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MAKING SENSE OF CORPORATE TOUR-GUIDE BLOGGERS' NETWORKING BEHAVIOR: A SOCIAL NETWORK PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Drawing on studies of social networks and technology sensemaking, this study examines tour guide bloggers' perceptions of their corporate blogs and how their perceptions and interpretations lead to different types of relationships in their blog networks. We conduct a qualitative case study of a major Taiwanese travel agency. Our findings suggest that corporate bloggers as actors make different senses on blogging and these senses lead them to establish different levels of closeness to their alters (other network actors). Providing social support and especially material support play significant roles in aggrandizing the transitivity, which help to attract more visitors to their blogs. However, the innovation and potential connections that may follow from the individualistic styles of some bloggers in addition to the hedonic emotional support to a travel blog should not be overlooked. Corporate bloggers should thus consider offering more incentives and should be given freedom to prosper in their grassroots use of technology.

Keywords: Social networks, Corporate blogging, Web 2.0 service, Travel industry, Sensemaking

1   INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 services such as social networking sites, wikis, and blogs have become important in travel planning and buying (Schegg et al 2008). Personal journal-style blogs, first used for interpersonal goals, e.g. exchanging personal travel experiences among friends, family, and other members of the online community (Nardi et al. 2004; Stehanone & Jane 2007), have been appropriated for business purposes in the worldwide travel industry.

These major online developments, Web 2.0 and its user-generated content, are reshaping the marketing methods of the travel industry. Travel companies have put more personal features and real language rather than the traditional marketing speech on their corporate websites. Online networks allow these companies to offer new types of services, enhance existing services, and forge new business models and opportunities. As Wang et al. (2002) point out, "Online networks have broadened the marketing horizon and are having great impact on marketing, sales, product and service development, supplier network, information quality, and distribution channels."

Travelers depend on the information they receive to make the best choices for them, thus making the travel industry quite information-intensive (Chung & Buhalis 2008). Corporate blogs take advantage of this appetite for information. Recent studies in tourism have suggested corporate blogs accelerate information flow, increase productivity, and improve reputation and customer engagement (Wang 2005). By allowing users to interact, exchange, and share their own experiences, corporate blogs turn ordinary users into voluntary travel evangelists spreading the good word of the company.

From the organization studies perspective, the corporate blogosphere should neither be regarded as a market outside corporate boundaries nor as a hierarchy inside corporate boundaries (Powell 1990). Rather, this blogosphere provides a conductive frontier to building social network communities of special interests. These informal social network connections among bloggers have an influence that extends beyond work patterns. Efimova and Grudin's case study (2007) of employee bloggers provides evidence for challenges to hierarchy. They assert that blogging for employees is an arena for negotiation and interplay between personal and corporate interests.

Despite extensive literature describing social networking sites and blogging communities, few researchers have explored their effects on users' work situations and how the heterogeneity of social network ties actually create tangible values. Prior research on corporate blogging mostly examined internal corporate blogs (Yardi et al. 2009; Huh et al 2007; Jackson et al. 2007), with few studies investigating the interplay of internal and external bloggers, especially in terms of their relationships. Drawing upon literature on *social networks* and *technology sensemaking*, this paper is a case study of the leading travel agency in Taiwan. Our research objective is threefold: first, to examine how tour guide bloggers establish relationships on corporate blogs; second, to examine the tour guide bloggers' perception and interpretation on corporate blogs; third, to explore how this perception and interpretation leads to the development of different relation types in ego-centric networks.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we introduce the literature on IT and Tourism, and blog communities. We continue with a discussion on our fusion of the theoretical concept *technology sensemaking*, which we use as a viewpoint from which the actors can be observed, and the concept of *social networks*, which we use to analyze the ties among the actors. Next, we describe the methods we used to do this case study and present the results. Finally, we discuss the salient insights we have gained from the results.

2   LITERATURE REVIEWS

2.1   Information Technology and Tourism

IT investment has become a growing essential business component in tourism in recent years, as technologies play an increasingly important role in strategic and operational management. (Malone et al. 1987; Lewis & Talalayevsky 1997; Kim 2004). The Internet makes information and booking

facilities available to a large number of travelers at low costs and serves as a communication tool among service providers, intermediaries, and end-consumers. Many recent studies have acknowledged the benefits of e-commerce on the travel industry (Frew 2000a; Werthner and Ricci 2004). Merkl and Scharl (2008) found Web 2.0 technologies yield important information from user-generated content and social network data to support decision making, and help improve the accuracy of targeted marketing campaigns. However, most of the prior research on this topic had a system-centric view and did not address how actors use the technology to manage customers and how interactive relationships among different actors are.

Leung and Law (2007) reviewed the IT studies on tourism published in three leading tourism journals (ATR, TM, JTR) [1] over the past two decades (1985-2004). They found an asymmetric development of the IT topic in tourism literature. For their review, IT tourism papers were grouped into six different research categories: networking, information management, intelligent applications, user interfaces, general business applications, and miscellaneous. Although this grouping revealed a shift in topic over time, it also indicated most publications related to the introduction of new technology and use of IT in the travel industry. Few studies examined the role of companies in adopting the new technology, i.e. how travel agencies and tour guides have adopted new technology. Although the interaction of travel companies and IT has been investigated more in recent years, most of this research has focused on customer or traveler perspective (Chung & Buhalis 2008; Yoo & Gretzel 2008; Jannach et al. 2009). We argue that attention should be paid to the corporate agents responsible.

The goal of this paper is to fulfill a gap in the literature on virtual travel communities. This is because corporate blogs are regarded as the most effective way of relationship marketing, yet we still lack empirical research in this regard. IT tourism scholars have advocated that future research should clarify the roles that online travel community play in building long-term relationships with travelers and sustaining profitability in online interactive markets (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004).

2.2   Blogs and Corporate Blogging

The rise of blogging is one of the most popular features of the Web 2.0 era. O'Reilly (2005) characterized the blog as "participating" instead of "publishing". Hyperlinks reshape blogs into a social medium for communication and interaction, in turn forming virtual communities subserved by social networks. Blogs, therefore, provide a unique channel for developing and maintaining relationships between organizations and the public (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Although there has been a growing interest in the study of blogging, little research has focused on the use of blogs within companies. Early research investigated the reasons and motivations for blogging (Efimova 2003; Nardi et al. 2004). More recent work pays attention to the structural properties of the social networks of bloggers (Chau & Xu 2007; Stefanone & Jang 2007; Jiang & Wang 2009) and the influence of online communities (Agarwal et al. 2008; Dippelreiter et al. 2008). Yet, none of these studies addresses the use of blogs in corporate settings.

Several initial studies, however, have looked into the different types of blogs companies have created and maintained. Jüch and Stobbe (2005) proposed corporate blogs provide three different communication pathways for companies: internal communication, market communication, and public relations. Through these pathways, these blogs have eight different functions. Employees may collaborate and share knowledge and insight with each other on the internal communication pathway. Companies may offer service and product information on market blogs and campaign on public relations blogs. Any one of these blogs may serve to avert a crisis and some may be used maintain customer relationships. Lastly, blogs like those of the CEO may serve any one of the functions listed and be available to everyone.

A few studies have identified social, relational and sharing benefits that blogging has brought to companies who create and maintain blogs (Cass et al. 2005; Kellehr and Miller 2006; Jackson et al. 2007). Two of which shed some insight on the complexity of corporate blogs. Efimova and Grudin (2007) found disagreement among companies as to what kinds of blogging make sense for their

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[1] They are the Annals of Tourism Research (ATR), Journal of Travel Research (JTR), and Tourism Management (TM).

company, and what kind of content is appropriate. Yardi et al. (2009) suggested a company's expectations of attention influences the company's attitude toward corporate blogs and their uses.

Despite the valuable insight on the significance of relational aspects of corporate blogs of these studies, most of them merely investigated corporate blogs designated for internal communication. We propose using a fusion of IS and social network perspectives to investigate the blogs where both employees and members of the public contribute since the different modes of relations and interplay among these "internal" and "external" bloggers remains unclear. One of the major characteristics of Web 2.0 technologies is that this "version" of the web is without boundaries. We argue that focusing on the places where boundaries fall reveals the essence of the technology and helps us learn how to make the best use of it. Accordingly, we will look at external corporate blogs and the interplay among bloggers inside and outside of the corporate boundary and ties of their networks.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Information technology is socially constructed and shaped. Many recent IS studies have adopted Giddens's structuration theory to explain the reciprocal processes of *sensemaking*, the negotiation and adaptation necessary for the adopting of complex technologies in organizations (Griffith 1999; Orlikowski & Gash 1994). They suggest that the meanings of IS are not directly derived from its technical features, but indirectly through the interpretations of the actors involved. Since corporate blogs consist of connected actions by themselves and others, we employ a *technology sensemaking* lens under this sociological paradigm through which we can examine how actors construct their actions. Employing the theory of *social networks*, a major trait of blog communities, also helps us analyze the different relationships of the different relations of ties in corporate blogs.

3.1 Technology Sensemaking

Studies have shown *technological sensemaking* reveals how actors make sense of IT and interact with it accordingly, so by using this approach, we aim to help technology designers and implementers better manage social technological systems. New technologies require that users attribute meaning to them—*make sense of them*—prior to becoming "users" and accepting the new technologies into their lives. Many studies have examined the initial *sensemaking* patterns of various technologies including email systems (Markus 1994), electronic marketplaces (Barrett 1999), healthcare information systems (Prasad 1993), groupware (Henfridsson 2000; Orlikowski & Gash 1994), internal communication systems (Lin & Conford 2000), information systems for bank security (Hsu 2007), and GPS taxi-dispatch systems (Hsiao et al. 2008). Information systems hold multiple meanings for different people and reflect their hopes, anxieties, dreams, and inadequacies (Prasad 1993). Actors in any information system, understood here as "group of connected actions," construct their actions, and these actions interrelate and form the system. Weick (1990) asserts that technology requires ongoing re-structuring and *sensemaking* if it is to be managed. Orikowski and her colleagues used "technical frames" and "windows" of *sensemaking* to address the mental models of the users in a social technological organization. With a better understanding of these systems, technology designers and implementers can design, build, and manage better technological systems.

3.2 Concept of Social Network

The combination of *technology sensemaking* and *personal network analysis* capture tour guides' perceptions and interpretations of corporate travel blogs and how these perceptions lead to different types of relationships among blog networks. Social network analyses, regardless of their scope, are classified into two major types: *whole network analysis* and *personal network analysis*. Developed earlier and more widely used, *whole network analyses* typically concentrate on uncovering the structure and composition of relationships among all members in one big network. *Personal network analyses*, however, treat social networks as a person's set of connections with those of others. Individuals at the center of these networks are called egos; hence, personal networks are also called

ego networks. These networks consist of a single actor, or *ego*, and actors, or *alter*, to which egos are connected via *links* (Wellman 2007a, 2007b). In a trade off of the comprehensiveness found in *whole network analyses* for a relative lack of "boundedness," *personal network analyses* reveal social support, social capital, and access to knowledge since these *links* do not necessarily have physical boundaries. Personal networks are better suited for the relationships we seek to reveal than whole network analyses are.

Studies of IT & tourism have looked at social networks in blogs and done many analyses. However, most of these analyses were whole network and found unevenly distributed structures. A method well suited for blog research, social network analyses, unlike variable analyses and topological analyses based on attribute data, focus on relationships and reveal structures of actors (nodes) and their relationships (links) (Scott 2000). Jiang and Wang (2009) analyzed the commentaries of a blog community and found that the commenting had a star and fan structure with star and fan relationships. "The most noticeable nodes in the network are a few central bloggers who possess a lot of incoming relationships. Each of them is surrounded by a number of ordinary bloggers (fan bloggers) who recognize the central blogger (start bloggers) as their exclusive information source in a star topology." Chau and Xu (2007) also found centers of influence in the social networks of bloggers in online hate groups. They argued that these bloggers may either be opinion leaders or communication hubs. These relationships are not as detailed and significant as proper analyses of corporate travel blogs require.

Personal network analyses should reveal social network as one person's set of connections with others that whole network analyses do not. We followed Granovetter's definition of the "ties" in this paper: "the strength of a tie is a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granvoetter 1973, p 1361). Fischer (1982) provided the contents of relations in his study of friend interaction. He found that the friendship ties tended primarily to be relations of sociability (e.g. meet each other, discuss, shared pastimes), intimate relations (e.g. discuss personal matters) and material exchanges. Wellman suggested six dimensions of support supplied by different types of relationships. That is, emotional support (i.e. emotional aid, and advice about family problem), small and large services (i.e. lending household items, micro and major house hold services, health care and day care etc.), and companionship (i.e. discuss idea, doing things together, and participating together in an organization) (Wellman & Wortely 1990).

Similarly, IT and tourism studies (Wang & Fesenmaier 2004; Chung & Buhalis 2008) suggest online travel blogs provide three fundamental needs to their members through online activities: functional needs e.g. relating to information gathering and other learning purposes, facilitating decision making; social needs e.g. relating to sharing similar experiences and forming meaningful personal relationships; and psychological needs e.g. relating to identification, involvement, and a sense of belonging. With these needs met, bloggers will more likely continue using the same blogs, whereas if not met, bloggers will tend to discontinue use. Hence, proper analysis of the structure relationships within corporate blog networks must consider other relationships rather than solely centers of influence. For this study, we conduct personal network analyses similar to those done in the sociological studies of friendship and social support.

4 RESEARCH APPORACH

4.1 Research Method

Our case study was conducted on Lion Travel, a major travel company in Taiwan that offers both inbound and outbound tours and trips. Lion Travel set up its blog to establish tighter connections with its customers to improve its reputation, increase the number of customers, and build communities of fans around "star" tour guides. In 2006, it asked its tour guides to host their own blogs on the company website and provided training. The guides were directed to share their travel experiences. Taking advantage of the experience, field knowledge, and charisma of the tour guides, the company hoped to build a relationship directly with customers through the blogs thereby differentiating its

services from its competitors. As time went by, it also hoped that certain guides would become "star" guides, further helping buyers select certain services from the large number of options it offers. In 2008, the company reinforced its blog writing policy for guides by stipulating that those who did not update their blogs regularly would be penalized. These guides would more likely receive less-profitable guide trips.

In our exploratory case study of Lion Travel, a qualitative approach was used to collect and analyze the data. We conducted in-depth interviews from October 2009 to February 2010 with the tour guide bloggers and management team of Lion Travel. The interviews with the tour guide bloggers were semi-structured and covered a set of questions about the corporate blogs, blogging habits, thoughts on blogging, and corporate blogging policy, the way they build relationships with customers, and the size of their fan base. For the management team, we conducted unstructured interviews, primarily gathering their thoughts on the company's blogging strategy and outcomes of the blogs.

We interviewed 20 people altogether, 7 managers and 13 tour guides. Of the tour guides, most of them are affiliated tour guides.[2] They are not formal employees of Lion Travel, but they have an agreement with the company in which they lead the company's trips exclusively and in turn, Lion Travel guarantees a certain amount of tours for them per month in return. We interviewed 10 outbound tour guides and 3 inbound tour guides. We did not interview as many inbound tour guides as outbound ones, as the former generally shared similar work practices and routines. Of the managers, some were top management and made the Web 2.0 policy, and others were middle management and executed this policy. While some of the middle managers supported the policy, others did not. Owing to the fact that only 8% of the total 450 affiliated tour guides had complied with the blog policy of the company, tour guide interviewees were picked from a rating list of a 2009 blogger competition held by Lion Travel. We included both successful and unsuccessful bloggers. Our selections were early adopters of blogging who were then noticed the heads of the department.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, we also analyzed the comments posted from November 2009 to January 2010 on the top eight blogs hosted by the interviewees.[3] We coded the comments as part of the analysis in order to capture the dynamic relationships in the personal networks of each blog. We developed coding categories partly based on the categories used in prior personal network studies, such as *name generator* (whether or not *alter* bloggers addressed the *ego* by his/her real name) and *types of support* (social support, information support, material support, and emotional support) to the capture the relational data. We obtained other emerging categories such as customer retention and acquisition information from our field notes. Acquisition information here refers to whether *alters* expressed their willingness to attend the trip again, and whether they invited others to participate in the blog. Relationships and their levels of closeness were extrapolated from the frequency of responses in each above feature. We rated those relationships with frequent responses in each blog as "strong', those with less frequent responses as "medium", and those with rare responses as "low". Network size is defined as the number of different *alters* who comment on a given blog during a set time period. A team of two researchers analyzed the same comments and interview transcripts. We later compared the results with those of our coding and reached a consensus.

Types	Management team	Tour guides
Informants	- Top management: President, GM, VP, System development director - Middle management: blog senior manager of tour guide department, Outbound manager, Inbound manager	- Outbound-long distance(2) - Outbound-short distance(8) - Inbound(3)
No. of Informants	7	13
Interview time	2009/10~2010/2	2009/12~2010/2

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[2] Most of the tour guides of Lion Travel are affiliated with the company. Only a few of them are formal staff of the company and served as a part time tour guide on weekend. Therefore, we only included one formal staff tour guide in the interviewees.

[3] We examined two team blogs and six individual blogs. Some blogs were shared by several tour guides because these tour guides can only blog between trips. One person leads the effort and exhorts the other team members to blog.

Length of the interview	1~2.5 hrs	0.5~1.5hrs (including two telephone interviews)

Table 1.   *Summary of the Interviews*

5   DATA ANALYSIS

In our data analysis, we identified three different perceptions and interpretations of the corporate blog that the tour guides had: the blog as a fan club, the blog as compliance, and the blog as a creative outlet. These three perspectives emerged from our analysis of the interviews, observation notes, and posts on the corporate blog. Each perception reveals a different way in which people have come to view—*have made sense of*—this technology and leads to different types of relationships among the personal networks within the blog. These perceptions are by no means exhaustive, covering all corporate bloggers, but they serve as a sample of what we might find in a larger study.

5.1   Blogs as a Fan Club

Several tour guide bloggers view blogging as an attention-catching means of making connections with the customers and as a means of showing their managers how much they contribute to the company. They blog proactively and aggressively, and their blogs are rated as the top blogs in the seasonal corporate blog competitions. They are all aware that they cannot change this blog policy since it was top management who enacted it. They thus decided to use the corporate blog to get the attention of top management. One outbound tour guide blogger, who specializes in photography (009), stated, "I was bred by Lion Travel. Jason [the president of Lion travel] has always been my role model and I did exactly what he told me to. In fact, if he complimented me on something I had written, I would be as happy as a clam". These tour guides managed to get the attention of those inside and outside of the corporate boundary. They have gained a following on their blogs not only for the personal achievements about which they have written but also for the value they have added to the company in order to get higher remuneration (payments) or acquire more resources. One tour guide (013), who specializes in singing, said, "Blogging gives me bargaining power. I have gotten the attention of both customers and my boss. Frankly, I have used my fans to get bargaining power with my boss."

Although these bloggers view the blog as a means for them to get financial rewards, they all surprisingly feel that the blogs should "be kept neutral", or not commercial. They work to become stars on their blogs and *brand* their names. They feel by *branding* themselves, the company and in turn, they themselves garner more customers and earn more. Hence, acquiring more fans comes before financial rewards. As blogger (013) said, "though my intention is to make money, I don't talk about anything relating to money in my blog on purpose because that is not the way to make friends." This blogger carefully separated his Lion Travel blog from his/her profitable bidding site on Yahoo, connecting the two through small links.

Should the company stop its corporate blog or no longer require that tour guides blog, these "blogs as a fan club" bloggers all say they would "quit blogging" immediately. Only one thinks the company might do one of these actions at some point. They note that blogging takes a lot of the tour guides' time and energy. If blogging no longer catches the attention of the top management, this group would no longer blog for the company.

5.2   Blogs as Compliance

Some tour guide bloggers feel the corporate blog serves as compliance function, an alternative communication channel among customers, the company, and fellow tour guides. Their posts stick to the company's itineraries and new products. One outbound tour guide (007) asserts, "Corporate blogs should relate to corporate interests. The things I write add to our trips' value. It is the company's blog after all. Tour guides shouldn't use the blog as a platform to express their personal opinions." They worry customers might raise unnecessary questions about the irrelevant things they might have put on

their blogs during a trip. These tour guides insist that blogs should bring the company directly to customers. Adding stories, photos, and sometimes film clips of company selected trips, they make their blogs akin to expensive advertisements and think the tour guide blogs make their company's trips more attractive than the trip descriptions the company used to have on the corporate website. "Customers just like it," said one of these bloggers (003).

Blogs led to information flows, which helped the sharing of tacit knowledge among tour guides to see what they are doing and even get tips. These bloggers then design new tours based on their experience and the experiences about which the other tour guides have written. These new tours may better fit customers' needs, improve efficiency of marketing communication, and increase sales. An inbound tour guide said, "I keep an eye out for any new things on the inbound corporate blog in case my customers have any questions for me. It [the corporate blog] also serves as a reference for me. I can learn from other tour guides." In addition to being a tour guide, blogger (010) has also served as a supervisor in the domestic product department. She concedes that corporate blogs serve as an on-the-job training database, especially for new tour guides.

Unlike the "blogs as a fan club" bloggers, these "blogs as compliance" bloggers are not showy and some of them even prefer not being popular. Though they did have numerous fans, some do not upload photos of themselves on the blog. One blogger comments, "As far as I'm concerned, *star* tour guides should be *sages*, walking dictionaries and atlases. I am not this kind of tour guide. I'm normal. My customers sometimes even know more than I do. When this happens, I just encourage them to share and then they feel better about themselves and the trip."

5.3   Blogs as a Creative Outlet

Some tour guide bloggers feel that the corporate blog is a creative outlet for them. Viewing the blog as a chance to express themselves rather than as a means to a corporate end, they personalize their blogs. They adopted the technology individualistically. Blogger (008) blogs to "document her life" for her own memory. She intentionally conceals her job position and personal identity on the blog, and deletes any posts that reveal it. "I do not blog from a tour guide's point of view. Whenever I get an idea about something to write, I first collect information and post it when I feel up to it. I have positioned myself as a traveler, a country X lover. I don't post photos of customers. It is just not my style." The drive to express themselves motivates bloggers like her to keep blogging.

The star tour guide for 2004, blogger (002) says "Blogs are personal. Every blog has its own character. I haven't done what others have suggested that I do… I write in a humorous style…Tourist experiences are subjective. People pay money to have a good time and we need to leave them with good memories when the trip is over. Therefore, I only post funny things and don't adopt specific themes. I want my customers and other bloggers to see various aspects of me."

These "blogs as a creative outlet" tour guide bloggers despise selling things on their blogs and are opposed to commercializing their blogs. Better serving their customers, they believe, is best done by acquiring expertise. These bloggers neither closely follow company itineraries nor the blogging rules laid down by the company policy. Blogging is "for fun". They struggle for more freedom. If the company stopped requiring blogging, they would not be bothered and would likely continue blogging. "I am a blogger no matter whether the company provides an incentive or not," a blogger said.

5.4   Relationship Types of Personal Blog Networks

Based on the feedback from the 13 tour guide bloggers interviewed, we adopted personal network analysis as our conceptual lens. They all feel blogging provides a platform on which they can establish friendships with customers and other tour guide bloggers, and most agree blogging encourages communication and interaction with customers and helps their reputation.

Our analysis of blog comments via coding reveals the dynamics of the relationships of these tour guide bloggers and their fellow bloggers and how their different perspectives of the corporate blog influence their daily blogging. Table 2 presents our coding of blog comments, the connections among

these tour guides and their alter bloggers, and the content of these Ego-alter ties.

Tour guide bloggers who view their "blogs as a fan club" maintain star-fan relationships with other bloggers and have larger network sizes (80-700 people), whereas those who view their "blogs as compliance" have weaker *ego-alter* ties and small network sizes (8-65 people). Those who view their "blogs as a creative outlet" have strength of ties with their *alter* bloggers and network sizes as diverse as their personal styles.

Tour guide bloggers with the same perspective of the corporate blog had similar ties with alter bloggers. Those who view their "blogs as a fan club" perceive their blog as a platform for them to sustain relationships with customers long after trips are over. Before a trip, they post their yearly group schedule on their blogs in order to gather their fans and customers online. They take pictures and videotape parts of their trips for customers. Later, they post pictures of customers on their blogs and invite them to see and participate in their blog. Some even provide incentives to customers who participate in sharing the photos of them. Others offer future trip schedules to solicit repeat customers and their families and friends, creating a snowball effect. Although customer relationships in the travel industry are typically pretty transient, thanks to the Web 2.0 technology, they can now be prolonged. "I not only make friends on my blog, but also make new friends on Plurk and Facebook. Every morning I say hello, and over one hundred people might respond to me." Managing their popularity is their key to success in blogging. The coding of comments in Table 2 reveal that fan bloggers interact often and provide social and material support to star bloggers in this group. Star bloggers even received some emotional support from several specific fans in the sharing of joy and distress. Some star bloggers also provide information support for their fans.

Blogs as a Fan Club	1. **Social support- high:** greetings, praise, appreciation, gossip, sharing ideas, companionship, fan clubs on Plurk and Facebook 2. **Material support- high:** incentives such as providing free photographing services, tour DVD, travel photo posting, providing photos as free gifts, online souvenir lottery, after-trip shopping services, and offline gatherings 3. **Emotional support- medium:** sharing feelings of depression or frustration with work, family pictures, discussing personal health problems 4. **Information support- medium:** asking about upcoming trips, prices, technical problems
Blogs as Compliance	1. **Social support- high:** greetings, gossip, discussion of tourist spots, encouragement, sharing ideas, companionship, pushing emails 2. **Information support- high:** asking about upcoming trips, souvenirs, food, and equipment etc. 3. **Material support-low:** travel photo posting 4. **Emotional support- low**
Blogs as a Creative Outlet	1. **Information support- medium to high:** discussing pictures and content posted on the blog 2. **Social support- random:** praise, appreciation, gossip 3. **Material support- random:** after-trip shopping services, photo posting 4. **Emotional support- random:** sharing hedonic feelings

Table 2.   Blog Perspectives and Types of Relationships within Blog Networks

Those tour guide bloggers who view their "blogs as compliance" perceive their blogs as a way to increase the mutual understanding of their company and customers and plan tours accordingly. "The tour became deeper. We have designed a mountain climbing trip with the tour guide handling the backpacks for the customers. We have fulfilled the dreams of those who lack the physical strength to hike a mountain and helped them gain respect for nature. Making trips like this happen for these people means more to me than the competition for the lowest price that used to occupy my time when arranging trips," said blogger (010). Tour guide bloggers who hold this perception of their blogs received high social and information support from *alter* bloggers. On their blogs, they generally discussed issues related to travelling, such as their travel experiences, new travel spots, and travel preparation advice. In contrast, they did not receive as much material and emotional support as those who view their "blogs as fan clubs." One tour guide did report some *alter* bloggers left comments on her blog seeking emotional support like "I wasn't in a good mood today," and "The whole company is against me, especially the witch…" However, she and the others hesitate to respond to these kinds of

comments. These bloggers have also adopted multiple communication tools such as email, SMS, and phone calls in addition to their blog to keep in contact with their customers.

Those who view their "blogs as a creative outlet" established diverse ties with their alter bloggers. No distinct pattern of their relationship with customers appears among bloggers who view their blogs the same way. Self-expression seems to be a higher priority than creating and maintaining relationships with customers. For example, in order to conceal her tour guide identity, blogger (008) intentionally deletes any of her customers' comments that mention her name on her blog. Consequentially, with a mere 3 *alter* bloggers having posted comments on her blog over the past three months, seeking mostly information support, she has maintained a very small network size. Bloggers like her rarely receive any social, material, or emotional support. Blogger (002), however, receives high social support no doubt in part because of his aim to amuse his *alter* bloggers. He receives medium material support, information support, and emotional support. A few of his fellow bloggers share their joy with him on his blog, ask him to purchase souvenirs for them, and express their willingness to attend his group again. However, these tour guides do not pay special attention to their customers. Breaking the corporate boundary, they embrace every blogger with open arms.

6   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Consumers have felt Web 2.0 technology like blogs empower them. They now have more transparency in the travel information and obtain greater freedom of choice. The travel industry, particularly travel agencies, has also felt Web 2.0 technology empowers them. They can build new and deeper relationships with customers and blur the line between company and customer. This study's findings echo the prevailing positive view of online community and social networks in the tourism marketing sector of the travel industry (Wang et al. 2002; Wang & Fesenmaier 2004).

Variances are observed, however, from prior research on corporate blogs. Yardi et al. (2009) contended that internal corporate bloggers perceive the attention of management and other employees as the only motivating factor to encourage their contribution to work corporate blog. Our interviews suggest instead that corporate bloggers' perceptions of external corporate blogs are diverse and that other motivating factors for those with different perceptions of their blogs cannot be ruled out. Differences of the scope of corporate blogs, internal or external, may account for the gap between our findings and the findings of Yardi et al. We identify three distinct views of external corporate blogging: blogs as a fan club, compliance, and a creative outlet.

Tour guide bloggers who perceive "blogs as a fan club" develop competitive advantages and become assets to the company in the PR they provide, and these bloggers, in return, are autonomous and free to negotiate corporate expectations of them within and outside of the corporate boundary. Burt (1992) suggested that "structure holes" have a strategic advantage in negotiating transactions with suppliers and customers in any social network. Those who take possession of these "holes" or "bridges" acquire a competitive advantage in the exchange of information, social capital and other resources, since they begin to constitute or have constituted the only route through which resources can flow to other parts of the network. Based on this "structure holes" argument, tour guide bloggers who perceive their "blogs as a fan club" become *structure holes* and then play important roles as "bridges" when the company crosses new frontier to bring external social capital into its corporate boundary.

Although garnering the attention of their management and customers is what drives these most active blog users, not all bloggers want to be or enjoy being *stars*. Despite offering competitive advantages, author visibility can actually be a "mixed blessing". In this study, those who view their blogs as creative outlets want to voice themselves and are not primarily concerned with sales. This perception of blogs is shared by most ordinary bloggers, who report in studies that blogging is a form of personal communication and grassroots self-expression (Nardi et al. 2004). No corporate boundary can stop them. Bloggers who view their blogs as compliance or institutional tools, complain that the pressure to blog frequently is no other than "extra burden from work without a raise." Some of them delay their responses to comments or seek to avoid making comments or updating. These blogs are more likely used by these bloggers to communicate for internal communication or marketing communication.

Efimova and Grudin (2007) investigated IBM's internal and external servers, suggesting that different perceptions of a given technology make different goals sensible and others not sensible.

Our comments data also reveal how perceptions and interpretations of external corporate blogs lead to different types of relationships in those blog networks, ones that are similar in some ways but different in others with the friendship networks. Like Wellman and Wrotley (1990), we find different people provide different kinds of support. For example, "friendship" ties, as described in Fischer's classic study of friendship networks (1982), typically represent offers of companionship (social support) and sometimes emotional support, but little material support, whereas "close" ties, like those of relatives, typically not only offer emotional support but also social and material support. Based on our analysis of ego-alter relationships, the blog networks of the tour guide bloggers and their fellow bloggers are somewhat different from friendship networks. Those blog networks which provide greater social and material support receive a greater number of revisits. However, these blog networks also tend to provide less emotional support than ordinary friendship networks. Interestingly, the most active tour guide bloggers are not the most influential. While blogger (009) has the largest network size among all tour guide bloggers, he posted 45 times but received 1761 comments in three months his blog was observed. One active blogger contributed 117 posts, but only received 32 response comments. Aggressive material support such as travel photo posting, souvenir lotteries, or shopping services seems to be the trick the influential tour guides bloggers use to bind their customers.

Other kinds of support, including social and emotional support, also may help. Social support leads to weak ties in *ego-alter* relationships, causing effective social cohesion. Granovatter 's (1973) proposal of the strength of weak ties could explain this phenomenon. In determining the extent of information diffusion and connections among cliques in large-scale social structures, *weak* rather than *strong ties* create more novel information flows to individuals. The mounting of page views of Lion Travel's blogs and websites real the strength of weak ties that connect to customers and their social networks. Emotional support, particularly in way of sharing fun, entertaining, and amusing information, seems to be a significant binder in establishing ties among bloggers. Blogger (002), who characterizes his blogging style as humorous, only posted 33 times in the three months observed, yet received almost 90 comments. Supporting previous findings, our study suggests hedonic benefits are major factors motivating the participation within the Internet travel community (Chung and Buhalis 2008).

In conclusion, Web 2.0 technology is, by its nature, bottom-up and belongs to grassroots. Even though entrepreneurs and investors have jumped on this bandwagon, our study suggests that there is no single rule to dominate the perceptions and the uses of this new technology. Different bloggers (actors) have different perceptions and interpretations on blogging and these differences in perspective lead to different levels of closeness to their *alters*. The *ego-alter* relationships of corporate bloggers typically have weak ties and through the "transitive" effect of social network, these weak ties may bind more *alter* bloggers and lead to more direct participation. Our study suggests that social support and material support are useful in aggrandizing the transitivity among bloggers. However, garnering attention as a motivating factor for blogging of some bloggers may bring about stronger ties for them and play an important role in corporate blogging. This study also suggests that other factors, such as the individualistic style of bloggers and the hedonic benefits that may motivate bloggers, should not be overlooked by managers, because these bloggers who are otherwise motivated might advance corporate frontiers by sharing specific interests inside and outside of the corporate boundary with undeveloped, distant potential customers. These forerunners of tourist blogging bridge the gap between the internal corporate culture and the external awareness of travel discourse and facilitate the growth of the company as well as the entire travel industry. Empowering corporate bloggers to blog and keep blogging may begin with instructing them to offer more incentives and giving them more freedom to blog.

Collectively, the theoretical and practical implications of this study contribute to our understanding of corporate bloggers' social networking behaviors. We hope the insights from the case study add to the explanations of how and why Web 2.0 technology came into being and the adaptive circle forming among the actors and their networks.

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