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The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth in an Online Travel Community on Travel Decisions: A Case Study

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THE INFLUENCE OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH IN AN ONLINE
TRAVEL COMMUNITY ON TRAVEL DECISIONS: A CASE STUDY

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management

by
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August 2008

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

As a result of embracing the Internet, online travel communities have become an important information source for travelers. The members of these communities communicate through postings called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) the act of sharing information on a particular topic. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is informal communications among consumers regarding the usage or characteristics of goods and services on the Internet (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan, 2008). Furthermore, the influence of eWOM has been found to be influential on consumer purchasing behavior (Guernsey, 2000). Thus, an understanding of the potential of eWOM in online travel communities on travel decisions has implications for tourism marketers as well as researchers.

The purpose of this research is to examine a single online travel community in order to conduct an in depth analysis of the influence of eWOM on travel decisions. The study uses online travel community postings (eWOM) to explore the types of travel decisions that are discussed, influence of eWOM on these decisions, the types of members and their specific influence on types of travel decisions, the information types provided by the members, the activity level of members and their influence on travel decisions of other members.

Thorn Tree Forum, part of Lonely Planet website is the online travel community studied for this research. In an effort to select a sample that would yield maximum variation, treemaps, and purposeful sampling is used to select eight country forums to use as the framework for collecting community member postings. Postings are collected for an eight month period. Data collection and analysis used a multistep process that included

thematic networks, coding for influence and details of information shared among members. The results suggest that eWOM in this online travel community influence travel decisions including accommodation choice, food and beverage recommendations, transportation options, safety of the destination, monetary issues, destination information, and itinerary refinements. Residents were influential in accommodations, food and beverages, and destination information, whereas experienced travelers influenced all types of travel decisions except accommodations. Information types identified include warnings, advice/tips, recommendations, and clarifications. Clarifications were the most influential postings, followed by recommendations and advice/tips. The members were categorized into three types low, medium, and high activity level members. Medium activity level members were the most influential members followed by low and high activity level members. The results of this study provide direction for theoretical development of using online travel communities for travel decision making and provide managerial guidance for utilization of online travel communities for enhancing travel products and destination.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Ergun Aarsal, who has stood by me during the challenges and uncertainties, believed in me, and supported all my decisions.

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This study would not have been possible without the support of many people. First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Sheila Backman, for her support and guidance throughout the course of the dissertation. I am grateful for her eagerness to learn with me, openness to new ideas, and all the time she put in for reading and discussing my study. I am also very grateful for having an exceptional doctoral committee and wish to thank Dr. Kenneth Backman for his patience and advice on my research, Dr. William Norman for his great ideas for improving this study and providing valuable insights, Dr. Elizabeth Baldwin for helping me with the qualitative study design, editing my work, and giving endless support, and Dr. James Witte for his enthusiasm for my research, his inspiration, and extending my horizon. I could not have done this study without their continuous support and encouragement. Also, heartfelt thanks to all my friends, faculty members, and staff at the PRTM department for their continuous support during my stay at Clemson University.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Unlike its unassuming role in previous decades, the Internet has become one of the most important communication mediums used by members of our society. Since the beginning of the 1990s, consumers' use of the Internet has evolved from one of curiosity or novelty to one of reliance. The number of Internet users was expected to reach 1.5 billion by 2007 (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2006), up from 1 billion users in 2006. Today, the Internet has become a communication medium which is integrated in the social and commercial lives of individuals.

Although the Internet has rapidly increased its central role in commercial activities, primarily as a means to increase efficiency, the adoption of the Internet for social communication has been somewhat slower. The Internet has been shown to have additional marketing efficiencies over traditional marketing communications media in each of the following areas: information presentation, collaboration, communication, and interactivity (Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000). Seeking to reduce costs and increase profits, the travel and tourism industry, like most sectors of the economy, has extended their traditional marketing and sales by providing opportunities for travelers to purchase travel goods online as well as to interact with travel suppliers.

Subsequently the Internet has become an important information source for travelers to utilize as they plan their trips as well as to interact with travel suppliers. Typically travelers' online information sources has been provided by travel suppliers and intermediaries (Buhalis & Law, 2008). For example, online reservation systems are used extensively by both transportation and accommodation suppliers. These types of systems

are primarily used in booking accommodations and transportation services. Travel intermediaries such as online travel agencies (e.g. Expedia.com), destination management organization (e.g. discoversouthcarolina.com), and price comparison sites (e.g. Kayak.com) also provide information for potential travelers to use when they plan their trips. In contrast to the information provided by travel suppliers and intermediaries a relatively new type of information source (user generated content, e.g. Tripadvisor.com) is becoming very popular for travelers to use when they plan their trips.

The travel industry has recognized the importance of user generated content in their new business model, which includes “collaboration marketing” (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997). Creating virtual communities for leisure travelers represents a good marketing opportunity for tourism industry suppliers. For instance, by having a virtual community, a destination marketing organization can acquire marketing intelligence related to customers’ opinions concerning their services. By reading the unsolicited postings provided by customers, destination marketing organizations can modify their services by taking into account customer opinions regarding the things they liked and did not like at the destination.

Although travelers’ information search behavior has been of interest to tourism researchers (Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1999; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Snepenger, Meged, Snelling, & Worrall, 1990; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998) for a number of years, it is only recently that researchers have begun to focus on how travelers use the information on the Internet to plan their trips. Early research that has been conducted is primarily focused on the factors that influence and improve the decision making ability of travel recommendation systems (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002).

Today's travelers are using the Internet as a trip planning tool. According to Forrester Research (2002) approximately 64 million users searched for travel information online or purchased travel products online, with total sales of \$20.4 billion. The most influential media in both the awareness stage and purchase decision for travel products was found to be travel supplier websites (DoubleClick, 2004). Today 86% of travel consumers purchase travel products online. For example, travel supplier websites like Orbitz.com have the most influence on purchase decisions. This example is important because the travel industry was found to be the most consumer empowered industry. This suggests that many travelers do not need help from a salesperson in making their travel purchases. Consumers have changed the way they make travel purchases as compared to five years ago due to the Internet. Recognizing the importance of the empowered online travel communities, travel marketers have adopted online communities at a faster rate than other consumer product communities.

The rise in importance of the Internet in the context of travel and tourism is further demonstrated by Hartvedelt's (2007) prediction that online travel bookings in the United States in 2007 is expected to be valued at \$86 billion including airline tickets, accommodations, car rentals, intercity rail, cruises, and vacation packages. It is interesting to note that with the expansive body of information available on the Internet, many travelers' online information searches have become futile. For example, a traveler's online information search can lead to information overload due to the vast amount of diverse information available on the Internet, thus often resulting in travelers acquiring irrelevant information (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006).

Online travel communities represent one potential solution for travelers to focus their information search specifically to their needs. The results of a recent study which focused on the use of online reviews for trip planning revealed that 82.5% respondents use the Internet for pleasure travel planning, and 90% indicated that they read travel reviews in online travel communities (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). In addition, research has found that 79% of online community members stay in regular contact with at least one of the online communities that they have used (Horrigan, 2001).

Online communities are formed around groups of people who have common interests and practices that communicate regularly on the Internet through a common location or mechanism (Ridings, Gefen, Arinze, 2002). The knowledge base, which is usually publicly available in the form of the community's conversation, provides insight into the members' likes, dislikes, behaviors, and concerns. Often the members critique the products and services of travel suppliers.

Individuals invest time, effort and financial resources to acquire information they need to make decisions; however, the way in which travelers search for travel information has changed because of the dominant role of the Internet in today's society. Online travel communities serve as an information center where individuals can search for information conveniently and cost effectively as well as retrieve information, maintain connections, develop relationships and make travel decisions (Stepchenkova, Mills, & Jiang, 2007). Furthermore, online communities are becoming influential information sources since travelers have more trust in their peers' opinions than marketing organizations (Gretzel et al., 2007). Additionally the amount and quality of information available in online communities is more valuable than the information that

has been accumulated by conventional published content for its members (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). This information is perceived as more valuable because it provides up to date, enjoyable and reliable information. During the travel planning stage the travelers' information search focuses on information such as where to go, where to stay, how to go, and what to do at the destination.

Travelers post information such as warnings, advice, and recommendations. For example, members can provide advice to other travelers regarding their experience at the destination. This information is related to attractions, food and beverage suppliers as well as accommodations at the destination. In online travel communities, different types of members exist such as residents of the destination, potential travelers to the destination, and travelers who have been to the destination. The type of information found in online travel community postings varies a great deal. With their postings in the online travel community they share their travel experiences and expertise regarding the destination. The postings are primarily about travel decisions such as where to stay, what to see at the destination, and transportation options.

In online travel communities, the activity level of the community members varies a great deal. While some members may post one message, others post fifteen messages a day. All these different types of online community information including discussion topics and type of information posted is considered to be eWOM.

The information posted in online travel communities is an influential eWOM form of communication that is being utilized by today's travelers in their travel decision making. It is important for tourism suppliers to recognize how eWOM impacts travelers' trip planning decisions.

According to Preece (2000), there is not enough academic research focusing on online travel communities. Online community research in the tourism field is fairly new, and there are only a few published studies about the subject. Examples of this type of research include Dellaert's (1999) study, which focused on the importance of online communities in tourism marketing over the Internet and Wang and Fesenmaier's (2002) study which focused on the needs of online travel community members and the reasons for their contributions to online travel communities (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003). Thus, knowing how the information found in online travel community discussion boards impacts travel decisions is an important question for tourism researchers as well as managers. However, previous research has not examined the influence of eWOM in the context of online travel communities.

In sum, the Internet has become an important source of information for travelers as they plan their trips. The plethora of information sources that have become available has created an information overload situation for many travelers. As travelers become more familiar with user generated content such as online communities for their information search they may come to rely on online travel communities for their information rather than traditional marketing sources.

Justification for the Study

Travelers and travel suppliers have become actively involved with collaboration marketing. This is particularly important in the travel and tourism industry, because this industry is considered to be the most consumer empowered industry. This suggests that many travelers do not need help from a salesperson in making their travel purchases. It is

evident that consumers have changed they make travel purchases when compared to how travel decisions were made five years ago. This fundamental shift can be attributed to the presence of the Internet. Recognizing the importance of the empowered online travel communities, travel marketers have adopted online communities at a faster rate than any other industry sector.

Both travelers and travel suppliers are generating content for the Internet that is used as an information source by other potential travelers. User generated content in an online community has been found to be important information for travelers as they plan their trips. eWOM is one type of user generated content that has been found to influence different types of consumer decisions such as types of travel decisions. Recent studies have focused on the influence of one type of user generated content, online reviews on travel decisions (Gretzel et al., 2007; Ricci & Wietsma, 2006).

Gretzel et. al. (2007) surveyed the users of the Tripadvisor. Additionally, Ricci and Wietsma's (2006) study used an experiment as well as a survey to conduct their studies regarding the influence of product reviews in travel decision making. The results of their study revealed that the influence of eWOM depends on the decision making stage and the type of product. Because there is little interaction between users in Tripadvisor, these studies regarding the influence of eWOM on travel decisions examined the influence of reading the postings but did not include the community factor in their study designs. Overall, these studies showed that eWOM has an effect on traveler's decisions.

However, while this line of research seems to offer great potential in the travel and tourism industry it is largely untested at this point.

Purpose of the Study

The online community phenomenon is a relatively new subject area that has been the focus of research investigations in sociology, marketing, and information systems (Kozinets, 2002; Porter, 2004; Preece, 2000; Wellman, 2001). However, there is little empirical research in the travel and tourism field, which has focused on online communities.

The purpose of this research is to examine a single online travel community in order to conduct an in depth analysis of the influence of eWOM on travel decisions. Results of this study can help tourism marketers notice trends in travel consumers' behaviors as well as a new venue to promote their products. It is during the information search stage that marketers can influence traveler's decision making. Therefore, understanding the influence of eWOM in online travel communities will lead to better marketing performance and product enhancement (Hwang, Gretzel, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2006).

This research is an attempt to contribute to the knowledge on online travel communities by exploring online travel community postings (eWOM) and their influence on travel decisions. This study examines the online travel community use for information search and its influences on travel decisions.

The Study

The members of Thorn Tree Forum communicate through postings (eWOM). Postings and eWOM are used interchangeably in this study. By reading and examining online travel community postings the researcher is able to analyze the types of travel

decisions that are discussed, influence of eWOM on these decisions, the types of members and their specific influence on types of travel decisions, the activity level of members, the information types provided by the members, and its influence on travel decisions.

Study Area

The online travel community utilized in this study is Thorn Tree Forum, which is a component of the Lonely Planet website. The community is divided into different sections such as departure lounge, the lobby, news stand, and tree house. The departure lounge has fourteen world regions and 204 distinct country forums.

Study Design and Approach

This research uses a qualitative methodology in order to develop an in depth understanding of how travel decisions may be influenced by eWOM. This is done by analyzing online community postings by members and following threads of discussion to determine influence in the form of a travel decision. Thorn Tree Forum is utilized in this study because members know each other and have a sense of belonging to the community and therefore produce dialog about travel decisions that can be analyzed qualitatively.

These factors may affect the level of influence of eWOM on travel decisions.

Nevertheless, there are still many questions that need to be answered related to the use of online travel communities by travelers. Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) suggest that more research is needed to understand cognitive, affective, and behavioral implications of eWOM on traveler behaviors.

Moreover, the research design employed case study approach and classification methods to examine whether eWOM in the online travel community influenced

members' travel decisions. In order to have a data sample that would have maximum variation, purposeful sampling and treemaps are used for data collection. Online community postings in the form of threads are collected for an eight month period from the eight selected country forums. Data collection and analysis is a multistep process that used thematic networks, coding for influence and details of information shared among members. A thread is a visual grouping of postings that is usually hierarchical by topic. These threads are examined for influence of eWOM on travel decisions, the types of travel decisions that were influenced by eWOM, identifying different member types, categorizing the information types, classifying member activity levels and analyzing each ones influence on types of travel decisions.

The researcher was an observer in this study and did not participate in online community discussions to keep the communication in natural flow. Also the research subjects did not know the forum postings were used for a study; this removed researcher presence bias in the findings.

Research Objectives

This study particularly explores one online travel community, Thorn Tree Forum, in depth for specific understanding of the community use and levels of influence on travel decisions. The specific objectives of this research are:

1. to determine whether the postings in an online travel community influence members' travel decisions and to identify what type of travel decisions are influenced by eWOM;

2. to recognize different types of information sources (online community members) and identify whether the types of information sources influence travel decisions;
3. to investigate the level of posting activity of online travel community members and their influence on different types of travel decisions;
4. to examine information types provided in the online travel community and identify their influence on different types of travel decisions;

Delimitations

The study is subject to the following delimitations:

1. the study will be delimited to the members of one online travel community, Thorn Tree Forum, utilized in the current research;
2. the study will not identify or describe travel decision making models;

Definitions: Listed Alphabetically

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) – It is “all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services” (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan, 2008, p. 461).

Experienced Traveler – A member of online travel community who indicates that he or she has been to the destination in his or her postings or member profile.

Level of Posting Activity – The categorization of online travel community members in accordance with their total number of postings.

Online Community – An online community “is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks” (Rheingold, 1998, p. 12).

Online Community Member – An individual who is registered to the website to become a community member.

Original Poster (OP) – A member of online travel community who starts a thread.

Posting – A posting is an online message that is written by the members of the online community, which can be read by others who access that web page or forum.

Potential Traveler – A member of the online travel community who indicates that he or she wants to visit the specific destination in his or her postings.

Resident – Online community member who indicates that he or she is living at the destination in his or her postings or member profile.

Thread – A thread is a visual grouping of electronic messages in online discussion forums, which is usually hierarchical by topic.

Treemap – A treemap is a type of data visualization tool that shows hierarchical data in various fields and each box in a treemap represents one data element (country) and size and color of a box is proportional to total number of threads and average number of replies to each thread.

Types of Travel Decisions – The travel decisions that a traveler needs to make after a destination is chosen. These are transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, destination information, safety, monetary issues, and travel itinerary.

Unknown Member – An online community member who does not write anything related to his or her travel experience level at the destination.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One is an introduction to online communities and tourism link and their potential for tourism marketing. Additionally, the justification, purpose, objectives, and key definitions are stated.

Chapter Two is a conceptual discussion of online travel communities and tourism information search. Overview of information search, online travel communities and word of mouth will be used to explain the influence of online postings on types of travel decisions.

Chapter Three is a review of the literature. Published literature regarding the community concept, online communities, travel information search, word of mouth, and influence will be examined thoroughly.

Chapter Four discusses the methodology used for analyzing the conceptual model. The dissertation model is presented. The study area, data sample, purposeful sampling method, data collection and data analysis are discussed. The research questions are stated.

Chapter Five reports results of the research in order of the research questions. This chapter systematically describes the influence of online postings in online travel communities, especially on members' travel decisions.

Chapter Six concludes the dissertation by summarizing the study findings. The implications for tourism research and practitioners, study limitations and areas for further research are discussed.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced online communities, travel information search and eWOM. The study area, design, and methods are explained. Objectives, purpose of the study and definitions are also introduced.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the basics of information search, online community, and word-of-mouth concepts. The study model is also explained including influence of eWOM and online community concept.

Overview of Information Search

Individuals' information search behaviors have been studied in various social science disciplines such as economics, psychology, marketing, and information systems. Because tourism products are mostly intangible by nature, information search has also been crucially important to travelers. Tourism products are delivered in different places far away from home and, as a result, functional, financial, psychological and social risks are involved (Lovelock & Wright, 1999). Therefore, information search has emerged as an important research topic in the travel and tourism literature, and it will continue to grow at an even faster rate considering the global impact of the Internet on the lives of millions of individuals and consumers.

The concept of information search originated in the consumer behavior field, rooted in the theory of economics of information (Stigler, 1961). According to this theory, consumers' search will continue to expand until the utility gained from search outweighs the costs. Figure 1 shows travelers' information search process.

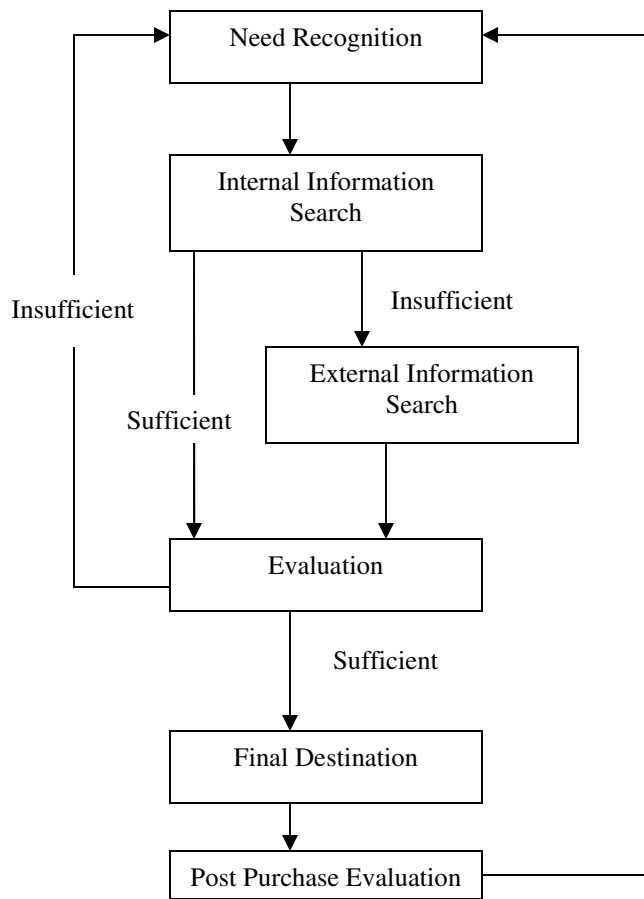


Figure 1. Travel Information Search Framework (Fesenmaier, Werthner, & Wober, 2006)

According to the Travel Information Search Framework, the first step is a need recognition. An individual has to have a need to travel in order to start travel information search. Internal information search is the process of looking back at one's memories of past travel experience when deciding on a repeat visitation to a destination. However, if one feels that internal information search is not sufficient, then external search is conducted. After an evaluation of the destination choices a final destination choice is made. During the evaluation stage, one may go back to the first stage if she feels that

evaluation was not sufficient. Choosing a final destination continues with post purchase evaluation stage and this stage may also go back to the recognition of need stage as well.

Bieger and Laesser (2004) categorized information search research into three groups:

- i) The *psychological/motivational approach* includes studies about external information sources.
- ii) The *economics approach* involves studies concerned with the costs and benefits of the information search process.
- iii) The *consumer information processing approach* is concerned with the information search process rather than the action itself.

In sum, the Internet has changed the way tourists search for information subsequently. Tourists' online information search has become a growing area of interest for researchers. To date, however, research on Internet users' travel information search has been mainly focused on the factors that influence and improve the decision making ability of travel recommendation systems (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002).

Overview of Online Travel Communities

Online communities vary in both names and types. For example, the terms virtual communities, computer-mediated communities, Internet communities, electronic communities, and cyber communities all refer to online communities. All of these online communities may take any of these forms: discussion forums, chat rooms, bulletin boards, and multi-user dungeons. Rheingold (1993, pg.5) defined virtual communities as "... social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those

public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”

Online travel community research is in its beginning stages. Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002) focused on brand building for tourism organizations using virtual communities. The kinds of needs of online travel community members (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2002) and the relationship between sense of community and loyalty on purchasing tourism products (Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004) were the research focus.

In online travel communities, the potential traveler’s decision can be influenced by two sources. One source refers to the features of the posting; the other side refers to the different aspects of the member who posts the message. The features of the posting that can influence members include the discussion topic and the type of information it contains. On the other hand, the member’s experience level at the destination as well as his or her activity level in the online travel community can have an influence on member’s travel decisions. The member’s experience level at the destination is analyzed by the categorization of members as residents (those who live at the destination) or experienced travelers (those who have visited the destination). Crotts (1999) found that eWOM communication from previous visitors to a destination were an influential source of information for consumer’s travel planning. Moreover, this information is available to all who click on the member profile. The member profile is where members indicate their country of residence and the countries they have visited. The member’s activity level is categorized by the total number of postings. This activity level is shown next to the username of each member. The number of postings a member has is an indication of his/her involvement in the community; additionally, postings add to the reputation of the

member. In online communities, reputation mechanisms are used in order to create trustworthiness for a member's word-of-mouth. These mechanisms are especially important in communities where there is a monetary transaction. For example, in eBay each seller's feedback score is a number between 100 and 500, which can be seen by everybody. Moreover, if a user clicks on the seller's name he/she can also see the number of positive, negative, and neutral feedbacks that seller has received. However, uncertainty and high risk factors associated with travel products make them vulnerable purchase decisions. Thus, a member's commitment to the online community is shown by the total number of postings. Postings are also an indication of member trustworthiness and reputation. In this research, a member's activity level is used to measure the influence of total number of postings a member has on travel decisions.

Overview of Word-of-Mouth

According to Nolan (1974), word of mouth communication was often seen as the most influential information source. Gunn (1972) and Gartner (1993) also pointed out that personal messages were highly effective promotional tools. Additionally, Nolan (1974) indicated that word of mouth communication was the "hub of travel information system" and other types of travel information support WOM communication.

The influence of online WOM and whether it affects consumer behavior is still a new subject for researchers. Online consumer reviews of video games have been shown to positively affect purchasing behavior (Bounie, Bourreau, Gensollen, & Waelbroeck, 2005). In another study, effect of online consumer reviews on book sales were compared between Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com (Chevalier & Myazlin, 2003). The

results suggested that when the reviews on both sites were mostly positive, improvement in a book's review increased book sales on Amazon.com, and the impact of bad reviews (1 star) was greater than the impact of good reviews (5 stars) (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2003). The influence of online WOM had also been studied by assessing its value for forecasting motion picture revenues. Results showed that average online movie ratings were better predictors of future movie revenues than a movie's marketing budget, professional critic reviews and other salient variables (Dellarocas, Awad, & Zhang, 2004). Thus, online movie reviews influenced consumer decisions about whether or not to watch a movie. In addition, Gruen, Osmonbekov and Czaplewski (2006) indicated that consumers perceive electronic WOM (eWOM) to be a reliable source of information and that eWOM impacted the perceived overall value of a firm's products and offerings as well.

In conclusion, WOM has been found to be an influential information source for consumer decisions. Moreover, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in the context of online communities has been found to be influential in consumer purchasing behavior.

Study Model

Figure 2 shows the study model. It proposes that online travel community use, information type, information source, and level of activity influence types of travel decisions. For instance, while using online travel community to retrieve information a recommendation from a high activity level resident can influence transportation decisions.

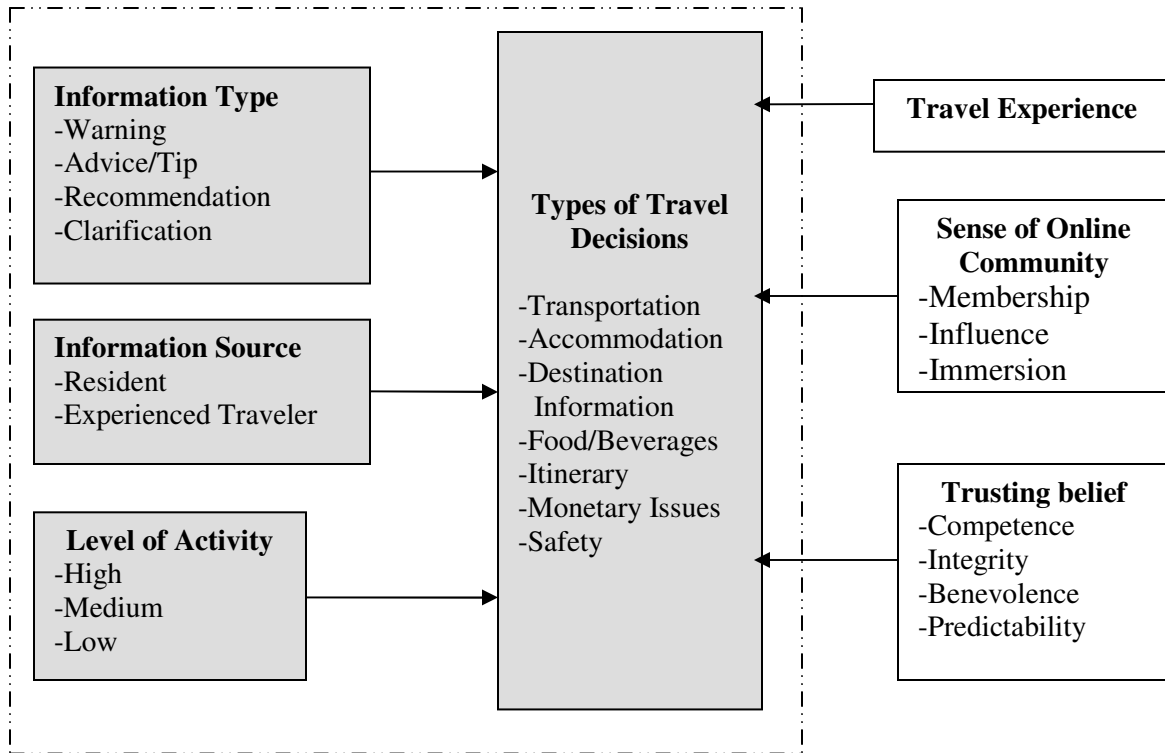


Figure 2. Study Framework

The main aim of this study is to show the influence of online communities on types of travel decisions. Recent studies about the influence of online word of mouth (WOM) communication in online communities, bulletin boards and discussion boards have shown that consumers perceive these sources to hold reliable information (Gruen et al., 2006). For example, online movie reviews influence consumer decisions about whether to watch a movie (Dellarocas et al., 2004), and online consumer reviews of video games positively affect purchasing behavior (Bounie et al., 2005). In addition, research by Ricci and Wietsma (2006) and Gretzel et al. (2007) has shown the influence of reading travel reviews on purchase decisions. However, this research goes beyond analyzing the influence of eWOM and identifies the impact of information type, information source, and level of activity of members on travel decisions as well.

Synopsis of the Chapter

This chapter introduced the conceptual framework for the study. The study model includes online community use, information type, information source, and level of posting activity and types of travel decisions. The following chapter will include the literature review related to the model and the constructs.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Previous research has investigated the phenomena of information search, online communities, word-of-mouth, and influence in a variety of contexts. The following discussion reviews the literature that addresses these concepts. The first section discusses relevant studies regarding information search. The second section focuses on the concept of community and online communities, and a description of relevant research that centers on word-of-mouth communication. Finally, the last section reviews research on influence.

Information Search

Information search is a central theme in the travel and tourism literature. The main reasons that consumers engage in information search are to enhance the quality of a proposed trip and to decrease the level of uncertainty surrounding the functional, financial, psychological, and social risks (Fodness & Murray, 1997). Information search is an important concept, especially for tourism products since they are intangible in nature and delivered in places different from home (Lovelock & Wright, 1999). Hence, the information search process is important for marketing management decisions (Wilkie & Dickson, 1985) as well as for consumers making travel related decisions.

Following the recognition of a need, information search is generally the second step in the decision making process. Information search is defined as “the need to consult to different sources before making a purchase decision” (Moutinho, 1987, p. 10).

There are a myriad of sources of information which can influence travelers’ vacation decisions. According to Fodness and Murray (1998), travelers obtain information from both personal sources, such as friends and relatives (i.e., *word-of-mouth*), as well as *marketer-dominated paid forms of communication*, such as information retrieved from hotels, airlines, resorts and destination marketing organizations. The traditionally paid form includes mass media advertising and promotion (e.g., billboards, newspaper or magazines). We can also add *the Internet* as a new platform of information source for gathering travel information.

Traditional travel information search

Traditional tourism promotions include paid advertising, publicity, public relations, and incentives such as gifts or discounts (Gunn, 2002). The goals of promotion include informing, persuading and reminding consumers of travel product and services. The consumer’s buying process is linked to travel promotion. The first stage of the buying process includes need awareness and information search. In this stage promotion of a destination informs the consumer about the destination and its possibilities. Persuasiveness of the promotion is key in the second stage of the buying process (evaluating the alternatives and purchasing the travel product). The last stage is post purchase evaluation and adoption, a stage which is enforced by reminding the consumer of the good times spent in the destination (Morrison, 2002).

The persuasive power of advertising makes it the most widely accepted and visible form of tourism promotion. However, traditional forms of advertising in printed media has disadvantages, such as an inability to target the right market, a short life span, clutter-inducing paper ads, the potential for consumers to ignore the ads, and a low potential to reach consumers (Morrison, 2002). In general today's consumers feel that advertising is less entertaining and less helpful for finding information about new products, and perhaps even irritating (Morgan & Pritchard, 2001).

Most of the research on travel advertising is related to the effectiveness of advertising and the effectiveness of measurement techniques (e.g. Siegel & Ziff-Levine, 1990; Woodside, 1990; Butterfield, Deal, & Kubursi, 1998). The travel and tourism industry is a good fit for online advertising since most Internet users are already purchasing most of the travel and tourism products sold online (Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000).

Bieger and Laesser (2004) classified research on information search into three categories: psychological/motivational approach, economics approach and consumer information processing approach. The psychological/motivational approach includes studies about external information sources that are influenced by individual characteristics and specific travel decisions including length of trip, previous experience and travel party characteristics (e.g. Snepenger, D., Houser, B., & Snepenger, M. 1990; Fodness & Murray 1999; Schul & Crompton 1983). The second type is the economics approach, which involves studies concerned with the costs and benefits of the information search process and implies that there is a trade-off between perceived costs and benefits during information search as well as uncertainty avoidance (e.g. Money &

Crotts, 2002). Finally, the consumer information process approach is concerned with the information search process rather than the action itself (e.g. Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

a) *Psychological/motivational approach:*

According to Fodness and Murray (1998), there are three dimensions of information search strategy: spatial, operational, and temporal. The spatial dimension consists of internal or external information search. The temporal dimension refers to the timing of search. The operational dimension involves conducting search while focusing on particular sources used and their effectiveness in the decision making process (Fodness & Murray, 1998).

i) *Spatial dimension:* The spatial dimension of information search is divided into two categories: internal and external search. Internal search takes place initially and internally, and involves long term memory search such as using past trip experiences when deciding on a repeat visitation to a destination. If one feels that memory of the past experience is not sufficient then external information search is needed. Usually for travel purposes, information search is external and involves different information sources such as brochures, guide books, magazines and travel agents (Schul & Crompton, 1983). Depending on where the information originates, external search can be divided into two categories. The first category is the marketer-dominated source, which can be retrieved from hotels, airlines, resorts and destination marketing organizations. The second type of source includes personal word-of-mouth from friends or relatives, a neutral third party or travel agents.

The external search can be affected by the number of travelers in the party, who is going on the trip and the social interaction between the travelers. For example, if a

traveler is not traveling alone, communication is necessary between potential travelers. One of them can cause an urge to travel in the other one. The traveler that proposes the trip can limit the information search and social interaction to see if the other traveler has any other preferences or if the second traveler will accept the first traveler's terms. However, they can agree on one of them doing the search and the other participating in other aspects of the travel decision. The key determinants in this case are classes that travelers fall in according to their reactions to an urge. In addition, decision making can depend on the social interactions between the person who has the urge and the others. If the urge is coming from someone that the other person wants to please, then it is going to have a different effect on the person, as opposed to being exposed to a travel advertisement on TV (Huan & Beaman, 2004).

ii) *Operational dimension*: The operational dimension of information search is related to the information environment. The consumer chooses from among a variety of product information sources. Kotler and Armstrong (1994) identified four categories of information sources that are commonly used. These were (1) family, friends and other formal and informal sources; (2) commercial or marketing-dominated sources such as sales people; (3) public sources (e.g. information gathered from magazines and newspapers); and (4) experiential sources that were formed by direct observation or product trial. With the widespread use of the Internet, now it is time to consider adding "electronic resources" such as websites and email promotions as a fifth source of information.

The results of information search depend on what kind of information source is used. Information sources can be contributory, decisive or ineffective. Contributory

information sources may increase knowledge while not necessarily affecting decision making. Ineffective sources do not have an impact on the final decision. On the other hand, decisive sources are perceived as necessary and sufficient (Fodness & Murray, 1998). Leisure travelers typically use more than one information source, and the selection of information choices is a rational development. The sources that are most likely to be used alone include family and friends, travel agencies and past experience. They are decisive sources in which tourists get information about the destination, things to do, and places to stay. Commercial guidebooks, brochures and state travel guides were used in conjunction with other sources (Fodness & Murray, 1999). Fodness and Murray (1997) found that information sources used by tourists are the result of situational, traveler and marketplace contingencies.

Leisure traveler's information search depends on various aspects. Traveling group composition is one of them. The traveling group's behavior is affected by the existence of children, the age of travelers and their life stage (retired or not). Other aspects that affect information search include purpose of the trip, mode of travel and socio-economic status (Fodness & Murray, 1999). Lo, Cheung and Law (2004) found no significant difference between Hong Kong business travelers and leisure travelers. The main information sources were corporate travel department, personal experience and friends or relatives.

iii) *Temporal dimension*: Research regarding this dimension is somewhat limited compared to the operational and spatial dimensions of information search. Temporal search dimension is related to search status (e.g. prepurchase and ongoing search). When faced with a purchase decision, consumers may become more sensitive to relevant stimuli (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994). Prepurchase search may not take place if an ongoing search

is being conducted. Moreover, ongoing search creates a knowledge base for future decision making (Bloch, Sherrel, & Ridgway, 1986).

b) Economics approach:

This type of research includes concepts such as uncertainty avoidance and cost/benefit analysis. Economics of information theory has been applied to tourism research. Travelers are likely to continue to search for information until the benefits gained outweigh search costs (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). The cost related to information search consists of financial cost (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998) and cost of time and effort (Fodness & Murray, 1999).

Money and Crotts (2002) added a cultural dimension to travelers' information search behavior. Their study focused on uncertainty avoidance, an influence on information search behavior. Risk is a major concern for international travelers (Yavas, 1990). Money and Crotts (2002) classified travelers into two groups according to their risk perception: high and medium uncertainty avoidance cultures. The results indicated that consumers with higher risk tolerance sought information from market-dominated sources whereas those with lower risk tolerance sought information from neutral third parties such as travel agents. As a result, risk-avoidant consumers spent less time at the destination and purchased package tours including lodging and airfare. In short, this study showed that in addition to other factors, cultural influences also play a role in the information search process.

c) Consumer information process:

The primary reason for collecting information is related to functional reasons such as trip planning. Other reasons include innovation, aesthetic and hedonic needs.

Innovation needs include novelty seeking, variety seeking and creativity dimensions. The novelty seeking dimension captures venturesomeness, which is defined as “seeking new and different information in order to learn about unique possibilities” (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998, p.560). Variety seeking is the need to find a range of stimuli in the environment. Creativity depends on individual’s characteristics and problem solving abilities. Aesthetic needs are a composition of stimuli for imagery and fantasy. Imagery in tourism refers to the images that individuals have about a destination (whether or not they have prior experiences at that destination). The fantasy dimension is related to cognitive image processing. In addition, psychographic and demographic characteristics of individuals influence search behavior. Therefore, it is suggested that a consumer’s attention and interests must be captured initially (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

Bieger and Laesser (2004) found dominant source paths. The results of their study indicated that the importance of sources reduced after the final trip decision was made, especially for destination and regional information booklets as well as tour operator brochures. The most important information sources were friends and relatives. The Internet’s importance as a resource was high until the definite trip decision is made.

Another study by Pan and Fesenmaier (2001) examined the information search behavior of call center callers. Call centers are important channels of information distribution as shown by the number of callers. The depth of information requested varies according to the interest regarding the information. Callers mainly ask questions about a specific destination or interest. The results showed that callers who were searching for a destination asked specific questions about the destination and then continued to ask more general questions. On the other hand, callers who wanted to learn about specific interests

tended to be more specific in their questions. If this kind of information can be combined with the process of decision making, then information processing can be better understood.

Online information search behavior of consumers

Because our knowledge of travelers' information search on the Internet is still at an early stage, the progress of our research and building a cumulative knowledge of the topic in the travel and tourism literature may depend largely on understanding the findings of other mature disciplines. The rich literature in the consumer behavior field may provide useful guidelines that tourism discipline can benefit from. Since studies on information search behavior are rooted in the consumer behavior literature, there is also a deep body of research on online information search. These studies include the comparison of Internet users such as novice vs. expert users, the effect of the use of interactive tools, recommendation systems and animation on websites, the effect of Internet on economics of information theory, and models of online information search behavior.

In her longitudinal study examining the differences between novice and expert users in their Internet use, Cothey (2002) suggested that the more experienced a user was the more systematic the Internet search would be. Although this seems to be a rational progression of Internet users, the study results showed the opposite. The users adopted a more passive or browsing style of information search instead of querying, and the range of Web sites became more eclectic as they gained experience. On the other hand, users became more selective of web pages as they gained experience. As a result, this study showed that there is not a uniform search behavior of Internet users; hence, individuals

became more distinctive regarding information search on the Internet as they gained experience. A longitudinal study of online travel behavior should also be conducted in the tourism literature so we can gain a better understanding of changes in the individuals' behaviors over time as well as the factors that influence those changes.

Haubl and Trifts (2000) suggested that interactive tools such as recommendation systems can help consumers in their decision making process. However, Senecal, Kalczynski, and Nantel's (2005) study found contradictory results. In their study, they used clickstream analysis to understand the effects of recommendation systems in online information search. Clickstream analysis can be defined as the consumer's path of web sites. Within-site information (e.g. pages visited), time spent on each page and between-site information could be included in clickstream analysis (Senecal et al., 2005). Senecal and Nantel (2003) classified online sources into three categories: (1) other customers, (2) human experts and (3) expert systems and consumer decision support systems (e.g. recommendation systems). The effectiveness of online recommendation systems on consumer behavior can be analyzed by using the clickstream method. Senecal et al. (2005) suggested that consumers who do not consult recommendation systems have a simpler online shopping behavior than those who do consult. Consulting an online recommendation system did not mean that consumers will follow the suggestion. Moreover, the study indicated that there were no significant differences in behavior between consumers who followed the recommendation system and those who did not. In the consumer research literature, it is assumed that consumers follow product recommendations to limit their information search process. However the results of this study indicated the opposite. This may be a result of not trusting online recommendation

systems or online information. There have been studies on recommendation systems in online travel information search; however, they are limited. Thus, further research analyzing this concept can provide tourism researchers and practitioners with valuable information about user preferences, user choices to use particular recommendation systems, and how these systems can be improved.

Websites use different types of animations such as Flash to attract online users. In a study that focused on the effects of Flash animation on users' online information search, it was found that although Flash animation attracted users' attention, it did not increase the recall of the item. In fact, it can reduce the recall of other items on the screen. Information processing not only depends on the attraction of Flash information but also on the other items on the screen (Hong, Thong, & Tam, 2004). Flash animation had a negative effect on users' focused attention and may result in a negative attitude toward the website. A similar study about animations on a travel website can be useful in understanding the effects of these features on the user as well as provide information about creating better travel related websites.

Economics of information theory, which is considered the basis for information search, would be affected by the Internet. According to the theory, search cost, expected benefits, price dispersion, and search efficiency affect consumer search behavior. Additional variables that influence consumer research behavior are prior knowledge, consideration set, self-confidence, store loyalty, and involvement with the shopping process. Biswas (2004) proposed that the Internet will have the following effects on search behavior: lower information search costs, higher information load due to a greater number of alternatives (also resulting in lower search costs by having more options to

choose from), availability of software agents that can customize search, low entry costs for sellers, and increased perceived risk for consumers due to the inability to physically examine the product. These propositions still need to be empirically tested, and the results would help us understand users' online information search behavior.

In order to understand the Internet's impact on consumer behavior, the information search process on the Internet needs to be understood. Kulviwat, Guo and Engchanil (2004) proposed a model of online information search. According to this model, perceived benefit, ease of use, satisfaction of computer technology, self-efficacy in an online environment, experience with the Internet or technology, effectiveness of online information, knowledge about technology, and user education level are determinants of online information search. Although this model has not yet been empirically tested, it is an important model to consider for research on online travel consumer search behavior. Another study on Internet users' search behavior was conducted by Ratchford, Talukdar and Lee (2001) in which a model of consumer choice on the Internet was developed. Benefits were considered as the outcomes of information. Costs of benefits reduced as access to the Internet and skill of using it would increase the amount of information gathered online. Internet use as a source of information varied among consumers due to skill and access abilities to the Internet as well as the cost of Internet access. In the future, the Internet may become the first information source, but today it only replaces some information sources. Moreover, as the purchase decision becomes routine and less assistance is needed for sales, the Internet is likely to play a greater role in consumer behavior. In a further study, Ratchford et. al. (2003) have applied their model, which indicated that total search depended on the potential gains,

prior information, productivity gained in obtaining information, and time costs for consumers who were looking for information about automobiles. The results showed that the Internet led to a reduced amount of time for search about automobiles as well as decreased time spent in the dealership. Thus both dealers and consumers gained from the Internet as an information source in terms of time spent in the dealership. Furthermore, consumers gained bargaining power since they have acquired the necessary information online. Previously proposed models of online information search can be adapted to online travel search, and the results would improve our understanding of consumer behavior.

Researchers have also paid attention to other factors that influence online information search (e.g. prior knowledge). Previous research investigating the relationship between prior knowledge and information search has different outcomes. For instance, Jacoby, Chestnut and Fisher (1978) proposed that there is a linear and positive relation between prior knowledge and information search. On the other hand, Simonson, Huber and Payne (1988) indicated a negative relationship, and Johnson and Russo (1984) proposed an inverted U shape relationship between prior knowledge and information search. Prior knowledge and credibility have been identified as factors that affect information search on the Internet (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). According to Kerstetter and Cho (2004), prior knowledge consisted of three dimensions: familiarity, expertise and past experience. Familiarity was the awareness of the product/service and is not related to actual experience. Expertise was the ability to perform tasks related to the products at hand (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Past experience was one of the most important factors that affect leisure tourism decision making. Credibility had been found to be one of the strongest predictors of information search (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). Individuals with

greater prior knowledge were less likely to trust information on the Internet, indicating that perceived credibility of the Internet as an information source affected the trust placed in information retrieved from the Internet.

In a study of Internet users' information search behaviors, Jansen, Spink, and Saracevic (2000) found that only a few short queries per search were submitted by users. Boolean operators and relevance feedback were rarely used. Moreover, the time of day in which the search was conducted affected Internet users' search behavior, indicating that searches conducted in the morning are longer and include more queries. Queries have been used in tourism information research to identify online travel information search. For instance, one of the recent interesting topics about Internet users involves understanding their online information search process. Mitsche (2005) investigated search patterns of Internet users and adoption of different search strategies on the Internet by examining search queries. Results showed that clicking and re-clicking on the search engine's homepage was the most important task. The author found that the starting point of travel related search was the name of a particular city, and the search results directed users to the official website of that city. On the other hand, the most frequent search keyword was "hotels". However, on an interesting note, while searching for information about a particular city, the keyword "hotels" was less frequently used. City maps were another important type of information that travelers search for on the Internet. Study respondents showed different search patterns and were divided accordingly. The first group consisted of a few individuals who quickly use the web site for varying tasks. The second (and largest) group included individuals who search for only a particular city. The third group was the smallest and consisted of users who look for information about a

particular city, click on the suggested city and request a national map and nearby cities. The results also showed that within a particular city users were looking for information about accommodations, destinations, attractions and transportation.

Since the search process is different from linear reading abilities (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2003), using the Internet to search for information requires different abilities in order to acquire the right information. Thus, Internet usability has been considered problematic for travel planning purposes (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2001). There is a discrepancy between the mental models of computer users and the information systems that determine the computer system's usability (Nielson, 1993).

Online travel information search

As evidenced in the previous research reported here, the Internet has had a major impact on individuals' information search behavior. The consumer behavior field has studied some of these impacts, and tourism research can take advantage of this literature since travelers are also consumers. Moreover, the information systems field may be considered another main source for online research that can be looked up to (e.g. semantic models).

Although Internet use is rapidly growing, travel agents still seem to be the preferred resource in business-related reservations. The reason for using traditional information sources (e.g. travel agents) is that they can offer more detailed information in addition to having direct contact with travel-related providers (Heung, 2003). The advantages of using the Internet are quick access to information, the opportunity to gather all information from a single source, the time convenience of search (e.g. search can be conducted whenever the user wants) (Beliveau & Garwood, 2001), and better service

quality (Heung, 2003). On the contrary, the disadvantages of the Internet are the overwhelming amount of information, the difficulty of knowing where to look and finding relevant information as well as the time consuming aspect of the search (Beliveau & Garwood, 2001). Even though individuals use the Internet to search for information, it is often not their sole resource. They also gather information from travel agents, tourist guides and documents, and friends or relatives. Individuals who do not have Internet access consult travel agents, tourist guides and documents, friends or relatives, and airlines. The major reasons individuals do not use the Internet to make reservations include security, confidentiality, lack of customer support, and time consumption. Moreover, respondents are afraid of making mistakes while booking their own reservations. As a result of this insecurity, consumers tend to rely on travel agents or direct booking with service providers (Beliveau & Garwood, 2001).

The semantic model of travel information space also influences information search on the Internet. In Pan and Fesenmaier's (2003) study, the semantic mental model included the information searcher's background knowledge and understanding of the Internet. There is usually incongruity between the semantics of information on the Internet and the traveler's mind. For example, a traveler's most important information needed when planning a trip could be the available attractions; however, the website provides only lodging information. When an individual searches for information on the Internet, the search results are established by the relevance of the linked texts, pictures or contextual information. As a result the keywords used in online search engines determine the search results. According to Pan and Fesenmaier (2003), travel information search can be broken into episodes in which a destination page is related to the solution of a sub-

goal. The web pages in which a traveler spends most of his/her time are essential in the decision making process. This also shows the congruency between the traveler's semantic mental model and the travel web site's semantic model. Moreover, this congruence indicates the satisfaction level of the information search process. The efficiency and satisfaction with information provided by the Internet is determined by the user's travel experience as well as the Internet use experience. Each individual has his/her own way of looking for information on the Internet; therefore, search results may be different across individuals. Pan and Fesenmaier's (2003) study confirmed the Internet usage problem due to the discrepancy between the traveler's mind set and the information provided by the Internet.

According to D'Ambra and Mistilis (2004), the Internet has been replacing some traditional information sources. Their study proposal focused on the impact of Internet access and other technological information sources available in visitor information centers. The task-technology fit model was used to operationalize the theoretical framework including the constructs of nature of information task, purpose of travel, duration of travel, information sources used in planning the trip, the level of usage of each resource, uncertainty, and access to the Internet. The possible outcomes are taxonomy of information resources used by tourists in trip planning, effectiveness of these resources, stratification of information resources according to tourist types, and understanding of tourists' information search behavior.

Semantic models are useful in understanding Internet users' search behavior. If the web pages can be designed in accordance with the user's mind set, then more individuals would search for information and find their answers more quickly. Semantic

networks can also be used to identify useful information on travel web sites and to show the appropriate information. For tourism research, the tourism industry's semantic mental model needs to be kept in mind as well as the user's semantic model. This would help increase the fit between the information provided on tourism related web pages and the information travelers are looking for.

In conclusion, the Internet affects the search behavior of individuals who use it as an information source. Online information search is a complex phenomenon; thus the results of studies investigating the Internet may not be generalizable since individual differences play an enormous role in online information search behavior (Peterson & Merino, 2003).

The Concept of Community

Online communities can be studied from different perspectives such as identity, communication, and community. For this study the most suitable perspective is the community, which is explained from a sociological perspective.

Community studies are a large part of sociological research with various results and definitions of the community concept. The word community has two major meanings. The first one is a geographical meaning, such as neighborhood or city, and the second one is about the characteristics of human relationships, such as a community of professional athletes (Gusfield, 1975). Wellman (2001, pg 4.) defined community as "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity." Viewing the study of community as related to the interactions and not to the place, Bender (1978) defined communities as social networks.

The community question is concerned with “how large-scale social systematic divisions of labor affect the organization and content of primary ties” (Wellman, 1979, p.1203). Sociologists have tried to answer this question by looking at the effects of industrialization and bureaucratization on primary ties. From a network perspective, there are three competing arguments about the community question: (1) *Community Lost*: As a result of division of labor societies have become solitary. Primary relations in the city are impersonal, transitory and segmental. There are a limited number of sparsely knit and loosely bounded social networks. However, this argument neglected the question of whether primary ties were structurally formed in bureaucratic social systems. (2) *Community Saved*: This argument is a reaction to the community lost argument. Scholars argue that in industrial bureaucratic society neighborhood and kinship values still exist because they provide support and sociability, informal social control, and homogenous residential and work areas. Supporters of the Community Saved argument claim that there are ties in urban areas which have been said to be lost. (3) *Community Liberated*: This argument accepts the fact that primary ties exist and are important, but most of these ties are organized in densely knit, tightly bounded solidarities. These ties are important sources of sociability and support. It also suggests that primary ties are dispersed among sparsely interconnected social networks (Wellman, 1979).

In order to understand the concept of community we need to look at the classical sociological community theories. The next section explains the basics of the community concept by Tonnies, Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber.

Ferdinand Tonnies

Tonnies (1887) emphasized the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). The essence of community and society is relationships, which are mutual actions. Human will is rooted in the core of the actions, which can be positive or negative. *Gemeinschaft* is based upon natural will, and *Gesellschaft* is based on rational will. The positive relationships are called associations that are formed with unity and mutual affirmation. The relationship results in association, is composed of real or organic life and is the essence of *Gemeinschaft* (community). The relationship can also be considered imaginary or have a mechanical structure that is *Gesellschaft* (society). *Gemeinschaft* (community) involves living together in a private and intimate life. On the other hand, *Gesellschaft* (society) is concerned with public life. The individual is born and bound to live in a family in *Gemeinschaft* while the individual goes into *Gesellschaft*. Tonnies explains *Gemeinschaft* as a living organism and *Gesellschaft* as a mechanical collective. According to Chirstenson (1984), *Gemeinschaft* is binding and related to primary relationships based on emotion whereas *Gesellschaft* is characterized by self-interest, negotiated accommodation and competition. Although it seems like *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are two contrasts, they are actually a continuum. Tonnies (1877) describes *Gemeinschaft* as the youth and *Gesellschaft* as the adulthood of society.

Gemeinschaft of mind refers to acting together for a common goal. According to Tonnies this type of community represents community of mental life, which is the absolute and truly human form. Understanding is individuals' intimate knowledge of each other and having the interest of being in another's happiness and sorrow. Accordingly, the similar the intellectual attitude and character, the more understanding there can be.

Understanding or consensus is the glue that keeps members of the community together. Language is the main tool of understanding and is the combination of gestures and sounds that express all emotions and feelings. Gemeinschaft is the foundation of unity and depends on the closeness of blood relationships, physical proximity and intellectual similarity.

Emile Durkheim

Durkheim (1893) developed a community theory based on two types: mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity is the bond between individuals as a result of their likeness, things such as shared customs, rituals, and beliefs (Bruhn, 2005). Individuals who live in small towns and in family units have mechanical solidarity. In this type of society people are mentally and morally homogenous and uniform (Tonnies, 1887). The totality of beliefs and sentiments in mechanical solidary societies is called “conscience collective”. It has two attributes: exteriority and constraint. The total conscience that is not a product of members of society at any point of time refers to exteriority. Constraint refers to having repressive laws for offense against collective conscience (Tonnies, 1887).

On the other hand, organic solidarity is a social order in which a society is based on differences, such as occupational specializations and thus is more dependent on each other (Bruhn, 2005). In this type of society, people are heterogeneous, they don't have mental and moral similarities, and conscience collective is weakened (Tonnies, 1887).

Georg Simmel

Simmel was concerned with urbanization and its effects on human values. In his study “The Metropolis and the Modern Life”, Simmel (1950) argues that the deepest

problems of modern life are caused by individuals trying to keep their individuality within a society that has sovereign powers on the individual. Individuals that live in rural areas act emotional and urban residents act rationally and even blasé to the same situations in everyday life. This is a result of metropolitan life in which punctuality, calculability, and exactness are required by metropolitan life and keeps irrational, instinctive traits of humans under control. Thus, individuals become indifferent or blasé in urban life in order to survive in the city.

Max Weber

According to Weber (1958), the duty of a sociologist is to understand the members of the society. There are two aspects of social action. First, the actions of individuals will be oriented to others during social encounters. Second, social structures refer to features of society that result from the individual actions in the society. Social action is neither random nor unique between the interactions of individuals. They have a pattern and may turn into customs, laws or structures. Social actions have meanings; thus an individual first examines the situation he is encountering, decides how to approach the situation, thinks about what others might do, and chooses an action that meets the purpose of the situation. This process may not be a conscious one, and a sociologist's duty is to understand the factors of interpretation of the situation and the meaning of the situation.

Weber (1958) also developed an ideal type of bureaucracy that is a rational form of administration and performs with maximum efficiency. In real world no form of bureaucracy is an ideal type but they have characteristics similar to Weber's definition of bureaucracy. Ideal type is a model which we can compare with the actual bureaucracies.

The complaints about bureaucracy are the parts that do not fit the ideal type definition. This may be because of lack of clear rules or administrators misusing their power. Although bureaucracies may limit freedom and form domination structures, they are necessary for the administration of modern society. If there were no bureaucracies, society would be in a worse shape than it is now. They have great power and eliminate human freedom. Standardized rules of bureaucracy create an equalizing opportunity for the members of the society. As a result, members can benefit from bureaucracy, since promotion and hiring is based on merit, not on personal favorites.

Weber's social action was about understanding individual action, yet the collection of individual actions develops patterns that create organizations, structures and norms of society. For Weber, in order to understand how society works we need to understand individual and group action and their results.

Weber called his concept of an ideal city a "full urban community". This type of community has five characteristics: 1) trade or commercial relations, 2) a distinct mechanism of exchange or market, 3) a court and some legal autonomy, 4) social relationships and organizations, and 5) some degree of political autonomy (Bruhn, 2005). He indicated that only medieval cities were the ones that fit the criteria of full urban community. Also, Weber proposed that politics and economy were the reasons for cities' uniquenesses, and cities would be different in different societies.

In the early stages of development of the community concept, it was studied as differences between rural and urban life as a result of industrial revolution as well as increasing population in cities. Tonnies defined community and society, Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber acknowledged city and urban life as well as the reasons of

differences between rural and urban residents. The table below is a summary of classical community concepts.

Category	Characteristics of Community (Gemeinschaft)	Characteristics of Society (Gesellschaft)
Areas of definition	Rural, family and people living in small towns (T, D)	Urban, large numbers of people (T,D)
Composition	Homogenous (T, D)	Heterogenous (T, D)
Relationships and interaction	Primary relationships based on emotion, frequent face to face interaction (T) Emotional (S)	Self-interest, negotiated accommodation and competition, infrequent interaction (T) Rational , indifferent, blasé (S)
Cohesion	Similar values and common ways of life (D)	Dissimilar and interdependent ways of life (D) Specialized division labor (D,W)
Thought processes, expectations, models	Conscience collective (D)	Individual conscience (D)
Authority	Traditional, personal obligation (W)	Rational, bureaucracy (W)
Key : T (Tonnies), D (Durkheim), W (Weber), S (Simmel)		

Table 1. Summary of Classical Community Concepts

However, the community studies did not end with Weber, and they continued to be the focus of sociological research in the twentieth century. Wirth examined the concept of community from similar lenses with previous studies and looked at the results of the industrial revolution and its impact on the community as well as the society. Wirth (1938) defined urban society as the engine of the whole society. He indicated that as a result of the industrial revolution a shift from rural to urban society occurred and changed every phase of social life. The larger, more densely populated and more heterogeneous a community, the more accentuated the characteristics associated with urbanism will be. According to Wirth (1938), the city was a melting pot of races, peoples, and cultures

where people from different parts of the world came together because they were different and useful to each other. The relationships in the city were face-to-face; however, they were impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental. Wirth (1938) emphasized that the larger the number of persons in a state of interaction with one another, the lower the level of communication and the greater the tendency for communication to proceed on an elementary level.

Later, Wellman and Leighton (1979) studied the community concept from a network perspective. They emphasized that neighborhood and community are two separate concepts. In their study they compared three competing scholarly arguments about the community: community lost, community saved, and community liberated arguments. Their results showed that community saved and community liberated arguments exist for social systems and individuals.

Gans (1982) focused on Italian Americans that were located in a West End neighborhood in Boston and their sense of community. According to Gans (1982), the specific institutions that constitute community are the church, school, and formal civic, social and political organizations. Moreover, some of these institutions are church related and some of them are commercial establishments. The outside world consists of work, education, health services, welfare agencies, government, and the mass media. In the middle class, people join community activities as a sign of prestige, leadership experience, or social and business contacts. Gans (1982) suggested that West Enders resisted change due to their family circle and the other institutions basic to the peer group society.

Further studies related to the community question can be classified into three major groups. Brint (2001) defined these lines of research as follows: community studies that examined community as the physical place, elective communities, and comparative studies regarding the characteristics of communities. He indicated that he considered the communities as a failure since they were mostly descriptive and gained attention for either supporting or debunking the ideal Gemeinschaft community. Brint (2001) concluded that in the modern world, loosely connected communities of place and friendship networks, activity-based communities and online communities have the potential to bring out some virtues of community such as fraternalism, less constraints on individual freedoms, and low levels of defensiveness to outsiders.

History of Online Communities

The first computer network, ARPANET, was created in the 1970s by researchers working for U.S. Department of Defense. The goal was to be able to operate different computers at a distance. Usenet is a type of conferencing system created by graduate students to link UNIX-based computer systems. Usenet consists of different newsgroups where users post their messages. Using a modem, hobbyists connected their personal computers and formed computer bulletin board systems (BBSs) (Rheingold, 1993). These systems enabled geographically dispersed individuals with similar interests to interact. Multi-user dungeons or domains (MUDs) are special types of virtual communities in which users interact and play fantasy computer games with each other in real time.

Established in 1985, WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) is one of the oldest online communities. It included topics for online discussions, and initial intentions were

to appeal to a wide audience including hackers and journalists. The motto for WELL is “you own your own words”; thus there is no anonymity (every member uses her real name). This creates responsibility for members for the things that they post on the discussion forums. It took two years for WELL to turn into a community, and members started to have face-to-face parties (Hafner, 1997). In 1992, WELL linked to the Internet and now consists of communities of interest (Rheingold, 1993).

Online Communities

There are different names for online communities such as virtual communities, computer-mediated communities, Internet communities, electronic communities, and cyber communities. In addition there are different types of online communities: discussion forums, chat rooms, bulletin boards, and multi-user dungeons. The variety of names and types of online communities raises a definition problem. Similar to the definition of community, scholars do not share one unique accepted definition for online communities.

Licklider and Taylor (1968) formulated the earliest ideas about online communities. According to them, online communities would have geographically dispersed members that are either working individually or in small clusters. In addition, online communities would be communities of common interest, not communities of common location. In each online community there would be enough members to generate extensive amounts of information. Members would be happier since they can interact with others who are similar to them or have common interests.

Virtual community definitions have different aspects of the concept. Rheingold (1993, p. 38) defined virtual communities as "... social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." One of the most comprehensive definitions of online communities is proposed by Ridings, Gefen and Arinze (2002, p. 273): "Virtual communities can be defined as groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism." Porter, (2004) defined virtual communities as "...an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms." There are five attributes of virtual communities (Porter, 2004):

- (1) *Purpose (content of interaction)*: Virtual communities are built around a common purpose, but there can be many different common interests among the members such as travel, golf, or living with diabetes.
- (2) *Place (extent of technology mediation of interaction)*: Interaction is guided by protocols and norms of the online community inside the community's space.
- (3) *Platform (design of interaction)*: In virtual communities interaction can be either synchronous (e.g. chat rooms) or asynchronous (bulletin boards, listservs, newsgroups).

- (4) *Population Interaction Structure (pattern of interaction)*: Interaction pattern in the online community is related to the group structure and type of social ties.
- (5) *Profit Model*: This model focuses on tangible economic values that virtual communities create.

On the other hand, Preece (2000) identified five characteristics of online communities: (1) members share a common interest (the main reason for joining the community), (2) members have strong ties, shared activities, and active, repeated participation, (3) members have access to shared resources determined by the policies, (4) members have reciprocity of information and support, and (5) members have shared social conventions, language and protocols.

Online community location or mechanism can be different things such as a chat room, bulletin board, newsgroups, multi-user domain (MUD) or a listserv (Ridings et al., 2002). Chat rooms are virtual places in which members interact synchronously. On the other hand, members communicate asynchronously through bulletin boards and newsgroups. Multi-user domains (MUDs) use text based communication and create virtual realities such as rooms, exits and other objects. In listservs members communicate via a common email program (Ridings et al., 2002).

According to Wellman (2001), individuals find community in networks. These community networks have an effect on individuals' lives and the resources they have access to. Online and offline communities have differences and similarities. For example, individuals can have community ties just as they do in face to face communities (Wellman and Gulia 1999). Many online relationships are not solely online; instead they

are supplements of offline relationships. Online relationships may not be as good as face-to-face relationships, but they may be filling voids of modern life. Online relationships can never be the same as face-to-face relationships because face-to-face relationships are deeper and have a richer history. Also, online communication consists of less information compared to in-person communication. In face-to-face communication between two individuals others can get in the conversation, but it is not possible to do so in online communication since individuals have to be invited in order to have three way conversations (Wellman, 2001).

Online travel communities

Online community research in the tourism field is fairly new, and there are few studies about the subject. Dellaert (1999) proposed that online communities can be key players in tourism marketing over the Internet. Travel websites that have interactive features (e.g. virtual community or discussion forums) are viewed by more unique visitors (Corigliano & Baggio, 2003). Since interactivity on websites encourages more visitors it can be another tool for attracting visitors to the website, thus promoting tourism services or destinations.

Wang et al. (2002) studied virtual tourist communities from a marketing perspective. They indicate that virtual communities can help brand building for tourism organizations as well as relationship building with consumers. Moreover, virtual communities can aid travel companies in new product development by enabling greater communication with consumers about their needs and wants. Virtual communities are the most inexpensive form of customer interaction for information dissemination purposes. Depending on the virtual travel community's success and volume of traffic, revenues

such as sponsorships, banner advertising, prospect fees, and sales commissions can be gained.

Online travel community members' needs were investigated in another study. Wang and Fesenmaier (2002) concluded that an online community was able to fulfill its members' social and psychological needs. Moreover, functional needs were found not to be important for members as they would like to spend more time interacting with members. In addition functional needs have negative effects on level of participation in online travel communities, whereas hedonic and social needs have positive effects. Member needs and participation are influenced by membership status and members' demographic characteristics (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004).

Efficacy motivation, instrumental motivations and expectancy motivation positively affect the level of contribution in online travel communities. Furthermore, active contribution to the community is positively related to ease of communication, members' personality, and level of community involvement (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003). Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) also examined the antecedents of online travel community activity and found that online travel community members mostly seek social and hedonic benefits. Members join the community to exchange travel information and tips and to share their travel experiences with others. Reasons for active contribution to the community include efficacy and potential for reciprocity.

Sense of virtual community's effect on loyalty and travel product purchase was measured in a virtual travel community (Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004). Four factors of sense of community membership - influence and relatedness, integration and fulfillment of need, and shared emotional connection - were used to measure sense of virtual

community. Three factors - membership, influence and relatedness, integration and fulfillment of need - were found to have a significant impact on members' purchasing behavior.

Wu and Chang (2005) examined whether trust and interactivity influence flow experience and online travel community members' purchase intentions. The results indicated that interactivity is an important factor of flow state whereas trust is not.

Why people join online communities

In order to understand the importance of online communities, we first need to understand why individuals join online communities. The need to belong is the key motivation in human relationships (Baumeister, 1995). The belongingness need includes frequent, stable and pleasant interactions with other people as well as concern for each other's wellbeing (Baumeister, 1995).

According to Ridings and Gefen (2004), reasons for getting involved in online communities include information exchange, social support, and entertainment and social relations (e.g. making new friends). Their study showed that the online community type also influences online community participation. In all types of communities the main reason for joining was information exchange. For example, in health and professional communities social support was the second most important reason, yet in interest/hobby communities friendship is the second most important factor. Moreover, lack of real world counterparts, time constraints, social anxiety and loneliness, and sharing a common predicament were individuals' main motivations for joining online communities (McKenna & Green, 2002). Personality related reasons (e.g. curiosity, boredom, need for interaction), social reasons (e.g. search for like-minded people), professional reasons (e.g.

job related), information reasons (e.g. receiving timely information), and pleasure reasons (e.g. entertainment and humor) were other major reasons to join online communities (Nonnecke & Preece, 1999) .

Knowledge exchange is a motivation for using emergent virtual communities (Wasco & Faraj, 2000). There are two basic modes in which individuals can use a virtual community—they can either get information or give information. Getting information is performed by simply reading the ongoing conversations in the community, as well as actively soliciting information by posting questions and comments. Giving information, on the other hand, is performed by posting conversations, either in direct response to another member's post or by simply starting a new topic in the community by posting commentary. Overall then, giving information thus involves a greater measure of active participation and exposure.

Knowledge can be considered a public or private good according to circumstances and individual perceptions. In online communities knowledge is a public good that is shared and spread throughout the community without losing its value during knowledge transfer. Individuals are inclined to share knowledge with others when knowledge is considered a public good. This motivation to share knowledge comes from a sense of moral obligation rather than reciprocity (Wasco & Faraj, 2000). In professional and organizational communities knowledge can be seen as a private good (owned by an organization or individual). In that case the motivation comes either from tangible returns such as promotions, raises, and bonuses or from intangible returns including reputation, status, and obligation from the knowledge seeker (Wasco & Faraj, 2000).

Typology of online communities

Lazar and Preece (1998) suggested four key characteristics of online communities that can help us in classifying them: (1) attributes of communities, (2) supporting software, (3) their relationship to physical communities, and (4) the concept of boundedness. Attributes of online communities can aid researchers in classifying online communities. These attributes included a shared goal or interest, strong social ties, shared activities between members, support among community members, access to shared resources, and population size. Supporting software used by online communities is another attribute that can be used for community classification. Online communities use different technologies such as listserves, newsgroups, bulletin boards, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), or Multi-User Dungeon (MUD). Boundedness is another way of creating an online community typology and is related to social relationships in the group or population. A community can be tightly bounded (i.e. interaction takes place mostly between members) or loosely bounded (i.e. members have more social ties with others outside of the community than with members of the community) (Wellman, 1997).

According to Aoki (1994), there are three types of virtual communities. In the first type of community members know each other and meet face-to-face. This type of community overlaps with physical communities. On the other hand, the second type of community consists of members that do not necessarily know each other; however, they have common goals, interests or value systems. They do not have common physical communities. The third type of community is the one in the middle of the other two types (it overlaps with physical communities).

Blanchard and Horan (1998) categorized online communities similar to Aoki and suggest that there are two types. The first type is a physically based online community, a supplement to physical communities. For example, city officials add information about town meetings to the city's website. The second type of online community is called virtual communities of interest. They are usually formed by members who are geographically dispersed yet have a common interest.

Markus (2002) divided online communities into three types according to their orientation: social, professional and commercial. She identifies socially-oriented online communities as the mother of all online communities and opened the way for other types of communities. They are categorized into two types:

(1) Relationship building communities: These are formed around a shared interest as the result of geographical proximity, demographic similarity or a common hobby. For example, these include travel related online communities such as virtualtourist.com, bootsnall.com, and Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree Forum.

Markus (2002) suggests that in these types of communities commitment to the group is strongest among all other types of communities.

(2) Entertainment communities: These can be adventure, game environments or chat rooms. Members join this type of community for entertainment purposes. This type of community is more focused on the member than the whole community.

The second type of online community is a professionally oriented community, in which professionals exchange information and knowledge with others outside their professional organization. There are two types of professional online communities:

- (1) Learning networks: These are for gaining knowledge about a new subject area.
- (2) Expert networks: These are for extending existing knowledge.

The third type is called commercially-oriented online communities, and their main goal is to generate profit. In order to identify whether the online community is a success or a failure profit-oriented factors such as sales are measured. Commercially-oriented online communities are subdivided into two categories:

- (1) Business-to-business: This type of community is formed to support supply chain and collaboration between professional organizations.
- (2) Business-to-consumer: These are built by organizations to support a product and are used for acquiring or retaining customers as a marketing tool.

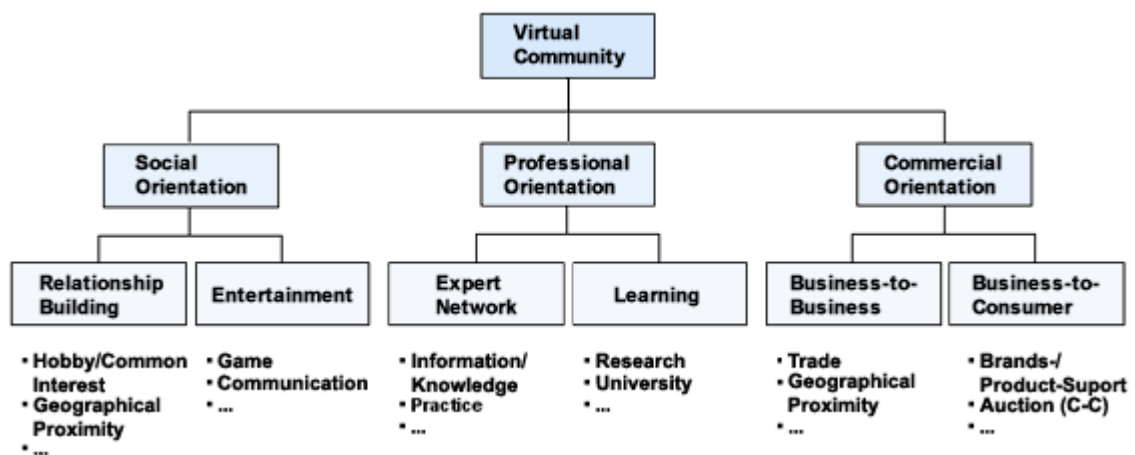


Figure 3. Markus's Virtual Community Typology

Porter (2004) divided virtual communities into two main categories: member-initiated and organization-sponsored. Member-initiated communities include relationships among members, whereas organization-sponsored communities have relationships between members as well as the sponsoring organization.

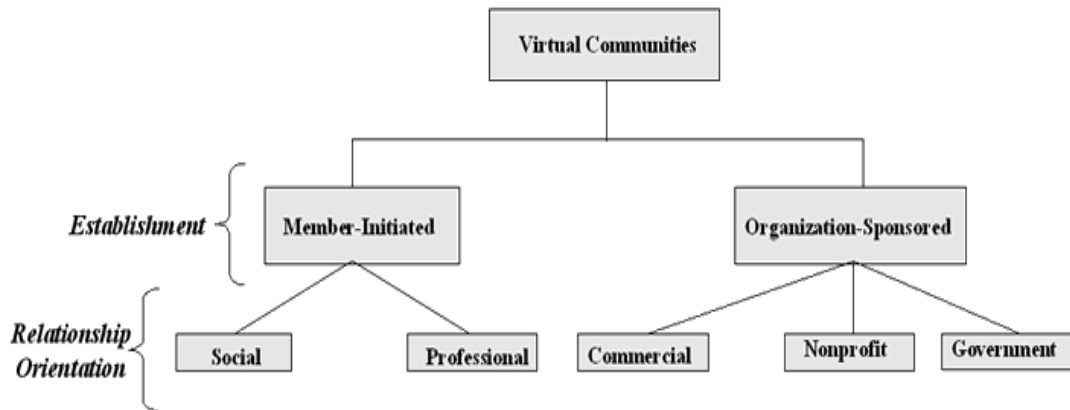


Figure 4. Porter's Virtual Community Typology

Word-of-Mouth

According to Andreasen (1968), there are four types of information sources: (1) Impersonal advocate (e.g. mass media); (2) Impersonal independent (e.g. consumer reports); (3) Personal advocate (e.g. sales clerks); and (4) Personal independent (e.g. friends). Senecal and Nantel (2004) extend this typology to online environments. The four information source types are: (1) Personal source providing personal information (e.g. My friend tells me that this product is best for me); (2) Personal source providing non-personalized information (e.g. The experts say this product is the best); (3) Impersonal source providing personalized information (e.g. Based on my previous purchases, the recommender system suggests this product); and (4) Impersonal source providing non-personalized information (e.g. According to Consumer Reports this is the best product).

Consumers' purchase decisions are also influenced by the type of product and information sources used (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992). Products can be classified as having search qualities that consumers can discover before purchase or

experience qualities that cannot be understood before purchase (Nelson, 1970). Tourism products are experience goods, making it impossible to evaluate them before the actual experience; thus consumers have a tendency to rely on recommendations of others. Senecal and Nantel (2004) indicate that recommendations for experience goods are significantly more influential than recommendations for search products. This type of recommendation comes from word-of mouth via family and friends that have experience with the tourism product. Previous research has found that WOM from friends and family is the most sought-after information source for travel decisions (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is defined as “informal communications between private parties concerning evaluations of goods and services” (Anderson, 1998, p.7). The influence of WOM is different in each step of the consumer decision making process. Previous research has shown the impact of WOM on consumer choice (Arndt, 1967; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955; Richins, 1983) and perceptions of post-purchase product (Bone, 1995). Katz and Lazarfeld (1955) also suggest that WOM is a more effective marketing tool than other traditional marketing tools like personal selling.

Through WOM individuals exchange their experiences with products or services, which can be positive, neutral or negative. Negative word-of-mouth is found to be more effective in the consumer decision making process (Arndt, 1967; Chevalier & Myazlin, 2003; Rositter & Percy, 1997) and can cause businesses to lose customers. Henning-Thurau and Walsh (2004) suggest that negative eWOM has a stronger impact on consumer purchase decisions than positive eWOM. Online recommendations have their strongest impact on refraining consumers from buying a product, followed by “telling

friends” about the online recommendation, buying a recommended product, and speaking to friends about the product.

Consumers’ knowledge about the product has a moderating effect on engaging in type of electronic word of mouth (negative, positive, neutral). Consumers who were experts about a product tended to transmit positive word-of-mouth information more often than negative information. On the other hand, novice consumers overestimate negative product information, tend to transmit negative WOM to others, and are more likely to transmit neutral information than positive information to others (Sohn & Leckenby).

Prior research has found that if a consumer suspects that the recommender has incentives to recommend the product, then those recommendations are discredited by the consumer (Mizerski, Golden, & Kernan, 1979). Moreover, according to attribution theory a communicator will be perceived as biased if the recipient can infer the messages can be used for the communicator’s personal gain (e.g. sales commission or non-product related motivations) (Kelley, 1973). Recommendations from websites that do not have commercial gain (e.g. online travel communities) can be more influential on travel decisions than information gained from marketing oriented websites.

Customer satisfaction and evaluation of the services can be influenced by customer-to-customer interactions, and dissatisfied customers are the most important ones in service settings (Kilinc, & Yuksel, 2006). Poor service recovery may result in customer dissatisfaction. The Internet provides the ability and resources for consumers to engage in negative word-of-mouth which can reach a broader audience through blogs, Internet forums, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) and user generated video sites

(e.g. YouTube). The purpose of sharing bad experiences with others is to tarnish the firm's reputation and discourage others from becoming customers of that firm (Gregoire & Fisher, 2007). On the other hand, an increase in positive WOM and satisfaction after service failure was found as a result of high service recovery efforts (Maxham, 2001). Positive WOM is especially important and effective for services (Ettenson & Turner, 1997) as well as for high risk products and intangible products (Zeithaml, 1981). Moreover, it has been indicated that even a single recommendation is enough to influence an individual to try the specified service provider (Gremler, 1994). Word-of-mouth's effect is greatest when there is a strong tie and homophily between the individuals that exchange information (Brown & Reingen, 1987).

The Internet changed communications between individuals and organizations. Through the Internet organizations can reach anybody with a computer and Internet access. In addition individuals can reach others and share their personal thoughts about products or services. Thus online WOM not only impacts an individual's friends and neighbors but also others who read online comments. Virtual communities include word-of-mouth communication in different formats, such as bulletin board or forum postings.

eWOM is different from traditional WOM in three ways: (1) eWOM's scale is larger due to the Internet's low-cost and communication capabilities; (2) eWOM provides the ability for organizations to monitor and control their operation; and (3) the absence of contextual cues and not knowing the information provider's identity makes it harder to interpret the subjective information in online interactions (Dellarocas, 2003). For organizations, online feedback mechanisms affect brand building and customer

acquisition, product development and quality control, and supply chain quality assurance activities (Dellarocas, 2003).

eWOM has different names and forms, such as virtual opinion platforms, consumer portals and online feedback mechanisms. These mechanisms can be implemented in different settings. For instance, Citysearch.com displays user feedback on restaurants, bars and performances; Tripadvisor.com does the same for hotels; and Amazon.com encourages users to rate and review purchased products.

eWOM's influence and whether it affects consumer behavior is still a new subject for researchers. Online consumer reviews of video games positively affect purchasing behavior (Bounie, Bourreau, Gensollen, & Waelbroeck, 2005). The effect of online consumer reviews on book sales were compared between Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com. The results suggest that the reviews on both sites are mostly positive; improvement in a book's review increases book sales on Amazon.com; and the impact of bad reviews (1 star) is greater than the impact of good reviews (5 star) (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2003). Chatterjee (2001) suggests that the influence of negative eWOM on perceived reliability and purchase intentions is determined mostly by familiarity with the retailer. Moreover, perceived reliability and purchase intentions differ for online only retailers versus click-and-mortar firms.

The motivation to read online reviews is to save time in decision making and to make better buying decisions. It is a known fact that many consumers value other consumers' advice regarding products and services that they desire to purchase (Punj & Stealin, 1983). Thus, an online community may also add to customer loyalty since consumers can exchange product information and experiences (Frank, 1997). Moreover,

some consumers may remain loyal because they value other members' input (Sirinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnnavolu, 2002). Moreover, readers' behaviors are influenced by online reviews (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004). For example, after reading a positive online review a consumer is more likely to buy the recommended product or refrain from buying it after reading a negative comment. The results of Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2004) study indicated that refraining from buying a product, telling friends about online reviews, buying a recommended product and speaking to friends and colleagues were the strongest impacts of online product reviews on consumer behavior. Also, negative online reviews had more impact on consumer decision making than positive ones.

Gruen, Osmonbekov and Czaplewski (2006) indicated that consumers perceive electronic WOM (eWOM) to be a reliable source of information that impacts the perceived overall value of a firm's products and offerings. Although eWOM is assumed to be true and authentic most of the time, trust and credibility are common issues in online environments. Different websites use different techniques to overcome these problems. For example, on Amazon.com users rate the reviews, thus creating an online reputation for the reviewer where reviewers can become a "Top 50 reviewer". The problem with this system is that the quality of online reviews is mostly ignored. Also consumers read online reviews on Amazon.com and trust the reviews just because they are posted on a reputable website and vendor. In a recent study, David and Pinch (2006) uncovered reviewer plagiarism; specifically, they found the same book review for two different books with just different book titles. These issues expose the vulnerability of online review systems. Moreover, online WOM may not be an actual indicator of product quality. When the mean of online product reviews was considered, it was found that it did

not show the product's real quality, thereby complicating future sales of the product (Hu, Pavlou, & Zhang, 2006). In addition, the results indicate that extremely satisfied or extremely unsatisfied consumers are more likely to review products than moderately satisfied consumers. Since online reviews are written by consumers with either extremely good or bad experiences, Clemons, Gao, and Hitt (2006) indicated that it was better to have some customers that love the product rather than a huge number of customers who merely liked the product. They also found that dispersion of online ratings was positively correlated with sales growth.

While reading online product reviews, different aspects of the recommendation can influence consumers, such as seller rating, product rating, product type, the number of overall ratings, and the number of negative and positive reviews. For example, for household products consumers are concerned with the average review and the number of negative reviews. On the other hand, for experiential products (e.g. movies) consumers are willing to accept negative reviews if those reviews indicate controversy rather than a poor product (Hankin, 2007).

eWOM's influence has also been studied by assessing its value for forecasting motion picture revenues. Results showed that average online movie ratings were better predictors of future movie revenues than a movie's marketing budget, professional critic reviews and other salient variables (Dellarocas, Awad, & Zhang, 2004). Thus, online movie reviews influenced consumer decisions about whether or not to watch a movie.

WOM's persuasiveness may be mediated by other factors. For example, information vividness has been shown to mediate the effect of WOM (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). Vividly presented information has a stronger influence than pallidly

presented information. Information accessibility also mediates the effectiveness of vividly presented information on judgment. Arguing that face-to-face information exchange is more accessible than less vivid information presentations, Herr, Kardes, and Kim (1991) concluded that WOM had a strong impact on product judgments.

Travel blogs are also form of eWOM and have the power to influence travel decisions due to the fact that tourism products are intangible and difficult to evaluate before consumption (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Moreover, research regarding eWOM is a way to gather authentic, rich and unsolicited consumer feedback from those who have travel experience (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crofts, 2007). However, locating and analyzing eWOM can be time consuming, and a targeted approach such as market segmentation may be used for analysis of destinations (Carson, 2008). Wenger (2008) studied travel blogs related to Austria and found that the results were not sufficient enough to understand Austria's destination image and the need to locate influential blog authors that may affect key markets.

The influence of product reviews in travel decision making depends on the decision making stage as well as the type of tourism product (Ricci & Wietsma, 2006). For example, for booking hotels the traveler consults reviews at the end of the decision making process to increase confidence in his/her decisions. However, for choosing activities at the destination the reviews were more important at the beginning stage of decision making. Their study also indicated that there was no significant difference between positive and negative reviews. In fact positive reviews are used for understanding and increasing product knowledge whereas negative reviews are used for product decision confidence. User characteristics such as gender and age can also impact

the influence of reviews. In the same study, men were found to be more influenced by reviews, whereas women were more skeptical about the reviews. However, they found no significant differences determined by the age of users (Ricci & Wietsma, 2006).

Influence

Evaluation of services in which travel and tourism is a part of is a complex process for consumers. This complexity is due to the characteristics of service goods: intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity, and simultaneous production and consumption (Mehta, Lalwani, & Ping, 2001). Furthermore, these characteristics bring higher perceived risk to decision making, and the degree of personal influence increases as the degree of perceived risk increases (Perry & Hamm, 1969). Travel is a high perceived risk consumption, and in order to reduce the risks consumers seek information from experienced others (Mehta, Lalwani, and Ping 2001).

Reference groups include individuals who are important to the decision maker such as family, friends, teachers, and parents. They also influence decisions, especially travel related decisions. Hsu, Kang, and Lam (2006) suggested that family and friends were the most influential reference group regarding decisions made to visit Hong Kong. Moreover, reference group influences are related to individuals' values, attitudes, motivations, and perceptions.

A reference group is an individual or group of individuals that influences an individual's behavior (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Reference groups can be family members, sportsmen, political leaders, classmates, or local communities. Reference groups are classified in different ways: (1) type of contact: primary and secondary groups, (2)

formality structure of groups: formal and informal groups, and (3) attraction: aspirational and dissociative groups (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2001).

Reference group influence can be classified in three forms: normative, value-expressive and informational. Normative influence is making decisions to gain approval of other group members (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2003). As a result, individuals can accept group behaviors and beliefs but can also comply with group norms without accepting all the behaviors and beliefs (Homans, 1961). Value-expressive influence is related to an individual's association with a positive referent in order to enhance one's self-concept or dissociating oneself with a negative referent (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Informational influence is making decisions to reach the best possible decision (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2003).

In discussing the effect of reference groups on purchase decisions, Witt and Bruce (1972) suggested that seven aspects of social influence were involved in purchase decisions: (1) perceived conspicuousness of the product or service; (2) the level of perceived risk of purchase decision; (3) the nature and extent of the product or service's symbolic involvement in the purchaser's social interaction framework; (4) purchaser's reference group's attractiveness; (5) the expertise of the referent involved; (6) purchaser's need for approval or reinforcement; and (7) the extent of satisfaction with the purchase associated with the purchaser's social environment. Previous research has also shown that publicly consumed products and services are more subject to reference group influence (Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

In online travel communities, community members' influence takes place through online postings and is based on self-reported behavior. The actual behaviors are not

visible to other forum members or users. Moreover, low entry barriers and easy exit of the communities make it easier for individuals who do not agree with the community's beliefs. Thus, normative and value-expressive influence is less likely to occur in online environments. In contrast informational influence may occur in online travel communities. For instance, informational influence may occur when facts, evidence or other travel related information are being discussed by community members via postings. Furthermore, shared information that has been mentioned or repeated by other community members has the potential to have more influence on decision making since this indicates the importance of the information for the group and decision making process (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2003).

Synopsis of the Chapter

This chapter has reviewed the literature regarding information search, online communities, word-of-mouth, and influence. The next chapter will present the methodology used in the current study to examine the influence of eWOM in online travel communities on travel decisions.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Previous research has investigated the phenomena of information search, online communities, word-of-mouth, and influence. This study follows an inductive approach to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of online travel community and its members. First, the online community used in this study is described. Second, description of data, data collection, purposeful sampling, and data sample are explained. Finally, data analysis methods are described.

Qualitative Research in Tourism

Qualitative methods are a good fit for online travel community research because of the infancy of empirical research in this area. A new phenomenon like online travel communities needs to be examined in depth in order to gain a better understanding of its effects on individuals who participate in these types of communities either by reading or posting information. In order to achieve this, researchers try to understand situations and experiences in their context. However, qualitative research does not answer what may happen in the future or make predictions; rather, it establishes motivations for behavior. Moreover, this type of research is conducted because of a lack of a theory or the existing theories do not explain the phenomenon. Thus it is inductive; the findings from the data are usually themes, categories, typologies, or tentative hypotheses. The researcher is the instrument for data collection and analysis; thus, the researcher may

have biases about the research which are important to identify. The study results are descriptive, and words rather than numbers are used to explain the study results (Merriam, 2002).

The dominant paradigm in tourism research is positivism (Decrop, 1999; Riley & Love, 2000; Walle, 1997). There are three main reasons for low numbers of qualitative research in tourism literature. The first one is that researchers are not familiar with qualitative research techniques, which makes it difficult for them to understand these studies. The second reason is that qualitative research findings are hard to translate into practical implications (Riley & Love, 2000). The third reason is the questions about the legitimacy of qualitative research. However, quantitative research has been noted by Walle (1997) to dehumanize research in order to reduce bias and increase rigor. Thus, to move tourism research towards a transition of whole system approaches, researchers, consultants, managers, and stakeholders need to understand complex systems through integrative and nonlinear approaches; otherwise progress will be hampered and results will be distorted, incomplete and devoid of full meaning (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004). As Decrop (1999) emphasizes “science is not a question of numbers but of reasoning, a qualitative study can be as sound as a quantitative one.”

Early qualitative tourism research based on either anthropological or sociological perspectives and examined the Self and the Other (Riley & Love, 2000). Quantitative research in tourism before 1990 was mostly concerned with economic impacts (Archer & Owen, 1972; Loeb, 1982; Sadler & Archer, 1975), segmentation strategies (Oppedjik, Walle, & Verhallen, 1986; Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980), tourist flows (Fritz, Brandon,

& Xander, 1984; Uysal & Crompton, 1985), and psychometric scales (Gearing, Swart, & Var, 1974; Goodrich, 1977; Pearce, 1982; Shih, 1986)

Qualitative research in the tourism field has gained legitimacy with the emergence of journals such as *Tourism Analysis*, *Current Issues in Tourism and Tourism*, *Culture and Communication* and their focus on theoretical and methodological issues (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001). In addition, the focus of qualitative research was mostly concerned with the tourist gaze and observations of tourism industry, which used discourse analysis, critical theory, social constructionism as methodological tools. In addition, Jamal and Hollinshead (2001) indicate that a few of these studies included “body” and “emotion” in tourism, which means the researcher was removed from the study and her insights were not included in the study’s interpretation stage.

The characteristics of qualitative research

Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting which enables the researcher to be highly involved with the study site and the subjects as well as their actual experiences. The data collection methods include observations, interviews, and documents such as text or images. Qualitative research is emergent and usually begins with initial codes, expands into broad themes, and comes together in interpretation. The researcher interprets the data by describing the subjects and the setting, analyzing for themes or categories, and drawing conclusions or interpretations about the meaning of the data based on experience and knowledge of researcher as well as meaning expanded by participants. The researcher uses inductive, multifaceted, iterative, and simultaneous reasoning. Thinking about the meaning of the data is iterative; the researcher goes back

and forth from data collection phase to data analysis to understand the meaning of the data with a focus on getting it right (Creswell, 2003).

Case Study Approach

Case studies are a common method in qualitative studies. Stake (2005) emphasized that case study is a choice of what to be studied, not a methodological choice. A case study is a process of inquiry about the case as well as the product of that inquiry. Case studies enhance our understanding on a subject by answering research questions.

Throughout the study, interpretation and triangulation are important steps in case study research. Moreover, the more a case study is a bounded system, specific, and unique, the more useful the study is. In case studies local meaning and foreshadowed meaning are important. They are reflective studies in which the researcher finds the meanings and relates them to the context (Stake, 2005). Stake (2005) identified five requirements for case studies: (1) issue of choice, (2) triangulation, (3) experiential knowledge, (4) contexts, and (5) activities.

- 1) Issue of choice: This includes choosing a topical issue to be studied and foreshadowed problems. For instance, the topical issue of this dissertation is the influence of eWOM in an online travel community on travel decisions. The foreshadowed problem is that many individuals use online travel communities to plan their travels and share their travel experiences; however, there is not enough academic research regarding their influence on travel decisions.
- 2) Triangulation: It is the process of clarifying meaning, verifying the repeatability of the observation and interpretations, and identifying different realities (Stake,

- 2005). Triangulation methods are used to construct the validity of research. In this study peer review is used to ensure the validity of the study results.
- 3) Experiential knowledge: Case studies report the experiential knowledge a researcher gathered from the case. This is a personal experience gained by time and access to the study area. The researcher becomes knowledgeable about the study area and the subjects, the relationships, the activities, and the contexts. For example, in this study while reading the posts the researcher gained an understanding of the members and their knowledge related to the destination.
 - 4) Contexts: The case to be studied – an online community – is part of a complex entity which can be studied in sociological, psychological, or communication contexts. In this study sociological context is chosen to explain the phenomenon of online travel community.
 - 5) Activities: The process of understanding the selected case's functioning. The researcher describes and interprets the activities. These activities are influenced by the context of the study; thus the context needs to be described in case studies. The activities of Thorn Tree community members are explained from a sociological point of view and the community concept.

Study Area

The study was conducted at Thorn Tree forum located at <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/index.jsps>, which is part of Lonely Planet's website (an organization known by its guidebooks and television programs). Thorn Tree

is an online travel community that includes various topics such as destinations, health, older travelers, and travelers with disabilities. By registering on the website individuals become members and have the opportunity to post messages. Registration requires an email address and username. The member's password is sent to the registered email address; thus the website has low entry barriers. On the other hand, anybody can read the forum. As of May 2008 Thorn Tree forum had approximately 450,000 members.

Thorn Tree forum has four main discussion parts in which all members post their ideas. The data for this study was collected from the Departure Lounge under world regions. Table 2 shows these four parts and the topics discussed in each part.

Thorn Tree Discussion Areas	Definition
<i>Departure Lounge</i>	Includes destination specific branches. Each destination is under a specific destination topic. For example, discussion topics about Turkey are categorized under Europe - Eastern Europe and the Caucasus branch.
<i>The Lobby</i>	Includes general travel information. The branches under this part are: Traveler Classifieds, The Gap Year & RTW travel, The Long Haul - Living & Working Abroad, A Life on the Ocean Wave, Walking, Trekking & Mountaineering, Activities & Gear, On Your Bike, Diving & Snorkeling, Health, Speaking in Tongues, Computers, Cameras, Phones, Gay & Lesbian Travelers, Older Travelers, Kids To Go, Travelers With Disabilities, Traveling Companions, Like a Sore Thumb, Experimental Travel, and Women Travelers.
<i>News Stand</i>	Has one branch called Responsible Travel and includes topics from ecology to economy and ethics of travel.
<i>Tree House</i>	Has different branches including Your Choice, Get Stuffed, World of Sport, Don't Forget to Write, Culture Vultures, Picture This, and All about Thorn Tree.

Table 2. Organization of Thorn Tree Forum.

Community members create content in the forum through their postings. Administrators are responsible for the proper functioning of the forum as well as monitoring postings for commercial advertising and improper language and deleting the posts that fall into that category. After they login, members choose the topic they want to post comments to. The Thorn Tree forum also has a search function according to keyword or author. All users can see online members by clicking the “who’s on” button. In addition there are help files and terms of use for new members. Users can also view member profiles which include the number of postings made by that user, when they joined the community, the last time they were online in the forum, and their average number of posts per day. In addition users can have information about their country of origin and first and last names; but since these are optional questions most members leave them blank or enter fake countries (e.g., Thorn Tree World) for their country of origin. Moreover, members can send private messages to each other. Figure 5 shows the home page of Thorn Tree Forum.

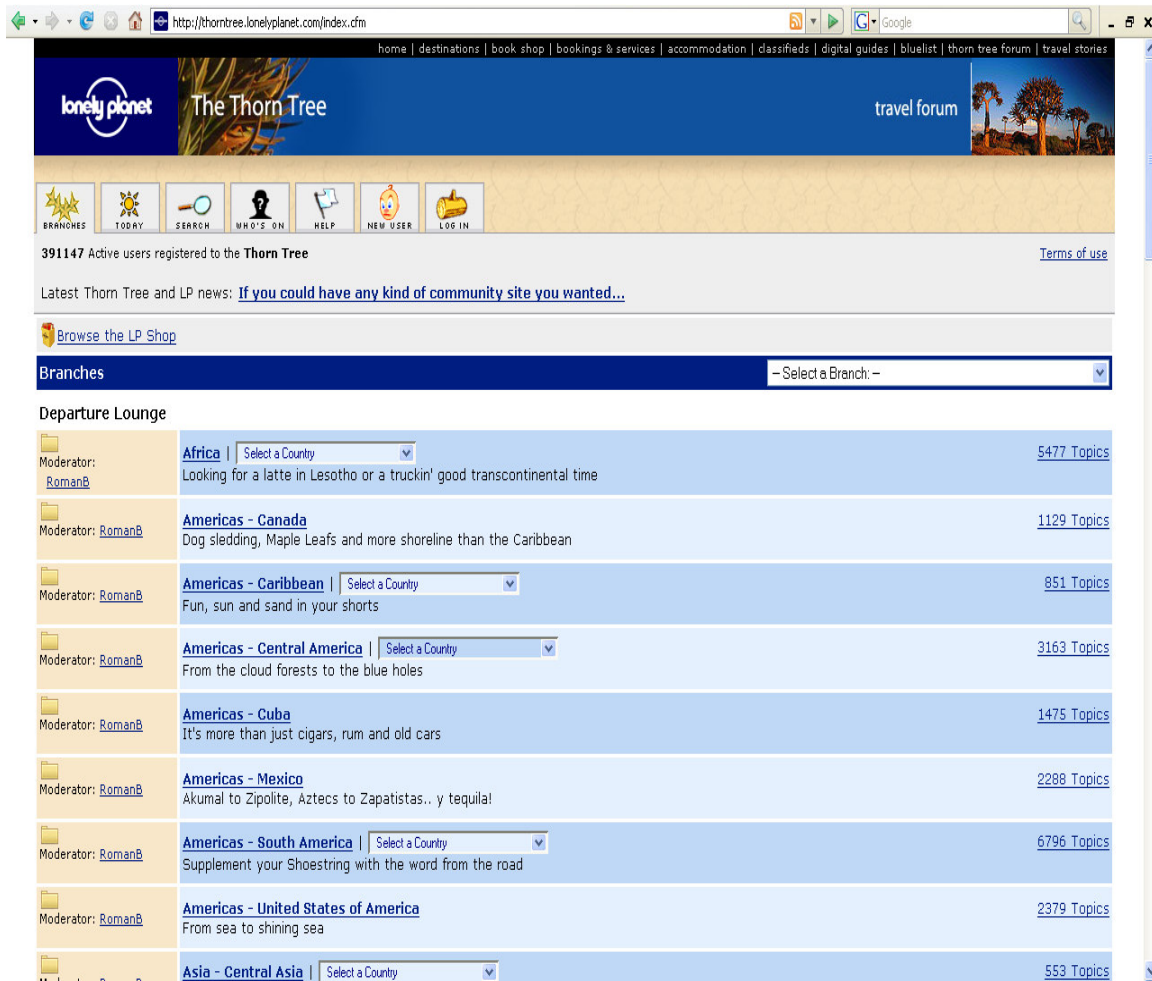


Figure 5. Thorn Tree Homepage.

The Community of Thorn Tree Forum

Thorn Tree Forum is considered an online travel community; however, the question is does it have the elements to be a true community. Driskell and Lyon (2001) summarized the basic elements of a traditional community: (1) specific place, (2) common ties, and (3) social interaction. This study analyzed Thorn Tree Forum based on these three core elements of community.

Specific place

Thorn Tree Forum, like all online communities, has a specific location on the Internet, meaning a website that can be reached by individuals who have Internet access.

In traditional community definitions specific place refers to a physical place that is rooted in soil where members meet. The Internet freed the concept of physical place in traditional community forms and turned it into a virtual meeting place. Online community members do not have to leave their homes to communicate with other members; they just need to visit the community website on the Internet. For instance, as opposed to a traditional community that meets in a community center, online community members meet at the community website located at <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/index.jspa>.

Gemeinschaft community type defined by Tonnies emphasized the importance of place for communities. He indicated that “a common relation to soil tends to associate people who may be kinsfolk or believe themselves to be such” (p. 257). Although Thorn Tree is a virtual community with no physical meeting place, the members see it as a real place. For example, when asked about their country of residence most of the members in the analyzed threads indicated that they were from “The Thorn Tree World”. This shows that Thorn Tree is more than a virtual place for some members; it is their country of residence and where they live.

Specific place in the sense of traditional community definitions may not exist for online communities; however, they have a specific place on the Internet. Local place and shared space are not needed for having common ties and social interaction in online communities. Wellman (2001) suggested that communities are networks of interpersonal ties which can exist on the Internet.

Common ties

Driskell and Lyon (2001) indicated that common ties need commonalities and “the group of individuals on the Net must have a bond, a measure of commitment, a set of shared values, a culture, a history, and a shared identity” (Driskell & Lyon, 2001, p. 337). The commonality in Thorn Tree Forum is the shared love of travel. It is specifically formed for travelers and creates a common location for sharing their experiences and concerns related to travel.

Tonnies (1887) indicated that the use of common language “brings nearer and binds human minds and hearts, so we find a common state of mind” (p. 49). In this online travel community members create a shared language among themselves. For example, the term “Original Poster” was defined by the members and is used for the member who starts a thread.

The members also have a bond between them. This can be seen by the jokes they post on the forum. For example, in the thread where a member asked where would be a nice place to have a bachelor party in Morocco, the members’ messages showed the bond among them:

Member A:

“I thought Member B would perform a belly dance for such a nice bunch of young guys. Be a good hostess!”

Member C:

“Maybe they'd rather have a dancing boy--you're on.”

Member C:

“(As a dancing boy you could almost win out for age with Omar's camels....)”

Member B:

“Oh, sorry fellas, but I'm booked for that night”

Member A:

“OK, I will don my tutu and head that way. But Omar's camels are pretty slow so if I don't get there in time please make alternate arrangements.”

It can be understood from the postings that these members know each other well enough that they start joking about one member performing a belly dance for the bachelor party. Moreover, Member C proposed that Member A (who is a male) can also perform a belly dance. This type of conversation can be offensive for individuals that do not know each other well. But in the case of this thread it shows the bond between members as well as a shared culture and understanding. Another important point in the previous conversation is that although members use pseudonyms, they know each others' gender, which is hard to identify in online environments. Since there was no posting regarding members' gender in the thread provided above, this shows that these members have a history together and know each other from other threads.

The measure of member commitment can be seen by the amount of time they spend in the online community and their total number of postings. The total number of postings a member has shows her willingness to help other members by posting their own

experiences at the destination or asking questions to better understand the Original Poster's situation. There are members who have more than 30,000 total postings since they have become members of this online community. For instance, one member has 31,387 postings since he became a member in September 2001. So this member was a part of this community approximately six years, and it makes 2,190 days of total membership duration and 14.33 postings per day. However, as in traditional physical communities, the level of member commitment varies in this online community. Some members have a few postings even though they have been a member for sometime. As an example, one member has only two postings in the community although she has been a member more than a year, and there may be others who are members but do not post anything and just read the forums.

The level of member commitment can also be seen by the time they take to write their posts and also by finding out the information they don't know personally. For example, in the following thread a member calls the authorities to help out another member.

Member D:

"BTW – Member E, where are you? Should I call up the tourist office in Ronda for fiesta info tomorrow? (it's a bank holiday today in Spain)."

Member E:

"Sorry, sorry. We leave in 5 days and tasks are mounting. Yes, Yes please get the fiesta info if it's not too much trouble. It sounds great."

Member D:

“Fiesta - that was fun, the phone number on the official website of Ronda for the tourist office is a private number - I had a nice conversation with the lady, she said she's had phone calls every five minutes and was considering getting a job in tourism - easier than correcting the error on the website....

Anyway, the procession leaves at 9 - 9-30 in the morning from the church near the Bullring, I think it's Iglesia de Merced - there will be a mass and lots of people around.

Dates - most probably the first Sunday after Corpus Christi, which would be the 10th of June. They do not have posters yet (btw those posters are collectors items - they usually are really beautiful - I stole a few off the walls after the event I admit (shhh...).

I'll confirm the dates by e-mail with you - it would be great if you could witness a "fiesta patronal" - they're so elusive and so much fun.

Do you need any more info on Granada/train, etc?”

In the postings above Member D found the answer for Member E's question even though she didn't know the answer personally by calling the tourist office. Moreover, Member D is willing to help Member E and asked if Member E needed more information about Granada and train schedules. Furthermore, members take time to find the information such as local bus schedules, museum closing times, and road conditions.

Social interaction

In traditional community definitions social interaction is mostly associated with face-to-face interaction. In online communities the interaction is computer mediated and asynchronous. Members post messages after they see it on the board, and there is a lag between the times a member posts a question and gets an answer. However, not having face-to-face social relations does not mean that social interactions in online communities are different from traditional communities.

Tonnies described social interactions in Gemeinschaft-like communities as:

“the feeling that we are intimate, that we affirm each other’s existence, that ties exist between us, that we know each other and to a certain extent sympathetic toward each other, trusting and wishing each other well” (p. 9)

Similar to a Gemeinschaft type community, the Thorn Tree Forum members care for each other and try to help others who need it. In the next example, one member bought an airline ticket, but the airline company declared bankruptcy. He is trying to get a refund; however, the website is in Spanish and he needs help in order to fill out the form to get his refund.

Member F:

“Can someone please help me filling out the form?”

1. Titular del Billete:

1. Apellido: - is that my adresses?

Dirección: - ?

Localidad: - ?

2. Datos del Billete

Localizador: - I can only type six figures, but "Localizador de reserva" in my e-ticket is much longer.

Trayecto 1 - De: A: Fecha: - what is that?"

Member G:

"Apellido is your surname

Dirección is the main part of your address.

Localidad is your town

Trayecto de.. a - Where you flight is from and to.

Fecha is the date

Dunno about the localizador."

Member H:

"Localizador" usually is a combination of 6 numbers and letters, and in e-tickets is the second part of "localizador de reserva". If you click at "guia de uso" in the main page you'll find examples of where are the data in a paper ticket and e-ticket"

Member F:

"Ok, I have completed the form now. Then I got to the window in the bottom of this page: <http://administracionconcurasal.airmadrid.com/usoweb.htm>

Has it been sent to them electronically or do I have to sent it to them via snail-mail?"

Member H:

"OK, I'll translate you the complete instructions for the procedure. Hope this can help you and others:

1 >>>>> "Cumplimente el formulario habilitado el efecto.

(La opción Registro le da acceso al mismo. La opción Uso Web le muestra como cumplimentarlo.)"

Fill the corresponding form (the "Registro" option gives you access to it. The "Uso web" option help you on how to fill it)

2 >>>>> "Imprima el documento que le genera el formulario tras registrar correctamente su notificación."

PRINT the document that the form will generate after register your notification (so you should BOTH submit via web and snail mail)

3 >>>>> Presente o remita mediante correo certificado y con acuse de recibo al Juzgado Decano, Registro Juzgado de lo Civil de Madrid, Calle Capitán Haya 66, 28020 Madrid, España el escrito generado por el sistema dirigiéndolo al Juzgado de lo Mercantil nº 5 de Madrid, Autos 411/2.006.

Send the printed document, VIA CERTIFIED MAIL WITH ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RECEIPT to the Court in Madrid:

Juzgado Decano, Registro Juzgado de lo Civil de Madrid, Calle Capitán Haya 66, 28020 Madrid

you should adress the document to "Juzgado de lo Mercantil nº 5 de Madrid, Autos 411/2.006" (this is the reference for them to allocate what case are you

referring to)

4 >>>>>>>> El escrito deberá ir acompañado de los documentos (billetes de viaje, ya sean físicos o electrónicos, así como del comprobante de pago y cualquier otro documento acreditativo) de los conceptos incluidos en el crédito que solicita que le sea reconocido.

You should enclose all relevant documents (paper or e-tickets, receipt of payment, any other relevant document....) regarding the credit you want to be recognised (so, the amount you want to claim)

5 >>>>>>>> Será imprescindible presentar un escrito por billete, no pudiéndose agrupar más de un billete en el mismo escrito aunque se hayan adquirido conjuntamente.

You should send a claim for each ticket, you cannot sent at the same time claims reagrding several tickets, even in case these were purchased at the same time (i.e. for you and another person...)

Please note I'm not an expert on these procedures, I'm just translating from the website. I would try to phone them before sending anything. In any case, keep copies of everything you send!

Do it quickly and be sure your claim reaches the Court before Feb 20.”

In the previous example, Member C’s native language is Spanish, so she translates the whole document and all the steps that Member A has to take to send his refund form. The translated document was not short, and Member C took time to help out another member, Member A, since she cares about and wants to help other community members.

Also, being a member of an online community does not mean that the members do not have face-to-face interactions. They may meet during their travels as in the case of Thorn Tree Forum. In the next example, it is understood that two members have met in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Member I:

“Be prepared with several bottles of a good red wine to share with Member J.

You may have to hide one just for yourself.

Ohhh, I don't know about suggesting anyone go on a tour with Member J in

downtown Jo'burg. Shall I tell about the little "incident" we encountered near the police station Member J?”

Member J:

“Not a word, Member I. Oooh, I can feel a twinge of gout already.”

Member I:

“Member J is a great host and tour guide; we stayed with him in Nov 05 and had a fabulous time. I'm sure after a couple glasses of wine that he'll tell you about our adventure in downtown Jo'burg. I did not feel in danger at anytime....in fact had a nice tour of the loo in the police station”

The messages above not only show the intimacy of social relations in Thorn Tree Forum but also their history. The two members in the above example have met face to

face, and Member I stayed at Member J's house during his trip. This also shows that their online interaction has gone beyond the Internet and flowed over to the physical world.

In conclusion, Thorn Tree Forum is an online community that has elements of traditional communities. The communities can exist without a local place such as in the case of online communities. Furthermore, Thorn Tree community members have common ties and social interaction similar to the physical world. As explained with the previous examples, they share their travel experiences, help each other find travel related information, meet and become friends in physical world, and even help with foreign language translations. The time and effort spent on writing these postings clearly shows that these members care for each other and have shared values. Considering all these facts, Thorn Tree Forum is a true community in itself.

Study Design

The study design is shown in Figure 6. It explains the data, purposeful sampling methods, the data sample, and data analysis steps taken in order to answer the research questions. The audit trail that explains in detail how the study was conducted can be seen in Appendix C.

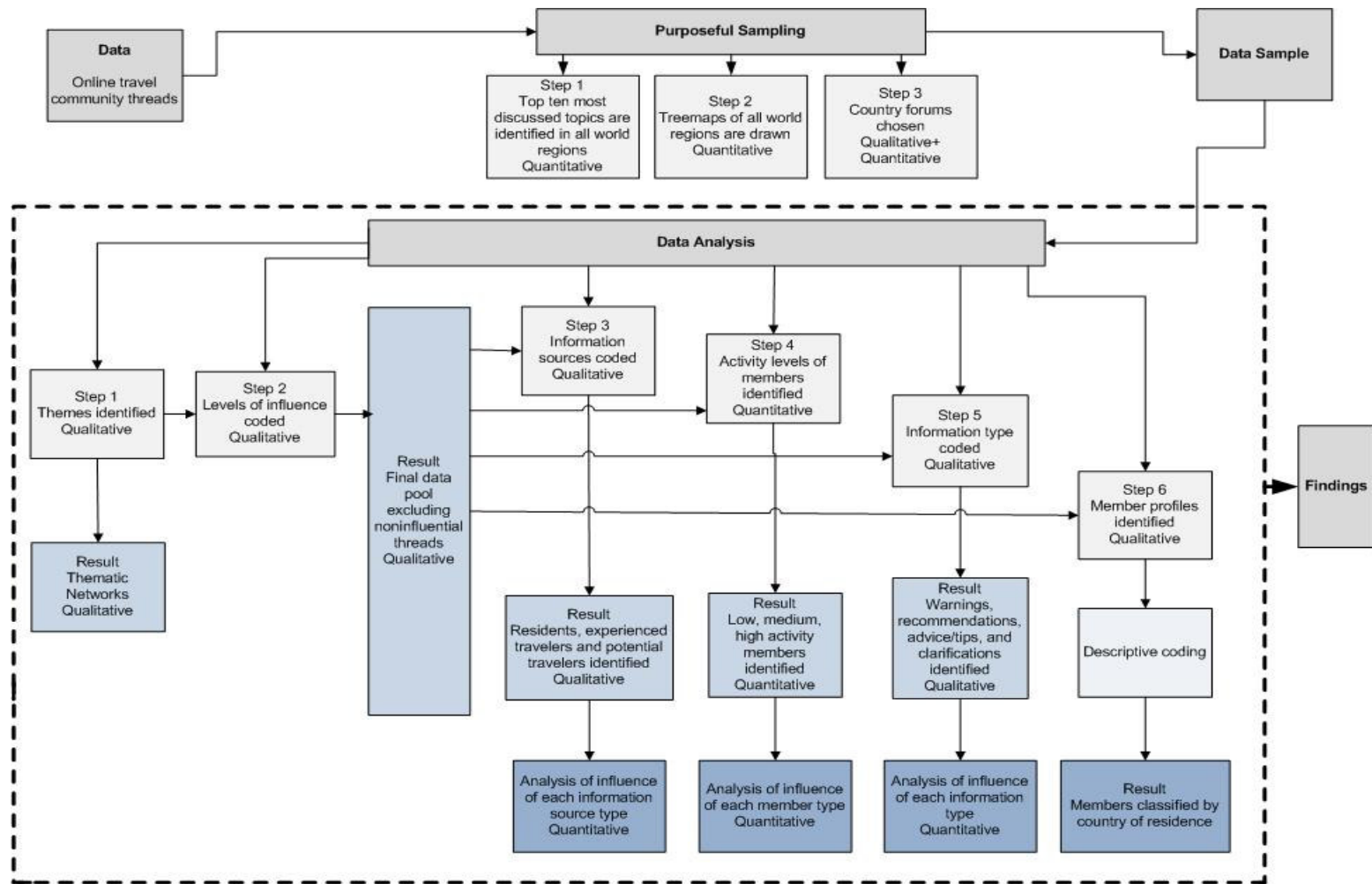


Figure 6. Study Flowchart

Data Collection

The data used in this study includes online travel community threads. The basic unit of analysis is a posting. A thread is a set of hierarchically organized postings under one posting. A posting is an online message that is written in the online travel community forum. Thorn Tree Forum has fourteen world regions that consist of 204 individual country forums and 48,431 threads that had a total of 230,698 postings. The data were collected for a four month period that represented eight months of postings. During data collection, the researcher was reading the threads, and the data collection lasted until no new topics were being discussed and the data was saturated.

1. Purposeful sampling

a) Identifying top 10 most discussed threads

In Thorn Tree Forum the total number of replies a thread has can be seen next to the posting. By looking at the total number of replies the top 3 countries in each world region were identified, and the 10 most discussed threads in each of those 3 countries were identified in specified country forums. All the threads were coded according to the thread discussions by reading all the threads. This resulted in a matrix of codes and country forums. This matrix can be seen in Appendix D.

b) Treemaps of the world regions

The treemaps of each of the fourteen world regions were drawn using Microsoft's treemapper (a software package used for visualizing data). Data visualization can be defined as "a method for seeing the unseen" (McCormick, DeFanti, & Brown, 1987). In social sciences data visualization has been used mostly by geography, economics,

geography, politics and sociology, planning, psychology, history, and social statistics. Some of the key technologies used in social sciences include advanced computer graphics, multimedia, the World Wide Web, and virtual reality (McCormick, DeFanti, & Brown, 1987; Orford, Dorling, & Harris, 1998). Treemaps are a type of data visualization tool. Today treemaps are used for visualizing hierarchical data in various fields. Treemaps have been used in different academic fields such as computer science (Arvelakis, Reczko, Stamatakis, Symeonidis, & Tollis, 2005), visualization of relations between software entities (Balzer & Deussen, 2005), financial analysis (Jungmeister & Turo, 1992), sports reporting (Jin & Banks, 1997), and social cyberspace (newsgroup) data (Fiore & Smith, 2001).

Treemaps were designed by Shneiderman and Johnson (1991) for visualizing files on a hard drive. The visualization is done by dividing a given area horizontally and vertically in accordance with the hierarchy of the objects and the proportion between data elements (Balzer, Deussen, & Lewerentz, 2005). Basically each box in a treemap represents one data element, and a box's size and color is proportional to the attributes given by the user. For example, in Figure 7 each country in Africa has a size associated with the number of topics discussed in each country forum. The treemap is constructed by subdivision of the rectangle by the size of country forum topics. The color of the rectangles represents the volume of discussion in each country forum associated with the average number of replies to each discussion topic.

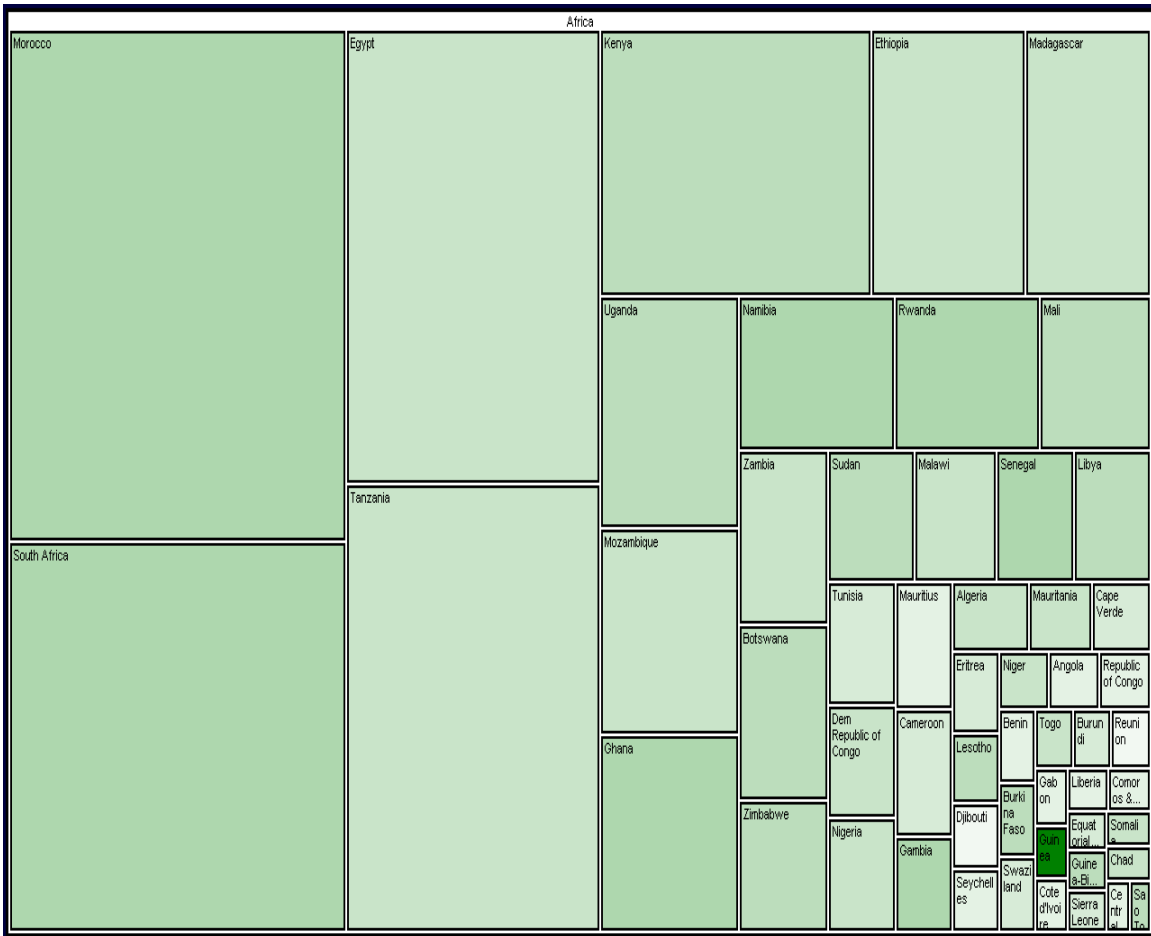


Figure 7. Treemap of Africa

Treemaps of each world region identified by the forum were drawn using the total number of topics discussed, the total number of replies, and the average direct response rate. Then the top three countries with the most discussion volume (including the country that has the most number of threads in all the world regions) were identified. Out of these identified country forums the top 10 most discussed threads were identified in each country forum and classified according to discussion topics. Some postings were categorized more than once since they had information that would fit into more than one

category. If the same number of replies was indicated for the 10th posting then the 11th and so on were also included in the topics analysis.

c) Choosing country forums

Africa and Western Europe were chosen as a result of their discussion topics to maximize variation in data, a purposeful sampling strategy in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Maximum variation enabled the researcher to have country forums with different discussion topics that are representative of the general discussion topics seen in the first coding. This process resulted in 52 country forums, 29,207 threads and 94,096 postings.

2. Data Sample

The data sample was chosen from Africa and Western Europe forums by identifying the countries that have the greatest number of threads and postings. As a result, 4 country forums from each world region that include 81 threads were chosen for data analysis. These were Spain (10 threads, 473 postings), Netherlands (11 threads, 265 postings), Germany (10 threads, 267 postings), Belgium (10 threads, 214 postings), South Africa (10 threads, 300 posting), Ghana (10 threads, 139 postings), Morocco (10 threads, 219 postings), and Guinea (10 threads, 156 postings). Data from chosen countries and topics was collected for a 4 month period (May 2007 - August 2007) that represented 8 months of postings.

Data Analysis

1. Thematic Networks

Data analysis was conducted using a multi-step process of data collection and coding. As a framework, thematic networks analysis was used to identify themes in the data. In this type of analysis the main themes in the qualitative data are shown as web-like illustrations (Attride-Sterling, 2001). Thematic networks analysis has been used in a variety of fields such as marketing (Powell, 2007), nursing (Burt, Whitmore, Vearncombe, & Dykes, 2006) and business (Bradley & Stewart, 2002). In thematic networks the data is categorized in three steps:

- (i) Basic themes: lowest-order themes that are evident in the text and say very little about the whole of the data on their own;
- (ii) Organizing themes: middle-order themes that are the categorization and grouping of basic themes that summarize more abstract principles;
- (iii) Global themes: the conclusion of the text that indicates the meaning of the whole text within the context of the analysis (Attride-Sterling, 2001).

Each posting was coded a second time by establishing recurrent issues in the text. The themes emerged as a result of coding the whole text. Twenty-two basic themes were identified according to the examination of the data for repeated codes. This process was followed by arranging basic themes in groups. The organizing themes were defined by categorizing the basic themes, which all together correspond to the global theme (the core concept of the data).

2. Level of Influence

Influence is defined as “the act or power of producing an effect without apparent exertion of force or direct exercise of command” (Merriam-Webster). Member influence was identified by looking at each thread and identifying whether the Original Poster (OP) mentioned in his/her postings that he/she will include things that were mentioned in the previous postings. An example is provided below:

OP: Where in Amsterdam or any nearby environs would one go to have an old-time dutch meal? I'm seeking the sort of place that the cheese makers would go to after a day at the market, preferably a smoky mom and pop place where everyone would wonder who the new guy is as soon as I walk in the door. All replies gratefully acknowledged.

Resident Member: “Moeders” is one of the restaurants I know that makes Dutch food the way our moms make it.”

OP: “Well Moeders it is then! Thank you both for the tip and the link; I will certainly give it a try”

3. Information Providers

Information is provided by different types of community members. The members were categorized by their experience level at the destination such as living at the destination (resident), had visited the destination (experienced traveler), and wants to visit the destination (potential traveler). This categorization was also confirmed by

looking at each member's profile on the community where they write the names of countries they have visited as well as which country they reside in.

The language the members use while posting in the online community was not always proper English; thus, the examples provided are edited to make them more readable.

Residents

Online community members who indicate that they live at the destination are categorized as residents. Also each member's profile on the community was also checked to see if they were classified correctly in the analysis. The indications are not always direct; however, they can be understood by the key words used by the member such as "my provincial capital", "hometown", or they refer to the residents as "we".

Residents' experience level at the destination and being local gives a different perspective to their postings. The perception of their postings by others who read the postings is different from other types of members as well. Resident members have insider knowledge about the destination, similar to having a local guide but before arriving at the destination. Thus, some of their postings provide off the beaten path places to go as examples, or things to do that are not known by tourists.

An example of a resident member posting:

*"Most surely visit the café Bonefields told you... it's very good on the beer selection. And have fun **in my provincial capital** :-)."*

Experienced Traveler

Online travel community members who indicate signs of travel experience at the destination are categorized as experienced traveler. The postings provided by experienced travelers are related to their travel experience at the destination either at the country or city level. Members either write that they have been to the destination in their postings, or they write the countries that they have visited in their member profiles. Depending on the situation and information needed, an experienced traveler's point of view of a destination is the closest one for potential travelers. They are more knowledgeable about places to stay and itinerary refinements since they have their own experience to rely on. Also their postings include specific names such as local dishes and drinks, as well as transportation options to the destination.

An example of an experienced traveler posting:

"I was in Amsterdam the day after Christmas this past year"

Potential Traveler

Members who did not start the thread yet jumped in the conversation by stating that they will also go to the destination are classified as potential travelers. These types of situations did not occur often. In most cases members ask their own question by opening a new thread discussion and getting direct answers under that thread. It is not common for other members to ask their own questions under a thread. Every member is encouraged to start a new thread for his/her own questions. This makes it easier for the information seeker (OP) and information providers, as well as others who are reading that thread, to retrieve information.

Unknown Members

In some postings it is not clear whether the member has any travel experience at the destination. These types of members are classified as unknown members. These postings usually are seen in general discussions such as health and safety of a destination. Unknown members write their ideas about the situation, usually with no indication of destination knowledge or experience.

4. Activity Level of Members

In Thorn Tree Forum, when members post a message, their usernames, the time of the posting, and the total number of posts that member has appears next to the posting. The total number of postings a member has is calculated from the beginning of their membership. The numbers in this study do not represent a member's total number of postings during the eight months of the study, but their total number of postings since an individual became a member. The total number of posts that a member has can also influence members' decisions while reading that post. Thus the contributing members in the identified country forums were divided into three activity levels: high, medium, and low. The activity level of members was identified by looking at their overall postings. Each contributing members' total number of postings was identified and arranged in ascending order. The scatter plot of the postings showed that the data was not distributed normally (Figure 8).

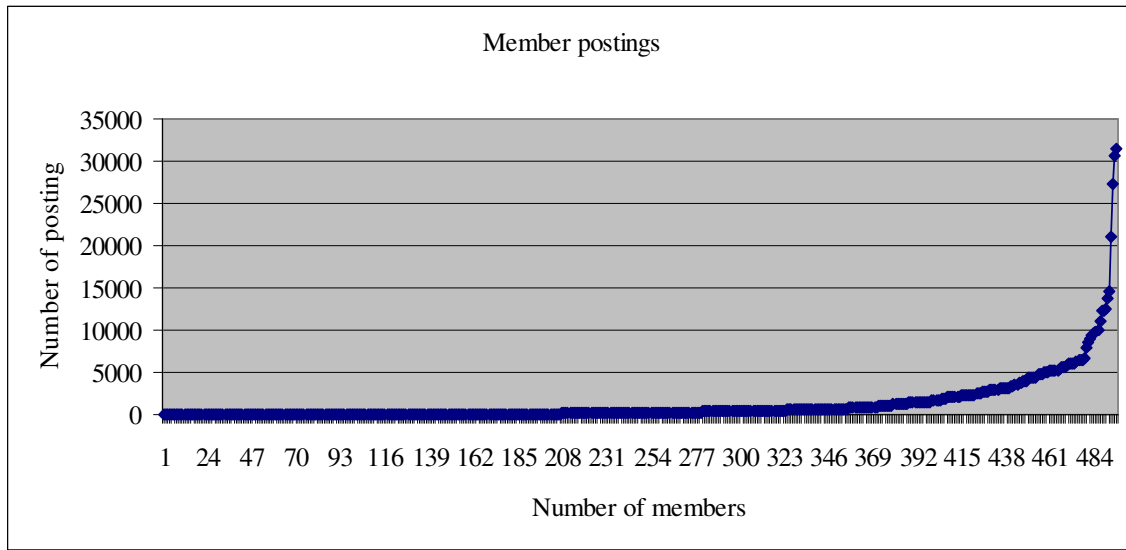


Figure 8. Distribution of Members' Postings

By looking at the data plot the members were divided into three groups. In the low activity group there were 336 members with postings between 1 and 600, the medium group had 113 members with postings between 602 and 3,966, and the high group had 47 members with postings between 4,320 and 31,387. Since the data was not normally distributed a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to test if these three groups were in fact significantly different from each other. This is a nonparametric test that compares the medians of three or more groups to determine whether the samples come from different populations. If the results are significant, then there is a difference between the groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test indicate that there are three groups in the data, and they are shown in Table 3 below.

Kruskal-Wallis Test		
Group	Rank Sum	Observations
<i>Low</i>	56616	336
<i>Medium</i>	44409	113
<i>High</i>	22231	47
H Stat		334.8484
df		2
p-value		0
chi-squared Critical		5.9915

Table 3. Kruskal-Wallis Test Results

5. Information Type

The information provided in Thorn Tree Forum is diverse. The information type classification emerged as a result of reading the postings. The postings were coded according to their contents and categorized by the type of information they provide. This procedure included reading and coding all the influential postings that were used in the previous analysis. There were four information type categories in this online travel community. These categories include:

- *Warnings* are postings that warn others about safety and health issues.
- *Advice/tips* are postings that include travel advice and tips related to the Original Poster's question.
- *Recommendations* include postings that included specific names of places such as hotels and museums
- *Clarifications* are postings intended to clarify information provided by other members

6. Member profiles

Members are classified as residents, experienced travelers, potential travelers and unknown members that post messages in this online community. When individuals join the online community they can indicate their country of residence in their member profiles. Member profiles can be viewed by anyone who clicks on the members' nickname. In addition members can also include the countries they have visited (on a world map or in their own words). Member profiles were also used for confirming the member type category of residents and experienced travelers. For example in Figure 9 the darker colored countries show the ones that this particular member has visited.

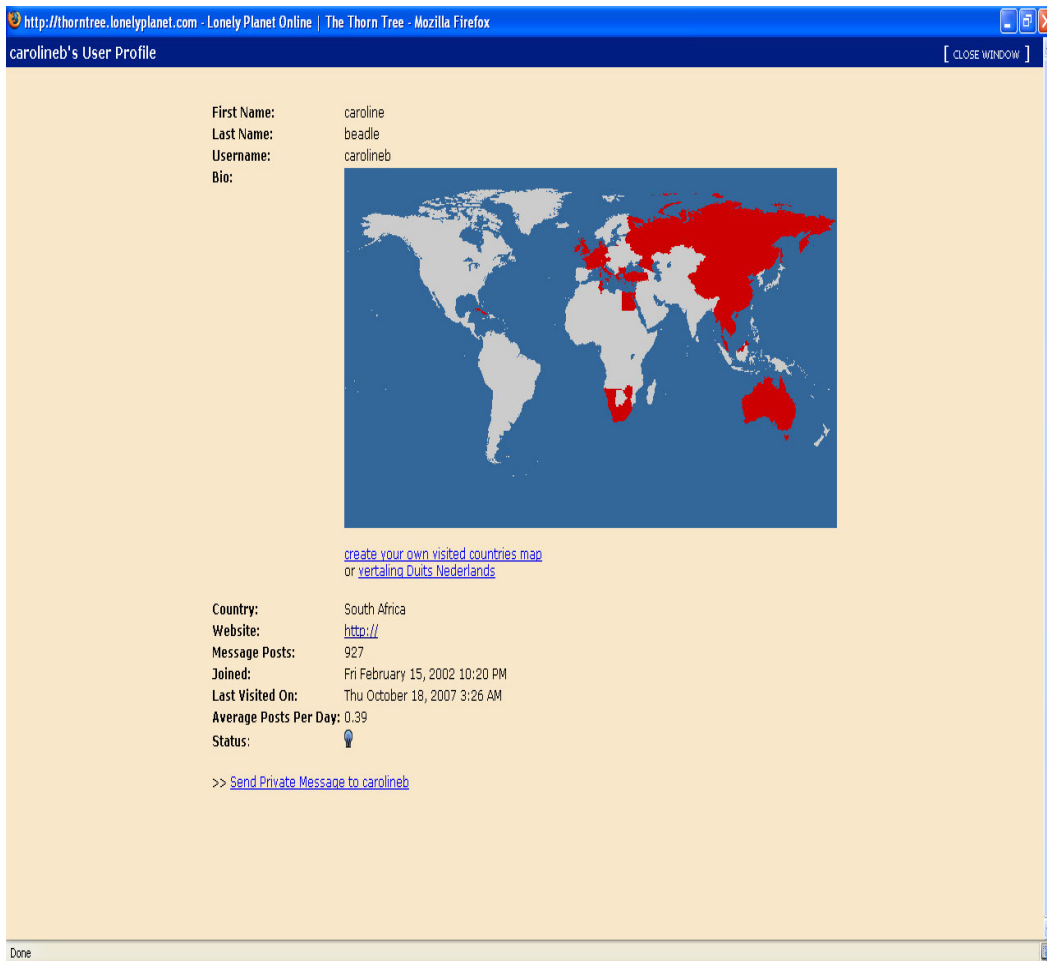


Figure 9. Member Profile

Trustworthiness

During the research process the researcher observed online community activity and did not interfere with online community discussions in any way. Observation gives the researcher the opportunity to see the phenomenon first hand. The researcher was a complete observer and community members were not aware of the fact that they were research subjects. Thus, the researcher's presence did not influence the study subjects.

Internal validity in qualitative research refers to the congruence of findings with reality (Merriam, 2002). Triangulation, member checks and peer review are the most

common methods used for ensuring internal validity. To ensure validity of results peer review was conducted with another researcher who was familiar with the research.

In addition the data was collected from eight different countries. The discussion topics in Western Europe were similar to each other, in the same way African forum discussion topics were similar among themselves. The analyzed country forums included 820 members that contributed to online community postings. Since the researcher did not ask clarification questions the data was collected from 820 members to ensure data validity.

Reliability is concerned with the replication of the study and getting the same results. However, replication of a qualitative study may not yield the same results, but this does not disregard the results of the study. In qualitative research it is important that the findings of the study are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2002).

The audit trail is a method used for reliability of a qualitative study. It is the description of how the data were collected, how the categories were derived, and how the study was conducted overall (Merriam, 2002). The researcher used an audit trail as a method for ensuring reliability of the research by writing memos throughout the conduct of the study.

External validity or generalizability in qualitative research can be conceptualized by user or reader generalizability, in which the readers determine whether the results of the study are applicable in their context (Merriam, 2002). Also, including a thick description of the study and maximizing variations in purposeful sampling are other methods for ensuring generalizability in qualitative research. In the present study

descriptions of all categorizations and examples of postings are used. Purposeful sampling and how it was conducted was explained in detail.

From an ethical perspective, the guidelines for conducting research vary across disciplines. Some of the ethical challenges include perceiving publicly available discussion forums as private, and vulnerable individuals are hard to identify (Markham, 2005). One other ethical question in online research is whether the researcher indicates that she is conducting research on the community or not. However, online community members know that their postings can be seen by anyone who visits that country forum; thus it becomes public knowledge. Furthermore, the anonymity of the users is established since they use pseudonyms in the community. Research ethics are protected by University Internal Review Boards (IRB) that ensure the wellbeing and rights of human subjects. In the case of this research IRB approval was not needed since they also agreed that information on the Internet is public knowledge and users are anonymous.

Summary

This chapter introduced the status of qualitative research in tourism field. The study area and the methodology used to guide the study were explained. Data collection methods including purposeful sampling and maximum variation techniques were established. Further, data analysis methods were described. Finally, the methods used for establishing trustworthiness of the study were explained.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the study as they relate to the research objectives. First, study results regarding the influence of eWOM in online travel communities on the types of travel decisions are presented. Second, information source types and their influence on types of travel decisions are reported. Third, the level of posting activity's influence on travel decisions in the online travel community is reported. Fourth, types of information provided in an online travel community and their influence level are shown. Finally, member profiles are reported.

Thematic Networks

This study's first research question was to determine whether the postings in an online travel community influence members' travel decisions and to identify what type of travel decisions are influenced by eWOM. In order to answer this question thematic networks analysis was utilized.

Thematic networks analysis revealed eight organizing themes from analysis of 81 communication threads. Each organizing theme is associated with basic themes represented in Figure 10. Thematic networks are referred to as topic areas in building the thematic networks.

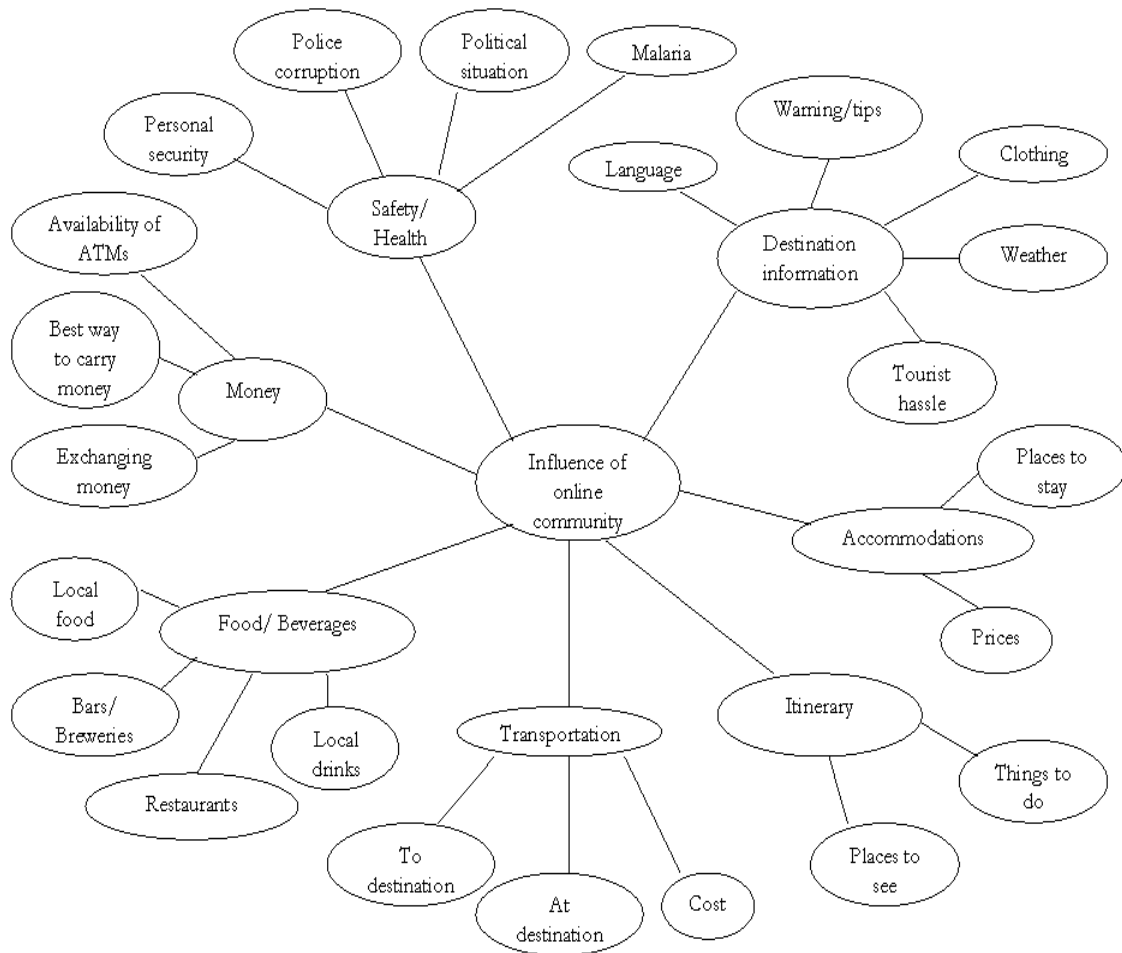


Fig.10. Thematic Networks

Organizing and basic themes

i) Accommodations: Finding a place to stay at a destination is an important part of the travel decision. This topic has two basic themes including places to stay and their prices. Members recommend the places that they have stayed.

ii) Food and beverage recommendations: Dining and drinking is an important part of the travel experience, and in Thorn Tree forum this topic is one of the most discussed in the

country forums. It has basic themes including local dishes and drinks, restaurants, and bar/brewery discussions. The community members' recommendations are very specific including the full name of the place, which district it is located in and how to reach that place (e.g., local transportation or walking).

iii) Transportation: This topic includes three basic themes: transportation at the destination, transportation to the destination and cost of transportation. Transportation to the destination is a discussion of airlines. At the destination level, discussions are about driving at the destination or how to go from one place to another.

iv) Safety/Health: In most cases this topic is discussed in African country forums and includes postings about safety at the destination, the political situation at the destination, and police corruption and health issues (e.g., malaria).

v) Destination information: This organizing theme has general information about a destination. The basic themes in this topic include weather, tourist hassle, what to wear at the destination, warning and tips about the destination, and language related questions.

vi) Money: Monetary issues are a concern for those traveling to foreign countries. Exchanging money, how to carry money (i.e. take cash, travelers check) at the destination and the availability of ATMs are basic themes for this topic. This kind of information may be hard to find both online and offline in some cases (e.g., traveling to a developing country).

vii) Itinerary/things to do: Writing a travel itinerary seems like a good way to ask for advice from those that have been there. This topic includes two basic themes: places to see and things to do.

viii) *Living at destination*: This topic was also discussed in the forum as members could have specific questions answered by the residents. The basic themes are visa issues, learning the local language, finding a job, which city to live in, what part of the city to move to, and living costs. However, this topic was not included since the intention of this study was to investigate travel related decisions.

Out of the 81 threads, seven were ignored due to their content not being related to travel. The ignored threads included four about living at the destination, one about Spanish to English translation, a troll discussion, and one about traveler help (asking someone to pick up his bag from the hotel that he left). The final data sample included seventy-four threads, 820 members and 2,033 postings.

A part of a troll discussion is included as an example. A troll is an Internet term that refers to a person who posts controversial and irrelevant messages in an online community. For instance in the following thread, members discuss whether OP is a troll for using foul language. An example of one OP's posting that was not included in this study is as follows:

Member A:

“Agree with Member Z. OP's arguments are too incoherent to be taken seriously, so no need to be offended. But I like his writing style. Definitely one of the better trolls on this board.”

Member B:

“Quote “Definitely one of the better trolls on this board.”

hmm, he needs to work a little harder to deserve the troll of the day award :)))”

Member C:

“Something tells me he is up for the challenge, Nav. Of course trolls have to be fed regularly or they'll starve to death.....”

Member D:

“I know, I know - some say milk and cookies like Santa, some say they catch mice at night. The latter would be useful, I'm overrun by mice at the moment and I am to chicken to set traps. I like mice...”

As it can be understood from the previous postings, the members are concerned about the authenticity of OP's postings and thus think that he may be posting messages just to disrupt the ongoing discussion.

The organizing themes identified in this study are congruent with previous research regarding eWOM and the types of travel decisions it is used for. Gretzel et. al. (2007) indicate that where to stay, where to eat, what to do, where to go, and when to go are the most important information types that individuals look for in an online travel community.

Level of Influence

The analysis was conducted by analyzing each thread and identifying whether that thread was influential in member's travel planning. The results revealed that 23 of the threads were influential for members that included 668 postings and 274 contributing members. The influential threads comprised travel decisions regarding accommodation choice, food and beverage selection, transportation options, safety of the destination, monetary issues such as exchanging money at the destination and using traveler's checks, destination information such as weather and what type of clothes to pack for vacation, and itinerary refinements such as how long to stay at one destination and which attractions to see. The results are in congruence with previous research about eWOM's influence on consumer behaviors (Bounie, Bourreau, Gensollen, & Waelbroeck, 2005; Chevalier & Myazlin, 2003; Dellarocas, Awad, & Zhang, 2004)

The threads where there were no influences do not have a conclusion or the Original Poster's question does not get answers. In the cases where there is no conclusion of the thread, usually the Original Poster does not come back and indicate his or her decisions regarding the postings or the thread discussion does not answer the Original Poster's question.

An example of an influential thread is provided below. The members are discussing the safety of a destination. In order to keep the anonymity of the members their real names and usernames are not provided in the example. Instead each member has been given a letter from the alphabet such as "Member A" and "Member B". Original

Poster is identified in order to demonstrate the influence of postings on travel decisions. In the example thread “Casa” refers to Casablanca, a city located in western Morocco by the Atlantic Ocean.

Original Poster’s message:

*“Hi,
Because of the recent bombings in Casa, I am concerned for my safety while traveling in Morocco. Is the increase in risk limited to Casa, or should I be concerned about all of Morocco? I am from USA, and I am well aware that Americans are not liked in many places. I plan on traveling with my husband, we are an older couple, and we plan on hiking in the mountains. In addition, we plan on renting a car to see the southern part of Morocco. We plan on being in Morocco 1 month. We are planning to visit all the cities/sites that have been recommended by others on this branch. We don't know whether to postpone our trip, which begins April 23. We are scheduled to fly into Madrid, and then we have a flight scheduled the same day on "easy-jet" to Casa.
Your comments will be appreciated. Thanks.”*

Replies to the member’s posting:

Member A:

“The radicals are trying to undermine Morocco's economy, particularly the tourist industry. Do you want to give in to them? Anything can happen, anywhere.”

Member B:

“I would dare to say that right now, the risk really is limited to Casa (and perhaps Tetouan). All of the suspects are from Sidi Moumen, one of the poorest urban slums in Morocco, and in rural areas, nothing of the sort is known to go on.”

Member C:

“Member B sums it up well...and who would want to hang around the poor slums of Casa anyway? Go. Have fun. And where did you get the idea that Americans are not liked in Morocco? Not true at all. I have never experienced such sentiments there, including on my most recent visit a week ago.”

Member D:

I can understand your concern, but it really is misplaced. There just isn't a groundswell of anti-American feeling here. Even those Moroccans who dislike what the US (and UK) are doing in the Arab world today can differentiate between the US government and its citizens. Even in Casa, I'd say any threat to you personally would be virtually non-existent. Remember that hundreds of Brits

and Americans arrive in Morocco every day. When was the last time you heard of anyone being attacked? Really, the likelihood of you dying in a road traffic accident (sorry to be so cheerful!) on your way to the airport in the US is probably a 1000 times higher.

So, relax, come to Morocco and have a great trip.”

Member E:

“I just wanted to chime in and express similar sentiments.....what upsets me about this person's post is not so much her justifiable concerns but just how much this plays into the American "culture of fear", exacerbated by the 9/11 attacks. What is needed more than ever by Americans now is to get out and travel, particularly to the places that the media would have you believe are dangerous. What Americans have allowed to happen to the world and to their own government can only be turned around by education and awareness, and travel is an excellent place to start. I've seen so many Americans change their attitudes towards Islam and "Arabs" (if we can even use that term in this context) after having seen Morocco.... if only more people would come and see for themselves.....”

Member A:

*“Member B,
That is just about the best post I have read in over 4 years of reading posts on this site. The Thorn Tree infuriates me with so many people not answering questions and competing against each other to better the next post. Too many "travelers”*

out there.

Top stuff.”

Member B:

“I agree completely with “Member E” and “Member D” here. The only reason Casa would not be "safe" at the moment is that those still out on the run have expressed intent to target tourist areas - therefore, tourist areas in Casa (not YOU personally) could be at risk. And in two years here, I've never once experienced any anti-American sentiment.”

Member F:

“Just go... first of all, changing your personal plans due to a terrorist act means they have "won". You are doing exactly what a bunch of terrorists want you to do. The day they read that morocco's tourism figures have gone down, they will say 'hey, we should keep doing this, because it works'... think of yourself as a sort of soldier for freedom. Having said that, as a soldier for freedom, your danger level, even in these trying times, is so incredibly low. Casa, not even a very touristy city, is HUGE... imagine you KNEW that in morocco tomorrow there would be a terrorist bomb somewhere. Even if you had that knowledge, the chances of you being in the place where the bomb is are 1 in a million. I just got back a couple days ago and had a great time...morocco is an amazing country and you shouldn't miss out on it!”

Member G:

“You want to hike in the mountains and go to the south. To the best of my knowledge, there has never been ANY terrorist activity in those parts of the country. Go.”

Member H:

“Original Poster, I live in a country that has been bombed on and off for the past thirty years so I would be much less likely to advise you to be a soldier for freedom just by visiting Morocco. I sat next to Canadians last year on a flight to Istanbul only two weeks after a bombing. They were concerned; I wasn't. Unfortunately, you just get used to it. I was also in the medina in Tetouan the day after Saddam was executed. I hadn't heard the news but I soon picked up an unusual atmosphere for Morocco - hostility. In fact, I was asked by a market woman whether I were American or English then told I was "sick". I actually wondered whether she had second sight and was giving me a medical diagnosis. I was a bit shocked but you shrug it off.”

Member B:

“Today, there were two more bombings in Casa next to the American Consulate on Blvd. My Youssef. You still feel oh-so-safe in Casablanca, everyone?”

Member G:

“Hello - Casa is one of the largest cities in Africa. Yes I still feel very safe there. Safer than in most cities in North America.”

Member A:

“As I said earlier, anything can happen anywhere. Random accidents on the whole cause more destruction than deliberate acts, and no-one is immune. Many people feel, and rightly so, that the unjustified and illegal attack on another sovereign nation by the "p-resident" (NOT the Congress and people of the United States) was an attack on all the world, and Muslims in particular. The so-far inability of Congress and the People to stop this continuing slaughter puts us at fault--and NON-VOTERS have a great deal to examine in this regard.”

Member I:

“Come to Morocco. The local wine is good (Medalion if you're splurging and Siroua from Meknes cellars if you're not) and the bread is fresh several times a day. Moroccan people are aghast at these happenings-they do not support it at all. Don't be surprised if people come up to you and tell you are welcome. The guys in the neighborhood butcher shop have very little English but had no trouble getting their message of support to me, as a foreigner, across. The increase of the fundamentalists worries the people here. And the government is on it, big time. I

expect that they will find the rest of the group before long. The majority of the people want to be more like the EU. - Better jobs, better housing, better education are the issues. The first step there is through tourism, and Moroccans know it. They see the improvements in infrastructure being made everyday (we all awaiting the opening of the new road to Marrakesh, yippee!)”

Member J:

“After spending three weeks in Morocco I was impressed with the warm heartedness and the level of political sophistication of most Moroccan people. People were most willing to differentiate between the position and activities of our governments and us as individuals. As a Canadian, I had my maple leaf pins in my pocket in case people were overtly anti-American but never put them on. People assumed we were American and we were generally treated graciously (except for the occasional pinch and grab at night in Djemma al Fina) and most people were overtly positive about the benefits of tourism. We met university students who were eager to understand how to convince North Americans to come to Morocco. Go and enjoy and do your bit to break down these divisive barriers....”

Member B:

“I want to be clear - I know that Moroccans are against this - and citizens (look at Mohammed Faiz for example) are fighting against it the best they can. That doesn't change the fact that in Casa, there are still several members of this same

group (the group which has perpetrated attacks this week) planning to detonate their bombs before they're caught. Moroccans are terrified too - I think that's a fair point to bring up. I don't think it's unreasonable to say "avoid Casa" - where this is obviously still going on.

p.s. Siroua is awful! Domaine de Sahari and Amazir are much better budget wines! I like Massinissa for a splurge (but Medalion is great as well)"

Member K:

"I have been viewing posts for Morocco since I will be travelling there within the next couple weeks. I think if you plan to travel to a country you should go with a sense of optimism. If you have a sense of dread and fear of being an American citizen then maybe it is not a good idea to make the trip.

Keep in mind that extremism can happen anywhere - New York, Washington DC, Madrid and London have all had terrorist attacks."

Member L:

"I think that you should stick to your plans. Danger is everywhere, i.e. the recent massacre of students/teachers at Virginia Tech. No matter where we are in the world, the most important thing that we must carry with us is our awareness of our environment, and our common sense. We cannot stop living our lives, or traveling due to events that are happening in the world. They will always be there. Safety is an illusion. Go ahead and go to Morocco. Pack your clothing, your

passports, and other papers, but most importantly, take your wits with you and have fun.”

Original Poster:

*“Thanks, to each of you, for the encouraging words. YES, WE ARE GOING!!
However, we won't be staying in Casablanca. We are traveling directly to Marrakech. We will do some hiking, if we aren't stopped by snow, in the Atlas Mountains, before going to Merzouga and all places in between! We will be in Morocco for a wonderful month, and we are very happy about the chance to visit this beautiful country. We are thinking positive, and we just really thank each of you who spent the time to write messages. I will write a report upon our return!”*

Original Poster was concerned about her safety while she is in Morocco and was asking whether or not to postpone her trip. As can be seen in her last posting, she does not postpone her trip but decides not to visit Casablanca as a result of some members' advice regarding the safety of the city. This example is a demonstration of the influence of eWOM in this online community on travel decisions.

Information Providers

The second research question was to recognize different types of online community members and identify the types of information source's influence on different types of travel decisions.

The influence of eWOM on travel decisions was identified by reading all the postings in one thread and recognizing if the Original Poster, the member who starts the thread, indicates in his/her postings that he/she will take into consideration other members' postings.

The influential threads are analyzed by topic discussion and information source type (member type) as well. The members in influential threads were categorized as experienced travelers, residents, potential travelers, and unknown members by reading their postings as well as confirming this information by looking at each member's profile where they indicate their country of residence and countries they have visited. This categorization is also in accordance with Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts's (2007) suggestion that the residence and nationality of opinion leaders' influence vary across cultures.

Member Type	Definition
Experienced Traveler	Indicate in their postings that they have been to the destination
Resident	Suggest in their messages that they live at the destination
Potential Traveler	State in their postings that they want to visit the destination;
Unknown Member	Do not specify their experience level at the destination

Table 4. Member Types

Member categorization was based on country forums. One member can be a resident in one forum and an experienced traveler in another country forum. For instance, a resident member of Netherlands who has been to Germany was categorized as a resident in Netherlands and an experienced traveler in Germany forum. Moreover, in the same way an Original Poster can be a resident as well as an experienced traveler in three different thread discussions.

The total number of postings by each type of member was also identified. Out of 2,033 postings utilized in this study, experienced travelers had the greatest number of postings with a total of 775, followed by residents (645 postings), Original Posters (318 postings), Unknown members (257 postings), and potential travelers (45 postings). A relatively low number of postings by Original Posters is also an indication of low interaction with other members; it results in a low number of influential threads. For each posting by an Original Poster there were approximately 2.5 postings by experienced travelers and 2 postings by residents. When an Original Poster posts a question and does not come back to the thread, the influence of postings cannot be identified by reading the thread.

Although there were 2,033 overall postings in influential threads, some of the postings were not related to travel discussion; thus they were not categorized as a travel discussion topic. In the influential threads 1,691 postings were coded and categorized according to discussion topics. The distribution of postings by member category and discussion topics is shown in Table 5. Residents, experienced travelers, and unknown

members posted messages mostly related to destination information; Original Posters (OP) posted regarding itinerary refinements; and potential travelers posted about safety of the destination.

Discussion Topic	Resident	Experienced Traveler	Original Poster	Unknown Member	Potential Traveler
Accommodations	19	28	21	37	2
Food and Bev.	13	116	25	15	1
Transportation	10	52	14	30	2
Safety	24	138	20	79	19
Money	0	44	5	9	0
Destination Info.	156	282	75	102	8
Itinerary	98	127	85	33	10
Total	320	787	245	305	42

Table 5. Posting Distribution by Discussion Topic and Member Type

Out of the 23 threads that showed evidence of influence, residents were influential in 2 threads about accommodations, 4 threads about food and beverages, and 1 thread about destination information. Experienced travelers influenced 1 food and beverage thread, 1 transportation thread, 1 safety thread, 1 money thread, 5 destination information threads, and 7 itinerary threads. The results indicate that residents were more influential in accommodations, food and beverage recommendations. Moreover, residents were also influential in 1 destination information thread. On the other hand, experienced travelers were more influential in the destination information category. They were also influential in food and beverages, transportation, safety, money and itinerary refinements.

Discussion Topic	Resident	Experienced Traveler
Accommodations	2	0
Food and Beverages	4	1
Transportation	0	1
Safety	0	1
Money	0	1
Destination Information	1	5
Itinerary	0	7
Total Number of Threads	7	16

Table 6. Thread Distribution by Discussion Topic and Influential Member Type

An example of a resident’s influence on accommodations is provided below:

Original Poster’s message:

“I decided to go to Antwerp this Tuesday on a whim. Does anyone have a recommendation on a hostel in the centre? Where would be a good place with cafes where one could sit all day and do nothing? I will be going alone for the first time so would prefer somewhere 'friendly' to people eating alone. What are the MUST-DOs in Antwerp? I'll only be there for about 24 hours so 1-2 places should be sufficient.

Thank you in advance:)”

Replies to the member’s posting:

Resident Member A:

“I never stayed in any hostel in my hometown :) but i have heard good comments on 'Den Heksenketel' in the Pelgrimsstraat. The location is very good, smack in the middle of the historical centre.

Must-do's depend entirely on your interests.”

Experienced Traveler A:

“Hi Original Poster,

Location Guesthouse26 is an awesome Bed & Breakfast in the centre of Antwerp, on the historical Pelgrimstraat near the Cathedral and the Groenplaats square.

Address Pelgrimsstraat 26, Antwerp

Telephone 0032/497.42.83.69

Fax 0032-3-289.39.94

Price Private rooms from US\$21.97/person.hostelz.com

regards,”

Original Poster:

“Ok will be emailing both hostels to see what they have..

I'm interested in markets (but this is only on Saturdays and Sundays according to the Antwerp city website), museums, anything really...

I'm not sure what Antwerp is famous for (except diamonds). Is there a diamond museum/factory sort of thing? I'm not buying anything so I really don't want to go into jewelry shops. I also wouldn't mind looking at some churches. Because I will be going alone and for a relatively short time, I would like to just explore the surrounding areas of wherever i will be staying (looks like both places are in Pelgrimsstraat so that's probably where!)”

Resident Member A:

“ Den Heksenketel, also here

Guesthouse 26 is in the same street and gets very mixed reviews.

't Katshuis is another very well located and cheap Bed & Coffee (very close to places where you can eat breakfast).

These last 2 places are no hostel though”

Resident Member A:

“Yes there is a diamond museum on the Astridplein, in front of the Central Station. Most beautiful churches: the Cathedral of course, Carolus Borromeus on Concienceplein (the most beautiful little square in town), Sint-Pauluskerk (might be closed). My favourite museum is Plantin & Moretus (it recently became Unesco world heritage) on the Vrijdagmarkt. Antwerp is famous for its nightlife (but a Tuesday will be quieter), shopping, the port,

I'll try to come back later - have to go.”

Original Poster:

“All 3 are fully booked. Strange, I thought this is off-season. :(Guesthouse26 start at 55 Euros. I only want to spend ..say 20 Euros or so a night (hence a dorm). If everywhere is fully booked, perhaps a trip to Maastricht would be sufficient;)”

Thanks for replying”

Experienced Traveler B:

“I stayed here last summer for a couple of nights on the way to Germany. Hotel Scheldezicht”

Resident Member A:

“There also is the Boomerang Hostel, a little bit less central but still within walking distance of everything. I just phoned them (because they have moved) and they have availability for Tuesday.”

Experienced Traveler C:

“Take a youth hostel, website: www.hihostels.com

Price (included breakfast) in general € 22

Musts the cathedral.

And go to Gent or Brugge , magnificent towns when you like history.”

Original Poster:

“got a place at Den Heksenketel so going after all! i read that it's quite dangerous around the central station when it's dark. is this a serious risk? Because if it is, I'll leave earlier (my original plan was arriving at 1900 or so) . I'm quite short and Asian so may seem like an easy target 0_0 I'm not going to lie, it's my first time going alone and I'm scared! Does anyone know where would be good for a sit-down dinner/lunch for one person? Somewhere around the 15-25 euro range. Thanks for all the suggestions”

Resident Member A:

“Original Poster, you really should not worry at that hour of the day, its not that bad! You have two ways to get from the CS to your hostel in the Pelgrimsstraat.

1) You walk about 20-25 min, taking De Keyzerlei, Meir (the big shopping street) and finally at Groenplaats you are very nearby and you can ask.

2) You take the tram in Gemeentestraat (you cross Astridplein and turn to the left), take tram 10 or 11 to Melkmarkt. From there you walk to the Cathedral (2min) and ask, again you're very nearby.

You might encounter many Chinese if you take the tram on Tuesday. It's Chinese new year right now and our 'Chinatown' is in a street that comes out on Astridplein (Van Wesenbeeckstraat - you will recognize it on the two statues with dragons at the beginning of the street). I think on Tuesday there is also a happening for them in a concert hall on Astridplein.

The area around your hostel is very safe!”

Resident Member A:

“For dinner and lunch, there are many bars and restaurants around there.

Close to you hostel are many Pita Bars, also many Italian restaurants (of the worst kind, catering for tourists). A good Belgian restaurant would be 't Spreeuwke (Oude Koornmarkt), but it's closed on Tuesday.

-In front of your hostel is a nice Spanish Tapa Bar, lively - with musicians sometimes.

-There is a good little Thai restaurant in the Vlasmarkt - very close - don't know

the name

-Bar2 on Vrijdagmarkt is more of an eating cafe, maybe good for your lunch on

Wednesday (it's in front of the Plantin&Moretus museum).

There are of course many other places but they don't pop up immediately (and i only want to mention places that I like)

Anyhow, enjoy your visit, be welcome - and for the case this would be my last response to you, please come back here after your trip and tell us everything about it :-)"

Original Poster:

"Thanks again for your suggestions. i don't feel like Asian ,Greek, Turkish, Spanish or Argentinean... I just want something ...Belgian . Nothing special. Bar2 sounds nice so will head there for sure!"

Resident Member A:

"You will come back and share your experiences, won't you? The good and especially the bad :)"

Original Poster:

"Back from Antwerp! Antwerp is a really pretty city and Flemish is incredibly funny (to my ears):D

I ended up having dinner at a place called the Rooden Hoed (sp?) simply because the other cheaper restaurants nearby were so crowded and I felt really odd eating alone. Dinner was over 50 euro but the food was good and I enjoyed myself!

*I also thought that the cathedral was beautiful. I didn't go to the Rubenshuis but I did manage to fit in De Scheldt (sp?), grote markt, meier (a little), groenplaats, saw the museum with the old ships and a bunch of other stuff...
thanks for all the help”*

Resident Member A:

*“Glad you enjoyed yourself and liked it! Didn't mention 'De Rooden Hoed' as I thought it would be too much upscale, but they do serve Belgian food!
How was the hostel? Was De Heksenketel ok? to be recommended?”*

Original Poster:

“Yes, the hostel was good. Great location and nice building. It's also clean. Only thing I didn't like was the fact that it had bunk beds. Every time someone moved, the bed would creak, waking up everyone else ;)”

Resident Member B:

“Hopefully you are convinced to return soon!”

The Original Poster chooses to stay at the hostel that Resident Member A suggested. Moreover, she comes back to the thread after her travel and shares her experience at the destination with other members.

Jun, Vogt, and MacKay (2007) suggest that travel information search and product purchase differ by travel experience. Their study indicates that travel experience influences accommodations, activities, attractions and car rental information search and purchase decisions regarding accommodations, car rentals and flights (Jun et al., 2007). The results of this research are in congruence with the study mentioned previously in all

categories except accommodations. The results of this study show that residents were influential in accommodation choices, rather than experienced travelers may seem plausible, however the experience level of residents may be a factor in this case.

Although experienced travelers have experience at the destination, this does not mean that they have more travel experience than the residents. Experienced travelers in the study sample may have less travel experience than the residents overall.

Furthermore, the distribution of postings according to the analyzed country forums is shown in Table 7. Overall the Spain forum had the most number of threads, followed by South Africa, Germany, Netherlands, Morocco, Belgium, Guinea, and Ghana. Residents were most active in the South African forum, experienced travelers and Original Posters in the Spain forum, unknown members in the Germany forum, and potential travelers in the Guinea forum.

Country	Resident	Experienced Traveler	Original Poster	Unknown Members	Potential Traveler	Total
Belgium	87	83	25	17	2	214
Germany	91	47	40	83	3	264
Netherlands	117	69	43	33	3	265
Spain	168	141	108	50	6	473
Ghana	12	87	15	18	7	139
Morocco	43	125	27	20	2	217
Guinea	1	110	22	11	19	163
S. Africa	126	113	38	18	3	298

Table 7. Posting Distribution by Country Forum

The distribution of members by country forum indicates that the Spain forum had the greatest number of residents, experienced travelers and original posters. This is also an indication of the quality and usefulness of the forum. The other forums in which residents posted the most were South Africa and Germany. After the Spain forum,

experienced travelers posted mostly in Morocco and South Africa. The greatest number of postings that Original Posters contributed was in Spain, Netherlands and Germany forums. On the other hand, potential travelers mostly posted in the Guinean forum, followed by Ghana and Spain. Unknown members mostly posted in Germany, Spain and South Africa.

Activity Levels of Members

The third research question was to investigate the level of posting activity of online travel community members and their influence on different types of travel decisions.

Member activity level is categorized by the member's total number of postings, which is shown next to the member's username. The number of member postings is an indication of his/her involvement in the community and adds to the member's reputation. Word-of-mouth reputation mechanisms are used in online communities in order to create trustworthiness. These mechanisms are especially important in communities where there are monetary transactions (e.g. eBay) (Standifird, 2001). However, uncertainty and high risk factors associated with travel products make them vulnerable purchase decisions. Thus, a member's commitment to the online community is an indication of that member's trustworthiness and reputation. In this research, member activity level is used to measure its influence on travel decisions.

The online travel community’s influence by member activity level was also determined. The Kruskal-Wallis test confirmed that there were three distinct groups of members (low, medium, and high activity).

The results show that low activity members were influential in 7 threads including food and beverages, transportation, language, destination information, and itinerary decisions. Medium activity members were influential in accommodations, food and beverages, safety, money, destination information, and itinerary decisions, being influential in 13 threads overall. High activity members were influential in 3 threads, including food and beverages, destination information and itinerary refinements. The thread distribution by discussion topic and member activity level in influential threads is shown in Table 8.

Discussion Topic	Member activity level		
	Low	Medium	High
Accommodations	0	2	0
Food and Beverages	1	3	1
Transportation	1	0	0
Safety	0	1	0
Money	0	1	0
Destination Information	4	1	1
Itinerary	1	5	1
Total Number of Threads	7	13	3

Table 8. Thread Distribution by Discussion Topic and Member Activity Level

The results show that medium activity level members were the most influential members in the online community. This may be an indication of influence and activity levels of members having no relation, meaning that the members are not influenced by the total number of postings a member has. Otherwise, high activity level members would have the most influential members in the community; however, this is not the case.

The discussion topics were also grouped according to members' activity levels.

Table 9 shows the number of postings in each discussion topic by different member types.

Discussion Topic	Low	Medium	High	Original Poster	Unknown Member
Accommodations	40	15	11	22	0
Food and Bev.	59	79	60	26	0
Transportation	46	31	17	14	0
Safety	108	87	70	18	6
Money	15	26	12	5	0
Destination Info.	169	178	127	74	0
Itinerary	124	187	78	92	0
Total Number of Postings	556	603	375	251	6

Table 9. Posting Distribution by Discussion Topic and Member Activity Level

The following thread is an example of low activity member influence on food and beverage decisions at the destination.

Original Poster's message:

“Besides the beer....is there any local alcohol that you guys would reccomend when going there????I probably would not like to try absynthe.”

Replies to the member's posting:

Low Activity Member A:

“The most traditional option is jenever or beerenburg. I do not know if it is recommended though, I've never had it myself. But it's definitely Dutch stuff.”

Medium Activity Member A:

“Tell you the truth, if you really want the "local alcohol drink", Heineken, Amstel and Grolsch should be enough, if you ask any Dutch(man).”

Low Activity Level Member B:

“Certainly not Heineken, speak for yourself girl {Miss T2K}. It tastes like water, same as the Budweiser Original Poster will certainly know. In the south of Holland you're not gonna please anybody with Heineken, but with Bavaria. Low Activity Member A is right, Jenever and Beerenberg are typical Dutch.”

Original Poster:

“Ouch Low Activity Member B ..That's a low blow, I really don't like the light beers in America. I drink them like you said water. I am from Seattle ,Washington, USA and we have some great microbrew beers that are strong in flavor and color. As far as Bavaria liking heineken, I don't know. My family is from Stuttgart and they wouldn't touch a light beer with a 10 foot pole.”

Medium Activity Member B:

“Low activity member B means a beer called Bavaria. Jenever is the way to go. It's similar to gin I think.”

Medium Activity Member A:

“Well guys, yeah... I have been to many pubs, bars, cafes and restaurants, even to the remotest in this country, the locals unanimously drink either, Heineken, Amstel and Grolsch. The Dutch (men) in my opinion (and observation) are not haute beer drinkers. They do not really go out of their way to look for that special brewed stuff. Maybe the Belgians, Germans and the English will but definitely not the Dutch. They are very content in their "light pilsner" (tap beer, more like the watery beer you guys said). So this is what I meant with really going local. Jenever is typically Dutch, but many Dutch (men) do not really drink this. Maybe there are a few that drink this but it's not that cool. It's really the older generation that drinks this, and guess what they drink this together with beer too. So there, you still end up with beer, lol. Try observing the Dutch this Monday on Queens Day and see what kind of beer everyone drinks.”

Low Activity Member A:

“Hey you guys, Original Poster said:

Quote “ Besides the beer....is there any local alcohol that you guys would recommend when going there?”

BESIDES the beer. So, your squabbles over Heineken vs. Bavaria vs. Grolsch vs. Amstel aren't what OP asked for at all. And jenever might not seem cool to us Dutchies (I said it was traditional), but OP might still wanna try it.

Anyway, I remembered another local drink called "Schrobbelèr" which is also an

herbal alcoholic drink (like Beerenburg). It's somewhat popular among the 20s crowd in the south of Holland. I can't tell you if Amsterdam bars have it.

Another traditional Dutch option is advocaat, but you won't score points with it if you are under 70. Advocaat is a thicker kind of eggnog for old grannies. You actually have to spoon it.”

Low Activity Member C:

“Low Activity Member A and Medium Activity Member A: Your observations are simply spot on! Indeed, most of the Dutch drink the pilsner type of beer, the biggest brands being Heineken, Amstel, Grolsch, Bavaria and smaller shares for Oranjeboom, Hertog Jan and Brand. I think everybody will agree with me that Oranjeboom must be avoided at all costs. It's plain dreadful. The other pilsners are not exactly tasty either with Hertog Jan en Brand being slightly better. Dutch pilsners are notorious for causing a (massive) hangover, unlike the German and Belgian beers. There are several small Dutch breweries (mostly from the far south) that do produce enjoyable pilsners: Alfa, Leeuw, Valkenburgs. In the past decade or so, cloudy wheat beer gained in popularity. The Dutch 'Wieckse Witte' and the Flemish 'Hoegaarden' are the big ones. They were quite nice, but since those breweries were incorporated by multinational breweries, their flavour was adjusted to serve a bigger audience. Now, they're not worth mentioning anymore, especially not compared to their German counterparts. A simple advice: if you can choose between a Dutch and a non-Dutch beer, go for the non-Dutch beer.

A typical beverage drunk only on Queen's Day is 'oranjebitter'. It's a bright orange, high-alcoholic drink with quite an unpleasant taste. You should try it. Another drink that's particularly popular with the oldies is the rum-flavored 'boerenjongens'. There are several brands of 'jenever', such as Bokma and Hartenvelt, but most of them do not have a particularly strong flavour. The province of Friesland has several typical beverages: the herbal drink 'beerenburg', the pilsner 'Us heit' and the rare though tasty whisky 'Frysk Hynder'."

High Activity Member A:

"Heineken has lion's share of Dutch market, so whatever you think of it, it is what the Dutch drink. There are a lot of other old fashioned liquors, and you can taste them at traditional bars such as this one but Medium Activity Member A is right about this as well, they're not common for younger people."

High Activity Member B:

"I was going to say "oranjebitter" if you are here on Queensday, but Reinier beat me to it."

Low Activity Member D:

"Save the absinthe for the Czech republic....and then even then.....ugh!"

Medium Activity Member C:

“If you want to drink jenever like a student, try it mixed with applejuice. It's quite good, although honestly I think it was only drunk that way at my local university. We called it a 'japie' (jenever-appelsap). There's also dutch wodka (Hooghoudt), regular and with 'flavors', such as lemon or blackberries. As others have said: try the Belgian beers before the Dutch!”

Original Poster:

“Thanks for the advice. So bottom line, stick with beer and make it non dutch!!!! Anyone ever see the drinking show "Three Sheets"”

Low Activity Member E:

“You could visit proeflokaal Wijnand Focking, next in the allee of Krasnapolsky Hotel for all kinds of jenever or the V.O.C.Café Schreierstoren, Prins Hendrikkade 94/95 and try the ols Dutch Sailor-gin(jenever). Anyway jenever is also called the Dutch Gin. jenever is/was mostly used by the older generation the youngsters go for the more fashionable vodka or just stick to beer.”

Low Activity Member F:

“Having recently moved to Holland I think the Dutch will drink just about anything. It seems there's any excuse for a party and if my Dutch boyfriends well stocked beer fridge is anything to go by I'd say there are many Dutch beers to

choose from! I guess it depends on the area you're in. the local pub mainly serves oranjeboom. oranjebitter made me feel very sick and very drunk on Monday! (queens day)”

Low Activity Member G:

*“Ij beer rules (but it's only available in Amsterdam at the IJ beer brewery)
<http://www.brouwerijhetij.nl/eng/index.html>”*

Original Poster:

“To answer Low Activity Member G, I heard that place is really good. I will be going there most definitely.”

Although OP was asking for advice about local drinks other than beer, most of the members recommended different sorts of beer. As a result, OP decided to try the brewery that Low Activity Member G suggested.

Information Type

The final research question was to examine information types provided in the online travel community and identify their influence on different types of travel decisions.

The information provided in the postings was classified in accordance with their content. Four types of information were identified: warnings, recommendations, advice/tips, and clarification. The influence of information type on travel decisions was

analyzed by counting the number of each information type and looking at which one influenced the final decision. Although the postings were coded by information type, not all the postings could be included in this analysis since some of the postings were not in any of the categories. Those postings were not related to travel in any way and mostly included jokes or personal discussions between members.

Warnings

The postings that warn others about safety and health issues were classified as warnings. For example, during the data collection period the political situation in Guinea was not stable. Hence, travelers were concerned about safety of traveling to the destination.

Example:

Original Poster's message:

“Security forces fired tear gas at demonstrators in the capital, Conakry, as street protests spread to seven other towns and cities on the eighth day of a general strike intended to force the country's ailing president, Lansana Conté, to step down. Mr. Conté, left, a 72-year-old diabetic chain-smoker with no obvious successor, grabbed power in a 1984 coup and has refused to relinquish control despite a heart ailment that has required him to travel to Switzerland for care several times in the past year. He is also said to be senile. The strike began after he halted the trial of two men accused of stealing millions of dollars from the state.”

Posting by another member:

“Thanks for the info. I'd like to visit there myself in the next year or so and have been studying up on the country but based on what's going on right now I may have to wait or just do G-Bissau. I have no desire to be in Guinea during a revolution!”

Warning by the Original Poster:

“PS. Guinea Bissau - things aren't good there, there was a lot of talk about a military coup happening soon.”

Advice/Tips

The postings that include travel advice and tips related to the Original Poster's question are classified as advice/tips.

Example:

Original Poster's message:

“Is it true that the ticket vending machines can't be used unless you have a national debit card?”

Advice from another member:

“If you're buying a train ticket during the day and you can't find a ticket vending machine which accepts coins, you can always go to the ticket box to buy your tickets with cash.. This should be a little bit more expensive though, because the Dutch railways try to encourage electronic payment!”

Recommendations

The postings that included specific names of places such as hotels and museums were classified as recommendation.

Example:

Original Poster's message:

"Hi, I am interested in Dutch colonial history and would like to see how the Dutch portray it in their museums. Does anyone have suggestions on which museums are the best to learn about the Dutch and their colonial history?"

Recommendation by another member:

"There's the Tropenmuseum (Tropics museum) in Amsterdam, which used to be called the Colonial Museum. However, it's more of an ethnographic museum than a museum about colonial history, if I recall correctly"

Clarifications

The postings that are intended to clarify information provided by other members are classified as clarifications.

Example:

Original Poster's message:

"Where in Amsterdam or any nearby environs would one go to have an old-time dutch meal? I'm seeking the sort of place that the cheese makers would go to after a day at the market, preferably a smoky mom and pop place where everyone would wonder who the new guy is as soon as I walk in the door. All replies gratefully acknowledged."

Reply:

“Dutch pancakes are also a treat... they are thin (like crepes) and really big served with a whole range of toppings. There are several pancake houses in Amsterdam and a lot of street stalls selling the fried foods.”

Clarification of the previous message by another member:

“Erica is right: poffertjes and pancakes are two different things.

To clarify, this is what poffertjes look like: all about poffertjes”

None of the warning threads were influential in members’ travel decisions.

Warning threads include information about safety of a destination and health issues related to the destination. For example, in one safety related thread members were concerned about bombings at one destination and the other members - especially residents - tried to convince the original poster that the destination is in fact a safe place. However, these threads were not influential as the OPs have not indicated their final decision about their travel plans.

In the 23 influential threads there were 9 recommendations, 3 advice/tips, and 11 clarification postings. The results indicate that clarifications were the most influential postings, followed by recommendations and advice/tips. The recommendations include postings regarding accommodations, food and beverages, destination information and itinerary refinements. Advice/ tips include postings about accommodations and itinerary related. The highest number of postings was clarifications and included food and beverage, transportation, monetary issues, and destination information. The posting

distribution by information type and discussion topic in influential threads can be seen in Table 10.

Discussion Topic	Warnings	Recommendations	Advice/Tip	Clarification
Accommodations	0	1	1	0
Food and Bev.	0	2	0	4
Transportation	0	0	0	1
Safety	0	0	0	0
Money	0	0	0	1
Destination Info.	0	2	0	6
Itinerary	0	4	2	0
Total Number of Postings	0	9	3	11

Table 10. Thread Distribution by Discussion Topic and Information Type

Overall in 23 threads the number of postings in each category was: 1 warning, 110 recommendations, 65 advice/tips, and 240 clarification postings. The distribution of discussion topics and type of information can be seen in Table 11.

Discussion Topic	Warnings	Recommendations	Advice/Tip	Clarification
Accommodations	0	21	13	14
Food and Bev.	0	31	2	49
Transportation	0	2	4	15
Destination Info.	1	4	8	137
Itinerary	0	50	36	11
Total Number of Postings	1	110	65	240

Table 11. Posting Distribution by Discussion Topic and Information Type

The distribution of information type by member category was also analyzed. The results indicate that residents, experienced travelers, and unknown members were mostly posting clarifications, followed by recommendations and advice/tips. Potential travelers post mostly advice/tips, followed by recommendations. The results of this analysis can be seen in Table 12.

Member Type	Warnings	Recommendations	Advice/Tip	Clarification
Residents	0	35	17	80
Experienced Trav.	2	67	38	123
Potential Travelers	0	2	3	0
Unknown Members	0	16	9	23
Total Number of Postings	2	120	67	226

Table 12. Posting Distribution by Information and Member Type

Member Profiles

The distribution of members by country of residence is shown in Table 13. When users register to become members they can specify their country of residence. However, this is not mandatory. Some members who do not want to disclose this information either leave it blank or write “Thorn Tree World”. Out of 820 members that contributed to the analyzed country discussions, 497 included their country of residence information. The greatest number of members was from the USA, followed by the Netherlands, Germany and Australia. Since Netherlands and Germany were two of the country forums utilized in this research, relatively high number of members from those countries was expected. On the other hand, the number of members who reside in Africa was relatively low. One reason for this may be not having a reliable and consistent Internet connection in some African countries.

Country	Number of Members	Number of Postings	Average Number of Postings
Germany	36	51557	1432.14
Belgium	13	16764	1289.54
Netherlands	40	76678	1916.95
USA	86	60578	704.4
France	10	28300	2830
Canada	23	19092	830.09
Spain	15	30053	2003.54
Australia	30	23882	796.07
South Africa	16	22632	1414.5
Morocco	8	5846	730.75
UK & Ireland	15	83260	5550.67
Thorn Tree World	145	131180	904.67
Ghana	6	587	97.84
Sweden	2	531	265.5
Norway	2	12508	6254
Italy	2	1232	616
Japan	2	8525	4262.5
Mexico	3	1510	503.34
Finland	3	1865	621.67
China	2	780	390
Denmark	2	4975	2478.5
Argentina	2	153	76.5
Switzerland	2	5363	2681.5
Others	32	61575	1924.22
Total	497	649426	

Table 13. Members' Country of Residence

Members were also grouped according to their country of residence and activity level. The high activity members were from Germany (5), Netherlands (5), the USA (4) and UK & Ireland (4). However, the most active members among the high activity group were the members from UK & Ireland with 4 members and 73,205 total postings. The results are shown in Table 14.

Member type	Country of Residence	Number of Members	Total Postings	Average Postings
<i>High</i>	Germany	5	32785	6557.00
	Belgium	2	10697	5348.50
	Netherlands	5	59660	11932.00
	USA	4	18026	4506.50
	France	3	24325	8108.34
	Canada	1	5229	5229.00
	Spain	2	19523	9751.50
	Australia	1	5428	5428.00
	South Africa	1	5961	5961.00
	Morocco	1	4375	4375.00
	UK & Ireland	4	73205	18301.25
	Thorn Tree World	10	88677	8867.70
	Others	6	59172	9862.00

Table. 14 High Activity Member Distribution by Country of Residence

The medium group consisted of members from the USA (18), Germany (10), Netherlands (10), and Australia (10). On the other hand, the most active members in this category were from Spain with three members and 8,392 total postings. The results are shown in Table 15.

Member type	Country of Residence	Number of Members	Total Postings	Average Postings
<i>Medium</i>	Germany	10	15611	1561.10
	Belgium	2	4184	2092.00
	Netherlands	10	12993	1299.30
	USA	18	33360	1853.34
	France	2	3151	1575.50
	Canada	7	10347	1478.14
	Spain	3	8392	2797.34
	Australia	10	16245	1624.50
	South Africa	7	14851	2121.57
	Morocco	1	724	724.00
	UK & Ireland	5	9224	1844.80
	Switzerland	2	5363	2681.50
	Finland	2	1848	924.00
	Thorn Tree World	16	32063	2003.94
	Others	12	33903	2825.25

Table 15. Medium Activity Member Distribution by Country of Residence

Low activity members were mostly from the USA, Germany and Netherlands.

Results are shown in Table 16.

Member type	Country of Residence	Number of Members	Total Postings	Average Postings
<i>Low</i>	Germany	21	2621	124.81
	Belgium	9	1883	209.23
	Netherlands	23	4025	175.00
	USA	63	9462	150.19
	France	5	824	164.80
	Canada	15	3517	234.47
	Spain	10	2138	213.80
	Australia	18	2209	122.73
	South Africa	8	1820	227.50
	Morocco	6	747	124.50
	UK & Ireland	6	831	138.50
	Ghana	6	587	97.84
	Argentina	2	153	76.50
	China	2	780	390.00
	Mexico	2	319	159.50
	Sweden	2	531	265.50
	Thorn Tree World	117	9602	82.07
Others	22	3831	174.14	

Table 16. Low Activity Member Distribution by Country of Residence

The results also indicate that although the highest number of members was from the USA, the most active members were from the UK and Ireland. This shows that the number of members and their activity level is not proportional. The 145 members who did not disclose their country of residence chose Thorn Tree World as their residence. The overall number of postings of the members who disclosed their country of residence information was also identified to see their activity level. The most active members were from UK & Ireland; although there were 15 members from that region their total number of messages was the highest in proportion.

Chapter Summary

The current chapter investigated the objectives outlined in Chapter I related to the purpose of the study. In an attempt to organize the results, a condensed summary of the study's major findings are displayed in Table 17 and Figure 11.

Objective	Findings
Determine whether the postings in an online travel community influence members' travel decisions and to identify what type of travel decisions are influenced by eWOM.	eWOM (postings) in this online travel community were found to be influential in travel decisions regarding accommodations, food and beverage, safety, monetary issues, destination information, and itinerary refinements.
Recognize different types of information providers (online community members) and identify the types of information provider influence on different types of travel decisions.	Four types of members are identified: experienced traveler, resident, potential traveler, and unknown member. Only residents and experienced travelers were influential among the other member types. Residents were more influential in accommodation and food and beverage types of decisions than the experienced travelers. Experienced travelers were more influential in transportation, money, safety, itinerary, and destination information types of decisions than the residents.
Investigate the level of posting activity of online travel community members and their influence on different types of travel decisions.	The members were categorized into three types: low, medium, and high activity level members. Medium activity level members were the most influential members followed by low and high activity level members.
Examine information types provided in the online travel community and identify their influence on different types of travel decisions.	Information types identified include warnings, advice/tips, recommendations, and clarifications. Clarifications were the most influential postings, followed by recommendations and advice/tips.

Table 17. Summary of the Study Findings.

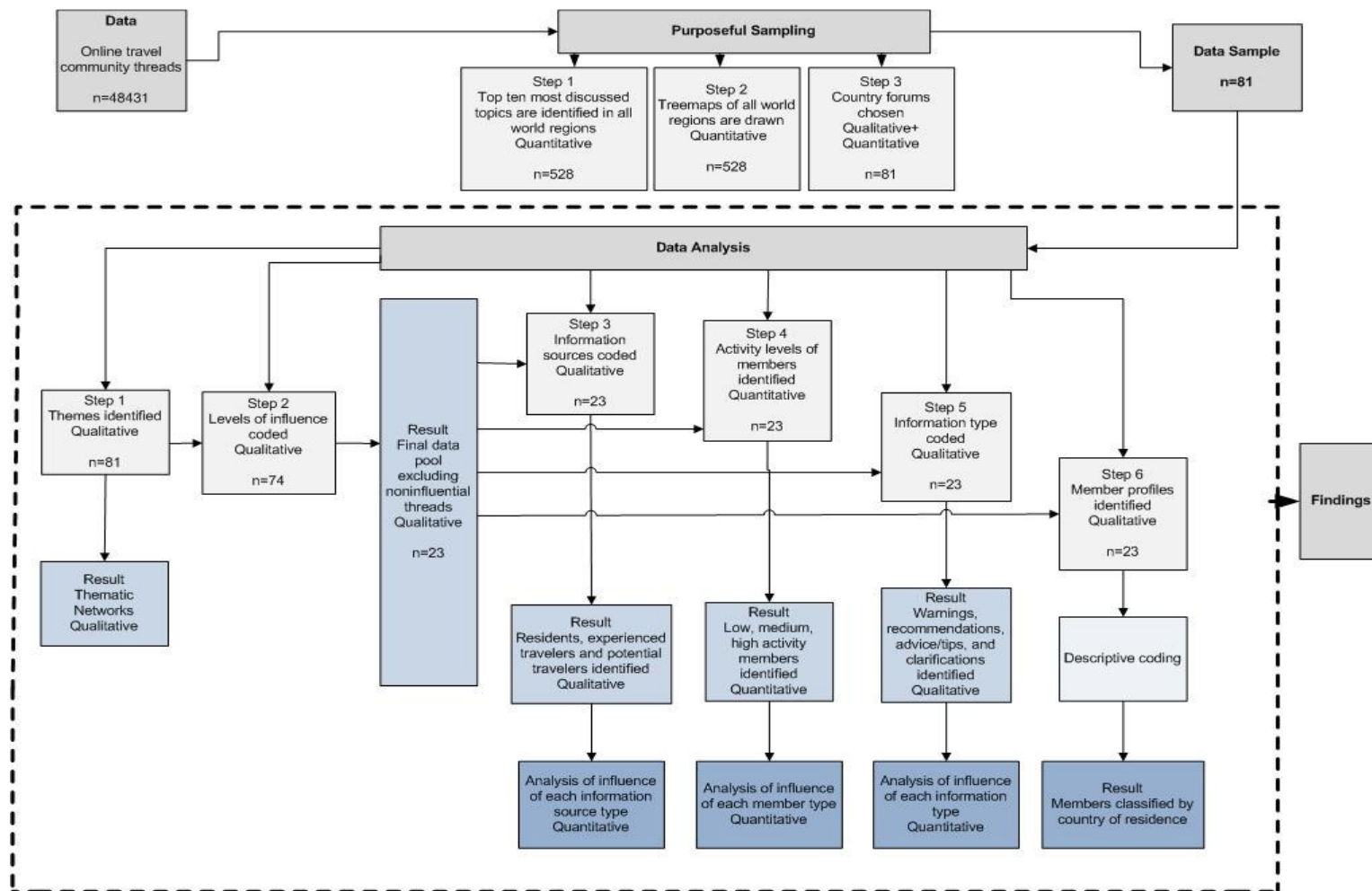


Figure 11. Study Flowchart with Study Sample Numbers

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This final chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section the study's findings are reported as they relate to the study objectives. In the second section theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are discussed. Finally, in the last section recommendations for future research are submitted in accordance with the findings of this study.

Review of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore eWOM in online travel communities and its influence on travel decisions. The influence of postings on types of travel decisions was examined using an inductive approach.

Based on a review of the literature, a conceptual framework was established for identifying an online travel community's influence on types of travel decisions. The appraisals utilized in this study were online travel community use, level of activity, information source, and information type.

Discussion Topics in the Online Travel Community

This study utilized one online travel community. The data sample included 81 threads. Each thread was analyzed separately to identify the discussion topics. Thematic

network analysis was utilized to uncover the themes discussed in the threads. The analysis revealed eight organizing themes including accommodation choice, food and beverage selection, transportation options, safety of the destination, monetary issues, destination information, and itinerary refinements.

Level of Influence

Influence was identified by analyzing each thread and identifying whether that thread was influential in members' travel planning. The results showed that 23 of the threads were influential for members that included 668 postings and 274 contributing members. The influential threads comprised travel decisions regarding accommodation choice, food and beverage selection, transportation options, safety of the destination, monetary issues such as exchanging money at the destination and using traveler's checks, destination information such as weather and what type of clothes to pack for vacation, and itinerary refinements such as how long to stay at one destination and which attractions to see.

Information Sources

Members were categorized in accordance with their travel experience at the destination as experienced travelers, residents, potential travelers, and unknown members. The influential threads were analyzed by topic discussion and member type. Neither potential travelers nor unknown members were found influential in the study sample. Residents were influential in each of the following categories: accommodations,

food and beverage, and destination information, whereas experienced travellers were found to be influential in all types of travel decisions except accommodations. When residents and experienced travellers were compared to identify which type of member was more influential in which type of travel decision, results showed that residents were more influential in the following decisions: accommodations and food and beverage recommendations. On the other hand, experienced travelers were more influential in travel decisions related to information focused on the destination.

Activity Levels of Members

The online travel community's influence by member activity level was also examined. Three distinct groups of members were classified as low, medium, and high activity. The most influential members were medium activity level members, followed by low and high activity members. The results show that low activity members were influential in 7 threads including food and beverages, transportation, language, destination information, and itinerary decisions. Medium activity members were influential in accommodations, food and beverages, safety, money, destination information, and itinerary decisions, being influential in 13 threads overall. High activity members were influential in 3 threads, including food and beverages, destination information and itinerary refinements.

Information Type

The information provided in the postings was classified in accordance with their content. Types of content included warnings, recommendations, advice/tips, and clarification. None of the warning threads were influential in members' travel decisions.

The distribution of information types in influential threads was as follows: 9 recommendations, 3 advice/tips, and 11 clarifications. The distribution of postings by member type shows that the largest number of postings was clarifications and was posted by residents, experienced travelers and unknown members, followed by recommendations and advice/tips. On the other hand, potential travelers typically post advice/tips followed by recommendations.

This research examined the eWOM's influence on travel decisions in an online community. In this online travel community eWOM was found to be influential in these types of travel decisions: accommodations, food and beverage, transportation, money, safety, itinerary, and destination information. In addition, the results showed that the influence level differed by the type of member as well as the type of travel decisions. Residents were mostly influential in on-site destinations such as finding accommodations at the destination, and experienced travelers were mostly influential on travel decisions up to the point that the traveler is on-site such as transportation. Moreover, clarifications were the most influential type of information provided in this online travel community followed by recommendations and advice/tips. Among the three activity levels of members, medium activity members were found to be the most influential on travel decisions.

Theoretical Implications

Tourism research has primarily examined residents/hosts as the group of people who are most likely to be affected by the impacts of tourism at the destination. This

research has investigated topics such as demographics of residents and perceived tourism impacts on the community (Bastias, et al 1993; Tomljenovic, 1999; Ahmed, 1986), residents' perceptions of economic aspects of tourism (Tomljenovic & Faulkner, 1999; Tosun, 2001), residents' perceptions of environmental outcomes of tourism (Lawson et al., 1998; Ap & Crompton, 1998), residents' perceptions of political factors on tourism (Reed, 1997; Ritchie, 1993), and social impacts of tourism on the community (Ap & Crompton, 1998; Faulkenberry et al., 2000).

Previous research on resident and traveler interactions did not examine the resident's role as information provider. Residents and travelers have the opportunity to interact with each other. This interaction may take place through online word-of-mouth communication such as travel blogs, chat, and online community discussion forums. It occurs before the traveler arrives at the destination and may influence where travelers visit as well as choice of accommodation and restaurants.

The Internet provides numerous opportunities for resident and traveler to communicate with each other. Online travel community discussions are important because they represent not only potential travelers but also travelers with previous experience at the destination as well as residents. Thus, residents become information providers for potential travelers and need to be studied from this perspective as well.

Practical Implications

Getting information from online communities reduce the information search time and gives the option to customize questions in accordance with traveler's needs. It is

easier to find basic destination information online, but getting what one is specifically looking for can be easy when using travel communities.

By reading an online community, individuals get both sides of the travel experiences - good and bad. This study showed the usefulness of an online travel community for travel decisions. One member explains the usefulness of these forums as: *“Thanks for your post. Forums like this are one of the few places you can read about first hand experiences. I try to read as many forums/stories as possible to help me form my opinions and make my decisions. One post bad or good won't change my mind much but 100 might.”*

Online travel community research is also essential for the tourism industry since the feedback emanates from experienced travelers. This information can be used to develop a strategic plan for destinations. For example, in this online travel community forum, tourist hassles by the local vendors as well as the local inhabitants seem to be a concern for potential travelers to Morocco. Thus, the government can take precautions to prevent this type of behavior, such as fining vendors who are too persistent in selling their goods and following tourists on the streets.

Additionally, learning the strengths and weaknesses of a destination from a traveler's perspective is important for travel suppliers because it can provide rich insights that can lead to modifying supplier tourism programs at the destination. For instance, the results of this study showed the importance of residents as information providers. Educational programs aimed at residents that are related to the destination and its heritage

would improve residents' knowledge. Thus, residents would be more informative in their postings and maybe more influential in a potential traveler's decision.

Monitoring eWOM in online travel communities can be a strategy for enhancing tourism destinations and products. For example, eWOM regarding a hotel having bedbugs can cause problems for the hotel. More importantly, this eWOM can be spread more quickly to a wider audience. A person can monitor the eWOM related to the hotel and fix the problems that the guests are complaining about. The problems would be seen sooner and thus can be resolved sooner.

Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations of Present Study

The current study was an initial attempt to gain a more thorough understanding of an online travel community and its members, their utilization of the travel information in these communities, and the influence of these postings on types of travel decisions.

The influence was identified by reading the postings; however, all of the threads may have affected travel decisions even if they seem to have no influence by only looking at the postings.

This study looked at the influence of online travel communities from the member's perspective by analyzing the postings. However, these types of online travel communities are open to anyone who has an Internet connection. Thus, the influence of eWOM in online travel community may reach more than its members to its users as well.

Users are exposed to the same travel information provided in the postings and they may not need to be a member to find an answer to their questions. Their questions may have been addressed in the postings already. The influence of eWOM on types of travel decisions may vary according to their familiarity with the other members and the destination.

This study explored the Thorn Tree travel community, and the results may be different for other travel communities. Thus, it is recommended to replicate the study for other online travel communities. While analyzing the postings the researcher assumed that original posters do not know whether other posting members are residents of the destination or travelers who have experienced the destination unless it was indicated in their postings. However, original posters can be followers of the online community by accessing it a few times a week (e.g. reading the forums). In that case they would be familiar with other members and their level of experience at the destination, and this information could influence their travel decisions as well.

Online discussion sites are highly transient, and the data that was used in this study may not be available a year later. The postings in online travel communities usually do not go back for more than a year. Also, the members who were studied as part of this research may not be participating in the online discussions anymore. Thus, a researcher who is willing to replicate this study may have different data and subjects within the same online travel community. However, even though the data and participants could be different, replication of this study would still give us insight regarding online travel communities.

In online environments individuals can act differently from real world environments since they are anonymous, invisible, the communication is asynchronous, and authority is minimized. Individuals are anonymous in online environments unless they reveal their real identity. This anonymity gives individuals an opportunity to separate themselves and their actions from the real world and, as a result, they tend to open up more easily. However, online environments also make it easier for some individuals to be hostile or disrespectful of others (Suler, 2004). The invisibility creates freedom to look at things different online than they would offline. Moreover, individuals do not know how others react to their words (e.g. bored expression or other disapproval signs). However, they may not hesitate to show their feelings through their words or text symbols (e.g. a smiling face). Communication is asynchronous in email and message boards. Individuals can take as much time as needed to answer these types of communications. This provides the advantage of thinking about the subject more thoroughly and may lead to a more sincere response. Online communication minimizes authority since an individual's offline status may not be known. It is unknown whether an individual is the president of a company or a mechanic. In addition, an individual's gender, race, wealth or age is unknown, and everybody has equal opportunity to express themselves. On the other hand, the minimized presence of authority in online communication provides an opportunity for others to express themselves (Suler, 2004).

Future Research Questions

The present study was conducted to get answers to the highlighted parts of the conceptual framework. The next step is combining the results of this study with existing

literature and examining the effects of sense of online community, travel experience, online travel community use, level of activity, information source, information type, and trusting beliefs on types of travel decisions.

The familiarity with destination may affect the degree of influence on travel decisions, especially in the absence of personal experience. In this online travel community each member's previous travel experience is not clear other than the specific destination topic unless the member indicates previous travel experience on his/her member profile. Furthermore, future research also needs to include users of the online travel community as well as members. In order to confirm the travel experience of members as well as users a modified version of experience use history scale can be used.

Sense of community could be a factor of influence in eWOM in online travel communities. McMillan & Chavis (1986, p.9) define Sense of Community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." Being a member of an online travel community may create a sense of belonging and responsibility for others who are asking for help. In order to understand the influence of eWOM in online travel communities, a survey that includes the users of the online travel community needs to be conducted.

Trust is an important component for the continuity and survival of online communities. Unless members trust each other, the community cannot function properly. Trust was defined by Deutsch (1973, p. 149) as "confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared." Trusting beliefs may form quickly due

to “social categorization, reputation, irrational thinking, illusions (irrational thinking), disposition, institutional roles and structures, or out of the need to immediately cooperate on a task” (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002, p. 340). In the travel and services area there is a limited number of studies that have looked at the role of trust on the Internet. Fam, Foscht, and Collins (2004) studied the online trust criteria of New Zealand accommodation consumers and found that consumers and accommodation providers perceive the importance of trust differently. Specifically, 'guarantees', 'refund', 'availability of product' and 'confidentiality' were factors that consumers viewed as important, yet these were not important factors for accommodation providers. In their study of online trust creation for eTravel agents, Schaffer and Mills (2004) found that competence and integrity were the most important trust beliefs that influence perceived risk. In his study of the role of trust in e-commerce services, McCole (2002) found that consumers look for specific cues when deciding whether a website is trustworthy or not; these cues are: appropriate interface and information about the company, informal method of communicating, consumer testimonials, free services, security assurances, honesty, design quality, up-front disclosure, comprehensive, correct and current content, and connectivity. These indicate that trust in a web site affects an individual's decision to purchase from that website.

In addition, Buhalis and Law (2008) suggest that analyzing online community content helps travel organizations to understand customer satisfaction, improve their offerings, create brand awareness, increase loyalty, and potentially result in consumer centric marketing.

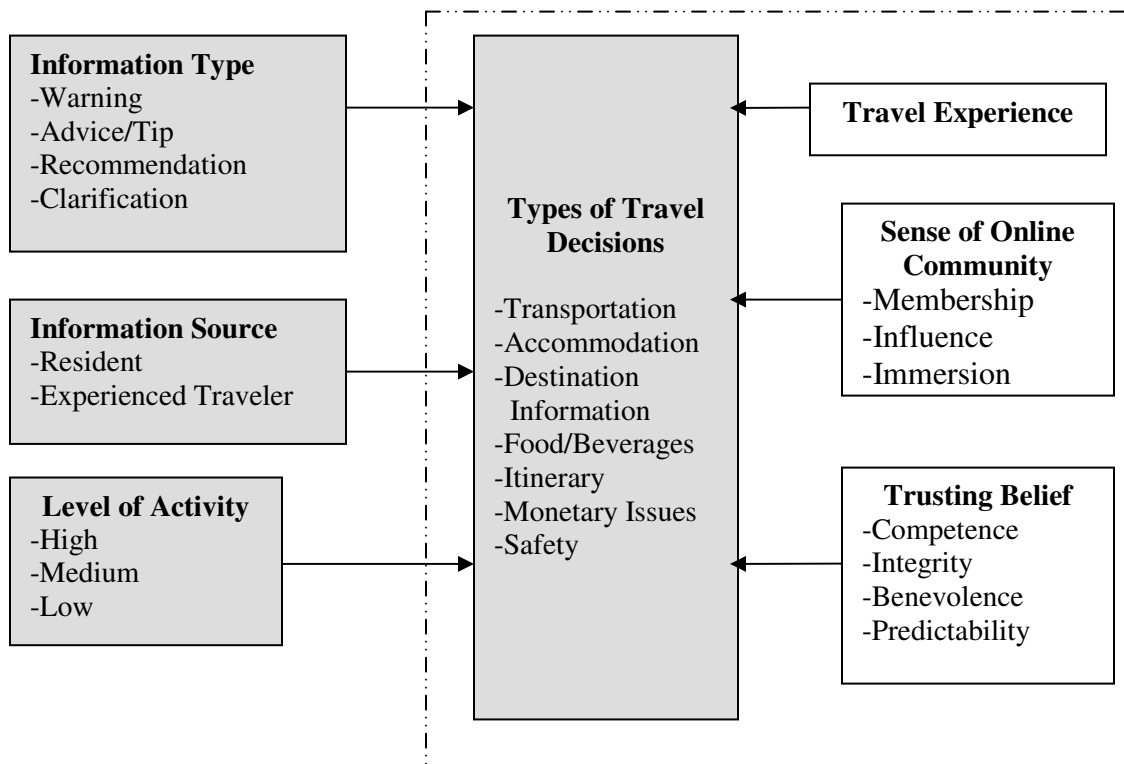


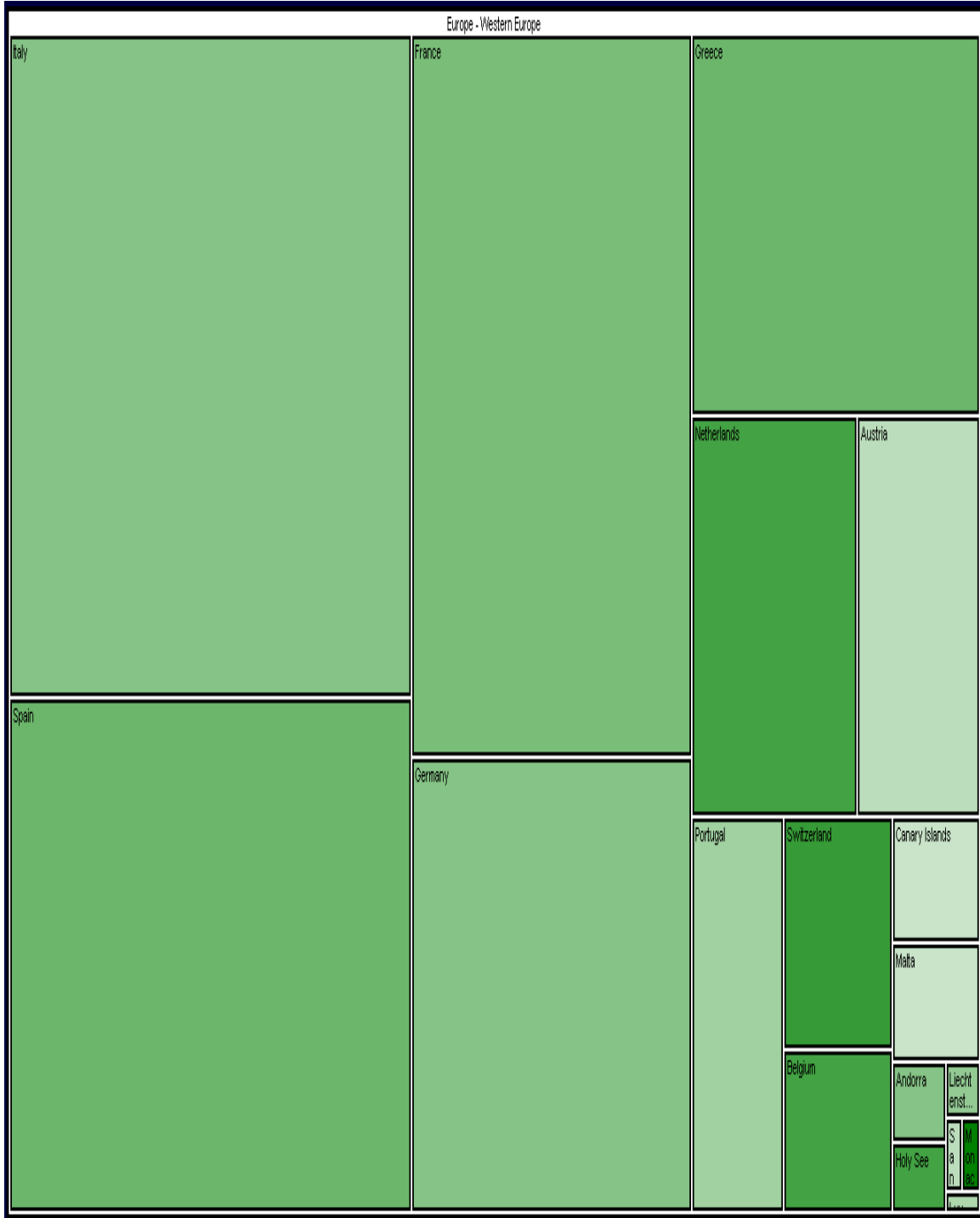
Figure 12. Future Study Framework

In conclusion, the current investigation was an attempt to understand the influence of eWOM or postings in an online travel community on travel decisions. It is believed that a more thorough understanding of online travel communities will enable all tourism stakeholders to better recognize travelers and their satisfaction level, as well as help them to enhance tourism products and destinations.

APPENDICES

Appendix B

Treemap of Western Europe



Appendix C

Audit Trail

The audit trail is a method used for reliability of a qualitative study. It describes how the data were collected, how the categories were derived, and how the study was conducted overall (Merriam, 2002). The researcher used an audit trail as a method for ensuring reliability of the research by writing memos throughout the conduct of the study. This audit trail explains how the researcher identified the final eight countries to be studied in this dissertation as well as the data analysis process.

Since there were too many threads on Thorn Tree Forum, the first step was to identify which threads to gather. There were 204 country forums on Thorn Tree, and the top ten most discussed threads in each country forum were identified by looking at the total number replies for each thread. All of the identified threads were copied and saved as a word document by country. The treemaps of all the world regions were drawn using Microsoft Treemapper. The treemaps display each country as one box in the regions. The size of the box represents the total number of threads, and the color of the box represents the total number of replies for each thread. Then from each region the top three countries with the greatest number of threads were identified. They represented the largest boxes in each country forum. In addition the darkest colored box, which represented the volume of discussion (the total replies for a thread) was chosen if it was not one of the top three countries identified. This resulted in choosing more than three country forums in some regions.

Region	Country	Number of Threads
Africa	<i>Guinea</i>	10
	<i>South Africa</i>	10
	<i>Ghana</i>	10
	<i>Morocco(*)</i>	10
Asia- North east	<i>North Korea</i>	10
	<i>Japan</i>	10
	<i>China(*)</i>	10
Australasia	<i>Australia</i>	11
	<i>New Zealand(*)</i>	10
	<i>Antartica</i>	11
Caribbean	<i>Saint Vincent & the Grenadines</i>	10
	<i>Jamaica(*)</i>	10
	<i>Sint Maarten</i>	4

Central America	<i>Guatemala</i>	10
	<i>Costa Rica(*)</i>	10
	<i>Nicaragua</i>	10
Central Asia	<i>Afghanistan</i>	10
	<i>Kazakhstan</i>	10
	<i>Tajikistan</i>	11
	<i>Uzbekistan(*)</i>	10
Eastern Europe	<i>Albania</i>	10
	<i>Czech Republic</i>	10
	<i>Ukraine</i>	10
	<i>Turkey(*)</i>	10
Asia - Indian Subcontinent	<i>India(*)</i>	10
	<i>Bangladesh</i>	13
	<i>Pakistan</i>	10
Middle east	<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	10
	<i>Israel</i>	10
	<i>Iraq</i>	10
	<i>Iran(*)</i>	10
Scandinavia	<i>Finland</i>	10
	<i>Sweden</i>	10
	<i>Denmark</i>	10
	<i>Norway(*)</i>	10
South America	<i>Guyana</i>	11
	<i>Argentina</i>	10
	<i>Peru(*)</i>	10
South-East Asia Islands & Peninsula	<i>Philippines</i>	10
	<i>Singapore</i>	15
	<i>Indonesia</i>	10
	<i>Malaysia(*)</i>	10
South-East Asia Mainland	<i>Laos</i>	10
	<i>Vietnam(*)</i>	10
	<i>Cambodia</i>	10
UK & Ireland	<i>England(*)</i>	11
	<i>Ireland</i>	10
	<i>Scotland</i>	10
Western Europe	<i>Netherlands</i>	11

	<i>Belgium</i>	10
	<i>Germany</i>	10
	<i>Spain(*)</i>	10
Total Number of Threads		528
(*) indicate the country forum that has the most number of postings		

For analysis, 49 country forums and 528 threads represented the top ten most discussed threads. The top ten most discussed topics were identified by looking at the total number of replies to each thread. In some cases this resulted in retrieving 15 threads from one country (e.g. Singapore forum). If the 10th most discussed thread had 15 replies, and the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, and 15th threads had 15 replies as well, they were included in the data sample.

Since all the topics were about the destinations, the researcher wanted to see the topics that were discussed in these country forums. All the threads were read by the researcher, and the postings in the threads were coded according to their discussion topic. This analysis resulted in what the researcher called the world matrix (see Appendix D). In this matrix each country and the topics discussed were marked in order to see the discussion topics in each country. Since the aim of this process was to identify the discussion topics, the researcher did not count the number of postings in each discussion topic.

After coding the 528 threads in 49 country forums, the researcher looked at the discussion topics by world region. Identifying which country forums to use in the study was also discussed with another experienced qualitative researcher who was familiar with the study. Africa and Western Europe had different discussion topics and overall contained all types of major discussion topics in them. In order to maximize variation these two continents were chosen. The countries included in this study were from the chosen regions that had the greatest number of threads and discussion volume in them. They were Spain, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands (from Western Europe) and Morocco, South Africa, Ghana, and Guinea (from Africa).

The researcher read all the postings in the identified country forums. There were 81 threads in total. Thematic networks analysis was used to analyze the data. There were 7 threads that were not related to travel planning so they were not utilized in this study. After reading the country forums, the researcher wrote notes about each country forum.

Belgium

Top ten discussed topics in Belgium section.

Country	Thread Number	Discussion Topic	Number of Postings
<i>Belgium</i>	1	Language	54
	2	Accommodations, night life	23
	3	Accommodation, things to do	20
	4	Language	19
	5	Things to do (Top 10 sights at dest.)	18
	6	Things to do, is it worth seeing	17
	7	Things to do	16
	8	Bar, beer, brewery	16
	9	Living at dest.	16
	10	Food/restaurants	15

In this section of the forum, major questions include language barrier, which cities to visit in Belgium, what to do in Belgium, food and restaurant recommendations as well as beer and bar/brewery suggestions, helpful tips about transportation at the destination (e.g. how to go to the recommended museum or bar, which bus to take and so on).

The original posters have never been to the destination; on the other hand, the posters that replied have either been there or actually live there (locals). Since they have been to the destination their recommendations are very specific, including the full name of the place, districts in which it is located and how to reach that place by local transportation or walking. Beer seems to be a big thing for Belgium, and posters give names of bars to go to as well as the names of specialty Belgian beers to try. The posters also confirm other posters in their posting, which strengthens the recommendation. The original poster usually posts a thank you message, indicating that she finds the postings helpful and would try to take them into consideration.

If the OP indicates her intentions at the destination, such as “looking for a good night life and lots of sites to check out during the day”, then it is easier for respondents to answer the OP’s questions or give recommendations. In Belgium, specific city names are given with positive and negative sides of each city in order to help the OP decide which cities to visit while in Belgium. In two instances the OP has returned from the destination and posted her experience there, and we can see that they take into consideration the

postings when they write, “I went to this place which was mentioned in another posting” or tried this beer that someone on this board mentioned.

Language barrier seems to be a problem for visitors of foreign countries where they do not speak the local language. There are many postings about which language is spoken in Belgium, where to visit according to the languages spoken and whether it is better to speak French than English in Belgium even if French could be the person’s second or third language. Individuals from Belgium assure that most of the Belgians speak English so language will not be a problem for the visitor. After reading all discussions about the languages spoken in Belgium, the OP decides to speak English.

One OP gets accused of being a TROLL after posting about “French speaking people being unfriendly to English speaking people and refusing to speak English”. Troll is an Internet term that refers to people who intentionally post messages about sensitive topics to cause controversy in an online community. When posed with a question like that most of the posters find it offensive and ignorant; however, there are a few that give explanations to the OP about her statement.

One of the posts is about moving to Brussels, and this OP cannot get satisfactory answers from the community and writes, “I guess I will have to try another forum if I want some answers”. Then posters start writing about the advantages and disadvantages of living in Brussels. But I think the OP does not come back to read most of them since she was frustrated in the beginning that nobody was giving any sufficient answers to her OP.

Mostly individuals who have been to the destination answer the OP’s questions, and it is understood from the postings that OPs have never been to the destination. Things to do at the destination and restaurant/bar and accommodation recommendations are the most common questions at this section of the forum.

Germany

Country	Thread Number	Discussion Topic	Number of Postings
<i>Germany</i>	1	Passport/visa	84
	2	Money	24
	3	Local customs	24
	4	TV and internet	21
	5	Describe dest.	21
	6	Experience at dest.	20
	7	Warning/tips	20
	8	Nicest city at dest.	19
	9	Food (cost)	19
	10	Beaches	19
	11	Living at dest.	17

The most discussed topics in the German forum include passport stamp issues, money exchange and how to carry money while traveling, local customs and facts about Germany from someone who lived there as a student, TV and Internet related questions, Baltic shore beaches and tips about what to do, food cost and what to eat and do on a limited budget, living at destination and which district to move, apartment rent, warning about specific airlines in Germany, and nicest small city at the destination from the perspective of visitors and locals.

A passport stamp question has the greatest number of replies because the OP frustrates the other members that reply by asking the same question over and over again and not listening to their advice about what to do. Thus it becomes a discussion more than giving tips to other travelers. This discussion is not a typical posting on the board.

In the rest of the postings the members answer the OP's questions to the best of their abilities, and the OP appreciates the help by thanking them in return. As similar with Belgium posts, the members who reply to the questions are either from that destination or have been there. Members post their own experiences as well in order to help the OP decide what to do or recommend other ways of doing things. For example, there is one negative experience posting at the destination about visiting a castle and waiting too long to get in. The other members disagree with the OP and explain why he might have experienced negative feelings about his visit or what he might have done to avoid crowds at a popular historic attraction. The same situation occurred concerning a warning about avoiding a specific German airline posting. The members all disagreed with the OP and explained why the OP might have felt that way. They also share their own experience with the same carrier (which was not negative). TV and Internet questions get the same negative responses since the OP uses the "behind" to describe Germany and compares it to the United States. Comparison of the two countries gets frustration from the natives of the destination the most because of the word "behind" (Germany is so behind when it comes to television?)

In this section, negative postings all got disagreement and frustration from the members.

When a question is short and direct it gets short and direct answers. For example the posting "which is the nicest small city in Germany" gets answers with the names of the cities, where they are located and not much more definition about the cities. The OP never returns and posts another message. A member warns others indicating that this OP has asked the same question in other country forums and has never come back to post another message, and it could be a waste of time to answer his posting. Still this does not stop other members from posting more answers.

The Baltic beaches question is from the Lonely Planet staff, which may be a reason for its high response rate.

Spain

Country	Thread Number	Discussion Topic	Number of Postings
<i>Spain</i>	1	Living at dest, experience at dest.	65
	2	Accommodations	63
	3	Food/restaurants	60
	4	Things to do	56
	5	Warnings/tips	45
	6	Language help	45
	7	Food/restaurants	37
	8	Accommodations, things to do	33
	9	Experience at dest	33
	10	Accommodations, things to do	32

The most discussed topics in the Spain section of the forum include living at the destination, accommodations, food and restaurant suggestions, things to do at the destination, tips and warnings against pickpockets, and language translation about closed airlines.

Members indicate that they get frustrated with vague posts and general questions which ask the forum members to basically plan their trip for the OP. Then the OP either leaves the thread or never posts another message after members take the time to write long detailed answers.

Planning a honeymoon in Spain was the most discussed topic, since the members tried to help the OP as much as they could. All of the members had been to Spain, a few had lived there and a couple of them are still living there. Thus the OP gets all the insider information without marketing intentions with as much details as she wants. Most of this information cannot be found easily on the Internet or from guidebooks. There is constant interaction with the OP and the other members trying to understand each other and give recommendations accordingly.

There is one troll in this discussion who asks about accommodations but uses profane language. This gets on members' nerves, and nobody answers his question but the discussion gets longer because members constantly indicate how disrespectful the OP is (gets 63 replies).

Living at the destination is a popular topic, especially in the Western Europe forum. Members give advice to the OP about where to move. The OP actually made a better choice of which city to move to according to his job options. One member who lives there actually checked out job opportunities for the OP. If the members believe that the OP is sincere about her question and comes back and keeps posting messages after

members post their recommendations, it is appreciated and members try their best to help the OP.

Food and restaurant recommendations are also posted often. Members who have previous experience at the destination give their restaurant recommendations. A posting is better if it not only asks the best restaurant in town but also adds specifically what the OP is looking for such as authentic, local, tasty, dishes and local drinks. This specification eliminates chain restaurants from the recommendation list. It also helps those looking for specific types of food (e.g. vegetarian) at the destination.

Negative comments about destinations are found to be skeptical by the members or seen as one's point of view. Members try to find an explanation about the negative experience at the destination or indicate that it is not specific to that destination but could happen anywhere in the world. Pickpockets at Barcelona are an example of this kind of thread.

Members also help each other with the translation of documents. For example, when one member booked a flight that got cancelled due to the closing of that airline, members helped him with the translation of the web page and what he had to do to get his money back. In the end the OP got his money with help from members. Another language topic is about learning the local language, helpful hints about how to learn a foreign language easier, and some book/cassette recommendations for learning the language.

Itinerary, things to do at the destination and where to stay are some of the most common topics in the forum. The members help the OP about fine tuning her itinerary and if the actual itinerary can be done in the specified amount of time. The OP indicates that she finds the postings helpful and rearranges her itinerary in accordance with advice from the members.

Transportation at the destination or how to go from one place to another is mostly discussed in these forums as well. The members give specific details about which roads to take if driving and the condition of the roads (e.g. if they are small mountain roads, if there is construction going on).

Netherlands

If people organize their questions in different paragraphs or number each question, then all their questions gets answered, since everybody can clearly see all the questions. The shorter and clearer the questions, the better and more helpful the answers. (This is a general observation.)

The most discussed topics include either negative remarks about the destination, locals or topics that were found to be not intelligent (stupid) or impossible to do within the OP's remarks.

Country	Thread Number	Discussion Topic	Number of Postings
<i>Netherlands</i>	1	Law, safety, accommodation	48
	2	Food/restaurant	25
	3	Living at dest.	25
	4	Museum	24
	5	Weather	22
	6	Accommodation	21
	7	Language	20
	8	Food/restaurant	20
	9	Weather, things to do, open Christmas day	19
	10	Buying train tickets	19
	11	Local drinks (alcoholic)	19

The most discussed topics include accommodations, local laws, safety about staying in a park at night, food and restaurant recommendations, Dutch colonial museum suggestions, language barriers, weather, and transportation at the destination.

The most discussed topic in this part of the forum is whether a person can live on a \$10 budget in Amsterdam for a month and the safety and legality of staying in parks. All the members find a \$10 budget impossible to do, and in the further postings the OP reveals that he actually has a little bit more money than he has declared in his original message, and is traveling with his sister. All the members advise him to stay a shorter period of time at the destination, otherwise it is impossible to do it and stay healthy. In the end the Op returns from his trip and, as a result of the members' discouragement, he went to Morocco and stayed there for that amount of time and lived under \$15 a day. However, the OP indicates that they decided to go to Morocco instead of Spain as if the postings on the board did not have any influence on his decision to go to Morocco. But he does what other members advise him to do like staying at a hostel instead of a park.

Food, drinks and places to find the best of them are discussed often as well. The visitors want to know where they can have real local food, specialty dishes and drinks and the cost. The local members usually give the address of the places which they suggest. In some cases food related topics lead to which country's cuisine is better and related topics.

Dutch colonial museums are hard to find as I understand from reading the posts. Since the Dutch are not proud of their colonial heritage, the locals indicate that their colonial history is mostly taught at schools, but visitors cannot see much around.

Weather is important to know for travelers especially if they are going to stay for a short period of time at the destination. Thus weather topics are discussed in many of the country forums. The locals recommend indoor activities if the weather is rainy or cold at the destination.

Language seems to be a barrier to visitors to foreign countries whose native language is not same as the visitors'. Thus, the main concern for visitors is whether the locals can speak English or will they have to learn basic terms in local language. In this type of question the locals always indicate that everybody speaks English and not to worry about it; this is also confirmed by visitors to the destination.

Living at the destination includes a short time working at the destination to immigrating to the destination. The immigration question is taken more seriously, and replies include harsh facts from the locals about living at the destination such as racism, not being friendly to foreigners, the difficulty in finding a job if you are not specialized in something in demand, and being an expensive country to live in. On the other hand, living for a short term is answered more positively with mostly suggestions about places to live.

Posting messages that abbreviate the name of a city such as calling Amsterdam as the Dam causes lots of anger and correction postings to the OP. In most cases the original question gets ignored and the OP is corrected by different members in their postings. That is why the posting gets lots of replies.

Things to do at the destination with limited time or budget is another popular type of question. The locals or the travelers who have been there before answer these types of postings. Each posting includes a suggestion with a name of a place to visit. Some of them also include transportation to that specific place.

Transportation while at the destination is discussed often. Travelers want to know how they can go to an attraction or accommodations from the airport or from city center. Also how to buy train tickets and if the ticket vending machines accept credit cards are vital questions that are mentioned at destination forums.

Guinea

Country	Thread Number	Discussion Topic	Number of Postings
<i>Guinea</i>	1	Political news	65
	2	Land borders/ crossing	26
	3	Itinerary/things to do	14
	4	Political news	12
	5	Weather, rec. activity, accommodations	12
	6	Borders, safety, ATM	11
	7	Political news	8
	8	Experience at des, safety	6
	9	Traveler help	5
	10	Town, city knowledge	3

The most discussed topic in the Guinea forum is political news about the destination as there were strikes going on and martial law was in order at the time of data collection. Border crossings, getting a visa, local police attitudes and safety were also discussed under the same topic.

Other members' experience at the destination is another topic that was discussed. This also included questions about specific cities, hiking during rainy seasons and best places to hike.

Itinerary and things to do were also asked in the forum as well. All the members that answered had been there previously and shared their experience with the OP.

This part of the forum got a lot of postings due to the political situation at the destination during the time of the data collection.

Ghana

Country	Thread Number	Discussion Topic	Number of Postings
Ghana	1	Transportation, travel cost	19
	2	Transportation (car rental)	18
	3	Solo travel	15
	4	Money	14
	5	Accommodation, transportation, things to do	14
	6	Warning/tips	14
	7	Experience at dest.	13
	8	Transportation (airlines)	12
	9	Safety	11
	10	Local customs	11

Transportation at the destination is the most discussed topic in the Ghana section. This includes travel cost to the destination, which airlines to take, whether to rent a car or hire a taxi driver, and asking about small airlines that fly to Ghana. Among these, hiring a taxi driver is the most discussed, and all members advise to do this and not try to drive themselves. Reasons behind this include a great number of accidents and a corrupt police department and justice system.

One posting about local customs in Ghana resulted in various answers without any consensus. The question is what is the proper protocol of calling women "Auntie" and men "Uncle".

A female solo traveler was looking for either a travel partner or asking is it easy to meet with other travelers. Most of the members indicate that there are few solo travelers in Ghana; however, they are not extinct. A few of them explained that they will be visiting Ghana and offered to meet and travel together if it suits the OP.

Places to go and see is another discussed topic at this part of the forum.

Safety as related to police harassment in Ghana was a concern for one member. Some members said they did not have any problems with the police, yet others said they did. This may relate to being unlucky and meeting the wrong kind of police.

Money and how to carry money at the destination, whether there are ATMs, and do places accept credit cards are kind of questions that travelers wonder about before going to a third world country (it is hard to find such information online and offline).

There was one warning about robbery at the beach. A few members confirmed that it happened to them as well. The other members indicated they have been to the same place and there were signs everywhere not to take anything to the beach with you as petty theft was a problem in that area. The OP talked about her own experience (robbed while on the beach) and she also wrote, "I appreciate such forums and I wish I knew about them before so many of my previous travels."

The last topic was a trip report and experience at the destination. This report was very detailed, included how long he stayed where, how much he paid for accommodations to the bread he bought, etc. Another member asked detailed questions about the OP's posting, and the OP replied to all of them in as much detail as he could. These kind of reports help readers learn more specific things about the destination, in particular things that cannot be known unless that place is visited. This may also give inspiration to others to visit the same destination if the OP had a good time there. At least the readers have a successful example in front of them.

Morocco

Country	Thread Number	Discussion Topic	Number of Postings
<i>Morocco</i>	1	Tourist hassle	29
	2	Local customs (clothing)	22
	3	Accommodation, entertainment (things to do)	22
	4	Safety	21
	5	Tourist hassle	21
	6	Taking a tour or solo travel	21
	7	Experience at dest.	21
	8	Local food	21
	9	Money	20
	10	Safety	20

Tourist hassle is the most discussed topic in the Moroccan forum. The OPs have heard stories about hustlers, touts, and people that want to be your tour guide. The OP's question starts from WOM and from the things that she has read. Most of the members say that tourist hassle is manageable in Morocco; they usually compare it to other countries like Mexico, India, Egypt, and Tunisia. Since everyone's personal opinion is different about this topic there is no real consensus about the hassle situation in Morocco.

But it is enough for the OP to make up his mind about whether to visit Morocco, and he books his flight. That means he is convinced that even though there is hassle in Morocco, it is not a reason for not visiting a country. It is the same way with the second OP that asks about hassle in Morocco and decides to go. This thread also discusses sexual harassment at the destination and the difference in hassle levels for males and females. Everybody accepts that there is sexual harassment on the street from the local guys either by shouting or whistling.

The second most discussed topic is safety in Morocco as a result of recent bombings. The OP was convinced by the members that Morocco is a safe place and anything can happen anywhere. In the end the OP writes that she will go for month as a result of the postings from the members. In the other safety topic, the discussion does not go far and members say that it is a safe place and then start joking around among themselves.

There is one posting which is actually a trip report from a member that explains in detail what she has been doing at the destination and her experiences. There is no discussion about anything; it is mostly the OP that posts the messages on this thread.

One member asks about strange food that they have eaten at the destination. The members post their own experiences about food and the ones that they liked and did not like.

The local custom question in this thread is about clothing. The OP leaves the thread early after most members say it is better to wear long pants rather than shorts, and the OP is convinced to wear long pants. However, other members post that wearing shorts for a guy is not a problem, especially if he is not old.

How to carry money during traveling, whether to bring cash or travelers check, and questions about ATMs are common travel questions. The members give recommendations about what to do and their own experience as well. The OP never returns or posts again.

Accommodation and entertainment options in Morocco was another OP question. The members agree that Morocco is not the best place for clubbing or night life, but they give other recommendations like renting a riad and hiring belly dancers. Many of the members actually advise the OP not to go there if his intention is nightlife and drinking. However the OP decides to go according to the postings on the forum.

Traveling solo or with a tour is another question here. All the members recommend solo travel, most indicate renting a car at destination and having more freedom to go wherever. The OP indicates he is leaning towards renting a car in accordance with most of the postings. He also changes his mind about accommodations that look nice on the brochure when members explain that it is overpriced and was part of a chain that went bankrupt some time ago.

South Africa

Country	Thread Number	Discussion Topic	Number of Postings
<i>South Africa</i>	1	Driving at dest.	60
	2	Itinerary/things to do	36
	3	Safety, experience at dest.	32
	4	Warning/tips	31
	5	Safety, transportation	29
	6	Accommodation, safety	26
	7	Health	23
	8	Accommodations, things to do	23
	9	Accommodations, transportation, things to do	21
	10	Itinerary/things to do	21

In the South Africa forum the most discussed topic is safety. One of the postings is about a warning to travelers where the OP explains how he helped a beaten up, robbed elderly German tourist that he saw on the street. The purpose of the posting is just to give an example of what can happen and especially warn elderly tourists to be more careful. However, as always, most of the members think that the OP is trying to tell the readers to not go to SA. But the OP insists that he was only trying to warn others to be more careful while traveling in SA. Another post is about driving and safety and asks others about their experience if they have done that. Members give advice and tips about things to do and not to do. The OP has heard stories about the danger of driving at the destination, and he is posting to learn from others that have done that before. Safety of staying at a mixed dorm is another question, but the OP is assured that it is not something to be worried about and also includes tips if she does not feel safe, such as moving out and staying in another room.

All the negative postings get the same reaction: the members claim that it could happen anywhere in the world, and the destination is as safe as one's hometown. Other explanations include the OP is a troll or just writing negative things about the destination since he does not like it. Members say that these people are usually ex-pats, and they are the ones that leave their country because they do not like it. Thus it is easy for them to criticize and indicate the negative aspects of the destination.

One of the members explains the usefulness of these forums as:

“OP (original poster)

Thanks for your post. Forums like this are one of the few places you can read about first hand experiences. I try to read as many forums/stories as possible to help me form my opinions and make my decisions. One post bad or good won't change my mind much but

100 might. Pay no attention to the people who don't understand why it is as important to post the bad as it is the good.”

Another safety question is about two females driving at night from the airport to their hostel. All the members advise them not to drive at night and stay somewhere close to the airport for that night and then drive during the day. Safety concerns are common in SA. Members also advise them to slow down before coming to red lights and try to avoid stopping at the red lights as carjacking is common in SA. Although in previous threads the members indicate that SA is as safe as anywhere, with this thread they accept that it is different and advise the OP not to drive at night. If it was as safe as anywhere then driving at night would not be such a problem. They also give advice about speeding and buying gas at the destination.

Some posts go further than the original question. If the OP feels satisfied with the answers then he posts others in the same thread. For example SA top10-1 was originally about driving distances between two cities; however, the discussion goes further about speeding tickets, buying gas, finding recent maps online, and using cell phones and their rates.

Another post is about itinerary, if it looks fine to other members, if it is doable in that amount of time, and any suggestions about other places to see that are not on the itinerary. It is basically a set of suggestions about the OP's itinerary. Then the OP changes her itinerary according to the advice that comes from the local members or others that have been there before. This also includes places to eat and drink special dishes and local drinks. Another one with an itinerary asks about lodging and seeing wild animals. In another post about where to stay and things not to be missed, the members suggest different places to see, how to get there and their own experience at the destination.

Writing the travel itinerary seems like a good way of asking for advice, since the members can see what you are interested in and also if it can be done in that amount of time. In most cases the OPs want to see every thing in 10 days or so.

In Africa another widely discussed topic is malaria. One posting is about the kind of medication used by experienced members in Africa and their side effects. All the members advise that it is a must to take medication, and they also give names of the medication that they have used themselves with the side effects.

After writing country notes, the researcher coded each posting, which made the basic themes. Then all the basic themes, including the postings, were read again and coded once more, which resulted in organizing themes. While reading the posts, the researcher saw the effect of postings and their influence on travel decisions, which was the global theme in this study. The network analysis figure was drawn to better show all the themes in the data. This was the confirmation of influence in this online community.

To identify influence, a thread was read thoroughly and if the OP indicated that she will include any of the tips written in the postings in her travel plans, it was considered an influential thread.

The researcher saw that members' travel experience levels were different from each other at the destination level. Some of the members were living at the destination, some of them have never been there before, and some of them had been there. All of their

postings were influential in different ways. Thus, the researcher decided to classify members by their level of travel experience at the destination. This was a two step process. In the first step, the researcher identified the residents and travelers with experience at the destination by reading the postings. Then, each member's profile was analyzed to see if they were residents or travelers with experience at the destination. In this second step, it was seen that not all members indicated their residence or travel experience at the destination level. However, when compared with the researcher's results and the member profile analysis, the researcher was right in all her results except in one case. Then, all the postings were coded again according to the information provider's experience level at the destination. This resulted in finding out what type of members were influential in what type of travel decisions. In order to identify which type of member was influential in the thread, the researcher identified which member's tip was considered to be in the OP's travel plans. If there were more than one type of member giving the same tip, then the number of residents and experienced travel tips were counted. The type of member that had the greatest number of influential postings was considered to be influential in that thread.

The researcher also coded each posting again in order to classify each posting's information type. This was done by reading all the influential threads and identifying what type of information the posting has. The researcher classified all the postings under four categories: recommendations, advice/tips, clarifications, and warnings.

Activity level of members was another category that the researcher thought would influence the member's travel decisions. All the members' total number of postings can be seen next to their user name. By looking at this information all the members were grouped into three groups (low, medium, and high activity) in influential threads. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to make sure that all the groups were significantly different from each other. The results confirmed that there were three groups. Then, all the influential thread postings were coded again to see if the activity level of members influence travel decisions. After the coding, the researcher identified the discussion topics by member activity level. As a result, which type of member activity level was influential in which type of travel decision was found.

While identifying the experience level of members, the researcher also noted the country residence of members that were in influential threads. This was the only kind of demographic information that the researcher could get by reading the postings. To get more information about the members, a survey is needed to ask the questions directly.

Appendix D

The World Matrix

Discussion Topics	Region & Country			
	Africa			
	<i>Guinea</i>	<i>South Africa</i>	<i>Ghana</i>	<i>Morocco (*)</i>
Transportation		*	*	
Political news/articles	*			
Safety	*	*	*	*
Currency, ATM, Banks	*		*	*
Health		*		
Itinerary/things to do	*	*	*	
Accomodations	*	*	*	*
Food/restaurants				*
Local customs/ clothing/ tipping			*	*
Entertainment				*
Tourist hassle				*
Solo travel			*	
Travel experience at the destination	*		*	
Visa/entry to country/passport				
Travel agency				
Travel companion				
Guide books				
Travel cost				
Travel insurance				
Boat tours				
When to travel				
Night life				

Animals/zoos				
Tips/warnings/scams				
Tour operator/guides				
Living at the destination				
Weather				
Recreational drugs				
Recreation activities				
Shopping/costs				
Language schools				
Volunteer work				
Border crossing	*			
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity				
Locals perspective				
Things I like at the destination				
Things I don't like about destination				
Language problems				
Local people				
Local language				
Nicest/ favorite city at destination				
Overcharged				
Laws				
Books/ movies about destination				
Favorite spot at the destination				
Meeting at destination				
Off the beaten path				
Traveler help	*			

Miscellaneous	* (specific town information)			
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Discussion Topics	Region & Country		
	Asia- North East		
	<i>North Korea</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>China (*)</i>
Transportation	*	*	*
Political news/articles			
Safety		*	
Currency, ATM, Banks		*	
Health			
Itinerary/things to do		*	*
Accommodations			*
Food/restaurants			*
Local customs/ clothing/tipping	*	*	*
Entertainment			
Tourist hassle			
Solo travel			
Travel experience at the destination	*		*
Visa/entry to country/passport	*		
Travel agency	*		
Travel companion	*		
Guide books	*		*
Travel cost	*	*	
Travel insurance		*	
Boat tours			
When to travel			
Night life			
Animals/zoos			

Tips/warnings/scams			
Tour operator/guides			
Living at the destination			
Weather			
Recreational drugs			
Recreation activities			
Shopping/costs			
Language schools			
Volunteer work			
Border crossing			
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity			
Locals perspective			
Things I like at the destination			
Things I don't like about destination			
Language problems			
Local people			
Local language			
Nicest/ favorite city at destination			
Overcharged			
Laws			
Books/ movies about destination			
Favorite spot at the destination			
Meeting at destination			
Off the beaten path			
Traveler help			

Miscellaneous		*(Japanese baths, travel insurance, overrated places)	
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Discussion Topics	Region & Country		
	Australasia		
	<i>Australia</i>	<i>New Zealand(*)</i>	<i>Antarctica</i>
Transportation	*	*	*
Political news/articles	*		
Safety	*		
Currency, ATM, Banks	*	*	*
Health			
Itinerary/things to do		*	*
Accommodations	*	*	*
Food/restaurants		*	*
Local customs/ clothing/tipping			*
Entertainment			
Tourist hassle			
Solo travel			
Travel experience at the destination			
Visa/entry to country/passport			
Travel agency			
Travel companion			
Guide books			
Travel cost			*
Travel insurance			
Boat tours			*
When to travel			*
Night life	*		
Animals/zoos	*		
Tips/warnings/scams	*		
Tour operator/guides		*	
Living at the destination	*	*	

Weather			
Recreational drugs			
Recreation activities			
Shopping/costs			
Language schools			
Volunteer work			
Border crossing			
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity			
Locals perspective			
Things I like at the destination			
Things I don't like about destination			
Language problems			
Local people			
Local language			
Nicest/ favorite city at destination			
Overcharged			
Laws	*		
Books/ movies about destination			
Favorite spot at the destination			
Meeting at destination			
Off the beaten path			
Traveler help			
Miscellaneous		*(GPS)	

Discussion Topics	Region & Country		
	Caribbean		
	<i>Saint Vincent & the Grenadines</i>	<i>Jamaica(*)</i>	<i>Saint Maarten</i>
Transportation	*	*	*
Political news/articles			

Safety	*		
Currency, ATM, Banks	*	*	
Health			
Itinerary/things to do	*	*	*
Accommodations	*	*	*
Food/restaurants		*	
Local customs/ clothing/tipping			
Entertainment			
Tourist hassle			
Solo travel			
Travel experience at the destination		*	
Visa/entry to country/passport			
Travel agency			
Travel companion			
Guide books			
Travel cost	*		
Travel insurance			
Boat tours			
When to travel			
Night life			
Animals/zoos			
Tips/warnings/scams			
Tour operator/guides			
Living at the destination			
Weather	*		
Recreational drugs		*	
Recreation activities			*
Shopping/costs			
Language schools			
Volunteer work			
Border crossing			
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity			

Locals perspective			
Things I like at the destination			
Things I don't like about destination			
Lanugage problems			
Local people			
Local language			
Nicest/ favorite city at destination			
Overcharged			
Laws			
Books/ movies about destination			
Favorite spot at the destination			
Meeting at destination			
Off the beaten path			
Traveler help			
Miscellaneous			

Discussion Topics	Region & Country		
	Central America		
	<i>Guatemala</i>	<i>Costa Rica (*)</i>	<i>Nicaragua</i>
Transportation	*	*	*
Political news/articles		*	*
Safety		*	*
Currency, ATM, Banks			
Health	*		
Itinerary/things to do	*	*	*
Accommodations		*	*
Food/restaurants	*		*
Local customs/ clothing/tipping	*	*	
Entertainment			
Tourist hassle			

Solo travel			
Travel experience at the destination		*	
Visa/entry to country/passport			
Travel agency			
Travel companion	*		
Guide books			*
Travel cost			*
Travel insurance			
Boat tours			
When to travel			
Night life			
Animals/zoos			
Tips/warnings /scams	*	*	
Tour operator/ guides			
Living at the destination			
Weather			
Recreational drugs			
Recreation activities			*
Shopping/costs	*		
Language schools			*
Volunteer work			*
Border crossing			
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity			
Locals perspective			
Things I like at the destination			
Things I don't like about destination			
Language problems			
Local people			
Local language			

Nicest/ favorite city at destination			
Overcharged			
Laws			
Books/ movies about dest.			
Favorite spot at the destination			
Meeting at destination			
Off the beaten path			
Traveler help			
Miscellaneous			

Discussion Topics	Region & Country			
	Central Asia			
	<i>Afghanistan</i>	<i>Kazakhstan</i>	<i>Tajikistan</i>	<i>Uzbekistan (*)</i>
Transportation	*	*		*
Political news/articles				
Safety	*			*
Currency, ATM, Banks				*
Health				
Itinerary/things to do		*		*
Accommodations		*	*	*
Food/restaurants		*		
Local customs/ clothing/tipping				*
Entertainment				
Tourist hassle				*
Solo travel				*
Travel experience at the destination	*		*	
Visa/entry to country/passport	*	*	*	
Travel agency				

Travel companion	*			
Guide books		*		
Travel cost		*		
Travel insurance				
Boat tours				
When to travel				
Night life				
Animals/zoos				
Tips/warnings /scams				*
Tour operator/ guides			*	*
Living at the destination				
Weather			*	
Recreational drugs				
Recreation activities			*	
Shopping/costs				
Language schools			*	
Volunteer work				
Border crossing	*	*		
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity		*	*	
Locals perspective				
Things I like at the destination				
Things I don't like about destination				
Language problems				
Local people				
Local language				
Nicest/ favorite city at destination				
Overcharged				
Laws				

Books/ movies about dest.				
Favorite spot at the destination				
Meeting at destination				
Off the beaten path				
Traveler help				
Miscellaneous	*internship at dest	*driving/roads/map	*altitude sickness	*Lennin statues

Discussion Topics	Region & Country			
	Eastern Europe			
	<i>Albania</i>	<i>Czech Republic</i>	<i>Ukraine</i>	<i>Turkey (*)</i>
Transportation	*	*		
Political news/articles				
Safety	*	*		*
Currency, ATM, Banks	*			
Health				
Itinerary/things to do		*		*
Accommodations			*	
Food/restaurants		*		*
Local customs/ clothing/tipping				
Entertainment				
Tourist hassle				*
Solo travel				
Travel experience at the destination	*		*	*
Visa/entry to country/passport	*	*	*	
Travel agency				
Travel companion				

Guide books	*		*	
Travel cost		*	*	
Travel insurance				
Boat tours				
When to travel				
Night life				
Animals/zoos				
Tips/warnings/ scams	*	*	*	*
Tour operator/guides				
Living at the destination		*		
Weather				
Recreational drugs				
Recreation activities				*
Shopping/costs				
Language schools				
Volunteer work				
Border crossing				
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity				
Locals perspective				
Things I like at the destination				
Things I don't like about destination				
Language problems				
Local people				
Local language				
Nicest/ favorite city				
Overcharged				

Laws				
Books/ movies about destination				
Favorite spot at the destination				
Meeting at destination				
Off the beaten path				
Traveler help				
Miscellaneous				*best hammam

Discussion Topics	Region & Country		
	Asia - Indian Subcontinent		
	<i>India(*)</i>	<i>Bangladesh</i>	<i>Pakistan</i>
Transportation	*		
Political news/articles	*	*	*
Safety		*	*
Currency, ATM, Banks			*
Health			
Itinerary/things to do		*	*
Accommodations			
Food/restaurants			
Local customs/ clothing/tipping			*
Entertainment			
Tourist hassle			
Solo travel			*
Travel experience at the destination	*	*	*
Visa/entry to country/passport		*	
Travel agency			
Travel companion			
Guide books			

Travel cost		*	
Travel insurance			
Boat tours			
When to travel			
Night life			
Animals/zoos			
Tips/warnings/scams			*
Tour operator/guides	*	*	
Living at the destination		*	
Weather			
Recreational drugs		*	
Recreation activities			
Shopping/costs			
Language schools			
Volunteer work			
Border crossing		*	
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity			
Locals perspective			
Things I like at the destination			
Things I don't like about destination			
Language problems			
Local people			
Local language			
Nicest/ favorite city		*	
Overcharged			
Laws			
Books/ movies about destination			*
Favorite spot at the destination			
Meeting at destination			

Off the beaten path			
Traveler help			
Miscellaneous	*digital photo storage, things not found at dest.	* cell phone use at dest, city location/ how to get there	

Discussion Topics	Middle East			
	<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	<i>Israel</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Iran(*)</i>
Transportation		*	*	
Political news/articles		*		*
Safety			*	*
Currency, ATM, Banks				
Health				
Itinerary/things to do			*	*
Accommodations			*	
Food/ restaurants	*		*	
Local customs/ clothing/tipping	*	*		*
Entertainment				
Tourist hassle				
Solo travel				
Travel exp. at the destination	*			*
Visa/entry to country/ passport	*	*		*
Travel agency	*			
Travel companion				
Guide books		*		
Travel cost	*			
Travel insurance				
Boat tours				
When to travel				
Night life				

Animals/zoos				
Tips/warnings/scams				
Tour operator/guides				*
Living at the destination	*	*		
Weather			*	
Recreational drugs				
Recreation activities	*	*		
Shopping/costs				
Language schools	*			
Volunteer work			*	
Border crossing		*	*	
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity				
Locals perspective				*
Things I like at the destination				
Things I don't like about destination				
Language problems				
Local people				
Local language				
Nicest/ favorite city at destination				
Overcharged				
Laws				
Books/ movies about destination				
Favorite spot at the destination				
Meeting at destination				
Off the beaten path				
Traveler help				
Miscellaneous				

Discussion Topics	Region & Country			
	Scandinavia			
	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Norway(*)</i>
Transportation		*	*	*
Political news/articles				
Safety		*		
Currency, ATM, Banks	*		*	
Health				
Itinerary/things to do	*		*	*
Accommodations		*	*	*
Food/restaurants		*	*	*
Local customs/clothing/tipping				
Entertainment				
Tourist hassle				
Solo travel				
Travel exp. at the destination			*	
Visa/entry to country/ passport				
Travel agency				
Travel companion				
Guide books				
Travel cost	*		*	*
Travel insurance				
Boat tours				
When to travel				
Night life				
Animals/zoos				*
Tips/warnings/scams		*		
Tour operator/guides				
Living at the destination	*	*	*	
Weather			*	*
Recreational drugs				

Recreation activities	*		*	*
Shopping/costs		*		*
Language schools				
Volunteer work				
Border crossing				
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity				
Locals perspective				
Things I like at the destination	*			
Things I don't like about destination	*			
Language problems	*			
Local people		*		
Local language		*		
Nicest/ favorite city at destination			*	*
Overcharged				
Laws				
Books/ movies about destination				
Favorite spot at the destination				
Meeting at destination				
Off the beaten path				
Traveler help				
Miscellaneous	* unemployment benefits			* whaling ports, arctic circle, airports

Discussion Topics	Region & Country		
	South America		
	<i>Guyana</i>	<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Peru (*)</i>
Transportation	*		
Political news/articles			
Safety		*	*
Currency, ATM, Banks	*		
Health			
Itinerary/ things to do	*		*
Accommodation	*		*
Food / restaurants			*
Local customs/ clothing/tipping			
Entertainment			
Tourist hassle			
Solo travel			
Travel experience at the destination		*	*
Visa/entry to country/ passport	*		
Travel agency			
Travel companion			
Guide books			
Travel cost	*		
Travel insurance			
Boat tours			
When to travel			
Night life			
Animals/zoos	*		
Tips/warnings/scams			
Tour operator/ guides	*	*	
Living at the destination			
Weather			
Recreational drugs			

Recreation activities		*	
Shopping/ costs			
Language schools			
Volunteer work			
Border crossing			
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity			
Locals perspective		*	
Things I like at the destination		*	
Things I don't like about destination		*	
Language problems			
Local people			
Local language	*		
Nicest/ favorite city at destination			
Overcharged			*
Laws			*
Books/ movies about destination			*
Favorite spot at the destination			
Meeting at destination			
Off the beaten path			
Traveler help			
Miscellaneous		*natural attractions, making quick money, theft, working at dest.	

Discussion Topics	Region & Country			
	South-East Asia Islands & Peninsula			
	<i>Philippines</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Indonesia</i>	<i>Malaysia (*)</i>
Transportation		*		
Political news/articles	*			*
Safety		*		
Currency, ATM, Banks				
Health				
Itinerary/ things to do			*	*
Accommodation		*		
Food / restaurants		*		
Local customs/clothing/tipping				*
Entertainment				
Tourist hassle				
Solo travel		*		
Travel experience at the destination	*	*	*	*
Visa/entry to country/ passport				
Travel agency				
Travel companion		*		
Guide books	*		*	
Travel cost		*		
Travel insurance				
Boat tours				
When to travel				
Night life			*	
Animals/zoos				
Tips/warnings/scams	*		*	

Tour operator/ guides				
Living at the destination				
Weather				
Recreational drugs				
Recreation activities				
Shopping/ costs		*		*
Language schools				
Volunteer work				
Border crossing				
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity				
Locals perspective			*	
Things I like at the destination				
Things I don't like about destination				
Language problems				
Local people				
Local language				*
Nicest/ favorite city at destination				
Overcharged				
Laws				
Books/ movies about destination				
Favorite spot at the destination		*		
Meeting at destination	*		*	
Off the beaten path			*	*
Traveler help				

Miscellaneous	* dating locals, treasure hunt	* hospitals, primary industry source	* places to meet fellow countrymen, lending money	* visitor demographics, comparison with another dest.
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Discussion Topics	Region & Country		
	South-East Asia Mainland		
	<i>Laos</i>	<i>Vietnam(*)</i>	<i>Cambodia</i>
Transportation			
Political news/articles	*	*	*
Safety			
Currency, ATM, Banks			
Health			
Itinerary/things to do	*		
Accommodations	*	*	*
Food/restaurants			
Local customs/ clothing/ tipping			
Entertainment			
Tourist hassle		*	
Solo travel			
Travel experience at the destination	*	*	*
Visa/entry to country/passport			
Travel agency			
Travel companion			
Guide books			
Travel cost			
Travel insurance			
Boat tours			
When to travel			
Night life			
Animals/zoos			
Tips/warnings/ scams	*	*	*
Tour operator/guides			

Living at the destination			
Weather			
Recreational drugs			
Recreation activities	*		*
Shopping/costs			
Language schools			
Volunteer work			
Border crossing			
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity			
Locals perspective			
Things I like at the destination			
Things I don't like about destination			
Language problems			
Local people			
Local language			
Nicest/ favorite city at destination			
Overcharged		*	
Laws			
Books/ movies about destination			
Favorite spot at the destination			
Meeting at destination			
Off the beaten path	*		
Traveler help			*
Miscellaneous	* eco-tourism		*help the local/ poor, traveling with kids

Discussion Topics	Region & Country		
	UK & Ireland		
	<i>England (*)</i>	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>Scotland</i>

Transportation	*		
Political news/articles		*	
Safety		*	
Currency, ATM, Banks	*	*	
Health			
Itinerary/things to do		*	*
Accommodations	*	*	
Food/restaurants		*	*
Local customs/ clothing/ tipping			
Entertainment			
Tourist hassle			
Solo travel			
Travel experience at the destination	*		*
Visa/entry to country/passport	*	*	*
Travel agency			
Travel companion			
Guide books			
Travel cost			
Travel insurance			
Boat tours			
When to travel		*	
Night life			
Animals/zoos			
Tips/warnings/ scams	*		*
Tour operator/guides			
Living at the destination	*		*
Weather		*	
Recreational drugs			
Recreation activities			
Shopping/costs			
Language schools			
Volunteer work	*		
Border crossing			
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity			

Locals perspective			
Things I like at the destination			
Things I don't like about destination			
Language problems			
Local people			
Local language		*	
Nicest/ favorite city at destination			
Overcharged			
Laws	*		
Books/ movies about destination			
Favorite spot at the destination			*
Meeting at destination			
Off the beaten path			
Traveler help			
Miscellaneous	* isolated churches		* driving transition left/right

Discussion Topics	Region & Country			
	Western Europe			
	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Spain(*)</i>
Transportation	*			
Political news/articles				
Safety				
Currency, ATM, Banks			*	
Health				
Itinerary/things to do	*	*		*
Accommodations	*	*		*
Food/restaurants	*	*	*	*
Local customs/ clothing/tipping				
Entertainment				

Tourist hassle				
Solo travel				
Travel experience at the destination			*	
Visa/entry to country/passport			*	
Travel agency				
Travel companion				
Guide books				
Travel cost				
Travel insurance				
Boat tours				
When to travel				
Night life				
Animals/zoos				
Tips/warnings/scams	*		*	*
Tour operator/guides				
Living at the destination	*		*	
Weather	*			
Recreational drugs	*			
Recreation activities				
Shopping/costs				
Language schools				
Volunteer work				
Border crossing				
Perceptions of different races/ ethnicity				
Locals perspective				
Things I like at the destination			*	
Things I don't like about destination				
Language problems		*		
Local people		*		
Local language	*	*		*
Nicest/ favorite city at destination			*	*
Overcharged				

Laws	*			
Books/ movies about destination				
Favorite spot at the destination				
Meeting at destination				
Off the beaten path				
Traveler help				
Miscellaneous	* museums		*internet and TV	

Appendix E

Conclusive Threads and Examples of Influence

1.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Hello all,</p> <p>I am going to Bruges in a couple of weeks and have never been there before..</p> <p>Was also wondering if it might be worth sacrificing a day in brugge to take a day trip to ghent?</p>
Examples of Influential postings	<p><u>Member A</u>: "Never been to Ghent, but I would use all those days and nights in Brugges if it was me. Absolutely one of my favorite places in the world"</p> <p><u>Member B</u>: "Brugge is definately more fun then Gent but both are worth your time. But when you only have 2 days: stick to Brugge."</p>
Original Poster's answer	Thanks for your help everyopne - I am now thinking that I will just stay in Bruges for the entire trip..But I will see how I feel after the 1st day
2.	
Original Poster's question	I decided to go to Antwerp this Tuesday on a whim. Does anyone have a recommendation on a hostel in the centre?
Examples of Influential postings	I never stayed in any hostel in my hometown :) but i have heard good comments on 'Den Heksenketel' in the Pelgrimsstraat. The location is very good, smack in the middle of the historical centre.
Original Poster's answer	Got a place at Den Heksenketel so going after all!
3.	
Original Poster's question	My wife and I will be spending a week traveling around Belgium (Bruges, Brussels, possibly Antwerp or Ghent day trips), and we have heard varying reports about language barriers for English speaking travelers. My question is how much should I begin working on my basic horrible interpretation of conversational French in order to be able to enjoy myself and communicate with residents? I certainly wouldn't want to offend anyone by automatically

	<p>assuming they speak English. I know there is no way that I can even attempt to pick up Flemish. Believe me....I've tried</p>
<p>Examples of Influential postings</p>	<p><u>Member A</u>: “From my experience, if you try to stumble through same basic French you will promptly be answered in perfect English. They may appreciate the effort, but you'll have no problem getting by with only English.”</p> <p><u>Member B</u>: “Don't worry! Almost everyone speaks and understands English, and besides, we're a very friendly people ;-). Btw, of all the cities on your list, Brussels is the only one where they speak French. Enjoy your trip!”</p> <p><u>Member C</u>: “As you will be traveling mainly to the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, your French won't help you much, most people speak English to some degree so no problems at all.”</p> <p><u>Member D</u>: “Your conclusion is correct, better to speak English than French. Have fun on your vacation!”</p>
<p>Original Poster's answer</p>	<p>I guess it is safe to assume that I'd better just speak English and hope for the best, and I appreciate the insight that this post has provided. Thanks all!</p>
<p>4.</p>	
<p>Original Poster's question</p>	<p>Hi, I'm spending 4 days (and 4 nights) in Belgium from May 14 - 18. I still haven't decided exactly where I'm staying. In particular, I'm looking for cities with a combination of good night life and lots of sites to check out during the day.</p> <p>Belgian ales are my favourite beers in the world, so it's a very high priority for me to sample many of these. That's why I'm putting a high emphasis on cities with a good night life. I'm taking this trip alone, so I'll need to find fun and entertaining people in hostels to go out drinking with. Any recommendations for hostels would be appreciated, too.</p> <p>How is the night life in Bruges? I know that the city is a must-see for tourists, but I haven't heard much about how fun it is at night. I definitely want to stop here, but I want to get a feeling about how much time to budget here.</p>

	<p>I hear that the night life in Ghent is lively, but I'd definitely like to stay in Ghent, but I'm not sure if its worth staying there for 1 or 2 nights.</p> <p>Is Brussels really fun? I might stop here for a few hours, but I'm not sure if I will stay for the night.</p> <p>I think its likely that I'll probably spend 2 nights in Bruges and then 2 nights in Ghent.</p> <p>I know for sure that I need to visit Westvletern. It's the only trappist ale that I haven't drank before. I must get some. I must! But that would just be a short trip during an afternoon one day. I'd probably go there from Ghent</p>
<p>Examples of Influential postings</p>	<p>I do perfectly understand your absolute desire to taste Westvleteren and make your Trappist experience complete! BTW i have an uncle who is a Trappist in Westmalle, have been there lots of times as a kid and Trappist was the first beer i ever tasted - and still being a kid i didn't like it :)</p> <p>I tasted the Westvleteren only a few weeks ago in café 't Waagstuk. It's a bar with a good selection of beers but it's not the most cozy or lively bar in town (Antwerp is my hometown).</p> <p>Another institution when it come to beer is De Kulminator, a quiet bar run by an older couple but what a list! Only reading the list keeps you occupied for a while. They also have vintage beers which is very uncommon, about 20 different years of Chimay! Some call this bar 'the Holy Grail of beer'. You will not know what to choose!</p> <p>In Antwerp, do taste a bolleke Koninck. It's a light beer (5%) with the advantage that you can go out on it all night long :) I understand that you are going to sample as many different beers as possible but we Belgians usually stick to one kind a day.</p>
<p>Original Poster's answer</p>	<p>Oh! I went to Europe, and I'm back again. I should report on what happened!</p> <p>The first I did when I got to Antwerp was go to 'T Waagstuk. It was a nice little bar on a square just to the</p>

	north of the Old City in Antwerp. I WAS SUCCESSFUL! I got the Westvleteren beer there! It was very tasty. I'm glad that I went. After that, I went to De Kulminator. They also had Westvleteren. In fact, they had a huge selection of beers. They had more beers available to choose from than any other bar I've been to in my whole life. And the atmosphere in the place is quite good too. The owners are friendly, too. I highly recommend going to this bar if you are a fan of good beer and you are in Belgium
5.	
Original Poster's question	I am going to be in Amsterdam for a week or so, I was looking for people to stay with on couchsurfing but no one got back to me so now I am thinking of just sleeping in the park. I have a tent and a sleeping bag, I imagine setting up the tent would be problematic but what about just curling up under a tree. Is this illegal, if so, is it the sort of thing I will actually be caught for? Is it totally not safe? Thanks!
Examples of Influential postings	Google 'camping Amsterdam' for campsites in Amsterdam. They charge between 5 and 8 euro per person per night plus 2-5 euro per night for your tent. Walking to the city center will take you between 45 minutes and 1 1/2 hour, depending on which campsite you choose. A ride on public transport will set you back at least E1,50 one way. In summer it's quite common for people to set up small barbecues in the park and have a picnic, so I imagine it won't be a problem to use your stove there.
Original Poster's answer	Amsterdam was great, on advice from someone here I stayed at a campsite just outside the city for like \$7 a night, I was only there for a week but it went pretty much as planned
6.	
Original Poster's question	Hi, I am interested in Dutch colonial history and would like to see how the Dutch portray it in their museums. Does anyone have suggestions on which museums are the best to learn about the Dutch and their colonial history?
Examples of Influential postings	<u>Member A</u> : "There's the Tropenmuseum (Tropics museum) in Amsterdam, which used to be called the Colonial Museum"

	<p><u>Member B:</u> “also here in AMS there is the SLAVERNIJ museum somewhere quite near to the Tropenmuseum in de Dapperbuurt. Its quite small, private, and thus of course run by Surinamers and reflects that aspect of the past. (=means slavery).”</p> <p><u>Member C:</u> “The Amsterdams Historisch Museum will likely have a small section devoted to the colonial era”</p> <p><u>Member D:</u> “1. You might visit this yard in Lelystad.</p> <p>"The Batavia Yard in Lelystad, the Netherlands, is foremost a center for traditional shipbuilding. Since 1985 over 200 young people have built an authentic reconstruction of the VOC-merchantman Batavia from 1628."</p> <p>2. You might visit this museum in Hoorn (Westfries Museum).</p> <p>3. Moreover, there are many regional museums which will also show parts of ths history.”</p>
Original Poster’s answer	Thanks to all of you. I will come on a short trip to the Netherlands some time over the summer and will check out some of these places.
7.	
Original Poster’s question	G'day, Where in Amsterdam or any nearby environs would one go to have an old-time dutch meal? I'm seeking the sort of place that the cheese makers would go to after a day at the market, preferably a smoky mom and pop place where everyone would wonder who the new guy is as soon as I walk in the door. All replies gratefully acknowledged.
Examples of Influential postings	<p><u>Member A:</u> “Moeders!”</p> <p><u>Member B:</u> “Moeders is one of the restaurants I know that makes Dutch food the way our moms make it. From the owner I heard that the visitors in his restaurant are about 50% foreign tourists and 50% regulars and Dutch people. I</p>

	love the food!"
Original Poster's answer	Well Moeders it is then! Thank you both for the tip and the link, I will certainly give it a try.
8.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Hello Everyone, I am going to Vienna this winter for New Years. I have begun shopping for flights (looking for a cheap flight, might as well start early)...anyway. I found a flight on KLM with a 7 hour layover in Amsterdam. (arriving at about 1:00 in the afternoon :)</p> <p>I thought I would go into the city. See a couple of museumms, eat and head back to the airport. I have always wanted to see Amsterdam so I figured this would be a good way to get a quick intro...the problem</p> <p>1) Is anything going to be open the day after Christmas (I am leaving on Christmas day)</p> <p>2) Is it going to be too cold....(the cold bit, I am from Los Angeles, CA...I have no concept of anything below 35 degrees...so be specific...) If I can bundle up and be fine then that is what I'll do...if no amount of bundling is going to work, I'll probably still try but at least I will have been warned ;)</p> <p>If this seems possible, please let me know, if there is anything place, that you think I should see, eat, hear, avoid during my layover just let me know</p>
Examples of Influential postings	<p>1) I was in Amsterdam the day after Christmas this past year. In the Netherlands, Christmas is celebrated for two days - therefore, all shops are closed. There were, however, plenty of bars and restaurants open. I can't remember if it was the 25 or the 26, but we also visited the Van Gogh Museum and the Holland Casino. The canal tours run on both days as well. There was a big line for Anne Frank House on the 25th; we could see it from the canal tour.</p> <p>2) It was cold, but not as cold as New York. I wore a</p>

	<p>medium winter jacket and jeans most of the time (I'm from Boston though).</p> <p>I remember a couple of points: when I asked on the LP if museums were open, most people said no and they were wrong. I don't know if the same museums are open each year though.</p> <p>Also, I was staying in the area around Damrak, and there was lots open there - even shops (tourist ones though).</p>
Original Poster's answer	<p>Thanks for replying so quickly.</p> <p>This is exactly what I needed to know...I've been to Boston and New York in December, I was FREEZING ;) but it didn't keep me in (of course both trips the locals told me it was 'warm' for the season). I'll make sure I bring my gloves.</p>
9.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Drinking in Amsterdam</p> <p>Besides the beer...is there any local alcohol that you guys would reccomend when going there????I probably would not like to try absynthe.</p>
Examples of Influential postings	Ij beer rules (but it's only available in Amsterdam at the IJ beer brewery)
Original Poster's answer	I heard that IJ beer brewery is really good . I will be going there mos def
10.	
Original Poster's question	<p>we're honeymooning for two weeks at the beginning of august, and, very literally, have no plans as to where we'll visit. i was a student in salamanca 10 years ago, and travelled all over, so i have a general idea of the places i'd like to revisit, but two weeks really limits us to one region of the country.</p> <p>so where's it gonna be?</p>

<p>Examples of Influential postings</p>	<p>where would YOU go on your honeymoon?</p> <p><u>Member A</u>: This is just a very personal thing but I'd prefer to spend the day and night of 8 Aug doing what you propose for 10 Aug, i.e. in Medina Sedonia, just getting the feel for the place. However, your schedule looks fine to me. Sure there's a bit of travelling in there but nothing too arduous.</p> <p>I highly recommend taking the route via El Bosque and Grazalema. Stop off in the slightly larger town of Ubrique if you're interested in buying leather products - it's the local industry and there are plenty of shops that specialise in all things leathery.</p> <p>Have you got somewhere in mind for a hotel in Ronda? If not, I can recommend these two romantic places, both worthy of a honeymoon: San Gabriel Alavera de los Baños There's always the Parador, of course. A bit modern and bland but what a location, overlooking that gorge and the mountains.</p> <p>Alternatively, and just as romantic if not more so, the hotel below is in a tiny village between Ronda and the Cueva, about 10 - 15 mins drive from Ronda and maybe 5 mins from the Cueva. It's in an idyllic location and you can go for a stroll along the river if you want to stretch your legs. Reception will be able to advise you on the path; they speak English. El Molino del Santo</p>
<p>Original Poster's answer</p>	<p>okay, kids. andalucia is locked down tight. thanks for all the guidance! we're staying here in Medina-Sidonia and here in Ronda. i took Member A's advice and rearranged our itinerary so that it looks like this:</p> <p>7 ago - arrive Jerez, drive to Medina Sidonia 8 ago - Medina Sidonia 9 ago - long, leisurely drive between M-S and Ronda (expecting to take around 6 hours with stops) 10 ago - Ronda, Cueva de las Piletas 11 ago - return trip to Jerez for flight at 18:15 - possibly some short exploration?</p>

11.	
Original Poster's question	Forgot to ask about Granada- want to do an overnite from ronda- how far in advance do we have to book tickets for the alhambra? and from a bank?? is that right? can we do it in barcelona? thanks
Examples of Influential postings	I just spoke to the Granada tourist office and they said BOOK NOW!!! Tickets for May are sold out already.... You can do it on the internet the BBVA bank link here and then print them out or write down the reference numbers
Original Poster's answer	Wow, the tourist office weren't kidding. Found a date and time slot after a bit of juggling. Thanks so much for that; it would have been 'stink' (another NZ idiom) to miss out
12.	
Original Poster's question	Vegetarian/Vegan Travellers My Husband and I are planning to travel to Spain around Easer for a relaxing holiday, we are hoping to spend a few of the days by the beach, however I was wondering what area would be best to find resturants/cafes that can best cater for our dietary requirements? Any suggestions would be gratefully appreciated. Thanks
Examples of Influential postings	I would reccomend you try and stay at a place with self catering as an option just incase you have as much trouble as i did, at least you will be able to buy some pasta and veggies and make some dinner!
Original Poster's answer	So I gather that self catering will provide us with a less stressful holiday. What is the fresh produce like in the coastal villages?
13.	
Original Poster's question	Hi, We are 4 Aussies (around 50) travelling to Spain in August this year. Been overseas many times but not Spain. We plan to spend 10 days in Spain flying into Madrid on the 16th August. From what I have been reading on this wonderful forum we have chosen places to visit. 1. Madrid 2. Toledo 3. Cordoba

	<p>4. Seville 5. Ronda 6. Granada 7. Valencia 8. Barcelona</p> <p>Then we are training it into France to continue the next part of our journey/</p> <p>We wish to use the train system in Spain and don't mind using a nights accomodation on a train.</p> <p>If possible can the above be feasibly done, and how many days in each place would be advisable? We are very young at heart and fit.</p> <p>Is there some of the above that can be cut out because it is too much. OK, we vistied England a few years back and overdid it on the castles and cathedrals (1 blended into another). We would like the best "Taste" of each place. We also want to stay in budget accomodation (hostels/pensions) that have double room accomodation. I have looked up many from reviews but are 6 bed dorms. We are married couples so would prefer double bed dorms. (Don't want much hey??!!!).</p> <p>In anticiplation - thank you so much for your time. This is a wonderful place to plan a trip. If you want into about Australia/Queensland I can help.</p>
<p>Examples of Influential postings</p>	<p><u>Member A:</u> Do you actually have full ten days, or are you counting in the day you fly in and out? By the time you get in and out of the airport, there won't be much daytime left to do anything...</p> <p>I would concentrate on one logical area and squeeze more enjoyment out of it. First off, either Madrid, or Barcelona, not both, These are big cities which will tire you out quickly and there is so much to do you won't even scratch the surface in such a short time.</p> <p>As you're flying into Madrid, cut Barcelona out.</p> <p>Note that there is no direct train route from Toledo to</p>

	<p>Cordoba.</p> <p>I would do (and I'm really trying not to be too selective) Madrid - Toledo (it would have to be a bus) Seville- Cordoba - Granada. No more.</p> <p>Minimum 3 full days in Madrid, 1 in Toledo, minimum 2 in Seville, 2 in Cordoba and Granada each. Are you flying back also from Madrid? It takes all night to get from Granada to Madrid by train, and it's not that cheap - 70 euros.</p> <p>Are your flights booked already? I'm not happy with the way this itinerary looks geographically.</p> <p><u>Member B:</u> The 'South of France' is a bit vague when you ask about the duration of train journeys. However, The Greman rail service is one of the best websites for finding out about international train journeys. It's going to be a long haul from Spain to Italy.</p> <p>From Granada to any significant destination in Italy is going to take at least 22 hours actual travelling time by train. The 'best' choice would be Granada - Madrid, Madrid - Barcelona, overnight train from Barcelona into Italy. However, that would be a very tiring journey.</p> <p>The difficulty, as I see it, is that you are proposing to head away from Italy when you travel from Madrid to Andalucia. I really think you need to reschedule your trip around Spain. I just can't see how you're going to fit Andalucia in with Italy without spending a disproportionate amount of your 20 days (and energy) on getting from A to B.</p>
Original Poster's answer	<p>I thank you all for your comments.. We have taken your advice and replanned our trip to Spain. How does this sound?? Certainly have taken on board every ones advice and comments. You were right - we were trying to do too much. So much to see, so much to do..</p> <p>Fly into Malaga on 16th August 2007</p>

	<p>Malaga - 2 nights Day trip to Ronda and return to Malaga Train from Malaga to Cordoba 3 nights Train from Cordoba to Granada 3 nights Flight to Barcelona 3 nights Flight to Italy that's planned...(and leave out France for next trip)</p> <p>We were unsure which to go to Seville or Cordoba so at this stage it is Cordoba. Please advise of pros and cons of each place. If we go to Seville, we will not go to Cordoba and vice versa.</p>
14.	
Original Poster's question	<p>One week for Seville - Granada and anywhere else in between!</p> <p>We have booked flights arriving Seville and flying out of Granada this September, and have 8 days in total to entertain ourselves.</p> <p>Thinking of spending a few days in Seville and a couple in Granada at the end, giving us 3 days in between to explore (by car).</p> <p>Quite fancy the coast but open to ideas, basically just want to avoid Malaga / Marbella etc.... like the plague. Does anyone have any suggestions? Hear Nerja is nice but it look still pretty touristy too.....</p> <p>Any help would be much appreciated!</p> <p>p.s any suggestions for reasonably priced B&B / guest houses (Seville / Granada & en route) would be good too-trying to keep costs down so the paradors are out of our league!</p>
Examples of Influential postings	<p>posada real is a fantastic place at 42 euros for a double, 49 with breakfast but I would go for breakfast to any of the little bars around. It is a beautiful old house, completely refurbished, Juan the owner is a wonderful guy, the</p>

	<p>bathrooms are 4* quality, the rooms are spacious and beautifully decorated - location couldn't be better, right in the middle of the old quarter called Barrio de Villa - whitewashed old hoses with pots of red and orange geraniums cascading off the walls. I was there two weeks ago and loved it. Highly recommended. It should be available in September - also there is Feria de Priego in September, I'll try to find out the dates for you, I think you'd love that.</p>
Original Poster's answer	<p>Wow, sounds like heaven, I'll definitely check this one out! Thank you again!!</p>
15.	
Original Poster's question	<p>We have bought some euros but want to avoid the excessive charges by our banks incurred using visa debit and atm's so were wondering what everyone thought of euro travellers cheques. We can buy them free of commission from our post office and the exchange rate is rather good at the moment. My question is: Are we likely to be charged commission at the Italian and German banks for changing euro travellers chqs into actual euro. My thoughts are that if there is a charge, it shouldn't be much as it is the same currency.</p> <p>We will also be carrying AUD in cash for Czech Republic and for emergencies. Have other travellers found much commission charged for changing AUD to Euro? It is really hard to decide which is the best way to do this without carrying huge wads of cash around. So are thinking 3 ways:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Euros cash - 500 each 2. Euro Travellers Chqs - 1000 each 3. 500 AUD each for changing over there <p>This way we would only be using our ATM and Visa cards for emergencies. What do you all think and does this sound enough money for 4 weeks.</p> <p>Thanks. Any help much appreciated.</p>
Examples of Influential postings	<p><u>Member A:</u> We had travellers cheques in Euros to use in Europe in 2005. It was not really by choice, rather it was because we earned the money in the UK and needed a way to get the cash we earned out of the country... and it</p>

	<p>seemed like a better idea to transfer the money to Euro travellers cheques, rather than transfer it to Aussie dollars THEN transfer AGAIN to Euros via our Aussie bank account.</p> <p>Yes you are likely to be charged commission - especially in Italy. You can sometimes avoid it if, for example, you have American express travelers cheques you can usually change them for free IF you can find an American express office.</p> <p>The best way to go it STILL to just use your Aussie ATM card. Yeah, it might cost \$5 every time you take money out of an ATM card, but if you take it out once a week, thats only about \$20 in 4 weeks, which is not SO bad</p> <p><u>Member B:</u> Cashing T/Cs may be VERY difficult in Europe - ppl. will look upon them as something like a steam engine or paying selling gold dust. Big department stores may accept them with no fees (if in €), while banks often will add a fee for cashing them except the one bank associated with the issuer. Which issuer is connected to those T/C you can buy? Can't you get answer to the fee question from their homepage?</p> <p><u>Member C:</u> NOBODY in Europe wants travellers cheques. NOBODY. Eventually you can find places that will take them such as banks, but they will charge high fees for doing so.</p>
Original Poster's answer	But thanks, you've talked me out of Travellers Chqs.
16.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Hi All,</p> <p>I'm hoping to head out to Ghana in July and hoping to volunteer for a few months before travelling around the neighbouring countries perhaps Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Gambia etc. Anyway, I'm not quite sure yet, its still very much in the early stages of planning BUT what I do know is that I'm travelling alone and I'm a female. Now I'm no stranger to travel - but have only done a short stint alone (and not in Africa). Although I loved travelling solo a big</p>

	<p>plus was meeting people along the way which I assumed would be the case on this trip too. However I've just read a post where someone in this area said she didn't meet very many independent travellers at all, and certainly very few women. Is this true?!</p>
<p>Examples of Influential postings</p>	<p><u>Member A:</u> I also traveled solo in Ghana, Burkina, and Mali in 2004. It was an awesome experience. I also didn't meet that many solo independent travelers and only 2 other solo woman from Holland and the USA. Even when we did meet up it was rare to end up traveling together for more than a couple days because we had different itineraries. However, if you're willing to be flexible and go wherever the group is going, you will definitely have no problem finding a group to travel with.</p> <p><u>Member B:</u> If you are 'open & friendly' you'll be fine, for locals and other travellers, keep your wits about you but don't get over-zealously 'introvert' (wrong word but I can't find the one I want!)</p> <p><u>Member C:</u> Yes, you will probably meet lots of people. As for white travellers, maybe not that many</p> <p><u>Member D:</u> I've toured West Africa a few times and have met probably less than a dozen other independent tourists. In terms of Westerners, in many areas you are more likely to run into people working for NGOs than tourists. But don't let that stop you; you'll meet a lot of locals which can be a lot of fun. No matter where, I've always managed to find at least one (not a 'guide') who was willing to hang out with me for a few days.</p>
<p>Original Poster's answer</p>	<p>Thanks alot for that. Comments much appreciated! Especially given that all of you had such good experiences. Am off to book my flight... :)</p>

17.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Shorts OK?</p> <p>Hello again,</p> <p>I've read in another thread that one should not wear shorts in Morocco. Does this also apply to men?</p> <p>I can see myself melting if I have to wear long trousers everywhere. HELP!</p>
Examples of Influential postings	<p><u>Member A:</u> Yes it applies to guys. And believe it or not, you will be cooler with long trousers.</p> <p><u>Member B:</u> You won't be arrested for it, you won't be attacked for it... you'll just look - as so many do - ignorant of the local customs. Where there's lots of tourists you'll blend in; in quieter streets and traditional areas, where you'll get a more authentic experience of the country, you'll feel uncomfortable. You make your own choices. Long thin cotton trousers are perfectly comfortable; I'd certainly avoid denim/jeans in the heat.</p>
Original Poster's answer	<p>Fair enough - long pants it is.</p> <p>Many thanks to you all for your feedback. I cannot begin to express how excited I am to be heading to Morocco.</p>
18.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Hi Guys!</p> <p>We are planning a Stag Do for our very good friend later this year, and are seeking some tips from experienced travellers that have been to Marrakech.</p> <p>We need advise on two main themes:-</p> <p>Accomodation (20-25 people) and ENTERTAINMENT!!!</p> <p>Any help would be much appreciated!</p>

	Thanks in advance. The Best Men.
Examples of Influential postings	<p>Morocco's probably not the best destination, but it's your life and I'm going to answer your question anyway.</p> <p>My suggestion is to rent an entire riad (search here), being honest and upfront about drinking. Check that it's okay to bring your own alcohol (or that they have a liquor license) - some do not allow it.</p> <p>As for going out, Theatro, Diamont Noir, and my favorite, Pacha, are all good nightclubs. Petit taxis hold 3 passengers, grand taxis 6. Pacha, the best, is quite far. Nightclubs in Marrakech tend to stay open until about 4 am.</p>
Original Poster's answer	<p>Thanks for all of you advise, I think some of you may have the wrong impression, I know the word 'stagg do' is associated with larger louts, causing trouble.</p> <p>We are a sophisticated bunch and have chosen marrakech, to avoid the traditional 'jobs on tour' places that you have suggested.</p>
19.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Hi there,</p> <p>after reading through the posts in this branch, I am now seriously confused. Do you get a lot of hassle in Morocco or not? People seem to be of a different mind about this one. I travelled in India, is it worse or better than there? Worse or better than Tunisia? Do you get the hassle from shop owners or hotel touts, and is it only in touristy areas or out of principle everywhere? Please enlighten me!</p>
Examples of Influential postings	<p><u>Member A:</u> Assuming you're male, most hassles come from shop owners in the medina and souqs, trying to get you in their shop. Normal. In places like Tangier and Fes, there are also hotel touts, and Fes and Marrakech have "faux guides" trying to get you to pay them to show you</p>

around (I find those easy to get around, though some find them to be the worst). It's mostly in touristy cities (Fes, Marrakech, Tangier are the worst) although shop owners in nearly any city will hassle you a bit (but not badly).

Personally, I don't find the hassle all that bad. When I first came to Morocco a few years ago, I got hassled a little bit, but now I manage to slip by mostly unnoticed. The only exception for me is Fes, where people don't seem to care that I live here or speak Arabic - they still just assume I've got a pocket full of cash.

As a female, on the other hand, I do get harassed by men on the streets (if you happen to be female, be prepared for a bit of that **NO MATTER HOW YOU DRESS**).

Member B: In years of travel to Morocco I never have found any real hassle, but I am a guy. Some people define hassle as persistent shop keepers...but they are just trying to make a living--a smile and a simple no should solve the problem. The real and fake guides can be a problem but just give them a firm NO!

If you are a blonde female with big boobs and revealing clothing, sure, you will get hassled...as you will anywhere in the world.

Member C: I got hassled nonstop in Morocco everywhere I went, Tangier, Rabat, Fez, and Casablanca. It was from shop owners and touts, but mostly from men offering my friends camels for me. This had nothing to do with being able to speak the language or not, as people would shout at us from across the street, "One hundred camels for her!" or me not dressing conservatively, because I did. I think what it had to do with is having long blonde hair, which just makes you stand out. I took to tying it back and wearing a hat...and it helped!

Member D: Yeah, i'm blonde, with pale blue eyes, but am travelling alone. As an experienced backpacker and student i think i give off a "i'm not rich and i know where i wanna be so there is no point wasting your time" vibe, and to be fair my hasstles so far have been minimal. I get a lot of whistles or comments from the side of the street but just

	<p>give the guys a 'camel look' as the moroccan women do and there should be no problem. Stick to well lit areas at night, and get a travel buddy if u like. The attention is NOWHERE near India in my experience, don't be paranoid about ppl talking to you or saying hello in the street as it is just friendly here. I've never been followed as in Egypt or India, and don't get groped like India or Indonesia. Enjoy :o)</p>
Original Poster's answer	<p>Thanks a lot to all you out there. A bit of hassle will certainly not put me off, I'm quite experienced and just wanted to know what to expect.</p>
20.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Hi,</p> <p>Because of the recent bombings in Casa, I am concerned for my safety while traveling in Morocco. Is the increase in risk limited to Casa, or should I be concerned about all of Morocco? I am from USA, and I am well aware that Americans are not liked in may places.</p> <p>I plan on traveling with my husband, we are an older couple, and we plan on hiking in the mountains. In addition, we plan on renting a car to see the southern part of Morocco. We plan on being in Morocco 1 month. We are planning to visit all the cities/sites that have been recommended by others on this branch.</p> <p>We don't know whether to postpone our trip, which begins April 23. We are scheduled to fly into Madrid, then we have a flight scheduled the same day on "easy-jet" to Casa.</p> <p>Your comments will be appreciated. Thanks.</p>
Examples of Influential postings	<p><u>Member A:</u> The radicals are trying to undermine Morocco's economy, particularly the tourist industry. Do you want to give in to them? Anything can happen, anywhere.</p> <p><u>Member B:</u> I would dare to say that right now, the risk really is limited to Casa (and perhaps Tetouan). All of the suspects are from Sidi Moumen, one of the poorest urban</p>

	<p>slums in Morocco, and in rural areas, nothing of the sort is known to go on.</p> <p><u>Member C</u>: I can understand your concern, but it really is misplaced. There just isn't a groundswell of anti-American feeling here. Even those Moroccans who dislike what the US (and UK) are doing in the arab world today can differentiate between the US government and it's citizens.</p> <p>Even in Casa, I'd say any threat to you personally would be virtually non-existent. Remember that hundreds of Brits and Americans arrive in Morocco every day. When was the last time you heard of anyone being attacked? Really, the likelihood of you dying in a road traffic accident (sorry to be so cheerful!) on your way to the airport in the US is probably a 1000 times higher.</p> <p>So, relax, come to Morocco and have a great trip.</p>
Original Poster's answer	<p>Thanks, to each of you, for the encouraging words. YES, WE ARE GOING!! However, we won't be staying in Casablanca. We are traveling directly to Marrakech. We will do some hiking, if we aren't stopped by snow, in the Atlas mountains, before going to Merzouga and all places in between! We will be in Morocco for a wonderful month, and we are very happy about the chance to visit this beautiful country. We are thinking positive, and we just really thank each of you who spent the time to write messages. I will write a report upon our return!</p>
21.	
Original Poster's question	<p>OK, I found a great price on airfare from the US to Marrakesh in March. But here's the problem: I keep hearing and reading so much about hustlers, touts, and pesty kids who want to be your guides that I wonder if I could really enjoy myself or would I get so upset at always being hassled that I'd wish I were in Mexico. Probably what I want from you is encouragement but the truth will do. BTW I've traveled all over the world--53 or 54 countries so far, so I'm not a virgin.</p>

<p>Examples of Influential postings</p>	<p><u>Member A:</u> If you've been to 53-54 countries, I wouldn't be too worried. An experienced traveler knows how to avoid being hassled to death. Personally, I don't find Morocco to be so bad (and I've lived here for almost two years); despite the occasional sexual harassment (hoots and hollers) from young men, I rarely have trouble</p> <p><u>Member B:</u> if u've been to more then a 53 country all alone by ur self do than u dont have to worry too much , just little advice try to avoid the faulse Touristic Guides , avoid the offers that comes suddenly from someone u dont know at the first time ...Dont try to go aloner in some places where u think its not good to be In ... Something else , in every big city or touristic one there's the Touristic Police Station so in case ... Good luck and dont worry that much , things are getting better in Morocco :) , Self Confidence and Use ur mind befor ur Heart :)</p> <p><u>Member C:</u> I didn't find much hassle at all in Marrakesh last year. Much less than what I was bracing myself for based on what others had said.</p>
<p>Original Poster's answer</p>	<p>Thanks to the words of encouragement so many of you posted, I just booked my flight to Marrakech in March. This forum is the greatest!</p>
<p>22.</p>	
<p>Original Poster's question</p>	<p>I suddenly have an opportunity to go on a 12-day tour of Morocco in June, and am quite excited about it. However, I've done a bit of research, and now I'm wondering if I wouldn't be better off travelling solo. Or maybe taking the tour, then sticking around for four or five extra days. I just don't think 12 days is going to be enough for me.</p> <p>Based on what little I know now, here's a list of the places I'd like to see: Rabat, Marrakech, Chefchaouen, Oualidia, and Taroudant. I have no interest in racing around like mad trying to see as many places as possible. Instead, I like to spend at least two or three days in a place so I can enjoy it in a leisurely way. The tour I'm thinking about involves a couple of those places, but probably not all - I'm</p>

	<p>not sure exactly where all it will go because the itinerary hasn't been finalized.</p> <p>Things I want to do: General walking around and sightseeing of architecture and landscape, visit a few gardens, shop for (lots!) of locally-made items and a couple of carpets. I'm not prepared to spend thousands of dollars on a carpet, though; I think a few to several hundred dollars apiece will be my limit. I'd also like to do some swimming and a bit of snorkelling.</p> <p>I'll want to stay in moderately priced riads or similar places. No international chain hotels, please - I want something with local character. I'd prefer to keep the nightly cost to no more than \$100.00 U.S., and I'm hoping for swimming pools because I'll want to take a dip or two between sightseeing jaunts. Any suggestions?</p> <p>Does anyone know of a tour company that might offer what I'm looking for, or am I being unrealistic?</p>
<p>Examples of Influential postings</p>	<p><u>Member A:</u> A tour is o.k. but renting a car and driving where you want, stopping when you want, and staying however long you want is my recommendation; but of course don't plan on driving in Marrakech (congestion).</p> <p><u>Member B:</u> hi, i thoroughly recommend that too - if you are hesitant about going on a tour spend what you would have spent on renting a car and go enjoy your independence and maximise your time and routes - you can also get to some better places to stay too.</p>
<p>Original Poster's answer</p>	<p>Thanks, Marocfan. As a matter of fact, I'm actually leaning toward renting a car. After doing a bit more research, I'm finding all kinds of wonderful sights to see, and it's clear that public transport isn't the best way to go. I must confess that I'm a little nervous about tooling around the country by myself, though.</p>

23.	
Original Poster's question	<p>Hello, will be in Morocco this friday for 10 days. I was wondering what kind of strange food there is to eat out there since I like to taste everything new. So, what was the strangest thing you eat in Morocco, where in Morocco, and was it good or not? Thanks</p>
Examples of Influential postings	<p>Pigeon pie was really good. Harissa was incredibly hot, but excellent on couscous. Sheep's heads looked tasty, but my friend was too squeamish to approach the stand. :-)</p>
Original Poster's answer	<p>Thanks guys, I'm looking forward to try the pigeon pie ;)</p>

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