

# Member Reputation and Its Influence on Travel Decisions: A Case Study of an Online Travel Community

Irem Arsal, Ph.D.  
Elizabeth D. Baldwin, Ph.D.  
Sheila J. Backman, Ph.D.

MODUL University Vienna  
Clemson University, SC, USA



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## Travel Decision Making

### Five Phases of Travel Experience

- Anticipation and planning
- Travel to
- On site
- Travel back
- Recollection



### Types of Travel Decisions

- Attractions
- Information
- Services
- Transportation

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## Information Sources for Travelers

1. Internal sources (e.g. Memory, personal experience)
2. External sources:
  - a) Market dominant
  - b) Travel advisors
  - c) Observed sources
  - d) Personal
  - e) The Internet

## Word of Mouth (WOM)

- **Word-of-mouth (WOM) is “informal communications between private parties concerning evaluations of goods and services”** (Anderson, 1998, pg.8).
- (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Fuchs, 2003; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Nolan, 1976; Nolan, 1974; Serwer, 2003)

## The Internet




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**Information sources:**

- Search engines
- Official destination websites
- Individual websites and blogs
- Email promotions
- Online travel intermediaries
- Online communities

## Online Communities



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- “... groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism” (Ridings, Gefen and Arinze, 2002).
- Individuals join online communities to retrieve information, maintain connections, develop relationships, and make travel decisions (Stepchenkova, Mills, & Jiang, 200).

## Online Travel Community Research



- **The importance of online communities in tourism marketing over the Internet** (Dellaert, 1999).
- **The needs of online travel community members** (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2002).
- **The reasons of contribution to online travel communities** (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003).
- **Antecedents of online travel community activity** (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004).
- **Understanding member identification in the online travel communities and member voluntary behaviors** (Lee, 2005- dissertation).

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## Online Travel Communities



- **Postings in online communities are a type of Word of Mouth communication also called electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM).**
- **eWOM is “all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services”** (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan, 2008, pg. 461)
- **In eWOM previous visitors to a destination are found to be more influential source of information in travel planning** (Crotts, 1999).

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## Electronic Word Of Mouth (eWOM)

- 1) eWOM has a larger scale due to the Internet's low-cost and communication capabilities;
- 2) eWOM gives the ability to organizations to monitor and control their operation;
- 3) The absence of contextual cues and not knowing who the information provider is makes it harder to interpret the subjective information in online interaction.

## The Influence of eWOM

- In IS & Management literature:  
**Book sales** (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2003); **video games purchases** (Bounie, Bourreau, Gensollen, & Waelbroeck, 2005); **movie revenues** (Dellarocas, Awad, & Zhang, 2004).
- In tourism literature:  
**Travel blogs** (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008); **online travel reviews** (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007; Ricci & Wietsma, 2006).

## Member Reputation

- Mechanism for creating trust in online communities.
- Shows a members commitment to the online community.
- Activity level of members represent the reputation of the member in this online travel community.

## Purpose of the Study

- The primary concern of this study was to investigate member reputation in an online travel community and its influence on different types of travel decisions.

## Methodology

- The research design employed case study approach and classification methods to examine the influence of member reputation on travel decisions of members in the online travel community.

## Study Area & Data

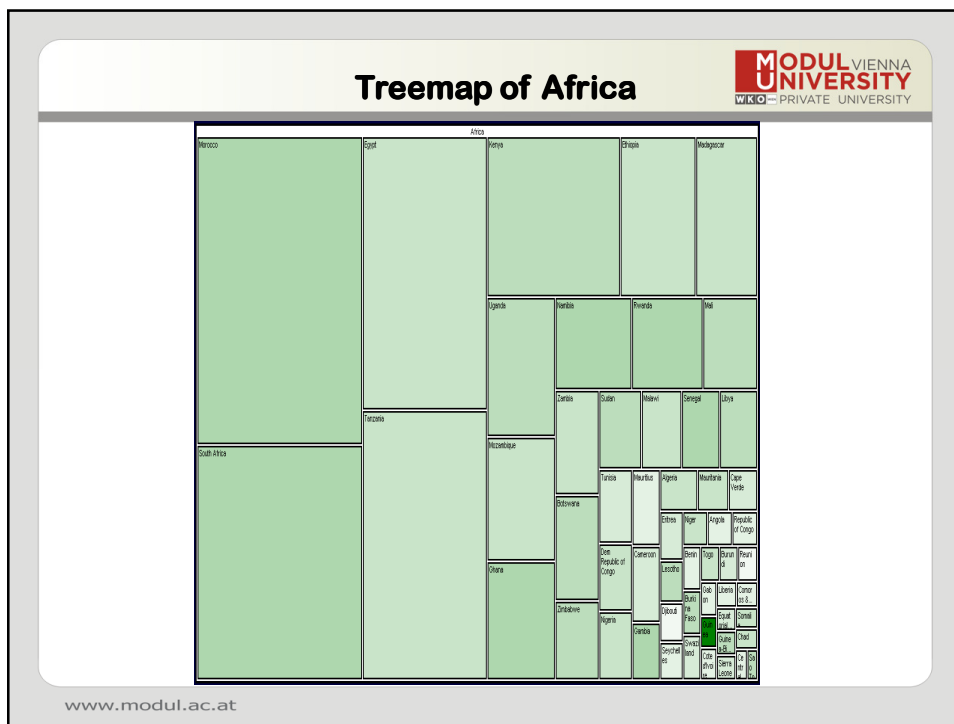
- **Study Area:** The analysis was conducted at Thorn Tree forum located at <http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>.
- **Data:** Online travel community threads.
- Thorn Tree Forum had fourteen world regions that consist of 204 individual country forums and 48431 threads that had total of 230698 postings.

## Data Collection


- The data were collected for eight months period until the data was saturated.
- Purposeful sampling and Treemaps were used for identifying the data sample.

## Purposeful Sampling

1. Treemaps of the world regions were drawn.
2. Top three countries in each region with most discussion were selected.
3. Among these countries top 10 most discussed threads in each country forum were identified.
4. Threads were coded according to discussion topics.
5. Country forums were chosen.



### Data Sample



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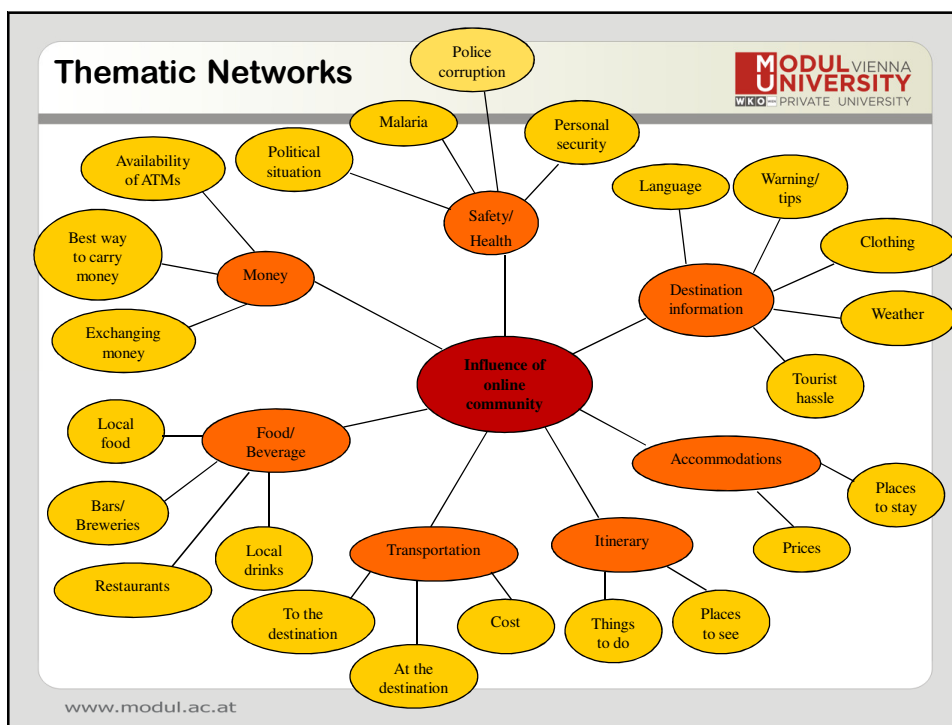
Country	Threads	Postings
<b>Spain</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>473</b>
<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>Germany</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>Belgium</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>214</b>
<b>South Africa</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>Ghana</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>Morocco</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>219</b>
<b>Guinea</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>156</b>

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## Data Analysis

### Step 1: Thematic Networks

- Data was analyzed using thematic networks.
- The data is categorized in three steps;
- (i) Basic themes
- (ii) Organizing themes
- (iii) Global themes



## Step 2: Level of Influence

- Out of the 81 threads 7 were ignored due to not being related to travel planning.
- In the analyzed threads there were 820 members that contributed to 2040 postings.
- Out of 74 threads included in the study 23 of them showed a clear evidence of influence.(31.1%)
- The influence was identified by reading the threads and finding out if Original Poster (OP) stated that he/she will include recommendations in the postings in his/her travel plans.

## Step 3: Activity Level of Members

- The contributing members in the identified country forums were divided into three activity levels: high, medium, and low.
- The activity level of members was identified by looking at their overall postings.

## Dividing into Groups

	Low	Medium	High
Number of members	336	113	47
Number of postings	1-600	602-3,996	4,320-31,387

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## Influence by Member Activity Level

	Low	Medium	High
Accommo.	0%	8.70%	0%
Food/Bev.	4.35%	13.04%	4.35%
Transport.	4.35%	0%	0%
Safety	0%	4.35%	0%
Money	0%	4.35%	0%
Dest. Info.	17.39%	4.35%	4.35%
Itinerary	4.35%	21.74%	4.35%
No influence	69.56%	43.47%	86.95%
Total	100%	100%	100%

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## Results and Discussion

- **Medium activity level members were the most influential members.**
- **High activity level members were the least influential members.**
- **More research is needed to investigate online reputation mechanisms in other online travel communities.**

## Implications

- **Brand building**
- **Customer acquisition**
- **Product development**
- **Learn strengths and weaknesses of a destination.**
- **Monitor destination forums and enhance tourism destinations.**

**Limitations**


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- One online travel community and its members.
- Replication of the study.
- Anonymity of online environments.

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**Questions**

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