

TRAVEL BLOGS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR DESTINATION MARKETING

Bing Pan*, Ph.D.
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management
School of Business and Economics
College of Charleston
66 George Street
Charleston, SC 29424
Telephone: 001-843-953-2025
Fax: 001-843-953-5697
Email: panb@cofc.edu

Tanya MacLaurin, Ph.D.
School of Hospitality and Tourism Management
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario Canada N1G 2W1
Telephone: 001-519-824-4120, Ext:56309
Fax: 001-519-823-5512
Email: tmaclaur@uoguelph.ca

John C Crotts, Ph.D.
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management
School of Business and Economics
College of Charleston
66 George Street
Telephone: 001-843-953-6916
Charleston, SC 29424
Email: crottsj@cofc.edu

**Corresponding Author*

First Submission: April 16, 2006
Revised Submission: October XX, 2006

Authors' Biographies

Bing Pan, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Head of Research in the Office of Tourism Analysis at College of Charleston (Email: panb@cofc.edu); Tanya MacLaurin, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at the University of Guelph (Email: tmaclaur@uoguelph.ca); and John C. Crotts, Ph.D., is a Professor and Founding Chair of the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management at the College of Charleston (Email: crottsj@cofc.edu).

TRAVEL BLOGS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR DESTINATION MARKETING

ABSTRACT

This study explores travel blogs as a manifestation of travel experience. Visitor opinions posted on leading travel blog sites were analyzed to gain an understanding of the destination experience being manifested. Travel blogs on Charleston, South Carolina were collected through the three most popular travel blog sites and three blog search engines. Blogs were analyzed using semantic network analysis and content analysis methods to ascertain what bloggers were communicating about their travel experiences. Results revealed that major strengths of the destination were its attractions: historic charm, southern hospitality, beaches and water activities. Major weaknesses included weather, infrastructure, and fast service restaurants. Qualitative results demonstrated that travel blogs are an inexpensive means to gather rich, authentic, and unsolicited customer feedback. Information technology advances and increasingly large numbers of travel blogs facilitate travel blog monitoring as a cost-effective method for destination marketers to assess their service quality and improve travelers' overall experiences.

Keywords: travel blogs; destination marketing; semantic network analysis; content analysis

TRAVEL BLOGS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR DESTINATION MARKETING

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that interpersonal influence arising from opinion exchange between consumers is an important factor influencing consumers' purchase decisions. Word-of-mouth or advice from friends and relatives often ranks as the most influential source of pre-purchase information (Crotts 1999). Some literature also suggests word-of-mouth can be manipulated by marketers (Smith and Vogt 1995). Most literature suggests that meeting and exceeding visitor expectations is the most effective means of inducing positive word-of-mouth (Dichter 1966; Westbrook 1987; Nyer 1997; Neelamegham and Jain 1999).

The Internet has become a major source of information for travelers and a platform for tourism business transactions. Specifically, the tourism industry is today's leading application of the Internet in a business to consumer (B2C) context (Werthner and Ricci 2004). According to the Travel Industry Association of America, 67% of the online travelers in the United States search for information on destinations or check prices or schedules via the Internet; 41% book airline tickets, hotel rooms, or rental cars (TIA 2005). With increasing amounts of travel-related online information, tourists have an enormous number of choices as to where they travel and what they do. The Internet will continue to influence and shape the tourism industry more so than any other sector of the economy (TIA 2005).

To date Internet marketing researchers have primarily focused on online consumer behavior and Internet advertising strategy (Hoffman and Novak 1996; Werthner and Ricci 2004; Yadav and Varadarajan 2005). The marketing of destinations has primarily focused on the potential of the Internet as a B2C medium where firms and organizations promote and sell their products and build customer relationships (Gretzel, Yuan and Fesenmaier 2000; Wang and Fesenmaier 2006). Though the Internet is an important medium for travel information, consumer confidence in Internet advertisement is low (Kwak, Fox and Zinkhan 2002; Cyr et al. 2005).

The Internet provides new ways for individuals to learn about tourist destinations and their products and services directly from other consumers. This has provided a new platform of communication which empowers consumers and is similar to word-of-mouth. Travelers can email each other, post comments and feedback, publish online blogs, and form communities on the Internet. Blogs, as “push-button publishing for people”, have gained more and more popularity (Cayzer 2004). There are currently 31.6 million blogs on the Internet (Perseus 2005) with 40,000 new blogs coming online each day (Baker and Green 2005). Essentially a consumer to consumer (C2C) medium, Internet blogs have important implications for destination marketers that have also been overlooked by researchers.

As one type of digital word-of-mouth, blogs poses new possibilities and challenges for tourism marketers (Dellarocas 2003). The purpose of this study was to understand travel blogs as a manifestation of travel experience, and through a marketing perspective, assess visitors’ opinions posted on leading Internet travel blogs to better understand the experience being communicated about the destination, including its strengths and weaknesses. This study also defines and refines a qualitative methodology that destinations could use to assess their position in the marketplace and visitor perceptions. The study will demonstrate that travel blogs are uncensored rich expressions of a visitor’s travel experience and a cost-effective method of collecting visitors’ feedback and potentially providing a tourism product and service quality control mechanism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant literature in marketing, consumer behavior, computer mediated communication, and information technology are reviewed. The review provides a conceptual basis for the discussion on the relationship of word-of-mouth communications and online blogs, as well as the development of the research methodology.

Opinion Leadership and a Model of Word-of-Mouth

Consumers learn about the attributes of a product in various ways: through advertisements, word-of-mouth, price, and sale quantity (Vettas 1997). However, a tourism product is in essence an 'experience good' meaning that the product is based upon a bundle of services and experiences which, by their very nature, are hard to assess prior to purchase (McIntosh 1972). The advice from other consumers who have prior experience with the tourist destination and who are interpersonally available will no doubt rank as not only the preferred source of pre-purchase information but also the most influential in travel decision making (Crotts 1999). Word-of-mouth has been defined as informal communication between consumers regarding the characteristics, ownership, and usage of a service or product (Westbrook 1987). Different from marketing information obtained through mass media, personal communication or word-of-mouth is viewed as a more credible source of consumer information.

Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet discussed a two-step flow of communication in which political views were influenced largely by the communication between voters themselves instead of the influence of mass media (1944). Thus, political information was first transmitted from the mass media sources to the audience, and then secondly within the audience themselves through word-of-mouth. The opinion leader is the agent who is an active user and who interprets the meaning of media messages or content for other users. Usually the opinion leader is held in high esteem by those that accept their opinions and their advice is sought by other consumers (opinion seekers). As the originators of word-of-mouth, opinion leaders are especially interested in a product field, are exposed to mass media about the product category, and are trusted by opinion seekers to provide knowledgeable advice regarding the product (Pirto 1992; Weimann 1994; Walker 1995).

Past research has investigated the sources, mediating variables, motivations, and outcomes of word-of-mouth communications. Consumers often learn about a product through real consumption experience or mass media (Dichter 1966). Driven by the motivations of altruism, self-interest, or the expectation of reciprocation, some consumers may spread product knowledge through word-of-mouth (Grewal, Cline and McKenna 2003).

This process of obtaining product knowledge and then voluntarily spreading this knowledge through word-of-mouth communication is mediated by several variables. Research has shown that a good customer-employee relationship can foster the generation of positive word-of-mouth (Gremler, Gwinner and Brown 2001); that more consumer involvement will lead to higher levels of word-of-mouth activity and consumers' effective levels will also influence word-of-mouth volume (Westbrook 1987); and the intensity of surprises in the consumption process is positively correlated with the volume of word-of-mouth (Derbaix and Vanhamme 2003). On the recipient's end, both positive and negative word-of-mouth can influence a consumer's loyalty, product evaluation, and purchase decision (Westbrook 1987). However, attitudinal and behavioral changes in the recipient are mediated by their evaluation of information sources. Research has shown that recipients do not readily change their attitude based on negative word-of-mouth since their sources may not be trustworthy (Laczniak, DeCarlo and Ramaswami 2001).

Blogs as Online Word-of-Mouth

With the advancement of the Internet, consumers now are able to access not only opinions from close friends, family members, and coworkers, but also strangers from all around the world who may have used the product, visited a certain destination, or patronized a property. More consumers are relying on online opinions for their purchase decisions, from which movies to watch to which stocks to buy (Guernsey 2000). Searching and reading other's opinions about a product can help a consumer save decision making time and make better decisions (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh 2003). More importantly, according to Bickart and Schindler: "the Internet extended and changed the nature of word-of-mouth communication and its impact on consumer behavior as well as the methodological approaches used to examine it" (Bickart and Schindler 2002: pp. 428). Thus, new research methodologies are needed to gain insight and understanding into the function of blogs as online word-of-mouth communication.

As an important format of digitized word-of-mouth communication, blogs are gaining more and more popularity. Blog is a shortened word originating from 'web log' (Chow 2005). The form is familiar, frequently

updated, reverse-chronological entries on a single Web page (Blood 2004). Audio and video blogging from mobile devices is also available (Baker and Green 2005). Currently there are 31.6 million blogs on the Internet (Perseus 2005) with 40,000 new blogs each day (Baker and Green 2005). Perseus (2005) randomly surveyed 10,000 blogs on twenty leading blog-hosting services, and they reported 68.1% of bloggers were females, with ages ranging from 13 to above 50 with 94% under the age of 30. Pew Internet Research showed that around 7% of the 120 million U.S. adults have created at least one blog and 27% of Internet users have read blogs (Rainie 2005). Sifry estimated that the total number of blogs doubles every 5 months (Sifry 2005) (Figure 1). Both blog creators and readers are more likely to be young, male, broadband users and Internet veterans who are relatively well-off financially and well educated (Rainie 2005). The distribution of influences as measured by the number of in-links to the blogs follows power-law distribution, which makes only a small percentage of blogs the most popular and well-read ones. Most blogs are read and linked infrequently especially those recently built (Marlow 2003). Nardi, Schiano et al. (2004) postulated that Internet users blog for various reasons: to document one's life; as a commentary; as catharsis and outlet for their feelings; and as a thinking tool. These are all intrinsic motivations indicating the genuineness of travel blogs as visitors' experiences which are similar to travel journals.

_____ Insert Figure 1 Here _____

Bloggers' motivations for producing blogs are more diverse than the mere communication of product information. Computer-mediated communication studies have shown that motivations for blogging include entertainment, information, social interaction, self-expression, passing time, and professional advancement (Papacharissi 2002). Among those, self-expression and social interaction are the two major gratifications for blogging (Papacharissi 2004). Bloggers trust online blogs even more than traditional types of media (Johnson and Kayne 2003). Company-sponsored blog sites were evaluated by consumers as containing "conversational human voice" (Kelleher

and Miller 2006). As a result, blogs have been shown to play an important role in online space (Trammell et al. 2006). For example, blogs have been used to overthrow prominent politicians (Shachtman 2002; Kurtz 2005). Blogs have been touted as the voice of the people and some elite bloggers' sites have become influential media sources (Winer 2003; Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005).

Dellarocas (2003) hypothesized that on a global scale, this type of digital word-of-mouth is different from traditional word-of-mouth communications in four important ways. First, with the low cost of access and ease of information exchange, this new type of word-of-mouth communication will appear on an unprecedented large scale and will create new dynamics in the market. Second, the format and communication type between those communications could be controlled and monitored precisely. Third, new problems may arise since users could be anonymous or intentionally misleading, and fourth, online blogs may be captured out of context and may induce multiple interpretations. Blogs and the information clusters formed around them through links could provide connections between otherwise disconnected smaller customer groups. Thus, they possess the potential to transform the blogspace into large virtual communities. However, the anonymity and almost free accessing and posting of online space make collusion a potential problem for both customers and marketers (Dellarocas 2003).

Research has confirmed that blogspace is a complex and rich environment for communications. Based on more than one million blogs in livejournal.com, Kumar et al. demonstrated that the blogspace consists of at least three layers: the individual bloggers who are defined by their demographic characteristics, a middle layer of pairs of bloggers constructed based on friendship, and a third higher layer of interest groups and virtual communities explained by geographic or demographic correlations (Kumar et al. 2004).

In a global scale of online space, Google bombing is a phenomenon in which savvy bloggers of Google take advantage of Google's algorithm. Google's PageRank algorithm utilizes the link structure of the web space to locate the most authoritative web pages (Brin and Page 1998). Those bloggers manipulate the search results when the users type in a query in Google (Tatum 2005). Blogs are actually the tool that Google bombers use in manipulating the

hyperlink structure of the web space and subsequently influence the returned results in Google. This demonstrates that different from physical word-of-mouth, blogspace can create virtual relationships and communities and its influence moves far beyond the readers of the blogs, creating a new type of reality through search engines in the online space.

Travel Blogs and Online Word-of-Mouth

The emergence of travel blogs will inevitably influence the link structure and the content of the information space for visitors and will induce different informational content when a visitor searches for destination-specific information on the Internet. A tourism product is in essence an 'experience good' (McIntosh 1972). Travel blogs express the experiences of the visitor at a specific destination. At the moment of decision making, the consumer must act on impressions of the product's attributes gathered from often imperfect sources of information. Word-of-mouth and digital word-of-mouth communications will inevitably become the preferred travel information sources (Crotts 1999). For this reason, tourism marketers need to understand blogs as a new technological phenomenon with implications for marketing and promotion of a destination. With the rapid development of Internet technology, it is vital for tourism marketers and the tourism industry in general to understand travel blogs and their implications for destination marketing.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, various research methods were used to gain insight into the meaning of travel blogs and their relationship to a specific tourist destination. Bloggers' demographic information was researched as were the characteristics of the travel blogs. Various qualitative data analysis techniques were adopted to develop a travel blog analyzing methodology. The text contained in blogs was collected and analyzed by word frequency, semantic network analysis (Doerfel 1998), and content analysis. The researchers hope that other researchers will replicate this research to gather information on visitors' experiences at their tourist destinations.

Charleston, South Carolina, United States

Charleston, South Carolina was selected as the tourist destination for qualitative blog data collection. Charleston is located in the Low Country of South Carolina and faces the Atlantic Ocean. The area is composed of three major cities or towns: Charleston, North Charleston, and Mount Pleasant with a combined population of around 600,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). Charleston boasts a rich history - the first shot of the Civil War of the United States was fired in Charleston in 1861. It is also one of the best preserved cities in America's Old South with many pre-Revolutionary War buildings (Porter 2005). In 2004, Charleston received 4.7 million visitors. The tourism industry created about 105,000 jobs in 2005 and proves to be a leading economic driver (Charleston CVB 2005). Charleston is ranked as the 6th "Top City in the United States & Canada" according to Travel and Leisure magazine's tenth annual World's Best Poll. It has consistently placed in the top 10 domestic travel destinations for the past 12 years by Condé Nast Traveler magazine's prestigious Readers Choice Awards (Charleston CVB 2005).

Data Collection

Since Google's PageRank algorithm ranks documents based on popularity (Brin and Page 1998), the three most popular travel blog sites were identified through searches on Google on September 7, 2005 using the keywords "travel blog". The top three travel blog sites were: travelblog.org, travelpod.com, and travelpost.com. All the sites have a directory of blogs which has a hierarchical structure of continents, countries, states, and cities. All 30 blogs on Charleston, South Carolina from the three sites were downloaded. The authors also used the keywords "Charleston, SC" and "Charleston South Carolina" to search blog-specific search engines, technorati.com, Google blog search, and IceRocket. More than 100 blogs were returned and the authors identified an additional 24 blogs on travel experience to Charleston after deleting blogs about real estates, college, or other aspects of Charleston. In total, 54 blogs were collected on September 12, 2005. Of these, fourteen did not contain content relevant to a travel experience in

Charleston, South Carolina. Instead, the bloggers might have been Charleston locals, or stopped in Charleston en route to another destination. The remaining 40 blogs contained content relating to visitors' experiences in Charleston. These 40 blogs were placed in a master file for qualitative data analysis. Each blog retained its title and identification information.

Data Analysis

After detailing the general characteristics of bloggers (demographical information) and their blogs (time of blogging and the length of blog), the full text of the 40 blogs were aggregated and analyzed using semantic network analysis and content analysis. Semantic network analysis is a quantitative method which has been used to analyze communication content and generate networked representation of semantic meanings (Doerfel 1998). Semantic network analysis has been found to be a useful framework for the construction and analysis of communication content (Doerfel and Barnett 1999). It has been used in organizational culture, communication, marketing, and tourism research. The communication discourses analyzed include phone conversations, published journal articles, messages in a Bulletin Board System, policy statements, and text on travel web sites (Doerfel and Barnett 1999; Pan and Fesenmaier 2006). Many researchers have argued that the meaning of a concept can only be determined by the relationship with other concepts, and a model of networked concepts can accurately determine their meanings (Woelfel and Fink 1980; Barnett, Palmer and Al-Deen 1984; Palmer and Barnett 1984). Since concepts are embodied by the words in languages, semantic network analysis uses text to capture the relationships between different concepts (keywords) and to explore the shared meaning. The adjacency of two concepts in the text reflects their relative distance of their semantic meaning. Semantic network analysis begins with a content analysis of textual data to extract the most frequently used symbols. The relative frequencies of co-occurring symbols and the relative distances between these symbols represent the closeness of their meanings. Neural network method is then used to obtain the networked mental models of symbols. Programs such as CATPAC II (Doerfel 1998) and TextAnalyst (Megaputer 2005) can be used to

generate semantic network from communication content. For detailed underlying neural network procedure for semantic network analysis, please see Doerfel and Barnett (1999). In this study, a semantic network of the bloggers' experiences was generated from the analysis of the full text of all the travel blogs to the Charleston area using TextAnalyst. Content analysis was also performed on the travel blogs (Weber 1990). An iterative process of content analysis was followed. Two researchers independently coded the content of the blogs. Upon examination of the results and discussion, a master coding scheme was constructed. The blogs were finally coded using two dimensions: the aspects of the tourism amalgam model (Cooper 2005) and the positive or negative orientation of the sentences.

RESULTS

The characteristics of bloggers and blogs revealed travel blogs as the manifestation of travel experience. The results of semantic network analysis and content analysis for travel blogs to Charleston were detailed to reveal the strengths, weaknesses, and the competitive environment of Charleston as a tourist destination.

Blogger Profiles

The demographic information of the bloggers was gleaned from the hosting sites through various methods. All the sites allow users to post their personal portraits in their profiles; their demographic and personal information can also be inferred from their blogs and usernames. On travelpost.com, the users can choose to disclose their age, gender, location, and occupation in their public accessible profiles. Through these methods, certain demographic information was obtained on 34 out of the 40 bloggers. Most bloggers were from the United States except one from Thailand and one from the United Kingdom. For the 13 users who chose to disclose their ages, the range was from 21 to 64 with an average age of 38. Two cohorts of users seemed to be present: one cohort in their 20s to 30s and the other in their 50s and 60s. For those users who disclosed their gender, there were eleven females (55%) and nine males (45%).

Blog Profiles

For most blogs, each piece contained the description of one trip from one traveler. There were exceptions: for example, in one case two bloggers produced several postings for one trip in which they described one day's experience in each. All the blog sites showed the time the blog was added; some sites such as *travelpod.com* and *travelpost.com* ask the bloggers to enter the date they traveled. Additional information about the trip could also be inferred from the blogs themselves. There were 18 blogs for which the researchers inferred both the trip dates and blog posting dates. One blog was posted the same day the trip was taken; four blogs were composed a few days after the trip; four blogs were posted 2-10 months after the trips; the rest of the blogs were posted more than one year after the trips were taken. The longest delay was a post in 2005 about a trip taken in 1968. Interestingly, one account was not always associated with one blogger: there was one family and two couples who co-owned one blog account besides other single individuals. However, it was not clear who in the group composed the blogs. In addition, some blogs contained both pictures and text about their trip to Charleston. Among 40 blogs, 11 contained pictures. The number of pictures ranged from 1 to 53. The number of words ranged from 4 to 1,972 with a mean number of 444 words.

Frequency Analysis and Semantic network Analysis

The travel blog text was analyzed by word or phrase occurrence and frequency using TextAnalyst (Megaputer 2005). Words commonly used in constructing sentences (stop words) were eliminated using a stop word list such as "the", "a", "of", and "is". The analysis resulted in the construction of a table of the 'Most Frequently Used Keywords or Phrases' that appeared at least 4 times in the blogs (Table 1). The most frequently used keywords or phrases demonstrated that travelers express many aspects of travel experience in their travel blogs, including attractions (e.g. "plantation", "city", and "Fort Sumter"), accommodations (e.g. "hotel" and "inn"), dining (e.g. "restaurant", "dinner", "menu", and "lobster"), and transportation (e.g. "car", "drive", and "road"). The travelers mentioned Charleston's

“plantations”, and they tended to talk about their en-route (“car” and “drive”) and accommodation (“hotel”) experiences. Dining was also one type of experience frequently mentioned (“restaurant”, “dinner”, and “menu”).

Insert Table 1 Here

Semantic Network Analysis

Semantic network analysis provided a useful framework for the construction and analysis of meanings and impressions of Charleston as a tourist destination. The most frequently used keywords or phrases reported were used to construct a semantic network diagram from TextAnalyst (Megaputer 2005). Word frequency was illustrated in the diagram by size and color of circle surrounding the word, i.e. large frequency is illustrated by a larger and darker colored circle, a less frequent occurrence is illustrated by a smaller and lighter colored circle. Lines drawn between the word circles illustrate the proximity of occurrence of the words. The semantic diagram provides a graphic representation of Charleston as a destination (Figure 2). From the graph, several clusters of keywords can be identified, indicating the types of travel experience as represented in travel blogs on Charleston. With its major tourist attractions, related accommodations and dining, Charleston is the most prominent cluster. The second major cluster is the driving experience related to the trip. The third cluster is specifically associated with plantations, a unique type of attraction in Charleston. Additional smaller clusters of keywords are connected with dining experience, camping and museum attractions. The results demonstrate the kaleidoscopic nature of travel blogs in representing travel experiences. Every aspect of the travel experience, from visiting attractions and dining at restaurants, to relatively ancillary activities such as driving and camping all become the major content of blogging and constitute a part of the travel experience.

Insert Figure 2 Here

Content Analysis

The researchers used NVivo (QSR 2002) software to perform content analysis on the blog data. NVivo tools enabled the researcher to create category trees to illustrate relationships between different categories. Each of two researchers independently coded the content by constructing topical categories dependent on their own analysis of the blog content. No prior discussion of categories took place between the researchers. Strengths and weaknesses were also coded for all content that possessed positive or negative sentences related to the blogger's travel experience while in Charleston. Upon completion of the researchers' independent coding of the blog data, coding trees were compared. This comparison demonstrated many similarities and differences in coding. All categories identified by the researchers were used to build a composite enabling the formation of a master list of categories. The tourism amalgam model developed by Cooper (2005) was adapted by adding subcategories identified in the independent coding process. Cooper considers destinations as amalgams creating an inseparable tourist product. His original destination amalgam model includes attractions (artificial features, natural features, and events, all of which provide the initial motivation to visit), amenities (accommodations, food, beverage, retailing and other services), ancillary services (related marketing efforts of tourism organizations and others), and access (transportation, car rental, and local transport) (Cooper 2005). The model could also be used to categorize travel experiences since the visitors encounter every aspect of the destination as described in the model and their experience is also integrated, holistic and inseparable from one aspect to another. However, from initial coding, the researchers discovered that the aspect of "ancillary services" is almost irrelevant; a new category of "overall impression" was necessary since sometimes the travel bloggers talked about their overall experience with an evaluation on the whole trip without referring to any single aspect of it. The final standardized coding categories with the numbers of codes are listed in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 Here

Researchers repeated the independent coding of the blog data using the standardized category codes shown in Table 2. Upon completion, coding comparison indicated that researchers were more consistent in their coding but significant differences remained in the number of items coded. Upon closer examination it was revealed that most differences could be attributed to varying coding practice. One researcher coded multiple lines as one item, while the second researcher coded four keywords in the same text lines as four items. A detailed set of coding procedures were developed to assist in the third coding stage. In the final data coding, the researchers followed the rule that one sentence should be taken as one coding unit. Thus, the final coding scheme was completed with two dimensions: dimension one consisting of the different aspects of tourism amalgam model and dimension two was the researcher's evaluation of either positive or negative sentence orientation, in order to understand the strengths and/or weaknesses of Charleston as a destination (Table 2). Pure neutral descriptions of the trip were very few and ignored since the goal of the content analysis was to assess strengths and weaknesses of Charleston as a tourism destination. Figure 3 depicts the complete procedure for the content analysis. The inter-coder agreement in the final state of coding with the settled categories is around 96%.

_____ Insert Figure 3 Here _____

Strengths and Weaknesses as Reflected from Travel Blogs to Charleston

Strength and weaknesses identified in the coding process were calculated. A total of 177 positive and negative sentences were articulated about Charleston in the travel blog text including 134 positive and 43 negative sentences. Thus, three out of four sentences made about Charleston were positive (75.5%). Looking at the major categories, the results showed that attractions (history, hospitality environment, and water attractions) are the major strength of Charleston. Major complaints about the city came from access issues. The complaints were focused on navigation in the city and crowded traffic. Amenities also have a relatively high percentage of negative sentences (32%). Looking

more in-depth in the coding on the secondary level, the results show that the four major complaints were weather (too hot in the summer), food (low quality food in quick-service restaurants and hotels), parking, and road signs (hard to find a parking space and unclear road signs). Three of the four complaints on overall impression were about the high prices of the destination in general (Figure 4).

_____ Insert Figure 4 here _____

In addition, the researchers also captured the names of cities that bloggers compared Charleston to when coding the text for strengths and weaknesses. The visitors compared Charleston with the following cities: Chapel Hill in North Carolina, Santa Barbara in California, New Orleans in Louisiana and Savannah in Georgia. However, these cities were only mentioned once. On the other hand, with the increased popularity of blogs and a larger sample size in the future, key competitor cities might emerge. The information could be used to identify the competitive assets of Charleston and provide destination marketers with benchmarking cities. The marketers would then need to pay special attention to those cities in terms of monitoring their marketing efforts and tourist volumes.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study revealed that travel blogs reflect the kaleidoscopic aspects of a visitor's experience at a destination - in this case, Charleston, South Carolina. Analysis on the blogs revealed strengths and weaknesses of the tourist destination. Travel blogs can also be a useful tool in monitoring the competitive environment of a destination and provide valuable customer feedback that is richer and more detailed than Likert response survey measurements.

Travel blogs as Manifestation of Traveler Experience to Charleston

Travel blogs qualitatively cover every aspect of a visitor's trip. From the overall experience of traveling, the anticipation, planning, packing, departure, driving, flying and delays en route were all reflected in the travel blogs. Visitors' experiences involved kaleidoscopic perception and sense of the destination: from attractions, accommodation and dining, to access and overall impressions. Most of the descriptions were experiential and subjective in nature. For example, driving was a major part of their travel experience. For some bloggers driving was positive while for others it was negative. Also food was found to be both a positive experience for many visitors but a negative one for others. In a more detailed analysis, it was revealed that the major complaints about food were mainly coming from quick service or free breakfast in hotels. Most experiences in fine dining restaurants in the Charleston area were positive.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Destination and Its Implications for Marketing

The results revealed that the major strengths of the destination of Charleston lie in its attractions: the historic charm, the southern hospitality, the beaches and water activities. The major weaknesses were weather, infrastructure (roads and traffic), and fast service restaurants. "Pricey" was one of the overall complaints that stood out.

Despite the majority of positive sentences, bloggers expressed many complaints about the infrastructure, especially on limited parking space, road conditions and traffic signs. In order to understand these complaints, the researchers looked into the city as a whole. Charleston has grown tremendously in the last decade. The Charleston-North Charleston Metropolitan Statistical Area is the 96th largest metropolitan area in the United States; its population has grown from 430,346 in 1980 to 583,434 in 2004, a 35.6% increase (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). The visitor volume has steadily increased from 3.2 million in 1997 to 4.7 million in 2004 (Charleston CVB 2005). The data show that the greater Charleston area is moving toward a major metropolitan region in South Carolina as well as the coastal South. However, the images developing from the travel blogs reflected a discrepancy between the image of Charleston as a town, versus the reality of a major metropolitan city. Thus in order to build a healthy industry in Charleston, more

investment needs to put into the infrastructure. In addition, marketers need to promote a transformation of the image of Charleston from a “town” with a single dimension of historic heritage, to a metropolitan area with multi-dimensional attractions, such as beach, seashore, golf, historic heritage and natural beauty. These results demonstrated that analysis on travel blogs can reveal detailed and in-depth information about the characteristics of a destination, which cannot be gathered from the Likert scale measurement on visitor surveys.

It should be noted that blogspace, like the Internet in general, is changing in real-time with new blogs being added and deleted everyday. In general, an automated monitoring system for online blogs could be proposed. The system starts with the definition of research questions. From the help of web crawlers or RSS (Really Simple Syndication), which allow Internet users to subscribe the websites or blogs) (Wikipedia 2005), the destination marketers could monitor the dynamics of customer feedback. Figure 5 proposes an automated mechanism and procedures for monitoring travel blogs and thus providing a real-time customer feedback and quality control tool for destination marketing. Researchers first need to identify and define the question and the goal of the study, whether it is the analysis for strengths and weaknesses of a destination or a hotel, or the effects of a marketing campaign; then those keywords related to the questions could be generated; for example, a city’s name or most commonly used complaint words. The researchers could then manually search the blogspace using identified keywords, or using RSS to track blogs in real time; those blogs could be manually or automatically downloaded, aggregated and analyzed using semantic network analysis or content analysis. Similar to the results of this study, this procedure will likely produce insightful and cost-effective marketing implications for tourism organizations and businesses.

_____ Insert Figure 5 here _____

LIMITATIONS

This study represents an effort in applying semantic network analysis and content analysis on blog data in order to understand the competitiveness and customer feedbacks of tourist destinations. Several issues need to be taken into consideration when applying this methodology to other destinations. These include sampling and data collection issues, the issues of unit of analysis, and semantic network analysis issues.

Sampling

First, this study chose Charleston, SC as the destination. Since each destination is unique, the applicability of the coding categories to other cities is limited. Second, the sample size was small and no random sample was taken. With the increased number of travel blogs, a larger sample size with random selections may be used. Third, the readership of the blogs is not clear and needs further research. For example, some researchers argued that blogs are more important as a form of individualistic self-expression rather than as a form of documenting current external events and social interaction. Even though blogs might influence the dynamics of online information space and Google ranking, further studies need to be conducted to explore the readership of travel blogs and how visible they are when travelers search for information online (Herring et al. 2004).

Data Collection

Data collection methods proposed here are the initial steps in understanding the nature of blogs and the implications for destination marketing. The researchers need to be aware of the following issues in adopting the methodology: the travel blogs are not collected from a random sample of all the blogs about Charleston; rather, they are collected from searching through major travel blog sites and three major travel blog search engines. The manual data collection method is a form of non-random sampling of the blogspace, which can and should be replaced by automated and complete random sampling in the future, with technologies such as RSS as described above.

Unit of Analysis

Another issue in the process is the unit of analysis in the content analysis stage. Depending on the goals of the research, and the researcher conducting the research, a word, a sentence, or a paragraph could be the unit of analysis. For example, a travel blogger who visited Patriot's Point, one of the major attractions in Charleston, wrote about her experience in five paragraphs with a very detailed description of each ship and room she visited. If the goal of the research is a destination, one coding unit would be sufficient for the analysis, but if the goal is to specifically understand the strength and weaknesses of Patriot's Point, then each sentence, or even each phrase, should be coded as one unit. It also should be noted that the coding categories are not defined but emerged through the initial analysis. Depending on different goals of research, coding categories might be different.

Semantic Network Analysis and Content Analysis

This study adopted both traditional content analysis for the analysis on strengths and weaknesses and semantic network analysis on travel experience; the two have their own advantages and limitations. Content analysis for texts require human-coding of the text (Krippendorf 1980), which involves tedious and potentially biased operations. For example, "weather" was coded as "Natural Environment" under the "Attractions" category. Even though both coders agreed on the sensibility of the coding and positive sentences on "Weather" as "Attractions", the negative ones on "Weather" as one aspect of "Attractions" is a little artificial. Alternatively, semantic network analysis uses the concepts and words as they appear in the text to construct semantic meanings (Woelfel and Stoyanoff 1993). The advantage of this method is that there is no need for preconceived categories and the test of reliability between different human coders. However, when people mention a place or food, they might express either positive or negative impressions; a high frequency of keywords or phrases can indicate mixed experiences and the direction is not reflected in the semantic

network. In this sense, the content analysis with human coding is superior. The combination of the two methods is recommended since it can reveal both the directionality and also the intensity of the experience.

In general, this study shows that blog analysis can be a useful way to detect the strengths and weaknesses of a tourist destination. Special attention must be given to the sampling, coding and analysis process. Depending on different goals of research, the unit of analysis and coding categories will be distinct. Combining semantic network analysis and content analysis could provide more detailed and valid results. Novel software tools could be used to automatically track the dynamics of blogspace and potentially provide a quality control mechanism.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It is our hope that this research will be refined and replicated by others to better understand a destination's strengths and weaknesses from the articulation of prior visitors who, by their actions, are willing opinion leaders. In addition, we hope that this paper stimulates interests among researchers as to the characteristics or profiles of these online bloggers. For those who choose to pursue this line of inquiry, we encourage you to capture subjects' national culture of birth and residence since the role of opinion leaders has often been shown to vary across national cultures (De Mooij 2004). In particular, subjects from countries along Hofstede's power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance dimensions will likely vary in terms of role, tenor, and willingness to offer interpersonal opinions (Hofstede 2001). On the other hand, the opinion seekers in the interpersonal exchange are a neglected area of study as well. Comparisons between those providing personal influence in contrast to those who are recipients of the information is, to our knowledge, an area that has been poorly investigated (Wright and Cantor 1970).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their detailed and constructive comments which helped the revision significantly.

REFERENCES

- Baker, S. and H. Green (2005). Blogs Will Change Your Business. *Business Week*: 56.
- Barnett, G., M. Palmer and H. N. Al-Deen (1984). An Examination of the Use of Multidimensional Scaling to Determine the Accuracy of Translation. *Communication Yearbook*. R. Bostrom. Beverly Hills, Sage. 8: 659-679.
- Bickart, B. and R. M. Schindler (2002). Expanding the Scope of Word of Mouth: Consumer-to-Consumer Information on the Internet. *Advances in Consumer Research*. 28: 428-430.
- Blood, R. (2004). "How Blogging Software Reshapes the Online Community." *Communications of the ACM*, 47(12): 53-55.
- Brin, S. and L. Page (1998). "The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine." *Computer Networks and ISDN Systems* 30(1-7): 101-117.
- Cayzer, S. (2004). "Semantic Blogging and Decentralized Knowledge Management." *Association for Computing Machinery. Communications of the ACM*, 47(12): 47-52.
- Charleston CVB (2005). *2005-2006 Charleston Area Convention & Visitors Bureau Bureau Book*. Charleston, Charleston Convention & Visitors Bureau.
- Chow, J. (2005). The New Frontier. *National post business magazine*: 40.
- Cooper, C. (2005). *Tourism : Principles and Practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ, Financial Times Prentice Hall.
- Crotts, J. (1999). Consumer Decision Making and Prepurchase Information Search. *Consumer Behavior in Travel and Tourism*. Y. Mansfield and A. Pizam. Binghamton, N. Y., Haworth Press: 149-168.

- Cyr, D., C. Bonanni, J. Bowes and J. Ilsever (2005). "Beyond Trust: Web Site Design Preferences across Cultures." *Journal of Global Information Management*, 13(4): 25-54.
- De Mooij, M. (2004). *Consumer Behavior and Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.
- Dellarocas, C. (2003). "The Digitization of Word of Mouth: Promise and Challenges of Online Feedback Mechanisms." *Management Science*, 49(10): 1407-1424.
- Derbaix, C. and J. Vanhamme (2003). "Inducing Word-of-Mouth by Eliciting Surprise - a Pilot Investigation." *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 24: 99-116.
- Dichter, E. (1966). "How Word-of-Mouth Advertising Works." *Harvard Business Review*, 44(November): 131-144.
- Doerfel, M. (1998). "What Constitutes Semantic Network Analysis? A Comparison of Research and Methodologies." *Connections*, 212: 16-26.
- Doerfel, M. and G. Barnett (1999). "A Semantic Network Analysis of the International Communication Association." *Human Communication Research*, 254(589-603).
- Gremler, D. D., K. P. Gwinner and S. W. Brown (2001). "Generating Positive Word-of-Mouth Communication through Customer-Employee Relationships." *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 12(1): 44-59.
- Gretzel, U., Y. Yuan and D. R. Fesenmaier (2000). "Preparing for the New Economy: Advertising Strategies and Change in Destination Marketing Organizations." *Journal of Travel Research*, 39(38): 146-156.
- Grewal, R., T. W. Cline and A. G. McKenna (2003). "Early-Entrant Advantage, Word-of-Mouth Communication, Brand Similarity, and the Consumer Decision-Making Process." *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 13(3): 187-197.
- Guernsey, L. (2000). Suddenly, Everybody's an Expert on Everything. *The New York Times*.
- Hennig-Thurau, T. and G. Walsh (2003). "Electronic Word-of-Mouth: Motives for and Consequences of Reading Customer Articulations on the Internet." *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 8(2): 51-74.
- Herring, S. C., L. A. Scheidt, S. Bonus and E. Wright. (2004). "Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs." *Proceedings of the Thirty-Seventh Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37)* Retrieved

April 28, 2006, from <http://www.blogninja.com/DDGDD04.doc>.

Hoffman, D. L. and T. P. Novak (1996). "Marketing in Hypermedia Computer-Mediated Environments: Conceptual Foundations." *Journal of Marketing*, 60(3): 50-68.

Hofstede, G. H. (2001). *Culture's Consequences : Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*. Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage Publications.

Johnson, T. and B. Kayne (2003). "Wag the Blog: How Reliance on Traditional Media and the Internet Influence Credibility Perceptions of Weblogs among Blog Users." *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly*, 11(3): 622-642.

Kelleher, T. and B. M. Miller (2006). "Organizational Blogs and the Human Voice: Relational Strategies and Relational Outcomes." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2): Article 1.

Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Beverly Hills, CA, Sage Publications.

Kumar, R., J. Novak, P. Raghavan and A. Tomkins (2004). "Structure and Evolution of Blogspace." *Communications of the Acm*, 47(12): 35-39.

Kurtz, H. (2005). "In the Blogosphere, Lightning Strikes Twice." *Washington Post*, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A20056-2005Feb12.html>.

Kwak, H., R. Fox and G. Zinkhan (2002). "What Products Can Be Successfully Sold on the Internet." *Journal of Advertising Research*, 42(1): 23-25.

Laczniak, R. N., T. E. DeCarlo and S. N. Ramaswami (2001). "Consumers' Responses to Negative Word-of-Mouth Communication: An Attribution Theory Perspective." *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 11(1): 57-73.

Marlow, C. (2003). *Audience, Structure and Authority in the Weblog Community*. International Communication Association, New Orleans.

McIntosh, R. W. (1972). *Tourism Principles, Practices, and Philosophies*. [Columbus, Ohio., Grid, inc.

Megaputer (2005). Textanalyst.

- Nardi, B. A., D. J. Schiano, M. Gumbrecht and L. Swartz (2004). "Why We Blog." *Communications of the ACM*, 47(12): 41-46.
- Neelamegham, R. and D. Jain (1999). "Consumer Choice Process for Experience Goods: An Econometric Model and Analysis." *Journal of Marketing Research*, 36(3): 373-386.
- Nyer, P. U. (1997). "A Study of the Relationships between Cognitive Appraisals and Consumption Emotions." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 25(4): 296-304.
- Palmer, M. and G. Barnett (1984). Using Spatial Models to Determine the Accuracy of Language Translation. *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*. W. Gudykunst and Y. Kim. Thousand Oaks, Sage. 18: 129-147.
- Pan, B. and D. R. Fesenmaier (2006). "Online Information Search: Vacation Planning Process." *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33(3): 809-832.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2002). "The Presentation of Self in Virtual Life: Characteristics of Personal Home Pages." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(3): 640-660.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2004). *The Blogger Revolution? Audiences as Media Producers*. Communication and Technology Division, International Communication Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Perseus. (2005). "The Blogging Geyser." Retrieved November 1, 2005, from <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/geyser.html>.
- Piirto, R. (1992). "The Influentials." *American Demographics*, 14(10): 30-38.
- Porter, D. (2005). *Frommer's the Carolinas and Georgia*. New York, Wiley.
- QSR (2002). Using Nvivo in Qualitative Research.
- Rainie, L. (2005). "The State of Blogging." Retrieved September 12, 2005, from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf.

- Shachtman, N. (2002). "Blogs Make the Headlines." *Wired News* Retrieved January 2, 2003, from <http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,56978,00.html>.
- Sifry, D. (2005, September 20, 2006). "State of the Blogosphere, October 2005 Part 1: On Blogosphere Growth." Retrieved August 20, 2006, from <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000343.html>.
- Smith, R. and C. Vogt (1995). "The Effects of Integrating Advertising and Negative Word of Mouth Communications on Message Processing and Response." *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 4(2): 133-151.
- Tatum, C. (2005) Deconstructing Google Bombs: A Breach of Symbolic Power of Just a Goofy Prank? *First Monday*, 10, http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue10_10/tatum/.
- TIA. (2005). "Executive Summaries - Travelers' Use of the Internet, 2004 Edition." Retrieved November 15, 2005, from http://www.tia.org/researchpubs/executive_summaries_travelers_use.html.
- Trammell, K. D. and A. Keshelashvili (2005). "Examining the New Influencers: A Self-Presentation Study of a-List Blogs." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4): 968–982.
- Trammell, K. D., A. Tarkowski, J. Hofmokl and A. M. Sapp (2006) Rzeczpospolita Blogów [Republic of Blog]: Examining Polish Bloggers through Content Analysis. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue3/trammell.html>.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2005). "United State Census Bureau Web Site."
- Vettas, N. (1997). "On the Informational Role of Quantities: Durable Goods and Consumers' Word-of-Mouth Communication." *International Economic Review*, 38(4): 915-944.
- Walker, C. (1995). "Word of Mouth." *American Demographics*, 17(7): 38-45.
- Wang, Y. and D. R. Fesenmaier (2006). "Identifying the Success Factors of Web-Based Marketing Strategy: An Investigation of Convention and Visitors Bureaus in the United States." *Journal of Travel Research*, 44(3): 239-249.
- Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic Content Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.
- Weimann, G. (1994). *The Influentials*. Albany, State University of New York Press

- Werthner, H. and F. Ricci (2004). "E-Commerce and Tourism." *Communications of the ACM*, 17(12): 101-109.
- Westbrook, R. A. (1987). "Product/Consumption-Based Affective Responses and Postpurchase Processes." *Journal of Marketing Research*, 24(3): 258-270.
- Wikipedia. (2005). "RSS (File Format)." from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS_\(protocol\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS_(protocol)).
- Winer, D. (2003). "What Makes a Weblog a Weblog?" Retrieved November 8, 2003, from <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/whatMakesAWeblogAWeblog>.
- Woelfel, J. and E. L. Fink (1980). *The Measurement of Communication Processes: Galileo Theory and Method*. New York, Academic Press.
- Woelfel, J. and N. Stoyanoff (1993). Catpac: A Neural Network for Qualitative Analysis of Text. *the Annual Meeting of the Australian Marketing Association*, . Melbourne.
- Wright, C. and M. Cantor (1970). The Opinion Seeker and Avoider: Steps Beyond the Opinion Seeker Concept. *Research in Consumer Behavior*. D. Kollat, R. Blackwell and J. Engel. New York, Winston: 480-501.
- Yadav, M. S. and R. Varadarajan (2005). "Interactivity in the Electronic Marketplace: An Exposition of the Concept and Implications for Research." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 33(4): 585-603.

List of Figures

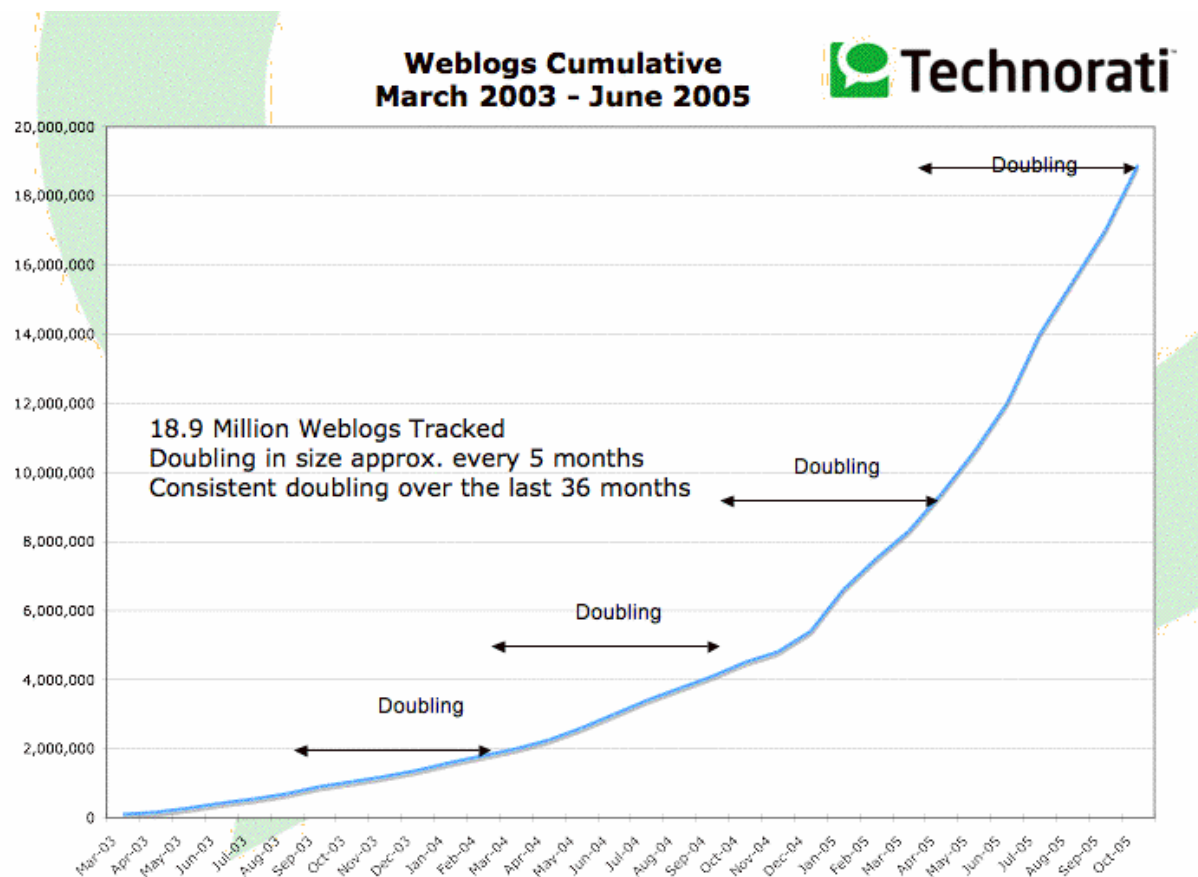


Figure 1. Growth of number of blogs from Technorati (Sifry 2005)

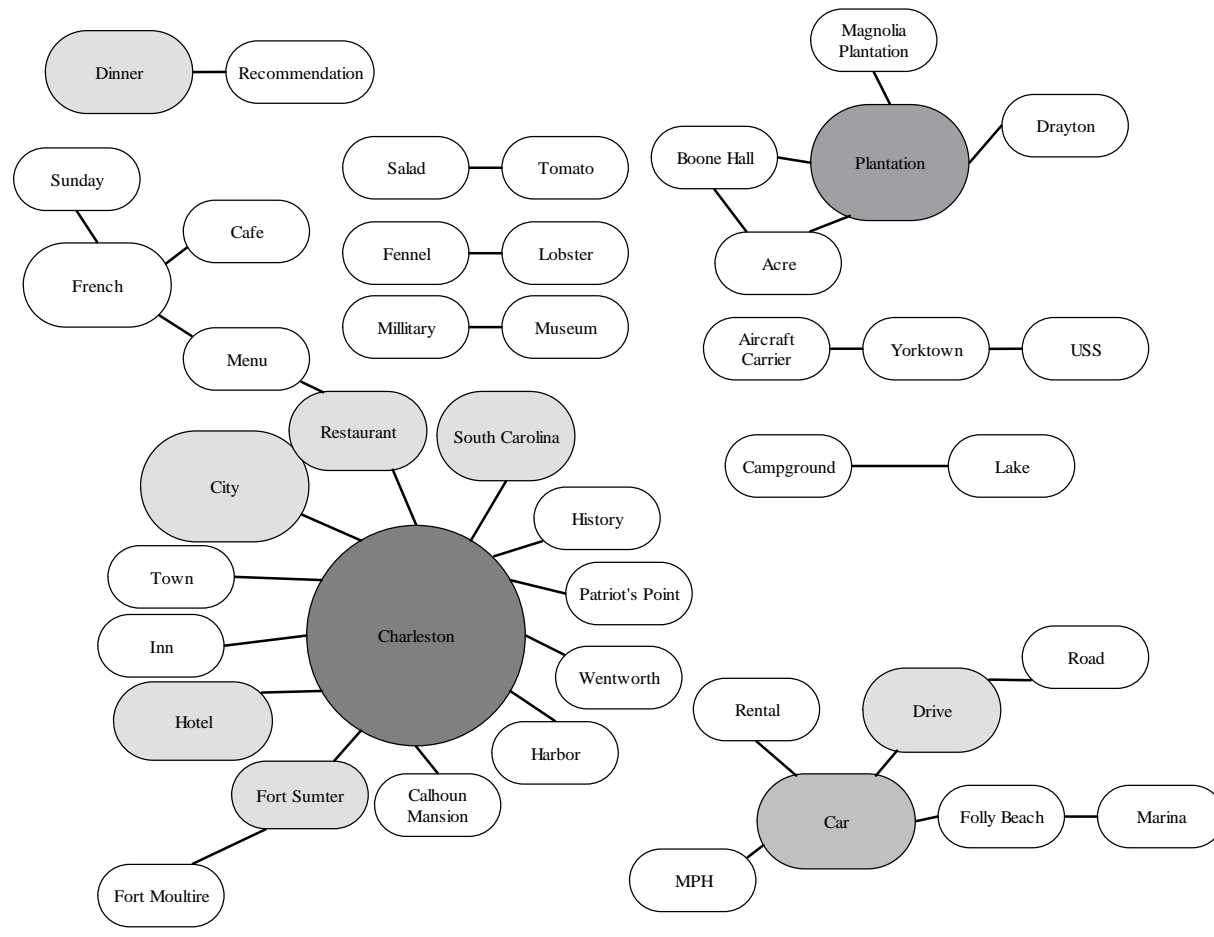


Figure 2. Semantic Network of Travel Experience to Charleston

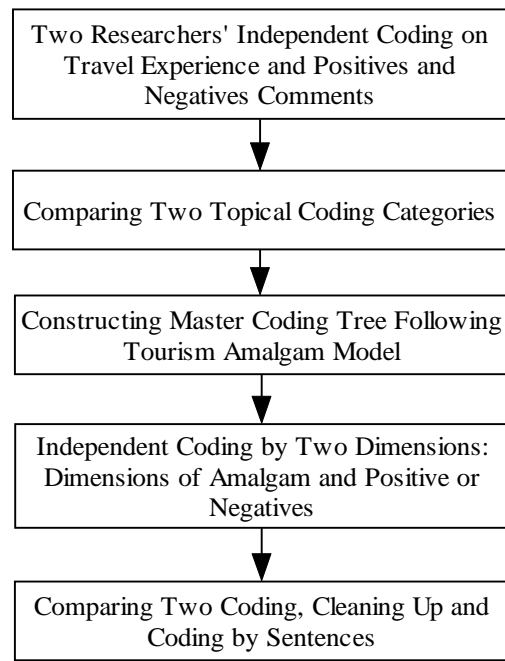


Figure 3. Coding Procedure for Content Analysis on Travel Blogs

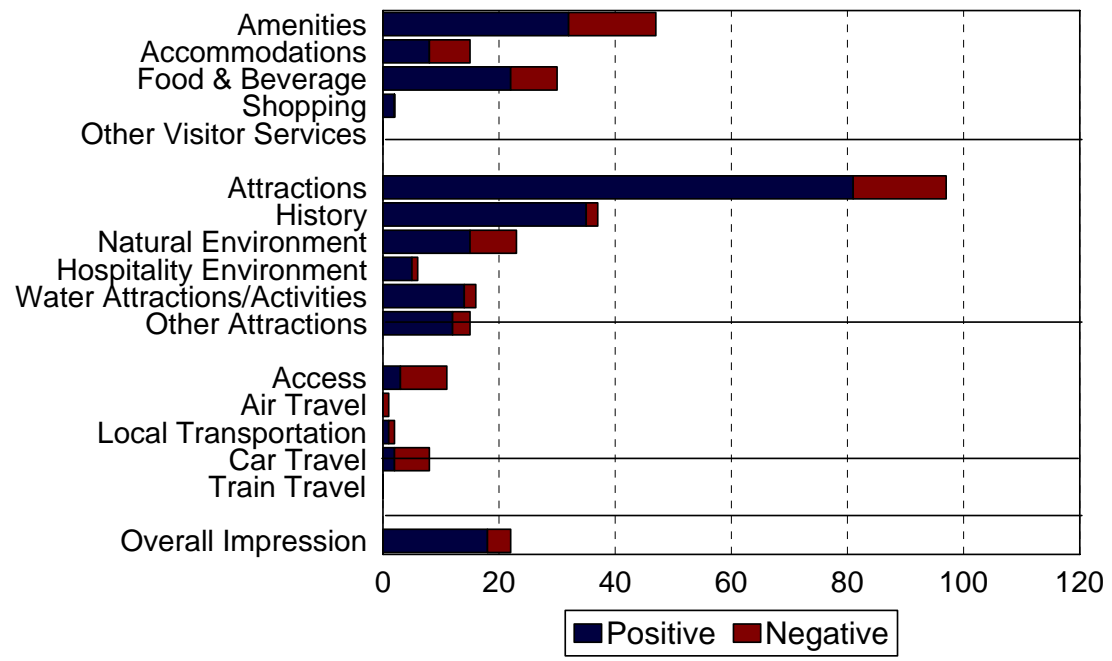


Figure 4. Positive and Negative Sentences in Travel Blogs on Charleston

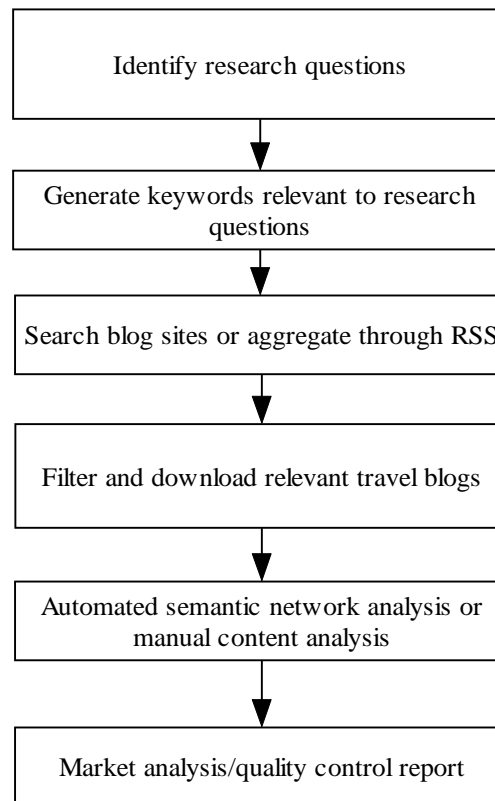


Figure 5. Automated Quality Control Mechanism/Market Analysis through Monitoring Travel Blogs

List of Tables

Table 1. Most Frequently Used Keywords or Phrases in Travel Blogs on Charleston

Keywords	Frequency	Keywords	Frequency
Charleston	75	owner	8
plantation	24	lobster	8
city	23	history	7
car	14	cafe	7
hotel	13	Magnolia	6
drive	13	Boone	6
French	12	aircraft carrier	6
town	12	museum	6
restaurant	11	Yorktown	5
South Carolina	11	mansion	5
dinner	11	acre	5
Fort Sumter	10	Sunday	5
menu	9	Patriot's Point	5
inn	9	salad	5
fort	8	Folly Beach	4
road	8	harbor	4
hour	8		

Table 2. Number of Positive and Negative Sentences

	Positives	Negatives	Total Sentences	% Negative Sentences
<i>Attractions</i>	81	16	97	17
History	35	2	37	5
Natural Environment	15	8	23	35
Hospitality	5	1	6	17
Environment	14	2	16	13
Water	12	3	15	20
Attractions/Activities	32	15	47	32
Other Attractions	8	7	15	47
Amenities	22	8	30	27
Accommodations	2	0	2	0
Food and Beverages	0	0	0	
Shopping	3	8	11	73
Other Services	0	1	1	100
Access	1	1	2	50
Air Travel	2	6	8	75
Local Transport	0	0	0	
Car Travel	18	4	22	18
Train Travel	134	43	177	24
<i>Overall Impression</i>				
Total				