Narrativity and involvement in online consumer reviews

The case of *TripAdvisor*

Camilla Vásquez
University of South Florida

Drawing on recent work on digital narratives of personal experience in online genres such as email, social networking sites, and blogs, the present study explores narrative features in 100 online consumer reviews of hotels. Focusing on negative reviews, or "Rants," from popular consumer travel platform, *TripAdvisor*, the article examines both canonical and genre-specific structural features of narratives, as well as some of the discursive resources used by online narrators to engage their audiences, and to draw them into their stories. Specifically, the study explores the use of story prefaces and related forms of second person address, represented speech and mental states, and deictic shifts, and suggests that narrative features such as these are useful in attracting the attention of an audience amidst a vast universe of online information.

Keywords: digital narratives, narratives of personal experience, consumer reviews, TripAdvisor, CMC, eWOM

Introduction

The past decade has seen a major shift in narrative studies, particularly with respect to a growing recognition of the diversity of narrative types and narrative activities. Several scholars have turned their attention from "large," autobiographical narratives — of the type that are often elicited in research interviews — to "small stories," which occur spontaneously in quotidian contexts, and in virtually every domain of "non-interviewed life" (Freeman, 2007, p. 156). While the

Requests for further information should be directed to: Camilla Vásquez, Department of World Languages, University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, CPR 419, Tampa, FL 33620. Email: cvasquez@usf.edu

Narrative Inquiry 22:1 (2012), **105–121**. DOI 10.1075/ni.22.1.07vas
ISSN 1387–6740 / E-ISSN 1569–9935

canonical Labovian oral narrative of personal experience (i.e., first-person, past-focused stories of non-shared events) is still alive and continuing to thrive in narrative research, some have argued that it is time for narrative researchers to consider a much broader range of narrative activities and types (Bamberg, 2007; Georgakopoulou, 2007a, 2007b), which may include "tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events" (Georgakopoulou, 2007b, p. 146) among others. Coincidentally, this analytic focus on small stories comes at a moment in history when more narrative activities are taking place in online contexts than ever before.

The field of narrative analysis has only recently begun to catch up with trends and developments in information and communication technologies. Georgakopoulou (2006, 2007a) was one of the first narrative scholars to examine narratives in a previously unexplored digital genre: email. Research on digital narratives of personal experience is continuing to grow in other online genres as well. For example, Myers (2010) has examined narrative features in blogs and wikis. And Page (2010), in her analysis of narratives in Facebook status updates, has challenged us to consider how newer forms of social media and digital communication are reshaping key concepts in narrative. For instance, both Myers and Page have identified the digital timestamp as a key element in constructing temporality in online narratives. Furthermore, they have shown how digital narrators in these CMC contexts share a preoccupation with "nowness" (Myers, p. 69) and recency, as opposed to pastness and reflection. More recently, Page (2012), has examined aspects of narrativity in various digital genres, ranging from identity on microblogging sites to the construction of place in a digital narratives project.

One online genre in which digital narratives of personal experience have not yet been explored is that of online consumer reviews. Online consumer reviews, sometimes referred to by marketing scholars as eWOM (electronic word of mouth), is a genre that continues to grow in both popularity and influence. Narratives in online consumer reviews have been previously attested by Pollach (2006). Pollach, in her study, which examined the generic features of online reviews, found that the 358 reviews of digital cameras she analyzed were comprised of "comments, and evaluations, and *personal stories* (e.g., weddings, vacations, christenings) involving the products reviewed" (p. 4, my emphasis). The present study focuses on narratives found in online reviews of a different type: reviews of hotels featured on travel website, *TripAdvisor*. More specifically, this study examines the ways in which reviewers address, reach out to, and engage with the readers of their narratives. This issue is a relevant one, given the overwhelming amount of information confronting today's Internet users, as they participate in an online environment consisting of millions of posts, tweets, uploads, updates, and so on. In such an environment, where the trend of increased interactivity has been on the

rise for several years (i.e., Web 2.0), digital narrators must find ways of engaging and connecting with their unknown audience. Therefore, because my focus here is on what authors do to engage their audience in their narratives, I discuss the following features that are commonly associated with involvement in discourse: story prefaces, reported speech and mental states, and deictic (i.e., pronoun and tense) shifts.

The notion of involvement has interested discourse analysts for nearly three decades (e.g., Chafe, 1982; Lakoff, 1990; Tannen, 1999). Early treatments of involvement (Chafe, 1982; Tannen, 1985) tended to approach the topic from the perspective of differences between orality and literacy. Spoken discourse was characterized as featuring more strategies of involvement, as opposed to written discourse, which was conversely viewed as more "detached" (e.g., Chafe, 1982). Consequently, involvement strategies — including reported speech, use of second-person address, and so forth — have traditionally been associated more with speech than with writing (especially written academic registers). Besnier (1994) critiques the aforementioned body of scholarship for its lack of precision in defining involvement, yet he usefully provides a number of general descriptors, all of which are perhaps subsumed under this broad construct. These include:

- "the attention that speakers pay […] to the needs of their interlocutor" (p. 280)
- "the interactional aspects of communication" (p. 280)
- "the cooperative construction of discourse and the display of positive affect toward interlocutors" (p. 287)
- "conversationalists willingness and ability to initiate and sustain verbal interaction" (p. 279)
- the creation/display of "engagement" (p. 281)
- "interpersonal dynamics (e.g., the maintenance of a good rapport among participants)" (p. 289)
- and, referencing Tannen (1999, p. 12): an "emotional connection individuals feel" toward others (p. 281)

For the purpose of the present study "involvement" is understood as consisting of a range of discursive resources that index some type of connection or interaction among participants — in this case, between authors of online reviews and the readers of those reviews.

It has also been noted (e.g., Besnier, 1994; Tannen, 1984, 1985) that involvement in discourse relies not only on language, but also on various "nonlinguistic cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and intonation" (Besnier, p. 281). Because these types of non-linguistic resources are unavailable in text-based digital contexts, the phenomenon of involvement may have somewhat different realizations in asynchronous computer-mediated contexts. Therefore it is worth considering

some of the resources that narrators use to establish an interpersonal connection with their audience throughout their digital narratives of personal experience.

Methods

The data for this study of narratives in online consumer reviews consist of a purposeful sample of 100 negative reviews from *TripAdvisor*, the most prominent online travel review platform (Zehrer et al., 2011). According to a recent tourism industry study (Yoo & Gretzel, 2009), more than 80% of travelers are currently consulting sites such as *TripAdvisor*, which means that the influence of such internet-based consumer reviews is potentially powerful and far-reaching (e.g., Briggs, Sutherland & Drummond, 2007; Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Miguéns, Baggio & Costa, 2008; O'Connor, 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). Travel review sites are especially popular, according to Zehrer et al. (2011), because tourism products represent a type of "experience good" (i.e., a type of product that cannot be easily assessed prior to consumption). In order to reduce risk and uncertainty, consumers seek information and advice from those who have already experienced the tourism product (i.e., hotel) for themselves; often, this information comes packaged in the form of a first-person digital narrative of personal experience. In a world characterized by increased mobility and growing interconnectivity, it has become common to rely on the eWOM of strangers, which can be freely and easily accessed on websites comprised of enormous user-generated databases. It is even possible that these online sources of travel information have surpassed in influence their more traditional, analogue counterparts (e.g., guidebooks, suggestions from friends and families).

Negative reviews were selected for analysis because, according to prior research (Ricci and Wietsma, 2006; Sen and Lerman, 2007), online audiences pay more attention to negative reviews than to positive ones. Each week on its homepage, *TripAdvisor* showcases approximately five of "the best" and the same number of "the worst" hotel reviews: this section of the website is labeled "Rants and Raves." Over a six month period (November 2008–April 2009), once per week, the website's featured "Rants" (i.e., negative reviews) were downloaded and saved, until a data set of 100 hotel reviews was created. That these particular reviews have been selected by the website to be showcased on the "Rants" section indicates that they have somehow been deemed as highly "tellable" accounts.[1]

The data set of 100 reviews is comprised of nearly 30,000 words. The average review is approximately 300 words in length, with the shortest around 50 words in length and the longest approximately 2,000 words. *TripAdvisor* offers reviewers an opportunity to construct a profile, which allows them to provide demographic

information about themselves; though, of course, not all authors of reviews choose to provide this information. Nevertheless, from the available demographic profile data, a slight majority of reviewers were female, between the ages of 35–49, and traveled for leisure as opposed to business. This aggregate profile is consistent with what was reported in an earlier study of *TripAdvisor* reviewer demographics (Gretzel, 2007). Approximately 70% of the reviewers resided in the United States or the United Kingdom, and the top destinations of hotels included cities in those same countries, as well as in Italy, Australia, and India. The topics of the negative reviews ranged from cleanliness, size, and condition of the room; location, price, security, and customer service in the hotel; and restaurant service and food quality. Most reviews addressed several of these categories.

Online hotel review stories

In the following section, I begin by providing a general description of the discrete phases of the hotel experience. I then describe these narratives in terms of classic structural features, before turning to a closer analysis of features of audience involvement.

Description of the structure of the hotel experience

A hotel stay is an extended temporal experience, and one which unfolds over several hours, days, or even weeks. This durative dimension of the experience no doubt lends itself to a chronological sequencing of events, especially in those reviews which follow a linear narrative structure. The sequence of events in the hotel

Table 1. Stages of the Hotel Experience

1	Research and planning stage: this may include reading other reviews
2	Reserving/booking the room: this can be done online, through a travel agent, or by phone
3	First impression/encounter with hotel/staff: this can happen on-site or off-site
4	Check in
5	First encounter with the room
6	Other hotel-related activities including: further communication with staff; visit to restaurant; use of hotel amenities (such as beach, pool, massage, etc)
7	Check out
8	Follow-up communication with hotel

stay consists of the following components, and narrative reviews often follow some variation of the basic chronological structure presented in Table 1.

It should be noted that not all reviewers will have experienced all of these events during their stay. Only some of these phases are obligatory components of the hotel visit experience (i.e., 3, 4, 5, 7). Furthermore, reviewers are also selective in the information that they choose to include in a review. Whether they have experienced them or not, in their reviews some authors may include a discussion of only some of these phases and not address other phases — even ones which they may have experienced.

Cannonical narratives

From a formalist perspective, the reviews featured in the "Rants" section tend to be quite canonical in their narrative structure. In other words, the majority of negative reviews are clearly recognizable as narratives. Because the data set is comprised exclusively of negative reviews, it is perhaps unsurprising that the narrative's "complicating action" is basically a built-in feature of texts in this genre. Moreover, in some sense, there is a single "master narrative" that is found in each of the individual reviews — which is that some part(s) of the *actual* hotel experience contrasted with the reviewer's *expectations* of the experience. This disjunct between the reviewer's expectations (Vásquez, 2011a) and the actual hotel experience lies at the core of all of the narratives in the data set.

Below, I use an example of one hotel review from the data set to illustrate what a canonical narrative of personal experience looks like in this genre. The narrative has been segmented below, in order to illustrate the traditional Labovian narrative elements (Labov& Waletzky, 1967). Evaluation, which can appear anywhere within the narrative, is indicated below with unitalicized font. (Additional description in the review has been deleted here due to space constraints.)

Excerpt 1: Canonical Narrative

Abstract	*There were* many bad omens *that preceded our stay at the [resort name].*
Orientation	*Firstly, I tried to arrange for transport from the panama airport to the resort prior to our arrival. I called the [resort name], long distance and spoke to seven different agents who* continuously *transferred me to another agent.*
Complicating Action	*In the end, I was reassured that I would be met at the Panama City Airport by a representative from the [resort name]. When my wife and I arrived to Panama City, there was no [resort name] agent there.*

	They put myself and my wife in a room with two double beds (not exactly romantic) *instead of a queen or king as we requested. The shower was* demon possessed *and fluctuated from* scalding *hot to* freezing *cold every ten seconds.* It was pretty awful.
Resolution	*After taxes, my wife and I paid about $320 per night for this place. This was an* exorbitant rip off *for what we received.*
Coda	*The* only redeeming quality *of this place was the* nice pools and beautiful beach… *but you can find this elsewhere for* much much cheaper.

The abstract is an optional component of narratives and when it appears it takes the form of a summary statement, which introduces the general topic of the narrative. The above example does begin with an abstract (e.g., *There were many bad omens that preceded our stay at the [resort name]*), however the majority of the narratives in the data set tend not to include an abstract. Similar to email narratives, where the subject line often functions as the abstract (Georgakopoulou, 2007), these online reviews are prefaced with a "header," which also serves as a sort of abstract, and provides the overall gist or tone of the review.

The orientation section of the narrative, also optional, provides background information about the story's who, when, and where. In this genre of narratives, it is very common to find an orientation section. This is logical, given that stories about hotel stays are often as much about the "wheres" as they are about the "whats." In this context, orientation takes on a special relevance. The orientation component of online hotel reviews typically consists of reviewers' reports of their reasons for travel –in addition to when, where, and for how long — as well as reference to their travel companions. (The ways in which these categories simultaneously function to index aspects of reviewers' identities is discussed in Vásquez, forthcoming). In addition, as can be seen in the example above, the orientation segment in online hotel reviews may also consist of reports of planning activities that took place prior to travel.

In terms of their primary function, online reviews are evaluative before they are narrative. That is, the main purpose of online consumer reviews is to rate, evaluate, describe, and, on that basis, to provide recommendations to others for — or against –a particular product or service. Therefore it is not surprising that 100% of the examples in the dataset include some form of explicit evaluation. In structural terms, evaluation is one of the two defining features of narratives, and it can occur in any and all phases of the narrative. As seen in the example above, evaluation appears frequently, is expressed using a variety of lexico-grammatical forms, and can be found in every section of the narrative. This pervasiveness of evaluation is quite typical of all of the narrative reviews in the data set.

Along with evaluation, a complicating action is traditionally the other defining feature of a narrative. The complicating action is normally realized linguistically via a series of past-tense clauses that are sequentially ordered. In this genre, the most highly narrative accounts tend to include forms of temporal deictic anchoring (e.g., *upon arrival…*, *the next day…*, *after that we went…*, *we were then told…*). Quite frequently, the types of actions that are reported in these narratives are interactions and communications with hotel staff: a phenomenon that will be discussed in further detail in a later section. While reports of actions and events are not atypical, there is also another, more genre-specific, type of "complicating action" that appears in some of these narratives — and that differs slightly from the canonical narrative. In several cases, rather than being comprised of actions and events (as one would expect), the complicating action is instead built up through negative descriptions. In other words, in a hotel review story, a simple listing of unpleasant or negative characteristics (e.g., *it is dirty and shabby*, *it smells*, *it is gross*, *the service is bad*) can constitute the complicating action: that these characteristics are in conflict with what the reviewer expected to find, when left unstated, remains inferable by the audience. To put it another way, in this particular context and genre of narratives very often it is *the overall experience of place itself* that comprises the complicating action.

The resolution serves as an end to the narrative events. Like the abstract and orientation, this phase is optional, but when it is included in hotel review narratives it tends to be about leaving or checking out of the hotel — or, in some cases, about requesting and/or receiving a refund. In the resolution phase of the narrative excerpt above, the reviewer makes indirect reference to checking out of the hotel by mentioning the total cost of the hotel visit. Although this does represent a form of closure for the narrative, in reviews that are negative, the resolution (more often than not) is not necessarily a positive ending.

The coda, which serves as a bridge from the story world to the current time of telling, is also an optional element of a narrative. When a coda appears in hotel review narratives, it nearly always takes the form of some type of advice, suggestion, warning, directive, or admonition. The coda is one of the sections of the narrative in which reviewers appeal directly to readers, commonly through the use of second person pronouns, as seen in the above example: *you can find this elsewhere for much much cheaper.* I now examine several other resources used by reviewers to appeal to, and engage with, their audiences: story prefaces, represented speech and mental states, and deictic shifts.

Story prefaces and other second person references

Conversation analysts have identified the "story preface" (Sacks, 1974) as a resource for interlocutors to negotiate a longer turn at talk, and to secure an extended holding of the conversational floor. Strictly speaking, this is unnecessary in an asynchronous CMC context, where there is no conversational floor to be negotiated by participants who are not co-present, and where a participant's "e-turn" can be as short or as lengthy as they want it to be. Nevertheless, story prefaces — which, in this context, index the dynamics of face-to-face interaction — do appear in some hotel review stories, as can be seen in the examples in excerpts 2:

Excerpts 2: Story Prefaces
We just returned, and let me tell you… <94>
Let me start at the beginning… <59>
Where should I begin?… <19>

The story preface, a convention of oral narratives, is thus carried over into a digital context. In an asynchronous online narrative, a story preface becomes a symbolic resource, in which the narrator simulates the negotiation of tellership and "speaking rights" with an unknown, non-present audience. In doing so, the narrator acknowledges the importance of the audience's active participation in the reading and reception of the narrative. In the three examples above, narrators open their narratives by drawing their audiences into their stories through the use of resources such as a second person pronominal address form, a verb with an implied second person subject, and the posing of a rhetorical question.

The story preface is only one of the points within the narrative where reviewers can use second person address to appeal directly to their audience. Similar types of features and constructions can also appear later in the narrative. The examples in excerpts 3 below rely on similar features (i.e., second person pronouns, questions) as those in the story preface, in order to engage the audience and to create a sense of connection and interaction.

Excerpts 3:
Well, what can I say… <15>
Can you believe that… <10>
Why didn't we move you may ask… <22>

Reported speech and mental states

Another way in which narrators make their stories come alive to their audiences is through the use of represented speech as well as represented mental states.[2] The

use of such "constructed dialogue" (Tannen, 1989) in narratives — when narrators perform or illustrate what happened, rather than merely tell or describe it — recruits an audience's interest by helping to bring about a sense of vividness and veracity. Besnier (1994) explains that constructed dialogue appeals to the audience to engage in the meaning-making process:

> Making sense of a reported dialogue thus requires the active participation of both speakers and interlocutors, and hence drafts the involvement of all concerned participants in the process of constructing linguistic and interactional meaning. Reported dialogues exemplify one range of involvement strategies, namely strategies which depend on the collaboration of interlocutors in the derivation of meaning from form (p. 280).

Traditionally, constructed dialogue has been closely associated with spoken genres. However, as can be seen in the examples below, not solely restricted to oral narratives, constructed dialogue is also a feature that appears in digital narratives of personal experience.

> Excerpt 4a
> *i asked (nicely) the housekeeping lady for an extra pillow, she glared at me and rudely said: "NO!!! NO PILLOW!!! NO!!!"* <90>

> Excerpt 4b
> *The staff were without exception surly, rude and unfriendly. When I greet someone with "Good Morning", I don't expect to have "Room number?" snapped back at me.* <23>

In oral narratives, the tone of a represented utterance (or thought, or emotion) is often communicated paralinguistically, by a shift in prosody, or nonlinguistically, through facial expression and gesture. Due to the absence of these resources in an asynchronous computer-mediated environment, some reviewers, like those in excerpts 4a and b, instead comment metadiscursively on the reported speech — through the use of adverbs (*rudely*) and descriptive speech act verbs (*snapped*) — in order to convey not just what was said during an interaction with a hotel staff member, but also how it was said. As seen in example 4a, orthographic emphasis can also be used to indicate non-linguistic information about the tone of the interaction.

When describing their interactions, reviewers often depict their responses to the utterances of others via representations of their own thoughts or inner feelings. In Excerpt 5a, the discursive portrayal of the reviewer's internal affective state (*I felt like crying out ok? How could this ever be in the vicinity of ok?*) occurs as a follow-up response to the inquiry of the hotel staff member, which is itself depicted as a semi-reported speech construction (e.g., *he first checked that 'everything was ok.'*).

Excerpt 5a
A silver-suited gentleman brought our bags to the room, he first checked that 'everything was ok.' I felt like crying out ok? How could this ever be in the vicinity of ok? The stench of dampness hit our nostrils 20 paces before we reached the room. <49>

Excerpt 5b
When I first walked into the hotel I thought, yeah this isn't as bad as some of the reviews I'd read.. So I was quite happy I'd picked it. <67>

A key difference here between representations of speech and representations of mental states is that whereas reviewers tend to use quotation marks to represent the former (e.g., in 5a, *he first checked that 'everything was ok.'*), they do not do so for the latter. However, the syntactic frames (*I felt like crying out…* and *I thought…*) as well as the spatial deictic *this* in both of the above examples (*yeah this isn't as bad as some of the reviews I'd read* and *ok? How could this ever be in the vicinity of ok?*) indicate that these constructions are representations of the reviewers' mental states, which ostensibly took place during the same time as the events in the narrative. In this context, communicating one's cognitive or affective states (which are normally "hidden" or unavailable to others not experiencing them) serves as a metaphorical way of granting readers privileged access to the internal workings of the mind of the reviewer, thus forging another type of relational connection between narrator and audience.

The example below, a segment from a relatively lengthy review, illustrates how in this particular narrative, the complicating action is actually built up as a dialogic exchange, as was mentioned earlier. Excerpt 6 contains six instances of attributed speech indicated by quotation marks, as they appear in the original text, as well as 15 instances of speech act verbs (e.g., *ask*, *say*, *tell*) and their related nominalizations (e.g., *explanation*, *response*), which are highlighted in bold below. This particular narrative is constructed as a representation of an extended conversation that took place between the reviewer, her husband and the hotel staff. The reported speech has an obviously evaluative function in this narrative, as does the information which the reviewer places in parenthesis.

Excerpt 6
Again my husband went to reception to make them aware and ***ask*** *for it to be put right. The girl on reception, to our absolute disbelief,* ***said*** *that this was not possible and the "solution" to our problem was to* ***speak*** *to the manager on Monday (we were only staying until Sunday morning and live in the UK so we're not sure how this was an appropriate "solution"). Her original* ***explanation*** *was that "they only made the bed that had been slept in". As I* ***pointed out*** *even if only one bed had been slept in and they made this, that would make two fully made beds.*

> *We also **asked** about the change of room and **were told** that in order to have done this, we would have to have checked out of the hotel at 11am "so they could clean and re-sell our old room" (well I hope the new people wouldn't have minded one bed not being made…) and that because we had not done this, we could not change. At no point when my husband **asked** on Friday night were we **told** this.*
> *The girl on reception was incredibly rude and became rather aggressive. We **asked** to **speak** to the manager and were **told** "you can't speak to him it's Saturday afternoon". We were both astounded at the way we were being treated as paying guests. Her constant **response** to our (very reasonable) **requests** and **questions** was "this is not a five star hotel". That was quite evident and we booked fully aware of this but at a minimum you would expect the place to be clean*. <25>

The agentless passive construction, *we were told*, which appears a few times in excerpt 6, is a typical way in which this type of information is packaged in the larger set of hotel review narratives — with the focal emphasis on the reviewer (i.e., *we*) and on the message itself, rather than on the specific representative of the hotel staff member doing the communicating. Excerpt 6 ends with a deictic shift from first person to second person reference (i.e., *we booked…but at a minimum you would expect the place to be clean*), which is the topic of the next section.

Deictic shifts

Deictic shifts — combinations of pronoun and tense shifts, more specifically — function to extend, or to universalize, a particular experience to others. Various uses of *you* (generic, referring more specifically to addressee, etc.) have been documented in other online narrative genres (Page, 2012), as the reader is projected into, and thus included, in the narrator's experience. In examples 7a and b, the narrators switch between first person *we* to second person *you*. In both excerpts, the second person forms co-occur with hypothetical constructions (i.e., *if*-clauses, and modals, such as *could*).

> Excerpt 7a
> *If you are strong swimmers (which we are) you could keep yourself warm by constantly swimming, but the water temperature was not suitable for just having a bit of fun in*. <28>

> Excerpt 7b
> *The main thing that we disliked the most was that the place had no "parlor" or a place that the guests could congregate. When you came back at night the only thing there was to do was go up to your room, you could not meet the other guests because there was no place to meet them, the dining room was closed. Their website is terribly misleading and I've had better times at Days Inn…* <26>

Like 7a and b, examples 8a and b also include shifts from first to second person reference, some of which also co-occur with modals. However, the following examples are noteworthy because the authors take their shift in perspective one step further. In example 8a, the second person reference occurs with present tense verbs (e.g., *you are left standing… then are given*), which has the effect of adding the reader into a situation that was actually only experienced by the narrator. Interestingly, the narrator in 8a also uses the passive form of the verbs *stand* and *give*, which further projects the reader as someone to whom things are being done. In addition, both examples combine second person reference with verb forms expressing futurity (i.e., *You will receive one hand towel …* in 8a; *Your cell phone will not work there…* in 8b). Combined personal and temporal deictic shifts, such as these, project the reader into the future — positioning him/her as an eventual guest of the hotel — and are interpolated into the otherwise past-time-oriented events of the first-person narrative.

Excerpt 8a

When I asked when we would be leaving, he just shrugged and sat there for 15 minutes more. All this for the 5 minute ride to the hotel, which initially looks good. But the terror continues at check in, where you are left standing ignored for another half hour, then are given a room as though they were doing you a favor. The rooms themselves are bare in the extreme. You will receive one hand towel — that's it. No printed material informing you of hotel regs, services or anything. I tried repeatedly to call the front desk for a wake up call and finally had to go down, where again I was ignored… <42>

Excerpt 8b

The bathroom has a large jetted tub. It was not very clean. It was scummy. You can see that in the pictures on their website. The other problem with the tub is that there was not ever enough hot water to fill it. The water pressure is terrible and the water is heated by a wood burning boiler. It takes two hours to get enough water in the tub to reach the jets. That is lukewarm water at best. In the morning you better shower quickly if you want the warm water, which is hard to do with the low water pressure. About half the time there was no hot water at all. Your cell phone will not work there. There is a phone in the room but fairly often when I picked it up someone else would be on it. There is supposed to be wireless internet but this would come and go and was very spotty. The same for the TV. The signal would fade in and out. You couldn't really watch anything… <54>

These four narrative excerpts reveal a continuum of perspective shifting: from more generic uses of *you* (which could be substituted by *one*), co-occuring with modals or other hypothetical constructions, to those uses of *you* that appear to refer to the reader more directly (i.e., those co-occurring with present and future verbs). The latter create a stronger sense of involvement, with the narrator actually

placing the reader in the midst of events that were only and uniquely experienced by the narrator. Deictic shifts within narratives serve a rhetorical function, as they move uniquely- and subjectively-experienced events to a broader level of shared experience. Additionally, in this context, they communicate a warning message akin to: "This is what happened to me, and if you choose to stay here, this will also happen to you." Future and hypothetical narratives have been documented in other digital genres, such as in blogs (Myers, 2010) and in email (Georgakopoulou, 2007). However, to my knowledge, this placing of the reader in the center of narrated activity — within what is otherwise a relatively canonical, past-tense, non-shared, first person narrative of personal experience — has not been previously discussed in work on digital narratives.

Conclusions

It has been argued (Page, 2010) that digital genres and online environments are introducing new constraints as well as new affordances for narrative activities. Page (2010, 2012) has shown, for example, how narrative elements such as temporality and sequence are being reworked in social media sites, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. In addition, explorations of narratives in other online genres (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Myers, 2010) have also noted the predominant emphasis on recency, which clearly contributes to the reshaping of narrative in these CMC contexts. However, digital stories may take many different forms across diverse online contexts. The *TripAdvisor* review narratives discussed here can legitimately be considered "small stories" in the sense that they are unelicited, and they do not refer to major autobiographical or landmark events. Yet, at the same time, it is evident that these small stories are "larger"– and certainly more canonical in terms of their structure — than the small stories told in *Facebook* status updates (Page, 2010), or on *Twitter* (Page, 2012). One limitation of the present study is its exclusive focus on negative reviews, which (as noted earlier) have a sort of "built-in" complicating action. Therefore, the extent to which positive reviews (as well as online reviews of other kinds of consumer goods and services) are narrative, and the ways in which they differ in their narrative features from negative reviews, remain questions awaiting further study.

Georgakopoulou (2007) has observed that interesting forms of intertextuality can emerge when narrators share personal experiences by telling stories both in face-to-face conversations as well as in email exchanges. The present study, in contrast, has focused on digital narratives of personal experience in an arena where narrators are *not* likely to know the people who read their stories. However, this unknown audience does not result in an absence of features of involvement that

are typically associated with conversational narratives. On the contrary, the analysis indicates that reviewers are aware of their audience as they write their stories, and that they use multiple discursive resources to engage their readers, to appeal to them directly, and to draw them into their narrative — in spite of the fact that, in this context, narrators and audience are unknown to one another, and are separated by both space and time.

The rise and ubiquity of social media has opened the possibilities for anyone with internet connectivity to post online their opinions about virtually any topic. Consumer reviews represent an enormous and steadily growing genre of online discourse: there are over 50 million reviews on the *TripAdvisor* website alone. Such quantities of information are staggering, and authors of reviews are clearly aware of this reality, and understand that they are competing with many others reviewers for the attention of a potentially vast, though simultaneously indeterminate, audience. There are many ways that reviewers can appeal to the attention of their potential audience. One of these is to package their experience in a narrative form. In addition, they can make their narrative a highly tellable one, through the use of the discourse features illustrated in this study (story prefaces, constructed dialogue, deictic shifts), as well as others, such as humor, vivid detail, and so forth. As more and more of our time is spent mediated by various interactive technologies, the more frequently our narratives of personal experience will take digital, rather than oral, forms — making digital narratives of personal experience the focus of further anticipated narrative research in the future.

Notes

1. In order to obtain information about how *TripAdvisor* selects which reviews to showcase on this section of their website, the company was contacted on numerous occasions, yet chose not to respond to the author's requests for this information.

2. See Vásquez and Urzúa (2009) for a discussion about representations of mental/emotional states as a category distinct from reported speech.

References

Bamberg, M. (2007). Stories: Big or small — why do we care? In M. Bamberg (Ed.) *Narrative — State of the art* (pp. 165–174). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Besnier, N. (1994). Involvement in linguistic practice: An ethnographic appraisal. *Journal of Pragmatics, 22*, 279–299.

Briggs, S., Sutherland, J., & Drummond, S. (2007). Are hotels serving quality? An exploratory study of service quality in the Scottish hotel sector. *Tourism Management, 28*, 1006–1019.

Chafe, W. (1982). Integration and involvement in speaking, writing, and oral literature.In D. annen (Ed.) *Spoken and written language: Exploring orality and* literacy (pp. 35–53). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Chung, J. Y., & Buhalis, D. (2008). Web 2.0: A study of online travel community.In P. 'Connor, W.Höpken, & U. Gretzel (Eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism: Proceedings of the International Conference in Innsbruck, Austria, 2008* (pp. 267–278). Springer: Vienna.

Freeman, M. (2007). Life "on holiday"? In defense of big stories. In M. Bamberg (Ed.) *Narrative — State of the art* (pp. 155–164). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2007a). *Small stories, interaction, and identities*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2007b). Thinking big with small stories in narrative and identity analysis. In M. Bamberg (Ed.) *Narrative — State of the art* (pp. 145–154). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2006).The other side of the story: Towards a narrative analysis of narratives-in-interaction. *Discourse Studies, 8* (2), 235–257.

Gretzel, U. (2007). Online travel review study: Role & impact of online travel reviews. http://www.tripadvisor.com/pdfs/OnlineTravelReviewReport.pdf [online report].

Labov, W., &Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experiences. In J. Helm (Ed.), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts: Proceedings of the 1966 Annual Ethnological Society* (pp. 12–44). Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Lakoff, R. (1990). *Talking power: The politics of language in our lives*. New York: Basic Book.

Miguéns, J., Baggio, R., &Costa, C. (2008). Social media and tourism destinations: TripAdvisor case study. In *IASK ATR 2008 (Advances in Tourism Research 2008)* veiro, Portugal.

Myers, G. (2010). *The discourse of blogs and wikis*. London: Continuum.

O'Connor, P. (2008). User-generated content and travel: A case-study on Tripadvisor.com. In P. O'Connor, W. Höpken, & U. Gretzel (Eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism: Proceedings of the international conference in Innsbruck, Austria, 2008*(pp. 47–58). Springer, Vienna.

Page, R. (2010). Re-examining narrativity: small stories in status updates. *Text & Talk, 30*(4), 423–444.

Page, R. (2012).*Stories and social media*. London: Routledge.

Pollach, I. (2006). Electronic word of mouth: A genre analysis of product reviews on consumer opinion web sites, in the*Proceedings of the 39th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*. IEEE Computer Society.

Ricci, F., & Wietsma, R. (2006). Product reviews in travel decision-making. In M. Hitz, M. Sigala& J. Murphy (Eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism, 2006* (pp. 296–307). Vienna: Springer.

Sacks, H. (1974). An analysis of the course of a joke's telling in conversation. In R. Bauman & J. Sherzer (Eds.) Explorations in the ethnography of speaking (pp. 337–353). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, S.,& Lerman, D. (2007). 'Why are you telling me this? An examination into negative consumer reviews on the web, *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 21*, 76–94.

Tannen, D. (1984). *Conversational style: Analyzing talk among friends*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Tannen, D. (1985). Relative focus on involvement in oral and written discourse. In D.Olson, N. Torrance & A. Hildyard (Eds.), *Literacy, language, and learning: The nature and consequences of reading and writing* (pp. 124–147). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tannen, D. (1989). *Talking voices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vásquez, C., & Urzúa, A. (2009). Reported speech and reported mental states in mentoring meetings: Exploring novice teacher identities. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 42* (1), 1–19.

Vásquez, C. (2011). Complaints online: The case of TripAdvisor. *Journal of Pragmatics, 43*, 1707–1717.

Vásquez, C. (forthcoming). "*Usually not one to complain but…*": Constructing identities in online reviews. In C. Tagg & P. Seargeant (Eds.), *The language of social media: Communication and community on the internet*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yoo, K.-H., & Gretzel, U.(2009). Comparison of deceptive and truthful travel reviews. In W. Hopken, U. Gretzel & R. Law (Eds).*Information and communication technologies in tourism, 2009* (pp. 37–47). Vienna: Springer.

Zehrer, A., Crotts, J., & Magnini, V. (2011).The perceived usefulness of blog postings: An extension of the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, *Tourism Management, 32* (1), 106–113.