COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Analysis of Effective Digital Communication in Travel Blog Business Models

Abstract

The tourism industry has been affected dramatically by the appearance of the Web 2. This research aims to perform a clear and measurable evaluation of a varied sample of ten of these travel blogs and their application of the Web 2.0 attributes in order to present a potential set of guidelines to be applied by future blogs. The study is based on an in depth comparative analysis of various metrics related to the blogs' profile, content, website performance/usability, social media, and marketing usage, with the help of different tables that were created for each of these sections. The results are later combined with the expert opinion of five different travel, journalism, and/or digital communication professionals. It is anticipated that travel blogs that operate as businesses utilize the Web 2.0 tools and informative attributes not only in their content, but also in their distribution, design, and digital ecosystems.

Keywords
Internet, social media, blogging, travel, digital, communication.

1. Introduction

Though the appearance and evolution of the Internet has influenced every industry, the travel sector especially has had to shift and adapt significantly. As opposed to many years ago, traditional travel agencies are no longer the first option when people want to plan a trip. According to the 2017 Global Economic Impact and Issues Report, over 80% of travel planning is through the Internet (Horoszowski, 2017). Essentially, tourism businesses need to be present in the digital world and actively take advantage of the web 2.0 tools and attributes to be sustainable. A timeline presented by Statista, displays the online travel sales worldwide from 2014 to 2020. As shown on Figure 1, it is projected that the growth in online travel sales will continue for the coming years.

The World Travel and Tourism Council (2017) explains that as overall connectivity amongst technological devices increases, new trends will continue to impact our lives and the future of travel. Because of this, it is essential that the tourism industry find ways to engage and interact with the public, create conversations, and establish relationships (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017). The Web 2.0 has opened up new ways of creating such conversations. Janet Hernandez quotes Filgueira, to define the concept of Travel 2.0 as "a new Internet model for consulting, publishing, sharing, discussing and distributing information about tourism, with content created by Internet users who interact between themselves" (Hernandez Mendez, 2015). Travel 2.0 tools include: travel community forums, travel review sites, and travel blogs. In general, all of these comprise goals such as: evaluate services and

touristic places, planning of routes, etc. This style of communication amongst travellers, has affected the way that the tourism industry markets itself (Kyung-Hyan & Ulrike, 2016). Another relevant factor of the evolution in the tourism industry is that it has become more accessible to all sectors of society. Younger generations in particular, have had a growing interest in traveling, considering it an enriching tool for growth and identity building. Research on tourism and the new generations highlight the important role this public plays in the industry; "Internet is increasingly used, especially by post-Millennials, not only to benefit from the available content, but also to produce information and materials: memories, reports, reviews, opinions, descriptions and stories" (Monaco, 2017).

With a large emerging market consisting of digital natives and the rapid development of new technologies (Dutton, 2004; Cerezo, 2006; White, 2008), the future of the tourism industry seems to be moving towards the arising virtual reality trends (Tracy, 2017). Immersive and imaginative real time experiences such as virtual travel are opening up a world full of possibilities for this industry to explore (Yong-Hyun, Hickerson & Lee, 2017). As of 2018, however, the most prevalent travel trends appear to be mainly focused on conscious and responsible tourism, and alternative uncharted destinations (Fanelli, 2017). Initially, blogs were simply online diaries, where their writers would share their experiences and opinions of the world (Donelan, Kear & Ramage, 2010). With time, blogs have become much more than that. Both companies and individuals have identified a blog's potential to reach and influence people, making them a rising business opportunity: Blogs will likely become inextricably linked to, even synonymous with, brands, destinations, or products. Consumers not companies will drive the process, creating a new set of opportunities for marketing communication theory and practice development (Evangelous, 2016).

In the tourism world, blogs have become an important source of information. Bloggers share their own traveling experiences and opinions, usually providing media to accompany it while allowing readers to comment or interact with their posts (White, 2008; Choat, 2017). Based on this, people can now make important travel decisions, and engage in creating and distributing new travel content of their own once their trip is over (Barauah, 2017). Because millions of individuals have joined this process, blogging has become a key aspect of the tourist production and consumption business (Bosangit, McCabe & Hibbert, 2009). The links, content, and popularity of a blog can not only influence user's travel decisions but it can also affect a company's search engine positioning (Orehovacki, 2010; Nielsen, 2015). Since this collobaration tool is known to provide impartial information, the e-word-of-mouth recommendations and suggestions of a blog can rapidly diffuse online (Sigala, 2012). Because of this some companies have even opted for incorporating a blog to their websites, hoping to connect with their customers in a more personal level. According to Sigala (2007), a weblog's content can: 1) Attract the attention, eyeballs of other Internet users and increase traffic on a website; 2) create Interest to users who can now seek more and additional information; 3) develop someone's desire to also visit a destination and/or buy the product; and 4) foster an Action.

Due to the vast amount of currently existent blogs and more being created on a daily basis, gaining enough visitors to become influencial has become a challenge (Rowles, 2017; Pinto, 2016; Soukup, 2014). For a blog to reach it's full potential it requires a large amount of effort, in the sense that it should provide quality content, that is not only updated regularly but that also results interesting and of value to the consumer (Pan *et al.,* 2007; García *et al.*, 2019). Akehurst states that some travel blogs, for example, started with good intentions but their content remains static for months (Akerhurst, 2008). While many travellers use blogs simply for fun or self-expression, some are now running their websites as a career option. Rather than simply documenting their personal experiences, the aim is to increase readership and facilitate monetization opportunities. However, in order for travel bloggers to transform their online practices into a profitable business, they need to achieve an influential position

in the industry. The digital communication and online interactions of a blog, certainly has a major effect in how it can position itself as an expert authority in the sector, reach a wider audience and grow it is online presence (Labreqcue & Milne, 2012; Leffel, 2016). With the continuous evolution of the digital world and a rising level of interest in the subject, blogging about travel has infinite potential (Wheeler, 2003). Thus, the main goal of this project is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a sample of ten travel blogs by analyzing their usage of the communicative resources available on the web 2.0. Reflecting on these findings and the expertise of professionals in the sector, we aim to elaborate and propose a set of conclusions that can be of value in the construction of future profitable travel blogging strategies. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the primary digital communication strategies currently used by travel bloggers.
2. To explore the use of the informative attributes (visual, audiovisual, interactive, etc.) that the web 2.0 offers.
3. To understand and describe the digital ecosystems of the travel blogs analyzed and their usage of social media.
4. To reflect on the strengths of the sample analyzed and to propose its application for future travel blog models.

2. Methods

Due to the complex nature of this study, we found that the most appropriate approach was to combine qualitative and quantitative research methods (Vilches, 2011), which allowed for richer and more comprehensive data collection (Chen & Zhang, 2014). Within the framework of a case study design (Yin, 1989; Stake, 2005), the research was most suited for purposeful sampling (Lee, Ungson & Russo, 2011). This sampling method allowed us to select information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2007). The blogs have been chosen from an expert consultation and from the directories prepared by national and international experts. The research sample, which is represented in Table 1, includes a total of ten subjects, which were selected under the following criteria (Forbes, 2017; Mediarails, 2017; Nadal, 2018; Stabile, 2018):

- Language Spanish or English
- Posts relating to International travel rather than just local
- Consistent online presence documenting their travels
- Include at least one form of digital marketing/monetization
- Present in social media platforms
- Award-winning or featured by prominent travel related entities/ media sites

Table 1: Research Sample.

Sample #	Blog's name	Website
1.	*The Blonde Abroad*	https://theblondeabroad.com/
2.	*Nomadic Matt*	https://www.nomadicmatt.com/
3.	*A Tomar Por Mundo*	https://atomarpormundo.com/
4.	*The Planet D*	https://theplanetd.com/
5.	*Mochileando Por El Mundo*	https://www.mochileandoporelmundo.com/
6.	*Just One Way Ticket*	https://www.justonewayticket.com/
7.	*Y Travel Blog*	https://www.ytravelblog.com/
8.	*Hand Luggage Only*	https://handluggageonly.co.uk/
9.	*Everything Everywhere*	https://everything-everywhere.com/
10.	*Nomadasaurus*	https://www.nomadasaurus.com/

Source: Own elaboration.

In order to get data from a broader spectrum, the sample of blogs includes authors of different nationalities including countries from North America, Europe, and Australia (Agarwal, 2018; Statista, 2018; Statista, 2019). All the blogs examined contained travel-related content, but there were specific profile differences among them along the following parameters: length of time blogging, age and gender of the blogger, and specific travel-related niche; all of which are detailed in the analysis (Elliot & Maier, 2007; Elliot, 2015). We chose to narrow our field of study to only data from the following two months: May and June 2018. Aside from following and documenting the subjects and their online movements in the blog and social media platforms throughout this timeframe, we relied on online analytic tools to obtain relevant information that could not be measured visibly (Clifton, 2012). To ensure accuracy, we compared the results from various sources including websitegrader.com, similarweb.com, alexa.com, twitonomy.com, and likealizer.com. To obtain a clear visual of the data (Cyriac, 2009; Yeo, 2014; Hardin, 2018) and perform more accurate comparison we developed a table of six different levels, each one pertaining to a different digital aspect of the Travel blog and the author.

2.1. *Level 1- Profile*

Level 1 allows for a better understanding of the bloggers/ blogs basic information, which is necessary to put into perspective when evaluating results. It is possible that some if not most of the blogs have incorporated team members over the years to help with specific tasks; however, we focus on how they present themselves online: as an individual writer or as multiple writers meaning a group/family, or a couple. Being travel enthusiasts, the subjects under study tend to be in constant mobility, making it difficult to identify a permanent place of residence, so we take note of bloggers' nationality instead. The travel niche pertains to the primary focus of the content/posts the blog contains. All this information was found through direct observation and research within each of the websites studied.

2.2. *Level 2- Content*

Level 2 pertains to the blog's content, strictly concerning their website, not their social media. We observe their use of imagery, video, and audio (not including that belonging to a video). As far as color selection, we note the blog's background color, as well as their accent colors, referring to the ones used for emphasis in the color scheme, perhaps in the menu bars, buttons, or details as such. We found the "average post length" by selecting 10 of the most recent blog post entries from each of the subjects, determining the word count of each entry, adding them together and dividing it by 10 to establish an average. For simplification, we

categorized this section as short, medium, or long according to the following: Short (100-1000 words), Medium (1000-2000 words) and Long (2000+ words). While uncovering the number of words, we also noted the type of font they chose to use predominantly across their site. Next, we investigated whether or not they use internal links. These are links that go from one page on a domain to a different page on the same domain, according to Entrepreneur Magazine, proper use of them helps with SEO and can also help structure and organize a site, as well as be helpful for the website's users (Siu, 2015). As far as the actual blog entries, we examined the kind of information the blogs present (post type), examples may be: experiences, anecdotes, reviews, guides, recommendations, interviews, case studies, or others. Additionally, we establish the monthly amount of posts they publish by researching each of the site's blog post entries archives and finding the average. Lastly, the "technology use" asks whether these blogs have incorporated any virtual reality, or if they have launched a mobile application, a gaming feature, or another form of a technological advance.

2.3. *Level 3- Website Performance & Usability*

Through Level 3 we examined the website's overall optimization and ease of use. The table also noted the blog's domain extension: whether it uses the most common one: ".com" or if it uses a different one, we also established whether the site is mobile responsive or not. According to Website Grader, a software program by Hub Spot, a webpage size should ideally be below 3MB and load within 3 seconds, also have a low amount of page requests since this can slow down the site (Website Grader, 2018). If the blog performed successfully in all three of these, then it was classified as "High performance," if it only performed well in two it was classified as "Average performance," and if it performed well in only one or none it was classified as "Low performance." An SSL or security certificate protects websites from attacks, which may give visitors confidence that a site is authentic and trustworthy, so we took note of whether the blogs have it or not. Lastly, we measured if the website's design and menu were familiar, usually referring to a top and bottom menu with clear options, and if it included a search bar since these are all aspects that can influence a blog's usability.

2.4. *Level 4- Website Analytics*

Level 4 examines the key performance indicators of the website presenting a complete comprehension of the readers' behavior concerning the blog. With the help of the SimilarWeb.com as well as Alexa.com, the following metrics were examined:
- Total visits: the average number of people that visits the blog per month.
- Average Visit Duration: the total amount of time on average each visitor spends on the blog.
- Pages per visit: the average amount of pages users visits within the blog –found by dividing the number of page views by the number of visitors. According to Techopedia, "A larger number of pages per visit generally means that the content on a given Web page is good and the related content –the other links on the page– is relevant and interesting enough to warrant a second, third or fourth click."
- Bounce rate: the percentage of users that opened a single page on a site and then exited it.
- Main traffic source: the primary way that people are finding and entering the blog.
- Social media that has produced the most traffic: the social media platform that has led the most users to the blog.

2.5. *Level 5- Social Media Usage*

Level 5 explores the blogs' usage of social media. Aside from establishing whether the blogs are present on the following social media platforms: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Pinterest, we take note of the amount of "followers" they have in each account, and if

applicable also the number of people they're "following." While these five platforms are some of the most commonly used, especially within the topic of "Travel," we also posed the question of whether or not they have a different social media account besides those. To answer the section "posts per month" on Instagram and YouTube, we visited each of the subjects' profile and carefully counted their posts from May and June to find a monthly average. The platform Twitonomy.com gives detailed and visual analytics on anyone's profile, so the Twitter calculations were done based on this. Lastly, for Facebook, the results were found by visiting each of the subject's profile in combination with the platform Likealyzer.com, a metrics tool to monitor and evaluate Facebook pages.

2.6. Level 6- Marketing Usage

Level 6 refers to the blogs' use of digital marketing for both outside entities such as hotels, brands, products, and other blogs; as well as how it markets itself. Marketing of other brands, which is generally paid or compensated in some way, is represented in this table in the sections: sponsored or branded content, affiliate links, display advertisement, and guest posts. On the other hand, the blog's self-marketing is represented by the sections SEM strategies (where we only take into account whether or not it has bought keywords in Google), email or newsletter opt-in, offering services or products, or applying SEO techniques. According to Website Grader, the platform used to evaluate the last section of this table, proper SEO application relates to page titles, Meta descriptions, and heading tags. Page titles should be no longer than 70 characters in length and not repeat keywords. Meta descriptions should be no longer than 300 characters in length and should be relevant to the page. Heading tags distinguish headings from core page content. (Website Grader, 2018). Therefore, we have classified that section of the table as: High (proper SEO techniques are applied to page titles, headings, and meta descriptions), Average (SEO techniques are only applied to two of the three) and Low (SEO techniques are applied to only one of the three or not applied at all).

To expand on the findings of the table analysis the second phase of the research consisted of an interview with five different experts. The experts were chosen based on availability and expertise. The formal process of analysis began by creating categories not only for the tables but also for the responses, to better identify the commonalities and differences amongst the sample of blogs. Once we generated correlations amongst the multiple elements of the table and within its different levels, we examined the interview responses of the five experts to further understand and describe the blogosphere phenomenon and the effects of digital communicative choices concerning positive performance metrics in a travel blog. The travel blogs examined as well as their social media accounts are public and viewable to any Internet user. The analysis poses no ethical risks or breach of confidentiality in any way, as all the data was obtained through analytic tools available for public use and by general observations. All images used belong to the respective authors of the blog. The photos are in the public domain and have only been utilized for academic research as examples and, thus, are not an infringement of copyright.

Although this research was carefully prepared, potential shortcomings and limitations may exist in regards to the researcher's subjectivity, and the analysis timeframe and sample. Inevitably, as Bloomberg explains, "Because analysis ultimately rests with the thinking and choices of the researcher, qualitative studies, in general, are limited by researcher subjectivity" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2007). Also, some argue that a small sample selected through purposeful sampling might limit the possibility of generalization. Through rich description and detailed background and context information, we anticipate the results may be assessed for its applicability and applied appropriately in other contexts, therefore addressing the issue of "transferability." Lastly, due to time limitations, we believe that this research can benefit and expand through further study.

3. Results

As previously stated, information about the profile served to give a more clear and visual representation of the subjects that were studied. In the case of our sample, 4 out of 10 blogs presented themselves as one individual, while 6 of them as a team, some of which were a couple, some a family, and some simply a pair of friends. Half of the blogs have been active between 5-9 years, 2 of them ten years or more, and only one is in the 0-4 years category. While the general topic of the blogs is undoubtedly Travel, every blog chose a subcategory or two to focus on within that category. Most of the blog contained a vast amount of information, which related to more than one niche. However, Photography, Gastronomy, Adventure, and Budget Traveling appeared to be a predominant topic amongst the majority of the blogs studied.

There were various similarities and a few differences found within the content of the ten travel blogs. While every blog has its unique color combination, 9 out of 10 of them used white as a background and 7 incorporated a tone of teal or green. All the blogs include images. A vast majority (9 of blogs) does not include audio, and only 6 of them include videos. 50% of the blogs featured blog post entries with a medium average length meaning between 1000-2000 words. Although there were a few variations on the font type of each of the blogs, Helvetica and Arial were both repeated choices. Additionally, we noted that none of the blogs chose to incorporate Script or Decorative Typefaces, but instead chose Sans Serif Type Styles. All of the travel blogs included internal links. 10 out of 10 blogs shared recommendations and travel guides in their posts. Unfortunately, we were unable to establish the amount of blog posts per month for two of the blogs, *Nomadic Matt* and *Mochileando por el Mundo*, since none of their entries are dated. However, based on the remaining eight blogs, the highest amount of posts per month found was 15 and the lowest 1. None of the travel blogs include an additional form of technology such as a mobile app, a type of virtual reality, gaming, or other.

Related to the perfomance and usability, as far as the blog's performance and usability we found that 7 out of the 10 blogs have an average performance as far as page size, number of requests, and page loading speed, meaning they perform well in at least two of these three things and the other can be improved. When evaluating this category, we discovered that the majority needed improvement in the area of "Page Requests." Furthermore, 10 out of 10 of the travel blogs have a security certificate, and all of them are mobile responsive. Finally, a significant majority (9 out of 10 blogs) chose the domain extension to be ".com," and 100% of the sample have a simple website set up and design with clear and easily found menu options and a search bar.

About the Website analytics, while evaluating each of the blog's website analytics, we found that the number of visits that each of the blog's receives varies largely, regardless of all being award winning and media featured blogs; some have a bigger audience than others. We found, however, that most of the blogs (7 out of 10) received a monthly average of between 100K-900k visits. Only one of the blogs, *The Blonde Abroad,* had an average visit duration of over 2 minutes, while the majority (6 out of 10 blogs) had an average visit duration of between 1 and 2 minutes. As far as the pages per visit, 6 of the blogs had an average of 1.5 or under and the rest of them were over 1.5. Half of the sample had a bounce rate of 60-80% while the other half was over 80%. In other hand, "Search" was the primary source of traffic for all the blogs. The social media that has produced the most traffic to the blogs is Pinterest followed by Facebook.

Related Social Media Usage, all the blogs analyzed have Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. 7 out of the 10 blogs have a YouTube Account. However, while *Nomadic Matt* still has a YouTube account, he does not actively publish videos any longer, or advertises his YouTube account on his blog like he does with his other social media platforms. Most of the blogs (9 out of 10) has Pinterest. As represented in Figure 1, the number of followers for each blog varies largely not only amongst each other but also across the different social media platform.

Table 2: Level 5 Results.

Blog	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Instagram:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Followers	150K + (529 K)	50-150K (92.5K)	0-50K (6.1K)	150K+ (224K)	0-50K (44.9K)	0-50K (36.4K)	0-50K (45.1K)	0-50K (49K)	150K+ (199K)	50-150K (86.1k)
Following	0-500 (429)	0-500 (104)	1.5K+ (3436)	500-1.5K (910)	1.5K+ (2034)	500-1.5K (1110)	0-500 (276)	0-500 (421)	0-500 (124)	0-500 (485)
Posts per month	24,5	10,5	11	9	22	1,5	47	32	7,5	10,5
Twitter:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Followers	0-50K (28.9K)	50-150K (118.4K)	12.3K (0-50K)	50-150K (135.5K)	0-50K (12.6K)	50-150K (76.4K)	50-150K (52.5K)	0-50K (24K)	150K+ (170K)	50-150K (92.2K)
Following	0-500 (420)	1.5K+ (1.6K)	1.5K+ (4.4K)	1.5K+ (4.7K)	1.5K+ (2.8K)	0-500 (197)	1.5K+ (2.4K)	0-500 (375)	0-500 (384)	1.5K+ (35.4K)
Tweets per month	133,2	438	358,2	276	229,5	226,2	489,9	261,6	101,4	269,7
Facebook:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Followers	150K+ (184K)	150K+ (246K)	0-50K (15K)	150K+ (196K)	50-150K (57.9K)	50-150K (54K)	50-150K (53.2K)	150K+ (196.4K)	50-150K (117.7K)	0-50K (45.1K)
Page Likes	150K+ (179K)	150K+ (247K)	0-50K (15.1K)	150+ (198K)	50-150K (57.9K)	50-150K (55K)	50-150K (55.6K)	150K+ (195.9K)	50-150K (120.5K)	0-50K (45.1K)
Posts per month	60	93	9	24	33	9	108	12	102	15
Youtube	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Subscribers	26K	12K	781	15.9K	N/A	7.1K	2.5K	N/A	N/A	655
Views	1.5M+ (1.8M)	500K- 1.5M (1.4M)	N/A	1.5M+ (3M)	N/A	1.5M+ (2.1M)	500K-1.5M (517K)	N/A	N/A	0-500K (55K)
Videos per month	4	N/A *(Stopped posting videos)*	1,5	3,5	N/A	0,5	3	N/A	N/A	1
Pinterest:	yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Followers	50-150K (60k)	0-50K (14k)	N/A	0-50K (45K)	0-50K (524)	0-50K (28K)	150K+ (4M)	150K+ (344K)	50-150K (89K)	0-50K (8K)
Monthly viewers	1.5M+ (5m)	500K- 1.5M (806k)	N/A	1.5M+ (1.7M)	N/A	500K-1.5M (735.8K)	1.5M+ (4.7M)	1.5M+ (4.7M)	500K-1.5M (1.1M)	0-500K (430.1K)
Other Social Media Account	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1: Visual representation in thousands of the blogs' social media followers.
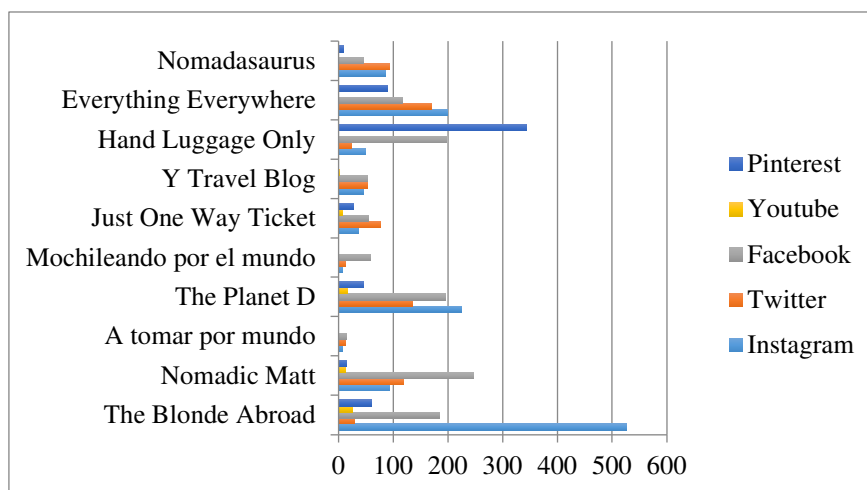
Source: Own elaboration.

Out of the ten blogs, Pinterest and Instagram are the two platforms with the largest amount of followers. 9 out of 10 blogs have another social media account aside from the ones evaluated.

Table 3: Level 6 Results.

Blog	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Features sponsored/branded content	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Features affiliate links	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Ye	Yes
Displays Advertisement	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Uses SEM strategies	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Offers Email Opt-in/ newsletter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Offers Services and/or products	yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Features guest posts	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Application of SEO techniques	High	Average	High	Average	High	High	Average	Average	High	Average

Source: Own elaboration.

While all of the blogs applied marketing to either promote themselves, or gain a commission or reward by promoting others, we found the following differences and similarities amongst the sample studied. 8 out of the 10 blogs include sponsored or branded content on their posts, and an even greater percentage (9 out of 10) included some sort of affiliate link. Most of them formed part of the Amazon affiliate program were they recommended travel related products and when viewers click or bought the product through their link they receive a commission. As far as display advertisement, only 7 out of 10 chose to include it. Perhaps in an attempt to show the readers full transparency or build trust, all the blogs studied provided some sort of disclaimer regarding their marketing practices. In certain countries such as the US, it is required by the Federal Trade Commission or FTC, to disclose If you use affiliate links on your website. In addition, a lot of third party affiliate marketing platforms such as Amazon Associates require it as well (Terms Feed, 2018). All the blogs featured an email opt-in or newsletter subscription, an example is shown in Figure 18. All of them also offered services, products, or both. On the other hand, only 50% of the blogs featured guest posts.

All the blogs offered a service or product. While researching each webpage, we discovered that most of them created travel related books, courses, gear, or services relating to travel planning assistance. Only 2 out of the 10 blogs made use of SEM strategies as far as paid keywords in Google. On the other hand, 100% of the blogs had an average to high application of SEO techniques, meaning they made proper use of titles, meta-titles, and key words in their publications.

Figure 2: Marketing Usage Graph.
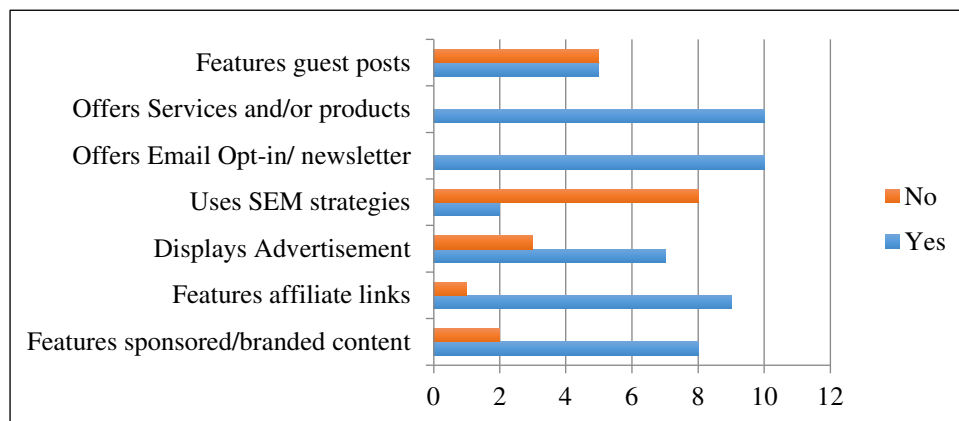
Source: Own elaboration.

4. Conclusions

Overall, the production and consumption processes in the travel industry have taken a significant turn. Travel blogs have an incredible capacity for influence when it comes to consumers' decisions. Blogs with a high level of readership can be monetized in different ways such as offering their services or products, displaying advertisement in their website, featuring affiliate links or even partnering directly with Travel gear/products companies, hotels, activities and excursions companies, and even restaurants. Due to the platform's highly accessible nature, millions of blogs already exist, and many more continue to be created daily, which makes differentiation key. The varied sample of award-winning and media recognized travel blogs that was analyzed combined with the expert opinion of professionals in the field of travel/tourism, journalism, or digital marketing and communication, allowed for a better understanding of how these blogs have so far succeeded to develop an audience and to manage their blog as a viable business. After careful examination of the results, we found that as previously predicted, travel blogs that operate as businesses utilize the Web 2.0 tools and informative attributes not only in their content but also in their distribution, design, and digital ecosystems. Also leading us to various conclusions relating to the importance of different factors in a Travel blog's digital communication strategy and their application of Web 2.0 tools.

It was perceived that a travel blog's profile has little to no effect in its potential for success. The sample of blogs studied not only had authors of different nationalities, but also with other differences such as single or multiple writers, and specializations within the topic of travel. This led to the premise that readers naturally tend to connect with the profile they feel most identified with. Therefore, the key lies in selecting a travel niche and creating and distributing content based on what appeals most to the target audience within that niche. In the same way, blogs that have only been active for a few years can achieve the same readership as those that have been around for over ten years, as long as they're keeping up with the trends of the sector and adequately utilizing all the resources of the Web 2.0. Content is perhaps the most critical factor in a Travel Blog's digital communication strategy. As opposed to print, online writing not only allows but also requires a different style of writing and usage of informative attributes. Primarily, it is essential to make use of a multimedia format, that includes images and preferably also video, and one that allows interactivity especially through the use of internal links. Visual elements such as design and presentation have significant weight. The website must have a clean and easy to read composition. The most common and effective way of achieving this is by selecting a white background and Sans Serif Type Style fonts such as Arial and Helvetica rather than Script or Decorative Typefaces. Likewise, research has found that green is often associated with nature and the environment and blue with trustworthiness, which may explain why the majority of the blogs included green or teal (which combines both green and blue) as their website's accent colors (Elliot & Maier, 2007; Elliot, 2015).

The length of a blog post entry and the frequency it is posted depends entirely on the type of post and the message that is trying to be conveyed. However, on average, most travel blogs present a medium to long post length (1000-2000+ words) and about seven entries per month. In some cases, shorter entries can be done on a daily basis, where the lengthy and more elaborate posts may be done every other week. The most important part is consistency, not letting months pass by in-between posts, and maintaining the information up to date. Bearing in mind that an elaborate digital communication strategy with poor quality content cannot succeed, another important factor to consider is the type of post and the writing style. A way to connect with the readers is to write informally, providing information that is practical and useful to the readers such as guides, lists of things to do, things to see, what to pack, etc., along with anecdotes and personal stories that allow the reader to imagine and live

those experiences through the writer. Nevertheless, multiple travel blogs inevitably write about the same destination, so it is important to focus on uniqueness. The use of technologies such as a mobile app, gaming, or any virtual reality is a rising trend. Surprisingly, however, this was not part of any of the blogs analyzed, so perhaps incorporating it could result beneficial.

Building on the previously mentioned relevance of design and presentation, a standard website layout which features a top/ bottom menu and a search bar is a way to highlight the blog's usability positively. It is inferred that users may be more comfortable with what is familiar, which is why perhaps most travel blogs have chosen the most common domain extension ".com." rather than something different. It is also necessary to emphasize the website's performance; the page size, request, and speed can all influence the user's experience. Other important factors are having a security certificate since it assures the users' connection to that website is secure and any data entered is safe. Lastly, since we are undergoing a "mobile first" transformation, a mobile responsive design may be the most crucial element regarding a blog usability.

Both the analysis of the travel blogs and the interview with the experts stress the importance of social media/ networks in today's society and in particular in the travel sector. Not only are they a way to build a community around a travel blog, but they can also be one of the most efficient ways to get content distributed. Having a strong social media presence is definitely a necessity in any business sector, in the case of the travel industry we found that Pinterest and Facebook are two of the platforms that can generate the most traffic, Instagram and YouTube are essential because of their highly visual nature, and Twitter is a fast and easy way to keep readers updated.

Ultimately, to become a viable business, a travel blog must incorporate different forms of marketing. The first way applies to ways the blog can generate, increase, or maintain an audience. The majority of the traffic from the blogs examined came through direct "Search," highlighting the importance of having a good search engine ranking and position. To accomplish this, effectively applying SEO strategies, particularly in page titles, headings, and meta descriptions, proved to be a more suitable choice than using SEM strategies. Correspondingly, a practical way of maintaining and building relationships with the readers is through offering email/newsletter subscriptions and even products and services. The second form of marketing pertains to advertising or partnering with other entities as a way to monetize the travel blog. Mainly, it needs to be done in moderation and always being aware of placements, as aggressive advertisement can often disturb the readers. Nevertheless, when it comes to marketing, transparency and honesty are crucial. If the readers perceive they are being lied to in any way, it will undoubtedly have an adverse effect, as credibility is a core component in the success of a blog.

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