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## **Analysing the Functions of Online Destination Forums through a Corpus-Assisted Discourse-Analytic Approach**

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### **Abstract**

Previous research on online travel communication has paid little attention to destination forums, where thousands of travellers worldwide post and view topics related to a place. The present study examines the functions of a destination forum on TripAdvisor. Through the first large-scale corpus-assisted discourse analysis of thousands of topic-initiating posts, this study identifies the functions of the forum, analyses how these functions are realised through prominent linguistic and discursive features, and investigates how these functions are performed by members with different levels of contribution and knowledge. The findings show that destination forums are functionally distinct from closely-related online travel texts and from forums in other professional contexts. This demonstrates the need to carry out detailed analyses of actual online travel communication across the spectrum to fully grasp the richness and subtlety of a set of interrelated forms of tourism discourse both as a whole, and as part of the whole.

**Keywords:** Corpus-assisted discourse analysis; Destination forum; Discourse analysis; Keyword analysis; Online travel communication; Tourism discourse; TripAdvisor

### **1. Introduction**

As one of the most important sectors in the global economy, travel and tourism generates approximately one-tenth of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) and creates almost 300 million jobs worldwide, equivalent to one in every ten jobs (World Economic Forum 2017, xi). The sector accounts for 6.6% of all global exports, making it the third largest in terms of global earnings (World Trade Organisation 2016). It is therefore hardly an overstatement to say that

travel and tourism has an impact on most of us to some extent, whether as a service provider or recipient. In the last few decades, the rise of the Internet has dramatically changed the face of the travel and tourism sector. Travellers no longer simply rely on tourist guides, official destination leaflets and guidebooks in their travel planning process. Instead, they turn to the web for inspiration for and information on where to go and how to travel (Google 2014). Their physical actions of travelling and touring in the real world are thus mediated by their research on the relevant online discourses in the virtual world. Given the considerable time, effort and expense involved in making travel-related choices and that tourism products are experience goods which cannot be easily evaluated before purchase (Nelson 1970), the role of online travel communication in shaping travel and tourism practices is expected to become even more significant with the advances in technology.

Despite the significance of online travel communication in affecting travel-related decisions, our understanding of the different forms and media of such communication is far from complete. Through the first large-scale analysis of posts in a destination forum on one of the world's most popular travel websites, the present study aims to identify the major functions and associated features of the forums, as a first step towards giving a fuller picture of the range of actual online discursive practices found in online travel communication.

## ***2. Literature Review***

### ***2.1. Functions of online travel communication***

Previous studies on online travel communication have explored a number of forms and media, ranging from official tourism websites, tourism marketing posts on social media platforms, tourism-related product reviews, to travel blogs and destination forums. Research on official tourism websites and tourism marketing posts on social media platforms has highlighted the promotional function of these online tourism texts, and how the commodification and consumption of a place is achieved through advertising features in language as well as in image. Bianchi (2017), for example, examined the use of Facebook as a marketing tool by tour operators and identified a number of linguistic and rhetorical strategies they used to promote tourist destinations including second-person pronouns, imperative verbs and metaphors. Focusing on the use of the two adjectives *different* and *distinct* on luxury hotel websites, Dolón (2020) shows how hotels persuade guests of their ability as service providers not only to understand but also to

cater for their guests' needs. In visual communication, Caldas-Coulthard (2008) exemplified how the human body was employed as a branding strategy in photographs on official tourism websites. Central to these texts is the prevalence of persuasive discourse produced by travel service providers, with an aim of exerting power over travellers, who are conceptualised more as a passive audience of the content (Francesconi 2014).

What is less well-understood, by contrast, is the functions of the variety of online travel texts with travellers as prosumers, i.e. producers as well as consumers. The rise of user-generated content (UGC) in online communication following the popularity of Web 2.0 in the last decade has finally allowed researchers to look at the ways in which travellers as ordinary web users actively create content in online travel communication. Tourism-related product reviews, travel blogs and destination forums are just some typical examples. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on review-related travel web genres. These include travel product reviews such as hotel, restaurant and destination reviews, as well as responses to such reviews. As part of her study on the discourse of online consumer reviews combining an eclectic discourse-analytic approach with the tools of corpus linguistics, Vázquez (2014) investigated the use of lexico-grammatical devices for expressing evaluation in hotel reviews on TripAdvisor. Her findings show that the primary function of the reviews is evaluative, as evidenced by the frequent use of such linguistic resources as evaluative adjectives and stance adverbs. Further, Villarroel-Ordenes et al. (2017) found, through an empirical text-mining sentiment analysis, that the polarity of sentiment expressed in hotel reviews is associated with particular linguistic features. For instance, first-person pronouns are more commonly seen in reviews with positive sentiment. Concentrating only on negative hotel reviews, Suau-Jiménez (2019) examined the linguistic devices of attitudinals and boosters and compared their uses on hotel websites. Directly following the travel-related product review genre in the discourse chain is the review response genre. In a study which explored the move structure of responses made by hotel management to negative online reviews, Ho (2017) established that the function of such responses was service recovery, i.e. to increase the level of confidence and satisfaction of customers and to boost their intention to repurchase. While such responses to reviews are produced by service providers rather than travellers, their production is strongly triggered by and highly responsive to travellers' negative reviews. Their existence is thus a testament to the growing power of travellers as prosumers (Bruns 2008), i.e. hybrid producer-users at the same time, in their

engagement in the collaborative construction of tourism discourse in online travel communication.

Compared with traveller reviews on tourism products, travel blogs and destination forums are severely under-researched, especially in linguistic or discourse studies. In marketing and tourism research where more studies on travel blogs and destination forums are found, a quantitative, statistically-based approach is often employed without much regard to the textual analysis of the actual content (for example, Li et al. 2015). In the small number of relevant work in linguistics and discourse analysis, travel blogs and forums have been taken as vehicles for the investigation of particular phenomena, including the tourist gaze (D'Egidio 2014), the construction of social actors and co-parental relationship (Dolón 2014), and the expression of voices through stance and engagement markers (Suau-Jiménez 2014), rather than as objects of study per se for their textual characteristics. Owing to the foci of these studies, little attention has been paid to the specific characteristics of these texts beyond a mere description as data sources. The exact nature of such texts, in particular their functions and associated features, thus remains obscure and awaits further investigation.

## *2.2 Characteristics of online destination forums*

Destination forums and travel blogs share some common characteristics in the sense that both are asynchronous forms of online travel communication with content largely contributed by lay travellers rather than service providers from the industry. They are also high in spontaneity as they are often produced and published while writers are on the move, i.e. in the middle of their travels (D'Egidio 2014), and/or on their mobile devices. From an analytical point of view, however, the former offers a richer venue for the study of functions and their associated linguistic and discursive features given the greater possibilities of interaction between forum members. While travel blogs can involve multiple authors, most travel blogs contain posts generated by a single individual with occasional comments from others. There is thus a strongly hierarchical host-visitor relationship with the bulk of the content produced and controlled by the blogger. By contrast, destination forums are more interactive as they allow all registered forum users to initiate and to respond freely on the forums. In other words, there is a greater potential for polylogues (Suau-Jiménez 2014). Membership in the virtual forum communities is comparatively more open and fluid (Angouri & Sanderson 2016). Accordingly, it is not

uncommon to see a large number of users coming from diverse backgrounds with varied levels of involvement participating in such destination forums. Interestingly, these communities are “imagined” as they involve people who have not met before and are unlikely to meet in real life (Kavoura & Borges 2016, 238). Often characterised by their international and cross-cultural composition, these destination forums can be seen as sites for online imagined communities of practice, where groups of people who only meet in the virtual world “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al. 2002, 4). While a large number of studies have researched the interactions of communities on online forums in different institutional and professional contexts, including in health-related and educational settings (see, for example, Angouri & Sanderson 2016, Delahunty 2012, Ladegaard 2012, Semino et al. 2017), no scholarly work has been conducted thus far to investigate the interplay between the functions of destination forums and the interactions of members in these communities in the process of knowledge and expertise deepening. Exploring how the transfer of knowledge and expertise among members in the online imagined communities of practice on these destination forums is achieved through the functions of the forums will therefore provide insights to gain a better understanding of this scarcely-studied form of travel communication, and of the similarities and differences between a set of interrelated forms of tourism discourse.

### ***3. Data and methods***

Data for this study came from a destination forum on TripAdvisor, one of the world’s largest travel sites. As a public social media platform that relies on user-generated content (UGC), TripAdvisor-branded websites attract on average 490 million unique visitors per month, and house 730 million reviews and opinions on 8.1 million travel-related products, including places to stay, places to eat and things to do (TripAdvisor 2018). Together these websites may therefore be considered a representative data source for investigating the functions and their associated features of online destination forums. In the present study, the Hong Kong Travel Forum was chosen, as the city is the world’s most visited city (World Economic Forum 2018).

Since September 2004, the Hong Kong Travel Forum has provided users with a platform to post topics about the city. While TripAdvisor provides localized versions of travel forums in 49 markets worldwide in 28 languages (TripAdvisor 2018), the Hong Kong Travel Forum in

English is by far the largest with the greatest number of topics. At the time of the study, more than 40,000 topics have been produced. For the purpose of this study, only topics in English posted between 2015 and 2016 have been collected. Topics with null replies are excluded from the analysis as such topics fail to initiate responses. Constituting only a minority of the total, such postings with no replies are considered to generate little interest from the Hong Kong Travel Forum community. Based on the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975) and Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986), the functions of replies are strongly determined by the topics, if the replies are to be considered communicatively meaningful and relevant. As such, the focus of the present study lies in the functions of the topics, but not of the replies.

Ethical issues surrounding the retrieval of online data in research have been much discussed (AoIR 2012), though they remain highly sensitive, debatable, and hardly straightforward, especially given the fast-changing online environment and the country-dependent regulations on the extraction and storage of online data. In the case of forum posts on TripAdvisor, all the material is in the public domain and available to be viewed without registration on the website. As such, it can be argued that contributors on the forums are aware that their posts and the associated data will be archived and freely accessible. In a large number of research studies on online discussion forums including TripAdvisor forums, no informed consent from the contributors of the forum was deemed necessary (see, for example, Attard & Coulson 2012). Following Vásquez (2014) who studied 1,000 online reviews from five websites including TripAdvisor, the present study conforms to the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR 2012) by removing personally identifying information from the forum posts through anonymization to protect the privacy of the contributors.

In total, there are 2,755 posts initiating topics with at least one reply on the forum in the one-year period specified above. These first posts are referred to as topic posts in the remainder of this article and constitute the focus of the study. Based on the meta-data collected from these 2,755 topic posts, the number of users with unique IDs producing these posts is 1,857. Each topic post can be structurally divided into two components: the subject line and the body text. The total number of words in the topic posts examined is 240,843, with an average number of 87 words per topic post. Table 1 details the size of these posts in number of characters.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Characteristics of Topic Posts on the TripAdvisor Hong Kong Travel Forum (in Number of Characters)

	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Subject</b>	2	62	32	33.02	14.26
<b>Body text</b>	5	7,219	315	425.88	441.10

Following a corpus-assisted discourse-analytic approach (Baker & McEnery 2015; Partington et al. 2013), the present study involved first a close reading of all the topic posts collected to classify them functionally. Since each topic post may fulfil more than one function, it may be assigned to multiple functional categories. This detailed functional analysis was inductive and solely data-driven. As an ongoing organic process, the functional analysis involved multiple rounds of coding to obtain reliability and consistency. Once all the topic posts were classified functionally, the dominant functions identified were examined in more detail, both quantitatively by keyword analysis and qualitatively by a discourse-analytic approach. For posts belonging to each dominant functional category, prominent linguistic and discursive features were identified and examined, together with the post producers' degree of contribution to and level of knowledge in the forum as revealed by the meta-data collected. Unlike most studies taking a corpus-assisted discourse-analytic approach which start with a frequency or keyword list to identify areas of interest for further examination, this study started with the manual coding of the topic posts to identify the most salient functions, followed by a keyword analysis. Assisted by the software suite WordSmith Tools 7.0 (Scott 2016), this quantitative keyword analysis identifies words which are statistically significant in topic posts belonging to one functional category when compared with all the topic posts examined. As such, it focuses on topic posts belonging to only one functional category but not multiple functional categories. The strength of keywords is measured by keyness value, calculated using the log likelihood ratio. Conventionally in linguistic research, as in the case of the present study, only keywords with a p value lower than 0.000001 are reported. It is believed that this approach can reveal distributional patterns more directly related to specific dominant functions, which will in turn provide a more nuanced understanding of the key features associated with each dominant function identified.

With this goal in mind, the aim of the study is to gain insights into the nature and functions of online destination forums as an important example of Internet-based travel communication. Through the identification and examination of the functions of topic posts on a destination forum

and the investigation of the relationship between the functional correlates with linguistic features as well as member contribution and knowledge, this study also aims to contribute to the further understanding of interactions within online imagined travel communities of practice. The three research questions below guide the present study in achieving its aims:

- What are the key functions of the topic posts on the TripAdvisor Hong Kong Travel Forum?
- How do the key functions of the topic posts relate to the degree of contribution and level of knowledge of the post producers?
- What are the linguistic and discursive features, if any, associated with the key functions?

#### **4. Functions of travel forum topic posts**

In the Hong Kong Travel Forum, the 2,755 topic posts collected and analysed have been broadly classified into five functional categories. The number of topic posts fulfilling only one single function is 2,718 (98.7%), which constitute the vast majority of the total. In other words, only a minority of the topic posts examined serve more than one function. As illustrated in the analysis below with examples quoted verbatim, forum topic posts serving different functions are produced by users with different levels of contribution and knowledge and are associated with different linguistic and discursive features. The five functional categories identified in the single-themed forum topic posts are listed in Table 2 in descending order of frequency of occurrence:

Table 2. Functional Categories Identified in Topic Posts in the Data

<b>Functional Categories</b>	<b>Frequency of Occurrence (Total Topic Posts = 2755)</b>	<b>Number of Unique Users</b>	<b>Mean Number of Posts by Users</b>	<b>Mean Post Size (in Characters)</b>
Information seeking	2,496 (90.6%)	1,730	330	334
Review seeking	123 (4.5%)	112	111	966
Information sharing	49 (1.8%)	19	17,833	450
Experience sharing	41 (1.5%)	38	1,992	1,592
Others	9 (0.3%)	9	5,216	340
<b>SUM</b>	<b>2,718 (98.7%)</b>			



#### 4.1. Information seeking

It can be observed from Table 2 that most of the topic posts found on the Hong Kong Travel Forum are information-seeking (N=2496, 90.6%). This overwhelming proportion of posts seeking information shows that a travel forum is predominantly a site of information exchange. More importantly, such exchange involves two online discursive actions of hierarchical knowledge transfer. First, users with little knowledge about aspects of the destination initiate the exchange through an information-seeking topic post. Users with knowledge about aspects of the destination then supply the information requested through replies to the original topic post. Information-seeking posts are therefore typically produced by novice users, who constitute the majority of the forum users, as evidenced by the number of unique users creating these posts. Of all the 1,857 unique topic post producers on the forum, there are 1,730 unique users who have written information-seeking posts (Table 2). This also suggests that such novice users are unlikely to produce more than one information-seeking post. When compared with users producing posts serving other functions, users producing information-seeking posts create the second lowest mean number of posts in total (Table 2). Their contribution to the forum is thus sporadic. This large but loose network of novice users joins the forum with the aim of getting quick and specific responses from more knowledgeable users. The awareness of target audience in the novices' queries is sometimes evident through their direct address of the expert users, as in Example 1:

Example 1.

Subject: Where to buy electronic stuff in Hong Kong?

*Hi all HK experts out there! I would like to know where in Hong Kong can I get the 4th Generation Portable Mini XIAOMI TV Box? Thanks in advance!*

Questions asked in these information-seeking posts are often fairly exact in nature, most commonly involving factual information on such thematic dimensions as transportation, accommodation and shopping, as in Example 1. Since these information-seeking posts largely involve only one question requesting straightforward factual information, they are the shortest in length among the five functional categories (Table 2).

In terms of linguistic and discursive features, the keyword analysis yields some interesting findings on items which are significantly more frequently occurring in this functional category than in all the other four categories. Table 3 lists the top ten keywords in information-seeking posts:

Table 3. Top Ten Keywords in the Topics Serving the Function ‘Information Seeking’

N	Keyword	Frequency in Category	% in Category	Frequency in All Other Categories	% in All Other Categories	Keyness
1	THANKS	969	0.55	54	0.12	188.97
2	I	4,506	2.58	698	1.57	170.09
3	HI	835	0.48	55	0.12	141.31
4	BE	2,028	1.16	252	0.57	138.92
5	ANY	1,064	0.61	97	0.22	124.73
6	IS	2,401	1.38	340	0.77	118.78
7	ANYONE	483	0.28	21	0.05	111.30
8	ARE	1,495	0.86	185	0.42	103.11
9	WILL	1,455	0.83	180	0.41	100.39
10	LOOKING	352	0.20	14	0.03	85.31

Keywords in Table 3 show that information-seeking posts are query-based, personal, informal and face-threatening. More than half of the items are commonly found to ask questions in the posts. The verbs ‘be’, ‘is’, ‘are’ and ‘will’ on the list are used as either main or auxiliary verbs to form yes-no questions (e.g. ‘Will it all be ridiculously expensive??’, ‘Is 2 weeks too long?’, ‘Are there English signs?’), whereas the determiner ‘any’ and pronoun ‘anyone’ are used in questions, sometimes elliptical ones without verbs, to informally invite responses from other users (e.g. ‘anyone has any recent experience?’, ‘Any suggestions?’). As the last item on the top ten keyword list, the main verb ‘looking’ introduces the particular information that is sought (e.g. ‘Looking for a place under \$100 night’), whereas the second most significant keyword, i.e. the first person singular pronoun ‘I’, reflects the personal nature of information-seeking posts which concern forum users’ own individual future travel needs, plans and preferences (e.g. ‘I will be visiting Hong Kong for the first time in October’). In particular, approximately one-eighth (579/4,506) of these instances of ‘I’ in the posts are in the lower case, indicating the spontaneity and informality of forum posts.

The two remaining items on the list, ‘thanks’ and ‘hi’, rank top and third respectively. They are thus prominent features which distinguish information-seeking posts from those serving all

other functions. These two features of informal language can be broadly subsumed under the class of politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson 1987). As a positive politeness strategy, the use of the informal greeting ‘hi’ minimises the distance between the novice post writers and the expert post readers. It is typically found at the beginning of a message (see Example 1). By contrast, the anticipatory ‘thanks’ expresses the novice users’ gratitude in advance for the information sought, typically at the end of a message (see Example 1). Since the use of ‘thanks’ implicitly acknowledges an imposition on the addressee, it is a negative politeness strategy. The fact that these two words are significantly more frequent in this functional category shows that seeking information on the forum from other users who voluntarily answer queries from people they do not know in this virtual imagined community of practice is a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson 1987) which potentially threatens the negative face of the addressees and thus requires mitigation.

#### *4.2. Review seeking*

Although review seeking is the second most frequently-occurring function, it is only found in a very small proportion of all the topic posts (N=123, 4.5%). Review seeking involves the topic producer supplying a detailed itinerary for other users to review. Unlike information-seeking posts which mostly concern requesting specific, straightforward or factual information, review-seeking posts require readers to go through the whole list of itinerary items, evaluate their suitability and make comments accordingly. Similar to information-seeking posts, such exchange also involves discursive actions of hierarchical knowledge transfer, whereby novice users request knowledge from other users discursively through the post submitted. Again, users creating review-seeking posts tend to be one-time contributors, and their overall contribution to this travel forum is the lowest in terms of the mean number of posts (Table 2). The size of their posts, however, is the second longest (Table 2). In the interest of space, a review-seeking post which is only around one-third of the mean size in this functional category is presented in Example 2:

Example 2.

Subject: Hong kong/Macau itenary for 7days
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*Hello all, Need your help in defining an itinerary to enjoy most of places at Hong Kong and Macau. My current plan is as below:- 1)arrive at around 06:00 am on 30th Dec.will be staying at best western harbour view hotel. 2)planning to spend 2 days I.e 31/12-01/01 at Disneyland. 3)02/01 wil be staying at cityview 4)will spend a day at ocean park on 03/01 4)04/01-06/01,will be in Macau at venetian.*

The long length of review-seeking posts arises from the fact that they are highly informational in content as they often provide very specific details, not only on a daily but sometimes hourly basis. Other users are invited to a) carefully examine the itinerary items; b) assess the places listed, the timings and duration proposed; and c) make comments and suggestions to the original topic posts. Table 4 lists the top ten keywords in review-seeking posts:

Table 4. Top Ten Keywords in the Topics Serving the Function ‘Review Seeking’

<b>N</b>	<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Frequency in Category</b>	<b>% in Category</b>	<b>Frequency in All Other Categories</b>	<b>% in All Other Categories</b>	<b>Keyness</b>
1	#	1,475	6.45	5,806	2.96	631.94
2	DAY	310	1.35	674	0.34	325.05
3	MARKET	113	0.49	91	0.05	250.53
4	PEAK	152	0.66	204	0.10	246.41
5	ITINERARY	77	0.34	59	0.03	174.91
6	TEMPLE	68	0.30	44	0.02	166.97
7	PM	76	0.33	67	0.03	160.62
8	EVENING	68	0.30	56	0.03	148.95
9	SYMPHONY	43	0.19	21	0.01	117.94
10	VICTORIA	65	0.28	79	0.04	112.92

The number one keyword in this functional category is the wildcard character ‘#’, which denotes any numerical figure. Its prevalence is largely due to its wide use in detailing the itinerary of travellers. In these review-seeking posts, figures are frequently used to represent dates, times, duration, listed items, and so on (see Example 2). Given the relatively long length of review-seeking posts, the use of numerical figures in listing has an important function of textual organisation. Two other items denoting times of the day, i.e. ‘pm’ and ‘evening’, are also found on the list. Their presence as keywords suggests that travellers’ activities are more often planned in the afternoon and evening rather than in the morning. Structurally, it is common for such posts

to start with a subject line containing the second and fifth most frequent keywords ‘day’ and ‘itinerary’, as in Example 2 albeit with a misspelling of the latter. This explicit labelling on the subject line with these two keywords allows other forum users to quickly identify such posts as requests for itinerary review.

All the remaining five keywords on the list show the names of attractions in Hong Kong which itinerary producers tend to include on their lists. These include different markets and temples, Victoria Peak, and the Symphony of Lights, a light and music show by the city’s waterfront. Together these keywords indicate the ‘aboutness’ (Phillips 1989) of review-seeking posts, i.e. the two main semantic dimensions of time and place in their contents, with the additional use of numerical figures as a device for structuring discourse.

#### *4.3. Information sharing*

Information-sharing posts concern the supply of factual information, often through referring to an external source. Only constituting a small number (N=49, 1.8%), these posts involve hierarchical knowledge transfer in the opposite direction of that observed in information/review-seeking posts (Table 2). Expert, rather than novice, users produce these posts for the benefit of less knowledgeable users. The mean number of posts produced by users who share information is substantially larger than that in other functional categories. On average, users who produce information-sharing posts contribute to this travel forum a staggering 17,833 times (Table 2). The number of unique users and frequency of occurrence of posts in this functional category also suggest that experts who share information tend to do so more than once (Table 2). Information-sharing posts are therefore created by a small number of core members of the travel forum who contribute regularly. Although minimal in number, these core members play a crucial role in the maintenance of the forum. Without their contribution both in responding to users’ requests in replies to topic posts and in sharing information in topic posts, the forum would not be sustainable. Example 3 shows how expertise knowledge is shared in topic posts:

Example 3.

Subject: Art Basel Hong Kong (15-17 March 2015)
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*The Art Basel - Hong Kong international art fair will take place in mid March and will be open to the public on 15-17 March 2015. See link for details*  
<https://www.artbasel.com/en/Hong-Kong> For ticketing information (see link) [https://... Useful-Information](https://...)

Unlike information-seeking posts, no greetings or expressions of gratitude are found. Instead, information is presented as factual and impersonal with a low level of subjectivity through the absence of such features of personalisation as first-person pronouns (Villarroel-Ordenes et al. 2017), hence imbuing such posts with a sense of objectivity and authority. Another major difference between information-sharing posts and topic posts in the previous two functional categories is that no explicit request for feedback or response is made. Table 5 lists the top ten words which are significantly more frequent for information sharing:

Table 5. Top Ten Keywords in the Topics Serving the Function ‘Information Sharing’

N	Keyword	Frequency in Category	% in Category	Frequency in All Topics	% in All Topics	Keyness
1	COM	55	1.60	122	0.07	227.32
2	LINK	19	0.55	34	0.02	84.66
3	WWW	17	0.49	39	0.02	69.19
4	SEE	35	0.99	299	0.16	64.46
5	INFORMATION	19	0.55	85	0.05	56.79
6	NEWS	11	0.32	19	0.01	49.58
7	EVENTS	11	0.32	23	0.01	46.35
8	ART	11	0.32	26	0.01	44.23
9	EN	9	0.26	17		39.33
10	DISCOVERHONG KONG	8	0.23	11		38.76

These keywords indicate that information-sharing posts are highly hypertextual. More than half of the keywords on the list, including ‘com’, ‘www’, ‘see’, ‘news’, ‘events’, ‘en’ and ‘discoverhongkong’, are found in hyperlinks as part of web addresses (e.g. ‘[www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/see-do/events-festi...](https://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/see-do/events-festi...)’). Indeed, only 9 out of the 49 information-sharing posts are without hyperlinks. Expert users thus rely heavily on their knowledge in the virtual world to disseminate information to other users. The fact that ‘discoverhongkong’ and ‘en’ are keywords shows that official local sources and English

resources are preferred, as these two items found on the web addresses are associated with the institutional website run by the local tourism body and the language of the websites cited respectively. 'Art' is a keyword as such hyperlinks often contain information about art fairs and exhibitions (see Example 3). The keywords 'see', 'link' and 'information' also reveal the intertextual nature of posts serving this function. 18 out of the 19 instances of 'link' found in information-sharing posts are immediately preceded by 'see', as an explicit intertextual reference to introduce the link to an external text in the virtual world (see Example 3). They are frequently accompanied by the word 'information' and its preceding modifier (e.g. 'ticketing') in the immediate neighbourhood to specify the kind of information supplied by the link if further details are required by the readers (see Example 3).

#### *4.4. Experience sharing*

Experience-sharing posts concern descriptive or evaluative accounts of users' personal travel experience, often in the recent past. They are similar in number to information-sharing posts (N=41, 1.5%), making up only a very small proportion of the total (Table 2). They are however the longest in length, almost doubling the mean size of review-seeking posts, which are the second longest (Table 2). Experience-sharing posts are submitted by forum users who have travelled to Hong Kong and hence gained direct personal experience of the city. From the ratio of the frequency of occurrence of experience-sharing posts to the number of unique users involved, it can be deduced that such users only share their experience once. Yet their average number of posts produced in the whole forum is much higher than the novice users producing information/experience seeking posts. Experience-sharing posts are therefore created by experienced users, who are between expert and novice users in terms of knowledge. Unlike for the other functions examined, knowledge transfer through experience sharing works in two directions, as it involves experienced users sharing their first-hand knowledge *both* to expert users and novice users. Example 4 shows how experienced users share their trip reports through detailing their positive travel experience as a token of appreciation for expert users who have given them advice for their trip in prior interactions on the forum. To save space, only excerpts from the original post are presented here:

Example 4.

Subject: Loved Hong Kong!!

*My family just left Hong Kong after 9 fun filled days. What a wonderful city it was. We had no problem filling in the time at all. Weather was beautiful and Novotel Nathan Rd was so central. The public transport buses trains etc was so efficient and very easy to navigate. Our highlights were: \* singapore airlines were fantastic and so efficient \* beautiful mild weather and no rain \* ...*

*We LOVED exploring Hong Kong and even with 9 days we still didnt tick off all of our things! Thank you Trip Advisor friends for all of your help and advice with our most memorable trip of a lifetime XXXXX family*

The trip reports as long narratives produced directly on the forum account for the large mean size of the posts belonging to this functional category. Apart from thanking expert users through giving positive travel reports, experienced users also warn novice users planning for a future trip through specific descriptions of their own negative travel experience. This testimony of users' first-hand experience is an important form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) for novice users in travel decision-making and is considered "the most influential source of information when choosing an experiential good" including a tourism product (De Ascaniis & Gretzel 2013, 157). Example 5 involves the personal description of an unpleasant incident as a warning to fellow forum users:

Example 5.

Subject: Being aware of one taxi driver in Kowloon

*There is one taxi driver in Kowloon I would like you to watch out for. He ripped my sister and I of. He would not let us out of the taxi until we paid him \$400. We reported him to the police . But because we were tourists we would have had to go back to Kowloon to go to court to lay charges against him . So he got away with our money . His taxi number is XXXXXX.*

Through describing their own positive or negative travel experience, forum users also at the same time express their emotions of enjoyment or disappointment. Table 6 lists the top ten keywords in experience-sharing posts:



Table 6. Top Ten Keywords in the Topics Serving the Function ‘Experience Sharing’

N	Keyword	Frequency in Category	% in Category	Frequency in All Other Categories	% in All Other Categories	Keyness
1	WAS	256	1.47	399	0.20	487.85
2	HAD	119	0.68	130	0.06	279.73
3	WERE	94	0.54	121	0.06	201.52
4	THE	921	5.28	6,812	3.38	150.47
5	WALKED	30	0.17	2		137.24
6	WENT	42	0.24	28	0.01	123.06
7	GLUTEN	25	0.14	2		112.63
8	T	34	0.20	28	0.01	91.40
9	S	35	0.20	41	0.02	79.10
10	GOT	38	0.22	52	0.03	78.42

On the whole, these keywords indicate that experience-sharing posts focus on past happenings. Six out of ten of the keywords, including ‘was’, ‘had’, ‘were’, ‘walked’, ‘went’ and ‘got’, are verbs and all are in the past form. Experience-sharing posts are therefore narratives filled with events taking place in the past (see Example 5). These verbs highlight the descriptive and evaluative nature of experience-sharing posts, as the action verbs ‘walked’ and ‘went’ detail the movements and sites visited in the narrative (e.g. ‘Day 3 we went on Hong Kong foodie tour of Sham Shui Po and night walk of Kowloon’), whereas the copular verbs ‘was’, ‘were’ and to a certain extent ‘got’ are used as linking verbs preceding predicative adjectives expressing particular evaluations (e.g. ‘weather was beautiful’). The letters ‘t’ and ‘s’ as keywords indicate the frequent use of contractions (e.g. ‘Don’t buy toy pen-drives in the night markets’; ‘it’s a fabulous day trip’) and of the possessive marker (e.g. ‘My dad’s favourite saying is “Ahh Sh\*t” lol’) in experience sharing. These features suggest informality and space-saving in these unusually long posts and lend further support to their strong emotive and evaluative focus, as the abbreviated negation marker ‘n’t’ is often used in warnings while users report negative experience, and the short form involving ‘s’ replaces the full copular verbs and introduces stance adjectives as described earlier. Interestingly, unlike review-seeking posts, numerical figures are not significantly frequent in experience-sharing posts despite their being longest in length. This indicates that listing and numbering are not a common feature in descriptive and evaluative

narratives, as there is no need for the use of signposts to facilitate specific responses from other users.

#### 4.5. Others

Two other very infrequent functions found in the topic posts are described briefly here: socialising (N=6, 0.22%) and companion seeking (N=3, 0.11%). Socialising concerns forum users submitting non-travel related topic posts which are rapport-building, especially among core members of the forum. Example 6 is a socialising post in which the writer sends Chinese New Year greetings to fellow forum users:

Example 6.

Subject: Gong Hey Fat Choy

*Hello to fellows on the Hong Kong forum. Gong Hey Fat Choy (Happy New Year) and may the Year of the Goat bring you health and prosperity.*

Companion seeking involves post writers inviting other forum users to participate in some activities or engage in some actions with them together in the real world. Example 7 is a rare companion-seeking post in which the writer invites forum users to be witnesses of her wedding:

Example 7.

Subject:

*Hi everyone, Will anyone be in Hong Kong (TST) in the afternoon of 15th January with a couple of hours to kill? My fiance and I will be getting married and need two witnesses. Please get in touch if you can help!*

## 5. Discussion

The analysis above shows that topic posts in online destination forums achieve a number of functions, which can be subsumed under two major meta-categories: informational and

evaluative. Information-seeking and information-sharing posts are mainly informational in nature in the sense that forum users are mostly interested in obtaining information from or giving information to other users. Review-seeking posts and experience-sharing posts, by contrast, are both informational and evaluative. On the one hand, review-seeking posts request other users to assess the suggested itineraries embedded in the posts and to provide relevant information to improve the itineraries. Experience-sharing posts, on the other hand, offer descriptions and evaluations of the users' own travel experiences. In systemic functional linguistic terms (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004), these two meta-functional categories largely correspond to the ideational and interpersonal meta-functions.

Based on the distributional patterns of the functions in the topic posts as revealed in the analysis, it can be seen that the vast majority of the posts examined are informational, in particular, information-seeking in function. Online destination forums are therefore predominantly a venue for information exchange. They are thus remarkably different in function from the highly evaluative travel product reviews such as hotel, restaurant and destination reviews (Vásquez 2014), which are sister forms of online travel communication commonly found on the same online travel website, and from the strongly promotional tourism official websites and tourism marketing posts (Bianchi 2017; Caldas-Coulthard 2008). Apart from being functionally distinct from closely-related online travel texts, destination forums also differ significantly in function from forums in other professional contexts. In medical forums where more linguistic research has been conducted, rapport-orientated functions including network support and community building are commonly observed (Angouri & Sanderson 2016). Elsewhere, in the educational setting, studies on online discussion forums of subjects for university students also highlight the importance of such forums in establishing rapport and trust, and in the formation of identity (Delahunty 2012; Ladegaard 2012). Findings from the present study, however, suggest that the number of posts serving phatic functions in online destination forums is negligible. Of all the functions identified, only socialising (N=6, 0.22%) is associated solely with building rapport within the travel forum online community. Compared with other online forums, destination forums are hence mainly concerned with addressing the practical travel needs of users, rather than their physiological or emotional needs. This dominance of topic posts serving task-oriented functions in the destination forum, combined with the tiny number of socialising posts, suggests that members in this virtual imagined community of practice require

little explicit online interpersonal support from other users to motivate them in their engagement with the forum.

What motivates forum users in their involvement, then, is their informational need, their desire for experience sharing, their intrinsic interest in the destination, and their wish for acquiring the expert status. This results in members with varying levels of expert knowledge generating topic posts of different functions realised with linguistically and discursively distinct features. Novice members are driven by their need to accumulate knowledge in the virtual world as a way of enabling real-world travel-related actions in the future (Hanell & Salö 2015). They therefore initiate information-seeking and review-seeking topic posts in the hope of satisfying such needs, which first require mitigating their demands and facilitating the meeting of such demands. Accordingly, their posts are filled with such pragmatic features as politeness markers, semantic features as place names and time indicators, and structural features as numerical figures to make their requests less face-threatening and to specify their requests as clearly as possible by providing adequate information with text-organising signposts. Experienced members, in comparison, are stimulated by their desire to reflect on and to report their past positive or negative actions after their trip, with a view to expressing gratitude to expert users and to providing future reference for novice users. They therefore initiate experience-sharing posts filled with movement and copular verbs which highlight the descriptive and evaluative nature of their narratives. In so doing, they transform their real-world actions made in the recent past into knowledge shared in the virtual world. Finally, expert members are motivated by their intrinsic interest in the destination and their wish for acquiring the expert status granted by the travel website. As core members who contribute significantly more posts than others, these expert members share their knowledge with other users voluntarily through highly hypertextual information-sharing topic posts. Their expert status is thus acquired and demonstrated through recognizable, repeated actions (Scollon & Scollon 2004, 13) materialised discursively on the forum by providing factual information via hyperlinks to external credible sources. As such, their knowledge in the real-world is turned into information-giving in the virtual world. Put differently then, the forum can be considered a knowledge resource, with its ecology maintained through three types of users with varying levels of expert knowledge and involvement, contributing to the forum with posts serving different functions associated with distinct linguistic and discursive features.

## **6. Conclusion**

Through an analysis of the major functions and associated prominent linguistic and discursive features of topic posts in a travel forum, this study has shown that online destination forums are crucial sources of knowledge resources for members in web-based imagined communities of practice to deepen and exchange their knowledge. These forums are essentially informational in function, and thus are fundamentally distinct from some closely-related and well-researched forms of online travel communication such as travel product reviews and official tourism websites. They are also functionally different from online forums in other contexts. This demonstrates the necessity of undertaking more empirical, situated analyses of actual practices of a range of online travel discourses in order to allow for a comparison of the similarities and differences between them, with a view towards a fuller and more nuanced understanding of such discourses both as a whole, and as part of the whole.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first large-scale study of the functions of online destination forums, and the first systematic attempt to examine the linguistic and discursive features of forum posts associated with different functions, together with the consideration of the level of knowledge and contribution of forum members. From a theoretical point of view, the study enhances our understanding of the interactions in an imagined online community of practice and the roles of members in the community through their use of language in an increasingly virtual world. Findings from the study also have implications for tourism professionals and policymakers. In the travel and tourism sector, there is an increasing demand for practitioners “to understand how tourists interact in the online medium and receive travel-related information to explore ways to leverage it” (Kourouthanassis et al. 2017, 815). The identification and analysis of the different functions of topic posts in destination forums will serve as an essential first step for meeting that demand. Industry stakeholders can, for example, gather valuable views from information-seeking posts on the frequently asked questions by potential travellers before visiting a destination. They can also learn more about the positive and negative aspects of travellers’ post-trip experience through experience-sharing posts, and discursively adjust the contents of the official website accordingly to cater for travellers’ preferences and needs (cf. Suau-Jiménez 2019). More effective communication and marketing strategies can in turn be developed to promote tourism, based on these authentic contributions

from individuals who take a keen interest in the destination by voluntarily participating in the forum.

This study has only examined one destination forum on one travel website. More destination forums on other travel websites need to be investigated to determine to what extent the findings are generalizable. Future research can explore destination forums in other languages for cross-linguistic comparison. It can also analyse all the posts on the forums rather than only the topic posts in order to better understand the lexico-grammatical and discursive characteristics of these forums as well as the discourse chains and processes involved. It is my hope that this study will stimulate more linguistic research into the study of online destination forums to unlock their potential in enriching our understanding of online travel communication and in offering insights to address real-world issues in tourism through the tools of linguistics.

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