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Linda Walz\*

# ‘You wanted to know about expat life’: Authenticating identity in blogs about transnational relocation

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**Abstract:** *Expatriate blogs* are personal websites in which individuals share their experiences of relocation and life in a different country, not solely for the benefit of their readers but also for their own benefit. As such, they constitute sites of identity construction in phases of personal transition, afforded by the linear nature of blogging. This paper illustrates how expatriate bloggers discursively authenticate identity. Drawing on tactics of intersubjectivity, the analysis explores twelve personal blogs by Anglophone foreign nationals who have moved to England. Authentication is achieved, firstly, through displaying expertise pertaining to life abroad. This at the same time legitimizes expatriates’ sharing of the everyday experiences, and indeed they portray themselves as providing deep insights and unadorned accounts. Additionally, identity is authenticated through discourses of personal fulfillment. The authentication of expatriate identity is thus closely linked to bloggers’ legitimizing of their own contributions. These findings add to research on discursive identity construction in personal negotiations of relatively privileged migration. They further make a theoretical contribution to the tactics of intersubjectivity as well as more generally to explorations of identity and authentication in online environments.

**Keywords:** identity construction, authentication, legitimacy, privileged migration, expatriates, personal experience

## 1 Introduction

This paper examines the discursive construction of authenticity in blogs written by Anglophone foreign nationals relocating to England. Personal engagement with moving abroad is a widespread phenomenon on the internet: akin to online diaries, so-called *expat (expatriate) blogs* enable individuals to write about their experiences of relocation and life abroad, whilst also maintaining transnational ties in the form of contact with family and friends back home. Moving from one

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country to another can represent a “biographical disruption” (Frank-Job and Kluge 2012: 49, my translation) with an impact on individuals’ sense of identity. Blogs lend themselves to engaging with ongoing personal transition due to their nature of being composed of single posts over time (Page 2011). An important element is authenticating identity through discursive means. This deserves closer attention – firstly because identity and authenticity are fundamental concerns for individuals, especially when they are experiencing transition; and secondly because research interest in these matters is growing, leading to what has been called “the age of identity” (Bucholtz and Hall 2010: 27).

Authentication is explored through a part of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a) tactics of intersubjectivity. The research investigated the question of how identity is discursively constructed in expatriate blogs, and this paper focuses on authentication because it emerged as a crucial means of identity construction, which highlights its importance in personal transition as negotiated in online environments. As a first step, the discussion reviews the literature and outlines the discursive approach to identity that this paper adopts, with a focus on authenticity and its construction especially in online environments. Subsequently, expatriate blogging is described and methodological aspects are discussed. The analysis illustrates how authentication is achieved firstly through displaying expertise. This is followed by an exploration of how bloggers provide deep insights and unadorned accounts of what life abroad is like. The final part of the analysis shows how individuals draw on discourses of personal fulfillment. The paper concludes by summarizing the main findings, discussing their impact and identifying areas for further research.

## 2 Literature review: Identity and authentication in online environments

The concept of authenticity has been the focus of critical discussion within sociolinguistics. Coupland (2003) identifies five traditional qualities of authenticity: ontology, historicity, systemic coherence, consensus and value. Being authentic thus entails existing for real and having done so with certain durability, being embedded in a cultural context that offers acceptance and protection of this status, and therefore holding “definite cultural value” (Coupland 2003: 419). Although it is possible to identify such qualities, authenticity is based on relativity: “The power of the term ‘authentic’ is to succeed in asserting absolute values in necessarily relative circumstances, and in asserting a singular essence when competing criteria for authenticity exist” (Coupland 2003: 429).

Indeed, whilst sociolinguistics has explored local, everyday phenomena as authentic, Bucholtz (2003: 410) cautions against taking authenticity for granted, stressing that the very notion of individuals and their language use being authentic is an ideology. Instead, she encourages an exploration of the social practice of authentication: rather than studying seemingly authentic features, such an approach focuses on how the effect of authenticity is discursively created.

Authentication as “the construction of a credible or genuine identity” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004a: 385) is part of the discursive approach (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), where identity is conceptualized not as a quality inherent in an individual, but as a process of construction and negotiation, for which a primary means is language. In this framework, authentication or its opposite is one of three relational dimensions along which identity is constructed, the so-called ‘tactics of intersubjectivity’ (henceforth ToI) (Bucholtz and Hall 2004a). They encompass the construction of similarity and difference (*adequation* and *distinction*), of authenticity and artifice (*authentication* and *denaturalization*), and of legitimacy and illegitimacy (*authorization* and *illegitimation*). Identity is “*the social positioning of self and other*” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 586, original emphasis) along these dimensions.

The issue of authenticity is especially salient in computer-mediated discourse (henceforth CMD) due to a lack of physical co-presence of interactants. Early research on online environments emphasized the opportunities that they afford for individuals to try out new identities, to “self-fashion and self-create” (Turkle 1995: 180). However, the multitude of online platforms available nowadays entails a spectrum of positioning, from granting complete anonymity through pseudonyms to requiring participants to sign up using their real name and other identifying information such as a profile picture. This variability is evident in expatriate blogs (see Table 1 in the appendix), where some participants use pseudonyms and withhold personal details, whilst others provide their name, pictures of themselves and in some cases even their address. Research on CMD has come to recognize that an individual’s discursive practices in offline and various online sites are not distinct per se, but may interrelate and shape each other in complex ways (West 2013), and the discursive construction of genuineness has emerged as an important feature (Vásquez 2014).

Individuals’ concern with authenticity has equally transpired from an investigation of blogs written by migrants in Canada (Kluge 2011; Frank-Job and Kluge 2012). The authors stress that blogs are typically met with the expectation to present “biographically authentic contributions” (Frank-Job and Kluge 2012: 55, my translation), by which they mean a person’s lived experiences and personal reflections on them. Indeed, bloggers were found to convey authenticity by

means of the content they published, such as an ongoing sharing of their own experiences.

The linearity of blogging is an affordance that enables expatriates to provide insights into their everyday life abroad as it unfolds, documenting the passing of time and tracing their transition by updating their blog with some regularity. This structure of incremental snapshots allows bloggers to convey the present moment as well as sharing lived experiences (Myers 2010). Important events in expatriates' lives can be communicated with little delay, and prompt updates are so much the expected norm that bloggers often announce if they will be away or busy for a while, or they apologize after periods of inactivity and explain the reasons.

Enjoyment and self-expression are important motivating factors in personal blogging (Puschmann 2013), and expatriate bloggers engage with life abroad not only for the sake of an anticipated audience, but crucially also for their own sake (cf. Davies 2013b: 234). Indeed, Brake (2012: 1072) emphasizes that although personal blogging appears to be predominantly intersubjective, "its importance to those who are involved in the practice can be primarily intra-subjective". Authentication appears a concern for individuals themselves regardless of their audience, as it is an important means of constructing expatriate identity and working through the transitional experience that relocating abroad entails.

At the same time, identity as emerging from blogs features a performative element (Davies 2013b). Personal blogs can be carefully crafted, allowing bloggers to choose which aspects of themselves and their experiences to portray and how.

Furthermore, authentication is closely linked to the notion of being legitimate. Bucholtz and Hall (2004b: 503) capture a particular kind of legitimacy in their tactic of authorization, which is the construction of identity that is accepted by being legitimized "through an institutional or other authority" (Bucholtz and Hall 2004a: 386). However, such a definition does not encompass instances when identity is legitimized not through an external authority, but by individuals themselves, for example in an attempt to portray themselves as authentic, as shown in the analysis.

As an example of this interrelation of authentication and notions of legitimacy, being genuine goes hand in hand with having the right to contribute to a discourse (see Richardson 2001). Authentication through claiming expertise is a key aspect in diverse forms of public broadcasting, from radio and TV public participation formats (Thornborrow 2001) to CMD in such diverse contexts as online consumer reviews (Vásquez 2014) and transgender video blogging (vlogging) (Jones 2019). Individuals who are non-experts on a topic may position themselves as authentic to justify their contributions by self-categorizing with a

relevant identity or by portraying themselves as somebody who has “something to say” (Thornborrow 2001: 472). At the same time, an emphasis on their non-expert status can equally serve individuals to legitimize their telling. Online reviewers may portray themselves as lay users of a product or service to relate to other potential customers and create trustworthiness (Vásquez 2014: 79), and transgender vloggers are found to authenticate themselves and legitimize their telling by sharing non-professional videos offering insights into everyday life (Jones 2019). Hence both the display of expertise and the claim to lay status can legitimize and authenticate individuals (and by implication their telling).

To summarize, authenticity as a key feature of identity must not be presupposed or remain unquestioned. Instead, research on discursive identity construction benefits from examining authentication, the way in which authenticity is created by participants. This is of interest, not least in the context of CMD, where such an investigation promises to be even more interesting (Page 2012: 165). Authentication is achieved in part through the affordances of expatriate blogs, which are discussed below.

### 3 Data and method

Expatriate blogs pertain to relatively *privileged* migration, in the sense that individuals have moved abroad by choice and with comparative ease rather than because of hardship (Croucher 2012). On websites aimed at such migrants, the term *expatriate* refers not only to individuals moving abroad on an assignment with a company, but also to privileged migration motivated by other reasons. This is also noted by Croucher (2012: 4), who agrees with Leonard (2010) in warning of its white and middle class connotations. Yet online expatriate communities include individuals from different national and ethnic backgrounds, and the term *expatriate* is employed by them indistinguishably. Because it is the term individuals use for themselves in this context, *expatriate* is adopted in this paper to refer to these relatively privileged migrants.

To increase the visibility of their blog for interested readers, bloggers can submit it for inclusion in an online directory. Expatriate blog directories list self-identified expatriate blogs usually by country of residence and provide a brief description and a hyperlink to each blog, with blogs linking back to the directory, establishing a mutual connection. Two such directories were surveyed in April 2015, identifying blogs that were live and accessible, and featured substantial linguistic content in English by a single non-professional author about relocation to England from abroad. Further inclusion criteria were that blogs

were begun by orienting to relocation, hence announcing or referring to the upcoming or recently undertaken move, and had been maintained for at least one year of living in England with a view to staying longer, thus excluding individuals on a study abroad year or other short-term endeavors.

The authors of the resulting 30 blogs were informed about the research, and 12 bloggers consented to take part. Ten participants are from the United States, one from Australia and one from New Zealand, which reflects the predominant nationalities of expatriates in the two surveyed directories. The gender distribution in the directories is similarly mirrored by the group of participants, comprising 11 women and one man. Relevant background information about the participants and the amount of analyzed data is provided in the appendix.

Consent was sought and all data were made anonymous despite the public availability of the blogs. This acknowledges that the participants may perceive their posts as private despite their public character (Markham and Buchanan 2012). At the time of contact, all analyzed content had been produced and was thus unaffected by knowledge of the research being undertaken.

Blogging encompasses a number of affordances that shape the way individuals can use this practice to share content and authenticate identity. Apart from its linearity discussed in the literature review, these include audience structure and comments, as well as intertextual features. Expatriate blogs constitute the bloggers' own discursive space, as they are in control of its content and able to block or delete unwelcome comments. Expatriate bloggers appear to anticipate both a familiar and an unknown audience. Several participants started blogging with the declared purpose of keeping family and friends informed about their life abroad, yet in the process found that their blog attracted a wider readership, including other bloggers and specifically individuals who were also experiencing transnational relocation. The posts attract a varying number of usually short and supportive comments, to which bloggers often briefly respond. The analysis focuses on how bloggers position themselves in their posts, rather than on the reception this receives, which would however constitute a worthwhile area for further investigation.

Finally, there are a number of intertextual characteristics that shape blogs as a space for identity construction. Expatriates can establish coherence by linking back to their previous posts or grouping them into categories. This includes showcasing a growing archive of posts arranged in chronological order, thereby visualizing the extent of an individual's shared expatriate experience. External links feature for instance in the blogroll, a collection of recommended blogs, which can serve to position the individual as a member of a wider expatriate blogging community. This ability to link to external pages afforded the approach to data collection taken in this research, as elaborated above.

3.1 Analytical procedure

The data were imported into NVivo and analyzed within Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a) ToI framework, which encompasses a total of six tactics: beyond authentication and its opposite, denaturalization, creations of legitimacy/illegitimacy and similarity/difference were identified, and the passages in which they occurred highlighted and subjected to further scrutiny. Instances where more than one tactic was seen to operate were considered under each relevant tactic.

Treating the dimensions of (in)authenticity, (il)legitimacy and similarity/difference as not mutually exclusive acknowledges the complexity of identity construction. With ToI leaving the linguistic size of an instance of a tactic unspecified, it was taken to correspond to a meaningful unit and was found to range from a few words up to an entire paragraph. Rather than an orientation to any form of expatriate identity, authentication specifically involves the participants portraying expatriate identity as genuine. The present analysis reports on the findings for this tactic because it emerged as a particular concern in expatriate blogs and because it grants insight into a specific discursive practice of identity construction enabled through blogging.

4 Analysis: Authentication in expatriate blogs

In total 568 posts were analyzed (see Table 2 in the appendix). Figure 1 provides an overview of how many instances of each tactic were identified in the blogs.

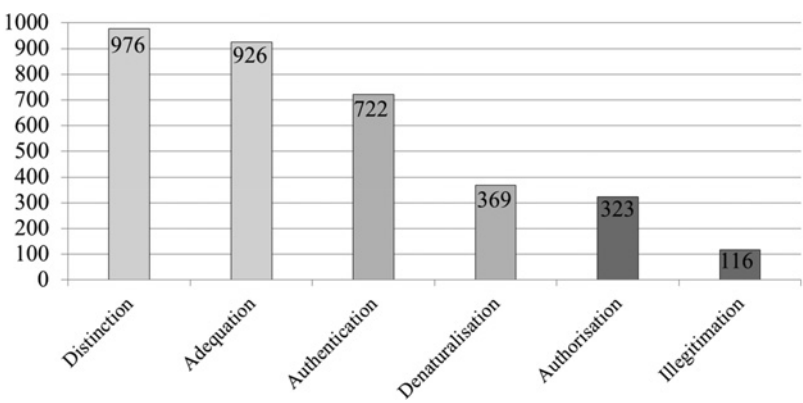


Figure 1: Number of instances identified for the six tactics.



Most frequently, the participants construct expatriate identity through negotiations of similarity and difference. This is followed by authentication, which is prominent throughout the data: 722 instances were identified within 350 posts. These numbers need to be treated with a certain reservation, due to the varying word length of instances and the fact that numerical discussions alone cannot meaningfully capture how identity is constructed.

The expatriate bloggers authenticate identity in a number of interrelated ways. The aspects illustrated below are therefore not mutually exclusive, but are discussed separately to address in a structured way the complexity of the phenomenon that emerged from the data. For this reason, the analysis does not offer a numerical count of how many instances were identified for each aspect. Rather, the aim is to show in detail in what prominent ways the expatriates linguistically achieve authentication in the course of sharing their personal experiences of relocation and life abroad as it unfolds, which in turn is made possible through the linear nature of blogging discussed in Section 2. Very noticeably, the expatriates highlight their expertise regarding transnational relocation. They also authenticate expatriate identity by providing insight into life abroad on the basis of their own experiences. Finally, relocating abroad is framed as enabling the expatriates to find personal fulfillment.

## 4.1 Displaying expertise

The participants were found to authenticate expatriate identity by portraying themselves as knowledgeable and experienced in expatriate matters such as visa requirements, moving pets and belongings abroad, and daily life in England. Expertise can be claimed explicitly or just implicitly displayed through individuals' contribution (Vásquez 2014), for instance when an expatriate outlines the steps undertaken to obtain their visa. Elaborations along these lines can be read either as a sharing of a blogger's experiences per se, serving functions like keeping readers entertained or aware of their progress, or they can function as providing information or implicit advice (Harrison and Barlow 2009). Such ambiguity can be a means of dealing with the potential face-threatening quality that advice has in an Anglo-Western setting (Locher 2006: 113). However, the expatriate bloggers also explicitly give advice to readers, which positions them as experts by virtue of their own experiences. That "invoking lived experience" can establish authenticity and authority in public contributions online has also been found in the context of a discussion forum (Davies 2013a: 34).

A case of such ambiguity, where the sharing of aspects of daily life functions as potential advice, is Emily's announcement of her family's relocation in her first

post, partly consisting of a list of 17 steps she has already taken in preparation for their move. She introduces this substantial account of her activities as shown below.

(1): Emily

As we are leaving sooner (4–6 weeks max) rather than later, I decided to just DO the things that i know from past experience need doing to make the move as smooth as possible .....<sup>1</sup>

The ensuing list contains tasks such as organizing packers, sorting through possessions, finding a buyer for their car and looking for a school in their anticipated area of residence. These points can either be read as an appraisal of her progress and a means of highlighting how busy she has been, or they can function as advice, as they convey how much effort goes into transnational relocation and what needs to be considered for such an undertaking. Readers who are also preparing for a move abroad may find these points helpful. In either case, Emily portrays herself as knowledgeable based on her *past experience* and able to deal with the necessary steps. Earlier in this post she mentions that this will be their third move between countries. She maintains that they are *far from experienced expats*, which lessens any potential imposition of the following report of their preparations, but she also points out that they feel like *[they] are global nomads*, and her list of necessary steps authenticates her as such.

The expatriates share not only their experiences of living abroad, but also what they have learned from them. For example, shortly before her six-month anniversary in England, Jessica shares her insights on living abroad in a post entitled *Expat Life: What they didn't tell me ...*, and Megan writes a similar post on *7 Things No One Told Me about Expat Life* after nine months in England. Both contain lists of things they would have liked to know before moving. Again, such lists do not merely have informational and entertainment value, but may be intended to help others in a similar situation (and in turn authenticate individuals as expatriates), as Jessica points out.

(2): Jessica

Maybe you might happen upon this post and let some reality sink in a bit, unlike myself. So I'm lending my advice to the online world of expats or soon to be expats with things I wish someone would have told me.....

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<sup>1</sup> All data are reproduced verbatim but are normalized for spacing and paragraphing. Alterations for anonymizing purposes are rendered in square brackets.

Jessica begins her post by looking back at her optimistic projections of what life abroad would be like, which she now portrays as removed from reality. Having lived in England for several months, she is now in a position to provide advice by virtue of her own experiences. Rather than factual matters, affective aspects dominate her list, such as how sounding different makes her feel or that she misses certain food items from home, which expresses a sense of nostalgia. These are insights that can only be shared in retrospect through having experienced them personally, which portrays them as genuine and in turn authenticates her as an expatriate who is in the hybrid position of gaining insight into her new environment whilst also maintaining associations with her home. At the same time, providing advice to other (future) expatriates positions her as similar to them on the basis of having achieved an understanding that may be relevant to them. This is hence an instance where authentication interrelates with Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a) tactic of adequation, the creation of similarity.

Such personal experience positions the expatriates as insiders: they can give advice that official sources cannot provide. Looking back on her first year in England and her struggles with moving her pets, Chloe makes her status as an experienced insider very plain, as illustrated below.

(3): Chloe

All of the information and documents you need can be found on the Pet Travel Scheme [website](#) [hyperlink]. However there are things you should probably know, no matter where you're moving to, that won't be on the website. So, friend to friend, I've got some tips of my own for you.

Whilst factual information is available on a pet travel website, Chloe points to the value of her own realizations, providing tips on relational aspects such as who to ask for help and how to communicate clearly with veterinarians. Her peer advice can complement or even outperform that of professional authorities. Such personal insights position the expatriates and their experiences as authentic.

Finally, the expatriates may claim expertise as a means of setting themselves apart from inexperienced others. A case in point is a comment by Jessica in a post on visiting Tantallon Castle, as rendered below.

(4): Jessica

Perched high above the sea side on a rocky cliff, Tantallon Castle looks like something right out of a fairytale. I overheard an American girl at Edinburgh Castle say that she felt like she was in a fairytale. Well, she was wrong... Tantallon is the fairytale! After seeing so many castles [internal

link to her previous castle posts], I feel like I have the authority to rank castles on fairytaleness :)

Jessica has visited many castles, which the link to her previous posts provides evidence for. Therefore, she now feels authorized *to rank castles on fairytaleness*. This involves contrasting her evaluation of castles with those of *an American girl* she overheard. Jessica sets herself apart from her compatriot, claiming more expertise. The smiley remains ambiguous: whilst it may serve to position her claim for expertise as somewhat playful, it may also mitigate any imposition of her claim, or orient to *fairytaleness* as an unusual criterion. In any case, Jessica portrays her assessment as reliable based on her rich experience of castles, which in turn authenticates her as an expatriate and legitimizes her judgment over that of other Americans, who may only be visiting some sights rather than live in the country for an extended period of time.

As illustrated, authentication was found to involve a sharing of expatriate experiences that goes beyond keeping readers informed or entertained to portraying individuals as well-versed in matters regarding life abroad. Constructing identity as individuals in the position to give advice or make judgments is closely linked to a further authentication strategy, which involves providing unadorned accounts of life abroad, as discussed below.

## 4.2 Providing deep insights and unadorned accounts

The participants further authenticate expatriate identity by setting themselves apart from short-term visitors such as tourists. Whilst they may portray themselves as foreigners in their surroundings, they are a different kind of foreigner due to the depth of insight they have access to. Such a positioning has previously been identified in forms of mobility both in the case of gap year travel blogging (Snee 2014) and an expatriate's travel blog (Cappelli 2008). The expatriates may conceptualize their settling in as no longer feeling like a mere visitor. For instance, the expatriates frequently blog about everyday life, an authenticating feature also identified by Jones (2019) in the case of transgender vlogging. For the expatriates, this includes home-making activities such as grocery shopping or dealing with household appliances like the fridge and washing machine. These are activities that locals engage in, but typically not visitors. Also, the expatriates explicitly offer unadorned accounts of life in England rather than just reporting on the positive aspects. Both practices are illustrated below.

Deep insights can take the form of having more local knowledge, as Jessica demonstrates in Example 4, contrasting herself with another American and potential

tourist. Another example is a comment made by Sarah on a picture of what the drains in her garden look like.

(5): Sarah

Victorian Plumbing 101. So here is something your average tourist does not get to see: the inner workings of Victorian plumbing. Our home was built in 1898, the era of Queen Victoria.

Sarah provides readers quite literally with deeper insights, showing and discussing the details of living conditions in a house built in Victorian times. In a humorous way she comments on the fact that this is hardly a standard sight for tourists, which authenticates her as an expatriate who truly lives in the country rather than just visiting it. Her experience of England may be unusual for tourists in its mundaneness, yet it is genuine. This echoes sociolinguistic conceptualizations of authenticity as involving the local and the ordinary (see Coupland 2003).

A similar understanding of everyday aspects of living in England is also communicated by the other participants. For instance, Leah writes detailed posts about grocery shopping or travelling on trains, positioning herself as knowledgeable in the daily workings of life in England. In a similar vein, being an expatriate is portrayed as entailing embracing everyday aspects of life abroad rather than seeking excitement. Example 6 illustrates Kim's reflections on the reality of living abroad as opposed to people's expectations of it.

(6): Kim

Sometimes, I feel there is an assumption that when you move abroad your life will immediately be more glamorous and full of adventure. I admit that is an easy trap to fall into; wishing that every day I had some incredibly amazing story to tell. And yes, sometimes my life here is more glamorous than my life in the US (and I love those times too!), but it's the every day that has become so meaningful to me. The mundane to me is the perfect.

Whilst Kim acknowledges that some days in her life abroad are *glamorous*, most are far less so than expected. Living abroad does not mean living a life *full of adventure*, which a tourist might expect during their brief stay. Instead, Kim enjoys the normality of her life in England. Her experiences may not be exciting, but they are real and *perfect* for being ordinary. Kim treats finding meaning in everyday life as preferable to a shallow chase for glamour and adventure. Shallowness has been associated with inauthenticity (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990), and distancing herself from this enables Kim to construct authenticity.

Being open about what life abroad is like and able to admit its mundaneness positions the expatriates as more than mere visitors. In instances where the expatriates report on negative aspects of living abroad or openly write about issues they are struggling with, they tend to justify such accounts to readers. They legitimize their telling by evoking authenticity: rather than only reporting on the positive aspects, they position themselves as offering a view of what life abroad is truly like. Nevertheless, the fact that such legitimizing measures are taken suggests that the expatriates perceive an expectation to only share positive experiences. For instance, Aubrey writes two posts on her likes and dislikes about England, having lived there for one year. She begins with the negative aspects and justifies this as shown in Example 7.

(7): Aubrey

I'll begin with a list of 10 things that I hate about this country. I'd rather start with the bad so as not to give anyone any illusions about being an expatriate. I've always said from the start that I'd share the full experience, not just the roses & daisies.

Aubrey makes clear that she wants to *share the full experience* so that readers can see what being an expatriate is really like. Her claim to experiencing negative aspects and her willingness to report them in her blog thereby serve to create authenticity.

At the same time, this post marks the one-year anniversary of her life in England. The majority of participants acknowledge when they reach this moment, reflecting on their experiences. Several expatriates also remark on the number of months that have passed since their relocation, or they blog about other milestones they have reached, such as obtaining their visa or celebrating their first birthday in England. This practice and its importance for identity construction in blogs about relocating abroad have also been identified in previous research (Kluge 2011), and it is afforded by the linear nature of blogging discussed in Section 2.

Similarly to Aubrey, Emily emphasizes the authenticity of her experiences to legitimize sharing them. She writes about how hard she finds settling into her new life in England because she feels lonely, accounting for her post with the following concluding comment.

(8): Emily

You wanted to know about expat life with [Emily] ..... bet you thought it was all long lunches, girls weekends away and parties. Bet you didn't realize that there's this aspect too, the one of loneliness even tho there's people around you.

Emily makes explicit what she assumes readers' motivation to be for following her blog: to *know about expat life*. She also displays awareness of the kinds of contributions that may be expected of her, revolving around extensive leisure activities. Her post does not match these expectations, which needs to be justified. Emily manages this by emphasizing that it represents a true portrait of what life as an expatriate can be like. Her understanding exceeds that of readers, which puts her in a position to challenge their assumptions. She implies that if they follow her blog to know about what living as an expatriate entails, they are going to gain an authentic picture rather than a confirmation of clichés. Hence, authentication is achieved through a rejection of stereotypes; conforming to what is considered typical is not enough to be authentic (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990).

To sum up, sharing realizations that are only accessible by having experienced life in England, and providing unadorned accounts of life abroad are prevalent authenticating strategies in expatriate blogs. At the same time, the expatriates orient to not fulfilling readers' anticipated expectations, and justifying their contributions serves to authenticate them. This highlights again that authentication is linked to notions of authorization (Bucholtz and Hall 2004b: 503): what is seen as authentic may depend on it being made legitimate and defended in its status (Coupland 2003: 419).

### 4.3 Finding personal fulfillment

The expatriate bloggers also authenticate identity by pointing out that they have found personal fulfillment through their move abroad. This comprises expressions of feeling real and natural, as well as assertions that they can be themselves. For instance, Kim reflects on the change in her living situation and how she feels when returning from visiting her family and friends in the United States.

(9): Kim

This year, I moved to England. It hasn't been the easiest year as I left everything that seemed familiar and comfortable to me. However, every time I get on a plane to return to England, I always know and feel how right it is to be heading east and back across the Atlantic to [English county].

Whilst she presents her relocation as challenging, she asserts that living in England feels *right* for her. This portrays her as having found fulfillment through her move despite all difficulties; living abroad is true to her and authenticates her.

Another element of finding personal fulfillment is the expatriates' assertion that their life abroad allows them to be themselves. In Example 10, Chloe expresses a sense of personal achievement about her new living situation.

(10): Chloe

I made this life for myself, and that makes me proud. I've seen new things and made new friends (among which I count the lovely readers who comment here :D), found a place to live, and a city where I feel happy to be who I am.

Chloe points out that she has been able to create a new life full of experiences and new relationships, and that living in her new city allows her to be herself. This is a displayed essentialist conceptualization of identity as an inherent quality that can be realized to a varying extent in everyday life. For Chloe, succeeding in the creation of a new life enables her to reveal this natural self. Nevertheless, the creation of authenticity is discursively achieved and lies in the very negotiation of this notion of being true to oneself.

Chloe has also made new friends in the form of her readers. Indeed, some participants orient to the fact that they are learning how to blog and are establishing a network of bloggers as time goes on, just as they are building their experience of what being an expatriate entails. Situating themselves within the practice of expatriate blogging and "display[ing] connectivity" (Davies 2013b: 237) with other bloggers endows them with authenticity in Coupland's (2003) sense of attaining consensus and value in this particular sociocultural context. As such, authenticating identity also involves embracing the somewhat performative side of expatriate blogging, as mentioned in Section 2.

Finally, several expatriates mention that they have fewer possessions now that they live abroad. Emily writes an extensive post on the subject entitled *Living Light and Lovin' It*, reflecting that not having many possessions is beneficial when moving as an expatriate. A transnational move necessitates sorting through and giving away personal belongings, which engenders a discursive engagement with how this impacts on individuals' sense of identity. For instance, both Ruth and Jessica mention that having fewer possessions has enabled them to gain more *life experiences*. Similarly, having moved abroad to live with the man she has fallen in love with, Claire reflects on how letting go of her belongings has made a fresh start possible, as Example 11 shows.

(11): Claire

It was during the time when I was selling off the furniture and things that made my house so cozy, that I realized the gifts I was receiving in learning



how to let go of the physical stuff in exchange for my deepening connection with [husband]. I had no idea where we would go or really how we would get there, but what I did know was that my house and all the things inside were not what made it a home. Freeing myself from the belongings that I thought had to have, gave me the opportunity to start over in a life I could not have imagined would be so right for me.

Claire reflects on her changed understanding of the meaning of home and her belongings. She portrays this as trading physical objects for a relationship, whereby giving them away and moving to England has allowed her to begin a new life that feels *so right* for her. The authentication that Claire achieves through this is strengthened by the contrast she establishes between her current situation and her former point of view, which she in retrospect portrays as hindering the achievement of her genuine self. This phenomenon occurs in other instances as well: individuals distance themselves from former points of view or ways of being, and this in turn enables them to create authenticity. A similar case is Jessica's list of things she wishes somebody had told her about being an expatriate (Example 2). Such transition to having deeper insights hence authenticates expatriate identity.

In summary, emphasizing personal fulfillment attained through transnational relocation functions as a further means of authentication. The expatriates express that moving abroad has enabled them to start a new life and gain more experiences, often in connection with having fewer belongings. This is portrayed as natural and right and as a way of allowing them to be who they believe they really are. Individuals' concept of a 'true' self that surfaces through their relocation, such as expressed by Chloe (Example 10) and Claire (Example 11), is an essentialist notion that views identity as a fixed property of an individual. Yet it contributes to the very creation of authenticity through discursive means.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

This paper has examined the discursive practice of a type of privileged migrants, expatriate bloggers, with a focus on how identity is authenticated in their posts. It follows Bucholtz's (2003) case for investigating how effects of authenticity are discursively created, which she refers to as authentication. The findings show that authentication is a prominent means of identity construction in expatriate blogs. Indeed, authentication is frequent, occurs across all analyzed blogs, and is accomplished in a variety of ways.

Overall, the linear nature of blogging and its audience structure afford the sharing of regular posts about life abroad as it unfolds. As one means of authenticating expatriate identity, the individuals display expertise, thereby also legitimizing their contributions. This is possible because of the individuals' hybrid position between their home community and their new sociocultural environment. Such in-betweenness also emerges from an analysis of the other tactics within Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a) framework and is a worthwhile topic for future discussion. Further, the individuals position themselves as able to provide unadorned accounts of everyday life by dispelling the stereotype of expatriate life being full of leisure and adventure. Challenging such notions and portraying themselves as having undergone a transition from their former views and expectations to a deeper understanding of what life abroad entails enables the individuals to authenticate their expatriate identity. Finally, the expatriate bloggers discursively create authenticity by emphasizing that they have found a life that is right and fulfilling for them.

It has been illustrated at several points in the analysis that authenticating expatriate identity is intertwined with legitimizing the sharing of personal experiences in these blogs. This phenomenon departs from Bucholtz and Hall's (2004a: 386) understanding of the tactic of authorization as predominantly pertaining to institutional power or other external authorities. Whilst the expatriates also engage in identity construction through institutional authorization such as orienting towards visa requirements, the focus of this discussion has been on authentication and the way this involves the expatriates legitimizing their own discursive negotiations. This paper hence makes a theoretical contribution to the ToI framework by applying it to a new context and highlighting the prevalence of matters of legitimacy in a non-institutional setting, which is not easily captured in the current framework despite Bucholtz and Hall's (2004b: 503) assertion that the tactics interrelate. Further interrelation in their framework, for instance the discursive creation of similarity and difference, is a worthwhile area for future investigation.

This paper adds to the exploration of how identity is constructed in online environments by emphasizing the importance of authentication in the unsolicited sharing of lived experience, and how this is aided by the affordances of blogging. Additionally, the findings contribute to efforts to achieve a better understanding of how expatriate bloggers make sense of privileged migration, which has received little attention in previous research despite a general increase in transnational migration. Making personal experiences publicly available online may be branded as self-indulgent. This would however overlook the meaningfulness and potential of expatriate blogging for participants and researchers.

A close analysis reveals the individuals’ everyday sense-making and positioning practices to construct identity pertaining to transnational relocation. Further, it draws attention to expatriate blogging as a way to manage transition and thus ensure personal wellbeing. Indeed, previous research has argued that blogs can function as online resources of support for expatriate adjustment (Nardon et al. 2015), and based on the finding that sharing stories of personal experience enables learning about other sociocultural environments, it has been suggested that companies should consider hosting blogs on their intranet to encourage such a practice (Gertsen and Søderberg 2010). The findings can thus inform human resources and service providers and enable them to better cater to individuals’ needs in an increasingly global environment. Exploring authentication in expatriate blogging is a means of gauging the impact that privileged migration has on individuals’ understanding of who they are and the role language plays in its negotiation.

## Appendix

**Table 1:** Contextualizing information on the participants.

| <b>Pseudonym and origin</b> | <b>Relocation background and typical blogging features</b>   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Sarah</b><br>US          | Sarah relocates with her husband, two children and a dog. She avoids revealing the names or pictures of her family.  |
| <b>Claire</b><br>US         | Claire relocates to live with an Englishman whom she has met online. She includes many pictures of herself and her partner in her posts.   |
| <b>Kim</b><br>US            | Kim relocates to live with her English boyfriend and pursue a postgraduate degree. She uses a pseudonym to refer to her partner.   |
| <b>Aubrey</b><br>US         | Aubrey relocates because she seeks a change and is recruited for a job. Her posts often include links to other websites, such as news articles. She reveals little personal information.             |
| <b>Emily</b><br>Australia   | Emily relocates with her husband and daughter on an assignment of her husband’s employer. They move from Japan after a three-year placement. Her posts are detailed but use pseudonyms.              |
| <b>Jessica</b><br>US        | Jessica relocates with her husband, two dogs and a cat when her husband is reassigned. She shares her name and address and her posts include many pictures of herself and her husband on trips away. |

(continued)

Table 1: (continued)

| Pseudonym and origin | Relocation background and typical blogging features  |
|----------------------|--|
| Megan<br>US          | Megan relocates with her boyfriend and their cats. Her partner has accepted a transnational assignment, and she also finds employment. She posts pictures, but not often of herself.             |
| Ruth<br>US           | Ruth relocates with her English husband and two children to experience life in England. Her husband finds employment upon settling in. She shares pictures, but rarely of herself or her family. |
| Chloe<br>US          | Chloe relocates to England with her two cats to pursue a doctoral degree. She frequently explores cultural aspects of her surroundings. Her posts include many GIFs.                             |
| Leah<br>US           | Leah relocates to pursue postgraduate study, visiting her English boyfriend in another city. She posts especially frequently whilst preparing for her move. Her later posts are quite detailed.  |
| David<br>New Zealand | David relocates for an ‘Overseas Experience’ and to explore Europe. He finds employment subsequent to relocation and moves to a different city. He posts pictures, but not of himself.           |
| Abigail<br>US        | Abigail relocates and subsequently finds employment. Her posts are short and usually include a picture of her environment. She reveals little personal information.                              |

Table 2: Analyzed data per blog.

| Pseudonym | Analyzed time span | Analyzed posts | Of which before relocation | Analyzed words |
|-----------|--------------------|----------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Sarah     | 12 months          | 57             | 0                          | 21,716         |
| Claire    | 12 months          | 51             | 0                          | 23,605         |
| Kim       | 13 months          | 43             | 6                          | 22,377         |
| Aubrey    | 13 months          | 32             | 3                          | 23,538         |
| Emily     | 15 months          | 65             | 26                         | 50,516         |
| Jessica   | 17 months          | 62             | 5                          | 30,065         |
| Megan     | 15 months          | 37             | 8                          | 13,425         |
| Ruth      | 13 months          | 42             | 5                          | 14,403         |
| Chloe     | 14 months          | 37             | 13                         | 21,099         |
| Leah      | 20 months          | 96             | 66                         | 39,183         |
| David     | 13 months          | 24             | 3                          | 9,565          |
| Abigail   | 12 months          | 22             | 1                          | 4,094          |
| Total     | 169 months         | 568            | 136                        | 273,586        |

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## Bionote

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