

MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Flights of fancy: Creating and communicating the elite travel experience

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Corinne Graham

Ryerson University
Toronto, Ontario

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FLIGHTS OF FANCY

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ABSTRACT

This major research paper (MRP) explores the discourses of elite airline travel by applying principles of travel discourse, linguistics, and social identity theory to a case study of Delta Air Lines' online marketing for its premium *Delta Sky Club* lounge. The following research questions guided this study: *How does Delta Air Lines' language use in the online marketing of their frequent-flyer and business-class services contribute to the creation of a Club motif? How does the Club motif help to differentiate the elite traveler (and their travel experience) from other ticketholders? How does it reinforce the salience of these groups? How does the loyalty-and-reward framework capitalize on social anxieties about status and group identification?* A qualitative analysis was used to analyze the spaces, status groups, and social structures that were featured on the five webpages selected from Delta Air Lines' corporate website. The results of this study not only contribute to our understanding of the travel experience for 'preferred' airline passengers, but also reveal the discursive strategies by which these passengers are stylized and positioned as elites.

Keywords: discourse; elite airline travel; motif; social identity; stylization

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INTRODUCTION

Long-gone are the days of glamour and luxury once witnessed in the Pan Am commercials of the late 1960's. Women freshening their makeup in a spacious bathroom, gourmet meals arriving to eager passengers, and the now unimaginable scene of a flight attendant lighting a man's cigarette.

Though other international carriers associate themselves with a similar level of opulence, the Pan Am experience represents a vignette within the larger history of commercial flight in the United States. The number of people enjoying air travel has increased dramatically in recent years, due to its democratization and the rise of the low-cost, 'no-frills' airline. This mass-marketization has proven to be a challenge for many full-service carriers, as they attempt to maintain former standards of luxury and personalized care in an environment of reduced profit margins, limited cabin space and weight restrictions. These conditions are simply not conducive to the novelties of early air travel. Thus, airlines have adapted their loyalty and reward business model to reconnect with their passengers, and preserve a sense of interpersonal obligation.

One of the key components of this strategy has been the development of exclusive titles and privileges for frequent-flyer and business-class travelers. When airlines first introduced the tiered status system in the 1980s, there were only two levels of service available: regular and elite (Barro, 2015). Though the concept of class distinction has remained, many elite programs have been expanded in recent years to recognize a wider range of passengers. The elite class

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designation is now reserved for those travelers who have paid a premium for their airfare, or have exceeded a given number of miles flown with the airline, thereby demonstrating their loyalty to the brand. These passengers are then able to occupy an elite stance vis-à-vis the economy-class ticketholder, or ‘the masses’. Once institutionally recognized as superior and privileged, elites are “positioned to inherit the full cultural capital of the identity bestowed on them by the act of labelling them elite” (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006, 108). The benefits of this self-identification are immediately evident in the modern travel landscape, where the promise of space has acquired major social value. Elite passengers are presented with opportunities for greater personal space, access into private spaces (e.g. membership-only lounges) and more efficient movement through common areas.

The stylization of the airline traveler is an ongoing process, as companies reconstitute what it means to be an elite flyer based on broader corporate needs. This reorganization can occur for a number of different reasons, such as changing travel behaviour among customers, new airplane models and seat configurations, or an imbalance within the system. As Delta Air Lines explained in an email to its frequent-flyers last fall, “when everyone’s an elite flyer, no one is” (2014). The airline currently has four levels of mileage rewards, in addition to other special offerings for business-class travelers. When it became apparent that the criteria for their elite statuses were no longer competitive, the airline announced that it would be changing the policy to create “even more exclusivity” for premium members. Minimum spending requirements were imposed, and

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then increased, on top of the standard distance-based requirements to reach elite status.

Therefore, passengers that were once identified as elites within the rewards program are now facing the possibility of being downgraded, should they not have the financial capital required to maintain their membership. These efforts to preserve the premium travel experience are significant given the airline's reputation as a full-service, legacy carrier, and make it an ideal site for analyzing the production of elite discourses in the travel industry.

Following from this idea that the airline elite are a discursive accomplishment – a product of communicative processes rather than some fixed, personal attribute – this MRP seeks to further our understanding of the processes by which some passengers are positioned as superior to others. This study will explore the phenomenon within the context of Delta Air Lines' frequent-flyer and business-class programs, and the communication of these services on their company website. I will demonstrate how this group differentiation is achieved in their discourse; by completing a discourse analysis of the online marketing of their premium travel services, I ultimately argue that Delta Air Lines normalizes the existence of the elite identity, establishing a system that merely varies traditional ideologies of class and social distinction.

The format of my paper is as follows: first, I will discuss relevant literature and empirical studies pertaining to travel, language, and social identity. Second, I will outline the theoretical questions that have guided the research for this study. Third, I will discuss my research methodology and introduce the first section of analysis in which I will qualitatively explore how

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Delta Air Lines' language contributes to the creation of a Club motif. In the second section of analysis I delve deeper into the significance of this motif; using a qualitative analysis to explore the relationship between the ideas conveyed by the Club motif and principles of social psychology, I reveal how airlines exaggerate difference via social identity. The final analysis section will discuss how the tiered service model capitalizes on existing anxieties about the acquisition, performance and permanency of social status. After a brief discussion of the results from the preceding analyses, I conclude by suggesting how this study contributes to academic research in the fields of travel and tourism, communication, branding, sociology and identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This MRP explores how the discourse surrounding frequent-flyer and business-class travel contributes to the stylization, and positioning of certain airline passengers as 'elites'. I will review the literature of three scholarly disciplines to cover the interdisciplinary nature of my research topic: (1) travel discourse, (2) linguistics and (3) social identity. This literature review begins with an overview of critical tourism research related to travel discourses, and the construction of the elite travel experience. Second, I will discuss important contributions to the study of the linguistic motif, in order to develop a model for identifying and deconstructing its use in Delta Air Lines' online content. Finally, this review will turn to the work of social psychologists, exploring the relationship between social identity and group formation.

Travel Discourse

In *The Language of Tourism*, Graham Dann (1996) provides what is widely recognized as the first sociolinguistic treatment of tourism. The essay proposes that tourism is a form of discourse with its own linguistic conventions and styles which together operate as a “language of social control.” Dann writes:

[T]ourism, in the act of promotion, as well as in the accounts of its practitioners and clients, has a discourse of its own. Seen in this light, the language of tourism is thus a great deal more than a metaphor. Via static and moving pictures, written texts and audio-visual offerings, the language of tourism attempts to persuade, lure, woo and seduce millions of human beings, and, in doing so, convert them from potential into actual clients. (p.2)

Drawing on previous studies by Prezclawski (1994), Dann argues that many tourism activities are constrained by economic, social, cultural, spatial and temporal forces. The process of “lur[ring] and “woo[ing],” as described above, ensures that tourists are not “liberated” by their travel experiences but rather are regulated and controlled as clients of the industry. He argues that the visual and written elements of tourism-related marketing materials, guidebooks, and postcards create experiential expectations that later inform (i.e. “control”) the actions, behaviour, and experiences of tourists (Dann, 1996, Ho, 2001). Thus, for Dann (2012) and other modernist scholars, these types of promotional materials produced by the travel and tourism industry are inherently problematic.

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This modernist approach influenced much of the travel and tourism research in the years that followed; however, Dann (2012) has since signalled the need for a new heuristic framework that can accommodate the recent advances in digital communication. The study notes that electronic communication affords consumers the opportunity to engage in open conversations with one another, as well as other key figures in the industry (e.g. companies, politicians). These exercises in “verbal to-ing and fro-ing [are] moreover conducted in the public domain, so that those similarly afflicted can join the discussion with their own related experiences” (Dann, 2012, 61). For scholars such as Dann (2012), these changes suggest an important paradigm shift in the industry towards a more “egalitarian, postmodern ethos of dialogue, or even triologue, between the key players of tourism” (59). There are now avenues for word-of-mouth to assume digital features on travel review websites, discussion boards, blogs and social media. Cumulatively, all of these interactive channels “provide collective evidence of the greater democratization of the language of tourism” (Dann, 2012). Thus, the study argues that scholars must adapt and develop new models that more accurately reflect the multidirectional communication of the travel and tourism industry.

Meanwhile, Stefania Maci (2006) further reinforces the importance of sociolinguistic analysis, noting that the social nature of discourse necessitates that scholars integrate contextual information while analyzing and interpreting texts. While earlier works have analyzed the linguistic tools employed by the travel and tourism industry, this study explores the relationship

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between texts and the broader social environment in which they are produced. More specifically, it examines how “the language of tourism discourse dynamically reflect[s] new societal trends, and the way in which the latter have modified tourism genres” (Maci, 2006). The results of this analysis suggest that social changes have often been mirrored in tourism discourse, in so far as it seemed to produce new linguistic strategies when tourism was used for marketing and other distinct purposes. Maci (2006) concludes that it is because of the dynamic nature of the tourism sector, and the economic processes that surround it, that tourism discourse is characterized by “ongoing linguistic and generic developments” (196).

Camille O’Reilly (2005) identifies similar variations in language use in her analysis of backpacker narratives, demonstrating how specific content and narrative techniques are used to describe a travel experience, as opposed to a touristic one. Backpacking narratives were gathered through participant observation, interviews and online engagement with the community on backpacker-oriented websites. Findings indicate that travelers prefer to refer to themselves as “travellers” or “backpackers,” since the terms are better suited to discourses of adventure and exploration (O’Reilly, 2005). It was common among all of the backpackers to make sense of their travels through narration and to translate its value into other contexts. O’Reilly (2005) notes in particular their tendency to reflect on experiences in relation to their career, personal identity and sense of self. Thus, this research confirms that travel discourses can inform the creation and communication of identity. For members of the backpacking community, the narratives that they

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share are not merely stories – they are “the process through which traveler’s reinvent themselves, communicate their new identities and enhance their social positions” (167).

Elite travel discourse

Thurlow and Jaworski’s (2006) analysis of frequent-flyer travel discourse offers unique insight into the stylization, re-contextualization and commodification of travel identities in the commercial airline industry. From a sample of 51 major international airlines, Thurlow and Jaworski (2006) conduct a critical discourse analysis of the websites (“online publicity documents”) created to market 46 different frequent-flyer schemes. The research examines how the “semiotic macrostructures” of the online content are manipulated with regard to their “local meanings, specifically the semantic domains through lexical choices and positioning of social actors” (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006, 106). In particular, they study the discursive processes, such as lexicalization, exaggeration of difference, synthetic personalization and status symbolism, by which elite travel is textured in the online marketing of frequent-flyer services. Findings from the research indicate that there is a great deal of uniformity across airline marketing materials, both in terms of linguistic practices and visual aesthetic. Thurlow and Jaworski (2006) conclude that the “act of conforming to these standardized semiotic repertoires is itself, therefore, an elaborate metadiscursive legitimization of each airline as a competitive, international player” (122). The study serves as an introduction to normative trends in the marketing of frequent-flyer travel, providing a broad overview of the discursive strategies used by airlines in their web-based

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marketing communication. My objective for this MRP is to build upon this existing body of research by conducting a detailed case analysis of the webpages marketing Delta Air Lines' frequent-flyer and business-class services. This project will also introduce motifs and social identity as subject matter for new analytical opportunities.

Linguistics

While work in the field of narrative folklore is somewhat tangential to my research concerns, it is valuable to my investigation in terms of its theoretical vocabulary, namely the terms it employs to differentiate between various types and functions of repetition in a text. In *Story-telling Techniques in The Arabian Nights*, Pinault (1992) identifies four distinct types of repetition - repetitive designation, leitwortsil, thematic patterning and formal patterning, and dramatic visualization. Though each term is defined in terms of its application to more traditional forms of narrative, Pinault's description of the leitwortsil (or leading word) is pertinent to my analysis of the Club motif in Delta Air Lines' online communication. El-Shamy (1996) summarizes the practice of using the leitwortsil as follows:

A concept borrowed from Biblical studies that denote a word or word root that recurs significantly in a text, in a continuum of texts, or in a configuration of texts; by following these repetitions, one is able to decipher or grasp a meaning of a text. (p. 187)

In addition to defining the various forms of repetition, Pinault's (1992) work also verifies that repetitive devices are one means by which a text produces and affirms meaning. These reading

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strategies inform the first two questions of my MRP, as I analyze the additional meanings that Delta Air Lines may be conveying through their repetition of the word “Club” on their corporate website. While on the surface it appears to denote the *Delta Sky Club* lounge, previous research by Thurlow and Jaworski (2006) has indicated that this motif is also used by other airlines with premium spaces that are differently named.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner: Early theoretical developments

Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) first introduced the theory of social identity – “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” – to expand on Tajfel’s earlier studies of social perception (e.g. stereotyping and prejudice) and move towards an understanding how the self is conceptualized in intergroup settings (22). Tajfel and his associates (1972) were interested in the ways in which a system of social categorization, such as the airline status systems discussed in the current project, can “create and define an individual’s own place in society” (293). The minimal group studies (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971) were designed to isolate social categorization as an independent variable and measure the impact, if any, that it had on intergroup behaviour. Tajfel and his team set out to create an intergroup situation where two social groups are created, but none of the other known conditions of intergroup conflict are

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present. In other words, they created a series of studies designed to identify the minimal conditions that are necessary to produce negativity towards other groups.

For their initial study, Tajfel and his associates studied the group behaviour of 64 Bristol schoolboys, aged 14-16. Social categorization occurs as the boys are organized into groups based on a trivial qualification (e.g. favourite painter), and only told to which group they had been assigned. In the second stage, the boys were then asked to allocate points to two other children about whom nothing was known other than the fact that one was a member of their group, while the other was not.

The findings were provocative and inspired future research into the dynamics of intergroup relations. Tajfel and his team (1971) found that the boys displayed high levels of favouritism towards members of their own group, giving more rewards (e.g. points) to the unidentified in-group members than to unknown out-group members. These results initially led scholars to believe that the mere act of dividing individuals into groups was enough to create antagonism. Tajfel (1974) proposed that views “about the nature of relations between groups (status, stability, permeability, legitimacy) influence the way that individuals or members pursue positive social identity” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, 123). However, Tajfel and Turner (1979; 1986) later note that aggression and competition between groups does not always occur. This initial research on intergroup conflict would lead to further developments in the study of social comparison,

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intergroup behaviour (e.g. Pettigrew, 1998; Taylor & McKirnan, 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social change (e.g. Lalonde, 1992; Terry & Callan, 1998), among others.

From a social identity perspective, a person does not merely have one ‘personal self’, but rather a number of different selves that correspond to broadening circles of group membership. Movement within different social contexts may prompt an individual to think, feel, and act on the basis of their personal, familial or national “level of self” (Turner et al., 1987). In addition to this primary understanding of self, an individual also has various other social identities. Social identity is the individuals’ self-concept resulting from their perceived membership within social groups (e.g. Hogg & Vaughan, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). It is a personal perception of what defines the “us” that is associated with any form of internalized group affiliation. This differs from the concept of personal identity, which refers to self-knowledge that develops from the individual’s distinct attributes.

One of the key concepts of social identity theory is that group membership creates self-categorization, including the distinction between in-group and out-group members (see figure 1). The minimal group studies (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) discussed above would be an example of this categorization and in-group favouritism. After the categorization process, individuals seek to achieve positive self-esteem by positively distinguishing their in-group from a comparison ‘other’ on some valued quality. This pursuit for a satisfied social identity means that people’s sense of who they are is defined in terms of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’.

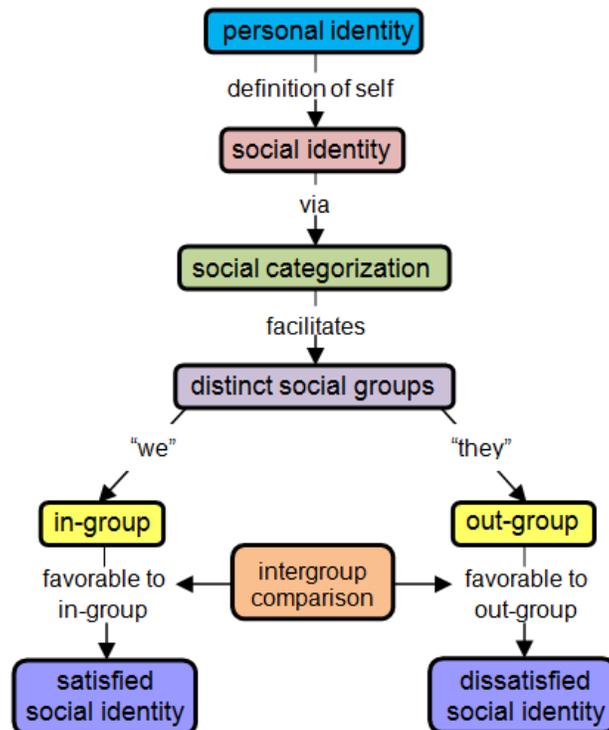


Figure 1. An overview of the social and cognitive processes involved in Tajfel and Turner’s (1979, 1986) social identity theory.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) identify three factors that contribute to the self-categorization of in-group and out-group members, they are as follows:

1. The extent to which individual’s identify with an in-group and internalize their membership as part of their self-concept;
2. The extent to which the current context warrants comparison between groups, and;
3. The perceived relevance of the comparison (‘other’) group, which is itself influenced by the status of the in-group.

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Alternative perspectives on selves and identities

Though social identity theory typically distinguishes between social and personal identity, some scholars have developed other conceptual models in an effort to move away from the social versus personal identity dichotomy. Brewer and Gardner (1996; Burke, 2006; Yuki, 2003) identify three aspects of the self: *individual self* (defined by personal characteristics that distinguish oneself from all others), *relational self* (described by dyadic relationships between the self and meaningful others), and the *collective self* (defined by group affiliation that distinguish “us” from “them”). In a later publication, Brewer (2001; Burke, 2006) further revises Tajfel and Turner’s (1979, 1986) theory by recognizing four types of social identity: *person-based social identities* which emphasize how aspects of groups are internalized by individual members as part of the self-concept; *relational social identities* that describe the self in relation to “specific other people with whom one interacts in a group context;” *group-based social identities* which are the equivalent to the social identity defined in traditional scholarship; and *collective identities* that “refer to a process whereby group members do not just share self-defining attributes but also engage in social action” in order to establish a precedent about what the group stands for and how they will be perceived by others.

The benefit of this more complex and multidimensional perspective, however, remains unclear. As Burke (2006) notes, the relational self or the relational social identity can be difficult to locate within the traditional theoretical model. From a social identity perspective, do they

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represent a form of social identity or a form of personal identity? Burke (2006) offers the possibility that it might depend on the larger social or cultural context of the group. In collectivist cultures, group membership can be described in terms of individual's relationships with one another (Burke, 2006; Osyerman et al., 2002). An individual's network of relationships helps to locate them within the group and solidify their membership. Within this context, Brewer's (2001) relational identity is how social identity is expressed. Though useful when making these types of cross-cultural comparisons, the model has been less widely adopted than its predecessor and will not be used in support of this research project.

Social comparison

Festinger's social comparison theory is a successor of his previous works on informal social communication (1950). As a student of Kurt Lewin, a scholar universally recognized as the founder of modern psychology, Festinger hoped to address such question as "why do people talk, to whom do they talk, and what is the result of their talking" (Corcoran et al., 2011; Wheeler, 1970). He proposed that communication mainly functions to reach agreement in the group and that this tendency toward uniformity occurs for two reasons: first, the need for group mobilization means that all group members must share a similar perspective and, second, the desire to agree on a social reality (Festinger, 1950). This confirmation of social reality is significant for group members, as it validates the accuracy of their own personal opinions and preferences. Though his theory of social comparison was not published until four years later,

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Festinger's initial research on informal social communication lays the groundwork for future studies on self-perception in a group context.

Festinger (1954) based his theory of social comparison on nine hypotheses which together support the idea that individuals compare themselves to similar others in order to assess their opinions and abilities. While the desire for a satisfied (positive) social identity is understood in social identity theory as the psychological force driving a person's actions in an intergroup situation, the social comparison process is the means through which an individual assesses their group's social significance. As will be discussed later, it can also be argued that social comparison helps to explain the relative nature of status, as individuals are motivated to perceive themselves "as not merely good and worthy" but as "better than other groups" (Festinger, 1954; Henderson et al., 2011; Roocas, 2003, p. 724). Hypotheses I and II state that the need to know the self combined with the inability to gauge ability and opinion in reference to the physical world in most circumstances motivates people to evaluate themselves in relation to other people. Hypotheses III, IV, and VIII propose that people will seek out individuals with views and abilities that are comparable, or marginally better than their own. He notes that comparisons among people whose skills and opinions are too dissimilar will be less valuable to the self-assessment process, since the results will likely be known beforehand. Finally, hypotheses VI, VI, VII, and IX address the social consequences of comparison, including the tendency for changes to occur in the direction of uniformity. While theorists (e.g. Wills, 1981; Taylor &

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Lobel, 1989) have since broadened Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison to explore other processes, the findings from his initial studies are nonetheless valuable in understanding the significance of "benchmarking" in the social comparison process.

Within this body of research, the initial assumption was that individuals would be more likely to compare themselves to others with average qualities or capabilities (Alicke, 2000). In other words, it was argued that lateral comparison was the most valuable source of information for self-assessment. Subsequent social comparison research has found that, contrary to this common assumption, individuals often focus on upward or downward (vertical) comparisons. Wills (1981) proposed that downward comparison would be the most favourable method of the pair, given that it would provide subjects with a more positive perception of their skills and self-worth. For example, individuals experiencing minor illness were more likely to compare themselves to people who are suffering from life-threatening illnesses. Other scholars (e.g. Suls et al., 2002; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992; Wood et al., 1985) have found that these types of comparisons will enhance the perception of their own circumstances. It was therefore expected that generally, individuals would engage in downward comparisons when assessing their own attributes, in an attempt to arrive at more positive results.

There are other scholars, however, who question whether downward comparisons are the only type of comparison that people often make (Gibbons et al., 2002; Suis & Wheeler, 2000; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). These studies revealed that individuals are also frequently engaging

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in upward comparisons. The tendency to compare with others who are deemed to be ‘better’ in a given domain (e.g. athleticism) appears to be motivated by the drive for “self-improvement” and “self-enhancement” (Collins, 1996; Helgenson & Mickelson, 1995; Taylor et al., 1995). Previous studies involving cancer patients, for example, demonstrate that they often make upward comparisons about whom they will interact with among other cancer patients (Molleman et al., 1986). Thus, despite the fact that making an upward comparison may result in a less positive self-assessment, studies have shown that these comparisons are still made quite regularly.

Drèze and Nunes (2009) consider new applications for this research, noting how the ordering of tiers in the airline industry make it an ideal site for viewing consumer’s perception of status through the lens of social comparison theory. An individual’s “perception of relative standing may influence many outcomes, including a person’s self-concept, level of aspiration, and feelings of well-being” (Drèze & Nunes; 2009; Suls et al, 2002; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). When customers occupying the top tier of a hierarchy look down (downward comparison), different configurations of this structure will influence what they see, including their perception of rank (self-evaluation), and what it means to be positioned at the top (self-enhancement). Drèze and Nunes (2009) identify two features that will influence how customers perceive their self-worth and superiority in the status hierarchy. First, individuals are concerned with the exclusivity of the group, which Drèze and Nunes (2009) argue can be enhanced by dividing the elite status group into various subgroups, or tiers of elites. Additionally, marketers must also take into

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consideration the number of travelers that qualify for each of these subgroups, as smaller subgroups are perceived to be more exclusive and distinctive (Drèze & Nunes, 2009; Pickett et al., 2002). Findings from their study also reveal that secondary tiers will benefit the super-elite traveler by “further clarifying their position and making them feel a greater sense of superiority” (892). These efforts to maintain the exclusivity of the status group enhance the customer’s perception of their status and reinforce the significance, or uniqueness associated with them attaining it.

Recent studies by Lockwood (2002) suggest that the presence of subgroups may also produce other benefits for individuals within the status structure. When individuals compare their situation to that of an inferior other, they may either take pleasure in their superiority or feel alarmed at the prospect of sharing a similar fate. Therefore, Lockwood (2002) proposes that additional tiers in the elite system provide a “safety net” for those positioned at the top, and therefore make the program more attractive overall. Drèze and Nunes (2009) are critical of how this will impact the perceptions of status in the top tier; however, I believe that the “safety net” is perhaps better understood as something that is sought throughout the system. In particular, this desire for stability might contribute to the use of the Club motif in Delta Air Lines’ online communication, since every preferred passenger is identified as a member of the overarching *Delta Sky Club*.

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Similarly, the significance of status labels has also been considered in the context of the airline industry. Drèze and Nunes (2009) propose that travelers communicate and “derive information about the structure of the hierarchy from status-laden labels” (893). Rank is often signified using labels that correspond to increasingly selective criterion (e.g. *Delta Diamond*, *Platinum* or *Gold Medallion* programs). According to Drèze and Nunes (2009), the use of colour can convey important information about rank and an individual’s overall status within the system. Colours such as bronze, silver, gold, and platinum acquire rarity through their association with precious metals (Drèze & Nunes; 2009). Through customs such as the use of gold, silver, and bronze for competitive sports and other competitions, these materials already have an inherent rank associated with them. Other authors have noted how colour can enhance a brand’s marketing by “complet[ing] their desired image and positioning” (Bottomley & Doyle, 2006). Thus, this research suggests that labels can be imbued with meaning that can evoke a number of responses.

Efficacy of groups

From an expectancy-value perspective, if an individual believes that a group is influential or capable of collective action, they are more likely to self-identify with this group (Klandermas, 1984; Zomeran et al., 2010). This sense of collective action emphasizes the shared identity of individuals, making the group feel more cohesive and salient for its members. In a recent study by Zomeran, Leach and Spears (2010), the participants were informed that the tuition fees at

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their university would soon be raised. While some individuals were told that collective action might be an effective means of preventing this change, other participants were warned that this type of action tends to be unsuccessful. The researchers then asked each participant to assess the degree to which they identified themselves as a student, as well as their overall willingness to participate in some form of collective action. It was found that individuals who received positive feedback about the effectiveness of collective action were also more likely to identify themselves as students. Thus, Zomeran, Leach and Spears (2010) suggest that this relationship was mediated by the motivation to participate in collective action. Though collective action is not a motivating factor within the context of my research, the findings of this study (Zomeran et al., 2010) do offer insight into the perceived value of influence in the self-categorization process.

The works reviewed above are representative of the interdisciplinary approaches used to examine issues related to travel, social identity and discourse. Previous studies have considered the links between contemporary travel practices and social issues, and many have concluded that the consumption of tourism occurs within a complex social milieu. Richard Sharpley (2006) alludes to this complexity when he writes:

[T]here is a rich, varied and sometimes complex literature on socio-cultural aspects of tourism...[meaning that] there is much to learn from tourism about social behaviour, consumer culture, intercultural exchange and so on. (p.128)

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While the aforementioned literature addresses these issues in various contexts, my research project contributes to the discussion by focusing specifically on the discourse of Delta Air Lines, an international carrier whose status program has grown to become one of the largest in the industry. Moreover, the existing literature lacks a thorough discourse analysis of airline marketing communication in general; the results of this MRP represent one step towards closing this gap in the research.

Opportunities for Research

This review points to several areas of research that have been understudied in the past. Scholars from fields as diverse as sociology, finance, marketing, and anthropology have studied the social and cultural practices by which travel and tourism are signified, structured and experienced (e.g. Ateljevic et al., 2007; Franklin & Crang, 2001; Selwyn, 1996; Urry, 2002). Works of critical tourism research that are grounded in theories of sociology and economics often speak to issues of power, representation, stereotyping, social organization, sustainability and the economic impact of 'touring' (e.g. Cohen, 1974, 1984; Dann & Cohen, 1991; Heimtun, 2007; MacCannell, 1973). In particular, a growing body of critical tourism research has emerged regarding the relationship between social organization and travel. Observations from this research reveal how personal opinions about a location or place can "dialectically inform identity formation," while other scholars have critiqued the development of the development of prestige travel and the "leisure class" (e.g. Ateljevic et al., 2007; MacCannell, 1976; Riley, 1995). The

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objective of these studies, however, has been to develop normative trends about social organization rather than to conduct close readings of particular marketing collateral.

Travel and tourism research has also expanded to the online sphere. The popularity of review sites and other online travel communities has contributed to recent growth in this area of research. Scholars are interested in how information sharing, communication, identity and group formation intersect in these communities (e.g. Arsal et al., 2008; Casaló et al., 2010; Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Qu & Lee, 2011; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2002, 2004). This MRP will contribute to the discussion about online travel communication and social organization, while also exploring how groups are formed in static online spaces (e.g. corporate websites).

As discussed in the preceding review, my research also addresses a gap in the existing works on frequent-flyer and business-class discourse. Using critical discourse analysis as a framework, Thurlow and Jaworski (2006) provide an overview of the discursive processes by which status airline travel is textured. While their study provides a comprehensive analysis of how elite travel is communicated as a whole, it cannot accommodate a more detailed close reading of any given strategy. This literature review reveals that few scholars have undertaken an analysis of the Club motif, despite its prevalence across the airline industry. Finally, an opportunity exists to broaden the scope of this research and incorporate theories of social psychology. The next section of my MRP will introduce research questions that are pertinent to these areas of critical tourism research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Travel and tourism has experienced (and perpetuated) the major shift by which service-oriented industries now render goods that are more “discursively mediated” and “semioticized” (Fairclough, 1999; Lash & Urry, 1994). As discussed in the literature, commercial airlines are known to be rich sites for exploring the representation of cultural and social values. This paper will study how travel discourses are manipulated to create a status-based service experience. It also explores how airlines then persuade their passengers to position themselves in these stylized roles. My research looks specifically at the online marketing of Delta Air Lines’ frequent-flyer and business-class services, using theories of critical tourism, discourse and social psychology to ground my analysis. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, Delta Air Lines has long-held the reputation of being a full-service airline with “all the graciousness the term ‘southern hospitality’ implies” (Whitelegg, 2005). The airline has expanded its services since it was first founded in 1940 and now offers a number of exclusive, premium benefits for its most loyal customers. Delta Air Lines’ ongoing success makes it a brand worthy of further examination, particularly given the growing popularity of low-cost carriers and cheap fare search engines, like Expedia. This study addresses three research questions:

1. How does Delta Air Lines’ language use in the online marketing of their frequent-flyer and business-class services contribute to the creation of a Club motif?

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2. How does the Club motif help to differentiate the elite traveler (and their travel experience) from other ticketholders?
 - A. How does it reinforce the salience of these status groups?
3. How does the loyalty-and-reward framework capitalize on social anxieties about status and group identification?

METHODOLOGY

Social constructionist approaches to discourse analysis inform this paper methodologically.

The field of discourse analysis consists of many different approaches to social constructionist research, such as Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, critical discourse analysis, the

Foucauldian approach and discursive psychology, among others (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

While the methods listed above are distinctive, all four share the underlying belief that discourse does not "neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play[s] an active role in creating and changing them" (e.g. Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995; Foucault, 1972;

Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The social constructionist method of analysis can be applied across many social contexts, "including organizations and institutions, and in exploration of language use in broad societal and cultural developments (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). This research project adopts a similar approach to study the production and use of elite discourse in the airline industry.

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My analysis is composed of three parts: first, I address the discursive construction of the elite identity by examining Delta Air Lines' use of the Club motif across the webpages for their frequent-flyer and business-class services. This process consists of identifying its use and then describing the contexts in which it appears. I delve more specifically into the significance of the Club motif in the subsequent sections: in the second, I draw on theories of elite tourism discourse and social identity theory to determine how the status traveler, and their overall travel experience, are differentiated from that of the economy-class passenger. This analysis of membership and group formation coincides with my second research question, which explores how Delta Air Lines reinforces the salience of social groups through the use of the Club motif. According to Turner et al. (1987), when the salience of one identity (e.g. Delta Sky Club member) increases, the salience of other identities will typically begin to subside. This portion of the study will examine 'eliteness' as a "structure of feeling," whereby the traveler is "talked into existence and otherwise semiotically achieved" (Thurlow & Jaworksi, 2006, 103; Williams, 1977, 132). It will consider how the Club motif invokes the *feeling* of being elite and how this affirms the importance of membership. Third, I conclude with a broad analysis of the loyalty framework as a whole, referring to literature on status and group identification as I explore the business strategy through a socio-psychological lens.

Discourse analysis is an ideal framework with which to approach Delta Air Line's online communication, given the interdisciplinary nature of this research topic. It is possible within this

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framework to combine elements from various discourse analytic perspectives with other non-discourse analytical perspectives (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). According to Jorgensen and Phillips (2002), this “multiperspectival work is not only permissible but positively viewed in most forms of discourse analysis” (4). So, while textual analysis is a key component of discourse analysis, it is also not limited to the linguistic analysis of texts. This flexibility is ideally suited to the interdisciplinary, qualitative analysis that I conduct for this study. My research approaches the ‘texts’ (webpages) using a combination of perspectives on linguistics and social theory, in order to accommodate the social, ideological and communicative processes under consideration. The results of this study will not only contribute to our understanding of elite discourse in the airline industry, but also hopefully reinforce how developments in linguistics and social science research can be mutually informative.

The Text

This MRP uses textual analysis as a means of interpreting Delta Air Lines’ language use on their corporate website. In particular, I study instances of the Club motif across five pages (see appendix A) that were randomly selected from the *Delta Sky Club* section of the website. This area of the site contains information about the services, statuses (i.e. passenger profiles) and social structures that are relevant to my research topic. The webpages are a rich site for studying communication in the travel and tourism industry. Since this study is primarily concerned with the linguistics of Delta Air Lines’ marketing strategy, I will be looking exclusively at the text

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that appears on the five webpages in the sample. The web affords developers the option to combine visual and written elements to create a cohesive, stylized experience for their users.

Therefore, my discussion section will also introduce future opportunities for a visual semiotic analysis of its contents.

Delta Air Lines produces an extensive collection of webpages that are specifically dedicated to marketing their premium services. For an in-depth interpretative study, a defined sampling procedure would have been inappropriate and impractical because of the limited number of contexts in which the Club motif is used. The aim of this research is not to define theories or derive statistically significant findings. Rather, I seek to develop a case study focusing on Delta Air Lines and the discursive construction of the elite travel experience. In this context, I believe that the following webpages from the Delta Air Lines website will provide data that is relevant to my overall research objectives:

- *Membership*
- *Perks and Amenities*
- *House Rules*
- *Locations*
- *Access & Policies*

Methodological Limitations

This research provides an interpretative analysis of Delta Air Lines' online communication and how it is manipulated to produce social hierarchy and symbolic capital. While it aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the discourses surrounding the elite travel experience, there are a number of research questions that are beyond the scope of this MRP. First, my research cannot speak to the branding intentions of Delta Air Lines' marketing team nor does it seek to provide empirical observations about its reception among travelers. This research is not concerned with developing statistically significant findings about the popularity, economics, or information regarding the demographics of their preferred passenger programs. While the study offers insight into the construction of the prestige travel experience, it cannot address all of the discursive strategies that were employed in the online marketing of these services. Furthermore, Delta Air Lines has produced content related to its frequent-flyer and business-class travel across a variety of media. It would be outside the scope of this project to examine all of the marketing collateral developed for these services. While data collection of this size offers a more comprehensive understanding of the entire web experience, it is unlikely that the results would warrant an investigation of this scope.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings from my textual and socio-psychological analysis of the online marketing for Delta Air Line's premium, frequent-flyer and business-class services. It will

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begin with an initial categorization of the different memberships and/or groups that I have identified on the webpages used for this study. The results from my textual analysis are then provided to discuss the various meanings that are associated with the use of the word “Club,” and the significance of these readings relative to the overall marketing themes identified in the sample. Further critical observations will then be discussed holistically to address my research questions.

Social Organization: Signifying Superiority and Exclusivity

An important component of all business-class and frequent-flyer travel is a form of performative speech act (Austin, 1961), by which a group of passengers are declared or identified as superior to other ticketholders. This status is reinforced by the name given to passengers, programs, and spaces to signify that they are associated with a more distinguished traveler. While Qantas and Gulf Air have explicitly named their programs *Frequent Flyers*, many airlines recognize the naming process as an opportunity to further stylize the elite travel experience. The following list accounts for all of the labels that were used to distinguish spaces, programs, and members on the webpages selected for this study.

- *Delta Sky Club*
- *THE BAR*
- *Club*
- *Lounge(s)*

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- *Member*
- *Executive Membership*
- *Individual Membership*
- *Delta Sky Club One-Day Pass Holder*
- *Delta One and SkyTeam Premium Cabin Passengers*
- *Delta Reserve Credit Card Member*
- *Platinum Card Members (American Express)*
- *Delta SkyTeam Elite Plus Member (Delta Diamond, Platinum or Gold Medallion)*

Deconstructing the Club Motif

When interpreting a written work, our understanding of the text can be substantially improved by looking for what is repeated (Abbott, 2008). ‘Themes’ and ‘motifs’ are two terms that are often used to discuss this type of repetition. The use of this strategy to ‘read’ Delta Air Lines online content reflects the central premise of this MRP that the elite traveler is a discursive accomplishment, rather than some universal, personal quality. The findings gathered for this portion of the analysis will help to answer my first research question: How does Delta Air Lines’ language use in the online marketing of their frequent-flyer and business-class services contribute to the creation of a Club motif?

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Delta Air Lines establishes a clean, modern aesthetic on their corporate website by limiting the amount of text that appears on each webpage. This minimalist design informs the layout and content across much of the website, though the *Delta Sky Club* section under investigation represents a notable exception. Here, the word “Club” appears repeatedly in the header, body text, and side panels on each of the five webpages selected for this study. Though it is a recurring element in the text, my analysis revealed that the word took on various meanings depending on the context in which it was used. It appeared to simultaneously represent the official *Delta Sky Club*, a more intimate lounge space for members, and a labelling strategy used to describe various types of members and memberships. Each of these readings will be described in greater detail below.

The word “Club” was most commonly used to denote physical space, specifically the *Delta Sky Club* lounges (see extract 1) that Delta Air Lines offers at many of the airports from which it operates. This finding was anticipated at the outset of the study given that the webpages were selected from the *Delta Sky Club* portion of Delta.com.

Extract 1

Let Delta Sky Club be your destination between destinations.

(Delta Air Lines, 2015)

In other contexts, the word “Club” appears without further reference to a particular program or member. This abbreviation provides opportunities to vary their language use on the

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website, while still signifying the *Delta Sky Club* lounges that are mentioned elsewhere in the text. The casualness of this language is also interesting from a marketing perspective. When employed in the text on its own, the word “Club” has positive connotations of entertainment, privacy, distinctiveness and a sense of community. The text encourages readers to make these positive associations through the use of an inviting, conversational tone (see extract 2). Finally, while it remains clear that “the Club” in question is the *Delta Sky Club*, this slight variation in the language helps to make it a more universal space that all readers can aspire towards and envision themselves in.

Extract 2

Your Club experience – whether you work, relax or play – is up to you.

(Delta Air Lines, 2015)

Extract 3

Tune into the day’s news or the big game with the satellite TV at the Club.

(Delta Air Lines, 2015)

“Club” is also a term that Delta Air Lines’ applies to members of the *Delta Sky Club* program. There are instances in the text in which it is employed to describe a type of member or membership, such as a “Club member” or a *Delta Sky Club One-Day Pass Holder*. An important part of the elite airline experience is the labelling process by which travelers are socially and temporally entered into their status roles. By using the word in this context, Delta Air Lines

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signals to readers their relationship to the physical space and to each other as lounge members.

The text does not advertise the experience by referring to any particular individual (e.g. in a testimonial), but rather uses the term “Club member” to invoke a uniformity and collectiveness within the group. These labels increase the salience of status groups by positioning readers away from their own personal identity, and then aligning them with a collective identity of greater social significance. Though differentiation will be discussed in the analysis for my second research question, it is worth noting that this labelling process also serves to categorize travelers as annual members, temporary visitors, guests and non-members.

Extract 4

When work demands more space and privacy, being a Delta Sky Club member really pays off.

(Delta Air Lines, 2015)

This repetition of the word “Club” is characterized as a motif, as opposed to a rhetorical or other linguistic strategy, due to its symbolic significance within the text. Motifs are a recurring element or “minimal thematic unit” within a creative work; used in service of larger themes or ideas that the writer wishes to convey to their audience (Prince, 2003). Therefore, the results of this initial textual analysis suggest that the Club motif is deployed to support the interplay of three key themes in the marketing of their premium travel services: luxury, exclusivity and

privacy. Further observations will be discussed in the next section of my analysis in relation to my second and third research questions.

Analysis

2. How does the Club motif help to differentiate the elite traveler (and their travel experience) from other ticketholders?

Textually, the Club motif represents an extension of the labelling and social sorting practices that operate within the elite status program. The distinctions that are made in the text between members, temporary members, guests, and non-member signify the importance of status labels within the *Delta Sky Club*. It suggests a social categorization process similar to that found in other areas of the airline, whereby the traveler internalizes a new group identity and performs it during their movement through the travel space. This distinction between ‘members’ and ‘non-members’ helps to facilitate an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dialogue, though it is somewhat mitigated with the inclusion of intermediary membership options. Finally, the Club motif establishes a line of distinction between premium and everyday travel experiences that appear to index both status and non-status customers. Status travelers, here represented by the Club member, are aligned with the professional environment of the *Delta Sky Club*. The categorical markers of higher social status that appear in the text (e.g. socializing, sophistication and comfort) are then implicitly juxtaposed with those that suggest a less prestigious travel experience. If the Club

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represents a reprieve from the mundane aspects of traditional travel, then readers can only infer that being a non-member will exclude them from sharing a similar luxury experience.

A. How does it reinforce the salience of these status groups?

One of the key features of social identity formation is the interaction between the self and external social structures. This interaction can take many forms, from individual-to-individual interaction, to more internalized self-assessments of social structure (Sejin & Stoel, 2014). The latter process in particular implies that people can engage with social categories on a psychological level, even when there is little or no direct contact with and recognition by other group members. Sejin and Stoel (2014) propose that these interactions may be based upon “information and meanings held in a given social situation, message or object associated with a [social] category” (496; Tajfel and Turner, 1985). This ability to internalize social structure is important to the overall success and development of the elite airline travel. For example, it is essential that passengers not only accept the identity that is bestowed on them during their travels, but to also internalize the ideologies and aspirations that this ordering invokes. Delta Air Lines facilitates a similar process on the *Delta Sky Club* website as they guide readers (potential customers) through the airline’s social structure, encouraging visitors to compare the service experiences on offer and to self-evaluate their own position within the hierarchy.

This MRP draws upon previous studies in marketing and consumer behaviour, which have similarly applied social identity to describe how consumer social identities are formed in

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response to corporate marketing (e.g. Grier & Desphande, 2001; Sejin & Stoel, 2014). Of particular concern to my research is the concept of ‘identity salience’ or the activation of a social identity within an individual’s social self-schema. Researchers have found that when a marketing object (e.g. the *Delta Sky Club*) relates to social category that is meaningful to the consumer, the consumer will identify him or herself with that category, and thereby activate their social identity (Sejin & Stoel, 2014). My research will examine how the *Delta Sky Club* is aligned with elite airline travelers, and the ways in which language is manipulated to reinforce the importance of this social category in the travel space. This study will also adopt the terminology used in these earlier studies, including the concept of ‘identity salience’ explored below.

Findings from my analysis of Delta Air Lines’ online marketing indicate that identity salience is heightened by (1) the uniqueness and exclusiveness of elite travel (or the distinctiveness of being a Club member), and (2) by the fit between the benefits of membership and the customer’s identity goals. The following discussion will consider each of these strategies in greater detail, including their relevance to existing research on identity salience, travel and corporate membership programs.

Distinctiveness

The Club motif consists of labels, categorization processes, and spaces which together help to actualize the distinctions that are made between the different classifications of airline traveler.

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The majority of these travelers will manoeuvre through the same security checkpoints, baggage claims areas, and gates regardless of their loyalty to the airline. Therefore, the Club represents an important temporal and physical barrier through which Delta Air Lines can acknowledge, and separate ‘preferred’ passengers from other groups. Though the space is meant to feel welcoming to all travelers (e.g. see extract 1), the clear guidelines surrounding *admittance* and *access* into the space suggest that the lounge is also restricted to specific clientele. The privilege of accessing this space is only granted to those who are identified as “members” or elites; a small minority within the social context of commercial airline travel. These statuses arguably represent very little beyond the airline’s discourse. However, these statuses and status-laden labels (e.g. *Diamond Medallion*) become more meaningful for consumers in the context of the Club, where they are aligned with ‘real’ (material and immaterial) benefits that result in a more comfortable, social, and productive experience for the traveler.

Identity congruence

As a qualitative study of Delta Air Lines’ elite travel services and online marketing practices, this MRP is limited in terms of its ability to discuss the cognitive fit (congruence) between the function of rewards and a consumer’s identity goal. This type of consumer behaviour research is better suited to a multimodal analysis of the *Delta Sky Club* program, since additional consumer feedback is required in order to make specific claims about this relationship.

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Despite these limitations, the results of this study help to develop a critical understanding of the ways in which these programs are designed to heighten identity salience. The promotional materials that Delta Air Lines creates for its *Delta Sky Club* lounge are meant to cater to the consumers' need for self-enhancement, while also highlighting opportunities for performance and self-expression within the program. Katz (1960) proposes that these latter two features are particularly important for value-expressive identity congruence, or "a consumer's perception that the value-expressive attributes of a loyalty program match his or her goals for expressing their self-concept and/or self-image" (Sejin & Stoel, 2014). It is not surprising that Delta Air Lines appeals to similar value-expressive functions in their online marketing, given the aspirational and ideological underpinnings of premium travel. The motif helps to facilitate this type of personal engagement with the customer. For example, there are opportunities for travelers to perform their expert status (which translates to higher service status), good (taste), professionalism, and mobility within the physical and semiotic environment of the Club. These illusions to performance and image are highly effective in the marketing of these services. Indeed, previous studies have shown that the effects of value-expressive congruency on consumer behaviour outweigh that of utilitarian (e.g. maximizing benefits and minimizing costs) congruency (Lee & Shavitt, 2006; Sejin & Stoel, 2014).

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3. How does the loyalty-and-reward framework capitalize on social anxieties about status and group identification?

Status is most commonly understood to be an individual's position in society, which is shaped in large part by other personal characteristics such as wealth, gender, race and occupation. Marketers are acutely aware of people's desire for social status and design loyalty programs that capitalize on this inherent need for recognition and superiority (Drèze & Nunes, 2009). The competitiveness of the global marketplace necessitates that companies continue to find new, compelling ways to engage and retain their clientele. Therefore, it is common practice in business today for companies to group their customers into distinct classes, creating a status hierarchy whereby a more loyal customer receives a distinct and preferential service experience. The popularity of these programs is indicative of the significance of status in our contemporary culture, particularly given that the status that companies bestow on their customers is highly context specific.

Within the airline industry, loyalty schemes also acknowledge the presence of multiple selves with appeals to people's innate desire to have a positive social identity. The basic premise that travelers will not only desire, but also be able to take on various social identities, was first articulated in Tajfel and Turner's (1979, 1986) theory of social identity. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986) proposed that in addition to our primary understanding of self, individuals also possess multiple other selves that correspond to expanding circles of group membership. Thus, an

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individuals' social identity is a self-concept that results from their perceived membership within social groups (e.g. Hogg & Vaughan, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). The services that airlines offer their preferred passengers are grounded in this belief that individuals have the capacity and desire to adopt other institutional identities. They create a rich semiotic environment in which the passenger undergoes a series of stylizing and labelling processes, whereby they are distanced from their personal identities and aligned with a more salient social group.

As evidenced in Tajfel and Turner's (1979, 1986) model of social identity, these social categorization processes lead to the formation of distinct social groups within the airline. For example, in the context of Delta Air Lines, one might consider the distinction that is made between the *Delta SkyTeam Elite Plus Members* and other customers that travel less regularly. These social groupings become more pronounced in the hierarchical structure of an airline, where an individual's social status is either elevated or diminished depending on their loyalty to the brand. This structure not only actualizes the semiotic distinctions that are made between the various classes of traveler, but also encourages processes of self-assessment and intergroup comparison. These processes are critical to the ideological and aspirational aspects of the elite travel experience. For example, previous studies have shown that individuals who engage in upward comparison with those who are deemed to be 'better' in a given domain (e.g. travel status) are motivated to do so by a desire for self-improvement and self-enhancement (e.g.

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Collins, 1996; Helgenson & Mickelson, 1995; Taylor et al., 1995). By differentiating their most loyal customers and placing them within the top tiers of the status structure, airlines are able to direct this upward gaze so that travelers know where to look for opportunities for self-improvement and self-enhancement. Thus, the differentiation process encourages positive associations between positive consumer behaviour and a more fulfilled social identity.

DISCUSSION

If contemporary life is largely shaped by globalization, it is also defined by the parallel crises of identity and the self. And it is within this environment of self-reflection and insecurity that the concept of 'lifestyle' comes to fruition, and that spaces give way to commodification and stylization. These forces are evident throughout the airline industry, including the elite travel programs under review in this MRP. The success of these business-class and frequent-flyer services rests not only the reconceptualization of economic and social discourses, but also their ability to capitalize on our enduring anxieties about identity and social status.

Researchers have long considered the tendencies of the economic and cultural elite to distinguish themselves from others (e.g. Henderson et al., 2011; Riley, 1995; Selwyn, 1996) and to consume nostalgically. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that there is a strong reminiscence underlying the contemporary travel experience and its synthetic personalization. These processes appear to work both ways, as passengers too share a desire to relive a time when customers were recognized and greeted as 'regulars'. The social capital associated with space, such as intimate

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and exclusive spaces, may likewise represent a reaction to the loss of space in mass tourism.

These moments of recollection can easily be attributed to the introduction of ‘the masses’ in mass-market travel, but they may also represent something greater than this; the “perceived and normativized need to recreate special, clearly defined and highly pampered spaces manifest a production of luxury and exclusivity” which serves and establishes structures of inequality and privilege (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006, 130).

Discussions about the elusiveness of elite travel status are not limited to academic discourse. The mystique surrounding the upper tiers of the airline status system has been the subject of much popular debate, according to a recent article in Maclean’s magazine (2013). There has been widespread speculation that there is an *ultra* exclusive level of status available at many airlines – one that is largely unadvertised and cannot be acquired by simply reaching a particular number of miles. In 2013, The Wall Street Journal was given a rare glimpse at United Airlines’ version of such a program, called *Global Services*. The story describes a “secret, invitation-only program” that ensures every whim is catered to and all problems are addressed, even before they arise. The program can offer assistance with “anything from re-booking a cancelled or delayed flight without being asked to sending someone to the dry cleaners to pick up a suit” (Sorensen, 2013). Nicas’ (2013) recounting of his experience in the “secret club” contained many of the same words and phrases that are often used in airline marketing collateral.

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The story captured the imagination of travelers everywhere, eliciting a wave of discussion about frequent-flyer and business-class travel online.

If the differentiation of statuses is in fact a main characteristic of our social existence, than Goffman (1951) notes that it also will depend on a consensus of opinion about the rights and obligations of each individual status; “as such, we are forced into constant communication about status in order to negotiate and reach this consensus” (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006, 125). While the promotion and positioning of these statuses is often attributed to an airline’s discourse, this is an example in which *we* (the public) are talking the ‘secret’ elite into existence. This online discussion is not only acknowledging the reality of this ‘ultra’ status in our society, but also granting those with membership a higher degree of social capital and power. Airlines heighten the exclusivity of these statuses by avoiding any public demonstrations of their existence (e.g. promotional materials, visible lounges), as members would logically feel the most attended to and privileged in a Club that no one else knows exists. The Maclean’s writer muses, “the airlines, which acknowledge the existence of these programs, but offer few details, seem to enjoy cultivating an air of mystery around the subject” (Sorensen, 2013). While the group may no longer be a “secret” among other travelers, by allowing the reporter to enter the space and have it be reproduced across various forms of media, the airlines are also enhancing the members’ perception of their own social status by entering their group (i.e. status label) into the public lexicon.

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The above discussion is representative of a theoretical shift that is currently occurring within the field of travel and tourism research. In this research project and previous studies by Thurlow and Jaworski (2006, 2009), the elite travel experience is deemed to be a product of the unilateral, monological discourses produced by airlines to market their frequent-flyer and business-class services. It is a unidirectional process by which an airline confers status and stylizes their preferred passengers. While this perspective is suitable for an analysis of passive consumer engagement (e.g. static web content), Dann (2012) notes that the paradigm has shifted since the publication of *The Language of Tourism* with the rise of digital communication. These digital spaces afford individuals the opportunity to engage in discussions of status, as evidenced in the United Airlines *Global Services* example. Scholars of travel and tourism are now developing new approaches to studying travel discourses as the product of a dialogue, or even triologue, between the key actors of tourism: the industry, the tourist and the touree (Dann, 2012). Thus, the topics discussed in this research project will not only be relevant to future interests in travel and tourism scholarship, but also to broader conversations about status, loyalty programs and marketing practices in the service industry.

Opportunities for Future Study

The travel and tourism industry represents the largest international trade in the world, meaning that there is “no one whose life remains unaffected by [it]” (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2009, 187). Its cultural, social, and economic significance has been universally recognized, making it

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an ideal site for further academic study. By undertaking this analysis, I have explored how communication practices inform the development of commercial airline travel in the United States. There are still many opportunities to expand on this area of critical tourism research, including several that are highlighted below:

Intercultural theory

The social identity literature that provides the theoretical grounding for this paper is positioned primarily within the Western context. The main characteristics of group cognition and behaviour may differ across various cultural contexts (Yuki, 2003). While the Club motif invokes the luxury, privacy, and exclusivity of a Gentlemen's Club for many Western travelers, it has not been determined whether passengers from non-Western audiences would exhibit the same reading strategies. As the tenth most popular international airline in 2014¹, it would be valuable to know whether the normative ideals presented in Delta Air Lines' marketing resonate with travelers from other cultural backgrounds. The results of such a study would be significant for scholars and marketing professionals, given the ideological and aspirational underpinnings of the elite travel status. Finally, a case analysis of a non-Western airline with similar service offerings would also be beneficial, as it would provide insight into the processes by which elite travel is communicated around the world.

¹ Delta was the most popular airline in the United States in 2014, having carried 129.4 million passengers on their domestic routes that year (The Economist, 2015).

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Semiotics

This study focuses exclusively on the discourses of elite travel, as represented on the webpages marketing Delta Air Lines' frequent-flyer and business-class services. In hypertexts, such as websites, the interaction between visual and written communication “affords new forms of informational and design complexity” (Lemke, 2002). Therefore, the webpages under analysis in this project would potentially be rich sites for research into the semiotics of elite travel. The results of this study could reveal how visual elements such as colour, design, and layout operate alongside the written text to create “composite verbal-visual meanings” (Lemke, 2002). It also offers an opportunity to ‘read’ the visual profile of the preferred passenger, based on their representation in the images chosen for the website.

Other discursive strategies

Future qualitative studies could expand on communication theories that help to describe the process of stylizing and positioning airline passengers. Language use in the travel and tourism industry has been understudied in the past, particularly in the area of online marketing. While my research offers new perspectives on the use of the Club motif, it cannot speak to all of the discursive strategies currently deployed by Delta Air Lines. Opportunities also exist for the subject to be studied in the context of other airlines. The marketing collateral produced by Qantas and Gulf Air for their loyalty rewards programs would be particularly interesting, given that both airlines have deviated from industry norms in simply naming elite passengers *Frequent*

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Flyers. This scholarship could potentially enhance our understanding of how luxury, privacy, exclusivity and other intangible ‘goods’ are marketed in the service industry.

Structured methods of analysis

Quantitative research can also be undertaken to determine whether the socio-psychological observations articulated in this study represent normative interpretations. The most appropriate sample population to study would be individuals that travel frequently for business or travel purposes, in order to verify the motivations and reading strategies presented in this research. However, other travelers beyond this audience could also be questioned to explore their views on status travel as an out-group. Adopting a less interpretative method of analysis, such as structured interviews or questionnaires, could provide researchers with an opportunity to gather interpretations from other travelers about the use of the Club motif in airline marketing collateral.

CONCLUSION

This MRP explores the use of the Club motif in the online marketing of Delta Air Lines’ frequent-flyer and business-class services. The aim of this project was to develop a critical understanding of the travel experience for ‘preferred’ airline passengers and to determine how these passengers are discursively positioned as elites. In particular, I analyze how language is manipulated in this web content to exploit and create symbolic capital, thereby reinforcing the significance of social hierarchies. My research was conducted using an interdisciplinary

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perspective that called upon theories of travel discourse, linguistics, and social psychology to ground my analysis. While previous studies have considered the social inequalities in the travel and tourism industry (e.g. Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Riley, 1995; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006), the socio-psychological factors underpinning these issues have been under-represented. Thus, my MRP sought to answer the following questions: How does Delta Air Lines' language use in the online marketing of their frequent-flyer and business-class services contribute to the creation of a Club motif? How does the Club motif help to differentiate the elite traveler (and their travel experience) from other ticketholders? How does it reinforce the salience of these groups? How does the loyalty-and-reward framework capitalize on social anxieties about status and group identification?

Though the word "Club" is a recurring element throughout the text, my analysis reveals that it takes on various meanings depending on the context in which it is used. It appeared to represent the airline's *Delta Sky Club* premium lounge, an inviting secondary space for members to congregate, and a label that was applied to identify different types of members and memberships. While on the surface the word appears to be simply addressing the airline's lounge space, previous research by Thurlow and Jaworski (2006) suggest that it is a popular motif among other international carriers as well. Therefore, my MRP proposes that it conveys additional meaning and helps to re-establish the luxury travel experience in North America. The presentation of lounges and mileage programs as 'Clubs' and the stylization of preferred

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customers as ‘members’ invokes a sense of exclusivity and grandeur that is reminiscent of a British ‘Gentleman’s Club’. Moreover, given the immateriality and semiotic significance of phrases like “comfort” and “luxury”, airline marketers are able to promote an aspirational lifestyle by which to define a group of their passengers as superior. As a result, they are also perpetuating the normative ideals that this persona invokes, reformulating “old-modes of transportation and traditional ideologies of class and distinction” (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006).

It is in this sense that an analysis of Delta Air Lines’ online communication can provide a more effective lens for theorizing elitism than a broad, descriptive account of the social structures in the travel industry. The marketing of frequent-flyer and business-class services consists of a rich semiotic landscape of exclusive, members-only features, such as special currencies (e.g. SkyMiles), private spaces for lounging and traveling, distinct titles, and roles that have been stylized to create an entire *experience* for the airline elite. The success of this stylization is not only indicative of the transience of identity, but also of a larger cultural preoccupation with the acquisition and performance of status. Therefore, this study reveals how professional communicators can inspire loyalty and weave a coherent, aspirational narrative through a deeper understanding of the socio-psychological factors that motivate the modern consumer.

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APPENDIX A

Web Resources

This MRP studied instances of the Club motif across five pages that were randomly selected from the *Delta Sky Club* section of Delta Air Lines' corporate website. Links to these webpages are provided below:

Membership - https://www.delta.com/skyclub/purchasemembership_performRequest.action

Perks and Amenities - https://www.delta.com/content/www/en_US/traveling-with-us/airports-and-aircraft/delta-sky-club/perks-amenities.html

House Rules - https://www.delta.com/content/www/en_US/traveling-with-us/airports-and-aircraft/delta-sky-club/house-rules.html

Locations - https://www.delta.com/skyclub/viewSkyClub_performRequest.action

Access & Policies - https://www.delta.com/content/www/en_US/traveling-with-us/airports-and-aircraft/delta-sky-club/glossary-of-terms.html