

Storytelling Approach of the Self-Reported Slow Adventure to Tibet

Abstract

Some of our travel experiences are stored, recorded and recouped in the form of stories, among which tourist elaborated blogs are a modern form of travel stories. This study investigates how travelers use blog-journal stories to construct their identity and frame their slow adventure experiences. The findings show that travelers either implicitly or explicitly express how the slow adventure experience to Tibet contributes to their identity construction and personal growth. This study contributes to storytelling theory and the literature of slow adventure by examining the framing effects of ideal self-identity and the narrated experience during the travel.

Keywords

Adventure tourism; travel blog; storytelling; identity management; tourist experience

1. Introduction

Stories are what we do as humans to make sense of the world. Stories usually contain the structures of relationships between characters and chronological sequences, which are necessary factors for making meaning (Escalas, 2004). Human beings are constant storytellers, from ancient oral stories to online storytelling in modern society, through which people make sense of their lives and review events in the form of re-lived scenes, nuggets of context and character, and actions that lead to realizations (McAdams, 1988). Stories have unique values as the natural mode of narratives. And they are crucial for understanding how meaning is constructed throughout human experience, in which travel and tourism experiences are a substantial part (Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005). Concurrently, storytelling and the associated travel stories are essential to any profound understanding of tourist experience.

Weblogs is a modern way that individuals share their own stories of “their lived experiences, beliefs, and attitudes that often include pictures (photoblogs) and video

(vlogs)” (Hsu, Dehuang, & Woodside, 2009, p. 99). As a part of the Weblogs, travel blogging is an activity that comprises more than just simply recording the people and places visited. A great deal of information that was stored in and recouped from memory is episodic stories including incitement events, experiences, results/assessments, and summaries/nuances of the relationships between people and place. Furthermore, the activity of retrieving, revisiting, or repeating stories produces what Aristotle calls “proper pleasure” (as cite in Hsu et al., 2009) which is a catharsis or eudemonic happiness related to Holt (2003)’s pinpoint that telling stories could enable individuals to “experience one or more archetypal myths” (Hsu et al., 2009, p. 99). By inference, blogging about one’s heroic adventure journey is to somehow also help travelers memorize and construct the archetypal myths with happiness and pleasure.

Participating in adventure activities, on the one hand, provides valuable material for heroic story writing while on the other hand, is a way to achieve meaningful experience. The past few years have witnessed the fastest growth of the adventure tourism market and its increasing attraction to mass tourists (UNWTO, 2014). However, the rapid growth of adventure tourism also makes the related products and services McDonaldization to be just like the packaged mass tourism. To seek meaningful experience and authenticity, travelers’ self-organized slow adventure appears (Fullagar, Markwell, & Wilson, 2012; Semple, 2013). Slow adventure is defined to be in contrast with the “fast” packaged adventure to emphasize the immersive experiences that engage with remote, wild and nature-rich places with focus on the quality and meaning of adventure over the quantity, efficiency, and convenience (Filep, Cao, Jiang, & DeLacy, 2013; Honoré, 2005). The recent popularity of slow movement globally makes the concept of slow adventure widely spread (Varley & Semple, 2015). The more meaningful and authentic the adventure, the more valuable and worthy of storytelling it becomes.

In the context of China, the development of mass adventure and the trend of slow adventure are evident, as one could observe from the increasing popularity of various

adventure activities among Chinese such as climbing Mount Everest, skydiving, whitewater surfing and so on. However, despite the growing popularity/interests of adventure tourism in China, little investigation has been conducted on the specific area of slow adventure. Moreover, little knowledge of the slow adventure segment has been attributed to its characteristics of self-organized travel, which might not attract business attention. Following this line of reasoning, one of the potential research areas is to understand the experience and meanings of slow adventure by investigating the self-reported stories posted by the adventurers. To bridge this gap, this study examines how travelers construct their slow adventure experiences through storytelling as part of the process of meaning-making and identity management.

2. Literature Review

Despite a rich body of literature about adventure tourism, there is little consensus on the definition of adventure tourism. Ewert and Jamieson (2003) defined it as “a self-initiated recreational activity, typically involving a travel and overnight stay component that usually involves a close interaction with the natural environment, structurally contains elements of perceived or real risk and danger, and has an uncertain outcome that can be influenced by the participant and/or circumstance” (p.68). The definition by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) is the most used one. ATTA defines adventure tourism as “a trip that includes at least two out of the following three conditions: physical activity, natural environment, and cultural immersion” (Wang, Liu-Lastres, Ritchie, & Pan, 2019, p. 248). The ATTA definition omits risk-taking, thereby admitting a possibility that includes risk-averse demographics open to slow adventurous encounters.

Though the definition is diverse, what has been achieved in common is there should be risk elements within the tourist activities (Kane & Tucker, 2004). Specifically, Weber (2001) opined that an activity regarded as adventure should include both risk and insight-seeking characteristics. Beyond risk and insight, qualities such as challenge and play should also be incorporated into the elements of adventure tourism (Cater, 2006;

Pomfret, 2006). Swarbrooke, Beard, and Leckie (2003) suggested that emotions such as “uncertainty, challenge, expectations of rewards, novelty, stimulus and enthusiasm, escape and separation, exploration and discovery, attention and concentration, and conflicting” should be considered when studying adventure activities (p.33). Based on the level of risks, physical effort and specialized skills needed, adventure tourism has long been categorized into two types: hard and soft adventure (Ewert & Jamieson, 2003; Hill, 1995; Lipscombe, 1995). While ‘hard’ adventure refers to activities with high levels of uncertainties and risks (e.g., mountain climbing, bungee jumping and caving), ‘soft’ adventure means activities with relatively low levels of uncertainties and risks (e.g., whitewater kayaking, surfing, and snowboarding) (Wang et al., 2019).

As the notion of adventure experience is a subjective and socially constructed practice (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Semple, 2013), any social movement might have potential impacts on the meaning construction of adventure. These impacts can be reflected in meaning construction through storytelling. The worldwide popularity of slow movement also extends to the sphere of adventure tourism, in which slow adventure is introduced by researchers to be in contrast with the “fast” packaged adventure that is generally regarded as the “McDonaldization” and mass commodification of adventure under the backdrop of modernity and hypermodernity of contemporary society (Varley & Semple, 2015). The criticism of fast adventure mainly lies in: first, it departs far from the essence of authentic adventure that emphasizes “the borderline experiences occupying the threshold between catastrophe and adventure” (Varley & Semple, 2015, p. 77); second, the tight package of contemporary adventure largely squeezes the authentic tourist experience; third, contemporary adventure is seen as resembling fast food for its convenience but losing its origins and ingredients (Loynes, 1998).

Slow adventure, in its broad sense, refers to slow, immersive experiences that engage with remote, wild and nature-rich places, emphasizing the quality and meaning of adventure over the quantity, efficiency, and convenience (Honoré, 2005). The notion of slow adventure in this study was largely adopted from Semple (2013) and Varley and Semple (2015). Initially, Semple (2013) presented some general idea about the

elements of slow adventure: “overcoming natural barriers and frontiers through mental resolve and ingenuity; long, slow and arduous journeys which hinge critically on navigational skill; the exploration of new horizons and distant goals; quests for *ultima Thule* and wilderness.” (p.72). Drawing upon the work of slow travel and tourism by Dickinson and Lumsdon (2010) and Fullagar et al. (2012), Varley and Semple (2015) defined slow adventure as “explorations of and reconnections with the ground: feeling, sensing and investing in place, community, belonging, sociality, and tradition over time and in nature.” (p.78)

In China, cycling and hitchhiking to Tibet is considered to be a type of slow adventure tourism for the following reasons. First, cycling and hitchhiking are regarded as land-based adventure activity (Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016). Second, Tibet is marketed and well-known as the paradise of adventurers for its mystery and remoteness by which Laing and Crouch (2011) named such places as “exotic ‘frontier’ locations” (p.1516). One could also find evidence from the popular book *Harrer’s Seven Years in Tibet*, which is listed as one of ‘100 greatest adventure books of all time’ by the *National Geographic* (as cite in Semple, 2013). Third, the cycling and hitchhiking tour to Tibet is usually a self-organized, active trip of participants rather than being a “fast” packaged passive adventure tour marketed by travel agencies. Fourth, cycling and hitchhiking to Tibet involves traveling a long distance over 2,000 kilometers and usually takes a long duration of 20 days on average. Fifth, the trip relies largely on the natural and cultural environment and the adventure activity encourages individuals to have deep engagement with nature, culture and local communities, which is consistent with the central idea of slow movement and slow adventure. Over decades, slow adventure to Tibet has increased in popularity on social media and also has produced substantial economic benefits despite the absence of official statistics.

Stories are fundamentally intertwined with travel experiences (McCabe & Foster, 2006), as Curtis and Pajaczkowska (1994) described, ‘the journey is a symbol of narrative’ (p.199). Travelers, almost all of them are storytellers and writers who reflect on their

own travel experiences and feelings (Moscardo, 2010). Stories are the key to understanding their travel experience, because stories carry memories of impressive events and occasions over time (McCabe & Foster, 2006).

In the context of adventure tourism, travel stories enable travelers not only to make sense of their adventure experience, but also to negotiate and elaborate their adventurous identities (Roberson, 2007; Urbain, 1989). Urbain (1989) argues that all tourism and entertainment are kinds of 'identity adventures'. Semple (2013) asserted that adventure was actually a form of leisure and was essentially a manifestation of a desire for adventure identity. The expression of this adventurous spirit depends not only on the challenges facing the body itself, but also on the stories and narratives surrounding and shaping the experience. These texts are derived not only from stories and subtle idioms about specific activities in a certain sub-cultural context, but also from historical narratives and fictional stories that constitute the adventure types, as well as from the rendering by social media. Moreover, adventure experiences can be chosen and presented by the tourists through 'self-defining memories' (Singer, 1995), because these selected adventure experiences can shape and endow identity with symbolic value (Semple, 2013).

With slow adventure, its relatively longer traveling period and extended duration of stay enables slow adventurers to incorporate "their identity formation through the autobiographical memory system as 'life chapters' (McAdams, 1988) within a larger 'life story' (McAdams, 2001)" (Semple, 2013, p. 75) . The extended timelines of slow adventure allow the elements of everyday life and the rhythm of nature to blend with the magnificent scenery and the excitement of peak adventure. It is worth noting that the paradox of adventure leisure and tourism goes beyond the scope of voluntary risk-taking, including profound and non-subjective motives for discomfort, loneliness, simplicity, immersion in the sublime environment, exposure to harsh conditions and suffering.

3. Research Methods

After establishing the links among travel stories, experiences and slow adventure to Tibet, this study suggests that blog-journal travel stories have the potential as data sources to examine how slow adventure experiences are narrated and to elucidate how self-identity is constructed and personal meanings are endowed within the stories of slow adventure to Tibet. Compared with researchers-led interviews, travel blogs provide more subjective information, full of personal emotions and feelings, which respondents might not be willing to show in face-to-face interviews. (Bosangit, Hibbert, & McCabe, 2015; Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019). Bosangit, Dulnuan, and Mena (2012) posit that travel blogs serve as platforms where tourists can remember, evaluate, store, and enrich their travel experiences. Schmallegger and Carson (2008) argue that travel blogging can be described as publishing personal journals of travel stories and recommendations in the form of online travel diaries.

It is worth noting that Chinese tourists' travel blogs have been widely used in tourism literature to explore various issues. For example, Wu and Pearce (2014) studied Chinese recreational vehicle drivers' motivations in Australia by using images and text generated by 22 Chinese bloggers. Using 102 Chinese travel blogs related to five tourist cities in China, Li and Pearce (2016) identified various types of tourist scams against Chinese domestic tourists in popular tourist cities of China. In a recent study, Jin, Moscardo, and Murphy (2019) collected 40 Chinese travel blogs to examine the features of Chinese tourist shopping behavior in Australia using social practice as the theoretical framework.

In this study, the approach of analyzing blog-journal stories of slow adventure to Tibet is social constructionist. The underlying proposition is that the story accounts in tourists' blogs of slow adventure experiences to Tibet construct individuals' social realities and are reflections of their self-identities. In fact, the act of writing blog-journal stories itself is an expression of identity construction. Through the presentation and combination of photos and texts, the blog-journal stories not only reflect reality but more importantly creating reality. The stories themselves play an important role in representing the

experienced world. As a result, travelers' slow adventure experiences to Tibet are constructed into various versions of blog-journal stories, which are construed by the readers. By scrutinizing these blog-journal stories, the authors of this study are able to examine "the dynamics of everyday life from an unadulterated first-person perspective" (Hookway, 2008, p. 107).

A purposive sampling (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) of the blog-journal stories of cycling and hitchhiking to Tibet provides the essential data for this study. The attempt was made to find diverse (both positive and negative) tourists' blog-journal postings of their on-going experiences of cycling or hitchhiking to Tibet by applying the following criteria. First, bloggers should have blogged about their cycling or hitchhiking experience to Tibet and updated their postings continuously for at least 15 days. This criterion was set to make sure that the trip is a long-term slowness traveling experience; and second, blogs should be written entirely in Chinese.

Keeping these criteria in mind, the website "qixingquan.com" (骑行圈 in Mandarin) , "mafengwo.com"(马蜂窝 in Mandarin) and "blog.sina.com" were selected as the online sites for this research. These sites were selected for the following reasons: First, "qixingquan.com" is specifically established for Chinese cycling tourists. It is one of the largest online communities of Chinese long-distance cyclists to Tibet, providing newly and unceasingly updated user created travel blogs, travel tips, notes, and tourist guidebook points with tourism services related to the Sichuan-Tibet Road and Yunnan-Tibet Road. "Mafengwo.com" is China's leading independent travel service platform where tourists can find meaningful travel notes, while "blog.sina.com" is the largest and most registered portal blog in China. Second, the selected three websites have a high volume of site traffic. In 2015, "qixingquan.com" had more than 80,000 registered members with an average of two million pages viewed per month (Qixingquan, 2016). There were 400 million users on the "blog.sina.com" in 2017 (Sina, 2018). Third, most of the blogs of cycling or hitchhiking to Tibet on these three websites are usually presented in a digital diary form. The three chosen websites are highly interactive online communities. To become familiar with this particular online community, the first

author of this study, as a native speaker of Mandarin, had registered and obtained memberships in all the three websites in May, 2013. The collection period was from early June to late August, 2018. This period was proper because it was summer vacation which was the peak season for travel. The first author got permissions for using travel blogs academically by leaving messages to the bloggers. A final dataset of 25 travel blogs was developed based on the consent of bloggers. The profiles of the bloggers were presented in [Table 1](#).

Informant	Travel mode	Companionship	Length of trip (in days)	Starting point of cycling or hitchhiking	Source of blog
1	Hitchhiking	in group	43	Qinghai	Mafengwo
2	Hitchhiking	in group	49	Qinghai	Sina
3	Hitchhiking	Most time alone	43	Chengdu	Mafengwo
4	Hitchhiking	Most time alone	40	Chengdu	Sina
5	Hitchhiking	Most time alone	45	Chengdu	Sina
6	Hitchhiking	Most time alone	43	Chengdu	Mafengwo
7	Cycling	in group	25	Chengdu	Sina
8	Hitchhiking	in group	45	Chengdu	Mafengwo
9	Hitchhiking	in group	39	Chengdu	Sina
10	Hitchhiking	in group	40	Lijiang	Mafengwo
11	Cycling	in group	28	Qinghai	Qixingquan
12	Cycling	in group but most time alone	29	Chengdu	Qixingquan
13	Hitchhiking	Most time alone	45	Chengdu	Mafengwo
14	Cycling	in group	22	Chengdu	Qixingquan

15	Hitchhiking	Most time alone	45	Chengdu	Mafengwo
16	Cycling	Alone, sometimes in group	30	Lijiang	Qixingquan
17	Cycling	Alone, sometimes in group	29	Lijiang	Qixingquan
18	Cycling	Alone, sometimes in group	30	Lijiang	Qixingquan
19	Cycling	Alone but sometimes in group	21	Chengdu	Qixingquan
20	Cycling	Alone but sometimes in group	25	Qinghai	Qixingquan
21	Cycling	in group	29	Chengdu	Qixingquan
22	Cycling	in group, sometimes alone	24	Chengdu	Qixingquan
23	Cycling	Alone, sometimes in group	27	Qinghai	Qixingquan
24	Cycling	Alone, sometimes in group	25	Qinghai	Qixingquan
25	Cycling	Alone, sometimes in group	25	Qinghai	Qixingquan

Table 1. Profile of bloggers

The data analysis was divided into two phases. To build the initial codes, the authors firstly chose five bloggers' postings as a start to get familiar with the content (Gill, 1996). The selected five bloggers represented different modes of slow adventure (for example, three bloggers who cycled to Tibet and two bloggers hitchhiking to Tibet) and different writing styles, lengths and content. To develop initial codes, the researchers engaged in the coding process of the five selected transcripts individually. After that, a brief meeting was scheduled to discuss the coding categories to achieve agreement on the coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A two-phase coding was conducted with all the selected travel blogs. Each of the two-phase coding has the different focus. The first phase of coding was mainly around the events that underpin bloggers' stories of slow adventure to Tibet. This allowed the researchers to distinguish the different sorts of stories that appeared from the data. The second phase of coding was to examine the feelings and actions behind the stories (e.g. the experience, identity and meaning-making); which allowed the authors to understand how bloggers personalize their experiences, construct their identity, and make meaning of such an experience. It should be noted that only travel blogs written in Chinese were collected. The first author translated the contents of the blogs into English when quoting, and then another translator who is good at both Chinese and English translated the quotes back (Chen & Boore, 2010). After the translator and all the authors reached an agreement, the English version of quotes was finalized.

3. Research Findings

The bloggers not only posted the travel strategies that they would like to give as information for other potential travelers, but also narrated their own memories of the slow adventure experiences to Tibet, which is the common focus of blog-journal stories. The data analysis revealed the three elements of the slow adventure experience to Tibet: First, hardship and adventure; second, novelty encounter, learning and transformation; and third, appreciation of nature and culture along the journey. By writing travel blogs, the slow adventurers conducted self-reflection and transformation of what they had gone through during the journey into meaningful personal experiences. The main

components of the narratives within the travel stories of the slow adventure experience were presented below.

3.1 Stories of hardships and uncertainty

Hardship and uncertainty are essential parts of an adventurous experience. The travel blogs were rich in stories of hardships and uncertainties (e.g., the tough road conditions, the changeable weather, the lack of facilities, food and medicine, and traffic accidents). Though the action of choosing cycling, hiking or hitchhiking to Tibet itself is a voluntary risk-taking behavior, some of the participants underestimated the hardships and challenges associated with the journey (Forsythe, Hasbun, & De Lister, 1998). There are also some involuntary tourist risk-taking and uncertainties along the journey (e.g., long distance rides and walks without enough logistics, being robbed, getting lost) (Bosangit et al., 2015).

In the storylines of hardships and uncertainties of the slow adventure to Tibet, informants used several emotional terms to describe their meaningful experiences. Informants use some extreme terms/phrases to depict challenging experiences. Some examples are “impending death”, “almost dying, and “agony”. When describing the arduous journey, informants usually compare it with their previous travel experience. For example, “I never experienced four seasons in one day in my previous travel’ and “I dare not travel like this a second time”. Their stories are full of depictions of how they deal with and overcome difficulties to finally reach mastery. To illustrate, the following extracts are collected from the blogs by Informant 7, 9, 12 to demonstrate travelers’ use of emotional terms to express the difficulties and obstacles they encountered during their slow adventure journey.

There are 12 mountains to be crossed along the Sichuan-Tibet road, with an average elevation of more than 4000 meters, and climbing the Zheduo mountain could be said as the first difficulty of the Sichuan-Tibet road...I never cycled and reached to such higher altitude before and the road conditions were very poor there... I think I am a true hero after successfully crossing over all the mountains... (Informant 7, cyclist, Jiangsu province, 25 days).

These mountains are capricious, and at the last second the weather is clear and cloudless, but the next minute it is wind, frost, rainy and snow. In the beginning, the Zheduo mountain is hot with sunshine, but soon the hail comes, and there is no shelter on the mountains... (Informant 9, hitchhiker, Sichuan province).

I got cold on the fourth day of my trip, and I could not get essential treatment as there is no clinic. Since I was at an altitude of over 3000 meters, taking medicine seemed to have no effect..., and it became even worse, when I crossed over the Haizi mountain where the altitude reached to over 4000 meters. I nearly gave up my trip but ... (Informant 12, cyclist, Shanghai).

Informant 12 mentioned his cold and the high altitude of the destinations which made his sickness so severe that he could not distinguish whether the sick feeling was from altitude sickness or cold symptoms.

Challenging the limits of oneself is one way of making sense of experience and making meaning of life. Csikszentmihalyi (1993) uses the term “evolving self” to describe the process of self-challenge and transcendence. In the travel blogs of this study, bloggers built their journals of hardships, challenges and uncertainties in and through the slow adventure experiences to Tibet. The personalized slow adventure experiences not only referred to one’s own realm of experience, but also with narratives of personal growth and descriptions of physical and/or emotional states. The action of blogging is reflective of a deepened sense of self and shaping a transformational identity through the slow adventure experience by which Beedie and Hudson (2003) use the phrase of “dislocation of self from the ordinary to the extraordinary”(p.625) to depict the process of approaching a more authentic self through adventure experience.

3.2 Stories of novel encounters with nature, culture and people

A variety of novel tourist experiences were indicated in the blog-journal stories collected. Novel encounters are multifaceted, ranging from the appreciation of pure nature, learning exotic culture to meeting/making friends with new people. The

frequently used words in these stories to describe those novelty encounters include: ‘the first time’, ‘fresh and new’ ‘interesting’, ‘sacred’, ‘exotic’, ‘legend’ and ‘mysterious’ Stories describing novelty encounters show that experiences are quite different from person to person and it also relates to one’s personal background such as prior social networks, experience and knowledge. The stories regarding novel experiences and encounters include; seeing a large area of Galsang flowers on the plateau, the blue lake and holy snow under the pure, clear sky of Tibet, and the astonishment from kowtowing Buddhist pilgrims. To some extent, the value of these kinds of experiences lies in expanding the self by doing something unusual. For example, Informant 18 explained his motivation for slow travel to Tibet, “to me, cycling to Tibet is a must-do activity before entering into 30 years old” and Informant 20 described his first time to be a guest at a local’s home: “I really could not bear the taste of the buttered tea, but I almost drank the whole bowl of it to be polite”.

The appreciation of nature and the simple and rustic country lifestyle is one of the main parts within these travel stories. Several bloggers expressed that Tibet is the closest place to the sky in the world and it has the magic power of purifying a travelers’ mind. But to achieve the purification of mind and spirit, one must take slow mobility, rather than directly flying to the place and going to see the must-sees. Another phenomenon observed from these selected travel blogs is that most of the bloggers used the term “you”. For example, Informant 10 wrote, “you have to slow down and take the time to get closer to the heart of the marvelous nature and the rich culture of Tibet.” The frequent use of “you” in travel stories is associated with Goffman (1973)’s notion of ‘footings’ which refer to giving travel suggestions to the audience in this context. Also, it means that the bloggers deem that their readers or audience shall include both people who they know and those they do not know.

In addition, unlike the traditional companionship of traveling with family members, close friends and one’s partner, the slow adventure travel to Tibet usually starts either independently from one’s original place, then gradually forming a small group with

three to five members by chance on the road, or simply by recruiting cycling or hitchhiking members through online communities. Five bloggers depicted themselves as independent travelers and started their travel from home alone. However, on the road to Lhasa, they encountered some other cyclists and became ‘donkey friends’ (“驴友” in Mandarin, means friendships that randomly formed during the trip). Ten bloggers reported that they called for riding friends through social media platforms like Twitter, WeChat, or other online forums and then became spontaneously and temporarily organized as loose club-like cycling and walking companions. Informant 1, a hitchhiker explained, “walking to Tibet makes me see some more unexpected beautiful scenery while also encountering some interesting people...”. Informant 14 described “during this trip, my teammates and I encouraged each other, helped each other, and formed a deep friendship...”. Informant 22, female who encountered with her current boyfriend by the trip to Tibet stated:

We never knew each other before, just getting together in Chengdu and starting our journey with new friends..., while my bike was broken by accident, he pushed the bike and walked with me for more than ten kilometers, and we keep in touch afterwards..., well, we start from ‘donkey friends’, but becomes close friends, and finally boyfriend.... (Informant 22, cyclist)

3.3 Stories of rite of passage

There are abundant blog-journal stories that address the importance of rite of passage in shaping their travel experiences. Accounts of rite-of-passage include both celebrating life’s milestones and catharsis of life struggles (White & White, 2004). Experiences that were framed as positive commonly regard that travel as celebration or self-incentives while experiences that were framed as negative usually include the notion that the long-term travel should have therapeutic value. In this study, five of the informants choose slow mobility to Tibet to celebrate their graduation from university and took this travel as a gap year to find out their life goals before entering into society to find a job. For example, Informant 21 described “I have no idea what to do. I hope the trip could make me clear about what I really want before I enter to career...”. Taking

slow mobility to Tibet is a popular form of travel that related to the graduation of college for some of the young adults in China. Besides, young university graduates put greater emphasis and investment in the meaning-making of cycling or hitchhiking to Tibet and to gain a sense of self as well as exploring the meaning of life. The emotions of taking a slow adventure trip as a rebellion against parents' overcare and as a manifestation of independence could also be observed within these stories. Informant 6 and informant 14, university students who just graduated, noted "my parents always ask me 'don't do this, don't do that, I was really sad and needed some fresh air..., I want to make my own decision this time as I have already grown up to face up with the hardships and joys of life...". Similar words were also found on the blog of Informant 14 who wrote 'it took me a whole month to persuade my mother..., I want to tell them that I grow up by taking this trip...'.

Another type of story focused on the slow adventure as 'therapy', which is a coping strategy to deal with life struggles. For instance, Informant 12 who just got divorced and experienced much sorrow, and then decided to cycle to Tibet, wrote, "I cannot stop thinking about the whole thing until I cycle to Tibet so that I have no time to think...". While Informant 1, who just got fired by his boss noted, "...to me, it was a planned kind of a healing journey..., I hope I'd forget those unhappy things and start a new life...". From this perspective, tourists took slow travel to Tibet as a distraction from pains and life difficulties.

By stories of rites-of-passage, the bloggers enter in, then access some sort of cultural capital. Moreover, the socially constructed stories of rites-of-passage are usually ritualistic in that the associated meanings are mainly symbolic. Taking blogs of Informants 11 and 3 as the examples: Informant 11 described in his blog that he and his teammates named their cycling group as "snail riders" by which to express their desire to travel slowly. He explained, "snail is the symbol of slow but persistent and rich... We want to use this symbol to encourage ourselves to finish the trip..." Informant 3, whose last job was a construction worker in Shanghai, was determined to stay in Tibet to be a Chinese teacher after the walking trip to Tibet.

During the past eight years, I've been changing jobs and working places from Guangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing to Shenzhen all the time, I just wanted to slow down to find a lifestyle that suits me well. I feel that Tibet is such a place to make you slow down to think about life. Therefore, I decided to stay here and contribute to what I have to help local people... but I might leave someday in the future..., who knows what will happen..., it's better to live in the present.... (Informant 3, Hitchhiker)

4. Conclusions

Tourist experience and travel identity have become the focus of scholars and practitioners. However, there is a lack of research on travelers' self-reported day-to-day reflections of the travel experience. Also, there is still considerable ambiguity in terms of how travelers transform their feelings, actions and perceptions of activities during the trips into the personally meaningful and memorable experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). This research systematically studied the blog-journal stories of travelers' slow adventures to Tibet to reveal the processes of travelers' transforming and framing the events, activities and the related emotions during the trip into the meaningful slow adventure experiences that are self-published to potential audiences. Compared with the common research approach that is usually led by researchers, blog-journal stories provide access to understanding experiences that are directly from tourists. Writing blog-journal stories is a way of reflecting and making sense of one's travel or consumption experience (Bosangit et al., 2012). The analysis of these user-generated contents provides a unique approach to examine the reflective chapters of the traveling experience in general, the slow adventure experience in particular, to pinpoint the main types and central qualities of the slow adventure experience which are chosen by the bloggers as the focus of writing and reflection. Furthermore, this study also reveals how tourists ascribe special personal significance to their slow adventure travel experience according to their own backgrounds.

The findings of this study showed that first, complex emotions are maintained and entangled in the context of slow adventure experiences through online storytelling of the bloggers during and after travel. This conforms with the conclusions of previous studies, which indicated that Chinese independent travelers prefer to share the positive

emotions of their travel experiences through online social platforms (Filep et al., 2013). Second, the richest stories presented in the travel blogs are usually based on the special, impressive events that travelers experienced rather than the general knowledge and facts of the trip. Moreover, whether the events are special or not largely depends on travelers' previous experience and personal encounters. In this study, the authors examined the three common elements that are pertinent to slow adventure experiences, which are also the main focus for travelers who choose to cycle or hitchhike to Tibet. The events behind these elements had also been depicted as memorable experiences as well as extraordinary experiences in previous studies (Farber & Hall, 2007; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

The analysis of the travel stories presented by the bloggers reveals that travelers actually personalize and frame their slow adventure experiences through emotional expressions and self-reflection related narratives. However, comparing with the study by Tung and Ritchie (2011) that used interviews as the data collection method, in which the interviewees only reported the positive emotions of the tourism experiences, the findings of this study show that bloggers wrote down a series of events with bundles of emotional expressions including both positive and negative aspects when they construct their travel stories. Emotions are reported to influence tourist satisfaction and behavior intentions (Bigné, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2005), tourism marketers have attempted to sell tourist experiences by arousing consumer emotions. However, when tourists recall and describe their experiences, they often refer to a variety of unexpected emotional combinations; they write down the moments of scariness, holiness, pride, disappointment, uneasiness, frustration, awe and so on.

These findings are different from the traditional opinion that tourists are motivated by pleasurable experiences (Crompton, 1979) and hedonic holidays (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). Additionally, the results of this study show that the emotional and reflecting processes of writing travel stories helps to construct, reconstruct and enhance the slow adventure experience. As a result, this research responds to the call for consumer-centered tourism experiences in the context of the experience-oriented economy (Pine

& Gilmore, 2011; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). To be more specific, this study provides a novel understanding of the significance of storytelling and emotional sharing into personalization of slow adventure experiences. For tourism organizations who seek to build emotional bonds with tourists, it is crucial to understand the emotional process of meaning-making in depth, which remains a challenge (Bosangit et al., 2015).

The results of this study also demonstrate that critical self-reflection is a necessary element in endowing special meaning to the slow adventure experience. Writing travel stories is a self-reflection process through which bloggers attribute personalized meaning to the experience. The process of personalization depends on each blogger's own lifeworld and previous experience. Bloggers use this slow adventure experience to Tibet to construct their self-identity and gain social capital while it is also a kind of imitation in the context of social comparison (Giddens, 1991). The blog-journal stories work as a way for adventure travelers to savor the memories of the adventure, make the meaningful experience of the mythic, heroic journey (Laing & Crouch, 2009) with abundant imagery, metaphors and exaggerations within these subjective meanings to expand ones' self-identities. This point is coincident with the notion of eudemonic happiness by Filep et al. (2013), which means a deep sense of pleasure after achieving a meaningful goal. The findings of this study show that both eudemonic and hedonistic pleasure is important to the slow adventure experience. Even activities or events that aroused negative emotions at a special moment could lead to eudemonic pleasure according to the travel stories presented by bloggers. Further, the process of blogging adds to the slow adventure experience through a sense of self extending.

Travelers expressed the self-changes that the slow adventure experiences bring to them. The implications of these special understandings to destination management is that tourism marketers should convey the transformative value of the meaningful and memorable adventure experience to travelers (Tung & Ritchie, 2011) and invest more efforts to develop products and activities that relate to the expression of self-identity. The findings of this study show that travelers usually selectively describe their experience through storytelling. The use of framing skills in story writing contributes

to knowledge which could help tourism marketers create story-able events to dramatize tourist adventure experiences.

Several limitations could be found in this study. First and foremost, this study only focuses on the blog-journal stories of slow adventure trips to Tibet that were written in Chinese. The specific slow adventure niche to Tibet cannot reflect the various experiences of slow adventurers all over the world. As a result, the findings might not be generalizable to other slow adventure activities and non-Chinese populations. Second, the data from this study only reported three main themes in travel stories of the slow adventure experience. Additional themes and insights might emerge through further collecting and analyzing a wider range of adventure travel stories. Third, the difficulty of validating travel blogs and the lack of physical context could also be one of the limitations that should be acknowledged. Fourth, this study only focuses on the experience of slow adventure travel to Tibet but without paying attention to tourists' activities at the destination which could be an area of potential future research. Finally, this study only pays attention to the identity constructions and the experiences that are underlying those travel stories, which are the essential elements of the meaning-making practices through the blogging activity among travelers. Researchers are highly encouraged to identify other types and uses of travel stories beyond travel blogs to understand the rapidly changing tourist experience economy.

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