

The impact of travel blogging on the tourist experience

[Media](#), [Social Media](#)



People have always been on the move; however their motivations differ over time. Conquering, fighting, finding salvation, being a pilgrim or enlarging worldviews were the main goals of travelling during the last centuries. Not only travelling, but also the tradition of writing about travel trips has a long tradition (Shackley, 2006). When conquering the new world, colonial travel literature had a great impact because it let the reader create a certain image of the unknown territories. Imperial ideologies were spread and were the only accounts of life in the conquered countries (Pratt, 1992). A biased report of the experiences started early in history, excluding the perspective of non-western societies and the lower classes (Towner, 1995).

In the 17th century travelling was a part of the education for young men of higher classes. Reports of these “ Grand Tours” were published and started to form cultural practices of tourism (Inglis, 2000). The tours were very time-consuming and expensive. The common practice of writing down one’s travel experience helped to justify the expense of the trip by providing an informative account to those who stayed at home, and these memoirs formed an intrinsic part of the experience. Tourism pioneers felt the urge to express, compare and to evaluate their different experiences (Steward, 2005).

With the first signs of industrialization an important change in lifestyle began. Rapid economic growth and new technologies increased opportunities and made travelling easier. Relaxation became a motivation for travelling too, - first as a luxury for the higher class and subsequently also for the middle class. In the post war period after 1945 there was a ‘ take

off' of tourism activity in the Western world; more industrial development and a technological revolution changed peoples' way of travelling at a high pace (Lickorish & Jenkins, 1997). The press was an important feature of tourism, promoting travel as a common and natural activity of the middle class. Writers started to specialize on travel literature, helping the reader to make decisions about their destination. Travel journalists provided different travel choices by writing about their preferences and thus expressing their ideal individual identity. Through the provision of this role model for tourism, these travel journalists also contributed to the identity formation of their reader (Steward, 2005).

With the advent of the internet, computer mediated communication quickly became very popular, changing tourism practices again. " The internet empowered the ' new' type of tourist to become more knowledgeable and to seek exceptional value for money and time" (Buhalis, 2001, p. 75). As the internet facilitated the process of globalization, tourism became increasingly more flexible by providing individualized and up-to-date information (Buhalis, 2001).

For Bauman (2010), travelling is distinctive for the age of modernity. He defines the modern world as liquid because it is continuously moving and changing. People are constantly on the move. They are prepared to be flexible and strive to collect information about what is going to happen next. In this regard, the internet is salient; it provides information that is always available. The perception of a fluid modernity is also recognized by Appadurai (1996). For him, modernity means a radical transformation: " The

new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models (...)."(Appadurai, 1996, p. 32). He claims that the modern world is too complex to use simple models; instead he uses dimensions of cultural flow with the suffix 'scape'. These scapes underline the flowing and irregular character of modern landscapes; they can be constantly reconfigured. One of the five scapes are 'technoscapes', which describe a new global configuration caused by the movement technologies bring. Through technologies people are able to cross previously closed boundaries and move at a faster pace.

The availability of relevant information that can be found online is striking, especially in the tourism industry (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). However, the data overload that emerged when new technologies became popular, possibly makes it challenging to decide if information is valuable and authentic (Bauman, 2010). Bauman (2010) claims that in the current society the quantity of connections is more important than their quality. In his book *Wasted Lives* (2004) he underlines this perception by claiming that everything, both material and immaterial goods, are replaceable in the fluidity of modernity and only used for a short period of time.

Identities of modern people strive to be disposable at any time and the internet fulfils this need (Bauman, 2010). A key role of the internet is recording and updating peoples' memories immediately. In this regard, the question comes up how to decide if reality in all these reports is represented correctly. The huge amount of information makes authentic experience

descriptions very valuable (Oxman, 2011). Poster (2001) states that culture is currently highly influenced by technology, which creates a virtual reality. This new way of existing is a combination of the imaginary with reality, which results in the creation of new forms of experiences and identities. The fact that online people are often anonymous can change the way one communicates. It became more important to represent the online personality as real and the written text as true and trustworthy. Identities online are not fixed, they depend among other things on the audience to whom they are writing. For example, people who write blogs perceive themselves as publishers, depending on the community who reads and builds the blog (Rak, 2005).

Apart from the perceived difficulty to decide between imaginary and reality, recording memories online is also seen in a positive light. Treanor (2009) explains that before archives were digitalized, collective memories were controlled more by the government. Today, internet users have the power to record their contents as well: they create their own archive, for example an online diary. It is an accessible conduit for sharing opinions and experiences with the rest of the world and a way that everyone can read about each other's perception of reality (Treanor, 2009).

In postmodern times the internet responds to changing human needs. According to Davenport and Beck (2001), for postmodern societies, individualism and the freedom of choices play a significant role. In this generation people feel a strong need to interact through online communication media. This generation is described by Davenport and Beck

with the book “ The Attention Economy”. Simultaneously with the trend of individualization, a need to be seen and recognized by others got stronger. In addition, people’s perspectives tend to be short term and they desire to consume immediately. These needs can be fulfilled easily through new communication media, for example blogs. Online communities that give users a sense of belonging became popular and personalized websites are common, for example when informing about travel recommendations (Davenport & Beck, 2001).

Online travel communities like Tripadvisor give tourists the possibility to interact with each other through writing and reviewing recommendations. Beyond the mere consumption of information, they have the ability to actively produce it themselves, and in doing so they provide independent information from commercial providers. Word-of-mouth information is powerful as it is regarded as very trustworthy. Recorded electronic-word-of-mouth, such as tripadvisor. com, is even more powerful compared to the ephemeral character of traditional word-of-mouth, which only reaches friends and family. Electronic-word-of-mouth presents new unpredictable dynamics on the tourism market since online recommendations or discussions spread instantly and have the ability to rapidly impact the tourism industry (Pan, Goldsmith & Litvin, 2008). In addition to the need to belong to an online community, the need to have memorable experiences got stronger. By taking a look back in history, we can see that economic values continuously changed. First beginning with an agrarian economy which concentrated on commodities, then the economy got industrialized

and valued on goods or services. In postmodern times, one's experience is the main economic value. Pine and Post-modernity is the era this thesis focuses on. It is understood here as a period beginning in the late 1970s. It is difficult to define this term in a consistent and clear way due to the unstable nature of this period of time. It is understood here not as a clear movement, but more as intellectual perspective, which draws on different movements such as post-structuralism Yilmaz (2010).

Gilmore (1999) define this new economy as ' Experience Economy'. The needs of consumers have changed, and they now strive to experience memorable events that are personally engaging. In short, experiences are considered to be more important than material objects. This is especially relevant in more developed countries where people have already reached their basic needs and therefore can begin to devote more of their time to focusing on selfactualization (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Thus, both experiencing tourism and sharing these experiences are valuable activities in postmodern societies. This is supported by the fact that the appearance of blogs continues to increase, according to BlogPulse and Technorati the number of blogs in 2004 was 3 million and increased to 164 million in 2011. Out of all the various blogging subjects, travel blogs have an important position. In 2008, the topic of travel was reported to be the ninth most important subject, representing 28% of all blogs (Bosangit, Dulnuan, & Mena, 2012).

The e-revolution has affected tourism. As will be shown in the following chapters, the influence of this relatively new and highly dynamic blog genre which tells the experience of the tourist has not been researched enough to

date. The fluid, unpredictable dynamics that came up in the age of postmodernity make an in-depth, qualitative study of blogs appropriate. Hence, the aim of this study is to find out how travel blogs influence the blog users, both writers and readers in the process of how they experience travel. Because of the physical location of the researcher and in order to compare results more easily, the Netherlands were chosen as the travel destination.

The semantics of travel and blogging

The word blog has its origins in the word weblog (Myers, 2010). Four forms of this term are part of this research. The word blog is used to describe the website on which the blogging discourse takes place, comparable to the pages of a book. The blogger is the author, the person who writes the blog and therefore creates the main content. Blogging will be referred to as the activity of writing a blog, or interacting on blogs, and it will be regarded as a means through which communication takes place, for example among community members. In the context of the already described phenomenon of globalization, blogging is regarded as an embodiment of rapid social change. In addition, the term blogosphere, the community of bloggers, will appear in this research. What follows now is an explanation of the semantics that are part of this thesis.

Travellers and tourists

The distinction between travellers and tourists has a long tradition in tourism literature. Cohen (1979) for example describes different modes of travelling, which range from the tourists' search for pleasure to the travellers' search for meaningful experiences. Furthermore, Galani-Moutafi (2000) explains

that both tourists and travellers move beyond their geographic boundaries, although their journey practices differ. Travellers from the Victorian era were driven by the motivation to reach self-realization and to learn about new places and cultures. Distinguishing the familiar and the foreign, they discovered more about themselves. With the rise of mass tourism the motivations for travel have changed. As Rojek (1993) says, tourists are presented as unadventurous persons without own initiative who aim to confirm their world view instead of using the opportunity to transform it. The goal often is to witness something and get a record of it, a proof of actually having lived a certain experience, for example by taking photos (Rojek, 1993).

Boorstin (1963) clarifies that the focus of the tourists does not lie on exploring something new anymore; “ we look into a mirror instead of out a window, and we see only ourselves” (Boorstin, 1963, p. 125). Tourists are supposed to look increasingly more for what they expect to encounter and will often buy into premade attractions and experiences (Boorstin, 1963).