

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The question of whether or not one can find “community on-line is asked largely by those who do not experience it. Committed participants...have no problem in accepting that...they belong to them (Haythornthwaite et al, 1998: 212).

The Internet has gained popularity and acceptance by allowing free access to valuable information. For something to have value, in the Western sense of the word, there must be some way to collect that value, some form, although indirect, of monetary compensation, of exchange of capital (Jones, 1999: xxiii).

1. Introduction

In this, the concluding chapter, research findings are outlined under the sub-heading “Summary”. This also contains a reflection on the lessons learnt from this research. Since the research problem centres on travel information recommendations with regard to policy and practice for the tourism industry are outlined in the sub-section “Policy and practice”. This is part of the section “Recommendations”. Suggestions for further research are covered in the sub-section “Further research”, which is also part of the section “Recommendations”.

The section entitled “Discussion” reflects on methodological aspects and the research technique that was used in this study. Moreover, part of a substantive reflection, findings in this study are compared with findings that followed from a literature survey. The latter is covered in Chapter Two.

This study attempts to increase our understanding of the impact of the Internet on travel information exchange by focussing on the networks that form when people participate in online discussions. In the sub-section “Scientific reflection”, conclusions are reached with regard to the contribution this study has made by employing a network approach.

2. Summary

At the outset of Chapter One, it is stated that this study investigates aspects of information exchange in an online network whose members share an interest in travel. This online computer-mediated social network, called the *Thorn Tree*, is managed by *Lonely Planet* and can be found on the WWW at <http://www.lonelyplanet.com>. The *Thorn Tree* resembles a real thorn tree with its various branches on which travellers hang travel notes or other messages. Similarly, the cyber-based *Thorn Tree* accessible through the Internet is also divided into branches and categories, as explained in Chapter Three. This demarcation determined the boundary of the population for the dataset, since whole populations are considered for analysis when employing social network analysis. The background to the development of the research problem is given in Chapter One and this, together with other reasons given in Chapter Three, explains why only the *Africa* category of the *Departure Lounge* branch was selected.

In Chapter One the aim is stated as an attempt to determine what the structure of the network resulting from *Thorn Tree* members participating in online discussions reveals about travel information exchange on the *Africa* category of a branch called the *Departure Lounge*. In other words, network analysis is used to explain how human interaction produces differential access to information resources. Network analysis reveals “who talks to whom”; content analysis, albeit limited to a selected number of messages, considers “what gets exchanged”.

Network analysis necessitates a clearly demarcated population for inclusion into a dataset. As mentioned in Chapter One and discussed in detail in Chapter Three this study focuses on the *Africa* category while data capturing occurred for a month. Furthermore, only actors that contributed to or initiated threads are included in the dataset. Mere viewers or people who only read messages cannot be included since no means exist to capture them as actors in this dataset. Inclusion in the dataset subsequently means that an actor has either originated a thread (posting the first message), replied to messages or both. In certain cases actors contributed more than once to a thread that they initiated. From such different ways and frequency of participation, patterns emerge which give structure to the network and subsequently places actors in various relations to others in the network. It also allows for measurements such as levels of reciprocity, density and centrality, not excluding clique analysis.

Reflecting upon the findings of the literature review outlined in Chapter Two, the nature of the Internet's impact on society is used as background for contextualising the role of the *Thorn Tree* and the manner in which members interact with each other in this computer-mediated environment. While scholars have different views regarding the nature and effects of the Internet's impact on society, the ability to create expanded networks across the globe is uncontested. More importantly, however, is the scale of these networks since time and space are no longer inhibitors to network or even community formation. An outstanding development brought about by the Internet is that networks are centred on interest more than anything else. Although the utopian goal of an all-inclusive network is propagated, the so-called digital divide is, however, a reality since certain (groups of) people are excluded from the Internet which means that factors other than time and location determine participation and thus inclusion. Before the Internet, time and location often determined the reach of social connectivity and the reaches of such networks.

Concerning shared interest, *Thorn Tree* members share a basic interest in travel, although cognisance is taken of the fact that not all messages are limited to travel information. Some messages contain information of a personal nature too, while others are aimed at evoking strong emotions and opinions about aspects not solely related to travel or related leisure activities. Being a discussion forum for travellers, its international reach and members' interest in general world matters or even personal affairs are understandable. However, consideration has been given to the possibility that membership of the *Thorn Tree* could be reflective of the profile of users of the Internet *per se*. In the absence of any reliable statistics, no conclusiveness on the issue could be reached.

With reference to Chapter Two, a question about computer-mediated social networks that raises questions among scholars relates to community. Commentators claim that the Internet has spawned unique forms of community – virtual communities marked by new kinds of social interaction, with revolutionary consequences for local and global communication and politics. While comments have been made in Chapter Four regarding the Internet and the “global village” globalisation could perhaps be realised as mainstream society is freed from the constraints of nationality, gender, race and class. Perhaps online communication is merely a substitute for the loss of “traditional” physical communities, or even the cause of their demise. More complex theoretical perspectives indicate that we need to interrogate our very notions of community and contemporary social networks. Moreover, mindful of the Internet's ability to accelerate differences (Castells, 1996) taking cognisance of exclusivity and who owns technological advancements, the notion of an ever-increasing divide among races or even along the lines of gender and class cannot be excluded.

Clearly, defining community is at the base of different conclusions about the capabilities of the Internet and computer-mediated communication to provide for the formation and continued existence of communities. For the most part, “community”

still refers to neighbourhood. Yet, most of the social support and much of the information and resources that people require to function in their day-to-day lives come from sources outside of the local setting.

Rheingold, a scholar that has been noted for his groundbreaking work during the early years of the Internet, claims that the creation of a whole new type of community, the “virtual community,” has done much to highlight the potential for communities to form beyond the confines of geographic space. This point is not necessarily contested, but Rheingold has been criticised for not exploring the concept community in detail: assuming community when dealing with computer-mediated social networks is subsequently dangerous and unscientific. This reiterates the importance of context when considering communities on the Internet. As such, assuming that the group of *Thorn Tree* members is a community might be premature or worse still, unfounded. From the evidence produced by this study, the following observations were made that could be influential in deciding whether to describe the *Thorn Tree* as a community or not. First, few members make frequent contributions or know each other well. Second, most members make very few contributions and have very little knowledge of other members, which explains the low density of the network and the weakness of ties. Thirdly, although initial contact was initiated in a computer-mediated environment, attempts are made by a limited number of members to meet in person. The notion exists that those members who propose so-called “piss-ups” or make the effort to attend such face-to-face meetings are frequent Internet users, known members on the *Thorn Tree*, and well-travelled in the physical world. This notion has not been scientifically tested, however.

Another notable point regards to the findings of Simmel concerning the size of groups. In large networks, it is easier to ignore some or even most. In a larger group, each member has less time to speak, more points of view to absorb and a more elaborate structure within which to function. At the same time, an individual has greater freedom to ignore certain members or viewpoints than he or she would in a

smaller group. In network analysis, dyads are prominent although the triad (three member groups) could be regarded as more influential and important with regard to group dynamics. Triads are surely more instable and thus more dynamic than dyads.

Although the Internet has created new avenues for people to form and become part of social networks that are based more or less exclusively on interest, it is the nature of these computer-mediated environments and the manner in which communication takes place that could affect community and community formation (Holmes, 1997: 27-43) While some scholars, like Castells (1996) have reservations about the Internet and its influence on community, others like Putnam, who theorises about social capital, see in the Internet a vehicle for the revival of social capital. The biggest concern with the findings of so-called dystopians according to Hampton (2002) is their tendency to privilege the Internet as a social system removed from the other ways people communicate. The study of cyberspace has largely maintained the frame of “community” as something that is physically bounded, by geographies of bites and bytes, if not by streets and alleyways.

Hampton (2002: 2) remarks that while the social presence and media richness of computer-mediated communication may mean the exchange of fewer social cues than with in-person interactions, there is little doubt that computer-mediated communication can be used in the maintenance of community relations and in the exchange of aid and support. As outlined in Chapter Two and Four respectively, the findings of Haythornthwaite and Wellman are applicable. It is impossible to determine if the size of peoples' social networks, if the frequency of contact because of Internet use decrease, or if the use of computer-mediated communication allow people to shift the maintenance of social ties to a new communication medium. Alternatively, the Internet may even allow people to reinvest time spent on in-person contact to establish new ties or maintain a greater number of social network members online, as is illustrated by calls to attend so-called “piss-ups”.

Looking only at cyberspace and ignoring the network of social relations that extend to other social settings fails to consider the crosscutting nature of community and the many ways and the many places where people interact. In accordance with Hampton's views (2002), online relationships should not be treated as entities in themselves as if existing social networks and existing means of communication did not exist. This is proven beyond doubt by this study.

Apart from community formation on the Internet in general and the *Thorn Tree* specifically, the concept community has not been tested among travellers yet. The fact that travellers who happen to be in the same geographical location such as a train in India or a backpackers' lodge in New Zealand share information and socialise does not mean a community is in the making; nor does the fact that people who have visited the same travel destination or who share similar travel experiences can form a community on these two grounds alone.

This point has implications when considering what Wenger (1998) calls communities of practice. Clearly, "practice" has relevance when considering *Lonely Planet's* philosophy: informed travellers have more fun and can be more responsible and considerate towards the local populations of the places they visit. This implies that we can refer to the practice of travelling and that such practices should be done in a responsible manner that would minimise the negative impacts of tourism. It also implies sharing knowledge amongst each other.

In some instances, "practice" can be replaced by "interest", which leaves yet another concept to be tested, namely "communities or networks of interest" since membership of the *Thorn Tree* is largely based on a common interest. It is also "common interest" that influences social capital and the extent to which social ties are beneficial. Concerning "benefit", *Lonely Planet's* views on the value of useful information raises an academic interest about social capital among travellers, emphasising "capital". Benefiting from information exchanges, how does one

calculate the value of experiences that became possible only because a fellow traveller was willing to share a vital piece of information? The opposite is also true: How does one calculate the value of a missed experience that could very well have been a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence or opportunity?

Since travel and travel experiences involve travellers and local populations alike, social capital gains considerable importance and without a doubt, the *Thorn Tree* facilitates social capital among travellers since it allows members to share their experiences. This does not mean that interaction in terms of social capital is limited to information exchanges. Scrutinising the content of messages, as outlined in Chapter Four, clearly shows that members share more than just travel information. For some there is a real interest in the personal lives of other actors, for example.

For destination areas, as suggested above, information exchanges have benefits in as far as these exchanges minimize negative impacts and raise awareness of obscure or unknown destination areas which could lead to an increase in the number of tourists and tourist spending. This does not mean that all information exchanges on the *Thorn Tree* or on the Internet *per se* are beneficial. Cognisance must be taken of malicious attacks, a single bad experience that is offered as the norm (bad service or unsafe taxis for example), or uninformed views (most Caucasians predominantly view themselves as superior to others). Perhaps an increase in travellers to a particular destination area is unwanted, for whatever reason. These and other matters raise a number of important questions about the extent of the Internet's influence; we are only starting to understand the effect of the Internet on social capital. Notable, however, is the limited attention the Internet has thus far received from theorists of social capital. Fortunately, from the point of view of leisure studies, social capital is starting to draw attention.

With the advent of the Internet, computer-mediated communication has opened avenues for many-to-many communications on a scale hitherto unknown to people.

Where other mass media such as television and radio before it are predominantly one-way media, the Internet offers various avenues that enable ordinary people to participate actively. While this has raised hopes for a world-wide democracy and active citizen participation, applied to other real world phenomena such as travel an online discussion board like the *Thorn Tree* offers a platform for people to provide information based on their own experiences. As such, ordinary people become information providers and not only information consumers reliant on travel agents, brochures, marketing material and so forth. In this instance, the concept participant media becomes prevalent. Related to the question about its influence on consumer choices, another question can be added: Is there anything different about the message when it is disseminated across the Internet? This question falls squarely in the realm of media studies and is not covered in this study.

An issue mentioned above has relevance to views about the Internet. It involves the manner in which digital domains are used and experienced by those participating in it. Although described as a platform by some, is a digital domain on the Internet another place and space altogether? In Chapter Two views about cyberspace, virtuality and virtual reality are outlined. Gackenbach et al (1998: 323) claim that the real significance of the Internet lies beyond the fact that it is a collection of information and interactions that flow over it:

[T]he collection of all of these components creates a new wholeness which is greater than the sum of its parts. The unique experience of and through this system including all the aspects of shared experience, dynamic interactions, and automated interaction with information, is a new and powerful extension to our normal experiences. The cyberspace is indeed an entire world unto itself, of and from our more concrete world, but more abstract and powerful in its representation and reflections of it.

Before expressing any views about how the *Thorn Tree* could be experienced by those browsing through its messages or participating in online discussions, it is necessary to note that in some ways the near immediacy of online interactions and the potential adventures that could result from a click of the mouse can very well be transposed to real travel. However, is the *Thorn Tree* another “place” people go to when seeking travel information? In this study, although not a main concern or focus nor a question that could be answered by means of social network analysis, it is questionable whether the *Thorn Tree* would be experienced as another place or digital destination. Yet, alternate views might depend on the manner in which individual members experience being connected to the Internet itself. Reflective on findings in Chapter Two about cyberculture studies, notably those of Stolterman et al (ca 2002) and Silver (2000), it would seem that finding an answer to this question would necessitate qualitative research involving interviews and questionnaires.

Viewed in terms of social capital, as explained in Chapter Two and mentioned in Chapter Four, ties among people are assets since such ties put them in contact with one another which means that resources can be exchanged. Indeed, one such resource is information. In the process of communicating and exchanging information among members in a network of others, patterns emerge. This suggests, as outlined at the outset of this thesis the importance of structure in an exchange network, which receives particular attention in Sociology too. However, in communication studies, especially in those cases where it involves Information Science, network analysis is a useful technique to study the exchange of information among users across computer networks.

In real travel, as much as in cyberspace, strangers make contact and exert particular influences on each other. Conversations centre on a number of things, giving cues to conversing parties and steering conversations into near predetermined directions. This also hints at a special kind of (mis)trust: When travellers converse, seasoned travellers are quick to sense when to retreat. As such, Internet surfers have adapted

their communication skills and developed new ones to communicate effectively and safely in an online domain, since computer-mediated communication is different to other forms of communication. It is mostly the absence of normal cues (eye movement, body language, voice intonation, and so forth) that complicates text-based communication. Moreover, it is the absence of any certainty with regard to identities that has necessitated adaptations when relying on computer-mediated communication. The temporality of interactions on the Internet too adds to the caution for some but excitement for others.

With reference to people's travel information needs and the use of the Internet to satisfy such needs, travellers in the physical world often exchange information amongst each other. Stokowski's landmark study (1988) points out how embeddedness in a network influences consumer choices and affects leisure experiences. In the case of the former, knowledge about leisure possibilities depends on accessibility to sources of information, which influences leisure choices. In the tourism cycle, gathering information is the first phase in the consumer decision-making process. In the physical world, travellers often converse and exchange travel information in meeting places *en route*, for example bars, backpacker lodges, stations and so forth. In the physical world, some people might ask a lot of questions, while others would be more inclined to reflect on their experiences without being prompted; some opt to remain quiet. Explained in Chapter Three, one of the premises that can be tested using social network analysis is the relations among *Thorn Tree* members based on information exchange, i.e. the extent to which members are sources, sinks or transmitters. Based on a one-mode network, the ego-networks of a limited number of actors were analysed thus indicating who communicates with whom. *Dayo* was classified as a transmitter, *dysfunctional* as a sink and *JayDawg* as a source while *NgaDef* was noted for being a transmitter with high reciprocated and total ties. *Micksailor* posted the highest number of messages (20), consisting mostly of questions about particular regions or

destinations in Africa after an opportunity has seemingly arisen for this actor to travel to this continent.

Apart from findings derived from a network analysis (one-mode), a content analysis of the contributions of the above-mentioned actors revealed more about the possible value of their contributions in terms of the capital others could derive from such contributions. Content analysis in this regard reflects on what is being said or exchanged.

It is however, necessary to consider aspects such as reciprocity and centrality in order to characterise the network and determine the role of specific actors. While the levels of reciprocity in this network are relatively low, closeness too is low. Only 23 actors engaged at one time or another in a reciprocal reply. Two actors are noted for their relative high levels of reciprocity, namely *DanFromPerth* and *NgaDef*. As outlined in Chapter Four, closeness is also related to betweenness which is often brought into relation with the influence an actor exerts. No-one in this network is particularly close to anyone else which means that no-one really exerts particular power (as measured and viewed in network analytical terms).

Apart from the above, it is apt to comment on cliques and clique formations in networks. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the strongest definition of a clique is some number of actors who have all possible ties present among themselves. Among the 1 282 actors, 1 027 threads and 6 547 messages, analysis indicates that there are 301 3-member cliques, 45 4-member cliques and 6 5-member cliques. This is considered low and corresponds well with other findings gleaned from a network analysis of this dataset that reiterate the low density of this network.

The differences between the total number of actors (1 282) and the number of posters or repliers indicate the number of actors who did not initiate or reply to a thread. Approximately 50% of all actors initiated at least one thread, 60% of all

actors replied to at least one thread and 5.6% neither posted nor replied to any message. The top 25 repliers account for approximately 27% of the total threads (postings), 3% of all repliers and 2% of all actors. As indicated in Chapter Four, the coefficient of variation for each of the 25 posters ranges from 3.9 (*dysfunctional*) to 8.6 (*londonviking*) indicating weak ties to the rest of the actors. In Chapter Four it is noted too that only three actors (*Dayo*, *NgaDef* and *Pizza_Wheel*) appear in the top 25 posters and repliers. With the exception of these three actors, actors are predominantly posters (sources) or repliers (sinks) and not both (transmitters).

As outlined in Chapter Four, the median response is 3, the average response is 3.63 and the mode response is 1. These results estimate that 25% of all threads terminate within 2¼ hours, 50% of all threads terminate within 20½ hours and 75% of all threads terminate within 56½ hours. This suggests a rather short duration for threads. Perhaps, similarly to an information kiosk, once answers to requests have been offered, those requesting the information move on. Similarly, travellers might converse while waiting for a train or while sitting in a bar. Answering questions and exchanging information about travel experiences does not suggest extended relations once a journey has been concluded. As such, the discussions on the *Thorn Tree* perhaps mirror what happens between travellers in real life too. This view is supported by the research findings: the number of views suggests that a large number of people are information consumers or sinks without making contributions. This is supported by the fact that the proportion of replies received to the number of views of a message is also very low: one in twenty views receives a reply.

From the above, the matter of the strength of weak ties comes to the fore. Weak ties, as is the case with the *Africa* category, are not useless. In fact, weak ties often connect people who are dissimilar, which tend to link people to other social worlds, providing new sources of information and other resources. This is clearly the case in a computer-mediated network such as the *Thorn Tree*. The tendency for ties to be weak rather than strong, as proven by the network analysis of the *Africa* category, is

furthermore emphasised by the ease and placelessness of electronic communication. Clearly, through the global reach of the Internet, people can belong to any number of specialised networks based on interest, moreover, contributions to a network can be made by members with varied backgrounds, points of view, experiences and intent.

3. Discussion

3.1 Methodological reflection

Rice (1994) outlines the application of a network approach to the study of computer-mediated communication systems and identifies a few central distinctions in computer-mediated communication research that uses network analysis methods. Notably, in the so-called structural phase, Rice mentions Contractor and Eisenberg who attempted to integrate Giddens's structural theory and Burt's structural theory of action to develop a useful initial framework for applying a network perspective to the study of computer-mediated communication systems (1994: 169). As outlined in Chapter Two, social network analysis examines patterns of resource exchange among actors to determine how and what resources flow from one actor to another. This corresponds with Rice's remark that for the majority of network-oriented computer-mediated communication research the unit of analysis is at the level of individual responses or ego-networks (1994: 172). Regular patterns of relations reveal themselves as networks, with actors as nodes in the network and relations between actors as connectors between nodes.

Haythornthwaite et al (1998: 210) states that since computer networks are also social networks, a social network perspective is especially useful for studying computer-mediated communication. Many of the issues of reaching others, exchanging information and support and maintaining community lend themselves to

discussion from a social network perspective. From this perspective, ties and exchange among computer-mediated communication users are the key elements for analysis (Haythornthwaite et al, 1998: 213). This, more than anything else, became a convincing factor in the choice of research methodology in the study of the nature and extent of interaction among and levels of exchange between members of the *Thorn Tree*.

A characteristic of social network analysis that adds to its usability for the study of Internet-based networks is the fact that this research technique strives to derive social structure empirically, based on observed exchanges among actors. Of particular importance are the core differences between social network analysis and other research approaches in defining “group”. Other research approaches, as outlined by Haythornthwaite et al (1998: 214), define group by an *a priori* classification of its boundaries. In contrast, a social network analyst examines what relations exist between actors before labelling them as a group. It is the patterns of “who exchanges what resources with whom” that gives the category of “group” its usefulness as a construct.

With its application to leisure and tourism as outlined by Stokowski (1988), social network analysis has its roots in sociology and particularly network theory. However, Homans (1986) claims that social network theory cannot be a general sociological theory since the existence of networks themselves still has to be explained. Homans, as mentioned in Chapter Two, does acknowledge that network analysis should help to clarify what social phenomena it has to explain. In this study, located within the cadre of Information Science, social network analysis proved an appropriate research technique to study the nature and extent of information exchange among *Thorn Three* members in a computer supported social network.

As expected, network analysis alone cannot reveal anything about the content of messages, i.e. the nature of the information that is exchanged. Based on the

findings of a network analysis, participation in a thread through posting messages are the reason for the existence of links (ties) between actors in a one-mode network. However, actors are related to messages and threads by viewing it as an affiliation, i.e. a two-mode network. This enabled the researcher to identify specific threads and actors, i.e. threads with the highest number of replies and actors that were clearly the most prominent source, transmitter or receiver. In this regard, one common thread (“Masai Mara or Amboseli or Ngorogoro Crater?”) between *Micksailor* and *Dayo* caused the former to be included in the two-mode graph.

Content analysis was used in conjunction with network analysis to investigate the content of messages in order to determine the nature of information exchange. This suggests that network analysis alone cannot lead to insight regarding the nature of exchanges. This was expected, since network analysis is used in conjunction with qualitative techniques such as content analysis to add to the interpretation of network analytical research results.

In conclusion to this sub-section it can be stated that although contributions to threads determine actors’ inclusion in this dataset and position in this network, amongst other things, it is the content of these contributions that determines the value other actors might attach to it and the influence it might have on tourism in general.

3.2 Substantive reflection

Since this study involves the Internet, it is necessary to reflect upon the study of computer networks. However, this study is foremost a social network analysis. It subsequently reiterates findings by other studies that computer networks are predominantly social networks. Computer networks are inherently social networks,

linking people, organisations, and knowledge. In this study, the emphasis falls upon travel information.

Studying the exchange of travel information using a network approach, Chapter Two states that a limited number of studies employing a network approach to travel information exchanges exist. The research was done before the large-scale integration of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) into everyday society (Stokowski, 1994: 74-75). Employing social network analysis to gain insight into travel information exchange among people in a computer-mediated social network, attempts at expanding the applicability of network analysis. Subsequently, a comparison of results is in order.

This study has shown that a network analysis of a computer-mediated social network is capable of mapping the simultaneous interactions of multiple actors. While relationships or ties can exist depending on what is measured, in this study relations exist between those actors who post messages to the same thread. An important finding in this study that reiterates the overall view regarding the strength of network analysis is that people have differential access to resources such as information or to other people. Correspondingly, different opportunities arise for participation.

It has also been proven beyond doubt that computer-mediated social networks have a particular structure since they comprise specific patterns of relational communication and interaction that are distributed among the roles and positions of social behaviour. Importantly, social networks are systems of people bounded by context. In the case of travellers using a computer-mediated environment, the *Thorn Tree* offers such a context. Resultantly, exchanges take place, such as travel information exchange.

This study furthermore agrees with other studies about travel information exchange in as far as travellers are willing to share information. Importantly, the information is based on recollections, which often change over time although this was not tested in any way in this study. This study does, however, concur with a study about information exchanges among backpackers (Murphy, 2000), as noted in Chapter Two. Results indicate that gathering information on destinations/businesses is a motivation for them to interact with one another. However, several factors influence the value placed on information, including the consistency of reports received, personal feelings or attitudes towards the provider, and previous expectations regarding the destination or business under discussion. In this study, however, the value actors place on the contributions of others was not tested.

In concurrence with studies about social network analysis as an approach for the study of information exchange, this study reiterates the findings of other studies. A notable study is that of Haythornthwaite (1996) that also found that information relationships indicate what kinds of information are being exchanged, between whom and to what extent. The work of Wellman (1997) also needs to be mentioned here. Furthermore, the pattern of relationships between actors reveals the likelihood that individuals (or actors in a network) will be exposed to particular kinds of information. However, the likelihood of their considering that data to be authoritative was not ascertained in this study and as pointed out in this chapter as well as in Chapter Four, something that needs different research tools. It is however, notable, as pointed out above too that this study concurs with a landmark study by Granovetter (1973) that information can be useful despite the sparse nature of a network.

Usefulness is a concept that could also be related to social capital in as far as it denotes value, since value in turn hints at capital. Warde and Tampubolon (2001) reflect on the way in which personal ties affect the nature and content of consumption. Stating that it is “banal to observe that friends, kin, colleagues and

neighbours influence anyone's pattern of consumption", these researchers indicate that comparatively little work exists on how this process operates. Since no other substantial evidence exists either to elucidate on matters of how social capital influence choice and taste with regard to consumer choices in respect of travel destinations too, no clear conclusions could be drawn on the possible impact social capital on the *Africa* category can have. However, it is necessary to point out that academic progress is made in the study of social capital and leisure. This is proven by the fact that a special edition of the authoritative *Journal of Leisure Research* intends to publish findings in this regard in the fourth quarter of 2005.

3.3 Scientific reflection

This study highlights the usability of social network analysis when doing research about communication among members of a computer supported social network. As such, it reiterates the fact that dealing with the Internet the so-called "virtual" nature of the data does not mean that it ought to be handled in a manner different from data that was collected in other ways. The fact that large samples can be taken without the usual constraints does not mean that attention should not be given to errors in data. For this reason, although social network analysis relies on various statistical calculations that could point out problems with the dataset, a number of descriptive statistical analyses were included that assisted with finding errors in the data.

However, in order to reflect on the nature of travel information exchanges among members of the *Thorn Tree*, it was necessary to undertake a limited content analysis too, i.e. analysing the contributions by following the messages constituting threads in chronological order. In the absence of any reliably biographical information, this revealed some information about actors. This assisted the researcher to gain insight into the contributions certain actors made which also helped to explain the findings gained from the network analysis.

Considering the landmark work of Stokowski (1988) in which the importance of place within a network of others can play with regard to travel experiences and related consumer choices, this study addresses the need to reconsider the importance of the Internet as a means to establish networks among people that in turn could influence leisure choices. As such, the Internet offers another channel or avenue to acquire information and establish contacts.

What has indeed transpired from this study is the effect of the Internet on society especially with regard to travel and tourism. As such, this study's contribution is concerned with the nature and extent of travel information exchanges in a digital domain such as the *Thorn Tree*. By using network analysis, the research design relies solely on the data that is obtainable from *Lonely Planet's* website. Due to the way in which the *Thorn Tree* is managed and the data that is captured by the *Lonely Planet* servers usable data was obtainable. From this, after converting the raw data as outlined in Chapter Tree, a dataset could be prepared that was used to construct the matrix on which the graphical representations and other statistical calculations associated with network analysis were done. *UCINET* software application was used in conjunction with *Netdraw*.

4. Recommendations

In the following sub-section, recommendations are made that could be helpful to the tourism industry. The manner in which the Internet enable people across the world to share in experiences thus enhancing the power of word-of-mouth to truly global levels has an influence on advertising and marketing campaigns. Members of social networks can surely benefit from the social capital present within the ranks of such expanded groups; rumours could also be damaging to all concerned.

4.1 Policy and practice

As outlined in Chapters Two and Three respectively, social networking and community involve the exchange of resources among actors. With the *Thorn Tree* as an example, the question arises to what extent the exchanges that take place among *Thorn Tree* members actual travel and tourism choices are influenced. The answer has far-reaching consequences, not only for viewpoints of a theoretical nature, but moreover for the leisure industry too. If a positive correlation exists between exchanges in computer-mediated social networks and customer behaviour in the real world, it would mean that leisure destinations and providers could learn much from the online discussions among travellers. After all, word-of-mouth has always been considered a powerful marketing technique. In as far as “word-of-mouth” entails messages across the Internet, word-of-mouth in this regard does not entail face-to-face communication but is reliant on computer-mediated communication in a digital domain that is text-based. This raises the question whether the medium influences the message. Are messages on digital discussion boards more trustworthy and believable than spoken words in face-to-face conversations, for example?

Interaction across the Internet certainly raises questions about trust. While Giddens' views (1990) on the matter are relevant as outlined in Chapter Two the levels of anonymity that could be achieved on the Internet bring to the fore the matter of identity too. Related to this study, the question arises whether the messages travellers post on the *Thorn Tree* are more or less believable than were they to be communicated through other media, i.e. print, radio, television or face-to-face or where the identities of actors are known.

Important for the tourism industry, what contingency plans and marketing actions need to be in place in order to circumvent the negative impacts of rumours, blatant lies and other unfounded or skewed views expressed in a digital domain such as the

Thorn Tree? No advertising is allowed on the *Thorn Tree* and *Lonely Planet* has strict policies with regard to advertisements. However, tourism authorities can indeed use a forum such as the *Thorn Tree* in a responsible manner to rectify skewed views or restore credibility where it is due. Research about the Internet as tourism marketing tool is not complete and many questions still need to be answered, such as trustworthiness and reachability of Internet-based marketing.

Considering the large amounts of money that gets spent on advertising annually, tourism service providers and their advertising agents can gain considerable insight into the consumer needs of travellers by scanning the threads on the *Thorn Tree* and other online discussion boards.

While *Lonely Planet* is at pains to draw attention to the fact that it cannot be held responsible for any views expressed by members on its electronic discussion board, it stands to reason that the views expressed by *Thorn Tree* members could affect their consumer choices. The extent of this effect was not measured in this study because it was not one of the aims. As outlined below, this is perhaps a question for future research.

4.2 Further research

With the advent of the Information Age, people have become inundated with information, to the extent that terms such as “information overload” have entered our dictionaries. The beginnings of the information age could be traced back to the invention of the telegraph in the 19th century and not the Internet. With the telegraph, the speed of information essentially separated itself from the speed of human travel. As such, information has taken on not only a speed of its own but also a life of its own. With computers, according to some scholars as noted by Brown and Duguid (2000: 17-18), this decisive separation has entered a second phase. Information

technologies have become capable of producing information independent of human intervention.

Brown and Dugiud (2000) argue that it is important not to overlook the significance of information's power to breed upon itself. However, they call for some caution and the need to ponder:

It might be time to retreat from exuberance (or depression) at the volume of information and to consider its value more carefully. The ends of information, after all, are human ends. The logic of information must ultimately be the logic of humanity. For all information's independence and extent, it is people, in their communities, organizations, and institutions, who ultimately decide what it all means and why it matters (2000:18).

Computers have been heralded as the passports to seemingly limitless stores of information. It has also been suggested that this liberating ability to be part of the information superhighway could satisfy people's *wanderlust* without the need to wander from the keyboard (Brown and Dugiud, 2000: 20). Despite Brown and Dugiud's critique of modern-day society's reliance on and simultaneous bombardment with information, the same technology has also made it possible for communities to exist in cyberspace. As such, so-called virtual communities, like their real life counterparts continue to thrive on information. Moreover, in a computer-mediated social network like the *Thorn Tree*, members add meaning to the countless bits of information stored on *Lonely Planet's* servers.

5. A final remark

Urry (2003: 156) claims that there is a large and increasing scale of travel that has grown simultaneously with the proliferation of communication devices that might substitute travel. Although Microsoft's advertisement caption "Where do you want to go today?" might entail "stay in front of your computer", members of the *Thorn Tree* show that no amount of Internet surfing can beat the pleasures of physical travel as an expression of leisure. In accordance with Urry (2003: 155; 171), who seeks to examine the place of travel within the emergent pattern of a networked sociability, this study proves that many people use the Internet in search of travel information: avenues vary and include the WWW or other avenues such as newsgroups and discussion groups. Based on these and also other sources of information, travellers make consumer choices. Unique travel experiences might fast become something of an enigma in an age where information about every destination on earth is available at the touch of a button or constantly streamed across other mass media channels such as TV, at least, the Internet has made it possible for those with physical or other barriers to share in others' travel experiences. Moreover, electronic discussion boards such as the *Thorn Tree* resemble an open-to-all travelogue that is constantly updated by the countless members who contribute to it.

Notably, the concept community is not applied in this study to either the computer-based social network that exists as a result of the *Thorn Tree* or to tourists travelling in real time between locales in the physical world. Yet, a content analysis of the messages in the dataset underpinning this study suggests that an electronic discussion board set in cyberspace offers a trustworthy source of (first-hand) travel information. As much as interactions in a backpacker's lodge for example might be valuable yet short-lived, cyber-based interactions with strangers known only by their screen names are in most instances limited but can fulfil specific needs.

These needs, often closely related to reasons for connecting to the Internet, can go beyond the functional level and include social, psychological or hedonic needs. Although it was not the intention of this study to find reasons why people post certain messages, contextualising conversations are important especially in an effort to understand the presence or absence of connections among certain actors. Although a context analysis was not developed or incorporated with the network and content analyses underpinning this study, not all conversations in this discussion board relate directly to travel. This in itself indicates that electronic domains such as the *Thorn Tree* can be meeting places for the sake of meeting and sustaining social ties with others based on shared interests.

The Internet and associated technologies have proven without doubt humans' ability to replace, stimulate and indeed reconstitute the world by way of technoscience, and indeed in the image of technoscience. While this study has emphasised the communicative abilities of the Internet by considering the exchange of travel-related information in a computer-mediated social network aimed at travellers, it is this particular transformation of modes of communication and information that lies at the heart of setting postmodern technosciences apart from for example Enlightenment science. In this regard Holmes (1997: 2) rightly remarks that human needs are no longer given, they are as much a product of the way the world is changed as are the commodities produced to satisfy them. For Holmes, as suggested by this study too, one very "special kind" of transformation brought about by postmodern technoscience is noteworthy: the transformation of communication and information. In this, the transformation of social context is achieved by the conversion of the communicative and informational contexts in which the needs for products and services arise. Since time and space are no longer real factors, modes of social integration and social recognition are reshaped to adapt to the new digital environments in which even identities are fluid.
