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Marketing Destinations through First-Person Stories: A Narrative Structure Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Narrative as digital word of mouth has the potential to be an effective way to market tourist destinations. Using ethnomethodology, this study identifies key marketing elements from narratives which include characterization, space categorization, and overall product and experience evaluation. The introduction of a blog writer as a personal character allows blog readers to access the picture of lived identities created through actions, attitudes, and values. Space categorization allows blog readers to have a cognitive construction of hypothetical travel scenarios including “rehearsals” of likely future travels. The results of this study demonstrate substantial potential for destination marketing organizations to facilitate and manage the interactive nature of storytelling as part of travel recommendation systems.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools for presenting products, services, or brands to consumers (Learned, 2007). Indeed, McCabe & Foster (2006:194) argue: “Storytelling has profound effects on the way in which people interact with others in the society”. Much of the social information that people acquire in daily life is transmitted through narrative (Adaval & Wyer, 1998). People create stories to organize their experiences (Escalas, 2004a) and communicate those experiences to others. On the other hand, people may use the self-constructed narratives stored in their memory as a basis for judgments of other people, objects, or events (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Thus, it seems that narratives enable people interpret the world around them in order to create meaning and to encourage imagination (Escalas, 2004b; Gretzel, 2006).

McCabe and Foster (2006) argue that a tourist has a *narrativistic* attitude. Tourists communicate their travel memories of visiting different places and meeting different people through stories as representations of their lived experiences. In constructing a story, experiences are presented in thematically and temporally related sequences. Therefore, narrative structure provides a framework for causal inferencing about the meaning of tourist experiences (Escalas, 2004b). According to Graburn (1989), the tourism process begins in the “ordinary,” progresses into “heightened” moments, and returns to the ordinary. Since there is a gap between the tourist’s “actual, onsite, real-time” experience and its representation, the tourist moment is (re)presented,

(re)produced, and (re)created through narrative in journal entries, postcards, photographs, and storytelling (Cary, 2004). Today, with the emergence of consumer-generated media (CGM), i.e., online content created primarily by Internet users themselves, stories about tourism experiences can easily be found on discussion boards, blogs, social networking sites, customer review sites, and photo galleries. The narratives typically use a combination of text, images, videos, and/or music to deliver to or share stories about tourism products and experiences with other Internet users through interactive technology applications.

The use of narratives to communicate travel experiences offers the potential for particularly “thick” experiential aspects of a trip (Gretzel, 2006). Hence, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have started to incorporate the narrative and interactive nature of first-person stories as a feature of their websites. The first-person stories or blogs act as a digital version of word of mouth communication. Although the stories are provided by real travelers, the main goal of the feature is to engage potential travelers with a persuasive tale about the destination. Thus, analysis of narratives posted on official tourism websites provides an in-depth understanding of the underlying message and persuasiveness of the stories.

The primary purpose of this exploratory paper is twofold. First, this study explores how personal travel narratives are constructed by deconstructing the stories into meaningful sequences; and second, this study examines the merits of introducing a journal-like narrative approach to destination marketing by abstracting the key marketing elements from the stories. It is argued that the results are beneficial in providing theoretical discussion on tourism and language as well as managerial and strategic implications for DMOs in promoting their destinations.

USING NARRATIVES TO MARKET TOURIST EXPERIENCES

Extensive research indicates that the narrative power of a story has the ability to “manipulate” mass audiences (Boje, 1999) in that a story can act as a contributing value justification for human action (Cragan & Shields, 1998). Narratives are uniquely effective in representing and conveying experience (Mattila, 2000; 2002). Mattila (2000) argues that the facts of an experience are constituted by its sequence of events; the act of narrating involves interconnecting these facts into a pattern that is a structure representing the experience. Hence, narrative appeals might be effective in communicating the value of experiential services (Padgett & Allen, 1997; Mattila, 2000; 2002), including tourism. Stories persuade via *narrative transportation*, which constitutes immersion into the text (Green & Brock, 2000). According to Escalas (2004a), the narrative structure of stories consists of two elements: chronology (temporal dimension) and causality (relational organization). The temporal dimension of a narrative process is based on the idea that events occur over time, which is configured as individual episodes. Episodes structure time into its beginning, middle, and end. The relational organization of a narrative process is configured as episode schema. Schema, in turn, structure elements into an organized framework that establishes a relationship between the story’s elements and allows for causal inferencing, i.e., goal-directed action–outcome sequences (Escalas, 2004a; 2004b).

A fully developed narrative may include clauses or sets of clauses with the following functions: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda (McCabe & Foster, 2006). Gabriel (2000) explored the mechanisms through which meaning is generated in narratives. The mechanisms represent either a way of making sense of specific parts

of the narratives or making connections between different parts; they are attribution of motive, attribution of causal connections, attribution of responsibility, attribution of unity, attribution of fixed qualities, attribution of emotion, attribution of agency, and attribution of providential significance. The mechanisms, referred to as “poetic tropes,” are central interpretive devices for storytellers (Gabriel, 2000).

In marketing, storytelling is about using stories to communicate messages that reflect positively on a company brand (Fog, Budts, & Yakaboylu, 2005). The meaning of a brand to a consumer is based on the narratives that he or she has constructed that incorporate the brand (Escalas, 2004b). Escalas argues that the self–brand connection may be formed based on perceived psychological benefits from the product (2004b: 168); a consumer might link the brands in a narrative to the achievement of self-related goals. The connection is a result of a process of mapping the goal–action–outcome structure within the narrative with self-related stories in the memory. The rich narratives that give context to daily life help brands to connect more empathically with the buying minds of customers (Learned, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes the narrative structure of first-person stories posted on a DMO website to elaborate on the persuasive nature of the stories (Fig. 1). Specifically, data were selected from stories about visits to Philadelphia from “visitPA Roadtripper,” a blog feature on the Pennsylvania Tourist Office website (www.visitPA.com). Three different travel genres were selected from six available Roadtripper stories of visits to Pennsylvania: History Buff (two stories), Culture Vultures (three stories), and Hipster Roadtrippers (three stories).

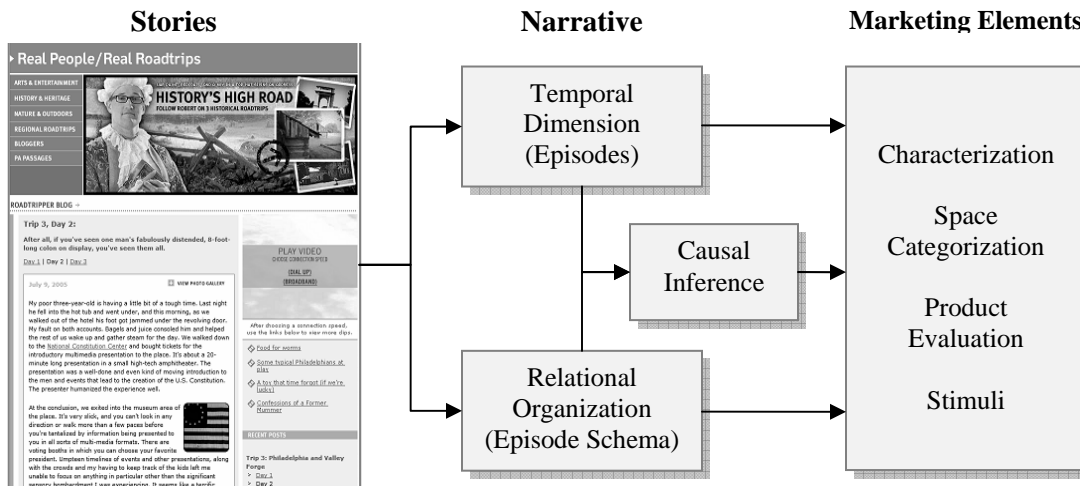


Figure 1. Analytical Process of the Study

This study uses ethnomethodology to analyze the characterization and plots of the stories (see Fig. 1). Based on the story elements suggested by Escalas (2004a; 2004b), episodes (beginning, middle, end) and episode schema (initial event, psychological state, formation of goals, action, outcomes) were identified from the stories through text analysis. The text analysis

method used in this paper is categorized by Lacity and Janson (1991) as an *interpretivist* approach; the authors tried to analyze the qualitative data based on subjective interpretation.

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF ROADTRIPPER BLOGS

Characterization. One of the important determinants of travel genres introduced on the Roadtripper Blogs is the characterization, i.e., the introduction of the “hero” and “heroine.” Characters are important in the process of understanding stories, as the effectiveness of a story relies on its ability to present structured characters’ action sequences. Moreover, characters in a story are lived identities to which people can relate in real life. The Roadtripper Blogs introduce and label their stars with titles related to, and images corresponding to, the travel genres: History Buff, Culture Vultures, and Hipster Roadtrippers. Hence, the characterization is strongly associated with the product that they (PA tourism office) are trying to sell, i.e., different types of tourist attractions and forms of trip itineraries. The identities of each character are presented both in the blogger’s bio which includes age, marital status, residence, and occupation, and within the stories themselves as self-generated keywords related to preferences, perspectives, tastes, and values (Fig. 2).

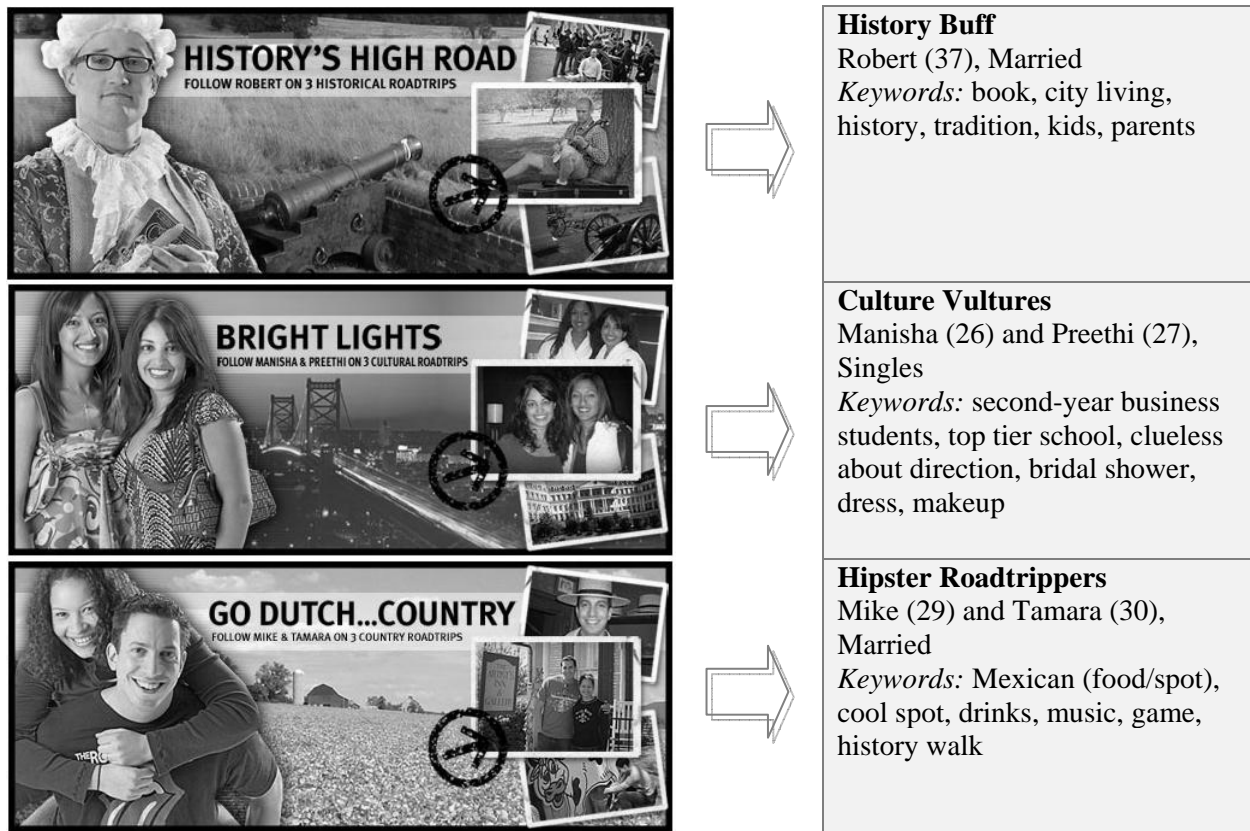


Figure 2. Characterization: Access to Lived Tourist Identities

Several differences can be identified from the stories in terms of character representation and structure. The History Buff represents one leading “actor,” with his family members acting in supporting roles, while both the Culture Vultures and Hipster Roadtrippers feature multiple leading actors. All stories have a single narrator; one (representative) leading actor describes the

whole experience throughout the trips. However, the self-generated keywords identified within the stories reflect the role of each narrator within his or her groups. Robert (History Buff) writes more about his own perspectives and feelings, supported by the drama he has with the other members of his group. Preethi (Culture Vultures) and Mike (Hipster Roadtrippers) tend to describe their shared perspectives, goals, and tastes (i.e., using the term “we”) with the other leading actors in their groups. The introduction of multiple characters in a story, whether composed of one leading character with supporting actors or multiple characters, is important for audiences’ sense-making process, since they are able to understand the narrative plots by connecting the narrative parts from the characters’ interactions with each other.

Episodes: Temporal Dimensions. The narrative structure of the Roadtripper blogs can be deconstructed based on the chronology or temporal dimension of events. Since all narratives represent tourist experiences, the stories can be interpreted chronologically from the tourists’ movement through space and time, whereby the characters move from one place to another during a certain time interval (Xia, Ciesielski, & Arrowsmith, 2005). Tourists’ movements can be seen as a dynamic process that is characterized by spatial and temporal references and attributable components (i.e., the nature of the place visited). The temporal sequences of the characters’ movements were identified based on three time intervals: morning, afternoon, and evening. Time references in journal entries were identified by finding exact matching words (e.g., “in the morning”, “in the afternoon”), words designating a point in time (e.g., “at 9:00 am”), and words with reference to other activities or situations (e.g. “after lunch”, “right when the store opened”). However, the time intervals do not reflect episodes; the stories may have more than one episode within one time interval and one episode may last for more than one time interval. The sample of the story chronology deconstruction is illustrated in Fig. 3.

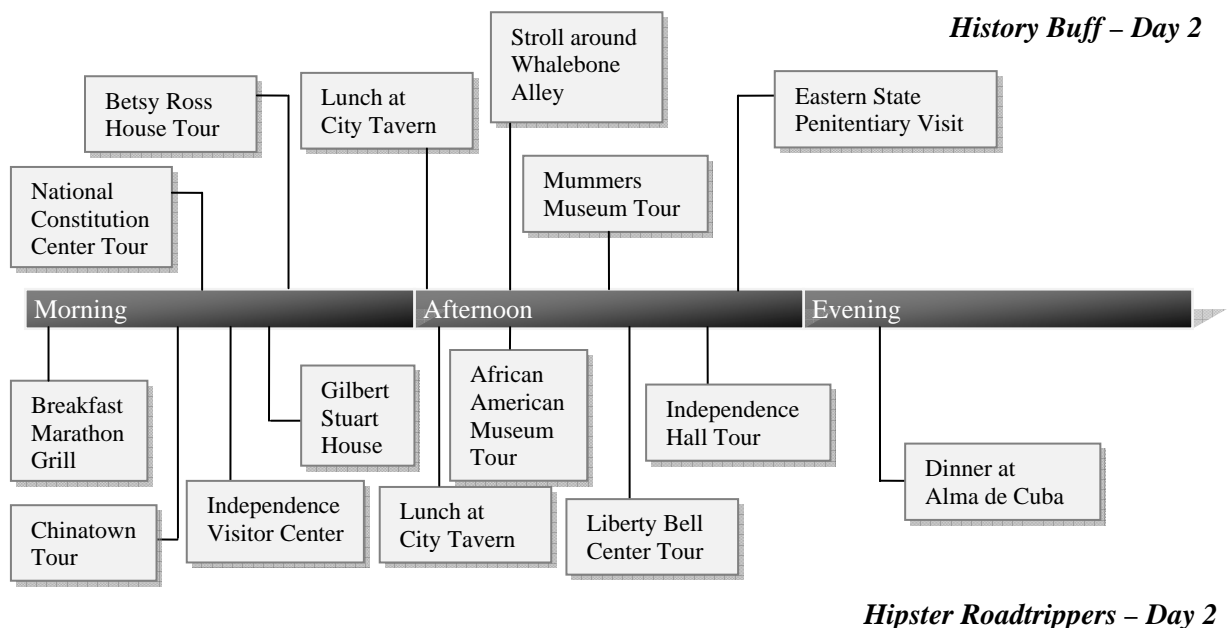


Figure 3. Story Episodes: Temporal Dimensions

The History Buff stories contain five episodes on the first day and six episodes on the second day. The Hipster Roadtrippers stories contain five episodes on the first day, nine episodes on the second day, and six episodes on the third day. The Culture Vultures stories comprise five episodes on the first day, four episodes on the second day, and three episodes on the third day.

All writers except Robert wrote the narrative in chronological order; Robert wrote a flashback episode in his first-day story. Most of the episodes from the stories occur at different places, which is important for the space categorization of the narratives.

Episode Schema: Relational Organization. Besides chronological order, narratives can also be deconstructed by their relational organization of goals–actions–outcomes. To interpret the relational organization of the narratives, a keyword search was conducted within the text of each episode identified in the chronological deconstruction process. Below is an extract from the third-day story of Manisha and Preethi (Culture Vultures):

Extract 1

- 1.1 *We walked around for quite some time, but finally decided that we*
- 1.2 *wanted to do some serious shopping. So we jumped in a cab and*
- 1.3 *headed down to Rittenhouse Square. Rittenhouse Square is an*
- 1.4 *upscale section of Philly that is known for great boutiques and stores.*
- 1.5 *Manisha and I spent a couple hours walking up and down the streets,*
- 1.6 *stopping at various stores and trying on clothes. Manisha was*
- 1.7 *looking for a dress for her upcoming bridal shower so that was the*
- 1.8 *focus of our shopping adventures today. After searching for hours,*
- 1.9 *we still had not found the perfect dress.*

In line 1.2, Preethi states their goal for that episode as “serious shopping.” However, this statement is not the “real” goal, but a contextualization of the episode. Preethi reiterates the real focus of the episode in lines 1.6-1.8: that Manisha was having a bridal shower and needed a dress. The actions were expressed in lines 1.2-1.3 (going to Rittenhouse Square), lines 1.5-1.6 (stopping at various stores and trying on clothes), and line 1.7 (searching for hours). Finally, Preethi closed the episode by stating the outcome in line 1.8 (had not found the perfect dress).

The second extract is from the first-day story of Mike and Tamara (Hipster Roadtrippers). The goal of this episode is expressed by Mike in lines 2.1-2.2: “find a bar or a club where we could get a drink and hear some music.” The actions were expressed in lines 2.3-2.4 (take a walk through the neighborhood). The outcome of that episode is expressed in lines 2.6-2.9.

Extract 2

- 2.1 *The locals told us Old City was the place to find a bar or club where*
- 2.2 *we could get a drink and hear some music. The streets were lined*
- 2.3 *with different bars and restaurants so we decided to take a walk*
- 2.4 *through the neighborhood. There were lots of people out; some*
- 2.5 *heading to the bars and some seated at outside tables enjoying*
- 2.6 *dinner. We came across a Jazz band playing on a street corner. We*
- 2.7 *stopped to listen to the music and watched children dance in the*
- 2.8 *street. The band could play, and I contributed to the arts and spotted*
- 2.9 *them a 5.*

Space Categorization. Based on the episodes and episode schema, the experiences represented in the narratives can be plotted into spatial movements. The story episodes reflect the temporal nature of the movements (illustrated in Fig. 3). Because a tourist’s location position can be derived at any point in time, tourists’ travel patterns can be conceptualized as spatial movements within a network. In this system, the nodes of the network are attractions or other points at which

tourists stop; the edges of the network are the routes that tourists choose to travel between the two places. When plotted spatially, the attractions and places visited by each blog character and their movement patterns signify the space categorization of each travel genre.

Figure 4 illustrates the spatial patterns of the episodes identified from the story of History Buff (second day) and Hipster Roadtrippers (second day). The episodes (illustrated chronologically in Figure 3) are represented by the attractions and places as nodes. The intertwined spatial and temporal patterns of all episodes make up the whole story as a description of a tourism product, a day-trip experience.

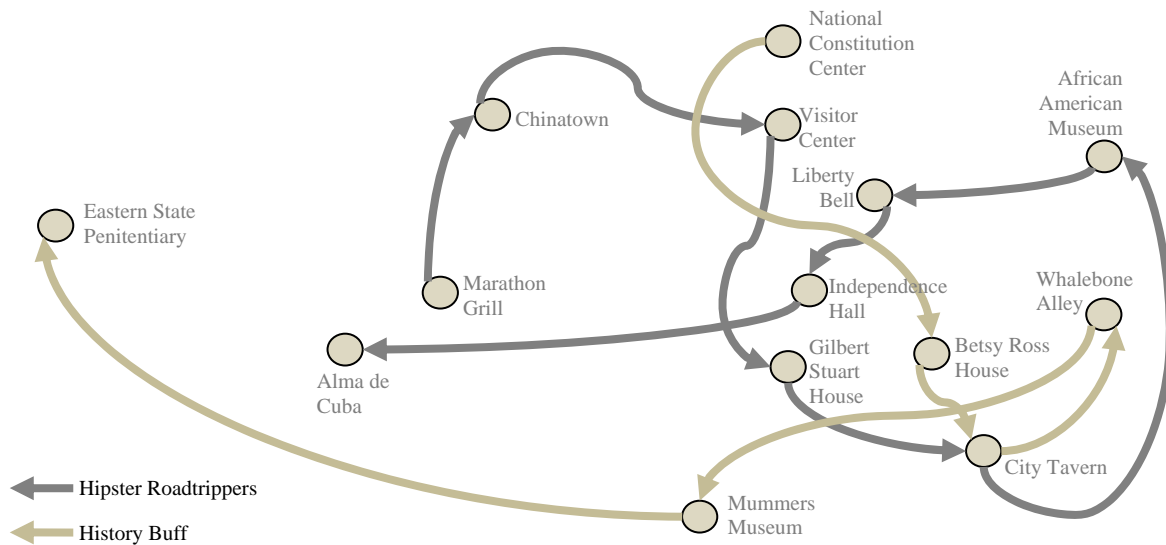


Figure 4. Space Categorization: Spatial Networks

Product Evaluation. This paper analyzes product evaluation (i.e., overall qualities of the experience) by interpreting the positive and negative feelings of the writers from the blogs. For example, words such as “sad”, “bad”, and “uneasy” represent negative feelings toward the experience, while “good”, “delicious”, and “fantastic” describe positive feelings. In some cases, blog writers also used cynical words to express negative feelings (e.g., “spectacular mood”). Several aspects were considered such as general statements about satisfaction, the quality of attractions visited and facilities used, the level of information available to make decisions on the itinerary and scheduling, and knowledge gained from visiting the various Philadelphia attractions.

Extract 3 comes from one of the episodes of the story of the Hipster Roadtrippers: when Mike and Tamara were having lunch at the City Tavern (located in Old City, Philadelphia). Mike expresses a positive evaluation of the restaurant. In line 3.6, Mike expresses excitement right after reading the menu, even before the waiter has arrived. Then, the excitement continued after the appearance of the waiter (lines 3.6-3.10). Finally, Mike stated his positive evaluation of the food in lines 3.10-3.12 (expressed by the words “indulged” and “enjoyed”).

Extract 3

- 3.1 *At that point lunch was in order, and we found it at the City Tavern,*
3.2 *the only place in the world where we could experience authentic 18th*
3.3 *century American culinary history, as the menu described. Not even*
3.4 *in New York could we order a “Salmagundi”, better yet pronounce it*
3.5 *correctly. Other items included liters of Thomas Jefferson or George*
3.6 *Washington ale. I was starting to get excited. Then our waiter*
3.7 *approached. Just like the food, he was 18th century style, clad in*
3.8 *black shoes, long white socks, a long sleeved white collared shirt and*
3.9 *a black vest that seemed true to history. He even seemed to speak a*
3.10 *little bit of 18th century accent. We indulged in the trip back in time*
3.11 *and enjoyed it all. I did her thing while I had some chicken noodle*
3.12 *soup just like George W., the original, used to enjoy.*

Most of the stories, as expected, contain positive product evaluation. However, a few negative notions of experiences were identified from several episodes in the stories. Most of these were results of negative outcomes in their attempts to achieve certain goals and were not directly related to the quality of the products. An example of a negative experience is presented in extract 4 which is an episode of the Culture Vultures on the third day. Preethi expresses her negative feeling with the words “very sad” (line 4.7) as a result of her lack of success in getting tickets (lines 4.3-4.4).

Extract 4

- 4.1 *We had originally reserved today to spend at the Philadelphia*
4.2 *Museum of Art but we had both been there several times and the Dali*
4.3 *exhibit, which we desperately wanted to see, was sold out. We tried*
4.4 *for weeks to get tickets but were unsuccessful. After studying Spanish*
4.5 *art in Madrid, Dali had become one of my favorite artists. Having*
4.6 *seen a majority of his artwork in Spain, I knew this exhibit would be*
4.7 *great and was very sad to miss it.*

CONCLUSION

This study identifies key marketing elements from the narratives provided by the Pennsylvania Tourist Office’s website. These marketing elements include characterization (i.e., introduction of “hero” and “heroine”), space categorization (e.g., types of attractions), and overall product and experience evaluation. Characterization and space categorization are determinants of travel genres. The introduction of a blog writer as a personal character implies the notion of tourist identity; it allows blog readers to access a picture of lived identities created through actions, attitudes, and values. Space categorization presents the evaluation and result of the narrative sequences; it allows blog readers to have a cognitive construction of hypothetical travel scenarios, including rehearsals of likely future travels. Based on the narrative structure and product evaluation, several key marketing elements were identified as destination marketing tools:

- *Introduction of tourist identities by labeling characters with different travel genres.* This approach can be regarded as customization in advertising; the message about the product (bundles of products) is delivered differently to different segments. Since blog readers

will relate to the lived picture of a character in the story, introducing characters with different tastes, preferences, and backgrounds can be effective in stimulating empathy among different readers. Readers having similar characteristics with the “hero” and “heroine” understand how the characters made decisions and acted, and perceive the benefits enjoyed by the characters. Therefore, the readers can be persuaded to experience the same trip as the characters in the stories.

- *Introduction of tourist drama by presenting multiple characters.* Characterization with multiple actors allows blog readers to follow the drama resulting from interactions among the characters. The drama helps readers to get notions of “realness” and character believability, which will lead to sympathy and empathy as emotional responses. Sympathy and empathy in turn lead to the “ad attitude” (Escalas & Stern, 2003): in this case, intention to visit.
- *Real spatio-temporal movement of tourists as product characteristics.* The temporal and spatial sequences of the trips, extracted from the stories, allow blog readers to have a cognitive construction of the hypothetical travel scenario.

Further study can be conducted to analyze the positive effect generated by the stories about Philadelphia as tourist destination. Narrative as digital word of mouth is an effective way of marketing a destination. The results imply the potential for DMOs to facilitate and manage the interactive nature of storytelling to create a recommendation system for travel.

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