

ON THE VERGE BETWEEN ANCIENT AND MODERN TIMES A linguistic analysis of Urban Exploration practices¹

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Abstract – Recently the fascination with the aesthetics of abandoned places has stepped into the limelight as a new form of tourism known as *Urbex* or *Urban Exploration*, which involves discovering abandoned places and reporting the exploration with documentary evidence on specialized websites and blogs. This paper aims to investigate online discourse on Urbex by analyzing how urban exploration is talked about in two different online spaces, i.e., interest-based communities where discussion about the activity of visiting abandoned places among members is fostered and encouraged (*Reddit*), and more public, monologic spaces, such as blogs and websites, where longer texts are produced with a more descriptive/commercial purpose. To reach this goal, a comparative analysis of keywords and selected key terms was carried out on two ad-hoc corpora, i.e., the *Urban Website Corpus* (UW-Corpus) and the *Urban Reddit Corpus* (UR-Corpus). Results show that the linguistic choices of urban explorers highlight the existence of tension between the core tenets and ethical principles of urban exploration - avoiding disclosure of exact location, focusing on sites disregarded by preservationists, awareness of legal repercussions for trespassing - and a shift towards a more mainstream, regulated type of activity. In the UR-Corpus, distinctive language forms suggest that Urbex aficionados constitute a discourse community.

Keywords: corpus linguistics; online tourism discourse; Reddit; urban exploration.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, the processes of globalization have deeply influenced the ways in which people organize their leisure time and how they approach leisure traveling, or tourism. To this extent, the United Nations World

¹ The research for this article has been carried out jointly by the three authors. Silvia Cavalieri authored sections 4, 5, 6.2 (from after example 20 to the end), 7; Sara Corrizzato authored sections 1, 3, 6.1; Valeria Franceschi authored sections 2 and 6.2 (from the beginning to example 20).

Tourism Organization (UNWTO) clarifies that internationally there were just 25 million tourist arrivals in 1950. 68 years later, in 2018, the number of tourist arrivals had increased to 1.4 billion per year, confirming that the tourist industry, as well as tourists themselves, have become one of the main pillars of contemporary society. Despite the considerable decrease in tourist flow during the Covid-19 pandemic, global international tourist arrivals more than doubled (+130%) in January 2022 compared to 2021, proving tourism practices have once again become central to people's life and consolidating the subcategories of tourism that have emerged in the recent past.

Therefore, trying to define who tourists are and categorizing them according to pre-established classification parameters seems an almost impossible task, as people travel for a wide range of different needs and reasons. If an interested person relies on Google for a rough overview of how many types of tourists exist, they can immediately realize how the web offers numerous categorizations based on different analytical frameworks, which take into account diverse aspects, such as the places tourists want to visit, the reasons why they take a break from their every-day life, how much they want to become familiar with the target culture or how much they want to spend.

This reflection also applies to the academic context, as different hypotheses have been put forward depending on the discipline and the analytical perspectives adopted. In fact, the first eye-opening categorizations given by some of the pioneers of this field of study (Cohen 1979; Dann 1996; Lennon, Foley 2000; Plog 1973; Rojek, Urry 1997; Urry 2002) were later followed by numerous studies that implemented the theories and added new research perspectives.

Thus, new definitions have been added to the most common categories, such as experiential/experimental tourism, allocentric/psychocentric tourism or dark tourism, trying to identify other specific forms of tourism. Some of the most popular forms are ecotourism (Fleischer 2010), gastronomy and wine tourism (e.g. Madeira *et al.* 2019), shopping tourism (UNWTO Report 2014), sex tourism (Oppermann 1999), sport tourism (Gammon, Robinson 2003), rural tourism (Lopez-Sanz *et al.* 2021) and health/medical tourism (Hall 2011). As the labels suggest, each option involves a different type of tourist, whose choices depend on the needs and desires they want to fulfill by choosing “an alternative solution to the ‘undesired’ type of tourism, that is, ‘the mass tourism’” (Triarchi, Karamanis 2017, p. 43).

The multifaceted identity of tourism is reflected in the language used in the industry: indeed, Chiwanga (2014, p. 148) states that “tourism as language has got a discourse of its own. Its vocabulary, jargon, registers, structure, grammar, stylistics, semantics, expressions and neologisms are exceptional”. Maci (2020, p. 10) highlights the “multi-dimensional nature of the language of tourism”, which emerges preeminently in lexical choices and

in different generic forms pertaining to both specialized – between specialists – and non-specialized – aimed at laypeople – communication. In addition to professionally-produced content, in the last few years interest has extended to tourist-generated content, which may contribute to shaping the destination’s image and, as a result, to influencing destination choices and travel behaviors (e.g. Peralta 2019; Mak 2017).

Studies on tourism discourse, especially in its non-specialized, promotional functions, have suggested that lexical and syntactic choices can infuse texts with perlocutionary force in order to promote target destinations: the semantic evolution of general words, the use of metaphors and similes, language crossing, ego-targeting, superlatives, evaluative adjectives, modal verbs to encourage actions and behaviors are just some of the features that characterize tourism discourse (e.g. Chiwanga 2014; Maci 2020, p. 16-25; see also Cacchiani 2014; Jaworski *et al.* 2003; Pierini 2009). In addition, lexical choices may be ascribed to the traditional perspectives of tourism as theorized in Dann’s 1996 landmark study: the authenticity perspective, which pertains to the desire for authentic and typical experiences; the strangerhood perspective, which represents a search for strangeness and novelty; the play perspective, which sees tourism experiences as games and spectacles; the conflict perspective, based on an interest in locations where wealth and power distribution is unbalanced.

Established research on the language of tourism may be applied to the study of texts produced within the various sub-categories of tourism in order to investigate the specificities of their language and how they fit within broader tourism discourse. In this paper, the recent popular phenomenon of Urban Exploration, or *Urbex*, is going to be investigated from a linguistic perspective and, more particularly, by looking at promotional and user-generated content about urbex activities and destinations.

2. Urban Exploration

Ascribed to unconventional forms of tourism, also defined by Klausen (2017) as “an alternative form of organized action” (372) or “ruin tourism” (Wadbled 2020, p. 1), Urban Exploration “revolves around locating, documenting, and physically exploring (temporarily) abandoned and derelict (urban) spaces” (Klausen 2017, p. 372), “discovering, infiltrating [...] little-seen parts of the built environment” (Fassi 2010, p. 146). Such places may be described as “TOADS (Temporary, Obsolete, Abandoned and Derelict Spaces)” (Paiva 2008, p. 9).

The term itself is attributed to urban explorer Ninjalicious, who founded the fanzine *Infiltration: The Zine About Going Places You're Not Supposed to Go*³ in 1996. Over time, this practice has grown, attracting aficionados from all over the world, who share their experiences on online fora, blogs and websites, and who have created archives of abandoned places that map and describe abandoned locations (Mott, Roberts 2014, p. 230). This fascination with the aesthetics of abandoned places is applied to a wide range of locations:

urban explorers recreationally trespass into derelict industrial sites, closed mental hospitals, abandoned military installations, sewer and drain networks, transportation and utility tunnels, shuttered businesses, foreclosed estates, mines, construction sites, cranes, bridges and bunkers, among other places. (Garrett 2014, p. 1)

Among the places not mentioned in the quote above we can also include castles, theaters, hotels, theme parks, swimming pools, train stations and malls. The presence of different types of locations also depends on the different geographical areas where the exploration takes place. For example, Russia and Eastern Europe are rich in abandoned locations dating back to the Soviet and Cold War eras, whereas castles may be more frequently found in France, alongside abandoned metro stations and sewers that are popular with explorers in bigger metropolitan areas. In Germany, places tied to the Third Reich may be the object of Urban Exploration (Devirieux 2016).

For its very nature, Urban Exploration does not develop through its explorers seeking permission to visit the sites, as in most of the cases the places are not part of conventional tourist tours, but they are private or public buildings abandoned for a (not so) long period. In other less common situations, sites can be visited by buying tickets, but such cases only refer to specific popular places, for instance the French catacombs, several Italian Roman ruins or some English or American tours of haunted buildings related to Halloween.

Offering a closer look at this phenomenon, urban explorers are particularly interested in past events to which ruined or abandoned sites bear witness and they are also guided from a desire for aesthetic contemplation, as they are attracted by the state of ruin of where they are. Mental asylums, metro stations, prisons, half-built shopping centres, bunkers or private houses are visited because they bear the marks of degradation (Klausen 2017). This behind-the-scene world (Ninjalicious 2005) allows the community of explorers and photographers to testify and spread the physical condition of the place, promoting a twofold reflection: on the one hand, ruins appear as

³ <http://www.infiltration.org> (17.5.2022).

ancient witnesses of the past, which cannot come back anymore; on the other hand, they can symbolize the influence of the past within the contemporary landscape (Massey 2021). Explorers look for “sites of haunted memory, seeking interaction with the ghosts of lives lived” (Garrett 2011, p. 1049).

As anticipated in the introductory paragraphs, urban exploration is positioned outside the beaten path of mainstream tourism, sometimes seen as a degraded version of the romantic fascination for ruins (i.e., ruin porn) or ascribed to the phenomenon of dark tourism (Morisson 2021, p. 93). As Garrett posits, the initial push “to go into interstitial urban spaces is to observe (and often photograph) unimpeded material decay” (2014, p. 5), but he states that more than that it is the value of the experience that drives explorers, “unregulated by sensory filters and mediating social conditioning” (2014, p. 6).

The experience of Urban Exploration is indeed connected to both time and place: this practice “gives agency to places with an appreciation for the life of an architectural feature or system that continues after abandonment, with an acknowledgement that, though the capitalist use-life of all places will inevitably end, places do not ‘die’” (Garrett 2011, p. 1050).

The community of explorers appears to discourage discourse popularization of abandoned locations with the mainstream public to avoid drawing attention to these places, as access to them may become increasingly difficult or impossible due to action on the part of local authorities (Garrett 2014, p. 3). While some websites dedicated to Urban Exploration do provide detailed descriptions of where to find the locations described, if not the precise coordinates, others avoid doing so. This may be due to the reasons detailed above, but also to ensure “the safety of visitors, prevent destruction and acts of vandalism” (Jasiūnas *et al.* 2013, p. 65).

The visual aspect of Urban Exploration is also crucial to the experience and to the dissemination of the experience within and outside the community. Both explorers and professional photographers dedicate their shots to these *res derelictae*, displaying the downfall of such locations: “[i]n prose and photography, they document scenes of ruin and decay ignored by preservationists, tourists, municipal governments, historians, and everyday city” (Fassi 2010, p. 145). Pictures also act as proof of the existence of the locations described and of the exploration, which may be perceived as an exciting, when not dangerous, adventure (Morisson 2021, p. 94).

Although Garrett (2014) calls urban explorers “recreational trespassers”, and other scholars highlight the illegal nature of Urban Exploration, Urbex has by now drawn the interest of tour guides and operators, who have started offering Urban Exploration tours among their services. Other popular destinations for aficionados of abandoned places offer

licensed tours, such as Pripyat and Chernobyl in Ukraine,⁴ or the *Manicomio di Volterra* (Volterra psychiatric hospital) in Italy.⁵ Interest for abandoned places has indeed shifted beyond the original community and has drawn the interest of the wider public, who may recognize the potential that certain locations have “to become official sites for historic, cognitive, extreme or some other type of tourism” (Jasiūnas *et al.* 2013, p. 65). Photo books and gallery exhibitions dedicated to this phenomenon have also been produced (Klausen 2017, p. 373), further highlighting the development of an alternative, more mainstream conceptualization of urbex.

Indeed, as Fassi (2010, p. 145) suggests, urban explorers “face a paradox familiar to those who struggle to represent the invisible or unspeakable; while they engage in a form of cultural resistance by encouraging awareness of defamed industrial ruins, they also risk transforming these ruins into artistic commodities”.

Urban Exploration has been looked at by scholars from multiple perspectives and across different disciplines, including but not limited to geography studies (e.g. Garrett 2010, 2011, 2014; Mott, Roberts 2014; Jasiūnas *et al.* 2013) and anthropology (e.g. Martínez, Laviolette 2016). This phenomenon is however understudied from a linguistic perspective, with the discourse of urban explorers and the budding interest for private or group urbex tours still largely unexplored.

3. Aims of the study

This paper aims to add to the existing literature on tourism by investigating online discourse on Urban Exploration. As Urban Exploration is still a niche type of tourism and its discourse still largely takes place within the explorers’ community, a choice was made to explore how Urban Exploration is talked about in two different online spaces, that is, interest-based communities where discussion among members is fostered and encouraged, and more public, monologic spaces, such as blogs and websites, where longer texts are produced for an imagined community that is more often silent.

Comparison between these two types of data has the purpose of showing how discourse on Urban Exploration available from online public spaces (where texts have a more descriptive purpose and may also have a commercial purpose, e.g., selling photographs, offering guided tours) differs from discourse characterizing private online spaces, where anonymous users share and discuss locations and topics pertaining to the activity of visiting

⁴ <https://www.chernobyl-tour.com/> (20.5.2022).

⁵ <https://manicomiodivolterra.it/visite-al-manicomio-di-volterra/> (20.5.2022).

abandoned places. This investigation will be carried out through a comparative analysis of selected keywords.

4. Data collection

To achieve the objectives illustrated above, two corpora were collected: the *Urbex Websites Corpus* (UW-Corpus) and the *Urbex Reddit Corpus* (UR-Corpus).

The *Urbex Websites Corpus* (UW-Corpus) was compiled collecting all the descriptive sections of Urban Exploration tours as found in personal websites, blogs, tour guides’ websites and travel platforms including information on abandoned places to explore. We focused on websites dealing with urban exploration in both European and extra-European areas. A choice was made to combine Western Europe and the US (the so-called Western bloc)⁶ and Eastern Europe with Russia (the so-called Eastern bloc), due to the political and cultural affinity of the territories involved in each category. The choice of which websites to include in the corpus began by simply typing into the Google search engine the keywords “urban exploration” plus the country concerned and by subsequently downloading descriptive texts until we arrived at the number of words included in Table 1. We also decided to limit the number of texts downloaded from travel platforms that collect descriptions of different places to a maximum of 5 in order to avoid having data biased by the fact that these texts may be written by the same author or follow a specific “editorial” style. Data was saved in Word format to be then analyzed using corpus linguistic analytical tools. Table 1 shows the word distribution in the UW-Corpus.

Reddit, launched in 2005 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, is a popular social news website where user-generated content is posted in interest-based communities known as subreddits, marked by the prefix ‘r/’. Subreddits may be dedicated to a range of different topics, from current world news and internet phenomena such as memes to minority groups or fan communities (Yadav *et al.* 2022, p. 1286).

PLACE	TOKENS
Western Bloc (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, UK, US)	78,502
Eastern Bloc (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland,	68,317

⁶ The terms Western and Eastern bloc were coined after WWII to identify the coalition of countries respectively allied with the United States and under the influence of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Russia)	
TOTAL	146,819

Table 1
Data distribution in the Urbex Websites Corpus (UW-Corpus).

As of January 2021, Reddit includes over 100,000 active subreddits, over 13 billion posts and comments, and over 50 million daily active uniques (DAU),⁷ that is, users active on a given day.

Reddit's structure is similar to that of a forum, fostering interaction among registered users, who create posts and threads in subreddits with content (text, videos, images, links, etc.) that is then commented on and discussed by other members of the community. Disclosure of personal identity and location is not compulsory on Reddit. Therefore, the majority of users are completely anonymous. Each subreddit has its own rules and one or more moderators enforce these rules and maintain a civilized atmosphere in the community. Usually, such rules are clearly visible on the right-hand side of the page, alongside the description of the subreddit.

One of the defining characteristics of Reddit is the possibility of voting (upvoting and downvoting) on both posts and individual comments, which adds another level of engagement to the content on the platform. Posts which receive many upvotes are featured more prominently within the subreddit and on the Reddit homepage (Michellebrous 2017).

The *Urbex Reddit Corpus* (UR-Corpus)⁸ was created by collecting all data available in the r/urbanexploration subreddit between May 2021 and May 2022, for a total period of a year. A Python⁹ script was employed to obtain the data from the PushShift archive, a service that collects and archives Reddit posts and comments¹⁰. The data was gathered in two different batches, one representing submissions or posts, and the other containing comments. Before saving them as CSV files, the separate batches went through an anonymization process in which all usernames were changed into a format of 'id' plus six randomized numbers such as 'id679841'. This guaranteed further protection for users, while also retaining important repeat posting information. Additionally, many non-relevant data columns were removed, except for the anonymized 'author', the text or 'selftext', the time

⁷ <https://www.redditinc.com/press> (16.5.2022).

⁸ We would like to thank Hunter Paul Youngquist, who cooperated in compiling the UR Corpus.

⁹ Python is an interpreted, object-oriented, high-level programming language with dynamic semantics. Its high-level built-in data structures, combined with dynamic typing and dynamic binding, make it very attractive for Rapid Application Development, as well as for use as a scripting or glue language to connect existing components together. (<https://www.python.org/doc/essays/blurb/>) (18.5.2022).

¹⁰ <https://www.reddit.com/r/urbanexploration/> (10.4.2022).

of the posting or ‘created_utc’ columns, and other various features, depending on whether the post was a submission or a comment. The two batches were then cleaned by removing posts that had no ‘selftext’, posts that were deleted or removed (marked by [deleted] and [removed] respectively). The ‘created_utc’ column contains date and time in epoch form after being pulled from the Reddit API. Therefore, we converted it to the more readable structure: “Year-Month-Date Hour:Minute:Second” in UTC. Before merging the batches, each received a new column, ‘type’, and every post was designated within this column as either a ‘submission’ or a ‘comment’ to allow for future subcorpora analysis. The second to last step was the merging of the submission data and the comment data. Finally, the new CSV file was reformatted into XML, allowing for the meta data annotation (such as ‘author’, ‘created_utc’, and ‘type’) to be separated from the ‘title’ and the body of the ‘selftext’, as well as to be readable for any corpus linguistic analytical tool. At the end of the entire data preparation process, the corpus consisted of 539,780 words.

5. Methodology

Drawing on Corpus Linguistics and Discourse Analysis, the study adopted a mixed method approach and data was investigated both from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. In the first phase of the investigation, the corpus tool *SketchEngine* (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014) was used to automatically calculate single-word and multiple-word keywords. Amongst the numerous reference corpora available on Sketch Engine, the English Web 2020 (*enTenTen20*) was selected as a reference corpus, since it represents an example of a text corpus collected from the Web. We extracted keywords and multi-word terms for both the UW-Corpus and the UR-Corpus, setting the ‘simple maths’ option of SketchEngine (Kilgarriff 2009) at 100 and with a minimum frequency of 5. The resulting output was filtered for noise, and terms not pertaining to the purpose of the present study were excluded from the final list. In other words, we excluded place names as well as names of the local areas involved in urban exploration (e.g. Volterra, Porto or Kupari), alongside words that only occurred in a single website, grammatical items, phrases, and redundant terms that appeared in Reddit comments automatically due to active bots.¹¹ We chose to take into consideration keywords scoring higher or equal to 3.0 and multi-word terms scoring higher or equal to 1.5 and, as a

¹¹ Bots are programs on Reddit that are able to carry out automated tasks. Reddit has different types of bots with several functions, from moderation and anti-spam action to automatic responses or votes (upvoting or downvoting) to posts and comments containing certain elements.

third step, the lexical items (adjectives, nouns, verbs, exclamations, interjections, written representations of non-verbal phenomena such as laughter) related to urbex tours emerging from the previous quantitative selection were classified into thematic categories.

This first quantitative process enabled us to pinpoint the predominant themes for the subsequent qualitative analysis of Urbex discourse and we thus decided to look more specifically at how these places and exploration activities are talked about by people who are part of the Urbex community in both the UW-Corpus and the UR-Corpus, to see whether we could relate any difference to the different genre and to the peculiar writing environment of the users. To this aim, the final part of the analysis focused on concordances and more specifically on the adjectives found 5 tokens left and right of some of the highest scoring key items in both corpora: the verbs *abandon* and *explore*, the adjective *abandoned*, the nouns *explorer* and *exploration*, all in their forms as lemmas.

In the next sections, the findings are presented, starting from the quantitative overview to arrive at the detailed qualitative description of the results.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Urban Websites Corpus

As specified in the previous section, the first step of the project included the automatic calculation of single-word keywords within the corpus: out of the first 200 keywords identified by *SketchEngine*, only those keywords with a keyness higher than 3.0 were selected. Thus, the final list includes 79 keywords. Excluding from the list proper names of places, proper names of specific sites, and words that did not directly pertain to the topic under investigation, the final keyword list contained 66 terms, which were grouped according to their semantic area, as Table 2 shows.

CATEGORIES	SINGLE WORDS
Descriptors of Places	<i>abandon, abandoned, beautiful, close, concrete, crumble, decay, demolish, empty, former, ghost, relic, ruin, still (adj.), urban</i>
Types of Places	<i>asylum, building, bunker, castle, church, city, complex, facility, factory, hospital, hotel, house, mansion, mill, mine, monument, palace, park, sanatorium, shuttle, station, tower, town, tunnel, villa, village</i>
Parts of Building	<i>ceiling, entrance, fence, floor, graffito, inside, roof, room, wall</i>

Attributes Referring to Geographical and/or Historic Context	<i>communist, industrial, nuclear, Russian, soviet, war</i>
User Activity	<i>exploration, explore, explorer, locate, tourist, trip, urbex, visit, walk</i>
Multimodality	<i>photo</i>

Table 2
Keyword categories in the UW-Corpus.

As shown in the table, the keywords can be classified in six different, but intertwined, semantic fields. The first category, Descriptors of Places, includes keywords that are typical of urban exploration: thus, they clearly focus on the degraded conditions of the sites considered. The most frequent verbs portray this degradation, as in the case of *abandon, crumble, decay, demolish* and *ruin*. In line with this perspective, the second group of keywords aims at precisely identifying the buildings and their original function; the high diversification of keywords pertaining to this field mirrors the heterogeneity of the abandoned sites which explorers are interested in.

As anticipated, the preliminary quantitative results show a consistent mapping of locations according to the geographical area involved: *castles, churches, mills, towers and villas* occur more frequently used in Western Europe websites, whereas *bunkers, factories, mines* and *tunnels* appear to be more common in Eastern Europe, where echoes of the Cold War are still present. The territorial distribution of other places, such as *asylums, hospitals, parks* and *hotels*, does not seem to be characterized by a specific geographical area, but is probably more linked to the evolving socio-cultural context. From the list of keywords, some parts of the building prevail, as the descriptive passages of *entrances, fences, roofs, rooms* and *walls* have a double function: on the one hand, the writers describe the specificities of the places they visit (or they suggest visiting); on the other hand, the references to the architectural details of the sites are useful to depict the practicability of buildings.

As far as the category “Attributes Referring to Geographical and/or Historic Context” is concerned, some adjectives occur more often than others and, except for one, they refer to the Russian war context of the last century.

In addition to that, a category related to user activities has been included: *explore, exploration, explorer, urbex, visit* are frequent terms often used when discussing exploration activities.

Unlike the results offered by the UR-Corpus, only one word, *photo*, occurs in the list of keywords, as the reference to the multimodal dimension is less prominent.

CATEGORIES	MULTI-WORD TERMS
Descriptors of Places	<i>bay of the abandoned hotels, beautiful decay, former glory, main building, main road</i>
Types of Places	<i>abandoned building, abandoned castle, abandoned church, abandoned hospital, abandoned hotel, abandoned house, abandoned site, abandoned village, amusement park, brush park, coal mine, cooling tower, former missile site, ghost town, haunted place, lost place, manor house, mental asylum, military base, missile base, power plant, power station, psychiatric hospital, small garage, small village, space shuttle, swimming pool, urban ruin, water park, water tower</i>
Parts of Building	<i>barbed wire, broken glass, broken window, central shaft, control room, dining room, ground floor, stained glass, upper floor</i>
References to the Geographical/Historic Context	<i>Cold War, early 20 century, Russian attack, Second World War, Soviet Union, Treaty today, United States army cops, World War II, world war</i>
User Activity	<i>urban exploration</i>
References to War	<i>capsule in a small garage, former missile, machine tool, missile in reaction, nuke missile, nuclear arm, nuclear tip warhead, nuclear tip, site container nuclear tip, tip warhead</i>

Table 3
Multi-word term categories in the UW-Corpus.

Table 3 lists the multi-word terms (total: 64) divided into semantic categories: as in the previous case, the most frequent nominal compounds and noun phrases are related to the types of places visited and specific parts of buildings. More prominence is given to history, especially to World War II and the Cold War. In line with this theme, several multi-word terms focus on missiles and nuclear weapons.

Among the selected keywords, we qualitatively analyzed those through which urbex website writers talk about the places identified in the list and the activities of exploring urban relics to see their use in context. Thus, as for the other corpus, this second stage of the analysis takes into consideration the verbs and *abandon*¹² (411 o.) and *explore* (140 o.), the adjective *abandoned* (174 o.), the nouns *exploration* (69 o.) and *explorer* (52 o.)

¹²All frequencies have been normalized using a common base of 100.000 for comparative purposes across the two corpora.

A closer look at the selected words shows that the word *abandon* is frequently found as the adjective *abandoned* and often goes hand-in-hand with adjectives that describe the place:

- (1) There are two shuttles from the Buran Space Program left and they sit in idle, turning into historic relics, within a forgotten and *abandoned* building located in Kazakhstan. [UW\doc.91]
- (2) We were all delighted to discover there were so many haunted and *abandoned* buildings in and around Barcelona to explore. [UW\doc.102]
- (3) Lot of people ask me - what is do (sic.) great about destroyed and *abandoned* buildings? I simply can't explain it – you just love it or don't understand it. [UW\doc.58]

Abandoned often co-occurs with the adjective *beautiful*, which stresses the uniqueness of the site and highlights the peculiarity of this type of tourism, which sees degradation as a desirable feature, as the following three examples demonstrate:

- (4) Why was this *beautiful abandoned* villa, with its treasures, left to itself? [UW\doc.27]
- (5) These *abandoned* buildings are full of *beautiful* sadness and enriched with history [UW\doc.133]
- (6) Today I want to show you pictures of *abandoned* and visited by me hospitals: *abandoned* mansion with a *beautiful* stained glass [UW\doc.58]

The state of decay of the places visited by the “urban wanderers” (Bennett 2010) is constructed as an element that aims at reinforcing the magic around them: in this sense, *abandoned* strongly collocates with the adverb *completely* to highlight the second life of these places, which cannot be remembered for their original function but for the “crucial role [they play] in the formation of the late-modern urban public space (Klausen 2017, p. 381).

- (7) Dating back to the 1800's, the building and its grounds have been *completely abandoned* and left to the mercy of the elements for many years, giving this once grand structure a far more imposing aura. [UW\doc.23]
- (8) This made it impossible to re-open as a tourist facility without major renovations. By the late 1990s, the hotel was *completely abandoned*. [UW\doc.18]

A set of words which describes the exploration of abandoned sites aims at positively describing the places, recalling in the reader's mind a fascinating past that will never return. Adjectives such as *amazing*, *fascinating*, *gorgeous*, *impressive* and *spectacular* help represent the places as having interesting spaces to visit, unique details to photograph and old corners to explore.

- (9) The beautiful Casino Royale is a *spectacular* abandoned Romanian Casino. [UW\doc.69]

The extensive use of the verb *explore* is often combined with technical and structural details about the sites: thus, descriptive passages give information on what people can find and see.

- (10) We explored building 25 and *it contained cells, solitary seclusion rooms, a refectory and day room with strange paintings on the walls.* [UW\doc.120]
 (11) We explored factory loading bays, engine rooms and storage vaults *whose thick steel doors hung heavy and wide open.* [UW\doc.94]

Shifting the focus from the locations to their human guests, two themes are mainly discussed: on the one hand, writers warn of possible repercussions related to the crime of trespassing and/or to the structurally compromised buildings; on the other, they give advice to their audience on the most appropriate choices of clothing, shoes and on the best hours to visit places.

- (12) Obviously, you explore *at your own risk. Shoes, preferably thick-soled, are absolutely mandatory* with the amount of broken glass throughout the building. [UW\doc.71]
 (13) Depending on where you will be exploring, your dress code may slightly differ. However, *it is generally safer to wear long sleeved shirts and pants and secure shoes.* [UW\doc.3]
 (14) Note: *do not attempt to trespass* on these properties unless it is specified you can do so. [UW\doc.111]

Taking the noun *explorer/s* into consideration, some further reflections on the use of the language within the UW-Corpus can be shared: the role of those who are interested in visiting “unconventional” areas or sites seems to have a heroic nuance, as the explorers are described as *brave, courageous* and *intrepid* who look for adventurous experiences, prefer darkness and want to stay away from crowds.

- (15) Even though some parts of the hospital are being restored, the more *courageous* urban explorers still enter inside. [UW\doc.8]
 (16) Other *intrepid* urban explorers, however, have braved even the nearby radioactive mines at their own risk. [UW\doc.73]
 (17) We wouldn't be the first to attempt this, and indeed a few *brave* souls had ticked them off before us, but it's certainly not a trip for the faint hearted. [UW\doc.86]

6.2. Urban Reddit Corpus

As with the UW-corpus, the keywords and multi-word terms extracted from the UR-Corpus were classified into thematic categories, filtering out

grammatical items, pronouns, temporal adverbs, city and country names, and redundant terms that appeared in Reddit comments automatically due to active bots. The final output resulted in 69 keywords and 32 multi-word terms, as can be seen in Tables 4 and 5 below.

CATEGORIES	KEYWORDS
Descriptors of Places	<i>abandoned, demolish, ghost, inside, location, spot, stuff</i>
Types of Places	<i>asylum, building, bunker, factory, hospital, house, mall, mansion, mine, tunnel</i>
Parts of Building	<i>floor, graffito</i>
Evaluative Terms	<i>amazing, awesome, beautiful, cool, crazy, creepy, definitely, interesting, like, love, nice, old, pretty, sad, shit, vibes, weird, wow</i>
Reddit Features	<i>bot, oc, op</i>
User Activities	<i>climb, exploration, explore, explorer, look, urbex</i>
Interactive Features	<i>anyone, comment, guy, info, someone, thank, thanks, wonder, yeah, yes</i>
Informal Writing Features	<i>damn, dude, fuck, haha, lol, oh, wanna</i>
Multimodality	<i>photo, pic, picture, shot, video, youtube</i>

Table 4
Keyword categories in the UR-Corpus.

The categories are similar for both keywords and multi-word terms, except for Parts of Building and Informal Writing Features which appear only with keywords. The latter category includes items that characterize an informal writing style which is typical of online discourse, including informal contractions (*wanna*), representations of vocalizations (*oh*) and laughter (*haha*) as well as acronyms (*lol* for laughing out loud) and interjections (*damn, dude, fuck*). The textual genre of this corpus is also visible in the presence of interactive features, that is, linguistic elements used by posters to interact with one another (e.g. *guy* appears frequently as part of the greeting ‘hi guys’) and Reddit features, which refer to the language typical of this and other discussion fora. In addition to *bot*, we find, *OC*, which stands for Original Content (as opposed to materials or descriptions shared from other sources) and *OP*, that is, Original Poster (i.e. the author of the post starting the discussion).

CATEGORIES	MULTI-WORD TERMS
Descriptors of Places	<i>exact location, time capsule</i>
Types of Places	<i>abandoned building, abandoned church, abandoned factory, abandoned home, abandoned hospital, abandoned hotel, abandoned house, abandoned mansion, abandoned place, abandoned school, bowling alley, ghost town, high school, military base, power plant</i>
Evaluative Terms	<i>cool place, great photo, great pic, great shot</i>
Multimodality	<i>full video, video link, video tour, youtube channel</i>
Interactive Features	<i>info in comments, link in comments, thanks for sharing</i>
User Activities	<i>urban exploration, urban explore, urban explorer</i>
Reddit Features	<i>good bot</i>

Table 5
Multi-word term categories in the UR-Corpus.

References to multimodal aspects, especially images (e.g. *pic, picture, photo, shot*) and audiovisuals (*channel, full video, video, video tour, youtube, youtube video link*), are also found in the corpus. The presence of such keywords and multi-word terms highlights the importance of the visual experience in urban exploration, with pictures and even videos that provide an immersive experience for users partaking in virtual exploration. Closer examination of concordances for these keywords shows that community members share or ask for recommendations on YouTube channels dedicated to urban explorations, or again comment and criticize the practices these YouTube explorers adopt and display in their videos. The majority of the selected keywords and multi-word terms belong to the categories of descriptors of places and types of places: the first includes items that are used to refer to the locations explored (*abandoned, location, places, spot*) and other characterizing elements. The term *time capsule* in particular highlights the link between urban exploration and the documentation of dilapidated places that belong to a city's cultural and historical heritage and display, untouched, a snapshot of a specific point in time (Pokojska 2015; Fassi 2010). Types of Places illustrates on the other hand the different types of locations described and commented on by users in the corpus, which includes a variety of different abandoned places, such as *asylum, bowling alley, bunker, factory, mansion, mine, tunnel*, and others, attesting to the wide variety of places that attract urban explorers.

The last category to take into consideration and which clearly sets the UR-corpus apart from the UW-corpus is that of “evaluative terms”. Probably due to the presence of comments rather than to the descriptions in the post, these terms are used to appraise, mostly in positive terms, the places and exploration activities shared on the subreddit (*amazing, awesome, beautiful, cool, nice, wow*) as well as the materials posted by users (*great pic, great photo, great shot*). This further reinforces the crucial role of the visual aspect of urban exploration, and the tension between not wanting to disclose too much information about the location and sharing evidence of the exploration with other people who are similarly attracted by such derelict places. Another type of tension, that between fascination with the ruins and the desolation of a lost place and time, is also shown in evaluative terms, with positive adjectives (*amazing, beautiful, cool, interesting, pretty*) appearing alongside terms highlighting the unusual (*crazy, weird*) and dilapidated state of such places (*creepy, old, sad*).

Let us now look more specifically at how these places and exploration activities are talked about by people who are part of the community. The analysis focuses on the adjectives found 5 tokens left and right of some of the highest scoring key items, notably: the verbs *explore* (238 o.) and *abandon* (257 o.), the adjective *abandoned* (107 o.), the nouns *explorer* (25 o.) and *exploration* (45 o.), in their forms as lemmas. The output was first filtered to eliminate those occurrences where the key word and the adjective occurred in different posts or comments, and irrelevant items were marked as adjectives.

The close reading of the remaining occurrences showed some recurring topics in the subreddit. The term *abandoned* is often found in combination with adjectives describing the location visited, often in terms of size, a qualitative evaluation of the location or of the experience, or adjectives that are part of the name of the visited location, as exemplified in the extracts below:

- (18) Massive *abandoned sanatorium* I found in a German forest. [UR\]
- (19) This is one of the most amazing *abandoned places* I’ve ever visited. [UR\]
- (20) I explored an *Abandoned Juvenile Detention Center*. [UR\]

The adjective *old* (206 o.) was a common descriptor found in combination with *abandoned* – adjectives marking a specific historical period were also found in the corpus in two instances:

- (21) The old *abandoned soviet hangar* [UR\]
- (22) Recently visited two *abandoned Victorian churches/chapels* ... [UR\].

This appears to point to an interest for older places that may also have a historical significance, although it should be stated that urban explorers do not seem to display a preference in terms of the age of the location explored,

as “urban explorer[s] may find as much significance in an abandoned grocery store closed down last week as in an 18th century castle in Belgium” (Garrett 2011, p. 1050).

Common topics of discussion relate to whether the exploration may actually count as ‘urban’, or to the actual status of a location as abandoned in the first case, redditors lament that some of the locations posted would better be ascribed to “rural exploration” than Urban Exploration, as rural locations cannot be considered part of urban environments.

- (23) I kinda miss when this sub was about urban exploration and not *abandoned rural buildings*. [UR\]
- (24) In the second case, users may question that *the location under discussion is abandoned as opposed to just empty* but still maintained by the owners, or even open for people to visit. [UR\]
- (25) This doesn’t appear to be abandoned, just an empty house not currently occupied. [UR\]
- (26) Hardly abandoned, its [sic] open to the public to walk through. [UR\]

This aspect is also closely linked to the definition of Urban Exploration as “recreational trespassing”. Redditors in the community appear to be aware of the legal repercussions of trespassing when exploring an abandoned location:

- (27) *There is a fine line between exploring abandoned buildings and breaking and entering*. [UR\]
- (28) They watch it and expect it, *they have caught many urban explorers trying to get in*. [UR\]

The comments above, among others in the corpus, suggest that the community does discuss the issue of trespassing and the consequences explorers may face if caught by guards or policemen patrolling the area. In (27), redditors are warned that they may face more serious charges than trespassing, whereas in the following example a user is trying to dissuade fellow urban explorers from visiting a specific location during the Halloween period.

The possibility of taking objects from the locations visited is also discussed by the community, and two main reasons may be identified for discouraging explorers from taking things during their visits. The first relates to legal consequences and ethics, as this redditor states:

- (29) There’s a fine line between thief and explorer, *stay on the ethical side*. [UR\]

The reference to the ethical side can be traced to one of the tenets of the Urbex community, that is, leaving no traces in the places explored so that other people are able to find them in their original state. Indeed, this is clarified in other extracts from the corpus:

- (30) Genuine *explorers* will *always respect what they find*, but unfortunately abandoned places often attract vandals. [UR\]

One of the other principles of the communities is not sharing the exact location of the explored places and there appears to be a certain tension between sharing and not sharing locations within the community. In a couple of occurrences, redditors clearly state that locations should not be disclosed:

- (31) It's not what you do in urban exploration. *Places are not to be shared you have to find them yourself*" [UR\];
 (32) [m]ost of the modern maps are not something people are going to post online, as the exploration and *mapping is illegal*. [UR\].

In spite of this, many redditors who are new to Urban Exploration ask the community about where they can find abandoned places to explore in their area. In particular, the verb *explore* is often used by redditors in interrogatives to question the community on new sites to visit, or to find people interested in exploring together as in the following examples:

- (33) Does anyone know of any *good spots* to explore in CT? [UR\
 (34) Urbex Buddy in Austria AT [sic] Is anyone here from Austria [sic]? *I am looking for someone* to explore with ☺. [UR\]

Even though redditors are often portrayed by data as solitary explorers describing their wandering among ruins in the first person singular, some of them rely on the platform to find people sharing the same interests who could become “urbex buddy” or “urbex friends.”

The UR-Corpus shows that the activity of exploring is often connoted positively and associated with the positive evaluated description of places that are defined as *awesome, beautiful, cool, good, and super*. However, when redditors *explore* the urban abandoned landscape, they expose themselves to a *dangerous* activity, which should be done in a *careful* way. In addition to potentially facing criminal charges, entering old buildings that have not been upkept may hold risks for the explorers' health, including encounters with ill-intentioned people; hazardous substances such as asbestos; structural compromise of buildings. Redditors warn the community of possible dangers and give advice to their audience on the safest choices when exploring. The next example shows this evaluative tension that swings from positive description to risk perception:

- (35) I found this place and thought it looked so *cool!* There were a couple of broken and not boarded up windows on the ground floor, but it looked to [sic] *dangerous* to explore inside. [UR\]

Writers in the UW-Corpus are also aware of the dangers of urban exploration, but on the other hand they appear to provide practical advice on what type of equipment to use in individual locations.

Interestingly, in the language of redditors the noun *exploration* is often substituted by *explore* used as a noun (also inflected in the plural form *explores*) to identify the redditors' urbex experiences. This occurs especially when they provide multimodal support (e.g. *pics*, *photography*, *photos*, *YouTube videos*) to describe their adventure to their readers. This use could be seen as a functional syntactic shift of the term from verb to noun, through the morphological process of zero derivation, that has entered the urbex community of redditors, as a symbol of this new discourse community of explorers. The following examples show the linguistic phenomenon described above:

- (36) Follow my Instagram for more urbex photography from my *explores*. [UR\]
 (37) But if you're interested, and would like to see the video of my full *explore*. [UR\]

In the UW-Corpus, users talk about the activity of exploring abandoned places in first person: this can highlight that redditors perceive Urban Exploration as an individual "adventure" rather than a collective activity. As described by the following examples, the frequent use of the personal pronoun *I* clearly shows that those who write tend to explore alone and then share their personal experience to the Reddit community of urban explorers:

- (38) *I* explored an abandoned 747 in Bangkok, It was super cool inside. Amazing experience. [UR\]
 (39) *I* explored it years ago but I can't remember the name or location for the life of me. [...] It had a gate to prevent vehicle access (no trespassing sign per usual). [UR\]

The words *explore* and *abandon* seem to be used with a promotional focus in the UR-Corpus with all positive connotations. The nuances of "being first somewhere" and "facing the unknown with curiosity and enthusiasm" emerge from the analysis of their concordance lines, thus indicating a semantic specialization of otherwise general terminology.

7. Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to shed light on the discourse surrounding Urban Exploration in different online contexts. Through the language used on the websites two main thematic axes pop up: abandoned places and their explorers. As far as the buildings are concerned, the spotlight is put on the

magnificence of the crumbling sites, where the connection between present and past takes shape, highlighting how the modern decay embeds the inheritance of history and shares fascinating traces of the lives of those who lived in those places. The descriptive passages as well as pictures shared on the websites give the chance to sink into different social contexts: rich families' glamorous lives spending time in sumptuous hotels, villas or castles; prisoners' and patients' miserable existence in prisons, hospitals and asylums; or soldiers' terrible experiences during World War II or the Cold war. Parallel to that, explorers within websites have a role of paramount importance, as they are the ones who actively visit the abandoned places sharing their reflections and practical suggestions.

The analysis appears to highlight the existence of a tension between the core tenets and ethical principles of urban exploration and a shift towards a more mainstream type of activity. This is visible in both corpora, with both redditors and bloggers highlighting the principles by which locations should not be disclosed, and others providing exact locations and asking for recommendations of which places to visit. A further shift towards a more 'passive' way of exploring abandoned places may be identified in the presence of guided tours, offered by both private guides and tour operators, which also include abandoned places. This also contradicts the core nature of Urban Exploration, which often includes potentially illegal practices, and a focus on derelict places that are ignored and forgotten by preservationists and other official figures (Fassi 2010).

Compared to the UR-Corpus, the UW-Corpus appears to refer to a more traditional idea of tourism. The identity of *explorer* appears to be something temporary, to impersonate for the duration of the activity, which is sometimes carried out in special organized tours that may be booked directly from the websites.

The Reddit community shows a distinctive use of language, with the coinage, through the morphological process of zero derivation of the noun *explore* (see examples 36 and 37), used to refer to the activity of urban exploration. This sets the urbex community apart from other explorers and other types of tourists by using a noun that can encompass the specific set of practices that characterize urban exploration.

Urban explorers live their experiences on the verge between strangerhood and tradition, past and present, as they are fascinated by the traces in the abandoned structures that refer to old uses and appropriations of places, but at the same time through their explorations they exercise their imagination by living through possible scenes from the past in the present time as well as being part, for a moment, of the ghostly shells of their former glory.

Further research needs to examine more closely the discursive domain of urban exploration as a type of tourism that seems to be specializing. Focus on the specialization of general terminology and the creation of neologisms could produce interesting findings that may account for the development of the discursive practices leading this niche tourism through a process of massification.

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