The (In)Dependent Traveller: a Rough Guide to the Discourse of Independence in Alternative Guidebooks

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The independent travel sector has mushroomed in recent years, but has attracted little academic attention. This study explores what it means to be an independent traveller through discourse analysis of alternative guidebooks. The results suggest that guidebooks construct independence by reifying inaccessibility, interpreting value, and constructing inauthenticity. This promulgates a powerful myth of the independent traveller as someone who defies inaccessibility, hunts for bargains, and avoids inauthenticity. Crucially, each of these practices also acts to engender an implicit relation of dependency between the book and the consumer that is found to contradict, but ultimately not threaten, the whole notion of independence that the consumption experience itself is predicated on, orientated around, and indeed valorised by.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction: Understanding Independent Travel Through Guidebooks

The independent travel sector has mushroomed in recent years, but despite the rapid expansion of the sector, there is as yet only a small, albeit growing, stream of academic literature exploring the phenomenon of independent travel (e.g. Elsrud 2001; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Sørensen 2003). Moreover, the question of what it really means to be independent within a huge industry of supporting and enabling service industries, or of how consumers maintain a sense of independence within this web of market interdependencies, have yet to be addressed. These are critical questions though given that the consumption experience itself is predicated on, orientated around, and indeed valorised by, a sense of independence.

This paper seeks to explore independence by examining how the notion of independent travel is constructed through the discourse of alternative guidebooks. Alternative guidebooks are an important element in the independent traveller’s consumption experience, and are a key repository of meaning for tourists. Along with other “markers” they play a central role in what tourists see and do, and how they see and do things (Bhattacharya 1997; Siegenthaler 2002). Moreover, by showing readers “how to get the most out of their trip”, alternative guidebooks propagate a set of implicit values and ideal behaviours that underline what it means to be an independent traveller, thereby shaping the identity and self-image of the traveller.

Methodology

The study utilised a discourse analytic technique, the prime concern of which is with the role that language plays in the reification of social realities—here the “reality” of independent travel. Embedded in a social constructivist philosophy that assumes texts are constitutive of social meaning, discourse analysis offers to researchers a way of seeing the processes involved in the production and maintenance of consumer practices. The approach adopted is closely aligned to Fairclough’s (1992) multi-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis. The analysis was thus concerned with both the constructive effects of language and simultaneously with the power relations implicated within that process of reality construction.

The focus of the discourse analysis was The Rough Guide To Spain (Ellingham and Fisher, 2002), a self-proclaimed alternative guidebook for independent travellers. This is part of a larger series of books covering a wide range of county and city destinations around the world. The Rough Guide series is for “independent-minded visitors on any budget” (www.roughguides.com).

Constructing Independence

Independence is a central idea running through the sample text and our analysis suggested that it could be best understood in terms of three underlying themes—reifying inaccessibility, interpreting value, and constructing inauthenticity. By analysing these themes, we reveal that the independent traveller can be characterised as someone who defies inaccessibility, practices bargain hunting, and avoids inauthenticity.
avoid inauthenticity; a comforting security in knowing how this can be achieved, and in the most cost-effective way; and offering a thoroughly mediated travel experience.

It would seem that the alternative guidebook offers consumers a self-image of risk, adventure and autonomy—an independent travel identity (Sorensen, 2003)—whilst also offering them protection from the concomitant uncertainty, unfamiliarity and fear that independence in travel might be expected to bring. As such, the notion of the independent traveller represents a powerful cultural myth to anchor understandings of tourist experiences and to give meaning to otherwise potentially contradictory consumption behaviours (Belk and Costa 1998; Stern 1995; Thompson 2004).

References
London: Macmillan.