

How do food bloggers and PR practitioners in the hospitality sector view their relationships? A UK perspective

¿Cómo ven su relación los bloggers de alimentos y los profesionales de relaciones públicas en el sector de la hostelería? Una perspectiva del Reino Unido

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Abstract

Bloggers are increasingly viewed by public relations practitioners as important influencers within the online media environment, yet research that explores relationships between bloggers and PR practitioners, particularly in the UK, is relatively limited. This paper reports on findings from a small-scale, in depth qualitative study of food blogger-practitioner relationships within the hospitality sector in the UK. The study explored why bloggers write about their restaurant experiences and how they view their relationships with PR professionals; while PR practitioners were questioned about their relationships with bloggers and the influence bloggers are having on PR clients' reputations. In keeping with previous research, this study found that the practitioner-blogger relationship is complex. The PR practitioners interviewed within the hospitality sector viewed restaurant review bloggers as highly influential to their clients' reputations and view the relationship as one that is built on mutual interests and trust. However, bloggers do not perceive the relationship in this light and are sceptical of PR practitioners' motives. While bloggers had different motivations for blogging, they shared a common passion for blogging and a drive to provide reliable information and objective advice to their readers. Concerns within the blogging community were highlighted in regard to accepting incentives (free meals) from PR practitioners, and how this can be damaging to bloggers' reputations. While some bloggers claim to resist PR

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practitioners' attempts to influence their blog content, other bloggers take an active role in building relationships with PR practitioners. It is argued that both parties are engaged in 'identity work' in order to protect their respective identities and practices and that emotion management plays a part in the practitioner-blogger relationship.

Keywords: Food bloggers, hospitality public relations, United Kingdom, relational practice, identity work, emotion management.

Resumen

Los bloggers son vistos cada vez más por los profesionales de relaciones públicas como un importante factor de influencia en el entorno de los medios de comunicación online. Sin embargo, la investigación que explora las relaciones entre bloggers y profesionales de relaciones públicas, en particular en el Reino Unido, es relativamente limitada. En este trabajo se analizan los resultados de un estudio sobre las relaciones con blogger en el sector de la hostelería en el Reino Unido. El estudio exploró qué bloggers escriben sobre sus experiencias en el restaurante y cómo ven su relación con los profesionales de relaciones públicas; mientras que los practicantes de relaciones públicas fueron interrogados acerca de sus relaciones con los bloggers. De acuerdo con investigaciones anteriores, este estudio encontró que la relación médico-blogger es compleja. Los profesionales de relaciones públicas entrevistados dentro del sector de la hostelería vieron a los bloggers como muy influyentes en la creación de imagen de los clientes y entienden que la relación debe basarse en los intereses mutuos y la confianza. Sin embargo, los bloggers no perciben la relación de la misma manera y se muestran escépticos de las motivaciones de los relaciones públicas. Los bloggers tienen diferentes motivaciones para escribir y comparten con los relaciones públicas una pasión común por los blogs y una unidad para proporcionar información fiable y asesoramiento objetivo para sus lectores. Una preocupación presente en la comunidad de los blogs es la aceptación de los incentivos (comidas gratuitas) de los profesionales de relaciones públicas, y cómo esto puede ser perjudicial para la reputación de los bloggers. Mientras que algunos bloggers dicen resistir los intentos de los profesionales de relaciones públicas "para influir en su contenido del blog, otros bloggers tienen un papel activo en la construcción de relaciones con los profesionales de relaciones públicas. Se argumenta que las dos partes se dedican a la obra de identidad "con el fin de proteger a sus respectivas identidades y prácticas.

Palabras clave: bloggers, relaciones públicas, alimentación, Reino Unido, identidad, manejo de las emociones.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“There's something delicious about a particularly cutting restaurant review. Not only does it warn fellow diners from a wasted evening and from parting undeservedly with their cash, it alerts managers towards how to improve their establishment” (Askmen, 2014). This opening to an interview with the prominent UK restaurant critic, Jay Rayner, demonstrates the potential of a restaurant review to influence readers and their views of restaurants. However, restaurant critics writing for the mainstream media no longer enjoy a monopoly of influence over consumer opinion on where to eat: in recent years, the professional critics' dominion appears to have been challenged by a community of online restaurant review bloggers writing about their own dining experiences – reflecting a shift from media consumption to production (de Solier, cited in Cox & Blake, 2010). The London restaurant review website, Urbanspoon, for example, maintains a ‘leader board’ of popular food blogs ranked by reader views and points. Here, blogger reviews sit side-by-side with the reviews of professional critics, as well as diner contributions, which Urbanspoon aggregates to produce a top ten list of London restaurants ‘Talk of the Town’ ranked by popularity (Urbanspoon, 2014).

As the blogosphere in general becomes widely recognised as a “legitimate platform for public relations efforts” (Smith, 2010: 175), this paper builds on previous work to critically explore the relationships between public relations practitioners and bloggers and their understanding of each others’ practice, with a specific focus on the views of PR practitioners who represent clients in the hospitality sector and U.K. based restaurant review bloggers.

2. WHY BLOGGERS WRITE BLOGS

Blogs, or weblogs, are defined as an “online diary of posts that are sorted in reverse chronological order” (Kent, 2008: 33). In contrast to a traditional diary or log, however, blogs are public documents. Kent (2008) identifies several types or genres of blogs, ranging from the highly personal, written for a narrow audience, to the news blog which imitates the mainstream media and attracts a high number of readers and comments. Yang and Lim (2009) conceptualise the blog in terms of its narrative structure, identifying the personal storytelling approach as a salient feature.

The blogger’s search for personal significance and self-identity through the medium of a food blog was identified by Watson et al (2008); while Smith’s (2010) study of bloggers of varying interests identified the blog as a personal medium for authentic, self-expression and community connection. Therefore, unlike journalists whose objectivity is restricted by economic imperatives, including their employers’ needs to reach a mass market (Kent, 2008; Lowrey, 2006), personal bloggers present information from only their own perspective; thus a blogger’s credibility with their audience plays an important part in the success of the blog (Yang & Lim, 2009).

Bloggers who are engaged in strategic self-presentation continuously ‘investigate who constitutes their imaginary audiences and who are the salient commentators’, thus constructing a ‘dialogical self’ through the process of ongoing interactions with others (Yang & Lim, 2009: 344-345). From their study of 16 food bloggers, Cox and Blake (2011: 9) identified a strong pre-occupation ‘with the question of who their audience was’ and some made attempts to track their audience, particularly fellow bloggers. A ‘collegial audience’ comprising other food bloggers was considered important, along with friends and family, but among the ‘hobbyist’ or ‘amateur’ bloggers it was less common for them

to reach out to a wider audience. Therefore, given the relatively narrow audience reach of some bloggers, as opposed to mainstream media restaurant critics, why do public relations practitioners view bloggers as important targets for public relations efforts and how do they view their relationship with bloggers?

3. BLOGS AS A PR TOOL

Research among practitioners suggests that digital and social media are gaining in importance in Europe, and consultancies and agencies in particular have a strong belief in the value of social media, leading the way in developing social media policies. European PR practitioners regard online social networks as the most important social media tool for public relations, although they are reported to be less comfortable with weblogs and microblogs (Verhoeven et al, 2012). While according to practitioner surveys conducted in the U.S., blogs are not yet used as a standard PR tool, three areas are identified where PR practitioners can make use of blogs. These include: researching and gaining information; detecting any negative issues concerning their organisation or client, and communicating with bloggers through online conversation (Porter, Sweetster & Chung, 2009; Porter, Trammell, Chung & Kim, 2007).

Blogs are a way for PR practitioners to target interest-specific groups of individuals who are actively seeking new information and searching for content that is relevant to them (Kent, 2008; Waddington, 2012). When individuals use search engines, key words from blog articles are also picked up, making them easier to find and increases the readership (Phillips & Young, 2009).

Katz and Lazarsfeld's two-step flow communication theory identifies a process in which messages initially reach opinion leaders who then spread the word to opinion followers to create a mass media message (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, cited in Windhal, Signitzer & Olson, 2009). Blogs can therefore be conceptualised as a platform for opinion leaders who can influence individuals seeking advice and recommendations online. However in the online environment, opinion leading and opinion following are not mutually exclusive.

Mintel U.K. (2012) reports that the growing social category of 'Foodies', typically under-35s living in urban areas, are not only interested in eating out in restaurants, 77% want to share their knowledge of food with family and friends, while 75% also want to be influenced by others' experiences. The Foodie community is relatively young and active online and the majority are, to a greater or lesser extent, acting simultaneously as opinion leaders and followers.

4. RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Relationships may be analysed in terms of power: when one party is dependent on another it is likely to influence the interpretation of that relationship. Thus everyday relational practice in public relations may be viewed both in terms of *identity work*, "aiming at achieving a positive sense of self, necessary for coping with the ambiguities of existence, work tasks and social relations" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002); as well as emotion management (Hochschild, 1983). For example, 'selling-in' stories to journalists over the phone is a routine part of the job but at the same time it is about the PR practitioner preserving a sense of professional identity and integrity while judging the timing, emotional tone and conversation to have with a possibly irritated journalist who is relevant to the PR client's story (Yeomans, 2010; Yeomans, 2013a).

Bloggers are approached by practitioners in a similar fashion to journalists to persuade them to accept PR content in their blogs. Bloggers as self-appointed opinion leaders may also require sensitive handling from a PR practitioner's perspective (Yeomans, 2013b). Gordon (2011) asserts that talking to bloggers is about putting time into building a relationship that focuses on mutual interests between a practitioner and the blogger, a process that can result in bloggers being provided with early access to information to create content that can potentially gain momentum on behalf of the PR client. Waddington (2012) argues that it is important to build a relationship based on mutual interests to help prevent bloggers' feeling of being used by PR practitioners. Rather than being perceived as mutually beneficial, the practitioner-blogger relationship could be seen as largely to the benefit of the PR client by the blogger, and of more concern, his or her own community.

5. BLOGGER INCENTIVES

The topic of incentives within the food blogging community is a sensitive one, along with related issues such as accepting advertising and sponsorship (Cox & Blake, 2011). Food bloggers' 'meal blagging' or accepting free meals from restaurants they are reviewing is the topic of press attention (Merrill, 2014; Mok, 2009). Food bloggers received particular criticism in *Time Out*, the London listings magazine, and some of the participants in Cox and Blake's study were aware of this criticism, claiming that they refused freebies to retain independence of judgement. However, other participants were more fully incorporated into a professional and commercial publishing system, making money through advertising, sponsorship and photo sales.

Holladay and Coombs (2013) argue that consumers should be made aware of messages that have been influenced by PR practitioners as this makes consumers aware of the motivations behind the post. There is clearly a blurred line when it comes to PR practitioners and their relationship with bloggers, and how far incentives can truly influence bloggers' reviews. While blogs can help raise awareness and influence others with reviews by creating messages on behalf of PR practitioners it is unclear, aside from press reports, whether the provision of incentives is compromising the credibility of restaurant reviews blogs. Further research into the personal ethics of bloggers, their communities, as well as blog content is required.

6. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative design was adopted to address the aims of this study; these were to explore the relationships between bloggers and public relations practitioners and their understanding of each others' practice, with a specific focus on the views of U.K. based restaurant review bloggers and PR practitioners who represent clients in the hospitality sector.

Macnamara (2010) observes that qualitative studies of social media use in public relations are few. Further, it can be argued that survey data has limitations when attempting to understand public relations as an everyday relational practice in the evolving area of practitioner-blogger relationships; hence a qualitative approach was deemed more suited to this study.

Drawing on the second author's experience of working in the hospitality PR sector, six agencies were selected as potential candidates within the niche group of London PR agencies specialising in the hospitality industry. Potential participants were contacted by email and interviews were ultimately secured with two practitioners who undertake public relations work for restaurant clients. To identify restaurant review bloggers, an online search was conducted on Urbanspoon, the London restaurant review website which shows food blogger rankings. Out of the 12 bloggers contacted, 3 of the top ten restaurant review bloggers gave their consent to be interviewed. Participant profiles are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: PR Practitioner participant profiles

Name (pseudonym)	Agency	Job Role	Experience in profession	Interview date	Length of interview
Helen	Agency A	Account Manager	3-5 years	18 th March 2014	18 minutes
Susan	Agency B	Managing Director	20 years +	19 th March 2014	17 minutes

Table 2: Blogger participant profiles

Name (pseudonym)	Years spent blogging	Interview date	Length of interview
John	10+	19 th March 2014	10 minutes
Kevin	20+	19 th March 2014	38 minutes
Steve	10+	20 th March 2014	15 minutes

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analytical and topic coding (Richards, 2005) were used to identify key themes to guide the interpretation of research findings. All participants gave written consent to be interviewed. Names, websites and blog rankings have been omitted to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used for the purpose of distinguishing and discussing the views of PR practitioners and bloggers.

7. RESEARCH QUALITY AND LIMITATIONS

Edwards and Holland (2013) highlight the importance of identifying research participants whose experiences are credible and trustworthy for the purposes of the study. For this exploratory, qualitative study, semi-structured 'expert' interviews were conducted with three experienced and highly-ranked bloggers and two PR practitioners who specialised in PR for the hospitality sector: all therefore qualified as reliable sources. Questions were devised to motivate and encourage good responses (Edwards & Holland, 2013) and open questions encouraged participants to share their experience and knowledge.

The study was limited by the relatively small number of participants, and the amount of time that some participants were available for interview. Telephone interviews presented a further limitation. The dates on which the interviews were conducted, in March 2014, coincided with an article in *The Independent* newspaper criticising bloggers for offering reviews in exchange for free meals (Merrill, 2014). This, we feel, influenced the responses from both practitioners and bloggers. However, as discussed later in this paper, the findings resonated with findings from previous studies; specifically the work of Smith (2010) who interviewed bloggers from a PR perspective in the U.S., and a large qualitative study of food bloggers in the U.K. (Cox & Blake, 2011), approached from an information management perspective. To our knowledge, however, ours is the only qualitative study of PR practitioner-blogger relationships in the U.K. where both groups have been interviewed, and as such, provides the basis for further investigation.

8. RESULTS

8.1. Blogger motivations

John's blog started as a hobby: "that's my thing, I wasn't doing anything else, you know. I wasn't building a car or going to concerts or music festivals". He enjoyed eating out and when food blogs started to appear, he decided to write his own: "I thought I could do it really". Kevin started writing about 'high-end' London restaurants twenty years ago and in 1994 he published a book which led to the setting up of his website "for friends and for people who bought the book" to keep them up to date about the restaurant scene. With the advent of search engines, he "started to get, in particular, a lot of enquiries from chefs about places I had been travelling to, so essentially the audience for the website sort of grew in scale and the site itself". Steve started a blog because he ate out as part of his job, and food blogging "just seemed like an easy thing that I was very passionate about [...] there weren't that many people whose opinions I really trusted".

8.2. Use of blogs in PR practice

Both PR practitioners, Helen, an account manager, and Susan, a managing director, were employed by specialist agencies within the hospitality industry. Their clients including fine dining (e.g. Michelin star rated) and casual dining restaurants. Practitioners emphasised the 'bespoke' nature of the client work, tailored to the individual requirements of each client. They also emphasised the importance of bloggers and how they are becoming increasingly influential within the restaurant sector. Working with bloggers was an essential aspect to the two PR practitioners' approaches with most of their restaurant clients. However, not all clients saw the value of blogger relations. Susan explained how a Michelin-ranked client they had been working with for a number of years "are not interested in talking to bloggers [...] where they want to be is international prestige print media, so bloggers are not even on their agenda".

From this it was understood that the amount of engagement and work with bloggers is entirely dependant on the specifications, requirements and budget set out by the client for the agency with which to generate coverage. The practitioners interviewed would only target bloggers that were well known in the restaurant industry and had a high following, as this was key to raising the most awareness for their clients. Helen

explained that “bloggers who are constantly at the new openings [...] uploading blogs weekly; it makes them a lot better” while Susan emphasised the importance of followers: “Most of the people we deal with have 10,000 plus [followers] and these are the people that we take seriously”.

8.3. Relationship building

Depending on the client’s requirements, the public relations tactics deployed to build relationships included inviting bloggers to “launch events” which referred to a new restaurant opening, or the introduction of new, interesting menus. Face-to-face events were also organised specifically for bloggers such as “food and drink taste pairing” (Helen). Tactics also included “complimentary dining”, a term that Helen used to describe providing free meals as incentives to bloggers. Helen explained that ‘complimentary dining’ was used at her agency with influential bloggers because they “drive lots of traffic” towards a client’s website. However, as discussed in the following section, such incentivising may not be a common policy among agencies.

Both practitioners stressed the importance of being aware of bloggers. Building good relations with influential bloggers involved getting to know them and keeping in regular contact. Helen described the nature of the relationship: “You kind of build up, I wouldn’t say a friendship as such, but you get to know them; and it is mutually beneficial”. Susan explained that her agency had built up strong relations with four or five restaurant review bloggers over a number of years: “It’s about mutual trust so if I say to a blogger if I have got something really interesting they’ll be interested in coming along and supporting it and blogging about it”.

Building relationships with bloggers can also be tactical: revealing information to bloggers early uses them as a “seed” that can spread the word and cause a word-of-mouth effect and buzz around a new opening of a restaurant. “They like to be the first to know so from that perspective it’s good and you know it really helps with long term relationships because there’s trust on both sides”. Building relationships with bloggers

was seen by Susan as the same as building relationships with journalists. Both types of relationship are built on the basis of trust: “we treat bloggers like journalists so in exactly the same way we would make sure our journalist contacts had information on a regular basis, we would also make sure that bloggers do too”.

The relationship between practitioners and bloggers, according to Helen and Susan, was not entirely one-way and initiated by practitioners. While Helen had observed a fairly predictable trend of bloggers contacting her agency at the time of a “new [restaurant] opening, lots of people really want to go there” on a “complimentary basis”, Susan had noticed a recent trend of people setting up blogs and seeing it as a business opportunity: “the people coming to me are all are young people [who have] got proper business plans; they are looking to monetise their blogs [...] and a lot of them have got a good journalistic background so their credibility is very high”.

Top bloggers John, Kevin and Steve shared an understanding that the more popular their blog became and the more followers they had, then the more contact they would receive from PR practitioners attempting to build relationships with them. John had developed good relationships with some PR practitioners, which involved forming friendships and eating out with them. By contrast, Kevin displayed a strong antipathy towards PR people, referring to them as “just another source”. “To me, the only use for a PR person at all is to just do fact checking for me [...] so I’ll ask for a general press pack about the restaurant which gives you certain information and background about the chef”. While Steve revealed that he had a few friends in PR, his antagonism with public relations practitioners’ approaches arose from the standard invitation, the “generic ‘dear X we would like you to come and review because we like your blog’ with no reference to the blog”. Steve was concerned that in order for PR practitioners to build relationships with bloggers they must show interest in the blog (“we know that you like Indian food”) and restaurant recommendations must suit the bloggers’ interests and taste. Bloggers Kevin and Steve seemed less assured that there were mutual benefits to working with PR practitioners. There was limited mutual benefit from their perspective as it was the PR practitioners who benefit from the coverage bloggers provide; however, bloggers were not discouraged by this as eating out and writing reviews was something

they were all passionate about and their benefit came from writing about what they enjoyed doing most.

8.4. Blogger incentives

Agency practitioners Helen and Susan presented differing views and practices when it came to incentivising bloggers. Helen talked of her agency's policy of "offering bloggers the opportunity to dine complimentary and invite them to blogger events but there would never be any other incentives offered to bloggers to gain positive coverage". The reviews made by bloggers were seen as uncontrollable but steps were taken by the agency to ensure that restaurants were fully briefed about hosting bloggers as well as journalists from the mainstream press, "so there is no embarrassment" (Helen) on either side that could leave a negative impression and lead to bad reviews.

Incentives would be offered to reputable restaurant review bloggers with a large following; but they would never be offered to bloggers with a small following, as this would not meet the requirements of the agency. Helen also explained how "the ability to offer incentives to bloggers came from the budget set by their clients and what they were looking for in terms of coverage". Susan's agency took a different approach to incentives stating that her agency "did not have the budget to offer incentives to bloggers". She explained that incentives, including free meals and payments, were not used with journalists to generate coverage for clients, so they did not believe incentives were required when working with bloggers.

Blogger John expressed the view that "it's nice getting free meals" and that as his blog grew in popularity, the more incentives he was offered by PR agencies. John explained that as he was not getting paid to blog, incentives like getting a free meal were a good benefit for writing about PR practitioner's clients. While John admitted that "it's awkward sometimes if you give them a bad review" he justified his position by being honest with his readers and "always saying when you get anything free and just posting all the time anyway". Bloggers Kevin and Steve, however, took an alternative standpoint, both sharing a negative view of accepting incentives from PR practitioners. Kevin felt that "it is exceedingly difficult, whatever people may claim, to be totally objective in writing the same review that you would if you were paying out of your own

pocket". Steve, a blogger who prided himself on not needing to be paid to eat out on a regular basis, echoed this point: "there aren't many people who are sophisticated enough to be able to move that away [being incentivised] from their actual experience". Bloggers were fully aware that PR practitioners offered incentives in order to get something in return; they were mindfully offering incentives to gain coverage and also hope that it is positive and helps the reputation of the client.

8.5. Engaged audiences

Both practitioners shared the view that followers of blogs are a highly engaged audience of serious restaurant-goers who are actively seeking information through blogs. Bloggers are able to interact with their readers thus increasing engagement. In order to reach the followers of blogs, Susan expressed the view that engagement with these audiences was achieved through building "long-term relationships [with bloggers] because there's trust on both sides". A measurement taken by practitioners to see the influence of a blog is to look at how engaged a blogger is with his or her audience and the consistency of the posts. Both practitioners also believed bloggers are extremely influential when it comes to engaging in localised areas. The younger audience in particular was recognised as being highly engaged with online media, seeking out information only online. According to Susan, "if it's not online and it's not being talked about by an individual that they trust [...] then it's not happening". Search engines have enabled serious restaurant-goers to find blog content easily and they are a lot more likely to click onto blogs to gain a wider range of opinions to support their decision-making.

8.6. Opinion leadership and influence

Both Helen and Susan saw restaurant review bloggers as opinions leaders due to their knowledge and interest in the restaurant scene. Bloggers were regarded as a very aware group that creates trends and buzz around the restaurants they write about; and when bloggers write negative reviews, they also can influence readers and have an impact on their views of restaurants. Helen explained that her agency kept a "massive blogger database" which will include "a blogger that has just started or one that we think could be influential" to ensure that clients are alerted to any mentions online, however small.

Helen explained that journalists and bloggers are regarded as opinion leaders; bloggers are seen as a key opinion leader to an online audience whereas journalists' opinions reach an audience through the print media.

Susan highlighted the influence bloggers have in localised areas, giving an example of a bar launch in London. "So the Hoxton bloggers and the East End bloggers are really, really important because they are part of the social fabric of the area". A constant monitoring of blogger reviews allows practitioners to "pinpoint the views of bloggers and give feedback" to their clients to help them provide the best service possible and maintain a good reputation while putting right any issues that bloggers draw attention to.

Bloggers John, Kevin and Steve shared the view that an important aspect of a good blog is how well written it is and this directly leads to popularity and a following, with readers coming to them for advice on where to eat out. Kevin asserted "I am reasonably sure that when I recommend somewhere that that's probably where they are going to go". In terms of his own blog influence, Kevin related the story of how a journalist had written a bad review that had severely impacted on a restaurant's fortunes: "it was quite quiet". However, following Kevin's own positive experience and subsequent review, and the positive reviews of other bloggers, "the restaurant started to pick up business". Equally, negative reviews had in some circumstances "resulted in cancellations". He also detailed how bloggers are increasingly influential as they have the "ability to cover a greater scope of restaurants than journalists, giving them an advantage". While John similarly agreed that "a lot of people do go to restaurants on the back of reviews of mine", Steve, by contrast, was less convinced of the influence of his own blog reviews: "I don't think people make choices that easily [...] we are looking at a very rarified little world here; the vast majority of people don't look at anything, they just walk past somewhere and go 'oh that looks nice, let's go there'". On the other hand, Steve was consulted by friends who might ask "I've got two vegan Hollywood producers that I need to go out with. Where can I take them where they are not going to be scared by meat? "

8.7. Reputation

Susan stated that their “clients are briefed on how to work with bloggers and the press to maintain a good reputation”. Both practitioners revealed that bloggers have the ability to affect the reputation of their clients both positively and negatively but the impact tends to be temporary. Susan asserted that “if a blogger comes from a journalistic background this gives them a better reputation”. For bloggers, transparency and honesty were important to a good reputation with their readers. John said that his reputation came from “being honest to the readers and stating when meals are free”. Kevin built up a strong reputation with readers by being honest and “not following the crowd”, also stating that journalists tend to give kinder reviews than him at times. Steve revealed that it is not only PR agencies checking the reputation of bloggers, but when he is contacted by agencies he will “look at the agency’s reputation” to evaluate whether they are trustworthy.

9. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study provides empirical evidence of PR practitioner-blogger relationships in the U.K. hospitality sector. Practitioners believed that building good relationships with restaurant review bloggers was an essential part of their practice and helped in creating long-term relationships that could in turn lead to positive reviews for their clients. While practitioners held the view that relationships with bloggers was mutually beneficial (Gordon, 2011), and made efforts to keep in regular contact with reputable bloggers, the bloggers who took part in this study viewed practitioners’ relationship building efforts with scepticism, regarding the relationship as more beneficial to the practitioners than to themselves (Waddington, 2012).

Blogs are a means for self-expression, authenticity and community connection, and have been described as an “extension of a blogger’s self” (Smith, 2010, p. 176). Bloggers are highly focused on their audience and are motivated to provide a service to their readers about something they enjoy doing – eating out and reviewing restaurants. Therefore their own credibility is at stake when writing reviews that are influenced by PR content.

Interpreted from a relational perspective, both bloggers and public relations practitioners are engaged in identity work; and PR practitioners are required to engage in emotion management to build relationships with bloggers in a sensitive way 'so there is no embarrassment' (Yeomans, 2010; Yeomans 2013a).

Both parties have to uphold their own ideas of professional identity and integrity when justifying their practice. While practitioners frame their relationship with bloggers as one based on 'mutuality' and 'trust', this is an ideal vision, particularly in view of some agencies' use of incentives as a blatant persuasive tactic. Cox and Blake (2011) drew attention to varying practices and identities within the food blogging community, from the 'amateur' or 'hobbyist' through to the blogger who has been incorporated into a professional/commercial system. Our study also identified that practitioners' agencies are being approached by bloggers who are becoming more pro-active and business-like in trying to build relations with the agencies.

The question of bloggers' identities in this study is thus raised and how far the top-ranked bloggers interviewed had themselves been incorporated within a professional and commercial system, or remained as hobbyists, or had adopted another identity. Blogger Kevin appeared to align himself more closely with a journalist identity, emphasising his resistance to external pressure and an independent stance. His framing of public relations as "just another source" that he used for "fact checking" supports this interpretation. The autonomous blogger identity was also implied by Steve, whose practice of checking out PR agencies' credentials when approached, suggested a careful regard for his personal reputation as a blogger. John, by contrast, appeared to identify with the image of the 'honest community blogger', the hobbyist who declares his free meals to protect his stance as a reputable reviewer; and yet was comfortable working with PR practitioners.

The study drew further attention to the ethics of practitioner-blogger relations, specifically in regard to incentives such as free meals and payments in return for positive reviews, previously highlighted in Cox and Blake's (2011) study of food bloggers. Helen's agency offered incentives to bloggers whereas Susan's agency would not offer any form of incentives to bloggers and she felt that this was an unnecessary practice. Holladay

and Coombs (2013) argue that consumers should be made aware of messages that have been influenced by PR practitioners as this makes consumers aware of the motivations behind the post. This point highlights why the variance in views is occurring as practitioners and bloggers all appeared to be wary and sensitive on this subject. Bloggers Kevin and Steve both shared very strong views about receiving incentives, arguing that a review cannot be objective if the blogger is not paying for the meal and that a lack of regard to cost can mislead readers. John was less concerned about accepting free meals as he felt that it was a nice perk of blogging and as long as he was open with readers and telling them the meal was free.

Smith (2010) contends that blogger tenure in the blogosphere may influence bloggers' selectivity with content. Smith's 'blogger evolution' analysis (2010: 177) places John at phase two of blogger evolution, which Smith labels as the 'community membership' stage. Smith identifies this as the stage where 'desires for new content make a practitioner-blogger relationship mutually beneficial'. Stage three is 'autonomy' where Kevin and Steve are apparently located. However, John's 10 plus years as a blogger indicates a tenure in the blogosphere that is comparable to Steve's, which suggests more complex reasons for John's relationships with PR practitioners.

Identity issues are again raised by the issue of incentives: for practitioners, the issue of 'spin' and manipulation is well documented in the literature and this accusation is something that Susan, as an experienced managing director, may have been conscious to deflect. For bloggers, the acceptance of free meals challenges the notion of an independent, credible source that is so integral to the autonomous blogger identity. (Smith, 2010; Yang & Lim, 2009).

In terms of opinion leadership and influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), both practitioners revealed that they treat restaurant review bloggers the same as restaurant critics and journalists, regarding them all as having the same impact and influence on consumers, although journalists were seen as more influential in the mainstream print press whereas online bloggers' opinions were more influential online.

All three bloggers indicated their awareness of the influence they had on their readers from the advice that was sought and the comments they received. While for Steve the

influence of his blog on actual restaurant visits was harder to judge, he recognised the reputation he had among his “friends of being the person who knows where to go”. As Cox and Blake (2011) observe, providing a service for friends and family is a common starting point for blogs and both Steve and Kevin referred to these origins for their own blogs. Readers of blogs, and Foodies in particular, are actively seeking advice from blogs that they see as sources of reliable information, thus giving bloggers the opportunity to share their knowledge and advice (Kent, 2008; Mintel, 2012; Waddington, 2012). Further, perceived blogger credibility is “not static and is often renewed” through the process of relational communication. These are the social or relational cues that the blogger provides to his or her reader through regular updates and interactions (Yang & Lim, 2009). These characteristics, are in turn, what practitioners look for to gauge the credibility of blogger’s websites.

Our study clearly showed that opinion leaders: the mainstream press, food critics and food bloggers are extremely valuable to PR practitioners and it is in their interest to build relationships with opinion leaders as they can help raise awareness and support the reputation of their clients’ restaurants. Susan highlighted that a key benefit to working with bloggers is raising awareness through them in a tactical manner to create buzz and plant a seed about a new opening. ‘Seeding’ is an effective way to use bloggers to raise awareness and spread the word to the blogs followers; yet at the same time this PR tactic could be an example of the kind of public relations that bloggers are suspicious of (Smith, 2010).

Both practitioner participants were actively involved and engaged with bloggers, and their main focus was to gain coverage for their clients through blogger reviews. The research indicated that both agencies have technological programmes they use to scan for all coverage and mentions of their clients online, in doing this blogger reviews are picked up. The practitioners revealed that all coverage, even content that had not been created through them is passed onto the client to relay the views of customers. These findings indicate that practitioners are taking an active approach to understanding their clients’ external audience and the views and feedback they publish online, thus adopting the recommendations in previous studies (Porter, Sweetster & Chung, 2009; Porter, Trammell, Chung & Kim, 2007). Bloggers, on the other hand, are less actively engaged

with PR practitioners as they are not a focus to what they are doing, and as discussed, it is not in their interests to admit to having regular contact with PR practitioners.

Influence plays an important part of public relations practice in the hospitality industry. Participants reported that restaurant review bloggers are becoming increasingly influential, and blogs are no longer just a place for information, they are also a place of influence (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). Bloggers with a journalistic background are more credible to practitioners because the salient features of a good blog is a blog that well written, uses a narrative structure, and demonstrates a clear knowledge and understanding of the subject area. This in turn makes the blog more influential. Bloggers are just as influential as journalists as they are have the ability to write independently about more restaurants whereas journalists are limited by economic and corporate pressures (Kent, 2008; Lowrey, 2006). Furthermore, there were claims that reputable bloggers can affect restaurant bookings, with negative reviews leading to cancellations. These findings present a paradox for PR practitioners. On the one hand, the best bloggers are understood to write well and have high credibility with their readers by presenting an independent voice; and yet these same bloggers appear to be harder for PR practitioners to influence with PR content. The bloggers in this study were all male. A study of female bloggers might have led to different results.

Finally, both bloggers and PR practitioners value their own reputations and each others'. Practitioners take an active role in briefing their clients on how to work with bloggers and the mainstream media to ensure they support a good reputation. A client's online reputation can be tarnished in an instant online (Burt, 2012). This proved correct for practitioners in the hospitality industry, as both practitioners demonstrated a considerable focus on maintaining good reputations for their clients. Reputation also proved to be extremely important to the success of a blog and all bloggers interviewed prided themselves on having built a good reputation for their blogs through practising honesty and transparency.

Reputation is a cautious two-way affair in practitioner-blogger relationships. While practitioners invest time in analysing blogs for their suitability as credible targets, blogger Steve indicated that when approached by PR practitioners he would look them

up to check the reputation of the agency to evaluate whether the recommendations they were making were trustworthy. This highlights how seriously reputation is taken by some bloggers as well as their wariness of PR practitioners as trustworthy sources.

10. CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine the relationship between PR practitioners and restaurant review bloggers within the hospitality industry and the influence restaurant review bloggers are having on PR practice.

The research has explored the different views and perceptions of U.K. PR practitioners in the hospitality industry and restaurant review bloggers. This study has highlighted the complexity of relationships between practitioners and bloggers within this sector. While the study indicated that practitioners do see restaurant review bloggers as highly influential within the hospitality PR industry, concerns within the blogging community in regard to PR practice were identified, in particular accepting incentives from PR practitioners and how this can be damaging to their reputation. The research also showed that restaurant review bloggers are passionate about what they do and their main focus is on providing information and advice to their readers. This would appear to take priority over any other motivations. Finally, we suggest that the practitioner-blogger relationship may be interpreted in terms of relational practice. The participant interviews indicated strong adherence to personal and professional identities through the descriptions and perceptions of their own work and each others'. Blogger relations efforts, from a PR practitioner's perspective, are similar to the efforts in media relations, indicating a requirement for the practitioner to engage in careful emotion management with a blogging community that prides itself on independence and autonomy.

More in-depth research is required to develop understanding of the practitioner-blogger relationship, specifically to investigate the ethical issues raised; and also whether the blogger's gender might have led to different results in terms of blogger identity and relationships with PR practitioners.

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