Review

Camilla Vasquez, *The discourse of online consumer reviews*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 216; ISBN: 9781441196286.

In this recent contribution to Ken Hyland's edited *Bloomsbury Discourse* collection, Camilla Vasquez adds her timely and original perspective on the discursive practices of online consumer reviews. From cars and holidays, through film and entertainment to clothing and everyday groceries, consumers increasingly share their feedback and inform their product choices in online review networks. Seeking to make visible the linguistic choices and rhetorical tropes that have become naturalized in everyday practices of review production and consumption, Vasquez extends the scope of largely techno-commercially focused review genre studies to raise a number of important questions about digital consumer cultures.

This book asks readers to consider the narrative politics of consumer reviews in a world where electronic word of mouth, or eWOM, is rapidly becoming the dominant form of product evaluation. In doing so it raises a number of important questions: What inferences can we draw from the complex nature of the user-generated review/brand relationship in a late capitalist marketplace? What socio-economic relationships can be traced between reviewers, audiences and the brands they engage with online? To what extent are consumers empowered by sharing online reviews, and how much are they extending the profitability of brands exploiting an essentially free global marketing resource? What motivates consumers to publish their reviews of products to potentially vast audiences online, and what kind of relationships and communities are formed in review networks? How can audiences discern between authentic and fake reviews commissioned by businesses themselves? Such questions are firmly contextualized within the complex networks of identity, language, taste, cultural capital, knowledge exchange, community and the political economies of consumerism that underpin contemporary existence in consumer economies.

Drawing on her earlier (2011) study of review practices on travel website *TripAdvisor,* Vasquez includes reviews from four additional websites across four specific product categories. 200 *Amazon* reviews provide the dataset for 'search goods', those appliances and tangible objects that lend themselves to easy pre-purchase evaluation; 100 *Netflix* reviews address 'experience' goods (such as films), where subjective opinion

significantly impacts on consumer response; 400 reviews in total from *Trip Advisor* and *Yelp* cover 'services' such as hotels and restaurants, with a final dataset for less tangible 'products' such as recipes gleaned from *Epicurious*.

The author is reflexive about the limitations of this, or indeed any online study faced with the management and selection of vast databases. Her selection methods are effectively designed to maximize the range of product types and consumer demographics producing a sample dataset capable of both producing valid inferences, and sustaining the manual sole-researcher data handling and qualitative analysis approach she prefers. The discursive features presenting themselves for analysis in such a dataset are obviously multiple, and Vasquez identifies clearly those broader contexts from which she selects her particular themes for focus in this book. From the 1000 texts, 160 product types, and 150,000 words gathered, Vasquez extrapolates and guides readers through a discursive consideration of evaluation; identity work and self-presentation; involvement and intertextuality, and narrativity.

One of the most impressive features of this book is its clarity and careful attention to its own narrative structure as a methodological tool for data presentation. Vasquez is at pains to broaden the scope of her discourse analysis approaches to fit the multiple review contexts within which she is working. Accommodating such complex multiple enactments of review has the methodological potential to produce a fragmented and incoherent narrative of findings, or (in an attempt to simplify) a homogenized research view of what is in reality a wildly heterogeneous landscape. Through a rich triangulation of discourse analysis approaches, and data organized coherently into relevant themed chapters, readers are skillfully guided through the key discursive strategies and practices of a complex dataset as briefly summarized below.

Following the broad introductory work of the first chapter, the second chapter looks at explicit evaluation of experiences, focusing on the stance taken by reviewers through distinct lexical, syntactical and discursive choices. From the '*meh*' experiences of the distinctly underwhelmed in relation to the exaggerated claims of product marketing, to the desire for repeated positive experiences expressed by satisfied customers, the author contextualizes her findings in the bigger picture of an endless quest for the elusive perfect product in late capitalism's consumer society.

The fact that such desires are ultimately meshed into issues of identity and lifestyle for the contemporary consumer is unarguable, and chapter three adds to the burgeoning scholarly field of digital identities in various contexts. Here Vasquez explores the discursive construction of reviewer identities online, focusing on the cues utilised to convey authenticity and subject knowledge in consumer review contexts where trust and identification are tied up with the potential financial risk of making a purchase.

The interactive aspects of online review exchange are clear, and the fourth chapter analyses participatory processes in review communities, exploring how reviewers engage and interact discursively with their audiences, drawing intertextually on other relevant reviews in relation to their own. This chapter's consideration of Kuehn's (2011) concept of

review communities as social spaces for consumers seeking to transcend the alienation and displacement of postmodernity is particularly pertinent, and threads neatly into an exploration of the drive to make stories out of our consumer experiences in the fifth chapter.

In this final themed chapter, the desire to narrativize and share our experiences in relation to what we consume, both in positive and negative terms, is read as indicative of the ways in which stories of consumerism function as sites for identity and lifestyle construction, knowledge sharing, and resistance in the digital era.

In conclusion, Vasquez is reflexive about the parameters of her study, acknowledging their selected inclusions and necessary exclusions. Among the latter she numbers such repertoires as humour, politeness (or lack thereof), and the use of popular culture references more broadly. I would suggest there is also potential for additional studies on the discursive practices of consumer review in relation to public services such as healthcare, education, social services, transport, local governance and the criminal justice system. In a world where all services are increasingly coded in the language of the marketplace, and citizens as consumers, the need for further work of this caliber and insight can only grow.

As useful for modelling a clear and succinct methodological approach to analyzing online discursive practices, as it is for the important questions raised about life in digital consumer cultures, I found this study both insightful and accessible. The work will undoubtedly feature as a resource for my own and my students' future work on discourse in online narrative communities. Furthermore, the book has relevance across a number of disciplines from linguistics, through cultural studies, to consumer studies, online communications, marketing, and tourism studies.

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