



Communicative functions of Online Travel Review titles A pragmatic and linguistic investigation of destination and attraction OTR titles



Silvia De Ascaniis^{a,*}, Ulrike Gretzel^{b,1}

^a Faculty of Communication Sciences, Università della Svizzera Italiana – USI, Via Giuseppe Buffi 13, CH-6904 Lugano, Switzerland²

^b Institute for Innovation in Business and Social Research, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 June 2013

Accepted 3 November 2013

Keywords:

Online Travel Review
Communicative functions
Argumentation
Online genre
Travel information search
Titles

ABSTRACT

The choice of tourism products usually requires time and effort, because of their nature and the huge amount of information available. In the online domain, the most credited source of information is word-of-mouth, which is mainly spread through social networks. The decision of which source to consult is often made relying on a first impression of search results, based on metadata. The paper considers Online Travel Review titles, and investigates their communicative functions adopting a pragmatic and linguistic approach. The results aim to describe characteristics of this type of metadata and provide indications for platform managers and designers.

© 2013 Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research. Published by Elsevier GmbH. All rights reserved.

1. Background

1.1. The tourism 'product' and the online domain

Prospective tourists face several challenges when making travel decisions – e.g. destination to visit, accommodation to stay, activities and attractions to enjoy, carriers to use – because of the very nature of many tourism products and services, which are intangible and perishable, and because of the extraordinary variety of options available. Tourism products are, indeed, fundamentally *experiences*, but not just in the sense that they are things that can be experienced, as a dish of pasta or the fragrance of a flower, rather in the sense that they are performances, experiences per se, as a concert or a drama (Dann, 1976; Smith, 1994). Given the same artist and songs, respectively the same plot and script, in fact, the experience of a concert or a drama is a *unicum*. A trip, in the same way, never follows a determined, fully predictable path; a number of variables interplay, making it a unique experience. The role of the tourists in the 'performance', though, is not that of a mere spectator, who enjoys – with more or less involvement – something being performed for her by someone else; she is an agent herself,

who actively realizes the trip. Her active role may appear clearer in a self-organized trip, where decisions have to be made at different levels – i.e. core, secondary, en route decisions (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998) – as well as at every stage – i.e. before, during and after the trip (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005) – but even in a guided tour, the tourist is an actual performer: once the tour and the respective programme have been chosen, she does not just jump on the bus and follow the instructions! Her trip is affected by the relations she entertains with the rest of the group, her willingness to learn about what she is visiting, her curiosity and openness towards different cultures, the pictures or souvenirs she decides to take (material objects that shape immaterial memories). A tourism experience is a space of freedom, where choices need to be made: without an active participation the show cannot go on.

The function of a tourism product is "the facilitation of travel and activity of individuals away from their usual home" (Smith, 1994, p. 583). If one asks of a tourist the main reason for her travel, with a high probability a very common answer would be "to relax and get away from it all" (Dann, 1976, p. 22). Since it cannot be viewed or trailed prior to purchase, the choice of a tourism product or service requires considerable time and effort, and consumers are often led to engage in extensive information search (Ballantyne, Hughes, & Ritchie, 2009). The evaluation of alternatives in the decision process is based on the information obtained, and crossed with a set of implicit premises comprising personal aspects like expectations, desires, values and beliefs, and socio-cultural elements related to the experience of travelling and to the tourism product itself.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 058 666 4674; fax: +41 058 666 4647.

E-mail addresses: silvia.de.ascaniis@usi.ch (S. De Ascaniis), ugretzel@uow.edu.au (U. Gretzel).

¹ Tel.: +61 2 4221 4823; fax: +61 2 4221 4210.

² Webatelier.net.

One element playing an important role in risk and uncertainty reduction in travel decision-making is *the testimony of others*. The evidence of people who experienced a given tourism product or service is considered interesting because it represents a highly credited information source: perceived expertise is more a criterion than anything else for advice seeking (De Capua & Dunham, 1993), and because people reporting their experience are presumed not to lie, unless they have precise reasons to do so (Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). The testimony of others, which is mostly spread through word-of-mouth (WOM) is, actually, the most influential source of information when choosing an experiential good.

Today, the *Internet* provides easy access to word-of-mouth discourses about almost every kind of consumer and experiential good. Travellers' information needs are expressed through searches conducted online, especially by travellers' use of search engines; a query, in fact, can be seen as the expression of the user's information needs in the context of a search task (Xiang, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009). Web 2.0 – or 'read and write web' – is giving new significance to WOM, which encompasses a variety of media forms and types of websites, providing consumers with a number of opportunities to voice their opinions. This content is known as User Generated Contents (UGC) and can equate to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Consumers increasingly rely on eWOM to make a variety of decisions, thanks to their ease of access and multiplicity of contributors. Online Travel Reviews (OTR) are the most accessible and prevalent form of eWOM in the field of online tourism – eTourism. They represent people's wish to share their travel experiences online, recommend a tourism product/service or complain about it. OTR share with the other types of UGC (e.g. forum posts, blog entries) the fact that they are directed towards an unknown audience and are at free disposal. They can be distinguished from other types based on several characteristics: OTR are monographic texts longer, for instance, than forum posts, that are dialogical moves in an asynchronous discussion, but shorter than blogs, which resemble diaries; they report on and evaluate usually a single product or service or experience; they represent one-to-many communication and typically one-way information flow (Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

1.2. Online tourism information seeking

Decision-making in tourism is a "temporal, dynamic, successive, and multistage contingent decision process" (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002, p. 15), in which preferences for products and services are rather ill-defined, unless they are regularly experienced (Gretzel, 2011). The decision-maker (i.e. the prospective tourist), thus, needs to collect relevant information to increase her knowledge about the alternatives. She engages in information search which involves time and effort and is limited by human cognitive capacity to process incoming information. Therefore, when looking online for a certain hotel, attraction, tourism service or, generally, a destination, people do not go through everything they retrieve from their search but select online resources they think can meet their needs. In order to do so, they have to make judgements regarding the search results. These judgements have to be quick, given the amount of information to be processed and, thus, are typically made based on a *first impression* of the results (Marchionini, 1995; Wöber, 2006). To support the first selection of sources, information retrieval systems display metadata such as title, URL, date. These metadata serve the function of overview and preview (Balatsoukas, Morris, & O'Brien, 2009), and contribute to the creation of a first impression of an online resource (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2006). The first impression is so crucial for online information search that a number of studies have investigated the decisive factors contributing to its creation (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2007, 2008).

The same is likely to happen for Online Travel Reviews. Since there is usually a huge number of reviews available for the same tourism product/service, the user has to make a first selection of those which seem to be most relevant. Some users might only browse through the *titles* without ever looking at the complete review text. Considering OTR titles is of practical relevance for at least two reasons: first, they are important to be taken into account in social media monitoring, because they provide insights into how customers summarize experiences and show what first impressions other customers will likely get of an establishment; second, identifying semantic and linguistic characteristics of OTR titles is a first step in developing algorithms for the automated selection and classification of OTRs. The role of titles in OTRs can be compared to the role of headlines in newspapers or the role of taglines or slogans for an advertisement. OTR titles share with news headlines the fact that they should anticipate something about what is reported in the text: well written titles should allow the reader to receive the best deal of information with the least cognitive/procedural effort (Dor, 2003). They share, then, with taglines the need for persuasion, that is the attempt to attract the reader's curiosity in order to convince her that what is written is of interest and to push her to go on reading (Freeman, 2005). Differently from taglines, however, OTR titles do not need to be remembered because they are not associated with a brand, so their persuasion goal may not be as explicit.

A first exploration of the properties and structure of OTR titles has been recently done by De Ascaniis and Gretzel (2012), revealing interesting specificities. They analyzed a corpus of 1474 OTR titles about three city destinations published on TripAdvisor. It came out that:

- there was an overall concordance between titles with a positive or a negative connotation and positive or negative review texts, meaning that OTR titles are quite representative of the review orientation and accomplish the general function of text titles in helping readers anticipate what follows in the text;
- less words were used for introducing a positive experience at a destination than for depicting a negative or average impression, presumably because negative judgements need to be convincingly supported, in that negative critiques are usually less accepted than positive ones;
- the frequency counts for keywords and keyphrases was suggesting a great diversity of words being used;
- in addition, titles made strong use of superlatives and slogans, and positive words were much more frequent than negative ones, which corresponds to the overall dominance of positive reviews in TripAdvisor (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). In the study by De Ascaniis and Gretzel (2012), a first investigation of the communicative functions of titles was also made, crossing insights from the literature with the frequency of some linguistic indicators. It came out that:
 - descriptive evaluative words (e.g. "Romantic Paris", "Rude citizens") were much more common than comparative words or words that would suggest a direct advice to the reader (e.g. "Sydney is better than x", "Be careful when visiting Rome!");
 - first person pronouns and possessive adjectives (e.g. "My holiday", "We enjoyed it a lot!") were more commonly used than second person pronouns and possessive adjectives;
 - a strong use was made of temporal indicators (e.g. "Rome in summer", "Paris in three days") and common nouns referring to the travel experience (e.g. "My trip to Sydney", "A Roman tour").

These results suggest that most of the titles are summary statements of a personal experience or a general destination description, accomplishing the function of summarizing and previewing the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/141262>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/141262>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)