

From Online to the Coastline: Exploring Travel Blog Narratives as an Emerging Communication Medium

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of blog narratives in tourism marketing has led to several researches on travel blogs. However, majority focus on content, and reader comments have not been given substantial academic attention. This qualitative study explores how potential tourists respond to travel blogs, as one of the popular online information sources and a well known communication platform in travel planning. The Attention, Interest, Desire, Action (AIDA) model was used to categorize 332 comments extracted from 43 travel blogs written about Apo Island, a small island destination in Dumaguete, Philippines. After developing a thematic coding manual and analyzing textual data, findings revealed that majority of readers' responses at almost 45% are attributed to *attention*. Likewise, marine wildlife and interaction with sea turtles emerged as the key elements from the responses. This provides valuable insight on the psychological phases that travel consumers go through in their decision making after being exposed to travel blogs as an online marketing communication platform and stimuli. Research findings also provide managerial insight and recommendations which are of value to destination marketing organizations such as the importance of the development and offering of value-added tourism related activities and the use of strategic content in crafting online communication executions for the promotion of tourist destinations.

Keywords: Apo Island, AIDA model, travel blogs, eWOM, UGC, tourism marketing

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been deemed as an industry that sells fantasies and builds on people's hopes, dreams, and aspirations, which are then converted into consumable products and services in the form of experiences (Martins, 2015). To many, tourism is associated with leisure, relaxation, or escape. In reality, the tourism industry is a global enterprise and an important business sector for the Philippine economy, contributing 12.7% to the country's total GDP (Mapa, 2019). An archipelago composed of more than 7,500 islands with a diverse range of flora and fauna, the Philippines' rich biodiversity serves as one of its main tourist attractions. In local employment, an estimated 5.4 million Filipinos work in the tourism industry, comprising 13% of the country's workforce (Mapa, 2019). "Things are looking brighter for the tourism industry," as claimed by Philippine Tourism Secretary Bernadette Romulo – Puyat (DOT, 2018). Apart from the Php3.6 trillion combined expenditure by both international and domestic travelers in 2018, there is an upward trend on international tourist arrivals at 7.1 million or a 7.7% increase from the previous year (DTI, 2018). Korea was the biggest

source of visitors with a 22.7% share, followed by China at 17.6%, USA placed third in the list at 14.4%, and Japan held the fourth spot at 8.8%. Other top ten visitor sources were Australia, Taiwan, Canada, United Kingdom, Singapore, Malaysia, India, and Hong Kong (DOT, n.d).

Travel blogs, an interactive online diary providing personal accounts about a destination and firsthand stories of travel experiences, is an emerging online digital communication platform in the field of tourism. Both the supply and demand side of the tourism industry benefit from blogs. From the consumer's perspective, it plays a crucial role in trip planning as a source of information and a communication platform (Chalkiti & Sigala, 2007). On the other hand, blogs provide value to Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) as a digital marketing communications medium with a vast potential for branding and promotions (Dellarocas, 2003). It has been argued, though, that blogs have the most significant impact as a marketing research and monitoring tool (Bulkeley, 2005; Sigala, 2007; Wenger, 2008). This unobtrusive approach of analyzing online content is a commonly used alternative data source since it allows representation and interpretation of a

wider range of travel experiences that also include opinions, reflections, emotions, and attitudes of visitors (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Volo, 2010; Martin & Woodside, 2011).

The popularity of travel blogs among researchers and practitioners has led to a number of studies. Some scholars evaluated blog contents as a manifestation of travel experience (Pan et al., 2007), as well as examined destination image perceptions through blog narratives (Wenger, 2008). Schmallegger & Carson (2008) illustrated the influence of blogs on tourism business functions, and Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier (2008) identified key marketing elements through narrative structure analysis.

If DMOs are to respond to this new reality in a highly competitive global industry, there is a pressing need to study how tourism consumers respond to online marketing content, specifically blogs, which can serve as the basis for micro targeting of travel market segments and strategic online marketing communication executions.

A widely used tool by both tourism researchers and marketing practitioners in evaluating consumers' responses to advertising as well as the groundwork for the development of marketing communication strategies is the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) model. The model classifies the progressive psychological stages of the purchase decision making process that a consumer moves through after being exposed to external stimuli, usually in the form of a marketing message.

To date, there is a significant amount of tourism researchers utilizing the AIDA framework in analyzing consumer reactions to various communication media. Lin and Huang (2006) used the model to study the unintended promotional impact of photos on a website by classifying holistic messages posted on the site. Yeh et al., (2017) found the model to be useful in analyzing the effectiveness of virtual reality as a tourism transmission medium. Hudson et al., (2010) employed the model to measure how a film can influence travel intentions, and Lee et al. (2018) employed the model as a framework to investigate how pop culture influences the decision-making process to travel to pop culture-featured destinations.

From the literature reviewed, it is apparent that there exist four major research gaps along the areas of how tourism consumers would respond to blogs. First, there is a dearth of information regarding how

consumers respond to blogs, in example, common themes and description of its key elements. Second, despite the significant academic attention given to travel blogs, majority of qualitative studies focus on post content but comments are excluded. Apart from being an indicator for the blog's relevance and popularity, comments define the interactivity of blogs where the authors can publicly communicate with their readers, and this provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics of reader responses to blog content (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Marlow, 2004; Mishne & Glance, 2006). Third, there are no existing researches on the use of the AIDA framework in analyzing customer responses to blogs as a marketing communication medium. Lastly, there is an absence of scholarly work with Philippine tourist destinations as the research setting.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how tourism consumers would respond to blogs. Specifically, the study sought: 1) to analyze, in the context of travel decision making, how tourist blogs as a C2C (Consumer to Consumer) communication medium engages its readers by utilizing the AIDA model as a categorization tool for readers' responses or blog comments; and 2) to identify and describe key elements from travel blogs' readers' responses.

This paper seeks to contribute to existing tourism literature in three ways. First, its exploring of comments in travel blogs is a pioneering initiative. Second, by employing the AIDA framework in classifying posted readers' reactions, it builds up the existing empirical evidences in support to the model as a tool in evaluating consumers' responses to advertising. And third, with Apo Island, Philippines as the research setting, this study provides insight on how potential visitors and contributors to the local tourism industry respond to online travel narratives on small island tourist destinations in the Philippines.

The succeeding section discusses existing literature on the key subjects of this research: tourism and digital marketing, eWOM and travel blogs, and the AIDA model.

Tourism and Digital Marketing

Volo (2010, p. 297) referred to tourism as a "marketplace of experience" and tourist destinations are "the mental places where the tourist experience happens". A tourist destination, unlike traditional products or services, is multifaceted and is made up of multiple products (Morgan, 2002). The UN's

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism product as “a combination of both tangible and intangible elements such as natural, cultural and man-made resources, attractions, facilities, services, and activities” (UNWTO, 2019). Tangible elements include geographical features such as mountains, beaches, and physical attractions, while intangible elements include culture, customs, and history (Qu et al., 2011). During a trip, a person interacts with locals, stays in a hotel, samples local cuisine, explores historical sites, enjoys the natural attractions, and tries out new activities. These complementary elements are perceived to be important parts of a whole tourist experience, which determine the tourist’s overall customer satisfaction in the tourism product (Albayrak et al., 2010), and may vary from one person to another (Schaar, 2013).

With the highly experiential nature of tourism products, the consumer’s decision making process is similarly complex. Travel planning requires extensive research and the Internet has become the most accepted source of travel information (Buhalis & Law, 2008), since travel and tourism are historically one of the most popular online subjects (Pan et al., 2001; Heung, 2003; Werthner & Ricci, 2004).

It has also been argued that travel decision making, in its multifaceted nature, has attitudinal and cognitive dimensions that may result to long term behavioral changes instead of immediate behavioral responses (Kim et al., 2005). When a tourism consumer is exposed to any form of marketing communication, their response is not limited to product purchase but is rather drawn out to a range of psychological processes related to awareness and intent that may not lead to an immediate visit to a destination, but instead contributes to a purchase decision in a longer time frame (Johnson & Messmer, 1997; Bendixen, 1993; Siegel & Ziff-Levine, 1990).

eWOM and Travel Blogs

The emergence of User Generated Content (UGC) or Web 2.0 applications, one of the most remarkable innovations of the Internet, has significantly altered the tourism landscape. This development has provided destination marketers with several advantages, among them, a micro targeting tool that can extract useful and meaningful information. In response to the advancement of online technologies, marketing efforts shifted from the use of traditional platforms to more modern, digital platforms (Elliot, 2009). People now go online not just to gather

information on travel destinations, but also to share travel stories. Interactivity is one of the strengths of UGC, where information seekers can also be content creators, and geographical distance is not a hindrance for information sharing among Internet users (Volo, 2010). Well known forms of UGC are social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and blogs. Personal blogs are one of the oldest and most popular forms of UGC (Hitz et al., 2006; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). A study by (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008) also revealed that reading travel blogs and other tourists’ comments and materials was the most practiced online activity in the traveler’s trip planning phase.

Five studies have found that one of the tourism industry’s challenges is the physical separation of the product from its consumers (Mack et al., 2008; Rabanser & Ricci, 2005; Senecal & Nantal, 2004; Eby et al., 1999; Gartner, 1989). As a result, a tourism product cannot be thoroughly assessed prior to its consumption and potential tourists are limited to only virtual instead of direct experience with their target destination (Rabanser & Ricci, 2005; Senecal & Nantal, 2004; Cai, 2002; Dellaert, 2000). The inherent uncertainty and high cost usually associated with buying a tourism product requires a consumer to do a thorough information search in order to create a mental picture of how their target destination fulfills their expectations to reduce perceived risk (Cai, 2002). Previous studies revealed that word-of-mouth is positioned as the most important source of information in a tourist decision making process (Crofts, 1999; Lewis & Chambers, 2000; Litvin et al., 2008). With the geographic pervasiveness of the Internet, word-of-mouth, which is also considered one of the oldest forms of communication, has evolved into electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM. For Hennig-Thurao et al. (2004), eWOM is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurao et al., 2004, p. 39). Travel blogs, with its storytelling nature, is a demonstrated form of eWOM and C2C (Consumer to Consumer) communication medium in marketing literature (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008).

A blog is a public online web based diary of personal stories (Sharda & Ponnada, 2007) that is not subjected to external editing and is generally presented in reverse chronological order. The impartial, authentic, and personal experiences

presented in travel blogs make them a trusted information source in travel planning and this is mainly due to the higher perceived credibility of consumer opinions compared to traditional tourist information sources (Sigala, 2009; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). In contrast to marketing driven content which is often biased towards publishing only positive characteristics of products and services, the unconstrained nature of blog narratives may also include negative experiences. Further, blogs are unstructured, can be regularly updated, and most importantly, encourage interaction between author and readers in ways that may not be possible on other online platforms (Gill, 2004; Sharda & Ponnada, 2007).

A blog post generally includes 3 elements: (1) a *header* with the title, name of author/s, and date of entry; (2) the *body*, composed of text, pictures, and other media files; and (3) a *footer* equipped with tools to enable readers to input a comment and engage in a dialogue with the author and other readers (Wijnia, 2004). Other content may include trip details, tips and suggestions, geographical information, supplier details, itineraries, attractions, and activities. Readers' comments, although not given much attention in studies, also comprise a considerable part of blogs, constituting 30% of the volume of posts (Mishne & Glance, 2006).

Previous literature pay attention to blog elements that have strategic implications in destination marketing. Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier (2008) discussed that travel narratives should be relatable to the readers and should communicate the benefits, value, and meaningful characteristics of the travel experience. Further, Volo (2010) argued that readers' travel intentions may be encouraged as a response to blogs that express 'experience essence', which emphasizes the author's deeper and more personal interpretation of their trip and explores the emotional dimension rather than just the mere sequence of travel events. This corresponds with tourism consumers being aspirational and are increasingly motivated by discovery and self actualization in their destination decisions (Morgan et al., 2002).

The AIDA Model

There is a need for contemporary thought to recognize that marketing communications is a stimulus which triggers context relevant psychological dispositions under which a behavioral response is formed (Grace et al., 2014). The AIDA framework

is an applied Stimulus-Organism-Response model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Modified by Jacoby (2002), this basic consumer behavior theory poses that environmental cues act as stimuli that influences an individual's internal state, which determines a behavioral response. It considers 3 elements: the **stimulus** is the "influence that arouses the individual and the factor that affects internal, organismic states" (Eroglu et al., 2001, p. 179), the **organism** refers to the individual's psychological dispositions or cognitive or affective intermediary systems that process the stimulus inputs, and the **response** is the final outcome in the form of approach or avoidance nonverbal, verbal, and behavioral articulation (Donovan & Rositer, 1982). Approach behaviors are positive responses, i.e., purchasing, whereas avoidance reflects the opposite (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Bitner, 1992). The S-O-R framework has been widely utilized in advertising (Lou & Koh, 2018; Grace et al., 2014) and consumer behavior (Rose et al., 2012, Mollen & Wilson, 2010) researches. In this study, travel blogs are positioned as representing the **stimulus**. The AIDA categorized blog comments which is the main focus of this research, correspond to the **organism** (attention, interest, and desire comments), and **response** (action comments). The succeeding discussion on the AIDA model will lend support to this representation.

The AIDA model evolved from the Hierarchy of Effects theory introduced by E. St. Elmo Lewis (1899) and developed by Strong (1925). It was initially practiced as a 'sales funnel' technique and was later adopted in advertising and marketing communications (Copley, 2015). The model posits that the message recipient's reaction occurs in stages: 1) captured attention, 2) engaged interest, 3) stimulated desire, and 4) readiness for action (Petit et al., 2011). In its modern development phase, Lavidge & Steiner's (1961) study connected the general psychological states of *cognition*, *affect*, and *conation* to the four AIDA stages. *Cognition* (think), which refers to mental or rational states, corresponds with *attention*; *affect* (feel), which conveys feelings and emotions, corresponds with *interest* and *desire*; and *conation* (do), which denotes behavior and intentions, corresponds with *action*.

The introductory phase is the recipient's initial exposure to the message. *Attention* is a manifestation of the consumer's awareness of the message by the willingness and readiness to put in cognitive effort towards processing the information provided

(Kahnem, 1973; Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999). *Interest* is evident when the message educates the consumer about the offering's benefits, and provides enough reasons to persuade them to know more about it (Stepaniuk, 2015). The consumer displays willingness to devote time and effort in research and gathering more information (Nasihatkon et al., 2016). It has been argued that *interest* is the most challenging phase in the model since it has to be maintained, and it serves as an important antecedent of desire (Strong, 1925). The consumer transitions to *desire* upon realizing the need for the offering after obtaining information about it (Wijaya, 2012). Emotional responses, further characterized by a deeper, passionate connection and an aspiration to purchase the offering are important determinants of desire (Mattila, 2001; Nasihatkon et al., 2016). Hansen (2005) suggested that desire is interchangeable with needs or wants and is a driving force that leads to action (Strong, 1925; Vakratsas & Amber, 1999), while Perugini and Bagozzi (2001) argued that although desire is a critical predictor for action, it is intangible and future oriented, and instead implies a more hypothetical sense of a person's intentions. Lagrosen (2005) suggests that online communication channels have the greatest potential to generate *interest* and *desire* since it is a platform of considerable breadth and allows for interaction among users. Once enough desire is created, the consumer moves up to the final phase, where they make a final decision and take immediate *action* by purchasing the offering (Sanayei et al., 2013; Rawal, 2013; Lee et al., 2018).

The model represents the consumer's purchase journey and from the marketer's perspective, once a campaign is introduced, it is assumed that a percentage of the target audience will pay *attention*, among them a lower proportion will express *interest*, even less will *desire* the product, and much fewer will be drawn to *action* or actual purchase (Barry, 1987).

The AIDA framework is a widely used metric to evaluate the effectiveness and persuasiveness of advertising communication and remains a common topic in advertising studies (Chen & Reams, 2013).

To date, there are existing researches focused on the practical applications for the AIDA model. It was employed by Lagrosen (2005) to determine the value of online marketing communications for service companies and Hassan et al. (2015) explored marketing communication strategies for social media based on AIDA.

This current study adopts the AIDA model since the tool provides a known basis for classification of consumer responses according to the different phases of the decision making process hierarchy. Employing the model in analyzing blog comments extends its usefulness to eWOM and C2C communication platforms.

Given the gaps mentioned, this research seeks to address the following questions:

- 1) In the travel decision making context, how do tourist blogs, as a C2C communication medium, engage its readers using the AIDA model as a categorization tool for blog comments?
- 2) What are the key elements that can be gleaned from travel blogs' reader responses?

METHOD

The qualitative research design is adopted in this study. As defined by McMillan and Schumacher (1993, p.479), it is "primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among categories." The main purpose of this approach is to draw out meaning from the distinctive and varied perspectives of the research subjects and to analyze their meaning under real-life situations (Lyons, 2000; Yin, 2011). This approach is subjective, and does not impose a single objective reality, but rather stresses that reality is a result of social constructs, and is translated and recreated based on individuals' varied experiences and relationships (Lyons, 2000; Jennings, 2010). The focus of evaluation is to create meaning as conveyed by the subjects in order to interpret their thoughts, language, and actions (Lynch, 2005) and is grounded on words or images which necessitates the creation of codes, themes, or categories for data analysis (Creswell, 2012). Although qualitative research covers a wide range of varying methods, Mason (2002) pointed out the commonality among these approaches: being hinged on an 'interpretivist' perspective and variables are undertaken in their natural setting, using flexible research techniques which are also sensitive to social context, and being based on analysis which considers complexity and context.

Research Setting: Apo Island, Negros Oriental, Philippines

Apo Island, Negros Oriental was chosen as the island tourist destination for this research. Located at 7 kilometers off the southeastern tip of Negros Island and 30 kilometers south of Dumaguete, Apo island is a small volcanic island known for its abundance of corals and magnificent sea creatures. It has a land area spanning 74 hectares and belongs under the Municipality of Dauin, Negros Oriental. With a total population of 823 (2015 census), their primary sources of income are fishing and tourism respectively. "Apo" was derived from the Filipino word for "grandchild". Apo Island is considered as a Marine Protected Area under the jurisdiction of the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) through the efforts of researchers from Silliman University Marine Laboratory (Van Beukering et al., 2007). The island is one of the most well known community-organized marine sanctuaries worldwide (Raymundo and Maypa 2001; Maypa et al. 2002; Alcala 1997). At present, the island's marine ecosystem boasts of rich and diverse marine life forms, including the green sea turtle which is considered an endangered species (IUCN, 2018). Major activities among tourists and visitors are diving and snorkeling, where swimming with the turtles is the most preferred activity since it does not require expertise unlike diving (DENR, 2019). In 2018, total tourist arrivals in Negros Oriental was recorded at 883,295, 1.6% of the national total of overnight travelers in accommodation establishments in the Philippines. From this number, 86.9% consisted of domestic tourists, 13.12% were foreign visitors, and 0.5% were overseas based Filipinos (DOT, n.d.). The municipality of Dauin recorded 3,481 arrivals, 79.5% of which were international tourists, and 20.5% were domestic visitors (DOT, n.d.).

Data Collection

Data collection period was April to July 2019.

Purposive sampling method was used for this study and only blogs about Apo Island trips were selected. The samples were generated using the following search engines: google.com, searchblogspot.com, and blogsearchengine.org using "Apo Island", "Apo Island Blog", "Apo Island Tour", and "Apo Island Travel" as keywords. The initial sample was 57 blogs. The entries underwent a preliminary review process where each post was read one by one to satisfy the researcher's criteria to analyze

only blogs with content focused on the author's travel experience and should exclude advertisements and other promotional material. After the first review, the blog samples were reduced to 51. Next, since the study focus is on reader comments, blog entries without comments were further disregarded. The final number of blogs was reduced to 43 After the second review. These blog entries were published from February 2009 to June 2019.

From the 43 selected blogs, a total sample of 332 comments were retrieved for analysis. Only readers' comments were included in the sample and authors' comments or replies were not counted. The comment samples were posted by 304 unique individuals or parties and out of these 304 parties, 283 posted only once and 21 posted multiple comments.

This study employed the casuistic approach for ethical considerations in online research data collection (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), thus, informed consent was not sought from the blog authors and commenters since content analysis performed in this study does not pose any form of harm towards the subjects or their privacy. Further, direct quotes of blog comments were anonymized.

Coding and Analysis

A codebook was developed to serve as the primary guide in the coding process of the analysis of the blog comments. Lin & Huang's (2006) categorization instrument using the AIDA model was adopted. The researcher utilized literature review material as basis in developing the initial code descriptions for each category. To validate the thematic codes, a focus group discussion was conducted to assess the adopted instrument and provide context to local tourism practices. Four (4) senior faculty colleagues from the College of Management were invited. The group consisted of 1 associate professor from the Management department, and 2 associate professors and 1 assistant professor from the Marketing program of the Accounting department. The consultants, apart from specializing in subjects on marketing communications, marketing research, and digital marketing, all have tourism marketing research experience, particularly on small island tourism. The dialogue centered on the participants' understanding of the existing codes, and one of the common questions asked was "Do you think this category is applicable in the context of Apo Island?" Suggestions were also taken into consideration and some coding

categories were edited to incorporate specific examples. The output of the discussion resulted to revisions in Lin & Huang's (2006) instrument, including the development of additional subcategories for each of the four AIDA phases (See Table 1).

It was also found that the collected data included multiple-statement comments which may possibly belong to multiple AIDA categories. To address this, it was emphasized in the coding protocol that the final classification for these multiple-statement comments

Table 1. Thematic codes for travel blog comments

AIDA	CODING CATEGORIES	REFERENCE
	Praise/s for blog entry and photos	Lin & Huang (2006) Hadiyati (2016)
	Thanking blogger for sharing their travel experience	Rowley (1998) Lin & Huang (2006) Meyrick (2006)
ATTENTION	Questions/Comments about the camera	Lin & Huang (2006)
	Comments about a personal feeling/sentiment on Apo island, including island's elements (i.e., turtles, natural scenery, activities); compares island with similar destinations already visited	Adams (1916) Lin & Huang (2006) Stepaniuk (2015)
	Shares websites discussing destination	Deci & Ryan (1980) Wasko & Faraj (2005) Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)
INTEREST	Destination is part of to do/bucket list	Nasihatkon et al. (2016)
	General inquiry about destination details without specific travel plans (i.e., 'seasonality' of turtles, how to get to the island, weather conditions)	Hassan et al. (2015)

Table 1 (continued)

AIDA	CODING CATEGORIES	REFERENCE
	Jealous of trip, regrets not going	Oflazoglu & Aydin (2016) Mattila (2001)
DESIRE	Identifies as dream destination, characterized by strong emotions towards going	Lin & Huang (2006) Hassan et al. (2015) Nasihatkon et al. (2016)
	States plans of visiting with target travel period	Hassan et al. (2015) Lin & Huang (2006) Weilbacher (2001) Vakratsas & Amber (1999)
	Specific inquiry about destination details with specific travel plans (rates for tour operators, amenities of hotel accommodation, what equipment to bring)	Lin & Huang (2006)
ACTION	Have already visited and recommends destination	Lin & Huang (2006) Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) Luke (2014)
	Nostalgia of past trip to destination	Luke (2014)
	States confirmed travel plans	Lin & Huang (2006) Lee et al. (2018) Vieira & Almeida (2019)

should be based on the statement belonging to the higher-ordered category since the categorization instrument is grounded on a framework that is hierarchical in nature.

To ensure reliability and to avoid bias, the blog comments were coded separately by two independent judges. After the coding results were generated, double checks were made through discussions. In the event of differences, a third judge was introduced into the discussion for a resolution. This method was also employed by studies analyzing television advertisements (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989) and evaluation of online tourist reviews (Cong et al., 2014). A common area of disagreement between judges were usually over the *interest* and *desire* categorization. The two judges coded 301 out of the 332 comments similarly, resulting to an interrater reliability of 91%, which is above the 85% reliability coefficient standard suggested by Kassirjian (1977).

Content Analysis

Content analysis is one of the various qualitative research methods employed in text data analysis. Defined by Hsieh & Shannon (2005, p.1278) as a “research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.” It was initially established in the fields of sociology, psychology, and anthropology, as a means to explore fundamental physical messages (Hashemnezhad, 2015).

This study uses the directed content analysis approach, with the general purpose of validating or extending an existing conceptual framework or theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Hashemnezhad, 2015). The AIDA theory lent focus to the research problem and served as the basis for coding categories and discussion of results. Since it is improbable that the resulting data can be compared using statistical tools (Curtis et al., 2001), the findings are described by presenting the frequency of coded data representing the four main categories of the AIDA model.

RESULTS

The succeeding section is divided into two parts. The first part provides an overview of the blog authors' characteristics as well as a general description of the blog contents. After which, a summary of the AIDA categorized blog comments are presented, followed by a brief discussion of the results per category.

Blog and Blogger Characteristics

Brief demographic information about the authors was available in the blogs that were analyzed. Of the 43 samples, 34 were individually written, 5 were co-produced (with a male-female collaboration), and 4 were tagged as missing values, since the authors' names represented a group. Of the 34 individual blogs, 65% were female and 35% were male. More than half of the authors (30) were from the Philippines, and 7 from foreign countries (France, Iceland, Belgium, UAE, USA, and Australia). There were 6 authors of indeterminable countries of origin. Majority of the blogs were in English and the 2 French written blogs were translated to English via *Google Translate*. A higher number of the authors indicated that they travelled with companions (31), while 9 went solo. 3 blogs were unclear whether the authors traveled alone or in a group since 3rd person narratives were used. No demographic data was drawn from the blog commenters due to the unavailability of personal information on their public online profiles.

General Overview of Blog Content

All blogs contained text and photos. Posted photos included images of the natural environment such as underwater experience (sea turtles, fish, and corals), beach scenery (shoreline, sunrise and sunset views, rock formations), hiking trails, the lighthouse, boats, and sailing boat rides. There were likewise photos of the host community and its elements - of the local townfolk and children, local food, and souvenirs. Content topics included accounts of Apo Island as part of a Dumaguete trip, itineraries and its cost implications, and the simple lifestyle of the people on the island. Featured activities were hiking, snorkeling, diving, and underwater navigation.

Categorizing Comments using the AIDA Model

The succeeding section details the results of the AIDA categorization of the blog comments. Comment extracts for each of the AIDA categories and subcategories are also presented on Appendix A.

All comments were evaluated and categorized and the results are shown on Table 2. Comments relating to *attention* ranked highest at 44.88%, *interest* was at 15.06%, *desire* comprised 28.92%, and *action* comments ranked lowest at 11.15%.

Table 2. Categorized travel blog comments—Attention, Interest, Desire, Action (AIDA)

CATEGORIZED COMMENTS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Attention		
Comments about a personal feeling/sentiment on Apo island, including island's elements (i.e., turtles, natural scenery, activities); compares island with similar destinations already visited	115	34.74%
Praise/s for blog entry and photos	16	4.83%
Thanking blogger for sharing their travel experience	14	4.23%
Questions/Comments about the camera	4	1.21%
(ATTENTION) SUBTOTAL	149	44.88%
Interest		
General inquiry about destination details (i.e., 'seasonality' of turtles, how to get to the island, weather conditions), does not indicate travel plans	25	7.55%
Destination is part of to do/bucket list	23	6.95%
Shares websites discussing destination	2	0.60%
(INTEREST) SUBTOTAL	50	15.06%
Desire		
Specific inquiry about destination details (rates for tour operators, amenities of hotel accommodation, what equipment to bring), may also indicate travel plans	65	19.64%

Table 2 (continued)

CATEGORIZED COMMENTS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Identifies as dream destination, characterized by strong emotions towards going	21	6.34%
Jealous of trip, regrets not going	7	2.11%
States plans of visiting with target travel period	3	0.91%
(DESIRE) SUBTOTAL	96	28.92%
Action		
States confirmed travel plans	18	5.44%
Nostalgia / reminiscing of past trip to destination	10	3.02%
Have already visited / recommends destination	9	2.72%
(ACTION) SUBTOTAL	37	11.15%
TOTAL	332	100%

Attention

Readers' captured *attention* was most evident in comments on personal feelings or sentiments about Apo Island and its elements. There were statements about natural attractions such as the underwater scenery and marine sanctuary, in which they were described as "amazing", "beautiful", and "gorgeous". Snorkeling and diving emerged as popular activities, and the island was identified as an ideal venue for it. The sea turtles, however, were the most recurrent theme, as they were cited in more than 60 comments under this category alone. They were mentioned in many, diverse contexts - from wanting to swim up close with them, cartoon movie references, to shared advocacies in protecting their species. There were likewise comments comparing the

author's experience in Apo Island with similar local and international destinations already visited by the readers. Other statements under this category were expressions of thanks to the author for sharing their travel experience and giving them the motivation to try underwater activities. There were also compliments on the manner of blog writing, as well as the quality of the photos. Comments pertaining to the author's camera included mentions about the camera's brand and photo elements such as underwater lighting.

Interest

Recognizing the value of Apo Island as a destination through information search was evident on the highest ranking comments under this phase. Readers posted general questions without stated travel plans. The inquiries included questions about

the underwater activities, whether it would be advisable to bring children or senior citizens, and entry and exit points to and from the island. The sea turtles were once again a dominant subject, as a considerable number of questions were about their seasonality. A significant number of *interest* comments expressed the readers' future plans of visiting Apo Island by adding the destination to their list of places to visit. It was evident, though, that these comments lacked a sense of urgency and immediate plans were not stated.

Desire

Specific inquiries comprised majority of the comments signifying *desire* towards visiting Apo Island. In contrast to the previous category under the *interest* phase, these questions were more targeted. The highest ranking inquiries pertained to transportation, specifically about trip schedules and cost. Specific suppliers were mentioned. For example, Harold's Mansion, a known hostel in Dumaguete offering tours in Apo Island came up more than once. There were likewise recommendation requests for accommodations on the island itself. Some inquiries also included stated tentative travel plans.

Apart from the nature of inquiries, another significant difference between *interest* and *desire* statements was the affective component present in the latter for comments identifying Apo Island as a target destination. The remarks were characterized by a stronger aspiration to travel to the island, and not just merely including Apo Island in their bucket list. The phrase "*would love to visit*" came up six times, and enthusiasm was also evident on statements such as "*OMG!! One of my dream destination!!!*", and "*I need to go!!!*" Although not as dominant as the previously cited categories, emotions from the other side of the spectrum were also evident and these were of jealousy and regret for not taking the opportunity to go to the island.

Action

Readers' responses indicating confirmed travel plans had the highest frequency under the *action* phase. Apart from stating the travel dates and looking forward to their trip, some comments also included inquiries on diving rates, boat schedules, and if sharing boat rentals with other travelers was possible. One comment stated confirmed plans of their second trip to the destination. Likewise included in this phase are comments by readers who have already been to

Apo Island. Some shared personal recommendations and others expressed a sense of reminiscence of their past trip. Such remarks from the readers reinforced the authors' narrative about the island.

DISCUSSION

This investigation offers insight on the role of tourist blogs in the travel decision making process. *Attention* related comments ranking highest based on the AIDA model suggests that most tourism consumers responding to online travel narratives are in the early stages of their trip planning. Further, underwater scenery, particularly sea turtles, emerged as dominant elements in the readers' responses. This finding may serve as a valuable input for Apo Island's tourism stakeholders in the creation the destination's marketing initiatives.

This section elaborates the study's theoretical and practical contributions, and discusses the study's limitations and recommendations for further research work.

Theory and Literature Implications

The first question of this study sought to investigate how online travel narratives engage its readers using the AIDA model as a categorization tool for readers' comments. Findings demonstrate that travel blogs elicited *attention* as the strongest response from potential tourists, followed by *desire*, *interest*, and *action*. Interestingly, although this research evaluated comments gathered from multiple blogs, results are consistent with the study of Lin & Huang (2006) who analyzed messages posted on a single platform, a personal Greek tour photo website. This draws attention to the similarities between the reactions of travel blog readers and personal website followers.

In the context of AIDA as a communication model in relation to the travel decision making process, *attention* comments ranking highest may be indicative that blogs may be one of the earlier forms of marketing communications that majority of tourism consumers sought or was unintentionally exposed to, given that attention is the initial phase in the AIDA hierarchy. Along the same line of analysis, it may also imply that blog readers who posted *desire* comments, which has the second highest frequency, might have been exposed to other marketing communication messages prior to accessing blogs. This is indicative that they may possibly be in the later stage of their trip

planning, and are perhaps much closer to making the final 'purchase' decision of visiting Apo Island.

In the S-O-R perspective, although not discussed in depth in this research, the results showing that almost 89% of comments classified under *attention, interest, and desire* may possibly imply that travel blogs as a stimulus has a higher probability of being a component of the organismic dimension or the psychological processes of the tourism consumer, and has a low likelihood of leading to a response or final outcome of deciding to visit a destination or not. This also lends support to previous studies on travel decision making which claims that exposure to marketing communications may contribute to a destination visit in a longer timeframe rather than leading the consumer to an immediate trip (Johnson & Messmer, 1997; Bendixen, 1993; Siegel & Ziff-Levine, 1990).

The present study also provides theoretical contributions. Aside from using blog comments as research data, this research initiated the use of the AIDA model in analyzing reader responses from multiple travel blog sources. The method may also be applied to other UGC and eWOM platforms in other contexts. Tourism researchers can also adopt the model in studying other tourist destinations.

Practical Implications

To address the second objective, results of the thematic analysis revealed dominant trip experience elements appealing to Apo travel blog readers – interaction with sea turtles. DMOs can leverage on this unique tourist attraction that may serve as the core component of the destination's promotion efforts. There is a potential for the creation of more value added offerings stemming from the island's existing marine life tourism activities. Tourism marketers can collaborate with the island's local stakeholders to explore the possibility of creating more meaningful marine wildlife experiences with sea turtles. Previous studies have reported that many wildlife tourists are unaware of how their activities may adversely affect the environment (Eagle et al., 2016; Meletis & Harrison, 2010). Incorporating educational sessions and interpretation programs to tourists will aid in increasing tourist awareness of marine wildlife and sea turtle conservation, and at the same time encourage them to become conservation partners by sharing information about the species and providing a clear explanation behind the island's enforced policies and practices on wildlife interactions. These

can be in different forms: slide show presentations for visitors, flyers and posters to be distributed upon arrival at visitor information centers and local tourism offices, interactive discussions with trained tour guides, or installation of informative and visually appealing displays in strategic locations on the island and in the airport. Active involvement of the island's accommodation and service providers can also be sought. Hostels, homestays, and restaurants can adopt the underwater/sea turtle theme in their establishments and also use the opportunity to educate their patrons by posting educational materials and collaterals on wildlife conservation, such as using informative tablemats in their restaurants. A more creative approach can also be employed. In a remote island community in Vanuatu, their locals stage a simple drama production entitled "I'm a Turtle," which is targeted to educate tourists about sea turtle conservation (Petro & Fletcher, 2007).

Moreover, there was strong evidence of readers' affirmative responses to photographs and this underpins the impact of images as online content and the value they contribute to blogs. The old saying '*a picture is worth a thousand words*' still holds true in the digital age. Apart from being a means to capture readers' attention and turning a scan into a sustained evaluation of the blog contents by revealing important visual elements of a tourist destination, photographs also have the power to evoke strong positive emotions. Thus, tourism marketers must maximize this potential with the strategic use of compelling images on online communication platforms.

Lastly, it was found that one of the strongest indicators of *desire* are requests for more specific information about the destination. Although it was earlier argued that the *desire* phase is rather abstract and less connected to action (Perugini and Bagozzi, 2001), this still presents an important opportunity for DMOs. This result is instrumental in determining what would prompt tourism consumers from *desire* to *action* or finally booking a trip to the destination. Given the nature of the inquiries posted, most common of which are transportation options, rates, and schedules; accommodation rates and details; and tour guide information. Tourism marketers and Apo Island's ecotourism stakeholders can collaborate and come up with strategies that will provide its potential tourists with an even more compelling reason to visit the destination. Some of these initiatives may include the following: providing safe transportation to and from the island, more frequent

trip schedules, flexible accommodation cancellation policies, partnering with online hotel booking sites which provide promo rates and discounts; and provide recreation amenities (accommodation) or promote alternative tourism activities (local government) in the event that underwater activities may not be possible. It is also of equal importance that these initiatives be properly communicated and promoted to tourism consumers through validated and accredited online communication platforms such as LGU tourism and supplier websites. As reinforcement to the personal experiences shared in their blog narratives, authors can provide links of these sites in their posts which readers can freely access, helping reduce time and effort intended for online research.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. First, it is acknowledged that although blog comments are considered a valuable source of information on readers as potential tourists, there is no guarantee that the findings from the qualitative data set used are representative of all reader responses since some may choose not to post comments. Furthermore, blog users represent only a subgroup of the tourism population as a whole, hence, caution must be applied in generalizing the results. In addition, there is no available data on readers' demographic characteristics. Lastly, this study is limited to only posted comments as a basis for classifying reader responses. It may be possible that some blog readers may choose not to comment, but still be in a particular stage in the AIDA model in response to being exposed to tourist blogs.

It is recommended that tourism researchers further confirm the results of this study with quantitative analysis to address some unanswered questions in this domain. The first subject of inquiry is the correlation between blog content and reader responses. It would be beneficial for practitioners to know what type of blog content may elicit favorable responses and yield the greatest positive impact on readers' travel intentions. A future study investigating the profile of blog users and their dynamics would also be very interesting. Likewise, the complex decision making process of tourism consumers is also another research area that can be explored.

CONCLUSION

This research was designed to determine how travel narratives as a marketing communications tool engages tourism consumers based on reader responses and employing the AIDA tool as a categorization tool. The results support the idea of the complexity of travel decision making, with focus on the different psychological processes that the consumers go through after being exposed to marketing stimuli. With the highest number of reader comments classified under *attention*, the first phase of the AIDA hierarchy, it can be an implication that majority of travel blog readers are in the initial phase of their trip planning or that the blog was one of the earlier forms of marketing communication that the consumer was exposed to. The study likewise enhances the link between tourism and the S-O-R theory, with the results demonstrating that travel blogs, as a stimulus, generally do not elicit an immediate response but rather trigger cognitive and affective processes in the tourism consumers' psyche. Another purpose of this study was to identify and characterize key elements drawn out from blog readers' responses. Sea turtles and marine wildlife emerged as dominant themes, as well as inquiries for specific Apo Island destination details. Taken together, these findings may serve as a basis for crafting of appropriate online communication strategies that can be executed in conjunction with travel blogs and can positively contribute to an integrated promotional effort for tourist destinations.

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