage of the research process with colleagues ensured that the study's objectives and procedures were clearly explicated, in a manner accessible to a non-expert, but intelligent audience. The reporting style, characterised by thick description, illustration and contextualisation, further provides for a thorough and comprehensive analysis.

FINDINGS: TOURISM SOCIAL MEDIA USER ROLES

From the analysis of the data five additional user roles or modes were identified within exchanges on Tripadvisor. These are troll; activist; socialite, social critic; and information seeker. The categories are each addressed in turn, after which further points about the interpretation of the data are made.

1. The troll

An interesting but deviant behavior which emerged from the data was that of the ‘troll’ (also referred to as ‘troller’). There were several occurrences of users posting ‘Troll Alert’ on several discussion forums, as is the culture of online community members when alerting others to the possibility of a troll. It was then necessary to examine the context in which these alerts arose, in order to gain insight into perceptions and experiences of trolling on Tripadvisor.

In the troll role, a user “constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement” (Hardaker 2010, 237). Typically, trolls achieve their ends by posting messages that are inflammatory, abusive, off-topic, insulting, aimed at provoking an emotional response, or luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab 2002). Herring et al. (2002) argue that often, the goal of a troll is to draw in particularly naïve and vulnerable users. Thus, from a U&G perspective, trolls seek satisfaction from outsmarting other users in various ways: deception of other users; amusement from observing the effect of their supposed ingenuity—in other words, from successfully manipulating their audience. Their success detracts from the social and utilitarian experience of other users. Thus, their efforts should be thwarted by not responding to them and flagging their posts.

It should be noted also however that academic perspectives on what constitutes trolling are not necessarily held by the users of online communities. As such, users will have subjective perceptions about what constitutes trolling. As Hardaker (2010) aptly points out, one person's active debate is another person's troll, and, further, a group's character and its norms of legitimate behavior will determine not only whether a troll is harmful, but whether a user is even deemed to be a troll at all. Similarly, Binns (2012) observes that what classes as a troll varies from site to site, as language and opinions that are welcomed on one site may be offensive on another. The following exchange between a (perceived) troll on Tripadvisor illustrates this point well. The 'troll' begins by making a derogatory comment about the city of Reykjavik:

Most boring capital of the world? Hello, I have visited Reykjavik in 2005 and, sorry to say, I was bored as never before. To me, right now, if anyone would ask me, it is the most boring capital city of entire world. And I have visited many. Very soon I will be visiting [Iceland](#) and Reykjavik again... (job). Please, convince me I am wrong.

What to do there except those baths (I am not fun of that). I saw it once and it was enough for the rest of my life. Also visited that famous church (nice one). Anything else? Thanks!

Illustrating that trolling is a construct of perception, some users interpreted the above post as a genuine comment, and responded offering their own opinions on Reyjavic. In other words, at this stage, the troll was a success, because other users were provoked into responding. The 'troll' in turn responded with more inflammatory and personal comments:

Seems that you may have been offended by my post or you took it very personally.

One way or another - my opinion is my opinion and certainly I have right on it. There is absolutely no need for personal attacks like "we hope you don't smell that much" or

"if you just open your eyes and mind". Those are low punches and not suited for a destination expert like you are. Don't worry, I do not smell. And my eyes and mind are open... Not sure what should be wrong with visitors from Timbuktu, unless there is something very racist underneath...Now, be a true destination expert and not an offensive and rude person, and tell me what should or what is there to do that will change my opinion about this place?

In response, another user then alerted others that this must have been a troll, by posting 'Troll alert!'. The alert is a way of discouraging more responses to the troll; to deny him/her the satisfaction of successfully causing emotional responses and time-wasting argumentation. In the above scenario, and in typical trolling fashion, the troll then adamantly denies being as such, and argues back and forth with users who feel justified in calling him a troll:

Take a look at your title "Most boring capital of the world?"...to me that is an example of my definition of a Troll....A "troll" is a person who posts disruptive, argumentative, and/or insulting comments to insight a ruckus.

Another example occurs in an Australian travel forum, where a user writes:

Dear travelers, Please be careful and watch out when you change your money at the exchange offices in Australian cities. They might cheat you even at the exchange offices of some famous banks Like ANZ and etc... The teller (changed) gave us cash for 2200 instead of 2300 USD. ...So, dear travelers be very careful in Australia. A foreign accent could be very tempting for various dodgy businesses.....

The above user could have in fact genuinely been cheated at a foreign exchange office in Australia, as claimed. However, in terms of how other users respond, the *perception of* trolling suffices as trolling, and indeed, another user promptly flagged this as a troll. It is

clear then that different social communities and individuals have subjective expectations of what constitutes acceptable and deviant behaviors. Furthermore, as Hardaker (2010) states, the impact of a troll depends on how it is interpreted by its audience: a trolling attempt can be frustrated if users correctly interpret an intent to troll, but are not provoked into responding. It fails if users do not correctly discern an intent to troll and are then not provoked. A troll succeeds if users are deceived into believing the troller's deceptive intentions and are provoked into responding sincerely.

Trolling behaviors that occur on Tripadvisor, as with any online community, can be understood in terms of online disinhibition, as stated earlier; cyber-anonymity creates a sense of impunity and loss of self-awareness, resulting in a greater likelihood of acting upon impulses that are normally inhibited (Binns 2012; Suler 2004). In this case, the pseudonymous nature of Tripadvisor—users identify themselves online with 'usernames' of choices, and their true identity remains concealed—appears to make users with deviant tendencies more likely to display them. The specific context of tourism social media studies has however not been dealt with in existing research on trolling.

From a managerial point of view, being able to differentiate trolls from genuine participants in social media is essential for businesses, otherwise time could be wasted addressing trolling activity. Of course, in a best case scenario, trolls are little more than an annoyance to other users and the businesses they may target. However, trolling may also amount to more serious corporate harassment, as in the case where the troll posts malicious, false information about a business, with the intention of damaging the business' reputation. Thus trolls cannot be always be overlooked, and businesses need to have strategies in place for dealing with trolls, including pursuing legal action where it is warranted.

2. The socialite

The ‘socialite’ role became apparent from the incidence of users who devoted most of their interactive activity to demonstrating their sophistication, by displaying forms of social and cultural capital acquired or experienced through (expensive) travel. As such, socialites were keen to share anecdotes about exclusive destinations they had been to; demonstrate their appreciation of high culture; and emphasize how they ‘avoid the crowds’, for instance:

A taste of the luxury lifestyle. One evening, before dinner, we sauntered into the bar for a quick glass of champagne and who should be sitting there, looking extremely comfortable and content, but Dustin Hoffman. That's the Carlyle for you! Inimitable and very highly recommended!

Another common behavior of the socialite was name-dropping—an indirect self-representational tactic that helps position the name dropper in a social hierarchy by asserting ‘social closeness between a person who employs the tactic and the individual who is mentioned’ (Lebherz, Jonas, and Tomljenovic 2009, 63). For example, a user details his gastronomic experience at a high-end restaurant:

Fantastic dinner in company of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt” Working in Ho Chi Minh with my office very close, this is by far my favourite place in Ho Chi Minh. Foreigners love it.... Food is excellent, loved the crab with tamarin sauce. Funily, Family Pitt/Jolie had dinner at the same time while bringing their vietnamese adoptive son for the first time to Vietnam. They must have a very good taste indeed.

The importance of gastronomy to class is well documented. As Fields et al. (2002) notes, eating in the ‘right’ restaurant and being seen to eat there has always been a means of drawing class distinctions. Further, the references to, and by implied associations with, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, who are global icons of popular culture, can be seen as meant to

give cues about the user's own higher social status. The experience might be made up; it might also be genuine. However, its realness, or otherwise, is not material; it is instead the intention of the user to be perceived a certain way that is relevant. The socialite is thus a status seeker, obtaining gratification from displaying elevated social status relative to that of other users. As Lampel and Bhalla (2007) observe, status seekers engage in activities designed to improve their standing in a group, by acquiring prestige, honor, or deference.

It is not a surprise of course that there would be socialite behaviors on a travel forum: travel is often a highly hedonistic pastime for many, and, requiring substantial discretionary income, it serves as an expression and display of affluence. The Internet becomes as useful medium for this display. The ostentatious manner of socialites might also be a reaction to the perception of the Internet as a 'level playing field' (Maurer 2002), implying a degree of classlessness, in the sense that virtually anyone can thereon express and publish their opinion. Thus socialites might feel a stronger need to subvert this classlessness by distinguishing themselves as wealthier, more travelled, more cultured, and so on, than other users. Indeed, social media has increasingly been shown as a channel for status seeking through self-display and self-presentation (Hogan 2010; Seidman 2013).

Bourdieu's (1984) theory of class distinction, wherein he argues that individuals, will, as part of self-presentation, show off a lifestyle consistent with that of their associated class fractions, is useful here. Following Bourdieu's assertion, tastes in recreation, food, culture, travel, and other forms of consumption indicate class as acquired and performed within the family from an early age (Bourdieu 1984; Skeggs 2004). When such tastes are displayed in social media, they can offer insights into the class fractions of participants in tourism consumption, or, more accurately, into the *self-portrayal* of such class fractions. In the above examples, displays of tourism consumption, carrying the hallmarks of the upper classes, via connotations of refined taste and luxury, rather than those of necessity, can be viewed as class

markers in social media. Of course, social class is relative and subjective—there are no absolute classes *out there*, and social media users will negotiate and interpret their own and others' class and taste according to their socialisation and frames of reference.

From a managerial perspective, socialites are valuable for insights into the role of class and discretionary spending. They thus provide social and cultural intelligence on fads and trends in tourism and hospitality consumption. By understanding the markers of class distinction and status, businesses wishing to target image and status seekers are in a position to do so more effectively.

3. Activist

Some users engaged with the social media platform as 'activists', in the sense that their communicative texts were intended to rally other users around an issue or problem pertaining to (a) particular establishment(s), or were an attempt to motivate other users to act in a certain fashion, to bring about change and/or create awareness. For example, one user writes in a review, urging other users to boycott a wildlife sanctuary:

Don't go to this place, don't give your money to this place...They made a baby elephant perform unnatural tricks (such as spinning a hoop on its nose and standing on its hind legs) and it was on its own the entire hour we were there. There was another elephant that was chained to a fence the whole hour we were there and couldn't even lift its head up properly so it was just rocking side to side. The Asian tourists here seemed to love the performance but it is sickening and horrifying that this still happens in this day and age. Please do not give any money to this place, their treatment of these majestic creatures is horrifying and if anyone knows if anything is being done to stop this from happening please let me know...I would like to support and donate.

Activists derive gratification from being able to potentially influence the actions of others, and to highlight causes they are passionate about. Thus the user above makes an emotional plea to other users about the treatment of elephants at the said sanctuary, even pledging to commit personal resources if needed. However, the activist's voice on a site like Tripadvisor is one of many, including those that contest whatever claim or plea is made. Successful activism therefore requires an ability to tackle rebuttals, and communicate a clear message effectively. Nonetheless, the appeal of the Internet as a channel for activism is arguably its global reach and the implied potential to address and influence a global audience (Shirky 2011).

The examples provided also highlights a broader and growing ethical consciousness among (tourism) consumers, referred to variously as 'ethical purchasing', 'green consumerism' and 'ethical consumerism' (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004). Tourism activists displaying this orientation in social media attempt to influence other users to use their 'dollar vote' (Johnston 2008) more ethically in making purchase or patronage decisions. However, ethicality is heavily contested—its criteria and practical implications are matters of construction, varying from and with individuals, contexts, motivations, and so on.

It is important to point out that online tourism activism does not necessarily yield offline results. Indeed, this has been a common criticism directed at social media activists (Karpf 2010; Lim 2013). Highlighting the inefficacy of social media activism, some scholars have warned against 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' (Karpf 2010; Lim 2013). As the terms suggest, the argument is that in modern society, 'real' (that is, offline) activism is increasingly being replaced by ineffective online behaviors where users think by clicking 'like' on a posting, they are supporting a cause and making a difference. Others however argue that while activism on social media might not, on its own produce desired offline results, it is an

important part of amplifying a message and creating awareness of an issue. This might then be leveraged to produce further tangible results through additional effort, offline.

In the context of Tripadvisor, while activist efforts are not of the scale that has been witnessed in highly publicised e-activism campaigns such as those associated with Arab Spring, it does still represent an attempt by an individual user to reach a large community and create awareness of an issue, and possibly influence behavioral change in some way. If users who read the above review, for instance, boycott the respective establishment, the impact could be significant. The business could lose a substantial portion of its patronage, and potentially go out of business. Therefore, it is in the interest of any business with an online profile to keep track of any cyber-activism that might impact its online image and ultimately, its performance.

4. Information seeker

A frequent theme among some user posts was the solicitation of information from others, through direct questions in discussion forums, or seeking clarification, detail, and so on, on a particular issue, product, service, or experience. In this ‘information seeker’ role, users were interested in learning and enriching themselves by actively inviting and exchanging opinions from the online community. For example, a user writes on a Zimbabwean forum:

Has anyone tried the e-visa online application? How long does it take after submitting the application online do you get the visa? The e-visa that is issued, is it emailed to be printed by me and carried with me? or is it issued in some other fashion? I am trying determine if the new Zimbabwe e-visa process is better than getting it at the boarder between [Zambia](#) and Zimbabwe in Victoria Falls.

It is interesting to question why, in this instance, the user does not instead seek official information from the Zimbabwean embassy or other relevant institution, preferring the

representations of the online community. One possible explanation lies within the perceived credibility of ordinary users' word-of-mouth over parties who might have a vested commercial or political interest in the matter in question (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007).

Similarly, another user seeks recommendations on travel destinations:

Im umming and ahing at the moment. Me and my partner are looking to go away OCT/NOV/DEC for 10 days. We want some where long haul and value for money, so [Asia](#) is the obvious choice. We have traveled parts of SE Asia, and are looking for somewhere with beautiful beaches/culture/interest/good weather. Do people think the Philipines would be a good choice? Other alternative is [Bali](#).. If we were to fly into [Manila](#) (cheapest airport) where would you recommend we visited? Is this easy/safe to do? Also, weather, i'm assuming that Nov/Dec is a good time to visit? Thanks in advance.

The user above subsequently engages in further discussion with responders and uses the information to make a decision on whether to visit Bali or the Philippines. The role and impact of social media in the tourism industry is therefore tangible, as there is a demonstrated link between online information seeking and purchase behavior (Xiang and Gretzel 2010).

The uses and gratifications sought by an information seeker lie in the opportunity to access rich information from users all over the world, which can prove useful for their personal consumption decisions. Indeed, in the case of Tripadvisor, this is especially relevant, due to the risky nature of travel consumption, linked to the impossibility of pretesting. Social media can thus be viewed as an important part of the Web 2.0 era's 'information horizon' (Savolainen and Kari 2004), a concept which refers to the various information sources at the disposal of information seekers. Research suggests that within this horizon, the Internet continues to rise in popularity, relative to other sources (Savolainen and Kari 2004). The ease

of information search on the Internet, including on social media, makes it a particularly attractive source; for a basic search, in most instances, one need only type keywords into a search engine, rather than paging through hundreds of files in a library. In the case of Tripadvisor, a traveller seeking information on Bali as a destination, for instance, can retrieve within seconds, hundreds of relevant pages in the form of reviews of various attractions in Bali, discussion forums relating to the safety of the destination, prices, and much more. Such information would represent the diverse opinions and experiences of users from virtually all over the globe.

However, the efficacy of social media for information seeking should not be overstated. In particular, information seekers face two key challenges. First, they might be overwhelmed by the huge amount of information on the site. For some destinations, for instance, there are thousands of reviews, and it might not be practical to go through all of them. Secondly, information seekers may encounter conflicting views, while lacking the resources to verify them. Furthermore, in the case of tourism social media, there is the possibility of trolls, who deliberately attempt to cause disruption to the flow and integrity of communicative content, as discussed earlier.

Nevertheless, information seeking on social media is quick, rigorous and robust, as the information provided by any individual user is open to contestation by all others. For instance, users can refute a claim, probe for more detail, reject an opinion, and correct a misunderstanding on the part of other users. Thus the exchange of information is comprehensive in evaluating the same, simultaneously. The original information seeker therefore has the added resource of the rest of the community in getting as close as possible to accurate information, and from as many perspectives as possible.

There is of course a portion of information seeking on sites such as Tripadvisor which remains invisible, as many users remain ‘lurkers’ (Kozinets 2002; Mkono and Markwell 2014), extracting information that is already available, but not contributing information on the site. As a result, the analysis in this section relates to information seekers who actively solicit information from other users. They, unlike lurkers, do not rely only on information which is readily available, but actively seek further detail, opinions, and so on, leaving a trail. What is also especially interesting about active information seekers is that they help identify gaps in information, and then make efforts to fill them. In this way, information seekers, paradoxically, indirectly create information through the posts of others who respond to their inquiries. Thus, by tracking the activities of users in this role, destination managers can determine what kinds of information they need to supply to their target audiences/markets, and whether or not information they have provided is interpreted correctly.

5. The social critic

The analysis also identified posts wherein users expressed criticism of social structures, discourses, and practices of the tourism industry. Individuals who generated such texts can be termed ‘social critics’ (Hull 2013). In this role, users demonstrated a high degree of self- and social reflexivity (Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, and Collins 2005; Pagis 2009), questioning norms and assumptions that relate to the tourism industry and its participants, and in some instances, outrightly rejecting them. Clearly, the social critic and activist roles overlap to a degree, as both groups express dissatisfaction with some element of the tourism *status quo*. However, social critics may just have a need to express an opinion, without necessarily calling for active change, whereas activists, as the term suggests, stress the need for action/active engagement in one form or another.

Expectedly, the criticisms were most commonly linked to topics or attractions where socio-cultural debates about poverty, repression, empowerment, ethnicity, power, and politics,

among others, are relevant. For example, in response to a posting about slum tourism, one user criticises the term 'slum' and its connotations:

Personally, I detest the word "slum". I think it denigrates the hard-working, honest people who by choice or circumstance live in a so-called "slum". While the word is broadly applied to depressed areas around the world, I, personally, do not consider Favelas to be slums per se; to me they are communities albeit low-income communities with perhaps more than their fair share of social ills. I won't reignite the debate regarding Favela tourism (TCantarelli's point is well made in that the topic has been overdone in this forum) but having been in favelas, and knowing people who live in favelas, I cannot begin to think of them as the Webster's definition of "slum".

The user problematizes the term, and argues that it is offensive. In support, another user responds, engaging with discourses linked to the humaneness of slum tourism, or lack thereof, reinforcing an ethical stance on the impropriety of the tourist activity:

I do agree with "cavemen" to a certain degree on the following premises : 1. Slums are residences of normal human beings like you and me, who might not be as financially fortunate as many others, and hence, live in such an environment. Why should that be promoted as a "tourist" destination / "attraction" ? 2. A large number of "slum dwellers" have been relocated to better staying conditions by the Mumbai Govt and are currently staying in multi storeyed apartments built specifically under the slum dwellers rehabilitation scheme. Do we project such houses as "tourist attractions" ? If not, then why not? Sincerely suggest that our friends who are interested in understanding the slum dwellers way of living should also visit such residential complexes. 3. Its really amazing to note that there are actually a few

"Walking Tours" in Mumbai who arrange for a "Slum Visit ". I'm sure its not for free or for any charitable cause.

The U&Gs sought by a social critic in this instance are grounded in a pursuit for ethical justice and practice. Criticism of the tourism industry, in reference to slum tourism, brings to the fore perspectives that can be repressed by parties interested primarily in generating profit. Thus social media serves as a conduit for voices that might otherwise remain muted. As has been suggested by some scholars (Kyriakopoulou 2011), social media spaces democratise the representation of diverse and, in particular, less powerful voices. Notably, in the context of host-guest relations, host voices are finding representation on social media, whereas (Western) guest voices have been dominant both in tourism research and in general representation (Aitchison 2001). For example, a local from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro expresses criticism of the voyeuristic nature of some slum tours being run in his home town:

I was born, grew up and still live in brazil's largest slum or favela. Life is difficult yes, but not impossible. I am proud to live here in [Rocinha](#)... What I do NOT like about the tours...the tours made in jeeps or trucks is the worst because it presents us like a zoo... Tours or visits where the guests walk in the favela are more welcome. There is one company that tells their guests not to interact with the locals if they are approached. This is wrong. The glamorization of violence is another thing that we do not like here...Favelas are not war zones and people need understand that real, honest hardworking people live there, we just make less money.

The democratising power of social media should however not be overstated, as online platforms are also subject to censorship. In the case of Tripadvisor, this is articulated in its terms of use (<http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/pages/terms.html>):

Tripadvisor reserves the right, and has absolute discretion, to remove, screen, translate or edit without notice any Content posted or stored on this Website at any time and for any reason, or to have such actions performed by third parties on its behalf, and you are solely responsible for creating backup copies of and replacing any Content you post or store on this Website at your sole cost and expense.

Thus, while in general anyone who has access to the Internet can participate on social media, ultimately, representation is not guaranteed. Nonetheless, social media remains a useful platform for expressing discontent with specific and broader social arrangements characteristic of tourism. Users can express their capacity for critical thinking and socio-cultural reflexivity. In a best case scenario, the willingness to challenge a status quo and potentially induce other users to do the same might be useful for disrupting oppressive systems and regimes that are manifest in the wider tourism system. The prevalence of social critiques in social media might also be indicative of cultural pessimism triggered by the way tourism is enacted in various contexts and forms. In the case of slum tourism highlighted in the example, the questions surrounding ethical practices are brought to the fore.

On the other hand, legitimate concerns have been raised that social media spells the demise of the 'professional critic'; that in the Web 2.0 age, 'everyone is a critic' (Tsao 2014). Cultural critique that reaches audiences of the scale of millions is no longer the elite preserve of a few 'professionals'. In the specific case of tourism, travellers do not have to rely solely on the opinion of expert 'travel writers'. This again is evidence of the democratising and egalitarianising power of social media and the Internet more generally, and leads to the question of whether, without the stature of being 'expert' critics, 'amateur critics' yield enough influence among users in their respective communities to sway consciences and opinions one way or another.

The social critic embodies the role of the tourist as a critically reflexive agent, vigilantly and discursively seeking transformation of some aspect of the tourism system. The tourist's reflexive capacity has largely been overlooked in research, with reflexivity virtually appropriated as an exclusive capability of scholars. It is also worthwhile pointing out that the idea that social media can be a tool for social criticism has not been sufficiently acknowledged in tourism research. Further, the deep engagement with social issues shown by some users, as opposed to passive or indifferent communication, is an interesting feature on Tripadvisor, and refutes the notion that users of social media are detached and superficial in their interactions (Baym, Zhang, and Lin 2004; Nie and Hillygus 2002).

For management, social critics are of interest to the degree that they sensitise managers to the socio-politics of tourism consumption—the ethical dilemmas, ambiguities and controversies of tourism practices; the political and structural imbalances of the tourism system. Thus, by engaging with their critiques and arguments, as well as responses to them, businesses can track sentiments on socio-ethical matters that are relevant to their activities.

6. Other notes on users

In order to portray user interactions accurately, and consequently, to be in a position to comprehend their implications to theory and practice, it is useful to clarify what the roles are not. These categories, it must be stressed, do not depict 'types of social media users', as users are not true to type—they elect, at any point in their online interactions, to assume a particular role as they wish. Rather, roles are behavioural orientations apparent in postings, giving an indication of the mindset, intentions and gratifications sought by the user. Roles are situation-specific, that is, users act in the context of the environment created by others, in terms of the topics raised, questions posed, as well as the policies, structures, and guidelines provided by the social media site. This in turn shapes, in part, the experience they ultimately have online.

It is also important to note that the paper does not suggest either, that these categories are exhaustive in capturing user experiences and behavior within tourism social media. Indeed, more categories may continue to emerge as the role and nature of social media platforms continue to evolve. Further, the goal in this paper is not to provide quantitative measurements of the prevalence of any individual category on the site. Rather, the focus is on understanding the different capacities and ways in which interactive users of tourism social media comport themselves. As such the analysis does not include ‘lurkers’ (Bechmann and Lomborg 2013; Heinonen 2011), as these have limited or no interactive engagement with other users.

Furthermore, other roles might lie within censored content which is not made available by Tripadvisor administrators. As noted above, TripAdvisor’s terms of use explicitly state that content which is deemed fraudulent, or otherwise inappropriate, is filtered out or removed from the site. The site does not provide further detail, however, on the scope and quantity of content that has been removed; it is therefore a matter of conjecture what the implication of this censorship might be. We can conceive nonetheless of epistemes of ‘censored content’, which, by their very nature, remain hidden from knowledge. However, the exploration of such invisible content falls outside the scope of the present study.

CONCLUSION

Using a uses and gratifications (U&G) lens, the study sought to understand and classify the roles individual users of tourism social media perform in their online interactions, as well as the gratifications they seek, beyond the basic role of information provision through appraising tourism and hospitality products. The analysis has proposed five additional user roles identified within exchanges on Tripadvisor, namely,

- i) the troll, who seeks gratification from manipulating and deceiving other users. To thwart their efforts, trolls should be separated from genuine users, unless their actions amount to more serious corporate or individual harassment.
- ii) the activist, who rallies other users to take action in pursuit of a cause, typically socio-ethical in nature. The activist can raise awareness of pertinent and/or critical issues affecting the tourism industry.
- iii) the socialite, whose interest lies in status seeking and display. The socialite's online behaviours provide useful cues about tourism consumption fads and trends.
- iv) the social critic engages with other users discursively and reflexively, and articulates socio-cultural and political issues, dilemmas and ambiguities.
- v) the information seeker solicits content from other users, in the process highlighting information gaps and enriching social media content. Knowledge of information gaps can be useful for destinations who want to communicate a clearer identity and position themselves in the tourism market.

By delineating this new classification of user activities and selves online, the nuances of online experience are revealed. Thus, a uses and gratifications framework permits a broadening of our understanding of the role of (tourism) social media, exposing the

inadequacy of existing perspectives. These describe users too generally as ‘reviewers’, implicitly suggesting that ‘reviewing’ is the full extent of their engagement with social media. By recognising the full capacity of social media as an interactive and self-expression conduit:

1. Other users – both individuals and businesses can better understand, interpret and respond to postings. Managers will be better equipped to devise a social media strategy for dealing with the range of social media activities their potential and real customers engage in, both prospectively and retrospectively.
2. The study offers a classification which will allow future researchers to tap into tourism's social media and develop more focused strands of research on users.

It is worthwhile re-emphasising that the categories discussed above do not represent ‘types of social media users’, as users do not necessarily interact in a singular role every time they are online, that is, they cannot be expected to be consistently *true to type*. Instead, users *elect* a role which they assume at any time; thus, they can play multiple roles and exhibit multiple user experiences over the course of their membership on Tripadvisor. The categories are not marked by rigid boundaries either, that is, some categories overlap. For instance, a social critique could simultaneously be interpreted as activist. This facet of user experience is hardly surprising, as identities, personalities, and attendant behaviors, online and otherwise, at whatever level, are invariably fluid, mutable, and messy. Social media research, as such, therefore points frequently to multiple selves in relation to online spaces, which are possible in part due to the anonymous/pseudonymous and invisible nature of interaction.

The study has several implications. On a theoretical level, understanding user experiences in a nuanced manner creates more specific lexicon for addressing different user categories in discussing social media, moving away from generalistic, umbrella references of who users are and what they do online. Through a structured approach as presented in this paper,

research can create more meaningful debate with a higher degree of clarity about online community behaviors. Additionally, an important observation from the findings is the agency of the tourist as a reflexive agent. This is demonstrated in particular by the social critic and the activist, who actively reflects on and critiques current practices, seeking to transform some aspect of the tourism system. In tourism theory, reflexivity in that sense is rarely attributed to tourists, and is often seen as a higher capability available to the researcher.

As noted throughout the discussion, at the level of tourism practice, managers can extract significant lessons from studying the characteristics of particular roles and their associated gratifications. Equipped with that understanding, business can profile consumers in a much more structured manner. In turn, this enables businesses to devise more meaningful and suitably nuanced online community engagement strategies and responses.

Two limitations are worth noting. First, the data are limited to communicative exchanges that occurred in English. Online users who post in other languages are thus excluded from the analysis. Secondly, the passive netnographic format precluded the possibility of engaging with users and seeking clarification on their postings. In future, therefore, more active netnographic formats might create additional richness in the data.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it is becoming increasingly clear that social media offer new and ever-evolving ways of understanding tourism and hospitality consumers. Through the enactment of the varied user roles, online communities discursively co-create online cultures and experiential narratives that have been shown to significantly influence consumer purchase decisions.

Several lacunae still exist in knowledge. In particular, more studies on trolling are expedient. While the subject has received significant attention in psychology and other disciplines, and its consequences have been well documented in the media (as in the case of celebrity

suicides), it is yet to be explored within tourism social media research. This is a glaring gap in light of its prevalence (or at least the perception of it) on sites such as Tripadvisor. It is also interesting to note the lack of consensus over what constitutes trolling, as evident in the cited conversation between a perceived troll and other users.

The politics of representation are also worth considering more closely. For instance, for the purposes of asserting a point of view on social media, users who are particularly articulate have leverage over others in communicating their opinions. Thus social media, as a representation of subjective opinion and its contestation, heavily relies on the ability of its users to express such opinion; it is mediated by language, which is in turn shaped by prevalent discourses and social construction. On sites where particular languages are the dominant lingua franca, the politics of language in representation, therefore, cannot be discounted.

Finally, in future, the study could be replicated in other online media related to tourism and hospitality experiences, such as Virtualtourist and Yelp. It is also envisaged that more categories of user experiences will emerge as social media platforms continue to evolve, and, therefore, research which responds to that transformation will be expedient at every stage. In that event, uses and gratifications theory will continue to provide a useful lens for examining tourism social media uses and users.

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