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‘The locals are friendly!’ An empirical analysis of mobility and mooring in travel blogs

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Abstract

While relations of power have been a repeated theme in studies on textual representations of guest-host interaction in travel and tourism, the emerging genre of travel blogs may offer a new perspective. This paper introduces the mobility/mooring paradigm as a framework for examining communications, looking initially at travel blogs. It proposes that bloggers both ‘moor’ their interactions with foreign locals in existing archetypes by representing them in stereotypical or generic terms; and represent them in ‘mobile’ terms, as individuals whose meaning is negotiable rather than fixed. Through qualitative and quantitative content analysis of travel blog posts, it finds that bloggers mostly report local people in positive terms, that these inhabitants written about mostly work in the tourism and service industries, and are mostly reported in ‘mobile’ terms that allows for re-negotiation of their identity through interaction. The implications for research into power in travel texts are discussed, as well as suggestions for future use of the mobilities/mooring paradigm in communication studies.

Key words: Travel, tourism, mobility/mooring; blogs, cultural studies

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‘The locals are friendly!’ An empirical analysis of mobility and mooring in travel blogs

Power—that is the implicit or real relationship of dominance and subordination between two or more people or groups—has been a repeated theme in cultural studies scholarship on travel and tourism (Hall, 2010) and tourism media (Fürsich, 2002, p.59). Said (1979) is perhaps the most influential thinker on this topic. In describing how the West constructed ‘the Orient’ in a certain way in order to justify colonialist oppression, he set a framework for much subsequent scholarship on the topic. So even in a post-colonial era, travel writing ‘frequently provides an effective alibi for the perpetuation...of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to “other” cultures, people and places,’ according to Holland and Huggan (2000, p. viii), at the same time as offering a locus for self-reflection and the potential to challenge stereotypes and familiar myths about destinations.

When one culture encounters another and writes about it (as with travel journalism) this involves what Derrida called the ‘violence of the letter’, of cultural inscription implicit in textual description, of subordinating another culture by the act of reporting it according to the mores of one’s own (Spurr, 1993). Studies have looked at relationships of power implicit in literary travel writing from pre-colonial times to the present day (Campbell, 1988; Pratt, 1992; Spurr, 1993; Shome, 1996; Holland & Huggan, 2000). More recently, scholars have looked at representations of foreign countries in travel journalism (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2001; Hanusch, 2010) which once again emphasize how places and their inhabitants are represented, so that travel journalism can ‘perpetuate problematic representations by exoticizing difference and favoring a western perspective’ for example (Fürsich, 2002, p. 62). This paper is concerned with one area of such representations in the online media environment: how tourists interact with local people in a destination, as represented by travel bloggers.

While the ‘trivial’ topic of tourism is niche in communication studies, it is significant as it is arguably the largest industry in the world, with growing number of people traveling for leisure (UNWTO, 2014), so that ‘our world perhaps is best understood through the eyes and creative writing of the tourist’ (Pudliner, 2008, p. 50). Travel media is a factor in how travelers construct their ideas of foreign people (Kellner, 1995; Gilbert, 1999). It reveals the writer’s social-cultural perspectives (Santos, 2004). It influences what travelers see and do when overseas

(Nielsen 2001; Santos 2004). The Internet is a growing factor, and more people search for travel information online, where they encounter blogs (Fesenmaier, Xiang, Pan & Law 2010), to which they turn for inspiration (Camprubí, Guia & Comas 2014). Crucially for this study, online travel media such as blogs offer insights into how foreign people are represented for a home audience (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2001; Cocking, 2009; Hanusch, 2010).

This paper takes a cultural studies approach to examine travel blogs as a locus for either a continued representative subordination of foreign people or for a new perspective as ‘power relations in tourism systems are dynamic and constantly changing’ (Cheong & Miller, 2000, p. 379). It introduces the mobility/mooring paradigm as a framework for communication studies. Travelers are mobile, which places them in an uncertain position; as a result they may seek reassurance, or mooring. This paper examines how travel bloggers sometimes use a ‘moored’ representation of local people in which they are fixed by heuristic, label or stereotype, and how they choose a more ‘mobile’ representation which allows for negotiation of peoples’ identity.

Symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969/1986) accounts for how people make meaning, which makes it suitable for understanding sense-making among travelers. This paper studies two alternatives in how bloggers represent locals* (*this is a compromised term: please see endnote*), characterized as moored and mobile. Reporting a local person is considered moored when they are given a fixed role, or described in generic terms which suggest a heuristic is being used. For example, one study found that travel journalism in *The Guardian* usually reported locals as homogeneous representatives of stereotyped national characteristics, or as faceless service industry helpers (Galasinski & Jaworski, 2003). Mobility, on the other hand, has the possibility of negotiated sense-making, an interpretation of reality based on interaction. Mooring implies less likelihood to engage critically, preferring instead to assume relationships of dominant tourist and subordinate local. When bloggers do not critique existing power relationships, they are likely to replicate them. As a novel communicative form, blogs have value as a new force for the negotiation of authenticity (Pudliner, 2008). The question is whether they do so, or whether they replicate existing relationships of power so often critiqued in earlier forms of travel media. This is examined through analysis of travel blogs for evidence of challenging existing structures of dominance and subordination, or whether they accept and reinforce them. To do so, this paper considers how bloggers interact with and write about local people in a destination.

This paper first examines the literature on how relationships of power have been and continue to be represented in travel and tourism media. Second, it looks at the theoretical underpinning for the study, symbolic interaction theory, which offers a prism for how travel bloggers construct meaning about a destination and its inhabitants. To do so, this study analyzed 130,000 words from 80 blog for evidence of mobility and mooring in encounters in foreign countries, to assess to what extent they reproduce and to what extent they challenge the much-critiqued relationships of dominance and subordination between tourist and host nation. The methodology section explains how content analysis has been used to explore blogs, as well as the selection criteria for those included. The findings and discussion section describes what was revealed by the analysis and what it suggests. Finally, limitations and opportunities for future studies are outlined, with implications for blogs' influence on social construction of meaning and tourist interaction with locals in foreign countries, and for the mobility/mooring paradigm as a tool to study communication.

Study context: Travel (writing) and power

Relationships of power have been noted—although often contested rather than universally accepted—in travel and tourism. Tourist power has negative consequences for the host nation, including ‘the display of materialistic consumerism, the commodification of culture, and the one-sided domination and exploitation of members of visited societies by the privileged class’ (Cheong & Miller, 2000, pp. 371-372). Locals are watched while the tourist watches, placing the former as the subject of the latter’s ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1990, p. 1).

More distinct relations of power have been observed in travel texts. Early travel writers often made monstrous the people they encountered overseas in order to justify conquest (Campbell, 1988). Nineteenth-century explorers ‘produced’ the rest of the world in tune with their own imperialist desires (Pratt, 1992). Shome (1996) speaks of travel writing as ‘controlling by discourse’, and into the 20th century, structures of dependency were implied in the wealth of tourist-producing nations compared with the poverty of the nations they were likely to visit (Britton, 1982). Relationships of power and subordination are personal as well as structural. The self-indulgence of leisure travel has been associated with personally feeling powerful (Wong, Newton & Newton, 2014). MacCannell (1976) notes that tourists wish to see the ‘back’ regions of tourist sites, on the understanding that to be allowed into the ‘hidden’ areas indicates social

standing; they have status if they are invited to be where others are not. The view is not always of dominant tourist and subordinate destination, however. Turner and Ash (1975) imagine the tourist as child, helped by proxy parents (hoteliers, guides, restaurateurs) without whom they could not function. Even so, tourists do have the power to travel to a foreign nation to gaze upon it and the people there. Urry (1990, p. 7) places media representations at the heart of maintaining relations of inequality both by guiding tourists to what is known, and by giving them structures with which to assess and report on what they have seen.

Travel journalism and guidebooks

Travel journalism has also been described as an arena in which issues of power and identity are played out (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2001). At its heart lies the problem of representing the Other for a home audience, which becomes more pressing as media becomes globalized and the audience less homogeneous (Fürsich, 2002). As journalists are partly responsible for shaping cultural memory (Zelizer, 1992), how they represent foreign people is significant. Scott (1998) calls travel guide books ‘scripts’ for travelers, and there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence that the beaten track tourists take follows where Lonely Planet leads. Other scholars have noted that guidebooks direct both what travelers see and the meanings they find in what they see (McGregor, 2000). They make tourism easier, but at the expense of limiting the destination through, for example, ‘top 10’ lists (Bender, Gidlow & Fisher, 2013). They guide the ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1990) which is primarily constructed by travel media through which ‘what the tourist’s gaze rests upon is prescribed’ (Bell & Lyall, 2002, p. 145).

Another way travel media reduces the complexity of foreign destinations is to use national stereotypes, which are defined as ‘beliefs about distinctive personality, social, physical and mental characteristics typical of members of a culture, and become cultural peculiarities conveyed by the media, hearsay, education, history and jokes’ (Bender et al, 2013). Differences are emphasized more than similarities (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986) and the outcome is that those identifying the differences feel dominant over those in whom the difference is identified. Fürsich (2002) argues that only self-reflexivity and a critical approach to writing travel texts can overcome the problems of traditional reporting; this paper suggests that a new form—travel blogs—may equally be able to challenge the norms of travel journalism, and depart from the relationships of dominance and power associated with travel texts. As they appeal to a global

audience, they have less incentive to report local life according to the norms and mores of one particular type of reader, driving them away from stereotyping (Fürsich, 2002). Equally, as they are not as linked to the travel industry as travel journalism has been, they may be free to see with new eyes, travel in a different way, and report with a fresh voice.

Travel blogs

Travel blogs, like other media representations, can either perpetuate a system or challenge it by critiquing the relationship between tourist and host nation. Robinson and Andersen (2002, p. 6) propose that such works ‘can legitimately be analyzed to see how they reflect and shape the economic, political, and sociocultural realities of the world.’ As a relatively new form of communication in which inherent mobilities and moorings are still fluid, they offer new potentialities. By contrast, their cousin, travel journalism, has developed accepted norms of representation which hamper the emergence of new forms of mooring and mobility. While mainstream media are constrained by commercial considerations to reiterate the status quo, travel blogs have greater freedom to not conform.

Blogs can offer an insight into how tourists make meaning from their encounters with foreign countries, as travelers describe what they did and felt about their activities (Bosangit, McCabe & Hibbert, 2009). Travel blogs are personal online reflections, updated as people travel, with the most recent post at the top. They usually include a profile of the blogger and a mechanism for other travelers to post questions and share their own experiences. In blogs, ‘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’ (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008, p. 304). They are thus innately mobile.

Most are written to share adventures with family and friends, while others are more professional and offer guidance for travelers. They are growing in popularity and it is anticipated that they will have an increasing effect on word-of-mouth communication among travelers (Bosangit, Dulnuan & Mena, 2012). They are an important locus of study for tourist attitudes and communication in tourism, because they take on the role previously performed by journalists, and because social identification with a preferred blogger means they become like a trusted companion and ‘readers connect to the bloggers like old friends, preparing itineraries based on posts and comments from these sites’ (Pirolli, 2014, p. 94).

Looking for travel information is a popular online activity (Pew Internet and American Life Survey, in O'Connor, 2010). Blogs are among the information sources travelers use (Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy, 2007), and more people use the Internet to plan travel and 66% of US travelers said they used it in 2009, up from 35% in 2000 (Li & Wang, 2011). Bloggers are valued for being like the reader in terms of interest, and credible because they are not in thrall to the commercial influence of the travel industry as journalism is (Raman & Choudary, 2014). Importantly for this study, blogs can influence the attitude travelers hold towards a destination (Banyai & Glover, 2012).

Most analyses of travel blogs have focused on what they reveal about the destination (Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007; Carson, 2008; Banyai & Glover, 2012). Fewer have been concerned with what they reveal about the blogger, although scholars have noted that bloggers write to construct their own identities as travelers, and to find meanings based on their experiences and cultural backgrounds (Bosangit, McCabe & Hibbert, 2009). Focusing on destination marketing, but with a symbolic interactionist viewpoint, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) identified the narrative sequences of travel blog as a process of meaning making that is then shared with readers and future travelers. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier note that the blogger characterizes the people he or she meets. However, their focus is on the interaction between narrator and space—the blogger and the geography of the destination—while this study looks at the interaction with the inhabitants of that space.

Conceptual perspectives

Symbolic interaction

This paper starts from symbolic interaction theory (Blumer, 1969/1986) to explore how tourist engagement with people in a destination guides the meaning they make of it. The theory accounts for the way in which people make meaning, which makes it suitable for understanding sense-making in the tourism context. A symbol can be defined as 'internal representations which are supposed to relate to entities in the real world' (Vogt, 2002, p. 429). These internal representations are created by interaction between individuals. Symbols are valuable to make sense of objects and activities most people will not encounter and places they are unlikely to visit (DeLoache, 2004), and to give people a framework of what to expect and do when they do encounter the person or event, or go to the place.

The theory is built on three premises: people structure and order their interactions with others according to assigned meanings; these meanings are constructed by interaction with others; and they may be modified through an interpretative process when the individual encounters others (Mead, 1934). Mead said that because meaning was shared, it was based on understanding and anticipating the needs and interests of others, or imagining what meaning they may construe from an object or event. Adopting others' perspective can be done internally, but more effectively by actively engaging with the other person. To do so involves a reflexive awareness of not only the other, but also the self. Self-reflection and cultural awareness have been identified as tools for more engaged, sensitive travel (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2001; Duffield, 2008), so this is a starting point to explore how tourists interact with people, and how they either maintain or re-negotiate meaning based on those interactions.

Symbolic interaction has been applied to tourism by Colton (1987), who stated that the meanings tourists find in a destination are significant insofar as they direct them towards activity. He proposes that, in order to interact efficiently, people rely on symbolic meanings for objects, events and behaviors, socially constructing their world according to a generalized agreement of subjective opinions. People interpret what they see, and share these interpretations to reach a consensus (Mead, 1956). This socially constructed reality is not fixed, however, and is open to re-interpretation and negotiation.

Mobility/Mooring

The mobility/mooring paradigm introduced here builds on recent work into mobilities, which originally looked at movement within systems, with people, money, goods and information moving around the world (Hannam, Shelly & Urry, 2006). It is both external and internal, and Urry (2007, p. 47) accounts for it thus:

Social life involves continual processes of shifting between being present with others ... and being distant from others... all social life, of work, family, education, politics, presume relationships of intermittent presence and modes of absence depending in part upon the multiple technologies of travel and communications that move objects, people, ideas, images across varying distances.

Mobility can be legal or illegal, voluntary or forced, conscious or unconscious, physical or virtual, and ‘every thing seems to be in perpetual movement throughout the world’ (Hannam, 2008, p. 135).

Tourism is an opportunity for not only physical mobility, but also social and cultural mobility as it frees people from the constraints of everyday life (Edensor, 2007). So while home life may be more fixed, travel offers opportunities to renegotiate relationships. Equally, though, tourism is a system of power relations, and it may be hard for travelers to escape the trails, routines, and mentalities that are characteristic of travel. Tourism offers an opportunity to be unreflexive and to stay moored within tourist enclaves; or to be reflexive and mobile beyond the attitudes and behaviors of tourists towards Others. Yet other scholars have noted that tourism is increasingly a part of daily life rather than an escape from it (Hannam, 2008), so relationships of power observed in tourism may not be confined to tourist systems.

This paper takes the mobilities paradigm out of physical movement of goods and people into the realm of communication—albeit via travel and tourism—and considers how communication can conform to the power status quo or challenge it, and can build new ideas on the firm foundation of accepted ideas or return to safety after an adventurous flight of thought. Mobilities empower people as networks connect and open up new opportunities. They are linked to old systems of power, no doubt, but mobilities also offer the potential for change and renegotiation of power. More recently, the ubiquity of mobilities has been challenged with the idea of ‘potential mobilities’ (Kellerman, 2012) as a way to interpret the movements of *homo viator* (mobile man). If there is potential for mobility, there must also be potential for its absence, or mooring. Agreeing with Hannam, Shelly and Urry (2007), this paper contends that mobility exists in association with mooring. The selection of one over the other offers intriguing grounds for scholarly research, and the interplay between the two is a characteristic of communication that merits further enquiry.

This intersection of power, symbolic interactionism and changing meanings, and the mobility/mooring paradigm suggested two research questions.

RQ1: How do moored and mobile representations of local people reveal how travel bloggers negotiate meaning in a foreign destination?

RQ2: Do travel bloggers' interaction with locals suggest acceptance or critique of existing power structures of dominance/subordination in tourism?

Encounters between blogger and locals are sites for re-negotiation of power and meaning; or not. A conversation with a local is a space in which meaning about the destination can be negotiated and opinions changed; or not. Equally, an encounter with a sight or an attraction is an opportunity to re-assess preconceived ideas, to challenge received wisdom and form new opinions; or not.

Method: Content analysis

Content analysis has been the most frequently used tool for studying blogs (Banyai, 2012). Many studies (Pan et al, 2007; Carson, 2008; Banyai & Glover, 2012) looked at what bloggers said about a destination; the concern was for the marketing potential of data gleaned from blogs, rather than cultural studies insights it offered into how travelers engage with a host nation. However, as 'in telling their stories, bloggers may consciously and unconsciously reveal what they see of the world and how they see it' (Bosangit et al, 2009, p. 66) they are also a good locus for examining travelers' attitudes. This study used multimodal critical discourse analysis (Calzati, 2013) of texts from 80 travel bloggers. Lee and Gretzel (2014) state that quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis are effective for understanding both the structure and content of a travel blog and, the implied interaction between traveler and local that they describe. This paper employs both methods.

Sample selection and coding

Like Calzati (2013), the blogs chosen were an account of a real journey. Blogs were selected only if the blogger interacted with people, in order to gauge whether their approach to locals could be characterized as mobile or moored. This in itself was problematic, as barely one in five of the blogs returned by a Google search reported any interaction with local people at all; most described only the blogger's observations and activities in a seemingly uninhabited landscape, reminiscent of New World explorers who 'discovered' North America as if it were not already

populated. This is in keeping with earlier studies that noted TV travel shows were more about the host's experiences than the people in the destination (Dunn, 2005; Santos, 2006).

As interaction with locals may depend on the destination visited, this study analyzed blogs on both mainstream and marginal tourist destinations, using the United Nations World Tourism Organization tourist arrival figures as an indicator of country popularity (UNWTO, 2014). Based on this, one mainstream and one marginal destination for five regions were selected: Africa (Morocco and Uganda); the Americas (Mexico and Jamaica); Asia (Malaysia and Sri Lanka); Europe (Spain and Slovenia); and the Middle East (the UAE and Lebanon). For each country, 10 posts were chosen giving a total of 100. Countries were avoided if a language barrier would make it difficult for an English-speaking blogger to have meaningful engagement with locals, such as China or Nepal, as well as those where cultural similarities and a lack of language barrier could also bias the Anglophone blogger, such as the USA or Australia. This resulted in favouring countries set up for tourism, so to counter this countries were also chosen based on having a strong non-tourist culture alongside the tourist one.

Region	Mainstream	Tourists (million)	Marginal	Tourists (million)
Africa	Morocco	10.0	Uganda	1.2
Americas	Mexico	23.7	Jamaica	2.0
Asia	Malaysia	25.7	Sri Lanka	1.3
Europe	Spain	60.5	Slovenia	2.3
Middle East	UAE	10.0	Lebanon	1.2

Source: UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2014 Edition

Table 1: blogs selected for content analysis, by region and country, with tourist numbers

The sample was collected in early 2015 by googling '<destination name> travel blogs' (Lee & Gretzel, 2014), and focusing on the first 10 blogs to be returned. Google is a regular source for identifying travel blogs for analysis (Carson, 2008; Pan et al, 2007; Bosangit et al, 2009). These blogs were among the most popular and hence most likely to influence travelers. All were in English. They were also analyzed for the identity of the bloggers as described in the 'About' section, which held some demographic information and usually a statement of why they traveled.

Coding

A selection of texts was initially open-coded for descriptions of encounters between blogger and local. These were subsequently grouped into a coding book according to whether they suggested a fixed or negotiable attitude towards the local, in keeping with the mobility/mooring paradigm. Blog texts were coded for moored and mobile descriptions of locals. The unit of analysis was a sentence describing an encounter. Texts were coded according to three themes, each representing a duality of mooring or mobility. The first theme concerns whether the local is observed by the blogger, or there is interaction. The second theme concerns whether the local is assigned a transactional role, or the interaction is based on a social relationship. The third theme concerns whether locals are described in generic terms, or given names and individualizing characteristics (Galasinski & Jaworski, 2003). In each case, the first option would suggest a moored approach to locals, in which they represent an existing shared meaning. This paper discusses what some meanings might be, based on the context of leisure travel. The second option suggests a mobile approach, where the blogger assigns the local an individual identity which allows for negotiation and interpretation of their roles.

Subsequently two researchers from Europe and Asia, analyzed 10% of the texts with an inter-coder reliability of an acceptable 83%. This led to a coding book for analysis of the remaining 80 blog posts, or 133,785 words of text. Each coder took four bloggers from each of the 10 countries. Contextual factors, the personal dimensions of the blogger such as age, gender, and whether they traveled alone, with a partner or as a family, were coded. Further cues (Lee & Gretzel, 2014) were sought in their expressed identity: traveler/holidaymaker; nomad/long-term traveler; working overseas/volunteer/expatriate; professional travel blogger; or professional travel writer. The countries they visited were coded according to region (Europe, Middle East, Americas, Africa, and Asia) and whether the country was touristically mainstream or marginal. These were combined with the six mobility/mooring themes, described with examples below.

1) Observation vs interaction

Blogger observes locals (Mooring). This involves observing specific people, rather than generalized references to ‘people’ or ‘locals’ in the abstract.

Cross the water and walk anywhere you want along the riverfront and you see what seems to be an overwhelmingly Slovenian crowd enjoying beers, coffees, wines, gelati, and pizzas in one another's company in what on a particularly wine-woozy summer afternoon seems to be a cobblestoned paradise of murmuring voices and well-fed dogs. (Scott, Slovenia)

Blogger interacts with locals (Mobility). This opens up the possibility of the writer changing their opinion of the local or the destination by having a conversation.

A Penang local named Chris, whom I met at the hostel, told me to trek Penang's National Park to reach the white sands of Teluk Ketapang or 'Monkey Beach'. 'How long is the trek?' I asked. 'An hour and a half,' he replied. 'It would be good to trek as a group, you know... when you reach the beach you can have a little barbeque and a few beers.'" (Rica, Malasia).

2) Role-based vs social interaction

Blogger reports a transactional, role-based interaction (Mooring). This may involve some form of exchange, and someone in the service industry.

At around 5:00 AM the bus driver stopped at a dark, dusty intersection in a sketchy part of town with only one street light. The driver flicked on the lights and began shouting at the passengers... We could not understand what he was saying but it was clear that he wanted us to get off the bus. (Cam, Malaysia)

Blogger reports a social or non-commercial interaction with a local (Mobility). This can be shown by a friendly conversation.

Somewhere between ordering a round of Kir Royales and figuring out our choice for a second round we find ourselves in friendly conversation with a group of Madrileños from a neighboring table. They confirm that Cock is indeed an established and well-known haunt for top cocktails and star sightings. 'Like...' I immediately blurt out the name of the hottest Spanish actor I know. My excitement is met with shocked faces. 'Nobody in Madrid likes Javier Bardem,' states one Madrileño named Juan. (Marissa, Spain)

3) Generic vs individualizing description of local people

Blogger reports locals as generic 'they' (Mooring). Here the locals represent a type rather than an individual. They are a generic 'local person' rather than having a name or personality.

In later times, draining of more of the groundwater led to the canals disappearing in the rest of the area, where they only remain in Xochimilco. Some local people still use them to grow crops, but they are now mainly popular with local, domestic and foreign tourists. When we went on a week day it was almost deserted, so I think it would be better to go on a Sunday when all the Mexicans go. (Daniel, Mexico)

Specific local people named or characterized (Mobility). The local is described in terms that make them appear as an individual rather than a representative of a certain type.

I noticed a little old man up on the steps of the city museum. He grabbed my hand 'Come, come' he said taking me around corners, up and down more stairs, into a church, a mosque, a French library. He obviously was proud of his town and must have been bored. I provided great entertainment. At every corner he plucked another flower from a bush and presented it to me. (Elisabeth, Lebanon)

Findings and discussion

This study analyzes travel blogs as a locus to examine how travelers interact with locals in foreign destinations, specifically whether they take a mobile approach which critiques and challenges preconceptions. It questions what effect traveler identity has on the way they report locals, and also what effect the status of the destination as mainstream or marginal has.

Observations of and interactions with locals were coded 2,532 times. It was more common for bloggers to ascribe locals a mobile, negotiable, individual identity (1,497 references, 59.1%) than a moored, representative identity (1,035, 40.9%). The most common theme was when the blogger engaged with a two-way interaction with a local (725, 28.6%) and the relationship could be described a social or non-commercial (428, 16.9%). Yet it was also quite common for the blogger to report on locals in generic terms as 'they' (367, 14.5%) and to report on a transactional relationship where the local took on a role such as tour guide (352, 13.9%).

Moored reports of locals $\alpha = .75$	Count	%
Blogger has one-way interaction/observation of locals	316	12.5
Reports transactional, role-based relationship with locals	352	13.9
Blogger describes locals as generic 'they', 'he' or 'she'.	367	14.5
	1,035	40.9
Mobile reports of locals $\alpha = .85$		
Blogger engages in two-way interaction with local	725	28.6
Blogger reports social/non-commercial relationship with local	428	16.9
Specific local people named or given character/personality	344	13.6
	1,497	59.1

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of mobile/moored reports on locals

Three dualities were examined to describe how bloggers chose a moored or mobile approach, and the relationship of power implicit in each. The first duality was whether locals were observed (mooring) or interacted with (mobility). They were observed doing one of three things, each of which may be said to have a moored meaning within a tourist context: ‘performing everyday routines’ was most common, and included eating and drinking, washing, playing music, watching TV, and working. It is used to show that the blogger has gone beyond the tourist trail, and the local’s observed activities have value as indicators of everyday authenticity (MacCannell, 1976). ‘Being exotic’ was the second most common and included locals mending fishing nets, performing religious activities and being craftsmen. This represents a different form of authenticity, which is characteristic of the place itself, different from the blogger’s own home life (Urry, 1990). In each case, dominance is based on the blogger having the freedom to travel and the power to observe without being challenged. Third, less frequently reported, was a sense of risk, such as bad drivers, drug dealers, or threatening police. Here the meaning is that travel can be dangerous but that is part of its appeal. The implicit power relationship is that the blogger maintains a safe distance, and is not subjected to the danger.

More often, though, the blogger reported an interaction with the local people, which indicates mobility. Four themes were noted of how the interaction was characterized. First, locals were hosts, and shared food, drink, or hospitality in their homes and among their families. Sharing was a regular form of interaction: food, humor, and advice on what to see and do. Second, locals were children who were shy, friendly, or curious. Interaction with children was commonplace when the blogger could not operate at a level of linguistic sophistication as the

adults, so children offered a level at which they could engage. Associated with this was the theme of challenges in communication, because of a language barrier, overcome by sign language. These were not reported negatively, but as obstacles successfully overcome and indicators of goodwill; so that two people with the intention of treating each other as individuals rather than representations of something, would make an effort to communicate as equals. Third, conversation with locals often veered away from food, drink, and tourist topics, to include race, religion, politics, the environment, history, and culture, which demonstrated a desire among the bloggers to know the destination and its people beyond the usual tourist experience. This was linked to a recurring theme that both sides were as curious as the other. Fourth, a hint of danger was reported by bloggers concerned about sexual attacks, drugs or scams. Yet these were often resolved into reassurance that the danger was in the mind of the blogger rather than of the locals.

The second duality was whether the interaction was role-based (mooring) or social (mobility). Locals' roles were commonly in the hospitality sector of hotels and restaurants, followed by guides, then by transport, then sales. The most common theme of commercial interaction was that the local revealed something (40), offered the blogger an insight, a view of the backstage, hidden region (Goffman, 1959; MacCannell, 1976). Next were interactions that offered a challenge (32) in which safety was compromised or assured, risk was undertaken or averted, and danger was experienced or avoided. Next most common was that the local helped the blogger (30) and improved the quality of travel by delivering service or doing a favor. Locals were often experts who enlightened the blogger (24). Finally, they performed the role of 'colorful character' (14)—a romantic poet, a soothsaying witchdoctor, a scolding housekeeper—who the bloggers offer up for the amusement of the audience.

Social interaction as a marker of mobility or possibility of negotiated meaning, was still overwhelmingly in the tourist sector. Interaction was characterized by conversation (42) about the weather, local life, politics and advice on what to see and do. Next most common was the local showing the blogger something, a view, or some history, their home, or some insider information (30). They also served the blogger with food, drinks, a lift, or helped in other ways (27); and finally they shared jokes, food, dancing, or culture (26). Discussions were often marked by an equal exchange, where the local wanted to know about the blogger as much as the blogger wanted to know about the local, suggesting a mobility approach. When locals showed something, they were reported as being in control, while the blogger was a more passive recipient.

The third duality was whether local people were described in generic terms as ‘they’ or ‘locals’ (mooring); or whether they were given names, personalities and characteristics that made them appear as individuals (mobility). In the first case, they performed three roles, each associated with the relationships of power that are omnipresent in tourism (Boley, McGehee, Perdue & Long, 20014). Generic locals were markers of authenticity and real life (57), whether they were driving badly, delivering things to a temple, sitting on rocks in kaftans or sharing local knowledge (MacCannell, 1976). They were friendly (42) in many different ways, smiling, dancing, welcoming, asking questions, sharing food, and being pleased if the blogger attempted a few words in their language. Finally, they were scenic, having picnics, wearing bright colors, being attractive, performing religious rituals, or looking hostile while the bloggers didn’t buy drugs from them.

But locals were also given names and characteristics, with the potential to become real rather than objectified, which was considered a marker of a mobility approach. Even so, the interaction was limited to primarily with people either in the tourism industry or had roles associated with it, such as driving. Among the 48 named people, 14 were guides, 12 in hospitality, seven drivers, and five shopkeepers. Just five friends were mentioned, which is surprising as travel and tourism is often as associated with visiting friends and relatives as with seeing new sights and people (Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, 2007). Women were also under-represented, with just 12 mentioned by name. Descriptors were more positive (63) than negative (7). Locals were often described in terms of behavioral traits such as friendliness, charm, elegance, or grumpiness (84 times) rather than physical terms such as hair, smile, or physique (21 times). The most common trait was being friendly (22 times).

For a second level of study, the data underwent statistical analysis with SPSS. There were no significant correlations between markers of the mooring/mobility paradigm and either age or gender, or with individual countries. However, the regions of Africa and Asia were positively associated with observation and interaction with local people, as well as with describing them in generic terms and on individual terms; and also a social or non-commercial interaction with them; while role-based interaction was common to all regions. Intriguingly, the more likely a blogger was to be a professional writer, the more likely they were to interact with locals on a role-based rather than social basis. Finally, traveling with a companion showed a negative association with social interaction with locals, or reporting them as individuals with names and

characteristics. This suggests that when people travel as a pair or a family, they feel less need to connect socially with local people.

	Region	Companion	Identity
Moored (representative) identity			
Blogger has one-way interaction/observation of locals	.29*	–	–
Transactional, role-based relationship with locals	–	–	.28*
Blogger describes locals as generic 'they', 'he' or 'she'.	.30*	–	–
Mobile (individual) identity			
Blogger engages in two-way interaction with local	.28*	–	–
Social or non-commercial relationship with local	.31**	-.26*	–
Specific local people named or given character/personality	.31**	-.29*	–

p>.05 = * p>.01 = **

Table 3: Linear regression analysis showing relationships among variables

Finally, the mooring/mobility paradigm markers were examined for correlations. All correlated, but some more strongly than others, which shows that bloggers report both forms of engagement with locals. Yet they did show some preferences. Describing locals as generic ‘they’ showed only weak association with giving them names or personality ($r = .28, p>.001$), which suggests that bloggers preferred one over the other. Similarly, bloggers who had social relationships with locals were not likely to describe them in role-based terms ($r = .38, p>.001$). Observation is the *raison d’être* for bloggers, and their role is to describe what they see; as a result, observation shows strong positive correlations with all the other variables.

	A2	A3	A4	B2	B3
A2 Blogger interacts with local					
A3 Social or non-commercial relationship with local	.86				
A4 Local people named or given personality	.63	.83			
B2 Blogger observes locals	.94	.74	.50		
B3 Transactional, role-based relationship with locals	.63	.38	.41	.61	
B4 Blogger describes locals as generic 'they'.	.45	.48	.28	.43	.40

All are significant at the $p>.001$ level

Table 4: Pearson’s r correlations among markers of the mobility/mooring paradigm

Conclusion, limitations and future research

In Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche Dubois sweeps off the stage accompanied by a doctor with the words 'Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.' Travel bloggers, as they immerse themselves in foreign places and interact with local people, often do the same. The mobility/mooring paradigm gives a framework for examining how travel bloggers represent them, and thus how they negotiate meaning in a foreign destination (RQ1). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the socially constructed reality of 'overseas' and 'locals' are not fixed, and are open to negotiation and re-interpretation.

While some encounters challenged the blogger, the tenor of interaction was overwhelmingly positive: the locals were friendly. Local people cooked, partied, shared, guided, danced, and gave gifts of food, drink and advice. They were characterized as sincere, generous, kind, open, sharing, welcoming, and caring. In terms of power relations, the blogger would often be grateful for hospitality, food and drink, or surprised at the kindness and generosity. These are often associated with access to the 'back' areas of tourism—people's houses, their cars, their special places—which MacCannell (1976) said was desired as an indicator of social status. The status of a favored guest does not have the power relations implicit in the paying tourist served by the hospitality industry of the host nation. A more reciprocal relationship was observed in shared humor, both at the same joke or an appreciation of the host's amusement at the blogger.

Bloggers reported mobility more than mooring in their interactions: they were more often open to negotiated meaning in the people they met. The spectre of colonialism noted in travel writing and journalism (Campbell, 1988; Pratt, 1992; Spurr, 1993; Shome, 1996; Holland & Huggan, 2000) is still evident here, but it is countered by an open, flexible approach to local people; and it is often noted that the locals are as curious about the traveler as the traveler is about the locals. The exchange of ideas is equal. Nevertheless, the relationship still revolves around showing, sharing and selling, which indicate it is based on tourism, service and hospitality. But the power relations often noted in travel and tourism and its related communications are challenged by travel blogs as a form of amateur, user-generated content. They depart from the traditional scholarly approach to travel writing as being post-colonial or forms of dominance, which is based on professional, authoritative texts.

Even so, power relations are still evident. The main goal of a critical inter-cultural communication study such as this 'is to empower individuals to resist oppressive power structures by providing an understanding of the power relations present and depicted in intercultural communication' (Santos, 2004, p. 626). The labeling of locals as 'friendly' thus demands interrogation. The frequency with which bloggers report that locals are 'friendly' suggests that friendliness is unexpected; otherwise, why mention it? It reflects presumptions of power relations, that they are surprised when those with little to give (by their standards) do so. The friendliness of the locals also endorses the tourist's travel in the first place; if the natives were not friendly, it is harder for the tourist to justify traveling in order to be among them. Locals in the service industry may be expected to be friendly; that is their role. But when the relationship is mobile and strays away from the confines of tourism, friendliness and sharing are both features that are frequently reported. Equally, bloggers may wish to distance themselves from such traditional tourist attitudes, and as a result look for, work at, and report egalitarian relationships with locals in which friendliness, and the equality that it implies, flourishes.

The second research question asked whether travel bloggers' interaction with locals suggested acceptance or critique of existing power structures in tourism. From the evidence of these 80 blog posts reporting from different corners of the globe, power relations *can* be negotiated. Urry (2006, p. viii) noted that 'mobility is necessary to develop the capacity to be reflexive about places' and this is not just physical but also social and cultural mobility. Travelers acknowledge different ways of seeing and being, recognize that the people they see overseas are not fixed, awaiting the tourist to spring into performance; their lives exist beyond the tourist gaze. Travel bloggers appear to be more open to such attitudinal mobility, while still often remaining moored in the stereotypes of traditional touristic interaction, just as travel journalists routinely report locals only in tourist industry roles (Hanusch, 2014). One area for further study is when travelers, journalists, and bloggers, remain moored, and when they allow for mobility. Fürsich (2002) wrote in favour of more reflexive travel writing that would challenge relationships of dominance; further research interviewing bloggers as to how reflexive they are, or whether it is instinctive to report locals the way they do, would be valuable.

We acknowledge that there is a western bias implicit in taking interpersonal interaction between a traveler and a local as an indicator of mobility (Lee & Gretzel, 2014), based as it is on assumptions about the individual in relation to the environment which may not be shared in a

more collectivist culture (Triandis, Bontempo & Villareal, 1988). However, as the blogs studied were written from an Anglophone/Anglosphere traveler perspective, this was taken to be a necessary limitation. Future studies might successfully compare and contrast travel blogs written by Asians in Asian language with western ones, for instance, in order to overcome this bias.

Finally, this paper introduces the mobility/mooring paradigm. One benefit of this is to open up space to explore the interplay in communication between the safety and reassurance of heuristics and stereotypes on the one hand, and the risk and challenge of negotiated, contested meaning on the other. It has applications for journalism, where new information (mobility) is consistently packaged according to accepted norms of journalistic practice (mooring). So research might look at the circumstances under which journalists negotiate new meaning; and under which they resort to reassuring tropes. In travel journalism it is common to see travel written about first as adventurous and then moored in something more reassuring—the wilderness safari ends up at a luxurious hotel, for example. In persuasive communication, new ideas (mobility) are often presented in association with tactics that place them alongside reassuringly known values for the consumer, such as social proof, authority, and scarcity (Cialdini, 2001) which operate as heuristics to confident purchasing behavior. Mobility/mooring can extend to social situations, too. Frankfurt (2005) describes ‘bull sessions’ among men, in which they launch risky ideas and try new opinions out for size, in a jokey, good-humored way, to see if the rest of the group approves of them. In other words they use the safety of the group setting (mooring) to launch new ideas and opinions (mobility), to negotiate levels of acceptability (mobility) and then to add them to their repertoire of acceptable norms for future use (a return to mooring). How, when and whether we favour mobility, and how, when and whether we prefer mooring, offers rich potential for research into human communication.

**The term ‘local’ is problematic, redolent of ‘othering’. A thesaurus offers the alternatives of ‘native’ which also has slightly disparaging overtones and ‘aboriginal’ which it states is “often offensive”. In the absence of a neutral and brief term to describe indigenous people of a foreign land—bearing in mind Robert Louis Stevenson’s dictum that there is no foreign land, only the traveler who is foreign—this paper uses the word ‘local’ with apologies to any who might take offense. It is, however, the most common term used within blogs to refer to people they encounter in a destination.*

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