The effects of perceived relevance of travel blogs’ content on the behavioral intention to visit a tourist destination

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**A B S T R A C T**

The tourism industry is characterized by ever-increasing competition, causing destinations to seek new methods to attract tourists. Traditionally, a decision to visit a destination is interpreted, in part, as a rational calculation of the costs/benefits of a set of alternative destinations, which were derived from external information sources, including e-WOM (word-of-mouth) or travelers’ blogs. There are numerous travel blogs available for people to share and learn about travel experiences. Evidence shows, however, that not every blog exerts the same degree of influence on tourists. Therefore, which characteristics of these travel blogs attract tourists’ attention and influence their decisions, becomes an interesting research question. Based on the concept of information relevance, a model is proposed for interrelating various attributes specific to blog’s content and perceived enjoyment, an intrinsic motivation of information systems usage, to mitigate the above-mentioned gap. Results show that novelty, understandability, and interest of blogs’ content affect behavioral intention through blog usage enjoyment. Finally, theoretical and practical implications are proposed.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is a popular activity in modern life and has contributed significantly to economic development for decades. However, competition in almost every sector of this industry has intensified during recent years (Horng, Liu, Chou, & Tsai, 2012; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008); tourism service providers are now finding it difficult to acquire and keep customers (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Ho, 2007). Therefore, methods of attracting tourists to a destination are receiving greater attention from researchers, policy makers, and marketers. Before choosing a destination, tourists may search for information to support their decision-making (Fodness & Murry, 1997; Grant, Clarke, & Kyriazis, 2008; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). By understanding the relationships between various information sources’ characteristics and destination choice, tourism managers can improve their marketing efforts.

Recently, personal blogs have become an important source for acquiring travel information (Lin & Huang, 2006; Litvin et al., 2008; Scott, 2001; Singh, Veron-Jackson, & Cullinane, 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). With personal blogs, many tourists can share their travel experiences with others and potential tourists can search for and respond to others’ experiences. Therefore, a blog can be seen as an asynchronous and many-to-many channel for conveying travel-related electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). By using these forms of inter-personal influence media, companies in this industry can create a competitive advantage (Litvin et al., 2008; Singh et al., 2008).

Weblogs are now widely available; therefore, it is not surprising that the quantity of available e-WOM has increased (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) to an extent where information overload has become a pressing issue (Chen, Shang, & Kao, 2009; Frías, Rodriguez, & Castaneda, 2008; Grant et al., 2008; Park & Lee, 2008). Empirical evidence, however, indicates that people may not consult numerous blogs for advice; the degree of inter-personal influence varies from blog to blog (Zafiropoulos, 2012). Determining which characteristics of these travel blogs attract tourists’ attention and influence their travel decisions now becomes an interesting question. The concept of information relevance (Xu & Chen, 2006) is adapted to describe these blog characteristics and a research model is created to answer this question.

The effects of various information sources, including e-traveling service providers, have been examined extensively in recent literature (Frías et al., 2008). The effects of information from travelers’ blogs, however, have received relatively little attention (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012); studies investigating the effects of information relevance in the context of information overload are particularly scant. The purpose of this study, therefore, is twofold. The first is to further our understanding of tourists’ information search and destination choice behavior by including perceived relevance of travel blogs into the traditional paradigm of tourism decision-making. The second is...
to construct and test a model regarding the formation of behavioral intention to visit a destination, revealing how travel blogs may influence a tourist’s future behavioral intention.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination choice and travelers’ information searches

With highly involved products and services like travel, tourists are likely to spend a significant amount of time searching information before their trip (Fodness & Murry, 1997; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Tourists may rely on external information when choosing a destination and making onsite decisions, such as accommodations, transportation, attractions, and even shopping (Fodness & Murry, 1998; Hyde, 2008). An information search is defined as an expressed need in response to internal and external contingencies to consult various amounts and types of information sources prior to a purchase decision to facilitate trip planning (Fodness & Murry, 1997; Hyde, 2008).

In the past, travelers mainly found tourism information from commercial sources in order to form a destination image (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Destination image affects the perceived quality of satisfaction with, behavioral intention towards, and willingness to choose that destination (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001). Destinations with positive images have a higher probability of being included and chosen in the decision-making process (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Bigné et al., 2001; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). A destination image is defined as a mental portrayal of the virtual experience, or what the experience might look like in a future trip (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007). It is composed of a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions about that destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Destination images, however, seem to develop over time from not only commercial sources, but also social stimuli, such as friends’ and relatives’ recommendations or word-of-mouth (Fodness & Murry, 1997). A handful of impressions are selected and elaborated in the individual’s mind to form the mental construct (Reynolds, 1965).

Information can also be used to minimize the perceptions of risk and uncertainty involved with certain destinations (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Money & Crotts, 2003). Tourism is an experience product characterized by intangibility and uncertainty, both at the time of purchase and consumption. Therefore, higher risk is involved when selecting a destination. High perceived risk may lead consumers to rely on a certain mode of communication, such as personal sources or WOM (Jeong & Jang, 2011). Positive WOM was found to increase purchase intention by creating a favorable brand image and reducing risk perception (Jeong & Jang, 2011).

2.2. Travelers’ blogs as the e-WOM platform

Weblog (blog) is one of the latest and most quickly expanding forms of media for Internet communication and publication (Scott, 2001; Singh et al., 2008). It differs from other types of web pages in both format and content. Tourists tend to store their travel experiences or destination images in story form (Govers et al., 2007), leading to blogs that normally consist of dated entries in a “story telling” format (Blood, 2004). Many blogs also allow readers to post comments to individual entries, much as they would in a thread on a discussion forum. The blog format, then, lends itself smoothly for use in various collaborative tasks, such as experience sharing. Advancement of media technologies has also allowed bloggers to include multimedia materials like photos, films and audio in their blogs.

Blog writing is characterized by a strong sense of the blogger’s personality and point of view (Dave, 2003; Hollenbaugh, 2010). Individuals can now use blogs to conveniently describe and share their personal subjective experiences or opinions with friends, or even strangers. People can write about their destination images and provide others with functional cues, such as better hotels or essential attractions, and can even use photos or films to illustrate the places they have been. Prospective tourists can search blogs for subjective travel experiences or respond to others’ experiences (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). In this regard, a blog can be seen as a social medium that carries user generated content for WOM distribution (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), and blog posts may represent a type of written WOM (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). In short, a blog can be viewed as a many-to-many and asynchronous platform that provides a personal, interactive process for communication and e-WOM exchange (Litvin et al., 2008) and produces interpersonal influences (Sigala, 2012; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012).

2.3. External factors: information attributes

2.3.1. Value of external information

Information search can be viewed as a goal-oriented activity aimed at reaching valuable outcomes (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Consumers gain value from processing retrieved information in order to reach a better decision (Grant et al., 2008). Consumer value comes primarily from the information medium’s characteristics such as availability of information (Frias et al., 2008). Information source characteristics that have been studied include, but are not limited to: (1) type and amount of external stimuli (information sources), such as movies, guidebooks, magazines, and the Internet (Fodness & Murry, 1998; Frias et al., 2008; Gartner, 1993); (2) quality and quantity of the information (Burgess, 1978; Grant et al., 2008); and (3) content and format of the information (Grant et al., 2008; Mercille, 2005).

Travel blogs represent one of the recent media for personal publication and interpersonal communication. Based on blogs’ ownership—individual, business and government, a typology of travel blog was developed (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008): each type of travel blog has specific content, target audience and mode of communication. Among which, personal journal blog is the only one that possess almost user generated content. Other types including corporate blog and government blog may be created in-house or by external professional bloggers, and is more or less commercial, factual or political oriented. Therefore, travel blogs other than personal journal blog will be excluded from this study.

Among various blogs, personal journal type of blog accounts for 70% of all blogs, and is almost single authored (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). Hence, an author’s characteristics, such as gender, age, personality, motivation, involvement, credibility, identity and anonymity, self disclosiveness, self-expression, ability etc., may have tremendous impacts on his/her production and/or readers’ perceptions of the blog’s content. For example, Armstrong and McAdams (2009) found that male authors were deemed more credible than female authors. These factors, however, have received relatively ample attention from literature (e.g., Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Chesney & Su, 2010; Hollenbaugh, 2010; Hsu & Tsou, 2011; Lin & Huang, 2006; Litvin et al., 2008; Para-López, Gutiérrez-Taño, Díaz-Armas, & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2012).

Information quality and quantity are two information attributes that influence the information processing strategies deployed by consumers (Grant et al., 2008), and may impact the relationship between information source and destination image (Frias et al., 2008). Travel product selection requires more abundant, higher quality information since the tourism product is complex and difficult to evaluate (Grant et al., 2008; Zafirooulos, 2012). The roles these two information attributes play deserve further investigation; however, this issue has attracted relatively little attention in the tourism field (Frias et al., 2008).
2.3.2. Information quality

Information quality in a travel decision situation can be defined as the usefulness of available information about travel product attributes in helping tourists evaluate the product. It is one of the primary factors affecting information systems (IS) success and user satisfaction (DeLone & McLean, 2003). Individuals use information output from an IS to make decisions. Then, they evaluate the value of the IS, and determine information quality based on the perceived value. Thus, measures of information quality, such as accuracy, currency, completeness, credibility, timeliness, relevance, richness, and consistency (Chen, 2010; Ho, 2007; Wang, Chen, & Chen, in press; Zheng, Zhao, & Stylianou, in press), are always perceptual.

Most previous works related to information quality were conducted in the context of goal-oriented decision making, such as financial investment (Shang et al., in press), tax filing (Chen, 2010), purchase of search goods (Grant et al., 2008), and information sharing in a virtual community (Zheng et al., in press). Tourists may gain value of objective or factual information, like accommodation prices and availability, from obtaining optimal decision quality (Grant et al., 2008). In this regard, tourists may be deemed as rational decision makers, and the selection of a destination may be viewed, in part, as a rational calculation and comparison of the costs/benefits from a set of alternatives (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

In such a context, imperfect information may harm decision outcomes. For example, an itinerary may not be optimal if the tourist received incorrect or obsolete information regarding uncontrollable factors, such as air schedules and air ticket fares. As a result of social media content produced by strangers, some researchers argue that information quality has become an issue in decision-making. This can be exemplified by the difficulty encountered in the evaluation of information sources credibility (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Chesney & Su, 2010; McKnight & Kacmar, 2006) which plays a role in impacting decision quality (McKnight & Kacmar, 2006; Shang et al., in press; Zheng et al., in press).

Information quality measures the semantic success of the information in conveying the intended meaning. Hence, the selection of dimensions and measures of information quality are contingent on the objectives and context of the decisions (DeLone & McLean, 2003). For example, Chen (2010) excluded relevance and reliability from their study regarding taxpayers' satisfaction with the tax-filing system, since government information is assumed to be reliable and highly relevant to users' information needs and decision tasks. Nevertheless, the measurement of objective information quality dimensions (e.g., accuracy and completeness) is often intrinsic to the information itself, regardless of the context in which it is applied (Watts, Shankaranarayanan, & Even, 2009). In other words, contextual factors may not influence the semantic meaning of objective information.

Grant et al. (2008), however, stressed that objective information quality may play a more important role in the purchase of search goods. When purchasing an experience like travel, a decision-maker may gain more values from subjective information that contains copious personal experiences and personal interpretations (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). This is evident from a recent study that showed in 5 out of 7 geographical regions, subjective information from interpersonal communications exerted more influence on the decision to visit Hong Kong for the first time (Doong, Wang, & Law, 2008). It is also found that social media use may have significant impacts on travelers' decision behavior and outcomes (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012).

Since destination image is described as a mental portrayal of a virtual or imaginary experience of a future trip, its creation involves a social and emotional process of selecting and processing experiences shared by others (Govers et al., 2007). During this process, people may interact socially with others to exchange information, thus making information being reciprocated back and forth among various actors to pass along to more audiences; an obligatory relationship among people may therefore be established to ensure social mobility of travel experiences (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Advancement of social media functionality enabled even wider social networking and interactions, allowing collaboration to easily take place among individuals, which make the trip planning from a solitary to a social collaborative process (Sigala, 2012).

Many social values, like intimate interaction, physical support and guidance, feedback to travel plan etc., and emotional values like playfulness, enjoyment etc., can be earned during this process (Sigala, 2010). These values become antecedents of the motivation to keep surfing and accessing the content of social media (Paradisis, 2012). Travelers may finally accomplish trip planning via searching, selecting, communicating, sharing or adapting experiences to co-create with others a collective intelligence about the trip (Sigala, 2012); however, during this process, they may encounter discrepancies within retrieved experiences, and can subjectively decide whether or not to incorporate these experiences into their mental portrayal when evaluating the affective, hedonic, or emotional value of a destination.

Watts et al. (2009) also argued that there are dimensions of quality that cannot be objectively measured and tend to vary with the usage context. They referred to this as contextual quality, since its evaluation is subject to contextual factors, such as personal preferences or decision characteristics. Recently, some researchers have begun to explore the effects of different kinds of contextual quality. Shang et al. (in press) identified social comparison and found that people may use information posted in virtual communities to compare their social status with others. Watts et al. (2009) proposed that relevance is one of the most salient contextual qualities. Levels of relevance generally depend on the decision it is being applied to (Watts et al., 2009); for example, travel experiences to destination “A” may be highly relevant to one who is planning to visit this destination.

To conclude, from a user’s point of view, perceptions of information quality in the context of experience consumption should be interpreted differently than in the context of search goods. Many traditional measures of information quality may not relate to or be useful in evaluating the value of subjective information. Researchers should identify the contextual quality that best suits their studies.

2.3.3. Information quantity

The negative effects of information quantity on image formation were stressed and explored by Frías et al. (2008). Ironically, one important benefit of the Internet is access to abundant dynamic information to support consumer decision making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The interactive nature of the web environment allows for deep, nonlinear searches initiated and controlled by customers. Consumers are increasingly exposed to online advice, desired or not (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). Websites with user-generated content, such as blogs, have gained considerable popularity in travelers’ Internet usage (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and made a huge impact on tourists’ decisions (Vermulen & Seegers, 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). With the advancement of Internet technologies, e-WOM via blogs spread much more widely and rapidly than traditional face-to-face WOM (Litvin et al., 2008). Information overload hence resulted (Grant et al., 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and became a pressing issue and a problem in consumer information processing (Chen et al., 2009; Grant et al., 2008; Park & Lee, 2008). This, in turn, produced adverse effects on one’s destination selection (Frías et al., 2008).

To overcome this problem, internal filtering mechanisms, like knowledge and experience, are used to solicit information irrele-
vant to decision information needs (Chen et al., 2009). A recent study deployed social network analysis technique to analyze data from 1305 wine blogs and found that the degree of inter-personal influence varied from blog to blog. Only a small portion of the blogs had a significant impact on consumers; 32% of them had no impact at all (Zafiropoulos, 2012). This finding suggests that consumers may consult only a few blogs for wine products or wine tours, and may be using some sort of strategy to focus on useful information. Then, exactly which characteristics of travel blogs will attract tourists’ attention and influence their travel decisions? The answer to this question may lie in the concept of information relevance (Xu & Chen, 2006), which illustrates the degree of relevance between a blog’s content and one’s mental constructs of a destination and trip expectations.

2.3.4. Information relevance

Since the 1970s, information relevance has been used as a criterion for judging whether or not the information retrieved is related to information needs. Since information search for decision making can serve and satisfy users’ utilitarian purposes, it can be objectively measured from utilitarian orientation. In this regard, it is a multidimensional cognitive concept whose meaning is largely dependent on the perception of the usefulness, value or utility of a document to the problem or task at hand (Xu & Chen, 2006). However, emotional or social values can also be derived from information search for trip planning (Sigala, 2012); hence, hedonic impacts such as enjoyment from reading document can be another aspect for the judgment of relevance (Xu & Chen, 2006).

Destination image can be seen as an imagined and anticipated vision of future tourism consumption. Though exposed to some external inputs when building this vision, people always retain the impressions that are relevant to them (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Xu and Chen (2006) proposed criteria that users employ in making relevance judgments: topicality, novelty, reliability, and understandability. The meanings of these concepts will be introduced and elaborated below.

Topicality has been identified as the first and most basic condition for relevance. If the user believes that the information retrieved is about the topic area of interest, or that the connection between the information’s “aboutness” and one’s information needs is high, it is topically relevant. Since information in travelers’ blogs is likely to be grouped by specific destinations, a blog’s content is not only created by travelers, but also informed by relevant experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zafiropoulos, 2012). Therefore, it is very likely related to the targeted destination, and topicality can be assumed while searching travelers’ blogs. As a result, this construct is not included in the theoretical model.

Novelty of content refers to the degree to which the information within a traveler’s blog is perceived to be new. Novelty plays an important role in tour decision-making (Crompton, 1979; Jang & Feng, 2007) and acts in opposition to familiarity; it is often defined as the degree of contrast between the present perception and past experience of a destination (Pearson, 1970). Crompton (1979) referred to novelty as a new experience; therefore, a novel trip is characterized by new and unfamiliar experiences that differ from prior life experiences (Faison, 1977).

A person with a higher level of product familiarity may possess more comprehensive product knowledge or experiences. While surfing travel blogs to select a destination, s/he may encounter less unknown or unexpected product features, and may consult more internal knowledge or experiences, creating less need for external information (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Conversely, a novel experience with a specific destination may represent unexpected product/service attributes, surprising the consumer. The degree of surprise depends on the difference between the new and prior experiences. Strong surprise may encourage an individual to focus his/her attention on the discrepancy, and create exploratory behavior (Joelle & Dirk, 2001). As a result, the social process of selecting and sharing experiences is activated.

Due to anonymity, active bloggers are, at most, “familiar strangers” to those who read their blogs frequently. The question of why people seek strangers for advice has just begun to attract research attention (Weiss, Lurie, & Maccinis, 2008), and deserves further investigation. Reliability of information has been frequently mentioned as an answer (Hirsh, 1999; Warnick, 2004; Weiss et al., 2008). Reliability of content can be viewed as the whole credibility of a document, and is defined as the degree that the content of a retrieved document is perceived to be true, accurate, or believable (Xu & Chen, 2006). Xu and Chen (2006) followed previous works (Hirsh, 1999; Warnick, 2004) to conceptualize information reliability as a concept including two dimensions of content and source credibility.

Content credibility differs from source credibility. Traditional literature in information quality stressed the role of source credibility as the primary factor judging information reliability (Warnick, 2004). Since trip planning may involve a social and collaborative process, a document, after its creation, is often borrowed, revised and parasitic on other hyperlinked text. Hence, social media content is not static; rather, it is like an organism whose proliferation or adaptation is partially dependent on the pattern of social interactions. Hence, website content would be experienced and evaluated subjectively by the involved travelers (Warnick, 2004). Reliability, therefore, is most importantly determined by document content; however, “source status, by influencing perceptions of source credibility, competence, or trustworthiness, can provide message recipients with a simple rule as to whether or not to agree with the message” (Petty, Priester, & Wegender, 1994, p. 103). Therefore, source credibility can be thought of as an external cue of content credibility (Bateman, 1998; Hirsh, 1999). Yet, Chesney and Su (2010) found that a blog’s source credibility would not change even if the blogger’s personal identity was revealed. They also found that presentation skills impact a blogger’s credibility; factors affecting content credibility may vary depending on readers’ personal characteristics, such as gender (Chesney & Su, 2010).

Xu and Chen (2006) define understandability of content as the extent to which a user perceives a retrieved document’s information to be easy to read and understand. The use of jargon or technical language reduces the message’s clarity and leads to a significantly lower evaluation of the message (Dwyer, 1999). For example, in a client-professional exchange of information, the use of hard-to-understand language may negatively affect the acceptance of the professional’s advice (Elsbach & Elofson, 2000). Both experts and non-experts are sensitive to the use of jargon in documents (Brown, Braskamp, & Newman, 1978). Background knowledge, however, is not the only factor that affects understandability (Xu & Chen, 2006); other factors, such as presentation and writing skills or inclusion of examples and graphics, can all affect understandability (Bateman, 1998). An article describing a trip experience would be easier to understand if multimedia materials like photos and films were provided. Vivid, involved, and affective psychological states occur more easily while surfing blogs with these types of articles (Govers et al., 2007; Hoffman & Novak, 1996). In contrast, blogs lacking understandability may create knowledge uncertainty about available product features, which may adversely affect the information search (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

2.3.5. Interesting content

Interesting content may be another noteworthy informational characteristic that helps readers judge information relevance (Hirsh, 1999). It can be defined as the appealing effect of an activity
on an individual emerged from person-activity interaction leading to a positive psychological state and sense of delight (Chen, Darst, & Pangrazi, 1999). It hence refers to the degree of fascination and attraction one feels about from reading the blog's content; it is the perceived fun, pleasure, and amusement one gains from blogging. Surfing travel blogs can be regarded as an activity where one learns of others' experiences. Interest derived from person-activity interaction, such as blogging, has long been a motivational factor for learning (Chen et al., 1999). It is a contextual quality characterized by personal subjectivity, since one's awareness of an activity's specific features determine the degree of interest (Chen et al., 1999). Due to the nature of blogs, this concept, though rarely investigated in the traditional stream of tourism studies, may be an important informational attribute in destination choice.

A traveler, after experiencing a destination, forms a post-visit image that is more realistic, complex, and probably substantially different from the pre-visit image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerrli & Martin, 2004). Every tourist has his or her own exclusive fantasies, perspectives, and approaches regarding a trip and gains unique insights to form a distinctive image. These images are not presented in people's blogs in a commercial style. Instead, travelers write articles, arrange text, photos, and/or films in a very personal, skillful, and innovative style. Thus, the content of travel blogs can be very fascinating and attractive to readers.

Interest, however, depends on one's preferences (Chen et al., 1999). A tourist searching for escape and calm might perceive experiences of exciting activities as uninteresting. An interesting activity is usually seen as new, complex, dynamic, and challenging; this can motivate people to try new things and explore complex ideas. Therefore, interest leads to exploratory behavior, such as reading about strangers' travel experiences (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009). Reading an interesting blog may be enough to draw the reader's attention to the content (Hoffman & Novak, 1996), and make the social process of image creation through blog surfing inherently enjoyable (Govers et al., 2007). Therefore, one can argue that reading interesting travel blogs can motivate people to learn about others' experiences and influence their perceptions of inherent enjoyment.

2.4. Inherent enjoyment: intrinsic motivation of blog usage

Since trip planning can serve tourists' utilitarian purposes, much of the prior research in this area naturally focused more on the objective utility of information such as usefulness or utility of the blog as an extrinsic motivational factor in choosing a destination (e.g., Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Bernardo, Marimon, & del Mar Alonso-Almeida, 2012; Ho, 2007; Hsu & Tsou, 2011; McKnight & Kacmar, 2006). Some authors, however, called for the necessity to pay more attention to the emotional or hedonic aspects of consumption (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Bernardo et al., 2012; Sigala, 2012). The hedonic perspective perceives one's emotions during decision-making and product consumption stages. It views consumers not just as rational problem solvers, but also as pleasure seekers looking for activities that elicit positive emotions (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

In this regard, searching for information may also be seen as a leisure activity, done for entertainment and pleasure. Positive emotional responses, including enjoyment, excitement, happiness, gratification, and enthusiasm, are brought on by such activities (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). High levels of information quality were also found to provide enhanced enjoyment (Ahn, Ryu, & Han, 2007). Hence, destination image is built not only from the information pushed by mass media, but also from an inherently enjoyable social process of collecting, selecting, and sharing others' experiences (Govers et al., 2007; Reynolds, 1965).

Given that travel is an experience consuming activity, anticipating pleasant experiences from information retrieved should be a prerequisite for a destination to be chosen. Viewing trip planning process as activities for seeking emotional value (Sigala, 2012), hedonic impact such as enjoyment from reading blogs may as well be treated as the "usefulness" of the blog's content in producing hedonic impact to the readers (Para-López et al., 2012; Xu & Chen, 2006"). Unfortunately, Xu and Chen (2006) focused only on utilitarian aspect of relevance. Whether or not relevance judgment is still effective in hedonic view remains unknown. This study, hence, decided to focus on intrinsic motivational factor like enjoyment in choosing a destination.

Intrinsic motivations for information search have long been discussed by scholars in the marketing field. Just as some lurkers may search for information without specific consumption needs, consumers frequently conduct on-going searches for product information, such as reading an automobile magazine or browsing in an antiques shop (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). There may be other shopping motivators besides making good purchase decisions, and consumers may enjoy the act of shopping itself. Recreational or hedonic motives have been found to be significant antecedents for on-going information searches (Para-López et al., 2012; Sigala, 2010).

Recreational use, manifested as non-directed search behavior, can be an important intrinsic motivator for consumers to browse a medium (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). According to flow theory, while navigating a website, goal-directed and experiential activities compete for the user's attention. Extrinsic motivation applies to goal-directed behavior that achieves a valuable outcome; intrinsic motivations apply to experiential or recreational behavior. Both extrinsic motivators, such as a directed search for utilitarian benefits, and intrinsic motivators, such as a non-directed search for hedonic value, cause the users to focus their attention on the blog's content. This state of focused attention may lead to a flow experience, in which a user's self-awareness disappears. The navigation process itself becomes intrinsically enjoyable, and results in a pleasing state of mind. Consumers in a flow state are more likely to remember their perceptions; this increased learning should have some impacts on one's decisions (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

Teo, Lim, and Lai (1999) defined intrinsic motivation as “the performance of an activity for no apparent reinforcement other than the process of performing the activity per se.” People may use web-based systems simply because they truly enjoy it. Perceived enjoyment from a particular medium may explain the acceptance of new technologies, like blogs. Recent studies have shown that interactions between humans and websites are intrinsically enjoyable or interesting (Ahn et al., 2007; Moon & Kim, 2001); additionally, a high level of perceived enjoyment positively influences the attitude and intention to use a website more extensively (Heijden, 2003; Lin, Wu, & Tsai, 2005; Teo et al., 1999). It has also been found that the use of user-generated social media, such as blogs, may be stimulated by intrinsic joy or derived enjoyment (Hsu & Lin, 2008; Para-López et al., 2012). Focused attention on a travel blog's content may communicate expectation of experiences of visiting a destination more intensively. Hence, inherent enjoyment might create imagination of a pleasant trip.

In order to form a destination image, a person must accumulate, memorize, process, and summarize relevant information. With blogs, people can access a greater amount of travel experiences. Expectations for the experience, along with pleasure and/or enjoyment anticipating the destination and future trip, are produced during the process. These expectations may stimulate the reader's sense of enjoyment during blog usage. The more favorable one's attitude is towards blogging, the more time one is likely to spend surfing for information. People may be more persistent and be exposed to more information, thereby forming a positive destination image and a greater desire to visit the destination.
3. Methods

3.1. Research framework

Many information quality variables have been identified in previous literature. Some of them, from tourists’ perspectives, may reflect the subjective experiences of travel blogs (Grant et al., 2008). Based on the literature reviewed, information relevance is proposed as the criterion for the interpretation, solicitation, and selection of blogs’ content. Normally, irrelevant information is useless for trip planning; tourists may apply this criterion to focus on limited, useful blog content in order to reduce the amount of information (Frías et al., 2008; Xu & Chen, 2006; Zafiropoulos, 2012). Based on the above concepts, a conceptual model was derived and is presented in Fig. 1 to answer the following questions: How do travel blogs impact behavior intention to visit a destination and what characteristics of travel blogs accomplish this?

In many cases, novelty-seeking is an important motivator for numerous pleasure travelers (Jang & Feng, 2007). If the content of a travel blog are perceived to be familiar, readers may not produce cognitive change (Xu & Chen, 2006); these readers may not find novel sources of pleasure and feel bored (Jang & Feng, 2007), leading them to stop reading that blog. Conversely, if an individual planning a trip perceives the virtual experience to be new, s/he may start the enjoyable social process of image creation, and begin to incorporate this experience into his/her own image (Govers et al., 2007; Grant et al., 2008). Positive feelings and affective psychological states would follow. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

H1. Perceived novelty of content positively influences blog usage enjoyment.

The evaluation of blog content reliability is largely dependent upon the perceptions of content and source credibility (Xu & Chen, 2006). Most bloggers publish anonymously; therefore, source credibility could affect whether a reader accepts the blog’s recommendations. Yet, blog source credibility does not change when the blogger’s personal identity is revealed (Chesney & Su, 2010). Therefore, content credibility becomes the primary concern. The evaluation of credibility often depends on the user’s experiences and personal preferences (Chesney & Su, 2010; Warnick, 2004; Watts et al., 2009). The tourists must believe that the travel experience is credible; otherwise, they will not continue reading the blog and will not act on its advice (McKnight & Kacmar, 2006). If readers perceive the travel experience as true, accurate, and believable, they may agree with it (Petty et al., 1994) and may pay more attention to it (Shang et al., in press); this increases the possibility that the image formation process will continue. Empirical evidence showed that perceived information credibility positively influences the willingness to follow a website’s advice (Shang et al., in press), even an unfamiliar website (McKnight & Kacmar, 2006). Hsu and Tsou (2011) also found that blog content credibility directly impacted readers’ blogging experiences. Hence, the following hypothesis is offered:

H2. Perceived reliability of content positively influences blog usage enjoyment.

A destination image can only be created if bloggers’ experiences are understandable. Difficult-to-understand information often leads to uncertainty and ambiguity for the tourists, and may ultimately result in time spent thinking about the blogger’s story. Users can waste time and effort reading travel experiences lacking understandability and be distracted by the ambiguity and uncertainty (Zheng et al., in press). Hence, a travel blog lacking understandability may cause users to reject the blogger’s opinions, and perhaps reject the overall blog (Elsbach & Elofson, 2000; Xu & Chen, 2006). The more understandable a blog is, the more likely the enjoyable image formation process will continue. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

H3. Understandability of content positively influences blog usage enjoyment.

While surfing and interacting with travel blogs, there are numerous opportunities to discover interesting experiences; additionally, uninteresting experiences may be regarded as irrelevant and filtered out (Hirsh, 1999). Since interest encourages exploratory behavior (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009), if the experiences in a blog are perceived to be interesting, people may spend more time reading it (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009). The process of image building is more likely to endure for a longer period of time and people might feel enjoyment regarding their blog usage (Govers et al., 2007). Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

H4. Interest in the content positively influences blog usage enjoyment.

While navigating a blog or social media website, people may engage in not only goal-oriented activities, but also recreational behaviors (Grant et al., 2008; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Individuals who experience immediate enjoyment from reading travelers’ blogs and perceive any involving activity as inherently enjoyable, are more likely to surf these blogs extensively (Hsu & Lin, 2008) and focus their attention on the blogs (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Then, an individual may be immersed in abundant information and learn extensively (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). This may lead to

Fig. 1. Research framework.
the creation of a destination image that is an integral and influential part of the traveler’s decision process (Beeler & Martin, 2004; Bigné et al., 2001; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Hence, the hypothesis below is proposed. 

H5. Blog usage enjoyment positively influences the behavioral intention to visit a destination.

3.2. Measures

To ensure content validity, the items selected for the constructs (shown in the Appendix) were primarily revised from prior studies. All constructs, except for the subjects’ demographic variables, were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale. Table 1 summarizes the operational definition and sources of the variables’ measurement items in this study.

Novelty of content is defined as “information in the blog about the destination that is new to the user.” Xu and Chen (2006) developed a generic measurement scale for information relevance that could be used here. However, items for measuring novelty (amount of new and unique information, and similarity to previous knowledge) were outside of the tourism context, and might be difficult for tourists to reply to, since they were designed for generic contexts. Hence, a nine item novelty-seeking scale developed by Jang and Feng (2007) was condensed into three items: (1) new culture and lifestyles, such as cuisine, crafts and handiworks, different cultures, interesting people, people from unique ethnic and native groups; (2) curiosity, such as new knowledge, a variety of things to do, and a place that one can talk about when home; and (3) discovering a new place for traveling. A six-items scale was developed from Xu and Chen (2006) and Jang and Feng (2007).

Understandability of content is defined as “the degree to which the user perceives the blog’s content about the destination as easy to read and understand.” Reliability of content is defined as “the degree to which the blog’s content about the destination is perceived to be true, accurate, or believable.” Measurement scales for these two variables were adapted from Xu and Chen (2006). Interestingness of content is defined as “the degree to which an individual perceives the blog information as interesting to him/her.” No existing scales for blog content interestingness were found in the extant literature. Chen et al. (1999) developed a 4-items scale to measure interestingness of Physical education. Among them, two items measure the overall impression of level of interestingness; and the other items measure the degree of sense of delight. Rossiter (2002), however, stressed that a single-item measure could be good enough, or even better than multi-item measures in conditions that: (1) nearly everyone describes the object to be evaluated, that is travelers’ blog, identically and (2) subjects have unanimous agreement as to what the concept is, and understand that there is only one holistic characteristics being referred to when the attribute of the construct is posed. This study therefore designed an item to measure readers’ overall impression of degree of interestingness.

Blog usage enjoyment is defined as “the degree of perceived enjoyment while using a blog.” Venkatesh and Davis (2000) designed a three item (enjoyable, pleasant, and fun) scale to measure enjoyment. It can also be viewed as the degree of playfulness experienced while using the information system (Moon & Kim, 2001). Another three item scale was designed by Moon and Kim (2001) to measure enjoyment (enjoyment, fun, happy) and was later adapted by Ahn et al. (2007). Both scales have been frequently used by later researches. We combined and adapted their scales to fit the context of this study.

Finally, the behavioral intention to visit a destination is defined as “the willingness to visit the destination mentioned in the blog.” A four item scale was designed by Vijayasaratthy (2002) to measure consumers’ intentions to purchase products from e-retailers with good reliability and validity. Two items from Vijayasaratthy (2002) were employed to measure this variable. The item “I intend to collect data about the product” was dropped because this study investigated subjects’ responses after data have already been collected. Since the probability of a tourist visiting the same destination many times in the near future is quite low, the item “I plan to shop for more products” was also deleted.

Two stages of pretests were used to develop the instruments. First, ten subjects were asked to examine the meanings and correct the wordings of the items. Then, we invited 50 subjects that had frequently visited travel blogs to fill out an online questionnaire and discussed their answers with them via MSN (Microsoft Messenger). SPSS 11.0 was used to analyze the factor structure of principal components of variables. Items from Xu and Chen (2006), including Q1.1, Q1.2, and Q1.3 were excluded because they were not loaded in predicted factors. Therefore, the novelty measurement items in the final questionnaire came mainly from Jang & Feng, (2007).

3.3. Subjects and data collection

The questionnaire was designed for an individual who has lurked on travel blogs. Since the locations described in the blogs differ, we asked informants to recall the most impressive blog to answer the questionnaire. To prevent a situation where the subject already intended to visit a specific destination and then searched blogs only to help plan the itinerary, this study restricted the subjects to those who were intending to take a trip and were considering destinations based on blog content. Potential informants were made aware of this requirement and only suitable subjects were invited to participate. One last question was added, which asked why they lurked on this travel blog. Replies other than “I am intending to go on a trip,” such as enjoyment only, killing time, or gaining knowledge to make the plan, were excluded from further study. Different sources were used to invite suitable subjects. An MSN friends list was used to inquire about our friends’ experiences with travel blogs. If any of them had experience, s/he was asked to fill out an online questionnaire. Also, an invitation to the online survey was posted on some well known travel blogs.

Table 1
Operational definition and measurement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Operational definition</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novelty of content</td>
<td>The blog’s content about the destination is new to the user</td>
<td>Xu and Chen (2006), Jang and Feng (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understandability of content</td>
<td>The blog’s content about the destination is perceived by the user as easy to read and understand</td>
<td>Xu and Chen (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability of content</td>
<td>The degree to which the blog’s content about the destination is perceived to be true, accurate, or believable</td>
<td>Xu and Chen (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interestingness of content</td>
<td>The degree to which the blog’s content is perceived to be interesting</td>
<td>Developed by this study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog usage enjoyment</td>
<td>The degree to which lurking on the blog is perceived to be inherently enjoyable</td>
<td>Ahn et al. (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>The willingness to visit the destination mentioned in the blog</td>
<td>Vijayasaratthy (2002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in Taiwan, along with PTT, the biggest billboard in Taiwan. Additionally, we invited students at our university to fill out a paper questionnaire. The survey lasted for 2 weeks. Two hundred and fifteen responses were obtained in this period (44 from travel blogs and PTT, 87 from MSN friends, and 84 from the university). Of the 215 samples, 179 responses were valid. Deletion criteria depended on the answers that were missed or if respondents chose more than one item.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Sample characteristics, descriptive statistics, and correlations

A total of 179 samples were collected. About 70% of our sample was going on a trip in the near future, and more than 60% accessed blogs for travel knowledge. The samples collected were suitable for further analysis because most of them could relate to the questionnaire items.

Since a profile of the blogger population is lacking and unclear, this study is unable to compare the demographics of general bloggers and the sample. However, empirical evidence may show that our sample could be, more or less, representative of bloggers in Taiwan. About 72.1% (n = 129) of the sample were female; about 85% of the sample ranged from 20 to 30 years old and were mostly students. This is in accordance with InsightXplorer (2007), which reported that more than 60% of students. This is in accordance with InsightXplorer (2007), which reported that more than 60% of students. This is in accordance with InsightXplorer (2007), which reported that more than 60% of students. This is in accordance with InsightXplorer (2007), which reported that more than 60% of students. This is in accordance with InsightXplorer (2007), which reported that more than 60% of students. This is in accordance with InsightXplorer (2007), which reported that more than 60% of students. This is in accordance with InsightXplorer (2007), which reported that more than 60% of students. This is in accordance with InsightXplorer (2007), which reported that more than 60% of students.

About 70% of our sample was going on a trip in the near future, and more than 60% accessed blogs for travel knowledge. The samples collected were suitable for further analysis because most of them could relate to the questionnaire items.

Table 2 reports variable means, standard deviation, and the Pearson correlations. No two variables are correlated above 0.70, a threshold for the multicollinearity problem (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995). An examination of the correlations shows initial support for all of this study’s hypotheses. The variables’ mean scores are all above 4.0, except for reliability of content (3.78). This may be because 70% of the sample was going on a trip very soon, and 60% was blogging for information. Most of the sample might, before replying to this survey, already have good perceptions of the blogs’ content and have a higher propensity for taking a trip.

4.2. Measurement model

This study conducted confirmatory factor analysis to test the reliability and validity of the measurement model. The goodness-of-fit indices indicate a moderate fit between the measurement model and the data (Chi-square = 144.61, p = 0.00, df = 80; Chi-square/df = 1.8; GFI = 0.9; AGFI = 0.85; NFI = 0.93; NNFI = 0.95; CFI = 0.97; IFI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.049; RMSEA = 0.067). The results of CFA are shown in Table 3. All item loadings were significant and larger than 0.5. The average variance extracted (AVE) of most constructs were larger than 0.5, except for that of novelty, which was 0.472. To improve the AVE of novelty, Q1.6 was deleted. Finally, all AVEs were larger than the square roots of correlations between variables, providing evidence of discriminate validity for the measurements.

4.3. Hypotheses testing

Partial Least Squares (PLS) is a commonly used statistical analysis method for latent variables. PLS can be used to confirm the validity of an instrument’s constructs and assess the structural relationship among constructs (Chin, 1998; Gefen, Straub, & Boudreau, 2000). It is able to model latent constructs even under conditions of non-normality and small- to medium-size samples (Chin & Newsted, 1996), making it appropriate to use for comprehensively testing the proposed model. Consistent with the distribution-free, predictive approach of PLS (Wold, 1985), the structural model was evaluated using the $R^2$-square for the dependent constructs and the size, along with the $t$-statistics and significance level of the structural path coefficients. The $t$-statistics were estimated using the bootstrap re-sampling procedure (500 re-samples).

We used structural equation modeling procedures implemented in smart PLS to test the hypotheses. Results of the hypotheses testing, shown in Fig. 2 and summarized in Table 4, show that the independent variables explain 31.7% of the variance in the blog usage enjoyment construct. All the $t$-statistics of every variable are significant, except for the path between reliability and enjoyment of blog usage. Therefore, H1, H3, and H4 were supported, but not H2. Blog usage enjoyment explains 11.1% of the variance in behavior intention. The $t$-statistic (4.586) is significant, which tends to support H5.

5. Discussions and managerial implications

Due to intensified competition, tourism destinations are looking for ways to attract tourists. Weblog represents a new information source that provides user-generated content, producing a higher level of inter-personal influence on behavior intention. A model based on information relevance, a measure of subjective quality, was built and tested to explain why and how some blogs have a greater impact than others on travelers’ intentions to visit a destination.

Some primary findings have contributed to our knowledge regarding the behavior intention to visit a tourist destination. First of all, the behavioral intention to visit a destination may be affected by relevant information. Criteria used for such judgment in- clude novelty, understandability, and interest (H1, H3, and H4). It is noteworthy that novelty exerts a more powerful influence than

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Table 2

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Int</th>
<th>Enj</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Und</th>
<th>Rel</th>
<th>Inter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Int</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.663</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enj</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.555</td>
<td>0.330*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.406*</td>
<td>0.459*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Und</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.247**</td>
<td>0.350*</td>
<td>0.289**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.172**</td>
<td>0.278**</td>
<td>0.339**</td>
<td>0.357**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.350*</td>
<td>0.144</td>
<td>0.211**</td>
<td>0.243**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 179; Two-tailed tests of significance were used.

Abbreviation: Int – Behavioral intention; Enj – Enjoyment; Nov – Novelty; Und – Understandability; Rel – Reliability; Inter – Interestingness.

* p < 0.05.
** p < 0.01.
the other two variables. However, some studies have contradictorily found that familiarity, not novelty, positively impact interest and likelihood of visiting a destination, along with perceived quality of the trip (Horng et al., 2012; Maestro, Gallego, & Requezo, 2007; Milman & Pizam, 1995). This discrepancy may arise from the different travel style preferences of tourists that value familiarity and those that are seeking novelty (Basala & Klenosky, 2001). Future studies may further explore the effects of travel style preference on the relationship between novelty and destination choice.

Secondly, interesting content is a new concept that reflects the information attribute of relevance, and may deserve further investigation in tourism research (H4). The effects of information relevance were originally examined from utilitarian aspect where jobs or work needed to be done (Xu & Chen, 2006). This finding indicates that, in the context of experiential consumption, interest should be considered as a component of relevance. In addition, there is a necessity for identifying more hedonic dimensions of information relevance. These issues represent some valuable opportunities for future researches.

However, the measurement scale of this variable is still immature. Following the “Cronbach α-LISREL” approach, interestingness was originally operationalized as a four reflective items to measure the perception of interestingness and sense of delight (Chen et al., 1999). This study, instead, followed Rossiter (2002) to focus on content validity requirement and designed a single-item measure. It seems that the results of hypotheses testing support Rossiter’s (2002) idea. However, PLS algorithm sets the latent variable operationalized as a single item equal to this item. Hence, it is questionable whether the variable is really latent (Henseler & Fassott, 2010). In addition, PLS estimates tend to be true value when the number of sample and items increase indefinitely (Wold, 1985). A single item measure, therefore, could make the results of hypothesis testing unreliable. A covariance based SEM technique, allows researchers to separate the relationships between constructs from their measurement errors, which favors the situation where the reliability of measure is less optimal (Chin, 1998). Unfortunately, there is still no precise way to estimate the measurement error of a single-item measure (Kline, 2011). A multi-items measure...
may resolve the above problems at the costs of adding unrelated items, or deleting related items (Rossiter, 2002). The sense of delight from interesting activities should be a complex concept involving various affections like fun, excitement etc. Chen et al. (1999) original scale measured the perception of fun only, which may deteriorate the content validity. In addition, whether these items are reflective is still questionable. For example, reading articles about restaurant experiences may make people feel pleasure, but not necessarily feel exciting; instead, reading articles about adventure experiences may make people feel arousal and exciting. Researchers are encouraged to determine the nature of these items, and refine this measure by using more suitable items to improve factorial analysis and reliability, and content validity concurrently.

Thirdly, researchers are encouraged to pay more attention to the effects of intrinsic motivation, perceived enjoyment in particular (H5). In previous literature, media conveying travel information, including motion pictures, magazines, advertisements, guidebooks, and Internet agents (Gartner, 1993, Frías et al., 2008), are all one-to-many mediums that lack interactivity in the information seeking task. Due to the interactivity between information providers and seekers, the structural characteristics of social media or blogs differ greatly from traditional media (Govers et al., 2007). The image creation process may also have recreational purposes, which may produce emotional responses from the user (Govers et al., 2007; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Future research may consider the effects of other emotional responses, such as curiosity, excitement or arousal, derived from surfing blogs (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

Unexpectedly, reliability of content did not have any effect on blog usage enjoyment (H2 was rejected). There are some explanations for this result. First of all, travelers’ reviews were often perceived to be more reliable than information given by tourism service providers (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). Secondly, reliability is, in part, determined by source credibility (Xu & Chen, 2006). Whether or not an information source is reliable involves a very complex judgment wherein the blogger’s current and past behaviors, relative to other information providers, influence people’s perceptions (Weiss et al., 2008). Empirical evidence has indicated that presentation of personal identification information may have no impact on source credibility; the rationale behind this finding is still unclear (Chesney & Su, 2010). Thirdly, judgments of credibility might depend on social and normative factors associated with the nature of the Internet environment, as well as values and priorities related to community values and the context of a website (Warnick, 2004).

Fourthly, aesthetic value can be gained from blogs by stimulating thinking, through imagining and envisioning a destination that is real and obtainable; it is also accomplished through fantasizing, the act of producing a multisensory image not drawn from personal experience (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). One can enjoy and dream about a trip, even if some facts are missing or vague. Finally, Watts et al. (2009) deemed credibility as a subjective and contextual quality of information, where many factors may impact its evaluation. For example, since tourism is a high risk product, risk-adverse tourists may need to experience the destination themselves before reliability can be judged. Current researches, however, have assumed the objective role of this variable and designed measurement scales accordingly (e.g., Shang et al., in press). Therefore, the measurement scales for this variable may not reflect its subjective nature.

The findings from this study indicate that blog can be used as an important tool for tourism marketing (Lin & Huang, 2006). Tourists are unlikely to build images using irrelevant information. Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) claimed, therefore, that the first rule of blogging is to provide relevant information to target customers. In this regard, this study has already found that novel, reliable, and interesting information regarding a destination, such as “I left my heart in the Aegean Sea” (Lin & Huang, 2006), can convince tourists to visit a destination. This provides marketing personnel and policy makers a new approach for promoting tourist destinations.

These findings lead to some practical tactics. Business should provide support to and help travelers build their blogs, creating a non-conventional, high-speed communication medium where people can exchange their travel experiences. Customers’ experiences can be collected, and their requirements and complaints can also be managed via this platform (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Also, companies can set up their own blogs to promote destinations, giving them closer contact with their target customers so they can act quickly (e.g., sales promotions) and get their feedback (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Additionally, travelers can be invited to write about and share their destination images with other people. For example, in 2009, the Taiwanese government invited and subsidized young people around the world to take a trip to Taiwan, on the condition that they would publish articles and images regarding their experiences in Taiwan on their blogs. Singh et al. (2008) referred to these types of travelers as thought leaders and urged managers to maintain these people’s blogs in order to provide current information, novel experiences, and deeper insights. Finally, marketers have traditionally tried to integrate the customer into their decision-making process. Customers are an important source of knowledge and can be a co-producer of products/services. Companies can design an evaluation judgment scale and ask customers to read and evaluate various blogs. Issues relevant to customers’ needs could be identified easily and quickly (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011).

6. Conclusions and future researches

Due to the nature of the Internet in general, and blogs in particular, abundant information may become a problem in information search; and the subjective information attributes of blog content may exert considerable influences on destination selection. Findings of this study suggest that tourists may only consult blogs that are subjectively perceived to be relevant to their information needs and concentrate on this limited information to build a destination image. During this image formation process, a perception of enjoyment may be produced to impact one’s intention. From the findings and the above discussions, some theoretical implications can be derived.

Interactivity and inter-personal influences have a great impact on blog or social media content. In addition, the widespread usage of multimedia technologies may further change the structural characteristics and information attributes of these new kinds of information sources, to the point where huge differences may exist between these new media formats and traditional sources, even face-to-face WOM. In the field of information systems, the effects of various measures of objective information quality on intrinsic motivations and behavioral intentions have been investigated for decades. Do these objective quality measures still play a role in the image creation process? Except for relevance, are there any other subjective information quality variables that deserve attention from tourism studies? What are the effects of these subjective quality measures, other than relevance? These questions have received relatively little attention.

Therefore, researchers are first encouraged to further explore the role of subjective information quality in tourism. For exam-
some studies are taking place, it is still in the early stages of development. How will social comparisons influence destination decisions (Shang et al., in press)?

Researchers are also encouraged to reconceptualize traditional information quality variables to decide whether they are purely utilitarian or not. Watts et al. (2009) maintained that some quality variables, relevance and credibility in particular, are subjective in nature. This study found support for the effects of relevance on destination decisions. Credibility, however, is most controversial since it is traditionally, and still is treated as an objective quality (Ho, 2007; Shang et al., in press; Zheng et al., in press). The natures of other variables can also be re-examined and conflicts should be resolved.

Recent studies related to subjective quality were unfortunately fragmental; each identified their own, unique subjective quality measures to serve and satisfy their researches’ purposes and contexts. For example, Bernardo et al. (2012) defined hedonic quality, as distinguished from pure utilitarian quality, for many businesses, including travel agents. Shang et al. (in press) explored the impacts of social comparison quality on investment decisions. Similarities and differences may be found among these studies; however, a consensus regarding the structure and dimensions of subjective quality is yet to be achieved. Further research is needed to identify more subjective quality variables in different contexts of hedonic consumption and develop a common dimensionality structure of subjective quality. Some claim that the theoretical and operational challenges of incorporating contextual usage into quality assessment must be resolved before advancements can occur (Watts et al., 2009). In this regard, Watts et al. advised researchers to account for the characteristics of the decision-makers and the decisions at hand.

Another major issue that requires further investigation is information overload encountered when surfing social media during image creation (Frias et al., 2008; Grant et al., 2008). Frias et al. (2008) found that destination image worsened when tourists faced with more information, but this effect was moderated by message involvement and Internet experience. Future researches can borrow other factors that alleviate the information burden from the information overload paradigm, such as destination involvement and travel experiences (Chen et al., 2009; Frias et al., 2008; Park & Lee, 2008). This will lead to further understanding of the causes and effects of information quantity on tourism decisions.

Furthermore, besides traditional informational characteristics, such as availability and currency, structural characteristics of social media not considered in this study, such as inter-personal influence and interactivity, should be taken into account. For example, links to other blogs or content feedback raise the question of severe content inconsistency (Shang et al., in press). Tourists can access many different travelers’ experiences with only a few clicks. How do information conflicts and contradictions among different blogs impact tourist decisions? How do readers consolidate different experiences and form their own unique image? Shang et al. (in press) measured perceptions of consistency and found that this variable positively impacts investment decision usefulness, but not satisfaction about the investment decision. The effect of consistency on tourism decisions, however, is yet to be explored.

More importantly, there are some occasions such as family or classmates trip that people travel in groups. In such context, pre-trip planning involves a social process among all actors participating group decision making and collaboration requiring many people to contribute and share individual intelligence, and co-agree on the travel plan. Blogging in this sense can be interpreted as a process of creating collective intelligence by writing, uploading, sharing and consolidating individual experiences (Sigala, 2012). However, various members may be conflict with each other on many issues like goals of the trip, budget constraints, preferences, etc. Then, how can a group reach a decision effectively and efficiently while surfing social media for advice? How does the structural nature of this social community affect tourism decisions, with issues like dynamics within social groups, consensus building processes, and roles of opinion leader (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1998)? How can collaborative and group decision technologies help making decisions? These issues receive relatively little attention from extant literature. Sigala’s (2012) pioneering work showed that users of geocollaborative portal, a group decision tool integrated with web 2.0 technologies, gave a greater importance to the impact of this tool on group decision process rather than the outcomes. Effects of many contextual factors such as users’ profiles, group size, type of trip etc., however, remains for further investigations.

In addition, pre-trip information search is a process composed of both rational calculation and pleasure seeking activities. Due to the very nature of this study, only an intrinsic motivational variable was incorporated into the theoretical model. Yet, a pleasurable trip without economic value may still not be an idea alternative for tourists. Therefore, extrinsic motivational factors such as usefulness of blog’s content can be further incorporated into the theoretical model in future studies.

Some limitations should be mentioned. First of all, readers should be cautious in interpreting the results since the sampling procedure was not random. While a convenient sampling method was used, self-selection could be a threat to validity. Comparison with sample demographics from other related studies in Taiwan proved that they were similar; therefore, the threat to external validity may be decreased to a certain extent. However, the sample may still suffer from cultural or geographical limitations, since there is no way to accurately compare the bloggers in Taiwan with other countries/areas due to the fact that the demographic of bloggers keep changing (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009).

Furthermore, the sample size was small, meaning the results may not be as stable and reliable. However, PLS, the statistical tool used in this study, is most suitable for testing hypotheses with small sample. Therefore, the above problems may not be too serious. Finally, this study asked informants to recall an impressive blog as the basis for filling out the questionnaire. This study, however, cannot be completely sure whether the blog led to the intention to visit a destination or vice versa. To prevent this problem, we restricted the subjects’ qualifications and added a question regarding the purpose of lurking on this blog, which was used to exclude unsuitable subjects.

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Appendix A.

Novelty of content

Q1_1 There was a substantial amount of new information in this blog
Q1_2 I knew little about the destination described in the blog before I came across this blog
Q1_3 This blog has a substantial amount of unique information that I have not come across before
Q1_4 Through this blog, I discovered a new destination
Q1_5 Through this blog, I learned about the destination's culture and way of life
Q1_6 Through this blog, I satisfied my curiosity regarding this destination

Reliability of content

Q1_7 I think the content of this blog is accurate
Q1_8 I think the content of this blog is consistent with facts
Q1_9 I think the content of this blog is reliable

Understandability of content

Q1_10 The information in this blog was easy for me to understand
Q1_11 I was able to follow this blog's content with little effort
Q1_12 Readers like me should find this blog easy to read

Interestingness of content

Q1_13 I think the content of this blog is interesting

Blog usage enjoyment

Q1_14 Using this blog provides me with enjoyment
Q1_15 Using this blog makes me feel relaxed and pleasant
Q1_16 Using this blog makes me feel happy
Q1_17 Using this blog is fun

Behavioral intention to visit a destination

Q2_1 If I get the chance to travel, I intend to visit the destination mentioned in this blog
Q2_2 When I go on a trip, the probability that I visit the destination mentioned in this blog is high


References

