Chapter  3

Audience Comments on Digital Travel Videos

Sabrina Francesconi
University of Trento, Italy

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to develop an ongoing research on digital travel videos, with an overall aim to offer methodological indications on how to analyze similar online multimodal and multimedia participatory situations. By addressing issues of popularity, response and appraisal, it examined meaning-making performed by text comments posted by YouTubers. Retrieved through the YouTube Comment Scraper software, comments have been inspected in terms of number, language, topic, appraisal, and linguistic features. Overall, instances show positive appraisal and are more focused on the videos, than on the depicted region, and their style epitomizes spontaneous and uncontrolled user-to-user communication within the digital participatory environment. More than for their content, comments seem to offer a relevant contribution to destination image formation, especially, through their presence and form, and from a connotative viewpoint. Alternative to formulaic and vertical tourism communication texts, they connote the destination as open and welcoming, as spontaneous and authentic.

INTRODUCTION

The article addresses a corpus of 544 posts commenting on 18 digital travel videos (henceforth DTV), available on the YouTube media platform. Uploaded over the years 2011-2013 by young and international web-artists worldwide, the selected instances have participated in the Can’t Forget Italy contest, launched by Basilicata Destination Marketing Organization (BDMO). Hence, dynamic texts variously describe, narrate and show the Southern Italian region and, more specifically, the 2019 European Culture Capital of Matera. Over the years, the DTVs have received 544 comments, variously dealing with the videos themselves, the project, other comments, and the Basilicata region. Claiming the discursive relevance of posts a) within the Can’t Forget Italy project, b) within the Youtube website, and c) within tourism discourse in general, this paper raises the following research question: how do text comments posted by Youtube participants co-construct the meaning-making process prompted within the contest?
Audience Comments on Digital Travel Videos

Part of a broader research project on the Basilicata DTVs, this comment-based step of research deploys a threefold motivation. First, and from the viewpoint of tourism discourse, it acknowledges the voice of (real or potentials) tourists and ‘tourees’, i.e. local people (Dann, 1997), expressed through the posts. Secondly, and from the viewpoint of digital media analysis, it recognized the value of video feedback in Youtube communication analysis (Androutsopoulos & Tereick, 2016). Thirdly, and from the viewpoint of research validity, this third step of comments’ inspection enriches and complements two previous stages (Francesconi, 2015, 2017), by enabling to empirically check preliminarily formulated hypotheses on DTVs’ appeal, based on video analysis.

BACKGROUND

Unsurprisingly, latest research in tourism discourse is extensively examining digital communication (Granieri & Perri, 2009; Maci, 2012). Critical attention is being given to institutional and organizational online platforms (Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Manca, 2016), whereby official and non-official institutions, boards, agencies provide information on a given destination, with a more or less explicit promotional function. Editorial texts migrated to the web, such as, guides, journals, magazines, are also being scientifically researched (Godnic Vicic, 2011), alongside more personal travelogues (Cappelli, 2008; Dann, 2007). More recently, an observation of 2.0 participatory configuration of meaning and increasing attention to 3.0 augmented reality (Denti, forthcoming) can be envisaged within tourism discourse studies.

Among the ‘superdiverse’ (Vertovec, 2007) range of ever-expanding and developing web genres, websites (Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Manca, 2012, 2016), blogs (Cappelli, 2008; Dann, 2007), digital journal articles (Godnic Vicic, 2011), online reviews (De Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2013), online videos (Francesconi, 2011), apps (Denti, forthcoming) are privileged objects of study. Against this backdrop, Youtube is yet neglected as a research site from the perspective of tourism discourse.

Acknowledging the limited number of specific references, conceptual and methodological tools for the present article may be borrowed from multimodal research in fields other than tourism-bound. Critical interest in Youtube discourse is testified by the monographic issue devoted by the Journal of Pragmatics in 2014. A book-length introduction to Youtube and to its position within digital communication sites is also Burgess and Green (2009), which discusses how it is being used by a range of agents, on diverse fields, in distinct modes and for different purposes. As for the diverse agents involved, Lange (2011) questions traditional binaries contrasting ‘professional’ versus ‘amateur’ videos, and explores the negotiation of technical and social identity in US teen video makers. More broadly, Dynel (2014) proposes an extended participatory framework for the analysis of Youtube interaction, accounting for a) synchronous exchange within the video, b) asynchronous video sender-recipient interaction, and c) asynchronous interaction among viewers commenting on the video.

Epitomizing the first category, Leppanen and Hakkinen (2016) examine how subtitling and editorial commentary negotiate the figure of the Other to Western viewers in three ‘buffalaxed’ videos. Lange (2014) mainly addresses the second level of interaction within the video. She inspects rant videos, whereby technical and social problems are described and discussed, and how such emotional messages are considered inappropriate by viewers. Adami (2009, 2012) discusses the impact of copy-and-paste on the rhetorics and politics of digital communication, with a focus on in/direct (mis)quotation and referencing in Youtube video exchanges. The author observes how visual and verbal artefacts can then be