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**TRAVEL INFORMATION EXCHANGES IN A COMPUTER-MEDIATED
ENVIRONMENT: A SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS OF THE *AFRICA* CATEGORY
ON THE *DEPARTURE LOUNGE* BRANCH OF THE *THORN TREE***

by

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Title: Travel information exchanges in a computer-mediated environment: a social network analysis of the *Africa* category on the *Departure Lounge* branch of the *Thorn Tree*

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This thesis reports on aspects of information exchange in an online network whose members share an interest in travel. The *Thorn Tree* resembles a real thorn tree on which travellers hang messages. Using social network analysis, the network resulting from members participating in online discussions considers the importance of structure and position in an exchange network to travel information exchanges on the *Africa* category. Different ways and frequency of participation result in communication patterns giving structure to an exchange network in which participation in a thread determines the presence of a tie between actors. Actors are placed in various relations to others; network analysis makes measurements such as levels of reciprocity, density and centrality possible.

At the heart of this study lies an inquiry into the Internet's impact on society, more so, human interaction in cyberspace where spaces, places and even communities are qualified as being "virtual". Scholars have different views in this regard. Some commentators claim that the Internet has spawned unique forms of community. The term "virtual communities" suggests new kinds of social interaction, with revolutionary consequences for local and global communication. Online communication could be a substitute for the loss of "traditional" physical communities, or even the cause of their demise. Others, however, praise the Internet for spawning communities even in the physical world. More complex theoretical

perspectives are indicative of a need to interrogate the very notions of community and contemporary social networks resultant from the many-to-many communication capabilities of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Apart from community formation on the Internet, the concept community has not been tested among travellers yet.

Networks, the ties people form and the exchanges that take place as a result of such ties relate to social capital. The notion of social capital in a computer-mediated environment needs more intense academic scrutiny. Nevertheless, for travellers and destination areas alike, information exchanges can be beneficial. However, not all information exchanges on the *Thorn Tree* or on the Internet *per se* are necessarily beneficial since verification is not always possible in a cyber environment.

Nevertheless, for travellers with a need for travel information in a sparse network characterised by weak ties, content analysis linked to a network analysis proves that weak ties are beneficial for spreading useful information. On the *Africa* category discussions are short while threads have very limited life spans. Of the total number of actors in this dataset (1 282), it was found that a few are particularly active, while many contribute a few messages to a limited number of threads and clearly do not interact regularly on the *Thorn Tree*.

Keywords

Computer-mediated social networks; Cyberstudies; Information exchanges; Internet; Leisure; Online communities; Social capital; Social network analysis; Travel information; Virtuality.

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