

Ecotourism Blogging: Strategies that Develop Trust Online and Transform Travel Behaviors

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

Sustainable travel bloggers have the power to alter perceptions of a location, enhance cultural tourism, and transform the way audiences explore different locations. To analyze how these blogs enhance ecotourism efforts while building their own credibility, a content analysis was executed to identify key strategies among ten different travel blogs. Among the most noteworthy findings was the importance of the bloggers' travel experiences and expertise, the strategic use of keywords and hyperlinks, and an honest disclosure of sponsorships and affiliate partners. A successful ecotourism travel blog must align content with its brand and values while showcasing its unique niche within the travel industry. This study will help sustainable bloggers employ effective strategies to enhance their online credibility and make a positive impact on the ecotourism industry.

I. Introduction

Cutting through the deafening noise of the digital world can be a daunting task. Travel bloggers in particular face the challenge of becoming the go-to resource for online travelers – something that will only become more challenging as this sector continues to grow. In order for ecotourism bloggers to make a lasting impression on the travel industry, they must develop and maintain their credibility, create a user-friendly website, and in most cases, monetize their platform in a way that does not diminish their online believability. This content analysis identifies key patterns that contribute to ecotourism bloggers' online success, which align with both the Source Credibility Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model. The results of this study will help current and future bloggers transform the way people travel and build increased trust with their audience. Even more broadly, it will provide insight into creating consumer-generated content that people trust, whether it be on social media or a personal website.

II. Literature Review

The ambiguously defined concept of ecotourism is widely considered to be the largest and fastest growing facet of the tourism industry (Dowling & Fennell, 2003). Mexican environmentalist Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin originally coined the term “ecotourism” in the early 1980s. He described it as “traveling to relatively

Keywords: blogging, ecotourism, credibility, Source Credibility Theory
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undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.” (Fennell, 2015).

It is important to note that ecotourism had been in practice long before its coining, and other academics had already conducted extensive research on similar topics. In 1965, Claus-Dieter (Nick) Hetzer crafted the four pillars for responsible tourism: minimum environmental impact; minimum impact on – and maximum respect for – host cultures; maximum economic benefits to the host country’s grassroots; and maximum “recreational” satisfaction to participating tourists (Fennell, 2015). Fennell defines ecotourism as “a form of nature-based tourism” with a “primary interest in the natural history of a destination” that emphasizes “learning, sustainability, and ethical planning, development and management.”

Donohoe and Needham (2006) developed a conceptual framework for eco-tourism based on six fundamental themes in the literature: (1) nature-based; (2) preservation; (3) education; (4) sustainability; (5) distribution of benefits; and (6) ethics/responsibility. These themes are practiced in some of the most iconic ecotourism destinations, such as Costa Rica, Ecuador, and the Great Barrier Reef. Today’s scholars are turning their attention to the rapid increase and proliferation of ecotourism holidays and activities across the world.

The rapid growth in ecotourism-related activities, coupled with more than two billion social media users, makes for a complex relationship. Review sites and blogs help ecotourism operators in the promotion of ecotourism products and services. Consumers view blogs and review sites as more reliable sources of travel information than traditional marketing techniques such as brochures, and they enjoy the virtual interaction that these sites provide (Bindu, 2018). However, Bindu also notes that while this surge in online marketing is contributing to the ecotourism industry’s growth, tourists are still relatively unaware of the key objectives of ecotourism. According to Lai and Schafer (2005), ecotourism operators often fail to express key principles of ecotourism, such as sustainability, in their online marketing tactics, leaving so-called ecotourists without a clear understanding of the fundamental purpose of these activities.

Travel Blogging and its Effects

Travel blogging is a powerful tool that can alter perceptions of a location, enhance cultural tourism, and transform the way travel and hospitality firms communicate with stakeholders (Minazzi, 2016). According to Azariah (2017), travel blogs as those have regular updates, personal stories or opinion, hyperlinks, and the ability for readers to comment. These personalized websites usually consist of a mixture of “organic images” – stemming from unbiased personal experiences – and “induced images” – created to sell a certain product or service (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The wide variety of topics, personal experiences, and bloggers’ knowledge bases provide a varied source of information for all things travel.

However, the portrayal of the same location can vary among different blogs. One study focusing on visitors’ perceptions and impressions of Stratford, Canada, concluded that travel blogs provide valuable insight (Banyai, 2012), but bloggers can manipulate a destination’s image and description to increase the adoption of certain products, which can falsely alter a potential tourist’s perception of a place (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The dichotomy between a destination’s portrayal on travel blogs versus visitors’ experiences in real life raise concerns regarding the effects that blogging could have on the travel industry.

Another study analyzing the economic, sociological and cultural aspect of online marketing on Iran’s ecotourism industry found that these online portrayals had a positive effect on the country’s cultural tourism and hospitality industries (Riasi & Pourmir, 2015). A comprehensive survey sent to a variety of tourism and hospitality workers found that many Iranian ecotourism sites promoting traditional music, food and drink, ceremonial events and other cultural attractions in rural Iran significantly enhanced the popularity of these activities and therefore improved Iran’s ecotourism industry as a whole. Additionally, the level of trust that consumers have in a certain blog or review site is highly influenced by the reliability and expertise of the author (Ayeh, 2015). Online travelers are much more likely to trust and use information created by an experienced traveler.

Travelers’ Trust in Consumer-Generated Media

Consumer-Generated Media (CGM) is described as “media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers” (Gretzel, 2008). This rapidly growing media is often described as a new form of

word-of-mouth marketing and encompasses a vast array of online platforms including reviews and ratings, pictures on photo sharing sites, and blogs and podcasts. The first-hand experiential nature of CGM is largely appealing to the everyday consumer, especially those looking for detailed and honest accounts of travel experiences. More than 50 percent of consumers consult CGM sources before purchasing a travel-related product or service (Gretzel, 2008).

Ayeh (2015) used two well-established models to better understand consumer trust and acceptance of CGM. The Technology Acceptance Model, originally proposed by Fred D. Davis in 1986, holds that an individual's acceptance of certain information is based on two cognitive factors: perceptions of usefulness, and ease of use. Ayeh found that if travelers perceive a certain type of CGM as useful, they are likely to adopt that information. Additionally, the amount of effort required to access and absorb CGM information while travel planning shapes attitudes toward the content and its perceived level of usefulness. The Source Credibility Theory holds that the knowledge and expertise of the author, as well as the type of position or occupation the author holds, are keys to developing trust and believability online. In addition, the level of perceived bias also affects the credibility of the source, and supports the idea that more objectivity leads to a higher level of source credibility (Pallavicini, 2017).

Each of these models and studies serve as a strong foundation for how travel bloggers can establish trust and rapport with consumers in the increasingly saturated digital landscape. While there have been several studies examining the usability and trustworthiness of travel-related CGM, this research will focus specifically on how ecotourism blogs are developing a loyal following and altering travel behavior through trustworthy and objective content, ease of use, and the author's credibility. The Source Credibility Model and the Technology Acceptance Model will serve as guiding theoretical models in this analysis.

III. Methods

Ten ecotourism blogs were selected for content analysis, drawn from recommendations by prominent travel bloggers and sustainable travel organizations. Each of the blogs analyzed (Table 1) met the following criteria:

- The blog and/ or bloggers have a mission statement and a social media presence.
- There is content specifically about ecotourism and/ or sustainable travel. Either the entire blog or a specific section on the blog is dedicated to this topic.
- The bloggers themselves are experienced travelers.
- The individual blog posts meet the necessary criteria outlined in the literature review, which include being topical, having anecdotal/ descriptive commentary, using hyperlinks, offering a comment section, and including relevant images.
- The blogs are monetized.

Table 1

Blogs selected for analysis
Soul Travel
Charlie on Travel
Don't Forget to Move
Two Wandering Souls
Miss Filatelista
Verdemode
The Uprooted Rose
The Green Pick
The Invisible Tourist
Green Suitcase Travel

The analysis first focused on the backgrounds of the bloggers, overall use of social media, and purpose of the blog. In particular, the analysis recorded:

- Blogger's occupation (e.g. full-time traveler, ecotourism expert, journalist)
- Use of social media/ third-party platforms
- Linked social media accounts
- How many followers blogger has on each platform
- The types of media mentions, if any, received
- The industry niche of the blog, if it has one

Second, for each of the blogs, the research analyzed two published articles: one that was about sustainable travel in general (referred to as the "all-encompassing post"), and one that wrote about a niche topic specific to that blog. Each post was analyzed under the following criteria:

- Length of posts
- Frequently used words or phrases relating to ecotourism
- Use of expert quotes and scholarly research
- Use of anecdotes and/ or opinions when making a claim or recommendation
- Frequency and quality of images used
- Number and destination of the hyperlinks in each post
- Number and sentiment of the comments on each post

Third, the blogs were analyzed for how they make money. This section is important because the way in which blogs are monetized can strongly impact consumer trust. From the types of ads on a blog post, to the products or companies affiliated with a website, these elements have a large impact the perceived level of bias and reliability of a blog. Some ways of monetization include affiliate marketing, ads on a Cost-Per-Click (CPC) or cost per 1,000 impressions (CPM) basis, sponsored posts, and sales of products and/ or services. The analysis noted company partners and how the blogger disclosed relationships with those partners.

IV. Findings

Three specific patterns emerged among the authors of each blog. The most common trait was that the bloggers are either full-time globetrotters or have traveled the world extensively. Each of these bloggers wrote about their years of travel in the "About" section of their website to help establish themselves as a credible source. Additionally, each blog provided a clear mission statement that explains why and how they are writing about a specific topic. Lastly, the majority of these blogs have a niche focus within the realm of responsible travel. Whether it be a specific destination or a unique style of travel, many of the bloggers have claimed a certain topic as their own to become an expert in.

For example, Australian-based Alyse from the Invisible Tourist writes about her gap year in which her "continuous adventure around the world" led her through "48 cities, 18 countries, 3 continents and almost 60,000kms." In total, she's visited 31 countries and more than 240 cities, and dives into each country specifically in at least one blog post. Miss Filatelista also highlights her diverse list of journeys, but instead of writing it out in a traditional text-based formula, she created a world map on her homepage that highlights each country that she has visited.

The second way that ecotourism travel bloggers develop credibility is through their current or previous professional occupation – a key factor in determining how consumers perceive Consumer Generated Media. Some of the common employment histories were journalism, tourism and hospitality. Linda McCormick of Verdemode, for example, had already been writing about sustainability and eco issues for a decade while running a website that provided people with sustainable travel guides for eight years. In a similar manner, Lola of Miss Filatelista describes herself as "a published travel journalist and has written travel articles for CNN, Lonely Planet, Atlas Obscura, Matador Network, and more."

These eco-travel bloggers encapsulated their overarching purpose and objective through a simple mission statement. While some bloggers referred to their mission with different terms (such as “goal,” “vision,” and “purpose”), they all clearly expressed their mission and placed it in an easily identifiable location. For example, Ellie and Ravi of Soul Travel put their “why” statement at the very top of their “About” page with an unmistakable label: “Our Mission.” In contrast, the Don’t Forget to Move blog placed a blurb on the bottom of each page with a header reading “About the Blog.” The accompanying text proclaims its mission is to “help promote and inspire adventurous, authentic and responsible travel around the world.”

After traveling the world and writing about a range of sustainability topics, many bloggers find a specific area that appeals to them the most. This varies in specificity, ranging from a specific destination to a particular type of travel. Regardless, establishing oneself as an expert in a specific area adds another layer of credibility to the blogger. Take The Invisible Tourist as an example. The blog has a section with extensive travel guides to six different Japanese cities, a Japanese etiquette rulebook, Japanese travel tips and tricks, and dozens of other blog posts describing her experience traveling responsibly in Japan. The trust she has developed with her readers is evident in the comments of each post. In her “2 Weeks in Japan Itinerary,” there are 44 comments where readers thank her for the detailed post and ask follow-up questions – all of which she thoughtfully answers. This pattern persists in the majority of her Japan posts, specifically her “Overtourism in Japan” piece that combines her love for the country with her passion for sustainability. This post garnered some intense discussions in the comments, with both foreign travelers and Japanese locals writing 2-3 paragraphs about the negative impacts of overtourism. Alyse responds to each comment with the same level of depth and care which showcases her passion for this topic and develops a relationship between her and her readers.

The All-Encompassing Blog Post

Seven out of the 10 blogs in the research sample had one overarching blog post dedicated entirely to the meaning and significance of responsible travel. These were typically longer than normal blog posts, ranging from 1,300-2,800 words, and included many of the same industry-specific keywords such as “local,” “sustainable,” and “environment.” Among these posts, three key features emerged: strategic keyword usage, copious hyperlinks, and unsponsored content. Among all the regularly-used keywords in each blog post, three stood out in terms of frequency.

1. **“Local”** – Each post in the sample used the word “local” at least three times – some used it upwards of 40 times – which came out to a total of 169 uses. The posts that used this term the most within the body text ranked higher in the Google search engine, but none used this term in their title.
2. **“Sustainable”** – Used a total of 93 times, 33 of which was within the phrase “sustainable travel.” Three of the titles included the phrase “sustainable travel” or “sustainable tourism,” and each were ranked among the top three search engine results.
3. **“Responsible”** – Used a total of 72 times, “responsible” was included in both the titles of the all-encompassing posts and within phrases such as “responsible travel” and “responsible tourism” in the body text. Two titles used this word, with one called “How to Travel Responsibly” and the other “What Exactly is Responsible Travel Anyway?” However, these two titles did not rank particularly well; the first one didn’t show up until the end of the third page of search results.

According to Google’s Search Console Help, two key tips for ranking higher in search engines are “unique, accurate page titles” and popular keywords throughout the body text – both of which are reflected in the majority of the sample. When the phrase “what is sustainable travel” was searched on Google, Charlie on Travel’s post entitled “What is Sustainable Travel? (And How to be a Sustainable Traveller)” ranked number one. This ranking, in part, could be attributed to the strategic use of keywords. This specific post used “local” 47 times, “sustainable” 44 times and “sustainable travel” 21 times, and the word “sustainable” was used twice in the title alone. However, when the phrase “what is responsible travel” was searched on Google, none of the sampled blogs came up until the end of the third page. This could indicate that “sustainable travel” is a more powerful phrase that a higher number of people are searching for. It’s also a more industry-specific term than “responsible.”

Another key feature of the all-encompassing blog posts is an extensive use of hyperlinks. This tool allows readers to click on a highlighted word or phrase that will bring them to a new page such as a website, document or video to learn more about a specific subject. In the 10 all-encompassing blog posts studied for this research, there were 131 total hyperlinks. The frequency of hyperlinks in each post varied: Half of the blogs used between 18 and 31, while others used only eight or less. Additionally, each blog post linked to various pages based on the topic and objective of the post. The most common link categories are below, in order of frequency:

1. **Own blog posts (42)** – This refers to blog posts that the author has already published on his or her own blog. It is essentially a form of self-promotion.
2. **Affiliate links (30)** – These links often lead to sites related to travel organizations, hotels, and product pages. Usually the blogger receives a small commission if their reader clicks the link and buys something on the site.
3. **News articles (17)** – These are typically linked to background stories or statistics, and range from international to industry-specific publications.
4. **Other travel blogs (10)** – These links recommend or give credit to another blog, typically within a related niche.

The last major characteristic of these all-encompassing blog posts is that the majority are unsponsored, which may indicate that the blogger wrote the post for purely informative purposes with little to no monetary incentive. The next section will discuss sponsored posts in greater depth, but it is essentially an advertising tactic in which a company or brand pays a blogger to write and publish a blog post on their platform about a particular product or service. Nine out of the ten all-encompassing blog posts were unsponsored; the only compensation received would have been from banner ads on the sidebars and/ or affiliate links within the body text.

Conscious Monetization

Each ecotourism blog in the sample is monetized in one way or another. All of the bloggers in this sample consider blogging to be part of their careers, and as with any business, there must be a monetary component involved. However, in order to build an easy-to-use platform and maintain consumer trust, the way in which a blog is monetized must align with the blog's brand while continuing to provide readers with valuable content. Four levels of monetization emerged in this analysis: affiliate marketing, a merchandise store, sponsored posts, and freelancing services. Some blogs use only one of these methods, while others utilize all four, but one theme that remains constant is that the method of monetization aligns with each blog's purpose.

One way that blogs can make money is through affiliate marketing, where blogs get a commission for selling a product. Every blogger in this sample places affiliate links throughout all types of blog posts, but some have an entire page dedicated to promoting ethical and sustainable products that the blogger recommends, which is often called an "EcoTravel Store." For example, Two Wandering Soles offers a "Complete Packing List for Your Next Trip" with a comprehensive range of products from travel gear to clothing to women's toiletries, most of which are through the Amazon affiliate program. However, the very first post on this page promotes a socially-conscious company called "Banana Backpackers" that sells travel backpacks at an affordable price.

The second way that ecotourism blogs make money is through sponsored blog posts, when a company or brand pays a blogger to write about a product or service, which in turn exposes the brand to a specific demographic. Out of the seven sponsored posts in the sample, five explicitly state that the content was sponsored; the other two do not make it clear. The analysis also suggests that niche posts are more likely to be sponsored than the broad overarching pieces. Some blogs include a disclosure statement at the beginning or end of each post. For example, one post on Don't Forget to Move included "This trip and article was in collaboration with LifeStraw, a company that we've always supported and purchased products from, years before we worked with them. All opinions and thoughts are our own."

Additionally, seven out of the 10 blogs have an entire page disclosing their work with other brands and companies, often diving into the logistics of sponsored content and affiliate links, all in an effort to remain transparent and honest in the eyes of the consumer. For example, Soul Travel included the following statement

in bold on its disclosure page: “Regardless of whether content has been sponsored or not, our experiences, thoughts and words are always my own and we will provide the reader with our honest opinion about a place to stay, a destination, or a product.”

Finally, a blogger can make money through freelance services. Four of the sampled blogs offer digital marketing and content creation services on a “Work With Us” page. From there, the blogs offer services including campaign strategy, social media marketing, and event planning.

V. Discussion & Conclusion

The three patterns that emerged among all the bloggers were rich travel experiences, a carefully crafted mission statement, and a specific niche or specialty within the industry. This aligns with past studies that indicate travel experience is a key aspect of building credibility with tourism blogs. Once this foundation has been established, another key feature that may strengthen a travel blogger’s credibility is expertise – or niche – within the realm of sustainable travel.

Among the sampled blogs, the ones that promoted a specific niche displayed two distinguishing features. The first was that the niche posts garnered an intense amount of discussion, most of which were thoughtful comments by people equally as passionate about the topic. This may indicate that finding and writing about a niche topic could lead to a deeper and more loyal following. Another important finding is that niche posts are often sponsored. Since most of the niche posts were written by a credible source who was both passionate and knowledgeable about the topic, the readers still seemed to trust that this content was helpful and reliable, even though it was sponsored.

One tactic that further contributes to the believability of sponsored content is a clear disclosure statement. Seven out of the 10 blogs studied had an entire page dedicated to disclosing affiliate work, and out of the seven sponsored posts in the sample, five of the bloggers explicitly stated that it was sponsored. They did not try to hide the motivation behind a certain post, instead, they explained their personal relationship or experience with the brand or travel experience at hand, giving their readers context for why they are writing about it. This combination of expert knowledge on a subject and a transparent relationship with readers may lead to an increased acceptance of sponsored niche posts.

A majority of the selected blogs had an all-encompassing blog post that described the meaning and significance of sustainable travel, as well as the bloggers’ personal connection to this type of travel. Not only do these all-encompassing blog posts provide a strategic outlet for self-promotion through hyperlinks to related posts, but they also set a tone by showcasing the blogger’s deep knowledge and passion for the subject. Additionally, these all-encompassing blog posts use many hyperlinks that represent a mixture of self-promotion, education, and marketing, which when done correctly can enhance the user experience by introducing readers to helpful resources and information.

The final noteworthy aspect of the sampled blogs was the way in which they were monetized. It is clear that the three most popular ways to make money from a blog is through affiliate marketing, sponsored content and freelancing services, but these must be executed in a careful manner to maintain trust and believability with readers. With sponsored posts in particular, the blogger must be transparent with the audience about who they are writing for and why. In order to provide value and retain trust, sponsored content must align with the blog’s brand and prove to be a helpful resource for the audience.

Limitations

With only 10 ecotourism blogs in the sample, it is difficult to determine how representative this study is of all such sites. Future studies could analyze a more comprehensive group of travel blogs, which leads to the second major limitation: the homogeneity of the sample. Approximately half of the sampled blogs were from either the United States or the United Kingdom. Future studies could employ a form of stratified random sampling to ensure that all demographics in the travel blogging industry are represented. Another important area that this study did not cover is social media strategy. Future studies should identify the branding techniques and promotional tactics employed by bloggers that enhance or diminish success.

Acknowledgements

I thank Naeemah Clark, professor at Elon University, for her extensive guidance and support throughout the research process. I also thank the Elon University School of Communications faculty reviewers who provided useful feedback to improve my article. Lastly, I thank each and every Elon professor I have had the pleasure of studying/ working with.

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