The ‘Blogosphere’ as a Platform for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: The Case of TEFL Tourism

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Abstract

The use of the Internet is becoming increasingly integral to the day-to-day operations of society, facilitating an inter-connected and globalised world, where geographic barriers are no longer a defining criteria for communication. This opens the researcher up to a realm of research opportunities, which to-date have been under-exploited. This paper contributes to the wider body of literature addressing the concept of Online research, demonstrating in practice how it can be utilised in the context of interpretative phenomenological analysis. It is argued that netnography is akin to IPA in that it accounts for an individual’s personal perception or account of an event or state, as opposed to attempting to produce an objective record. This paper outlines how blog analysis can be utilised in the context of IPA, demonstrating how this worked in practice during the initial exploratory research phase of the TEFL tourism phenomenon.

Keywords: netnography, Internet, blog, interpretative phenomenological analysis, TEFL tourism

Introduction

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is concerned with trying to understand lived experiences. It is phenomenological in that it explores an individual’s personal perception or account of an event or state, rather than attempting to produce an objective record (Smith *et al*, 2009). Conceptualised in the mid-1990s (Smith, 1996), this methodology continues to hold a dominant position in qualitative research (Willig, 2008). There are a range of possible approaches which facilitate the use of IPA through a strong idiographic focus, ranging from the more traditional methods such as interviews, to more contemporary research methodologies such as netnography. Complimentary of IPA, netnographic research yields deep human understanding through observations and interactions made on the Internet. This can be undertaken through analysis of a number of online means such as Facebook updates, tweets, recommendations on Trip Advisor, discussions on specialised online forums and blogs (Meged *et al*, 2014).

According to Technorati’s (2013) Digital Influence Report, blogs rank among the top five ‘most trustworthy’ sources for information on the Internet with consumers. However, despite such popularity of blogs as a method of research amongst consumers, this has not to date been echoed within scholarly practice (Snee, 2013). Instead, the limited studies on travel blogging that have been undertaken have largely focussed on travel blogs as a type of research data that can inform marketing and management strategies (e.g. Bosangit *et al*, 2012; Carson, 2007; Magnini *et al*, 2012; Pan *et al*, 2007). This paper however, introduces travel blog analysis as a means of interpretive phenomenological analysis.

In a world of surging globalisation, English is increasingly becoming the medium in every domain of communication within local and global contexts, resulting in high demand for English speakers (Khamkhien, 2010; Puntheumasen, 2007). In Thailand TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) positions are commonly filled by tourists (Punthumasen, 2007), thus conjoining the two aspects of teaching and tourism. However, whilst both of these concepts have been analysed at length individually, to date there has been no recognition of the amalgamated notion of TEFL tourism. As a result of the introduction of this new phenomenon it was first necessary to undertake inductive, exploratory research in order to identify key trends and themes, which could then be further explored. This paper thus demonstrates how blog analysis was utilised as a means of IPA in the context of TEFL tourism research.

Netnography and the ‘Blogosphere’

In recent years the Internet and online social networking have become an integral part of society. This is demonstrated within the tourism and TEFL industries, with the Internet providing information on tourism products and services, facilitating tourism transactions and offering new ways to learn about tourism products and services directly from other consumers (Hookway, 2008; Pan *et al*, 2007; Mack *et al*, 2008). As a result of the importance and reliance placed on online presence, researchers have begun to turn to Internet sources, such as blogs, as a valuable means of data collection (Carson and Schmallegger, 2008; Hookway, 2008). Analysis of such data sources is often referred to as netnography, defined as ‘a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet’ (Kozinets, 2015 p80). Netnography faithfully exports anthropology’s set of ontological, epistemological and axiological commitments to the study of social experiences within an Internet context (Kozinet, 2015).

Conceptually parallel with the progressive societal movement away from traditional face-to-face interaction towards a virtual communicative era, modern day technologies have provided ethnographic researchers with an entirely new research realm, whereby geography is no longer the defining framework for culture (Boyd, 2009). Research based on the premise of the examination of online cultures extends the traditional notions of ethnographic study from the observation of co-located, face-to-face interactions, to technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities, and the culture or cyberculture shared amongst them (Kozinets, 2010). Travel blogs, within which category TEFL teaching in Thailand often falls, can be data-rich and valuable netnographic sources of information (Banyai and Glover, 2012).

A travel blog can be broadly defined as individual entries which relate to planned, current or past travel (Banyai and Glover, 2012). They are the equivalent of personal online diaries and are made up from one or more individual entries strung together by a common theme, in this instance TEFL teaching. Travel blogs are commonly written by tourists to report back to friends and families about their activities and experiences during trips (Puhringer and Taylor, 2008, p179). They are frequently updated and displayed in reverse chronological order. They also tend to be interactive in nature, allowing readers to post comments (Carson and Schmallegger, 2008). Although most blogs contain primarily textual information, uploading audio and video files is becoming more popular. Whilst the textuality of much online content often yields useful data, some have questioned whether this may be abstracted and analysed too far beyond the material conditions of life (e.g. Blichfeldt and Marabese, 2014).

Blichfeldt and Marabese (2014) emphasise that there are two fundamental acts in play here; ‘being’ and ‘communicating’. They suggest that rather than netnography facilitating the examination of ‘tourist-being’, researchers are instead exposed to the act of communicating about ‘being’. Although the content posted online may resemble the former, this may not always be true for all instances, and there is little opportunity for the researcher to determine data validity. As such it can be noted that blog analysis may not facilitate ‘a window into naturally occurring behaviours’ (Kozinet, 2002, p62), rather the researcher has simply gained access to specific communicative acts of tourists, as opposed to the tourist in a holistic sense (Blichfeldt and Marabese, 2014). Whilst Hine (2000) criticises netnography on this basis, describing it as ‘wholeheartedly partial’, it is akin with IPA in that it accounts for an individual’s personal perception or account of an event or state, rather than attempting to produce an objective record (Smith *et al*, 2009).

Blog Analysis as a Method of IPA

Blog analysis was a valuable source from which to undertake the preliminary exploration research phase of the TEFL tourism industry. This is because blog analysis helped to understand the previously unexplored phenomena through the narratives provided by bloggers and the content uploaded. The blogs provided easy access to data and spanned wide geographical areas, reaching data that would otherwise be unobtainable (Carson and Schmallegger, 2008; Snee, 2013). Hookway (2008, p91) describes this contemporary research method as ‘the new guardians of democracy, a revolutionary form of bottom-up news production’. Bloggers are free to upload a range of content of their choice, making this data source unique in that it is not in any way influenced by the researcher. Data from blogs derives from naturally occurring, communal, cross-consumer interaction that is not found in alternative research methods (Meged *et al*, 2014). Furthermore, analysis is unobtrusive, meaning that data is untainted as it was not produced specifically for research (Krippendorf, 2004). The blogs enabled access to TEFL teachers’ interpretations of experiences, along with their impressions, perceptions, thoughts, feelings and anything else that may otherwise not be accounted for in a research constrained environment (Banyai and Glover, 2012).

This notion of value-free data can disadvantage the researcher as there is no opportunity to ask the blogger for clarification or elaboration of any of the topics discussed (Snee, 2013). It is without doubt that data collected in this way can provide valuable insight into a new phenomenon such as TEFL tourism, although this method of data collection is not without critique. Researchers have acknowledged that it may not always be possible to identify the author of the blog or their blogging intentions (Carson and Schmallegger, 2008; Snee, 2013; Stainton and Iordanova, 2016), and a particular concern is the growth of marketing imbedded within blogs, such as sponsored blog posts. There is no way of verifying that the intended author is the actual author, nor that the information presented is accurate (Stainton and Iordanova, 2016). For sponsored posts this may be particularly troublesome as bloggers may be remunerated for promoting a product or service which may result in blog posts being reflective of the marketeer’s requirements as opposed to the blogger’s personal viewpoint (Carson and Schmallegger, 2008; Snee, 2013).

A second important theoretical current in need of consideration is hermeneutics, where it is imperative that the researcher acknowledges limitations resulting from interpretation (Smith *et al*, 2009). In line with the nominalist ontological underpinning of qualitative approaches, Freud (1958) emphasises the importance of acknowledging the researcher’s perceptions and personal experiences that could subsequently influence the data collection and analysis. Examining qualitative issues, such as why people choose to become TEFL teachers or how their experiences are shaped, enables unique opportunities to construct understanding from the perspective of the informant. However they also mark an inherently subjective endeavour (Tufford and Newman, 2010). As such, it is the researcher’s role to interpret and analyse the data with as little bias or subjectivity as possible, suspending judgement and focussing only on the data at hand (Tufford and Neuman, 2010). Whilst this may not be an easy endeavour, it can be argued in accordance with nominalist ontology that all concepts are formed through inevitable subjective interpretations and therefore that research constructed through methods incorporating elements of subjectivity are not less valid, but rather they are representative of the social world.

The least discussed, but arguably one of the most important aspects to consider when undertaking blog IPA are the ethical considerations. Research has recently begun to emerge addressing the ethical considerations of online research (e.g. Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR), 2012; Boellstorff *et* al, 2012; Snee, 2013; Economic Social Research Council (ESRC), 2015), however available protocols and guidelines are scarce and at large generically applied. This research took the view that the blogs analysed were published in the public domain, and therefore there was no need to request consent (Snee 2013; Stainton and Irodanova 2016). Additionally, many bloggers were unidentified, thus making the ability to contact the author in order to request consent highly unlikely (Punch 2014). Taking into consideration the ethical guidelines produced by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) (2012) and Stainton and Iordanova (2016), blogs and author identities were viewed as public, but web addresses and identities were kept confidential.

Blog analysis provides the researcher with a wealth of data sources to utilise in IPA research, however the challenge is locating them in today’s vast Internet space. The array of data relevant to the TEFL tourism phenomenon available on the Internet was too large to be examined as a whole, requiring the need for the data set to be condensed to a manageable size through the means of sample selection (Krippendorf, 2013). Within blog content analysis however, the term ‘sampling’ does not accord with traditional definitions involving selecting a subset of participants from a targeted population of people. Rather, in this context, sampling involves obtaining a subset of elements from the targeted population of content located within online blogs (Neuendorf, 2011).

The sample consisted of a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure that the blogs selected were relevant to the conceptual framework and aims of the research (Miles *et al*, 2013). Fundamentally, purposive sampling is a selection method during which the researcher is free to choose research samples which in this instance were blogs that were most likely to yield data beneficial to the research (Neuman, 2014; Punch, 2014). This sampling technique is particularly useful when attempting to describe a phenomenon or develop something regarding which only a little is known (Punch, 2014). Following this approach therefore, blogs were located through the search engine Google and Wordpress blogging platforms and only blogs that addressed one or more of the following criteria were analysed for the research; motivations for TEFL teaching in Thailand, experiences whilst TEFL teaching in Thailand and characteristics of the TEFL population, conforming to the aims of the research. Additionally, only blogs that were written by past/current/present TEFL teachers were analysed in attempt to avoid any marketing material, although it was noted that discreet advertising though the use of sponsored blog posts may not always be apparent. It is common for blogs to include hyperlinks or references to other blogs (Krippendorf, 2013); as a result, any references to relevant blogs were examined and included within the sample providing they met the sample criteria, demonstrating the use of snowball sampling, whereby an interconnected network of blogs was identified, starting with an initial blog which lead the researcher to further blogs.

Purposive and snowball samples enabled the researcher to obtain a significant amount of data that may have been inaccessible through the use of alternative means of sampling due to the niche nature of TEFL blogging. Although both purposive and snowball sampling can be criticised as not being representative and subject to selection bias (Seale, 2004), this is not a concern for initial exploratory research that will later be verified through alternative methodologies. A total of 36 blogs were collated over a period of 8 weeks, after which time the determined saturation point was reached (where no new themes had arisen for ten consecutive blogs). The length and depth of blog content varied significantly, ranging from blogs comprising only a few short entries, to those with hundreds of postings. The nature of the content and blogging approach also differed.

Whilst blog analysis can be considered a form of netnography, most researchers tend to focus predominantly on textual content, employing the use of techniques closely related to content analysis (e.g. Banyai, 2010; Carson, 2008; Choi *et al*, 2007; Enoch and Grossman, 2010; Law and Cheung, 2010; Pan *et* al, 2007; Wenger, 2008). This allows researchers to systematically review qualitative unstructured data presented in the blogs and to classify them according to themes, characteristics and patterns relevant to the research aims. Through the use of computer analysis software Nvivo and NCapture, TEFL tourism data was organised according to key themes, trends and concepts with the use of codes and sub codes. Content analysis was inductive, allowing for coding categories and units to emerge empirically while continuously revising and updating the coding system.

Blogger Typology

In order to ensure data collected via blogs is verifiable, it is first important to understand the motivations for writing the blog. Bosangit (2011) outlines the main motivations for a traveller to produce a blog which includes; documenting travel experiences, updating family and friends, social networking, sharing information, communication and entertainment and financial rewards. Huang *et al* (2007) separate these motivations into two types of blogging behaviour; those that are interaction-orientated such as self-expression and documenting travel experiences, and those that are information-orientated which could include posts seeking information and discussion forums. There are three common actions behind travel blogging, which Bosangit *et al* (2012) describe as representing places, acts of self-presentation and ‘othering’.

All blogs analysed for this research appeared to be interaction-orientated, where the motivations appeared to centre on documenting experiences, updating friends and family and maintaining a professional blog, which may or may not yield financial rewards. On this basis bloggers were broadly segregated into three categories; the diary blogger, the camaraderie blogger and the professional blogger. Amongst bloggers that identified themselves or their motivations, 31% were categorised within the diary-based segment. For these authors, documenting their experiences appears to be their primary motivation, for example;

‘… the premise of this blog is that it will detail all of the highly enthralling exploits I get up to on my time travelling all over the big ol’ globular globe’ [sic]

The camaraderie blogger had a similar style of writing, whereby they documented their experiences in a dairy-based fashion, however their primary audience is their friends and family back in their home. Although they may blog in a diary fashion in line with the diary bloggers described above, their intentions are to inform family and friends of their experiences as opposed to simply documenting them. One camaraderie blogger describes their blog as;

‘An amazing way to share my teaching and travel experiences as well as keep all my family up to date with my latest adventures!’

This segment also accounted for 31% of bloggers. The remaining 38% can be described as ‘professional’ bloggers. Although it is not known whether these authors are financially rewarded for their work through sponsored posts, adverts, or other fiscal incentives provided by outside parties, their blogging approach distinctively differs from the first two categories. The term professional blogger refers to an author that has a well-structured, regularly updated blog. Blogs will often have a personal profile, logo and means of connecting with the author such as a Facebook page or Twitter account. They are likely to have adverts and a sizeable audience, often evident from the number of followers on the blog or social media. These bloggers will not normally be limited to first hand descriptive accounts of their experiences like the diary-based or camaraderie blogger, instead they tend to be of a more informative nature. They may also include guest posts written by other individuals. A key difference between a professional blog and a non-professional blog is the URL, as professional bloggers will normally have purchased their own domain. One professional blogger described his website as;

‘A blog[that] is about embracing a lifestyle of traveling and working overseas. In this blog, I share videos, offer advice, and tell stories…all in hopes that I can inspire you to pursue your own dream of living and working abroad.’

By having a broad understanding of the motivations behind writing a blog, the research is enlightened somewhat into the possible accuracy of the data collected. For example, professional bloggers that write whilst travelling are likely to blog for money at some time or another, therefore there may be risks of posts written with marketing intentions (Stainton and Iordanova, 2016). Similarly, those blogging for the benefit of friends or family in their home country may not be entirely truthful about their experiences as there may be some aspects that they do not want to share, for example if they were to embark on new relationships, be reprimanded at work or indulge in illegal behavior.

The TEFL Tourism Phenomenon

Whilst the data collected through this method of IPA was by no means exhaustive nor representative, it was invaluable in that it revealed key themes and trends that were part of the TEFL tourism experience, which could then be examined more rigorously utilising subsequent methodologies. In accordance with Bosangit *et al* (2012), there was evidence of content that represented places, acts of self-presentation and ‘othering’. There were also strong notions of self-reflection and the documenting of experiences. In contrast to the bulk of existing literature addressing TEFL, there was little pedagogic reference to the TEFL experience, instead content was largely focused around the four key themes of tourism, camaraderie, teaching duties and education.

Ninety-two percent of blogs included content addressing leisure pursuits undertaken by the TEFL tourist with a total of 551 references recorded, thus indicating that tourist activities were a significant part of the TEFL experience. Upon running a coding matrix in Nvivo it was revealed that 89% of references to tourism were made by bloggers classified as diary-based or camaraderie bloggers, thus indicating that bloggers of this type may provide a more holistic account of their experiences than professional bloggers, of whom may be more likely to blog in accordance with readership demands. Tourism-based activities noted within the blogs were broadly distinguished by the motivation to undertake them. There were a wide range of leisure activities noted in the data, the majority of which were classified as motivated by self-interest, which included aspects such as ‘to have fun’, ‘to relax, or ‘to learn’. The most frequent references were to activities involving beaches (discussed by 81% of bloggers), activities involving animals such as visiting tiger sanctuaries or elephant riding (50% of bloggers) and activities that involve drinking alcohol or taking drugs (81%).

Not all tourist pursuits appeared self-indulgent in this way, with evidence of philanthropic tourism and motivations to help others, although this category was somewhat smaller. Twenty-two percent of bloggers discussed experiences within this category which included activities such as visiting a refugee camp and volunteering on a farm. In contrast to the frequency of self-interest based touristic activities, the data collection demonstrated an ‘anti-tourism’ theme amongst TEFL tourists, where teachers indicated that they wished to avoid the mass-tourism scene and were in search of an experience that they perceived to be authentically Thai. In fact, there was indication that TEFL tourists differentiated themselves from traditional tourists, indicating that they perceived themselves not as a typical tourist, but instead as a separate entity who shifts between tourist and teacher depending on the day of the week, geographical location and the company that they are in.

There were 249 references thematically coded camaraderie. This was then sub-coded in to one of three categories; western, home and local. The bloggers identified that comradeship was an important and integral part of the TEFL experience, with 86% of respondents having made references in this respect. TEFL tourists who undertook a formal TEFL training course tended to discuss relationships with their Western comrades. This initial training appeared to facilitate the formation of many close friendships and 36% of blogs examined demonstrated an emphasis on the significant impact that this had on the TEFL tourist’s experiences. Some TEFL organisations facilitated social interactions virtually via social media platforms such as Facebook prior to departure for Thailand, enabling these bonds to be established before commencing their TEFL experience.

Sixty-nine percent of bloggers discussed communicating with friends and relatives in their home country via means such as Skype, Whatsapp or Facetime. This was particularly important to TEFL tourists in times of emotional hardship, giving them the option to communicate freely with their friends and relatives at home. Twenty-two percent of TEFL tourists made references to feeling homesick, 28% of which were accompanied by discussions of Christmas. Sixty-nine percent of TEFL tourists described social experiences that they had whilst in the local community that they were based within, with frequent remarks to the friendly culture offered by the Thai people (102).

When examining the blog content in search of details of teaching specific experiences, four main sub-themes were evident: duties, teaching methods and standards. The concept of frustration was a flowing theme throughout, where bloggers highlighted the areas that they were unhappy with. There were 141 references coded under the theme of frustrations, accounting for 69% of bloggers, particularly relevant to the research as these frustrations discussed are not evident in any marketing or promotional material advertising TEFL positions in Thailand. Frustrations tended to center around the duties required of them, the standard of foreign teachers recruited and the Thai educational system. TEFL tourist duties included assembly, gate duty, teaching English to the local police and Thai colleagues, evening tuition and attending and participating in school events. Many TEFL tourists worked at English camps during the school holidays, were required to plan their own curriculum and design assessments. A further 91% of TEFL tourists demonstrated experiences whereby particular attention was focused upon them because they were a ‘farang’ (foreigner), which in many instances subjected them to positive discrimination, giving them a pseudo celebrity status.

References to educational attainment focused largely on that received by the TEFL tourist as opposed to the education that they provided. This was made up of two dominant themes, formal and informal education. TEFL training was discussed by 58% of TEFL tourists, of which 86% appeared to have undertaken a course that was included as part of a ‘TEFL package’. A further 33% of TEFL tourists discussed personal development that took place as a result of their TEFL experience such as cultural education, skill development and a newly developed outlook on life. Whilst there were frequent references directly made to educational attainment, 364 references were coded in-direct education, where they TEFL tourist did not discuss learning, but indicated that learning had taken place through the blog content.

Conclusion

IPA provides fertile ground from which to commence research on topics of which relatively little is known. Whilst there are a variety of methods that can be employed to facilitate explorative research in this way, this paper has demonstrated that blog analysis is a contemporary and unique approach that is able to successfully provide accounts of an individual’s personal perception or account of an event or state, as prescribed by IPA (Smith *et al*, 2009). The concept of TEFL tourism is one which has not previously been explored, thus requiring the use of the exploratory research phase. Whilst the data collected was not representative, exhaustive or explanatory in nature, it was invaluable in that it revealed key themes and trends, as summarised in this paper, that were part of the TEFL tourism experience. This therefore provided a foundation from which the concept could be examined with increased rigor utilising subsequent methodologies.

The use of the Internet is becoming ever-more integral to the day-to-day operations of society, facilitating an inter-connected and globalised world, where geographic barriers are no longer a defining criteria for communication. This opens the researcher up to a non-exhaustive realm of research opportunities, which to-date has been under-exploited. Whilst the body of literature addressing netnographic and Online research methodologies is now rapidly expanding, there have been few that have utilised blog analysis as a means of exploration. This paper therefore contributes to the wider body of knowledge addressing the concept of Online research, demonstrating in practice how it can be utilised in the context of IPA.

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