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Out of their comfort zone: Student reactions to cultural challenges while travel writing

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Abstract

Many journalism students harbour desires of becoming travel writers. And yet, when taken on a travel-writing trip, how do they react when confronted with the reality? And how does their own social framework influence their perception of a foreign country? This paper uses content analysis of travel articles written by mainly Singaporean journalism students on two travel-writing practicums in South-East Asia, to examine choice of topic; the role of the travel writer as commentator and intermediary; and the representation of the 'other' country for consumption by a 'home' audience. Its impact on journalism education is to encourage students to consider their own reaction to and creation of the Other – more commonly done in international reporting, or covering topics such as immigration, homosexuality, disability, race and religion – and it is hoped that insights from this research can be applied to education in other forms of journalism. Finally, it considers whether student journalists from an Asian city state that emerged from the shadow of empire can escape recreating the patterns of colonialism implicit in much Western travel writing.

Introduction

For years, travel writing has been seen as the poor cousin of hard news reporting. The argument goes that it lacks the objectivity deemed so important in journalism as it attempts to make fact out of personal experience (Campbell, 1991; Cocking, 2009). Yet, while news journalism is hedged by standardized approaches, norms and conventions which allow the writer less room for exploration and hence for self-revelation, travel journalism is not so constrained. As a result, a study of travel writing is

fertile ground for understanding not just one culture's construction of the Other but also of itself. This led to the first research question, whether students writing about a foreign culture, would consider their own actions as much as those of the people they wrote about (RQ1). Travel writing reveals as much about the writer as about the country it seeks to portray, as in this example from one of the travel articles in the study, written by a female student trekking in northern Thailand:

Two hours after I embarked on my life's most meaningless journey, we started heading downhill... I looked at my fingers and saw the most horrifying sight in my life. My precious fingernails have turned black and were stuck with dirt. I have always judge people based on the cleanliness of their fingers but not this time.

Travel writing demands attention because it is a regular feature in most newspapers and lifestyle magazines and it merits scholarly investigation for its representation of foreign cultures (Hanusch, 2010). It reflects the growth of the tourism industry (Cocking, 2009) which by some reckonings is the second largest industry in the world (Moss, 2008). Cocking (2009) places it alongside international reporting as an indicator of how one society views others, marks it as an important site for "transcultural encounters" (p. 54). He goes on to look at whether the travel writing represents the writer's own 'othering' of a place, or the writer conforming to the expectations and demands of the readership, which expects such a representation, which may tell us more about the receiver than the creator, the society than the writer. The writer does not have to conform to societal prejudices, though, and Hooper and Youngs (2004, p. 10) also see benefit in the way that "travel writing remains a useful medium for the interrogation of ethnocentrism and for the displacement or estrangement of received ideas about 'other' cultures".

Campbell questions whether the writer or the reader is the cause of how travel writing is practised: "How do the pressures of audience expectation and the writer's predisposition transform the language and content of such records?" (1991, p. 2). In terms of journalism education, this is an important distinction to make as it brings into focus the limitations imposed on journalism by a society, which extends to writing about all Others such as sexual, ethnic, racial and religious minorities (see also Merican, 2010). And if journalists are for the most part drawn from the dominant demographic group in a society (Weaver, 1998) and are then routinely placed in contact with a different class, ethnicity or nationality (Fürsich, 2002), what does that mean for the way they construct the reality on which they report (Tuchman, 1978)?

This paper is a study of a small but complete population of 30 articles written by 20 Singaporean students on two travel writing practicum trips to Thailand and Vietnam, allowing them to benefit from the “pedagogy of experience” (Robie, 1997, p. 121). The trips were arranged by the author with a specific idea of taking students out of their comfort zones; they combined soft urban travel with more adventurous rural elements in order to expose students to different experiences so that they could write for a variety of audiences.

Shadow of empire

Fürsich and Kavoori (2001) label tourism as a new form of imperialism. This was the common research approach for many years after the 1970s (Mills, 1993), to view Western travel writing in a post-colonial discourse, as in Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Bishop’s study of literary representations of Shangri-La looks at how writers recreated it as a fantasy land, suggesting that travel writing is not concerned with the discovery of a place but also with giving it meaning in the popular imagination (1989). The link between travel writing and imperialism is historical as well as cultural. Europeans were the first to travel for leisure, which coincided with the height of their empires – indeed empires financed their wealth that gave them time and means to travel. Later, the wave of popular tourism in the Sixties coincided with loss of empire and the need to re-establish a new power relationship with foreign countries which led to the echoes of empire found in European travel writing in the second half of the 20th century. Pratt (1992, p. 4) places travel writing in the realm of ‘transculturation’ and of dominance versus subjugation, and places travel writers writing in the places “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination”.

A recurring theme is that while travel writing appears harmless entertainment, it carries powerful myths that distort our view of other countries (Holland & Huggan, 2000) and can even be considered propaganda (Mora, 2009). Spurr (1993) acknowledges that early Western writers faced the challenge of constructing a coherent reality out of the incomprehensible experiences they had in foreign lands, for an ignorant and suspicious audience at home – and draws a comparison between colonisers and travel writers, practising “self-inscription” on to the lives of people they meet. So what would a post-imperialist reading of travel texts make of the most recent development in global tourism, the rise of a wealthy Asian middle class with a will to travel (Fürsich, 2002)? If Western travel writing created landscapes of the imagination in the places it represented, would a newly emerging, confident Asia do the same? Fürsich and Kavoori (2001) delineate the possibilities raised by these new travellers as a one-

way stream becomes two-way, and vicarious travel through magazines becomes an aspirational replacement for the real thing.

If colonial Europe defined itself in part by defining Other, surely each emerging region and country does the same; and Singapore as the wealthiest nation in Southeast Asia might be expected to create an imaginary landscape and reality for its neighbours to help establish its own identity. Yet, even if that were the case, would Asian travel writing be expected to be more sympathetic to its neighbours, and to make the locals in the host country part of 'we' rather than 'them'? (For a more complete analysis of Asian journalism taking a different route from Western journalism, see Gunaratne, 2009.) Or would the affluent Asian middle classes revert to a neo-colonialist power relationship with their near (but poorer) neighbours? This led to two more research questions – whether students would react to the Other by seeking to reaffirm their own identity and culture (RQ2), and to what extent they would 'other' natives of other Asian countries (RQ3).

Teaching travel writing

The word tourist is historically linked to the 18th-century English gentleman on a tour of Europe to complete his education (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2001). Even today, taking students out of their home environment gives them a chance to explore who they are as they explore a different country, to experiment in dealing with others, developing empathy and understanding, and forging a connection with a putative reader on whose behalf they are travelling. Duffield notes the value of stepping out of one's culture: "Cultural awareness and cultural learning have come to be recognised as centrally important in the educational process..." (2008, p. 108). Other writers have said that separating from the group is key to travel writing, and that the reporter must return to "firsthand, solitary discovery of local knowledge" (Kaplan, 2006. P. 49). This is true up to a point, as people reveal more when they are observed or engaged in conversation rather than being formally photographed or interviewed. But at the same time, it is not possible for a writer to remove him or herself from his or her culture, and his or her opinions are always conditioned by upbringing and background. But to connect with a foreigner in a foreign land means specifically stepping out of the comfort zone, and this was evident in the travel articles studied where it was rare to hear the voice of a local. Swick (2001) notes that in travel writing about Africa the animals are mentioned more than the people, and a lack of reported speech does suggest a lack of engagement with the native culture. Significantly, when it was, the conversant went from being Other, mistrusted or misunderstood, to one who has dignity and value:

Poo... is a 22-year-old Bangkok native who now works as a full-time masseuse in Chiang Mai... Poo considered herself highly religious – she practices an amusing amalgam of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism... My chat with a couple of Buddhist monks before that night certainly brought my conversation with Poo into perspective. The Buddhist doctrine is receptive of her vices, as she is merely earning a living to support her family back in Bangkok.

There are many suggestions as to how travel writing students can avoid the pitfalls of dealing unsympathetically with Others, and most centre around self-reflection. Fürsich suggests new professional routines to “defuse the complex situation of representing others” (2002, p. 58). She urges journalism educators and students to constantly question their forms of representation of the Other and proposes three factors that affect journalism at the beginning of the 21st century: the first is globalization, which undermines the standard (national) frames of reference for a journalist. Globalization is central, too, to Gainer’s support of critical media literacy students should develop in navigating texts in all forms, encouraging them to interrogate these texts to look for the attitudes behind the dominant discourse that they represent (2010). Fürsich’s second factor is the blurring of the boundaries between information and entertainment; and third, technological developments, specifically the Internet, which bring voices into the travel writing sphere and challenge the journalist’s position as opinion. She suggests strategies journalists can use, including the postmodern approaches of contextualizing and showing how a travel TV programme is made, allowing the voices of others into the report; and she also suggests regular programmes on social, historical and economic aspects of travel to contextualize tourism. There is little evidence that the audience wants this kind of journalism, however, which has to be a key aspect of the debate over how travel writing ‘others’ people.

Yet her points are echoed by Holm (2002), who quotes Deuze that education should focus on critical self-reflection and consider changes in society towards multiculturalism, globalisation and identification building, and break out of the national mould. This adds to Spurr’s (1993) point that journalism does not encourage reflection on the historical and geographical forces, eloquently set out by Diamond (1997), that have put the journalist in the position to travel, visit and report on another country.

This is also being debated in academic research circles: Traustadóttir notes how often scientific discourses have constructed the Other in ways that makes them appear inferior (2001). Her response is also self-reflection and her suggestion as an ethnographer is to use inclusive language – a ‘we’ that

includes both in and out, both self and Other – which she acknowledges runs the risk of not being understood by the audience which may not want to be grouped with the Others, and equally being rejected by the Others who find their identity in being different. Chang and Holt (1991), meanwhile, draw similarities between ethnographers and tourists, and how each group selects elements of culture to represent; they suggest that ethnographers and tourists engage in cultural *inscriptions* (not *descriptions*) that create the people they are studying.

Us and them

This process of ‘othering’ is central to travel writer’s representations of a foreign country, as well as to the task of a journalism educator intent on developing empathy in a globalising student body, as the process of defining Other equally defines ‘self’ (Inokuchi & Nozaki, 2010). This is important for journalists because it forces self-reflection on their identities both as a journalist and as a member of a certain nation, culture or community. By the same token, it is hard to distinguish the writer’s and the reader’s interest in the Other. Readers want difference, exotica, wonders, and that is what the travel writer gives them; travel writers are, after all, fulfilling a need in exchange for money.

Creutz-Kämpfi (2008) describes ‘difference’ as being descriptive, while ‘otherness’ is strategic, describing a distribution of power with the Other usually in a subordinate position. Fürsich and Kavoori, at the same time, propose that travel journalism is similar to international news reporting insofar as it provides a cultural frame for Others; and for travel writers, it is part of the job description (2001). Clifford (1997) makes the point that in travel writing, the host nation has a (false) fixed cultural identity, and an assumption of rootedness on the part of the traveller looking at the native – assuming that we come and go, but they stay the same – because that adds value to our travelling experience, and encourages us to feel superior. This also reveals itself in a common approach to ‘othering’ which is to speak in generic terms about a group, to reduce them to a collective rather than individuals. Hence one of the texts had this to say about the people of Vietnam:

Hanoians are loud talkers and gesticulate wildly. They lounge comfortably as much as the squat stools allow them and can stay at a particular place for hours, unconcerned about time, the heat or grime. The Vietnamese are curious about visitors and spring at the opportunity to grill a tourist about themselves.

The other side of 'othering' is to represent and tell stories about the self (Bishop, 1989; Blanton, 1995; Holland & Huggan, 2000). The out-group helps define the in-group, and a basic tenet of social identity theory is that people will incorporate the group to which they belong into their own identity (Bicchieri, 2002). Brewer and Gardner sum up a body of research thus: "Individuals seek to define themselves in terms of their immersion in relationships with others and with others and with larger collectives and derive much of their self-evaluation from such social identities" (1996, p. 83). As a travel writer represents a group (the readers) he or she is likely to incorporate some of the attitudes and characteristics of that group. In this case, Singapore has worked hard at creating an identity, and writing about the search for the Singapore idea, Lee (2002, p. 977) points out that the "rhetoric of home" is familiar to Singaporeans. It is also a new country which has followed a nation-building model of journalism (Lee, 1971), and in which travel writers might be expected to look at the aspects of a country that put their own nation in the best light. Certainly George (2006) characterises Singapore journalism as one concerned with maintaining the status quo, backed by the people's (in the main) acquiescence which is in turn partly thanks to a high standard of living that lends credibility to the Singapore Way. In this example, a student travel writer specifically frames the weaknesses of Thailand in terms of the benefits of the home country:

I am grateful to be back in Singapore in one, solid piece. Speeding tuk-tuks, narrow alleys, rough and bumpy roads, and confusing traffic were some of such dangers that I had to deal with while I was traveling in Chiang Mai over five days.

But equally, their own country can suffer by comparison to the host nation and Clark (1999) also saw there are 'potential reversals' in which the home nation can be denigrated. So in the articles analysed we also see that meeting an educated market-stall owner: "...debunked my assumption that night bazaar sellers were generally a low-educated bunch of people who slog their guts out in order to have a better life... In my opinion, they live a lifestyle that would make most Singaporeans turn green with envy."

In creating the self, there is the question of which 'self' is created, and its relationship with the audience 'back home'. This is one identity that a travel writer carries with him or her, both as a representative of the reader and as one who has been acculturated to that society simply by being one of its members (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Hence the articles included statements that forged a relationship with the reader, such as this semi-humorous line:

Being the typical Singaporean, I start estimating my life's worth in dong and settled on what I thought was a decent sum for her help. "100... thousand dong," I clarify. This is about \$10 Singapore dollars.

Travel writing does not need to reconfirm preconceptions, though; it can equally challenge notions of other countries and cultures – that is part of its power (Hooper & Youngs, 2004) – just as it allows a society to question its own values (Holland & Huggan, 2000). This was a repeated motif in the articles analysed, the subversion of a long-held popular preconception upon exposure to reality:

I went over with the expectations of having to plough through dark alleys lined with ladyboys, prostitutes and pimps offering me tuk-tuk rides to unknown destinations with most uncertain of outcomes. Hustlers would pull me into freak shows where they perform disturbing sexual acts not found anywhere else... But it was not to be.

Methodology

A population of 30 articles was analysed, written by 20 students on two field trips to Thailand and Vietnam. The intention was to answer these three research questions:

RQ1. Will these students writing about a foreign culture consider their own actions as much as those of the people they wrote about?

RQ2. Will these students react to the Other by seeking to reaffirm their own identity and culture?

RQ3. To what extent will these students 'other' natives of other Asian countries?

The first analysis was to consider the topics written about in the articles, which yielded a list of common topics including food, shopping, history, landscape, sports, leisure, massage, charity, sex and wildlife. Next, two coders worked together on five other articles written by student journalists but not taken from the 30 as the population was already small. The aim was to discuss what could feasibly be measured in the texts based on what was agreed was present and measurable, for a content analysis. During this process, operational definitions were clarified, which is discussed later.

The resulting coding sheet first took a sentence or assertion as the unit of analysis, to judge whether each assertion was positive, negative or neutral about the country and culture, following Mannheim and Albritton's approach (1984). Did the writer represent the host nation as uncomfortable,

quaint, different, dangerous, or in other negative terms; or as exciting, exotic, glamorous, warm, welcoming or other positive terms? For example, “On the way back to my hotel at Old Quarter, it’s difficult to resist stopping in for an hour-long foot massage from a professional who expertly and efficiently kneads, rubs and squeezes my feet, gently massages my shoulders, and manipulates my back,” would be coded as positive, while “Chiang Mai holds a certain rustic charm that perhaps may only be found in less developed Asian cities; the roads are poorly maintained, the housing scattered and the city planning irrational,” would be coded as negative. Meanwhile, a sentence such as “Make the Museum of Ethnology your next sightseeing stop, and the Baguette & Chocolate café beside it your pit stop for a quick refueling” would be coded as neutral. Most sentences were expected to be neutral – that is, making the reader feel neither positive nor negative about the country and its people.

Second, a five-point Likert-type scale took each article as a unit of analysis to measure the attitude the writer had towards the place. Were they likelier to seek strangeness or familiarity, to judge or empathise, to observe or immerse themselves in the country? An operational definition of strangeness was when the writer focused on the unusual or different from home; while familiarity was when the writer looked for reassuring similarities with home; observation involved the writer reporting what they could see; while immersion involved the writer reporting what they did; if they were labelled critical/judgmental, they passed opinion on what they saw from an implied position of superiority; while they were considered empathetic/understanding if there was a tone of humility and an attempt to appreciate the subject’s own viewpoint. To operationalise the scale further, if empathy (for example) was evident six or more times, it was considered as ‘always’; four or five times was ‘often’; two or three times was ‘sometimes’; and once was ‘rarely’. The scale was given figures so that ‘always’ scored 5, ‘often’, 4, ‘sometimes’, 3, ‘rarely’, 2, and ‘never’, 1. To reach a final score for each variable, the figures for each were tallied for each coder, and then the two tallies from the two coders were averaged out to give a final score for each variable.

Third, a similar approach measured whether the narrative voice chosen was first-, second- or third-person. Naturally, the writer could use different voices in the same article, and refer to ‘I’, ‘you’ or ‘they’ at different times. As before, the same frequency was counted to place it in the same categories, and the same values of 1-5 were used. More specifically, the coders considered at whether the writer addressed the reader directly as ‘you’, a direct connection based on an expert talking to a novice; or as ‘we’, a connection based on assumed shared experience or interest; or whether the writer took the first-person ‘I’, with its connotations of author expertise combined with shared interest (or, indeed, of self-centeredness); or the third person ‘he’ descriptions of the lives of the natives, with its ethnographic

connotations. To establish inter-coder reliability (ICR) the lower of the two coders' scores for each variable was divided by the higher to gain a percentage agreement on each variable; these percentages were then averaged across all variables for an ICR of 92%. For subsequent SPSS analysis, however, a simple average was calculated from the scores of both coders for each variable for each article. Finally, the study used Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient to look for correlations between variables to establish whether they give any suggestions about the attitudes of the writers towards the society they are depicting, and their own society ¹.

Results and discussion

The most common topic among the 30 articles was food and drink (evident in 18 articles) followed by shopping (16) (see figure 1). While these are surely popular activities for many people regardless of nationality, in a Singapore context these are comfort zones as both are widely held as Singapore's national pastimes (Chua & Rajah, 1996). Descriptions of landscape and geography came in third, just above indulgence (10) and history (9). Topics that could be associated with danger were less well represented in the articles with drugs mentioned in only a single article, sex in five and politics (considered an area for caution in Singapore) twice. At the same time, such benign topics as wildlife (4), fashion (3) and romance (3) were also mentioned rarely; while danger was mentioned nine times. Apart from the heavy bias towards the safe topics of food and shopping, these results were inconclusive, and led to a deeper content analysis of the general attitude towards foreign countries.

¹ While Pearson's r is not usually used for nominal variables of the kind associated with Likert-type scales as such scales tend to be categorical, in this study the scales had continuous values ('Always' represented six or more mentions in the text, 'often' represented four or five mentions, 'sometimes' represented two or three mentions, 'rarely' represented a single mention while 'never' represented no mentions in the text) and hence it was considered a valid measurement.

Figure 1: Frequency of topics mentioned in travel articles (n=30)

The students were more positive than negative towards the countries they visited and the people they saw. Out of 1,605 assertions across the 30 articles, there were 383 (24%) coded as positive, 236 (15%) coded as negative with the rest neutral. There are several possible reasons for this. It may be that as Asians visiting an Asian country, there is little motivation to denigrate what they see as a regional kinship. Equally, as inexperienced travellers they may tread cautiously and not be quick to disdain what they see. A repeated pattern was that writers set up the other country in negative terms only to turn that around if, for example, the traveller engaged fully with the country:

Watching a food seller cut meat on the pavement while the blood of the carcass trickles down into the nearby drain as fumes from passing vehicles float by is enough to put many off trying local street food... The overly-cautious approach to street food is what makes beginners miss out on indulging in the local cuisine, and even more so, on getting a first-hand glimpse into the lives of the Vietnamese... Trying local food is the perfect opportunity to enter their world.

This generosity of spirit continued in their assertions about the countries visited. The most common attitude was the writer seeking strangeness, or finding something new and exotic (an average of 3.4 on the 5-point scale). This is not clear evidence of 'othering' as one of the purposes of travel writing is to find differences, which can then be treated in a culturally-sensitive (or not) way, although a postcolonial-style superiority is implicit in statements such as "With voluntourism all the rage today, I simply can't travel to a place as such and leave without as much as a thought on what I can do to help... What I was looking for was a chance to contribute in a way to help Hanoians become self-sufficient." Travellers of all stripes seek strangeness or familiarity along a continuum (Cohen & Cooper, 1982), and in this case the students sought strangeness (M=3.4) more often than familiarity (M=2.8); they were slightly more likely to be critical and judgmental (M=3.3) of the country and its people than to be empathetic and understanding (M=3.1); but were equally likely to remain on the sidelines as an observer as to get involved (both M=3.3).

The first person was the most popular point of view (an average of 3.4 on the 5-point scale), with over 480 uses of the words 'I' or 'me', affirming the preoccupation with self that is suggested by RQ1, 'Will these students writing about a foreign culture consider their own actions as much as those of the people they wrote about?'. This was followed by an address to the reader giving advice or taking the role of the guide (M=3.1, and 170 uses of the words 'you') even though direct reference to the writer taking on the role of the 'Singaporean abroad' was rare (M=2.2). However, a common trope was an unspoken idea that "I represent you and my experiences will be of interest to you because we are similar people" which might explain the predominance of first-person writing. Equally, this might reflect the natural solipsism of youth, especially those trying a new experience; or reflect the self-regard of a generation accustomed to blogs and TripAdvisor reviews where an individual's experience is considered valid reading.

More objective reporting of what people said and did (M=2.2), or descriptions of the place (M=2.7) were less common, as was writing about the locals in generic (and hence dismissive terms) as 'them' (M=2.6). Taken together, this suggests that self-identity takes precedence over 'othering' in these articles, answering RQ2 'Will these students react to the Other by seeking to reaffirm their own identity and culture?'. In post-colonial terms, this suggests that the writers' national, collective identity may not be as fully concretised as was the case for Western travel writers over the last 200 years, and hence their interest is in exploring who they are more than who the Other is. Equally, this may be to do with age, as these students are aged between 20 and 24, and are still developing their own self-identity. At the same time, it is revealing to consider exactly who is represented in the articles: Singaporeans appear

most often in relation to food, shopping, army and pampering, and the students refer to themselves as writers or journalists only twice. The natives, meanwhile, are quoted a mere 30 times in 33,500 words, and are represented by monks, prostitutes, masseuses, hairdressers, nail artists, guides, taxi drivers, restaurateurs, kick-boxers, shopkeeper and ethnic tribeswomen, which are indicative of the activities and interests of the students.

Figure 2: Frequency of attitudes expressed and choice of narrative voice in travel articles (N=30)

Bivariate analysis using SPSS threw up the following associations using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient². Bearing in mind RQ1, there was a significant negative correlation between using positive language and writing in the first person singular 'I' ($r = -.456$, $n = 30$, $p = .011$) or the first person plural 'we' ($r = -.466$, $n = 30$, $p = .009$); and a positive correlation between taking a more critical tone and using the first person singular ($r = .472$, $n = 30$, $p = .008$) and the first person plural ($r = .405$, $n = 30$, $p = .027$). This suggests that when the student chooses a more personal viewpoint and

² Strong associations between use of the first person singular and plural ($r = .858$, $n = 30$, $p = .000$) and negativity and a critical tone ($r = .599$, $n = 30$, $p = .000$) and a negative correlation between seeking strangeness and seeking familiarity ($r = -.510$, $n = 30$, $p = .004$) suggested a reasonable level of reliability.

writes about his or her own experiences, the result is more critical and negative than when he or she is more objective. This is further demonstrated by a significant positive correlation between being more empathetic and writing in the more objective third person 'he' ($r = .512$, $n = 30$, $p = .004$); while the third person 'he' was also associated with being more neutral ($r = .508$, $n = 30$, $p = .004$). But the use of 'they' – often associated with 'othering' – in this case is associated more with empathy ($r = .452$, $n = 30$, $p = .012$), answering RQ3. 'To what extent will these students 'other' natives of other Asian countries?'. In addition, there was a positive correlation between taking an upbeat tone and writing in the second person 'you' addressing the reader directly ($r = .400$, $n = 30$, $p = 0.28$), suggesting that when the writer wanted to involve the reader more directly, it was with a view to sharing good experiences rather than bad.

As expected, a preponderance of negative statements was positively related to being critical ($r = .599$, $n = 30$, $p = .000$), and writing about strangeness was negatively correlated to writing about familiarity ($r = -.689$, $n = 30$, $p = .000$). Observation was negatively associated with familiarity ($r = -.386$, $n = 30$, $p = .035$) but positively associated with strangeness ($r = .367$, $n = 30$, $p = .046$); this suggests that as long as the writer stays as an observer, he or she is likely to see differences. There was, however, no similar but obverse pattern for writers who chose to immerse themselves in the foreign country – rather this was associated with writing in the first person both singular ($r = .514$, $n = 30$, $p = .004$) and plural ($r = .626$, $n = 30$, $p = .000$). That leads to the supposition that a first-person viewpoint is associated with immersion rather than observation, but also with criticism and negative language. If they immerse themselves in an activity, they were more self-centred about it, and also more negative.

Conclusion

While it would be overstatement to say there was post-imperialist tone in any of the travel writing examined, there appeared to be some evidence of a dismissive, critical or otherwise negative tone of voice towards the country visited. This tone of voice appeared to be connected to the point of view chosen by the writer. The first-person viewpoint is associated with being negative and critical; it is also associated with immersion in the country. This suggests that when these students got their hands or feet dirty and actively engaged with a country, it translated into more negative articles. Yet at the same time, conversation with locals brought understanding of and perspective on the lives of the people. This suggests that the combination of immersion and first-person viewpoint creates the least empathetic

articles. This may be connected to the kind of travel writing they are likely to read, which may be in the form of blogs and first-person reports in online reviews. Certainly it was striking how consistent was the idea that a first-person experience was valid because they had 'been there, done that' which the students appeared to believe was a hallmark of credibility – despite the side-effect of producing more negative articles. This is a potential direction for future research, to see what influences their choice of point of view, and tone of voice.

When they wrote in the third person, however, they were likelier to be more neutral and empathetic. If they remained as observers, they felt safe enough to focus more on what is strange and less on what is familiar. It seems that if what they were observing did not actively impact on them physically, they were likelier to appreciate the strangeness. So for the writers to be more empathetic and understanding of a country, they must either be allowed to keep it at arm's length, or their immersive activities must be more closely allied to their own areas of interest and levels of physical comfort. Alternatively, the group leader must brief them that an immersive experience in another country may not be pleasant, but it is best viewed from the perspective of that country rather than from the writer's own perspective – when empathy is consciously applied to a challenging experience, it may be reported in a more positive light. To further encourage empathy and understanding, educators may also want to expose students to a wider range of voices, and not just to people in the service industries that students might come across as tourists.

This kind of content analysis can only reveal so much, however, and the next step for research would be more in-depth interviews with travel writing students to see, for example, how their opinions of the foreign country changed before and after; and what they believe the reader (and hence their own culture) wants to hear about the foreign country, and what its preconceptions are. This would go some way to encouraging the writer to consider more closely his or her cultural baggage, and to be more understanding of the host nation.

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