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Travel Bloggers: Who Do They Think They Are?

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Introduction and Literature Review

The global travel industry has changed multiple times from the industrial revolution, which provided the rising middle class an opportunity to travel, to tourism as the largest service sector in the world, to the 21st century travel experience connected to the World Wide Web, which allows instantaneous sharing of information (Lew & Prideaux, 2008; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Veblen, 1973). The WWW has changed how people access travel and tourism opportunities, and how information and ideas about travel and tourism are exchanged, through short periods of time and across far greater geographical distances (Mack, Bloise, & Pan, 2008; Wegner, 2008; Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006). In particular, travelers have altered the ways in which they share stories. In the past they used travel journals, novels, photos, and slide shows, but more recently virtual digital photo albums, social media posts, mobile updates, virtual maps, websites, eBooks, web blogs (blogs), and video web logs (vblogs) have been common methods of sharing these experiences. These changes have provided travelers with the opportunity to become self-published contributors to the WWW, experiencing a high degree of interconnectedness with other individuals around the globe (Hewitt, 2005; Volo, 2010). In particular weblogs, or blogs, provide online contributors the opportunity to be prosumers as they both consume and produce online tourism content simultaneously (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Tapscott, 2009; Toffler, 1980).

These technological shifts have altered how people experience leisure and share tourism experiences with others. These adaptations can be better understood using frameworks such as the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) identified by Robert Stebbins (1977; 2007) some thirty-five years ago (see Appendix A). The SLP describes leisure participants based on their degree of commitment. The framework has repeatedly demonstrated that “knowledge, training, skill[s]...high level[s] of achievement...[and] experience” (Stebbins, 1998, p. 21) can be developed while participating in leisure and recreation activities, and that these skills transfer to other environments (Robert Stebbins 2007). The serious leisure portion of the SLP has revealed that novice and amateur participants can transform their leisure pursuits into professions. The SLP has also helped researchers understand the role of leisure and work in people’s lives, and connected tourism with serious leisure, which has provided insight into the skills people develop as they travel (Stebbins, 1992; Stebbins & Hartel, 2011; Worthington, 2006). This research uses the SLP to help understand the motivation and benefits of using web logs to share travel and tourism experiences, and to provide a further understanding of the interplay between leisure, work and the evolving tourism industry.

Research Purpose and Method

Research in the field of tourism and online non-traditional media has focused on travel blog consumers, but little research exists querying the travel bloggers who have contributed to the WWW by adding their stories, photographs, and videos online (Cheyne, Downes, & Legg, 2006; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Sharda & Ponnada, 2008). This research explored why travel bloggers spent their time, energy, and skills posting online content as part of their leisure and/or work. Guiding research questions included:

1. Why do travel bloggers create and maintain travel blogs?
2. How do travel bloggers see their travel blogging experiences with regards to their leisure and work?

Having used four online search engines to find participants (Google, Technorati, Million Short, and Facebook), and having employed a 14-question qualitative measurement instrument (shared via email or Skype interview), 28 travel bloggers contributed to this research. The research used content analysis (cross-sectional and non-cross-sectional data) “to identify overall structures within each case or interview” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 203), and to observe and identify any patterns, relationships, categories, sub-categories, and outlying data relevant across all interviews (Burnard, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Sjorstrom & Dahlgren, 2002).

Research Results

Motivation to Travel Blog

As part of this research, three categories of motivation to blog were identified: altruistic, personal, and public/social. In addition thirteen subcategories were identified. Several of these subcategories included: as educational tools and to inspire others (altruistic); to develop knowledge, skills and abilities, and a strong connection to blogging (personal); and, to connect to readership, and share the humour of travel (public/social). These categories provided further insight into the reasons why people begin and maintain travel blogs, and increased the number of subcategories or reasons to create and maintain travel blogs, while positioning these reasons within a tourism context.

Time Spent on Travel Blog

In analyzing the time individuals spent on their blogs, and what activities they performed connected to their travel blog, it was identified that there were four categories that research participants could be placed in: pleasure bloggers, part-time bloggers, highly dedicated bloggers, and lifestyle bloggers. These categories provided further understanding around the different levels of commitment travel bloggers had to their blogs. Those in the first two categories identified their blogs as a hobby or as a leisure pursuit, while those in the second two categories had a more challenging time differentiating their online efforts between leisure and work.

Leisure, Work or a Combination

When asked directly how research participants’ experienced travel blogging, some identified their blog as pure leisure or as an enjoyable hobby. Others identified the blog as part of a business or as work with a caveat, it was work that they were proud of, passionate about, and improved their quality of life. The final group identified travel blogging as a combination of work and leisure identifying that the travel blog was an important part of life, and several participants stated it was key to their lifestyle, one based around travel and blogging. This suggests that travel blogging is connected to serious leisure (as amateurs and professionals), and potentially to other categories of the SLP.

Benefits of Travel Blogging

Four categories of benefits were identified as part of this research, which included: professional, financial, personal, and social. Thirteen sub-categories were also identified. Several of these subcategories included: building relationships/networking and employment opportunities (professional), income and alternative forms of income (financial), location independent lives and a creative outlet (personal), and being part of a

travel blog community and mentorship (social). As this research demonstrated, travel blogging, as a travel based leisure pursuit, influences many aspects of an individual's life. Many of these benefits echo the motivations travel bloggers identified as reasons for creating and maintaining a blog. This research is the first to identify the benefits of travel blogging, which, as will be explained, can be leveraged by the tourism industry.

Discussion of Results

As part of this research, six new subcategories were identified as motivations to blog. These reasons included: give back to the WWW, strong connections to blog, boredom, share humour of travel, to inspire others, and to experience a natural high. This research also created categories of motivation not seen in previous research. One of the most interesting categories, altruism, is important as it is often assumed that people blog for self-serving reasons. This research confirmed that people create blogs for personal, professional and altruistic reasons, which can lead to stronger blog communities, dedication to higher principles, and improve one's health (Brown, Consedine, & Magai, 2005; Batson, 2011; Evans, 2011).

This research identified the benefits of blogging, which had not previously been addressed in academic research. Having made the connection between motivations to blog with the benefits of blogging, a cyclical relationship was identified that supported travel blogging in two ways. First, it provided travel bloggers with strategies to avoid blogger burnout, and secondly, it provided the tourism industry ways in which to engage travel bloggers as marketing partners (Riggs, 2013; Rowse, 2013; Shaeffer, 2014).

The qualities identified in this research that linked travel blogging with the serious leisure perspective included self-expression, life enrichment, financial benefits, time commitment, and social communities, all of which were evident as part of this research (Stebbins, 2007). These connections warrant the addition of a category to the SLP under the serious leisure category, titled "virtual pursuits." This broad serious leisure subcategory provides researchers with the opportunity to complete additional research to identify more virtual leisure pursuits as part of the SLP. This research also contributed to the idea that there is a blurring of lines between leisure and work for some individuals, and that leisure and work may occur simultaneously or consecutively while performing the same leisure pursuit.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to find connections between tourism, blogs, the SLP, and to shed further light on the connection between serious leisure and work. This was accomplished by observing the motivations and benefits of travel blogging, as well as the attitudes and experiences of the travel bloggers while they participated in their serious leisure pursuit. This research was able to support previous academic findings, contribute new ideas to the academic research, and provide a suggestion to expand the SLP. This research also provided further understanding of the influence and importance of travel blogging to the tourism industry in order to support the building of mutually beneficial relationships.

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Appendix A: The Serious Leisure Perspective

The Serious Leisure Perspective Website, www.seriousleisure.net.

(February, 2013 version)

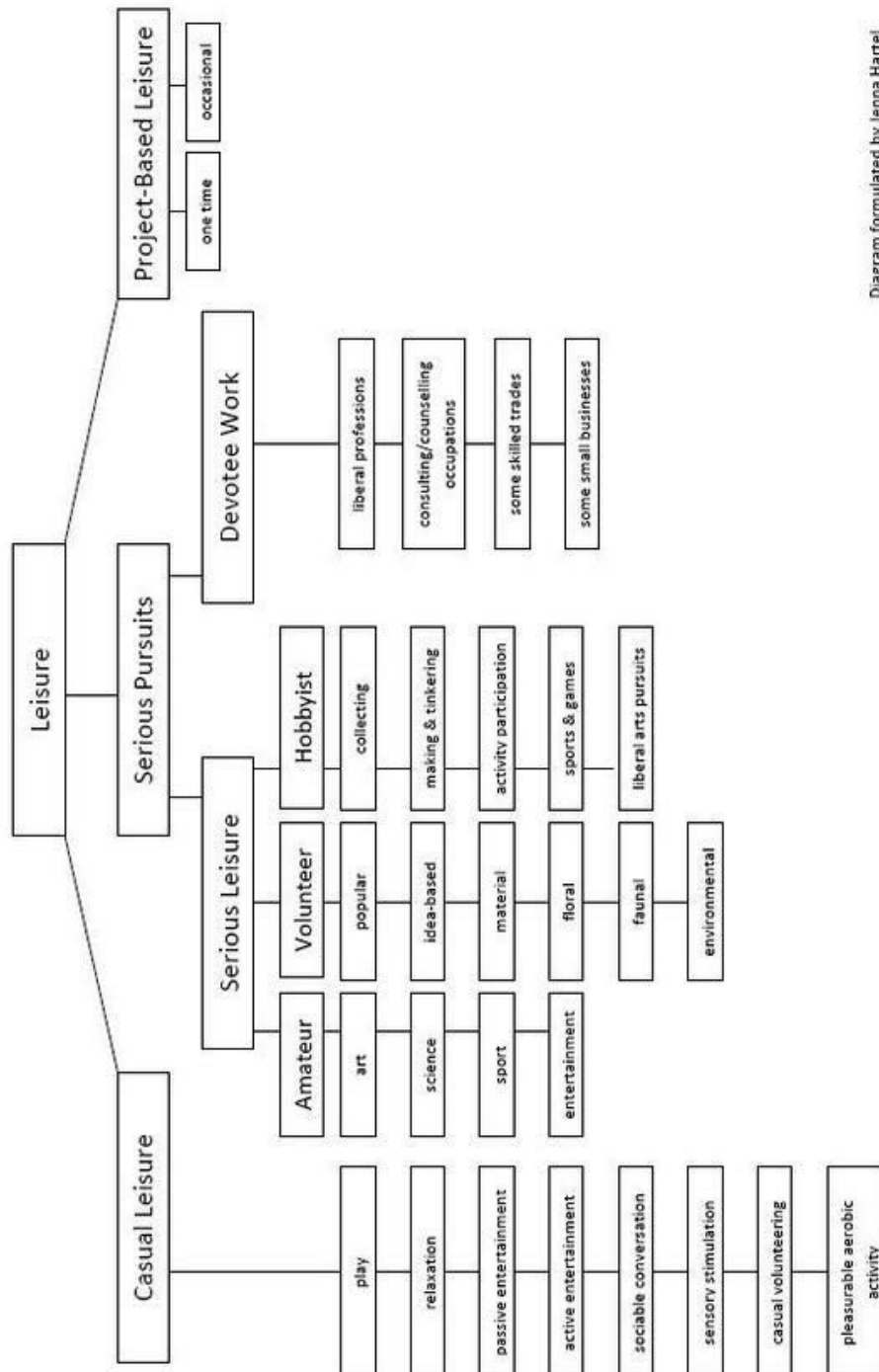


Diagram formulated by Jenna Hartel