

Believe it or not: Credibility of blogs in tourism

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS: *blogs, marketing communications, perceived credibility, tourism*

This study examines the use of blogs as a means of tourism marketing communication. Using a scenario-based approach, an online experiment was conducted to test whether consumers perceive corporate and personal blogs to be credible sources of information

and to compare the perceived credibility of blogs to that of traditional word-of-mouth. The findings suggest that while consumers do not generally equate the overall credibility of blogs with that of traditional word-of-mouth, some consumers do appear to attribute similar levels of authoritativeness, a dimension of credibility, to them.

INTRODUCTION

The internet has significantly changed the landscape of the tourism industry. In fact, in recent years, tourism has been ranked as the number one industry in terms of online transaction volume.¹ In 2005, around 78 percent of online travelers, or 79 million Americans, logged online for travel information. More than 75 percent of these travelers booked or made travel reservations. This volume of transactions has exceeded all other types of booking methods, including phone booking and travel agents.² Compared with other types of sources and transaction channels, the internet contains a large amount of information, is more interactive, can be customized, and provides highly tailored content.³ When tourism marketers promote their products, the internet has become one of the most important marketing communication channels.⁴

Past research has shown that increasing numbers of consumers are relying on online opinions for their purchase decisions, from which movies to watch to which stocks to buy.⁵ However, from the consumer side, the online tourism space is vast and contains information from different parties, from hotels, airlines and destination marketing organizations to



consumers themselves, such as customer-to-customer exchanges, online forums, and blogs. The quality of information, authoritativeness and trustworthiness of these sources may vary. Without a doubt, though, the internet has extended and changed word-of-mouth communication since consumers can exchange opinions online asynchronously and their posts have the potential to reach millions of viewers.⁶

More specifically, blogs have become increasingly ubiquitous in recent years. The impact of blogs on traditional journalism has been monumental.⁷ Initial evidence suggests that web bloggers tend to judge blogs as more credible information sources than traditional sources of news media.⁸ The use of the blog as a mode of marketing communications has also begun to receive attention though little is understood about this new, and flexible, technology.⁹ The role of blogs in tourism marketing communications strategy has yet to be determined. Several travel blogs have gained increased popularity, such as *travelpod.com*, *travelpost.com*, and *travelblog.org*. To what extent do travelers trust these online blogs? Do they trust online blogs as they do traditional word-of-mouth? The answer to these questions can inform the tourism marketer as to whether or not blogs are a viable marketing tool. Given the potential for impact, this study examines the use of blogs as a means of tourism marketing communications. More specifically, it addresses the perceived credibility of blogs, the extent to which blogs are perceived to be as credible as traditional word-of-mouth and whether they represent a potentially effective alternative for promoting one's property or destination.

INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

The importance of effective marketing communications is reflected by the many organizations engaged in extensive planning to determine the correct mix of communications methods necessary to reach the desired target market and achieve organizational objectives within the available budget. For the

tourism industry, consumers' homes and the product/service to be purchased are physically separated with the consumers' limited access to only virtual destination experience before actually traveling to the place. The nature of the industry calls for more carefully planned and conducted marketing communication practices. Current teaching and practice focuses on an integrated marketing communications strategy.¹⁰ This traditionally includes some combination of traditional media along with other communications forms such as events sponsorship and direct marketing integrated into the mix with organizations also striving to develop methods to enhance positive word-of-mouth. Technological advances have introduced interesting and challenging aspects to this already complex scenario with the various components of the internet options available today. The advancement of the internet and its geographic pervasiveness allows consumers and businesses to communicate with almost anyone, anywhere and at anytime. Marketers have begun to harness the internet as a communications tool with success in Business to Business (B2B) as well as Business to Consumer (B2C) strategies. One particular component of the internet, blogs, has increasingly received attention.¹¹

BLOGS AS ONE CHANNEL OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION

The term 'blog' was coined by Peter Merholz in 1999 and blogging attracted wide media attention with the 2004 presidential elections.¹² The year 2004 actually became known as the year of the blog since the word was the most searched for definition in a number of online dictionaries in that year.¹³ The simple number of bloggers and blog users demands that marketers take note of the potential impact of the blogosphere. Some estimates are that blogs number over 20 million with around 70,000 new blogs launched each day.¹⁴ Perlmutter and McDaniel¹⁵ also report that the blogosphere doubles about every 5.5 months. The profile of blog creators is mostly male (57 percent), young (48 percent under 30), broadband users, internet veterans, higher income and well

educated. While somewhat more mainstream, blog readers also tend to be younger, better educated, and internet veterans.¹⁶

While the internet has become an integral part of many organizations' communications strategies, the use of blogs is still under careful examination. Blogs have brought technology to one of the oldest methods of communications, word-of-mouth, by basically creating a high-tech consumer to consumer (C2C) mode of communication that is not controlled by corporations but instead run by consumers.¹⁷ A 2005 ComScore report indicated that bloggers are an attractive group for marketers given they are 'disproportionately affluent, young and broadband-enabled'. Some companies are developing strategies to take advantage of blogs. Bluefly.com, an online fashion designer of clothing, communicates with customers through blogging, encouraging them to check postings on its styles and designers.¹⁸ Grant reports a ComScore Network study indicating that shoppers visiting blogs actually spend around 6 percent more shopping than average shoppers online and that blogs are a way of reducing shopper's fears regarding purchases from unknown retailers.

In terms of the categories of blogs, Smudde¹⁹ lists four types: 1) Personal blogs – expression of 'personal convictions, observations, suggestions, etc.'; 2) Topic or industry blogs – related to given subject areas/industries – often equated to a white paper or even a keynote speech; 3) Publication based blogs – often by editors, reporters and freelancers on topics of immediacy in media outlets; and 4) Corporate blogs – hybrids of personal blogs but authored by corporate executives, board members, etc., to get the message out about the company.

Some types of blogs, such as personal blogs, are written with a personal opinion which may often be quite opinionated and even vicious. Some sites, such as the children's entertainment site Kaboose.com, are actually monitoring postings by requiring registration.²⁰ Issues, of course, revolve around questions of ethics, free speech and credibility of this new communications method. This evolution also adds pressure on corporations to proactively become involved in this relatively new form

of communications. Increasingly, companies are setting up their own corporate blogs to respond to personal blogs as a result of their need to put their own spin on the extensive information being posted about them. This allows businesses to distribute their own information regarding their companies or to hype their products. They can talk to, as well as listen to, customers directly. Many businesses such as General Motors, Microsoft, CBS news, Vespa and Wal-Mart are attempting to tap into this method to interact and build relationships with their customer communities.²¹ According to CRM Magazine,²² less than 5 percent of Fortune 1000 companies use blogs strategically although predictions are that this use will triple in the next two years. Companies are also listening via blogs. Embria, a market research firm, collects blog postings over the web for its clients, mostly big consumer companies.²³

CREDIBILITY OF COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA

The usefulness of blogs as a marketing channel will depend on how the consumers view and trust online sources. Over the years, numerous studies have emerged that attempt to assess the credibility of various sources of information ranging from advertising to word-of-mouth. Among these are a number of studies addressing consumers' perceptions of internet credibility.²⁴⁻²⁷ One of the primary goals of these studies has been to gain a better understanding of how surfers assess the credibility of a website and to determine which characteristics of the site lead consumers to believe the information they have encountered is, in fact, credible. For instance, Freeman and Spyridakis²⁸ illustrated how the presence of street addresses and links to external sites on a website increase readers' credibility perceptions of online health information in the form of articles said to be posted by the National Health Organization, a fictitious organization used in their experiment.

Studies have also examined the perceived credibility of the internet by heavy media users,²⁹ though a debate exists regarding the credibility of internet news sources dependent

upon the user and his/her typically preferred media source of information.³⁰ While reports are that people have a preferred traditional news source which they often judge as the most credible source, some have found that the more we go online, the more credibility we give to the information on the internet. Greer³¹ reports that the amount of time we spend online is the strongest predictor of whether the online medium will be judged as credible. Complicating these results, Johnson and Kaye³² found that internet users are often not heavy traditional media users and thus have inadequate experience to judge their online information as credible in context with other media sources. Information from the travel industry also presents interesting perspectives of internet use and credibility. Given its extensive use, however, reports are that confidence ratings of internet information in the travel industry are low.³³ Regardless of the debate over internet credibility, it is playing an increasingly important part in communications with expectations that the internet will account for 10 percent of media spending in the current 2006 year.³⁴

While a number of internet credibility studies have been conducted, little effort has been devoted to examining the perceived credibility of the blog itself and the potential influence blogs may have on consumers in comparison to other forms of communication. As mentioned previously, one study did examine the perceived credibility of blogs as a news source as compared to other more traditional forms of news media.³⁵ Another, more recent, study examined the relationship between movie ticket sales and online word-of-mouth (in the form of message board postings).³⁶ Based on data collected from the Yahoo Movies message board, the authors conclude the volume of postings was a significant predictor of new movie revenue while the valence of the postings (whether the comments were positive or negative) was seemingly unrelated to the success of the movie. The authors suggest that the effect of the message board postings was one of awareness rather than persuasion. That is, the online postings simply resulted in more consumers being aware of a new movie's release which led to

increased ticket sales rather than the content of the postings having any significant impact on consumers' attitudes. While this study did not specifically measure the credibility perceptions of the postings among readers, the findings raise an interesting question as to what type of evaluative responses online word-of-mouth really evokes in consumers and what the strategies should be for dealing with this new phenomenon.

STUDY PURPOSE

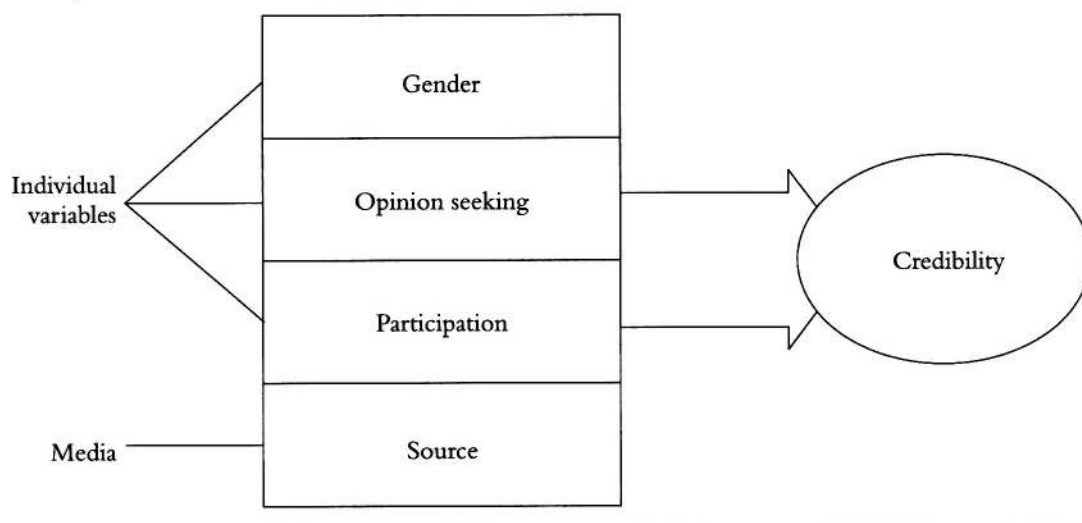
Our limited understanding of blogs is also evidenced by the fact that many marketing decision makers are wary of aggressively taking the plunge into the emerging online form of communications despite the high profile of the blogosphere and the long existence of word-of-mouth advertising (the offline counterpart of blogs).^{37,38} While questions regarding technology may be issues in some cases, many simply are unsure of how blogs may fit into their marketing communications strategy in context with other communications sources. This is not surprising since little is understood about the nature of consumer reactions to this new channel of communication. The purpose of this study is to begin to examine whether consumers perceive blogs to be credible sources of product information. More specifically, an experiment was conducted to determine if the credibility of online word-of-mouth (in the form of personal and corporate blogs) in any way compares with that of traditional word-of-mouth. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model addressed in this research: we hypothesize that the perceived credibility of different types of communication channels will be determined by individual variables such as gender, opinion leadership, one's level of participation with online sources, and different media types.

METHODOLOGY

The experiment was conducted using a web-based survey administered during the spring of 2006. The target population, somewhat reflective of the blogger profile, was college students. This population is considered to be

Conceptual model of credibility of communication channels

Figure 1



internet savvy, and accessible through new forms of media such as blogs. Facebook.com is an online community in which college students across the country can interact. At the time of the survey, Facebook reported that two-thirds of users return every day and that users spent an average of 20 minutes per day on the site. The online community of Facebook.com as well as campus email addresses of students at a mid-size southeastern university were used to obtain a convenience sample for the survey. The survey announcements were sent through Facebook to students at four southeastern universities other than the home campus of the researchers (where student emails were used for the announcement). Subjects were invited to enter a website and complete the survey upon which time they would be entered into a drawing to win an iPod Nano. Names and personal information were kept confidential and destroyed after the drawing.

When a participant responded to the invitation and entered the survey website as indicated on the announcement, one of three scenarios relating to the purchase of a cruise was randomly presented (see Table 1). The participant was asked to read the scenario and then respond to a number of questions. The scenarios describe information about a cruise line. One of three scenarios were presented: a corporate blog from an executive representing

the cruise line, a personal blog from a traveler who had been on the cruise line or a word-of-mouth interaction about the cruise line between the reader and his/her co-worker. This scenario-based manipulation of the source of the information follows the approach used by Smith et al.³⁹ to test the effect of different recovery efforts on customer satisfaction in the event of a service failure in a restaurant and hotel setting.

After reading the scenario, respondents were then asked to answer three sets of questions. First, a set of credibility items were presented asking participants to respond on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to indicate the extent to which they felt the information in the scenario they had just read was credible, authoritative and trustworthy. These items were modeled after those analyzed by Freeman and Spyridakis⁴⁰ in their effort to measure web-surfers' perceived credibility of online health information. Perceived authoritativeness and trustworthiness are thought to be dimensions of overall credibility.^{41,42} Second, Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman's Opinion Seekers scale was used to ascertain whether the respondent tended to exhibit opinion seeking behavior in a cruise purchase context.⁴³ With this scale, subjects are also asked to respond on a scale from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to

Table 1: Three scenarios

Company blog	You are planning an upcoming cruise vacation, but you are having difficulty choosing between Cruise Line A and Cruise Line B. While browsing Cruise Line A's website you come across a blog written by the CEO. This blog details the company's commitment to excellent customer service, their involvement within their community, selection and quality of their onboard activities, and their dedication to the environment.
Personal blog	You are planning an upcoming cruise vacation. While browsing blogs you come across Bob's blog on his experience on Cruise Line XYZ. He said that he had a great time. He commented on the outstanding service; the staff was helpful and friendly. The ship was very clean and the rooms were comfortable. He said the food was tasty and always fresh. He also enjoyed the vast array of onboard activities, especially karaoke night!
Word-of-mouth	You are planning an upcoming cruise vacation. While talking with Bob, a co-worker, he tells you about his recent experience on Cruise Line XYZ. He tells you that he had a great time. He commented on the outstanding service; the staff was helpful and friendly. The ship was very clean and the rooms were comfortable. He said the food was tasty and always fresh. He also enjoyed the vast array of onboard activities, especially karaoke night!

strongly agree) to indicate how much they agree with six statements related to whether they value obtaining other people's opinions about a product when they make a purchase decision. Third, the respondents were asked to complete Zaichkowsky's revised Personal Involvement Inventory.⁴⁴ This scale consists of 10 bipolar adjective pairs selected to measure interest, enthusiasm and involvement with a product. Respondents were also asked to answer several demographic items including gender and ethnicity as well as questions about their internet usage.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A total of 221 surveys were collected of which 193 were complete and usable in the data analysis. Eighty-four (43.5 percent) of the respondents were men and 109 (56.5 percent) were women. Most of the participants were white (83 percent) and the rest were black (7 percent), Asian (2 percent), Hispanic (3 percent) and other (5 percent). The majority of the sample indicated they make purchases online (71 percent), surf the web for entertainment (82 percent) and use the internet as a news source (79 percent). When asked whether or not they currently read blogs,

31 percent indicated they do and 14 percent indicated they actually post blogs.

To compare the perceived credibility of the different information sources, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was run where the credibility item included in the survey served as the dependent measure and a source variable (which distinguished between the personal blog, corporate blog and traditional word-of-mouth scenarios) served as the independent variable. Control measures included in the model were gender, a dummy variable representing whether the participant actively posts blogs and two covariates, an opinion-seeking score and an involvement with cruises score. These control variables were included in the model to adjust for individual differences in experience with the web and shopping behavior tendencies that might affect credibility ratings.

The opinion-seeking scores were generated by summing the six items from the opinion-seeking scale included in the survey. The scores ranged from 6 to 30 with a mean of 22.6 (SD = 4.52). To sum items in this fashion, the scale was first tested for unidimensionality. To test this, a factor analysis was performed on the items. The results indicated the items load on a single factor with an eigenvalue greater

than one that accounted for 59 percent of the variance. The reliability of the scale items was tested as well with a resulting coefficient alpha of 0.86. The Personal Involvement Inventory items were summed in a similar fashion to generate each subject's overall involvement score. The scores ranged from 10 to 70 with a mean of 49.92 (SD = 10.53). The factor analysis performed on this set of items revealed these also loaded on a single factor with an eigenvalue greater than one that accounted for 56 percent of the variance. The coefficient alpha was 0.91.

The ANCOVA results (displayed in Table 2) reveal a significant main effect for the source of information as well as a significant effect of involvement on credibility ratings. Post-hoc comparisons (see Table 3) of the average credibility ratings for the three sources indicate subjects' perceive traditional word-of-mouth

to be significantly more credible than both corporate and personal blogs; with no difference in perceived credibility between the two types of blogs.

To get a better understanding of how the credibility perceptions differ, a second analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was run for the dependent variables perceived trustworthiness and perceived authoritativeness with the same independent variables as the previous model. The results of this second analysis are displayed in Table 4. Similar to the results for perceived credibility, a significant main effect of source of information was revealed for perceived trustworthiness. The post-hoc comparisons of the average trustworthiness ratings for the three sources (see Table 5) indicate subjects' perceive traditional word-of-mouth to be significantly more trustworthy than both corporate and personal blogs; with no difference in perceived

Table 2: ANCOVA results for perceived credibility

Variable	SS	df	MS	F	Significance
Corrected model	21.060	12	1.755	2.475	0.007
Intercept	12.456	1	12.456	17.567	0.000
OpinionSeeking	0.023	1	0.023	0.033	0.857
Involvement	3.337	1	3.337	4.706	0.032*
SOURCE	9.937	2	4.969	7.008	0.001*
Gender	0.511	1	0.511	0.721	0.398
PostBlogs	0.053	1	0.053	0.074	0.786
SOURCE × Gender	0.008	2	0.004	0.006	0.995
SOURCE × PostBlogs	0.604	2	0.302	0.426	0.654
Gender × PostBlogs	0.603	1	0.603	0.850	0.359
SOURCE × Gender*	0.024	1	0.024	0.034	0.853
PostBlogs					
Error	75.158	106	0.709		
Total	1414.000	119			
Corrected Total	96.218	118			

Adjusted R-Square = 0.130.

* Significant at the 0.01 level as in the bottom of Table 3.

Table 3: Post-hoc analysis for average perceived credibility ratings

Word-of-mouth	Corporate blog	Personal blog	Significance
3.944	3.081		0.002*
3.944		2.909	0.000*
	3.081	2.909	0.485

*significant at the 0.01 level.

trustworthiness between the two types of blogs. Again, this finding matches that of the overall perceived credibility analysis.

In contrast, the results for perceived authoritativeness were somewhat different. As Table 4 shows, three variables were significantly related

Table 4: MANCOVA results for perceived trustworthiness and perceived authoritativeness

Variable	SS	df	MS	F	Significance
Corrected model	24.180	12	2.015	2.999	0.001
	28.634	12	2.386	4.000	0.000
Intercept	30.645	1	30.645	45.603	0.000
	21.736	1	21.736	36.437	0.000
Involvement	0.476	1	0.476	0.709	0.402
	7.317	1	7.317	12.266	0.001*
OpinionSeeking	1.458	1	1.458	2.170	0.144
	2.482	1	2.482	4.161	0.044*
SOURCE	13.389	2	6.695	9.962	0.000*
	0.837	2	0.419	0.702	0.498
Gender	0.775	1	0.775	1.153	0.285
	0.158	1	0.158	0.265	0.608
PostBlogs	0.164	1	0.164	0.244	0.622
	8.913	1	8.913	14.942	0.000*
SOURCE × Gender	0.350	2	0.175	0.261	0.771
	0.697	2	0.349	0.584	0.559
SOURCE × PostBlogs	0.969	2	0.484	0.721	0.489
	3.707	2	1.854	3.108	0.049*
Gender × PostBlogs	0.416	1	0.416	0.619	0.433
	0.020	1	0.020	0.033	0.855
SOURCE × Gender × PostBlogs	0.162	1	0.162	0.241	0.625
	0.162	1	0.162	0.271	0.604
Error	71.232	106	0.672		
	63.231	106	0.597		
Total	1341.000	119			
	1139.000	119			
Corrected Total	95.412	118			
	91.866	118			

Adjusted R-Square = 0.169

Adjusted R-Square = 0.234

Note: = Perceived Trustworthiness Results.
 = Perceived Authoritativeness Results.
 Significant at the 0.01 level

Table 5: Post-hoc analysis for average perceived trustworthiness ratings

Word-of-mouth	Personal blog	Corporate blog	Significance
4.034	3.018		0.000*
4.034		2.831	0.000*
	3.018	2.831	0.436

* = significant at the 0.01 level.

to perceived authoritativeness: an individual's involvement level with cruises, the extent to which the individual is an opinion seeker and a variable representing an interaction between the source of information and whether the individual actively posts blogs. To get a better sense of what these findings suggest about the effect of source on perceived authoritativeness, post-hoc analyses were conducted with the data split into two subsets; those who actively post blogs and those who do not. Table 6 displays the results. As one can see, among those who actively post blogs online, there was no significant difference in perceived authoritativeness of the three information sources. On the other hand, those who do not actively post blogs perceived a significant difference in the authoritativeness of personal blogs and the other two information sources. More specifically, those who indicated they do not actively post blogs perceived personal blogs to be significantly less authoritative than traditional word-of-mouth and corporate blogs. These findings will be addressed further in the discussion section that follows.

DISCUSSION

In terms of overall credibility, this study suggests nothing beats traditional word-of-mouth. Previous studies have suggested traditional word-of-mouth is one of the most influential sources of pre-purchase information.⁴⁵ The results of this study are consistent with this line of thought as the perceived credibility ratings for the blog scenarios were no comparison

to that of the traditional word-of-mouth scenarios. Further, these findings provide interesting insight into why this may be the case. Liu⁴⁶ reports two characteristics of word-of-mouth make it particularly unique; it is usually perceived as more credible and trustworthy and it is more readily accessible through social networks. The results of this study indicate blogs can be distinguished from traditional word-of-mouth in terms of perceived trust among consumers. That is, in this study, blogs (whether personal or corporate) were perceived to be significantly less trustworthy than traditional word-of-mouth among participants across the board.

One explanation for this could come from recent research that has shown that when information is exchanged among consumers the nature of the relationships between the listeners and the message authors may influence word-of-mouth behavior. A consumer could interact with other consumers of different levels of closeness ranging from a spouse and family members with which the communicator has strong ties, to an acquaintance, to an utter stranger online with which an individual has weak ties.^{47,48} Bone⁴⁹ studied restaurant patrons and their word-of-mouth behavior. Her results showed that consumers tend to engage in word-of-mouth behavior for strong ties. Wirtz and Chew⁵⁰ investigated word-of-mouth behavior in an experiment and they reached similar results; they also found out that consumers tend to have stronger negative word-of-mouth with strong ties if they are unsatisfied. Applying these results to the internet

Table 6: Post-hoc analysis for average perceived authoritativeness ratings

<i>Word-of-mouth</i>	<i>Corporate blog</i>	<i>Personal blog</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<i>A. Results for subjects that post blogs</i>			
3.658	3.411		0.586
3.658		3.757	0.810
	3.411	3.757	0.357
<i>B. Results for subjects that do not post blogs</i>			
3.118	3.131		0.947
3.118		2.334	0.000*
	3.131	2.334	0.000*

*significant at the 0.01 level.

one can see, there is potential for the strength of the tie among contributors and readers to help explain and predict subsequent behavior. When consumers read online blogs, most of the time they receive word-of-mouth from a stranger, not an acquaintance. These results are consistent with past research suggesting that consumers tend to trust word-of-mouth from strong ties more than weak ties (blogs from online strangers).^{51,52}

Interestingly though, the findings also indicate participants as a whole attributed similar levels of authoritative to corporate blogs as they do traditional word-of-mouth. So, while traditional word-of-mouth may have the biggest impact on consumers due its high overall credibility, there may be room to promote one's product effectively using corporate blogs as well. One instance in which the use of corporate blogs might be particularly useful to destination marketers is when complaints in the form of travel blogs make their way into the blogosphere. As reported earlier, a number of organizations are already making use of blogs to communicate with disgruntled customers and dispel rumors. The results of this study suggest such attempts are likely to be one of the more effective uses of the corporate blog in the travel industry.

Equally interesting is the finding that those who actively post blogs attribute similar levels of authoritative to personal blogs as they do corporate blogs and traditional word-of-mouth; those who do not post blogs find personal blogs to be significantly less authoritative than corporate blogs and traditional word-of-mouth. This suggests there is at least a portion of the blog audience out there, those who post, that will be somewhat responsive to either type of blog. So again, while the blog may be no match for traditional word-of-mouth, a select group of consumers do attribute at least one of the advantageous qualities of word-of-mouth to blogs of both kinds. Given the large number of blogs estimated to be posted in 2006 alone (and therefore a large number of individuals likely to be actively posting), it would seem an organization could benefit significantly from encouraging the spread of positive, personal blogs among its consumers as well.

CONCLUSIONS

What does this mean for marketing communication strategy? One should appreciate the limitations of blogs. There appears to be no comparison to traditional word-of-mouth. Blogs simply aren't as credible as word-of-mouth; nor, however, are other methods of marketing communications. We should not discredit the use of blogs in developing integrated communications strategies; but, instead, should work to understand their role in the communications mix. The results of this study provide preliminary evidence that even those who do not write blogs (non-bloggers) tend to attribute one of the positive characteristics of traditional word-of-mouth namely authoritative, to corporate blogs while those who actively post blogs tend to equate the authoritative of traditional word-of-mouth with that of both corporate and personal blogs. These findings suggest travel consumers will likely be receptive to the contents of what they read in the blogosphere at some level even if it is not taken as personal word-of-mouth.

Future research needs to address the usefulness of blogs at different points in the decision making hierarchy, between developing awareness of the product/service through post-purchase evaluation. Further investigations targeting more experienced bloggers (who appear to attribute higher authoritative to blog information), and the position blogs take with respect to other communications methods should be addressed as this population increases in size with increased blog activity. And, of course, the role blogs play in other product/service arenas outside of tourism, as well as with other tourism offerings, must be more clearly understood. Questions that have been asked regarding traditional methods of communications must be asked with respect to blogs, such as whether or not risk perception interacts with the perceived credibility of blog information, or whether order or information (positive/negative) presentation in the blog (actual message design) has an impact on its perception.

Is the blog likely to ever have perceived credibility comparable to that of traditional word-

of-mouth? Wright⁵³ reports that computer-mediated relationships become more similar to face-to-face relationships over time as individuals become use to communicating with one another and gain more information about one another. The blogosphere, in its current form, simply is not designed to facilitate this type of learning as well as other forms of internet communication such as chat where there are better opportunities to learn about the other online contributors. For this reason, the blog may not attain the influential role that word-of-mouth has historically played. This does not, however, diminish the importance of blogs and they should not be ignored as one of the many tools available for use in the development of an organization's integrated communications strategy.

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