



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

Travel Blogs in Marketing Research: Stories of Stratford, Canada

Item Type	article;event
Authors	Banyai, Maria
Download date	2024-06-23 22:18:15
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/48449

Travel Blogs in Marketing Research: Stories of Stratford, Canada

Maria Banyai

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies
University of Waterloo

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a case study for the exploration of travel blogs for market research. The growth and popularity of travel blogs over the Internet influenced few tourism researchers to see the online narratives as valuable sources of information for destination marketing. This research analyzed the content of travel blogs related to trips to Stratford, Canada to establish the most talked about topics and the experiences surrounding these. Three phases of data analysis were completed to achieve both quantifiable and qualitative results reflecting the travel experiences. The findings suggest that Stratford is primarily seen as a cultural and culinary destination. Methodological and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: travel blogs, destination marketing, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that the growth of travel blogging sites, such as Travelblog.org and Travelpost.com, facilitates powerful discussions impacting consumers' decision making, affecting destination images and even reshaping the communication networks previously dominated by traditional information suppliers (Wenger, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). With over 100 million blogs indexed, Technorati announced in the 2010 State of Blogosphere Report that 20% of bloggers surveyed were blogging about travel experiences (Technorati, 2010). Also, TravelBlog.org has more than 150,000 members, hosting over 450,000 travel blog entries (Travelblog.org, 2010). Blogs are a new important form of digitized world-of-mouth communication, "becoming a more important mechanism for exchanging information among tourists, and for destinations and businesses to learn about the attitudes of their markets" (Wenger, 2008, p. 169).

Because travel blogs express the tourists' experience at a specific destination, tourism marketers "need to understand blogs as a new technological phenomenon with implications for marketing and promotion of a destination" (Pan et al, 2007, p. 38). In hopes to reach out and learn about the online traveller and how the information generated can aid in business management, few researchers have analyzed the content of such online word-of-mouth, finding it to be a significant source of marketing information. The content of travel blogs can be used for various marketing strategies such as improving and monitoring destination images and products by responding to tourists' demands and expectations, and also adjusting competitive strategies (Carson, 2008; Litvin, et al., 2008, Pan et al., 2007; Wenger, 2008). Moreover, travel blogs can offer destinations a deeper understanding of bloggers' production and consumption of tourism products (Bosangit, et al., 2009; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). Akehurst (2009) argued that, if market research would focus more on travel blogs, the results may provide the greatest and

most long-lasting impact as compared to more traditional marketing tools which may not assess “hard to reach” market segments. Thus, travel blogs do not only represent a source of information for potential tourists, but also for destination marketers and managers looking to learn about visitors and their experiences. The aim of this paper was to understand and reveal bloggers’ travel experiences as described on personal weblogs, and provide destination marketers with a window into what is being communicated over the Internet.

BLOGS IN TOURISM

The use of blogs began in the mid 1990s (Keren, 2004). The term “weblog” was created by Jon Barger in 1997 (Young, 2006), while the word “blog” was later coined by Peter Marshals in 1999 (Mack, Blose & Pan, 2007). Travel blogs are defined as “individual entries which relate to planned, current or past travel...are the equivalent of personal online diaries...commonly written by tourists to report back to friends and families about their activities and experiences during trips” (Puhringer & Taylor, 2008, p. 179). Blogs are primarily used as a form of social interaction and self-expression where people can post positive and negative experiences, but also opinions and beliefs (Pan, et al, 2007, Schmallegger & Carson, 2007). People blog because it is a form of expression free from external censorship where people are able to provide the ‘real’ story (Wenger, 2008).

The majority of studies on travel blogs are based on identifying positive and negative perception of tourism destinations (Carson, 2008, Pan, et al., 2007; Wenger, 2008). These studies were also aimed at examining travel bloggers’ comments related to locations, activities, tourism products, events and transportation. The travel information offered by bloggers on Austria related blogs, revealed that the most visited cities were Vienna and Salzburg, where tourists would visit the town centers and architectural buildings such as cathedral and fortresses; while the activities undertaken included dining, attending classical music concerts, and taking tours (Wenger, 2008). The blogs related to visits to Australia’s Northern Territory contained information about the south and center of the Territory, and about various outdoor and wildlife activities such as the rim walk at Kings Canyon and taking tours to see the jumping crocodiles in the Mary River near Darwin (Carson, 2008). But travel blogs are also a source of negative information. Complaints were directed towards opening hours for shops, poor signage, low accommodation service, the weather, high prices, accessibility, food quality and service, and parking (Carson, 2008; Pan et al., 2007; Wenger, 2008). The image of tourism destinations as projected on travel blogs is another common research topic. Choi’s, Lehto’s and Morrison’s (2007) study, for instance, examined Macau’s destination image on the Internet to identify image representations and to assess consistency over various online information. Law and Cheung (2010), meanwhile, analyzed 120 travel blog entries to gain insights into Chinese tourists’ overall perceived image of Hong Kong.

Travel blogs have also been researched to gain knowledge about how tourists construct identities, how they make meaning from their experiences, and to examine the temporal and spatial characteristics of travel experiences. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) used narrative structure analysis to identify key marketing elements from tourists’ blogs which can aid destination marketing organization in facilitating and managing travel blogs. The data sample was selected from tourists’ blogs posted on Pennsylvania Tourists Office website. The narrative

structure analysis of the Pennsylvania blogs included characterization, temporal dimension, relational organization and space categorization. The creation of six different characters allowed the individual bloggers to relate to the character in real life and feel more comfortable narrating. The characters also provided potential travellers with an informative tool, making it easier to search for information related to their travel interests.

The creation and expression of tourists' identity was also examined by Bosangit, McCabe and Hibbert (2009). The analysis of 30 travel blogs on three different travel blog websites: *travelpod.com*, *travelblog.org* and *travbuddy.com*; was aimed at understanding how tourists construct order and make meaning from their experiences. The analysis revealed that most bloggers had a desire to communicate with an audience in that they used terms such as "you", and included personal characteristics in the narrative which shows that the bloggers had a historical social relationship with the readers. The narrative analysis of blogs revealed "most bloggers told their stories chronologically: their narratives started from the beginning of their trip, when they left their home, included their travel towards a destination, their various activities in the destination and finished with the end of their trip" (Bosangit et al., 2009, p. 68). Moreover, an analysis of the meanings of narratives revealed that bloggers gave meanings to their experiences based on previous occurrences and expectations.

STUDY BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Located a few short hours from Toronto and the U.S., Stratford, Ontario is "a destination internationally renowned as one of North America's great arts towns" (Stratford Tourism Alliance, 2010). Stratford's destination marketing organization, The Stratford Tourism Alliance (STA), was established in 2007 as a private non-profit organization. The STA's objective is to "expand awareness and consideration of Stratford as a multi-experiential gateway destination" (2010 Marketing Plan). The STA's positioning strategy focuses on three identities: character (heritage, bucolic, pastoral, dynamic, inspirational); culture (drama, music, artistry, design, community) and cuisine (creativity, style, cultivation, artisans, locality).

Given the relative new nature of travel blog research, this study follows an exploratory design to gain a better understanding of what tourists reveal in travel blogs and how the data can be used for marketing purposes. The study sample consists of 13 independent travel blogs written by tourists who have visited Stratford and documented their experiences online on personal weblogs. Hookway (2008) noted that the search feature on blogging communities "can aid purposive sampling" (p. 99). The sample for this study was drawn by performing a search query on Google Blogs using the key terms "Stratford Ontario". Although the blogs included additional information posted by fans, such as pictures and videos, only the text content was selected and saved in a text file for analysis.

A multi-method approach to data analysis was used to gain insight into travel bloggers' experiences at the destination. In the first phase, CATPAC II was used to content-analyze the qualitative data. CATPAC II identifies the most frequently used words in the text and determines the patterns between words by performing neural network analysis (Woelfel, 1998). It has been recognized by tourism researchers as a useful computer software for identifying destination image representations over a variety of electronic media from tourism official websites and

review sites, to travel blog sites (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007; Govers, Go & Kumar, 2007; Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007; Tang, Choi, Morrison & Lehto, 2007). Numerous runs of CATPAC II program were conducted to ensure that no meaningless words were included in the analysis. When the research is exploratory in nature, it is recommended that the analysis include 40 unique words because the resulting dendrogram will be easily interpreted (Woelfel, 1998). In a second phase, the 40 most frequently used words were used to conduct neural network analysis, to show the relationships between these most commonly occurring words. The third, and last phase of data analysis involved a deductive qualitative content analysis, connecting already established categories, based on the most frequently words, with the text (Mayring, 2000). Krippendorff (2004) argued that the meaning of the text is dependent on the surrounding environment and the reader, and that it is the researchers' job to make inferences from texts based on the research context and objectives. The use of quotes to support the most frequently used words allows for a better understanding of the travel situation and environment.

FINDINGS

This study focused on understanding bloggers' travel experiences in Stratford, Canada. 9 of the 13 sampled travel blogs were written between June 2010 and October 2010, with the majority of bloggers being females (8 of 13). Most blogs were written by Canadians and Americans (5 from Canada, 4 from the US). The results of the three steps taken to analyze the data reveal the most talked about topics which are supported by quotes from the sampled blogs to bring travel experiences to life.

Frequency analysis and neural network analysis

Table 1 illustrates the 40 most frequently used words by the Stratford travel bloggers. As it was expected, bloggers' experiences are described the most in terms of the "Shakespeare" "Festival", cultural experiences reinforced by other words such as "play", "theatre" and "show". References to the city's culinary offerings are also popular descriptors of the travel experiences. Words such as "chocolate", "garlic", "food", "cheese", and "fudge" are within the top 40 most frequently used words. Tourists describe their travel experiences in terms of the "gardens" visited, and the "ducks" and "swans" of the Avon River. The analysis also revealed tourists are oftentimes "driving" into Stratford, while others are taking the "train" or the "bus". However, to gain a better understanding of what visitors value, CATPAC II was used to provide a dendrogram displaying frequent co-occurrences of words.

Table 1
Most Frequently Used Words

Total words = 455		Total unique words = 40	
Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
Stratford	52	Ducks	8
Festival	36	Great	8
Shakespeare	24	Love	8
Chocolate	21	Swans	8
Play	21	City	7
Theatre	18	Driving	7
Garlic	17	Gardens	7
Town	14	Good	7
Place	13	Morning	7
Trip	13	Bus	6
People	11	Cool	6
Canada	10	Dinner	6
Plays	10	Enjoy	6
River	10	Feel	6
Show	10	Fudge	6
Food	9	Life	6
Train	9	Local	6
Beautiful	8	Old	6
Breakfast	8	Ontario	6
Cheese	8	Photos	6

The “buildings” shown in the dendrogram (Figure 1) represent the word clusters, their height illustrating how tightly the corresponding words cluster together (Woelfel, 1998). The largest cluster suggests visitors’ “trip”[s] are usually focused on the “plays” offered during the Shakespeare Festival, the “theatre”, and on “garlic”. The strong association between these words is probably based on the fact that the Garlic Festival takes place during the Shakespeare Festival, events which allow visitors to experience the theatre productions but also Stratford’s culinary offerings. Nevertheless, the content of travel blogs also revealed that visitors’ travel experiences involve discussions of the “local” “food” and “cheese”; of the “great” [Avon] “river”, but also of the affective characteristics of the trip. Bloggers described Stratford as a “beautiful” “place” resembling an “old” “life” with a “Canad[ian]” “feel” to it. They also perceive the local “people” to be “cool”. The small town is further described as a tourist destination, a place where visitors who come on a “bus” take “photos” of the destination.

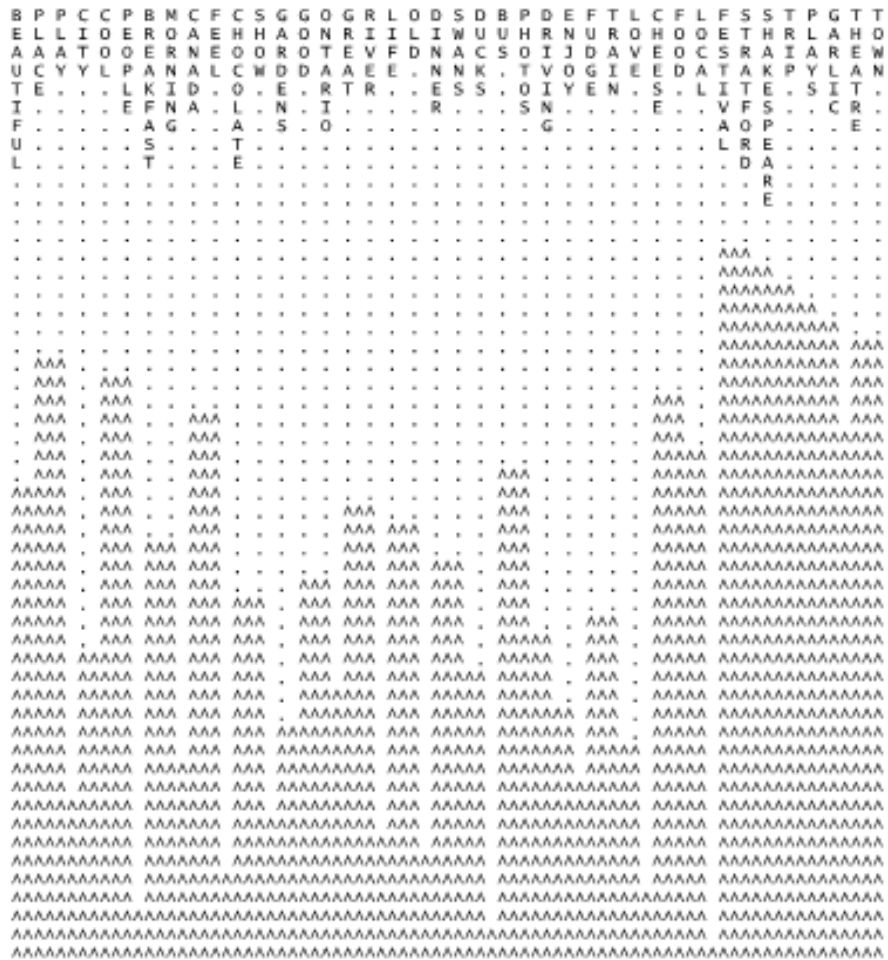


Figure 1 Ward's Clustering

Qualitative content analysis

To provide a richer description of bloggers' travel experiences, the top most frequently used words can be supported by direct quotes from the narratives. To maintain anonymity, bloggers are given pseudonyms. A search query of the word "festival" in the global text file revealed the following perception of Stratford:

It was equal parts delightful and slightly depressing. The delightful parts had to do with what happens when a small, largely rural community gives itself over to live theatre for almost half the year...Stratford has a handsome historic downtown of four or five blocks, perched prettily on a river...but it's encircled by aging strip malls that are in turn surrounded by cornfields, and some of the incongruity of the festival's location was summed up by the sign that ushered us into town. (Mary, 2010)

While discussions of the Shakespeare Festival led some bloggers comment on the incongruity of the small town image, others described the strengths and weaknesses of the festival itself:

In fact, the best parts of the festival were the most amateurish, in the best sense of the world: though the actors were all professionals, there was a palpable sense that they and the audience...were there for the love for the plays, for Shakespeare, and for live theatre.... But the less amateurish stuff was less agreeable. The mainstage production--the one in the fancy theatre, with the big-name star, and with lots of special effects--was dreadful. (Emily, 2010)

References to the “festival” did not only include the Shakespeare Festival, but also other festivals held in Stratford. Bloggers described experiences related to the Stratford Chocolate Trail and the Garlic Festival:

The Stratford Shakespeare Festival produces world-renowned theatre, but what I didn't know was that Stratford is also an ideal destination for chocolate lovers. When I heard about the “Stratford Chocolate Trail”, I thought it sounded like heaven, and like Halloween for big kids! The trail consists of 16 stops, including three chocolate shops and various restaurants and shops with chocolate specialities. (Heather, 2010)

On Saturday we headed to the Garlic Festival to see, taste, and smell all things garlic! Are you already getting a sense of how they find ways to celebrate everything around here? The whole festival was bigger than expected, with vendors selling all sorts of garlic produce. (Jill, 2009)

Bloggers' experiences in Stratford did not only impact their perceptions of the town as a theatre destination, but also as a culinary destination offering exciting celebratory events. Bloggers further described travel experiences at the Savour Stratford Culinary Festival:

The food available for sale to eat were what impressed me the most. Nowhere was there a 'branded' food seller (i.e., Pizza Pizza) or typical festival food vendor (i.e., french fries, fried fish, etc.). All of the food vendors at the Festival were local not-for-profit organizations preparing food from scratch from local only ingredients. AMAZING!! Any other place would have perhaps offered the grilled cheese but it would have been made from processed bread, single slice processed cheese and margarine. There definitely wouldn't have been made-from-scratch soup either. There were burgers available through Community Living of Stratford and area, but they were locally made and served on freshly baked buns, and topped with locally grown onions and tomatoes from Oliver Gardens. (Carrie, 2010)

Thus, bloggers were not only surprised by the variety of festivals offered in Stratford, but also by the provision of locally grown and freshly prepared foods offered at these festivals. Overall, it seems festivals held in Stratford are successful events, bringing back visitors year after year:

I was at the event last year and thought it was good. This year, it was superb! I can barely put into words how great the festival was....It was definitely a great day (despite the crappy on-again-off again rain) and cannot wait to go back again next year! Great job Stratford! I don't think there is any other food festival that even compares to this one!" (Carrie, 2010)

Other words such as "feel" revealed the affective characteristics of the travel experiences: "This is a town I enjoy as it has a small town feel and is quite 'artsy'" (Diana, 2010). Another blogger's description of the Stratford "feel" reveal the perception that the town "it's the perfect place to splurge a little and just relax and feel – even for a little while – that there are no worries in life to concern yourself with". (John, 2010) The Avon River has also been a topic of discussion, tourists talking about walks along the river banks: "We walked along the Avon River which was beautiful with lots of fall colour along the river bank" (Steve, 2009), "Relaxing strolls along the river that winds through downtown is how we're enjoying our time along the river between meals". (Diana, 2010) Moreover, bloggers also described Stratford as a destination where "the plays are not the only reason for visiting this beautiful city...", tourists also coming to Stratford to "enjoy the gardens" (Elisa, 2010). The gardens in Stratford, such as "The Shakespeare Gardens beside the Avon River. A perfect spot for lunch – on a park bench in the sun"(Tom, 2009), are viewed by tourists as "special" and "famous".

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study revealed bloggers' travel experiences in Stratford, Canada by analyzing the textual information of travel blogs. The frequency analysis revealed the most talked about topics, while the neural network analysis between the most frequently used words allowed for a fuller understanding of what visitors value. However, to bring the travel experience to life, the analysis was complemented with quotes from the actual blogs. Oftentimes, quantitative analysis of qualitative data results in the quantification of travel experiences, neglecting the meanings tourists assign to their experiences. Providing quotes representative of the most talked about topics, allowed for the latent content in the data to arise, offering an understanding of surrounding circumstances which influenced the creation of meanings and impressions of the travel experiences.

The results of this research revealed that travel bloggers' experiences in Stratford, Canada are primarily based on the theatre and culinary offerings. The Stratford Shakespeare Festival, along with the Garlic Festival, the Stratford Chocolate Trail, and the Savour Stratford Culinary Festival being the most talked about travel experiences. While the bloggers' "exposure to the mass-market Shakespeare industry" has left them with memories of "world-renowned theatre", the narratives were widely focused on the culinary offerings. Stratford was described as "an ideal destination for chocolate lovers", a town with "tons of good food". Moreover, the

analysis revealed that travel experiences were generally positive, with little negativity being expressed as related to the town's image and perceptions of the Shakespeare Festival.

While other researchers have focused on the content of travel blogs for gathering information about travel bloggers and their travel experiences (Carson, 2008; Wenger, 2008; Pan, et al., 2007; Law & Cheung, 2010; Choi et al, 2007; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008; Bosangit, et al., 2009), the methodologies employed so far have either quantified the travel experiences, or have turned to narrative analysis to provide an understanding of how meanings and identities are created. This study provides an alternative research method for analyzing the content of travel blogs, offering the opportunity to categorize and quantify the main topics of discussion, but also to gain an understanding of the situation influencing these discussions. The use of quotes to support the most talked about topics ensures meanings are not taken out of context, hence providing the "real" travel experience.

Moreover, this study offers a window into the potential of using travel blog in marketing research, especially for larger destinations looking to improve or assess the effectiveness of their marketing strategies. Aside from gaining knowledge about visitors' trip experiences, by analyzing the content of travel blogs, destination marketers can gain access to the demographic profile of the Internet savvy visitor. Knowing who is more likely to generate and share information over the Internet can provide destinations with a competitive advantage by responding and communicating with this market in a timely manner. Furthermore, the direct quotes can be a valuable strategic and promotional tool for destination marketing organizations looking to use real people and real experiences in their communication mix to entice potential visitors.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that travel bloggers were primarily talking about Stratford as a cultural and culinary destination, both which were identified by the STA as the Stratford experience identities. While this study is exploratory in nature, meant to offer an understanding on what is being said on travel blogs, and how the data could be analyzed for market research purposes, the sample size is too small to draw any generalizable conclusions about Stratford's travel bloggers and their lived experiences. Babbie and Benaquisto (2002) note that "the chief shortcoming of exploratory studies is that they seldom provide satisfactory answer to research questions, though they can hint at the answers and can give insights into which research methods could provide definite answers" (p. 79).

Nevertheless, researchers and tourism marketers should recognize the "uncontaminated" and "self-revealing" content of the blogs due to the researchers' minimal or non-existent involvement in the data creation and collection (Hookway, 2008) and capitalize on it when engaging in marketing research. The "real time" applications of blogs, which give tourists the opportunity to tell a story as it unfolds while at the same time, allowing readers to engage in the travel experience, offer researchers and marketers with immediate information about participants' lived experiences (Hookway, 2008). Thus, the blog content can offer destination markets with "real time" information compared to data gathered using traditional research methods.

REFERENCES

- Akehurst, G. (2009). User generated content: the use of blogs for tourism organizations and tourism consumers. *Serv Bus*, 3, 51-61.
- Babbie, E. & Benaquisto, L. (2002). *Fundamentals of Social Research* (1st Can. Ed.) Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson.
- Bosangit, C., McCabe, S. & Hibbert, S. (2009). What is told in travel blogs? Exploring travel blogs for consumer narrative analysis. In *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2009: Proceedings of the International Conference in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2009*, edited by Wolfram Hopken, Ulrike Gretzel, and Rob Law. New York: Springer. Pp. 61-71.
- Carson, D. (2008). The 'blogosphere' as a market research tool for tourism destinations: A case study of Australia's Northern Territory. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 14, 111-119.
- Choi, S., Lehto, X.Y., & Morrison, A.M. (2007). Destination image representation on the Web: Content analysis of Macau travel related websites. *Tourism Management*, 28, 118-129.
- Govers, R., Go, F.M. & Kumar, K. (2007). Promoting tourism destination image. *Journal of Travel Research*, 46, 15-23.
- Hookway, N. (2008). Entering the blogosphere: some strategies for using blogs in social research. *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), 91-113.
- Keren, M. (2004). Blogging and the politics of melancholy. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 29, 5 – 23.
- Krippendorff, K.(2004). *Content Analysis. An Introduction to its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Law, R., & Cheung, S. (2010). The perceived destination image of Hong Kong as revealed in the travel blogs of mainland Chinese tourists. *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, 11(4), 303-327.
- Litvin, S.W., Goldsmith, R.E., & Pan, B. (2008). Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. *Tourism Management*, 29, 458-468.
- Mack, R.W; Blose, J.E., & Pan, B. (2008). Believe it or not: Credibility of blogs in tourism. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*. 14, 133- 144.
- Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), Art. 20.
- Pan, B., MacLaurin, T., & Crofts, J.C. (2007). Travel blogs and the implications for destination marketing. *Journal of Travel Research*, 46 (1), 35-45.
- Puhringer, S., & Taylor, A. (2008). A practitioner's report on blogs as potential source for destination marketing intelligence. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 14(2), 177-187.
- Stratford Tourism Alliance (2009). 2010 Marketing Plan.
- Tang, L., Choi, S., Morrison, A.M. & Lehto, X. Y. (2009). The many faces of Macau: A correspondence analysis of the images communicated by online tourism information sources in English and Chinese. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 15(1), 79-94. .
- Technorati (2010).State of Blogosphere 2010.Retrieved from <http://technorati.com/state-of-the-blogosphere/>.
- Travelblog.org (2010). About TravelBlog. Retrieved from <http://www.travelblog.org/about.html>

- Tussyadiah, I.P., & Fesenmaier, D.R. (2008). Marketing place through first-person stories – An analysis of Pennsylvania Roadtripper blog. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 25(3), 299-311.
- Wenger, A. (2008). Analysis of travel bloggers' characteristics and their communication about Austria as a tourism destination. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 14, 169-176.
- Woelfel, J. (1998). *User's guide: Captac II Version 2.0*. Rah Press.
- Xiang, Z. & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, 31, 179-188.
- Young, M.L. (2006). Blogging: An introductory look at an old pastime in a new medium. *Library Hi Tech News*, 8, 27 – 28.