Appraising netnography: towards insights about new markets in the digital tourist era

Mao-Ying Wu & Philip L. Pearce

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RESEARCH NOTE

Appraising netnography: towards insights about new markets in the digital tourist era

Mao-Ying Wu[a]* and Philip L. Pearce[b]

[a]*Tourism, School of Management, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou 310058, People's Republic of China; [b]Tourism, School of Business, James Cook University, Townsville, Qld 4811, Australia*

Netnography, a naturalistic and predominantly unobtrusive technique developed by Kozinets for exploring online contributions, was the centrepiece of this appraisal. The authors argue that netnography could play a valuable role in enhancing our understanding of (a) rapidly changing tourist markets, (b) the growth of new markets and (c) the perspectives of culturally distinctive groups. The analysis of the blogs of Chinese recreational vehicle tourists who had visited Australia was chosen as a case study. In studying an emerging market segment from a rapidly changing and culturally different community, the case represented a key test of the value of the approach in generating insights. Practical steps to employ the method – entrée, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation and member checks – were illustrated. Issues arising from the case study for the application of netnography in tourism research were highlighted. They included the value of the detail inherent in the postings, the attendant ability to consider the material using conceptual schemes, the practicality of getting additional information, the need to fully address ethical concerns and the value of supplementary perspectives. Suggestions for ways to adapt the technique for better information retrieval and interpretation were also provided.

Keywords: netnography; digital tourist era; emerging phenomenon; Chinese RV tourists; Australia

1. Introduction

The substantial increase in online social networking has influenced the way many people, including tourists, communicate and share information. These processes also create opportunities for social scientists to follow people's social activities and encounters on the Internet and through other technologically mediated communications. In this social and digital environment, novel research methods to study how we think, feel and behave are being developed. One of these new methods is netnography, an adaptation of traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 1997, 2002). The aim of this paper is to explain, comment on and illustrate this technique with an extended example of its application in the tourism field.

Tourism, a special component of our social life, has been strongly influenced by information and communication technologies and a new digital tourist era can be identified (Pearce, 2011). Travel- and tourism-related topics are frequently discussed in online communities (Banyai & Glover, 2012). Further, travel blogging and other styles of communication online have become part of the tourist experience. These online tourist activities

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*Corresponding author. Email: maoying.wu@gmail.com

provide an opportunity to investigate several components of tourist behaviour, especially at the post-consumption stage (Bosangit, Dulnuan, & Mena, 2012; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012).

In particular, netnography can be proposed as a powerful method to understand new markets and new travel activities such as couch-surfing, the gap year in Asian countries, AirBnb (Air Bed and Breakfast) and the rise of slow tourism. The case considered in this study is the Chinese recreational vehicle (RV) tourists' motivations and their travel routes in Australia. The case combines the interest in a rapidly developing culturally different market (outbound Chinese travellers) with an emerging activity pattern (drive tourism).

As a methodologically oriented article, this study begins with a review of netnography, including its background, its notable features and its current application to a range of topics. The work then briefly reviews the context for the case – Chinese outbound tourists, a fast growing and changing market. Next, it employs netnographic analysis and examines three core questions about Chinese RV tourists in Australia: Who are they? What are their motivations? And where do they go? The last section of the article discusses some insights about netnography both derived from and beyond the case study. It then describes ways in which netnography might be used to play a greater role in innovative tourism research.

2. Netnography

Netnography can be identified as 'a new research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). The method was developed in the context of the increasing popularity of virtual communities where people share interests, and build social ties (Kozinets, 1999).

The netnographic approach has some commonalities as well as some differences from traditional ethnography. Both research approaches can be described as naturalistic and not manipulative, and thus powerful in gaining an insider's perspective on a given online/offline culture (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). The ability of ethnography and netnography to access emic voices may be similar, but the online approach provides scope for studying a larger number of individuals (Kozinets, 2010). Further, netnography sometimes provides researchers with access to groups of people who may otherwise be difficult to reach. For example, there are difficulties in accessing participants engaged in unconventional activities (e.g. couch-surfing). Similarly, those whose travel involves sensitive topics, such as having cosmetic surgery or undertaking sexual adventures, are also difficult to access. In these instances, the anonymity of the computer interface in social communication offers some degree of privacy which may encourage individuals to post comments about their experiences (Langer & Beckman, 2005).

Research ethics have been a critical concern for researchers for a long time (Diener & Crandall, 1978). In Kozinets' view, ethical netnographic research needs to obey the following rules:

> (1) The researcher should fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any study; (2) the researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity of informants; (3) the researchers should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched; and (4) the researcher should take a cautious position on the private-versus-public nature of the medium. This fourth requirement directs the researcher to contact community members and to obtain their permission (informed consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly cited. (Kozinets, 2002, p. 65)

Some researchers, however, have argued that these ethical guidelines should be re-considered (Haggerty, 2004; Langer & Beckman, 2005). Kozinets' guidelines make

sense in restricted (semi) private online communication and are closely allied to those used in traditional ethnography. When a publically accessible online community is being considered, these guidelines are, arguably, too rigorous and also endanger the unobtrusiveness of online communication studies. A further discussion of priorities surrounding this issue will be considered in the particular case study being investigated.

In most instances, the netnographic approach is time-saving and inexpensive. These comments are most applicable in the introductory stages of accessing information through searching relevant websites and online communities (Mkono, 2012). By way of contrast, the analysis of large amounts of text and visual material can be demanding on the researchers' time and budget. As a consequence of some of the positive features mentioned above, netnography has gained a number of followers in social and marketing research. It has been used to detect perceptions and attitudes towards various topics, including dissecting café culture (Kozinets, 2002), managing cross-cultural wedding ambivalence (Nelson & Otnes, 2005), understanding cosmetic surgery experiences (Langer & Beckman, 2005), reviewing ticket distribution channels for live music events (Beaven & Laws, 2007), assessing the salsa dance experience (Hamilton & Hewer, 2009), itemising criteria for successful destination websites (Osti, 2010) and interpreting an exotic food experience (Mkono, 2011). It has also recently been adopted by tourism researchers (Ismail, Melewar, & Woodside, 2010; Janta, Lugosi, Brown, & Ladkin, 2012; Mkono, Markwell, & Wilson, 2013; Podoshen, 2013; Podoshen & Hunt, 2011). A review of these empirical studies suggests that all the researchers have found netnography to be a powerful method in eliciting natural and detailed descriptions about both general activities and some sensitive activities.

In addition, the authors of this study argue that netnography can be used to explore newly emerging phenomena, where relatively little is known about the market and the tourists' experiences. This special feature of netnography is highlighted in this article by exploring a case study of the Chinese recreation vehicle driving market in Australia. To facilitate the understanding of the case, a brief review of the growing and changing Chinese outbound tourist market is presented before illustrating the application of the netnographic analysis.

3. Chinese outbound tourists: a fast growing and changing market

In 2012, China generated 82 million outbound tourists, which represents an annual increase of 16.7%. Further, the number is expected to keep growing (China Tourism Academy, 2013). The size of the Chinese outbound markets and its growth have gradually attracted worldwide attention from various destination marketing organisations (OTTI, 2012; Tourism New Zealand, 2012; TRA, 2012a). Research about the Chinese outbound tourist behaviour is also developing (COTRI & PATA, 2010; TRA, 2012b; Xu & McGehee, 2012).

The available studies have suggested that the needs and characteristics of Chinese tourists are evolving, with increasing numbers of independent travellers being recorded (Arlt, 2013; Pearce, Wu, De Carlo, & Rossi, 2013). Independent travel is seen by the growing numbers of Chinese tourists as having several advantages. Travelling by oneself or in a small social group can help enhance one's knowledge and skills more than being in a large travel group (Tsaur, Yen, & Chen, 2010). Independent travel is also connected with being able to pursue a flexible itinerary and prevents the tourists being forced into obligatory shopping opportunities, which characterise some commercial group tour itineraries (Huang & Weiler, 2010). Further, being one's own boss is not just liked more but confers more status for the young generation of Chinese (Corigliano, 2011; Xiang, 2013).

The influence of social media and its role in shaping Chinese tourist behaviour are also notable. It has been well documented that tourism is an information-intensive business (Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012). Social media is playing an increasingly important role as an information source for travellers (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013). The Chinese market, especially the independent travel market, is also well connected and active online (Kristensen; 2013; Pearce, Wu, & Osmond, 2013; Shao, 2012). In a recently released report, The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2013) observed that there are 564 million 'netizens' and the number is still climbing. It has also been well documented that tourism blogs (Volo, 2010; Xiang, 2013) and review websites (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Mkono, 2011) have become essential information sources for travel planning and reflection. These information and communication options are keys to help understand the contemporary Chinese market.

In the Chinese outbound tourism market, it has also been witnessed that increasing numbers of independent Chinese tourists are renting vehicles when overseas, particularly in the USA, Australia and New Zealand (Qyer, 2012). Some of them even opt for unfamiliar vehicles such as driving a RV. The questions to be examined in the case study are who are these Chinese RV tourists, what motivates them and what routes did they take? In the present study, this newly emerging RV activity serves as an example of the kind of novel development where netnographic analysis can be examined and its role in providing formative information assessed.

4. Research procedures: using netnography

This section of the study reports how netnographic analysis is employed to understand a developing market. This study follows the typical procedure of doing a netnographic study: entrée, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, research ethics and member checks (Kozinets, 2002).

4.1 *Entrée: selecting the most informative online community*

At this initial stage, it is important to identify the particular online forums appropriate to answer the study goals (Kozinets, 2002). Bearing the research questions in mind, as specified in terms of the who, why and where approach to RV travel, several criteria were adopted to select the site. These criteria include those suggested by Kozinets (2002), for example, (1) identify a focused and research question-relevant segment, topic or group; (2) focus on a higher 'traffic' of postings; (3) obtain more detailed or descriptively rich data and (4) seek out more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question. The researchers added another criterion: that is (5) try to reflect the voices of the market leaders whose behaviour may be followed by a large population.

In considering all the online travel word of mouth channels classified by Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008), travel blogs and virtual communities were positioned as our primary target, because they provide a wide scope for communication and are usefully asynchronous; that is they enable postings and tracking over time to be considered. 'Qyer.com' and 'Sina.com' were finally selected as the online platforms to study. Qyer.com specialises in providing a forum for discussing outbound independent travel. It is the most popular and interactive online community among the Chinese outbound travellers. Qyer.com, when considered at the end of December 2012, had 477,530 travel blogs, with 14,030 about travelling to and in Australia (Qyer, 2012). The second site, Sina.com, is China's most popular comprehensive online community. It covers all aspects of life. Sina blog, as one of its sub-

communities, has also been well received among the ordinary Chinese who use blogs to express and broadcast themselves, including posts about travel topics (Sina, 2012). By selecting these two slightly different website styles, the researchers have been able to examine both general interest and specially focused reports about Chinese RV travel in Australia.

To be familiar with this specific virtual community, one of the authors, who is a native Mandarin speaker, registered as a member in both communities in May 2012. She then read more than one hundred blogs about different destinations. This kind of activity is central to the netnographic research approach as defined by Kozinets (2010).

4.2 *Data collection*

Kozinets (1999, 2010) classified the online message posters into four categories based on their level of involvement in the online community. These four groups are tourists/lurkers, minglers, devotees and insiders. In Kozinets' view, the most important data sources are the voices from devotees and insiders. Both devotees and insiders have strong consumption interests, but vary in the level of attachment to the online community. Similarly, Wenger (2008) emphasised that the value of monitoring blogs may depend on locating blog authors who are more likely to influence key markets.

In this study, the authors used 'Australia' and 'RV self-driving' as the keywords to search all the relevant travel blogs posted in Qyer.com and Sina.com in January 2013. The study assessed blogs in the time period 2010–2012. A total of 107 blogs were identified. Since the interest in this research is about accessing detailed reports from outbound Chinese tourists, more than two-thirds of the blogs were excluded from the analysis if: (1) they simply introduced RV as a travel style, (2) they only posted questions about RV travelling, (3) they visited Australia and actually did the RV trip in New Zealand or (4) they were written by Australian Chinese contributors. In summary, only rich detailed blogs posted by mainland Chinese were chosen. RV blogs which were cross-posted were counted as one blog entry, while those who travelled to Australia on two different trips and contributed two separate blogs were counted as providing two blog entries. In total, 37 blogs were identified to suit the purpose of the research with 27 blogs being generated from Qyer.com and 10 valid blogs elicited from Sina.com.

The writers of most of the 37 blogs adopted a detailed mixed text and image style presentation. They invariably used their own photographs to record their Australian RV tours and provided a record of their travel on a daily basis. These blogs were very well read by other site users and therefore fulfil the requirements of the study to seek the key opinion leaders (devotees and insiders) who are seen as socially influential in the relevant community of interest (Kozinets, 2002, 2010). Qyer.com provides the number of times the blogs have been reviewed. These individual blogs have been read from 587 to 240,562 occasions (on 7 March 2013). In short, the 37 blogs contain abundant descriptive material and offer much detail for analysis.

These 37 blogs were carefully studied by the authors. A profile for each blog was built, covering demographic information, travellers' motivations, travel routes and pivotal comments. These summary documents totalled 92 pages.

4.3 *Data analysis: manual coding-based method*

This study adopted a manual approach to analyse the data. This approach is seen as effective when the dataset is reasonable in size, can be organised quite readily and the researchers are

very familiar with the context (Kozinets, 2010). These criteria applied to the present case material. An established qualitative data analytic process was adopted (Berge, 2007). First, the user generated quotes were identified and checked; second, codes were analytically developed and inductively identified from the data and applied to the content; later, codes were transformed into superordinate categories (themes); after that, all materials were sorted by those categories. Next, by identifying similar phrases, patterns, relationships, commonalities or disparities, the sorted materials were examined to isolate meaningful patterns and processes. Finally, the identified patterns were considered in the light of previous research theories, and a summary made. The coding of a sub-section of the blogs (seven in total) was cross-checked by a Mandarin-speaking research assistant, with an average agreement of assigning the categorical labels of 97%.

4.4 *Research ethics and member check in the case study*

At a broader level, the authors checked the two online communities' terms and restrictions on how their websites' contents can be used before extracting their data for research purposes. These two websites, though designed for different purposes as stated earlier, prohibit activities of using the website or its contents for any commercial purposes without their written permission. The use in this study is for academic purposes only, and thus is automatically permitted.

   At the level of specific blogs, due to its open access nature, it was not considered necessary to obtain the blog poster's permission to code and assess their online contributions. Due to its open access, an individual only needs to be a member if he/she wants to interact with other members. Initially, the Mandarin-speaking researcher did not inform the bloggers that she was observing their blogs and conducting research. At the data collecting stage, the researcher only contacted the bloggers on two occasions, if: (1) the blog posters did not necessarily present all the information in which the researchers were interested and (2) direct quotes or photographic materials were used. In these cases, the Mandarin-speaking researcher approached the informants by sending them an online message in which her identity and research interests were disclosed. Mostly, she received feedback in a couple of days because the informants were active in the two online communities and checked their messages regularly. Through these interactions, most of the missing demographic or profile information was readily obtained. When the images and direct quotes were used, the identity of the tourists was not directly revealed in reporting the material.

   A member check on the interpretation developed by the researchers in this study was also conducted. The Mandarin-speaking researcher contacted some of Chinese RV tourists and asked them to comment on the findings of the study. In all, five informants were contacted and participated in these checks. There was a uniform agreement that the researchers were not misrepresenting RV travellers' perspectives.

5. Research results

The data derived from the netnographic approach and analysed in detail by the manual coding and theming provided detailed answers to the three main questions driving the case study. This material is reviewed succinctly since its purpose is principally to illustrate the application of the netnographic technique and prompt reflection on the approach.

   In terms of the question of who are these new Chinese RV travellers, the demographic details which are directly available in the posts, and indirectly available through the text and photographs, provided ample materials to formulate some useful generalisations. In broad

terms, the new RV market in Australia from China consists principally of young middle class, technology aware couples, family groups and small friendship groups. They stay in the country for longer periods than group tourists from China. They travel in the main Chinese holiday seasons. They rent the better class of vehicles from the highly reputable companions. They mix well with the senior domestic RV market, but are considerably younger and travel further each day than the better studied and well recognised grey nomads group (cf. Hardy, Hanson, & Gretzel, 2012; Mcclymont, Thompson, & Prideaux, 2011; Onyx & Leonard, 2005; Patterson, Pegg, & Litster, 2011).

The results for the question as to why they travel in this way revealed a range of motivations. By classifying the motives into push (internally generated) and pull (destination features) motives, the following overview was generated. The push factors included the desire to participate in novel behaviours, to build and enhance their close relationships in their holiday period by travelling in this style, and to relax and have fun. There were also self-esteem and status benefits derived from being 'pioneers' in this newly emerging holiday option. Special interests, e.g. driving, golf playing and bird watching, were also observed as strong push factors. The pull motives revolved around the characteristics of the vehicles and the independence of being in control of one's daily routes and meals. For some, the option had the benefits of being cheaper while others highlighted the ability to cook for themselves and the advantage of not repeatedly packing and unpacking while on the move. There were consistencies in the motivation data with the key motives reported in broad motivational theories (Hsu & Huang, 2008; Pearce & Lee, 2005). Some cross-cultural differences were found between the domestic and the new Chinese RV travellers in both the push factors concerned with status and the pull characteristics such as the meaning of flexibility, notably the ease of cooking and less packing (Hardy & Gretzel, 2011).

The third principal question which was addressed through the Chinese blogs and the netnographic approach was an analysis of the routes taken. Interestingly, and usefully,

Figure 1.   The 17 great Australian road trips.
Source: Tourism Australia (2011), edited by the authors.

the entire sample recorded their trip itineraries, making it possible for the researchers to identify the daily kilometres and the directions and extent of the travel. Key favoured routes were easily noted. One such route, the Great Ocean Road, was used by more than 70% of the sample. The incorporation into the blogs of maps and sketches of the journey plus highlights from the photographs assisted the process of identifying exactly where people had travelled and what key aspects they enjoyed. Most of these road trips were conducted along the well-promoted Australian tourism themed routes (Tourism Australia, 2011) (Figure 1). Routes 8, 9, 4 and 2 in Figure 1 were favoured by Chinese RV tourists.

Some ancillary materials were also observed during the coding process. In particular, it was noted that many of the travel blogs contained information about to how to travel safely during the RV experience. There were many hints and useful suggestions for future road users in Australia which included such ideas as practising with a conventional vehicle before driving an RV, taking out the maximum amount of insurance, avoiding big cities and driving only during the day. The existence of this kind of supplementary information in blogs is an item for further discussion.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Some of the strengths of the netnographic methodology are confirmed and augmented by the case study results. First, the judicious choice of an online community can serve a researcher's purpose quite precisely. As a first step towards understanding the phenomenon of interest, well-chosen blog sites assessed with the netnographic technique can provide demographic and profile information which can be used to describe the sample and test within sample differences. Further, the detail in the materials posted online, as well as the depth of discussion on topics can be richly informative. In the present case, the maps and itineraries provided a quality resource for one of the study's key questions. The researchers were able to trace the routes taken by all Chinese RV users in the sample and record their reactions to these highways. In a broader context, these findings are proving to be of interest to a number of regional destination managers with multiple requests for the work because of its insights. The ability to access details about and views of the communities of interest which are somewhat inaccessible is a notable highlight of netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Langer & Beckman, 2005).

Second, the approach taken in the case study also illustrates the important point that netnographic analysis can be structured around conceptual schemes and ideas. It is not an approach which merely provides rich descriptions. In the case of the RV drivers, it was possible to use the push−pull approach to motivation (Dann, 1977; Hsu & Huang, 2008) to structure the understanding and interpretation of the travellers' motives. An allied strength of the netnographic method lies in the richness of the material which can be dissected, and then the insights generated compared to information sourced from related target samples using other techniques of inquiry. In the present case, substantial differences were observed between the Chinese RV travellers and their domestic Australian counterparts from the data revealed by the netnographic analysis. These differences can then challenge researchers to rethink the techniques they have used to build the existing body of knowledge. The netnographic work can thus provide an impetus to potentially redraw the boundaries or content of that information. These possibilities for examining material with existing and developing conceptual tools, and for refreshing the knowledge base, both support the call for more netnographic research in tourism study (Mkono, 2012).

There is a third and unique attribute which is practical when using the netnographic approach. It is possible for the researcher to have rapid and efficient contact with

members of the community of interest. This contact may be used in two ways as illustrated in the case study. It can be employed to clarify items of special interest to the researcher. For example, a small number of respondents may not have spontaneously provided material concerning a behaviour or activity which others have reported but which the researcher may require to understand its widespread applicability. A polite and respectful personalised request can often result in receiving a reply detailing the requested information. As a point of contrast, such an approach would be logistically difficult with an interview, focus group or survey-based methodology. A further component of the relatively easy means of contact with the online respondents lies in the ability to check the researchers' interpretation of their findings. This kind of interpretive check is becoming more commonplace in interpretive and constructivist research paradigms (Jennings, 2010). It is efficient and practical to seek such confirmatory or indeed corrective responses through the netnographic approach.

A fourth stimulus for looking at blogs and using netnography can be identified. The Chinese RV tourists' blogs contained additional information beyond the focus of this paper. Supplementary information contained in blogs may alert researchers to important

Table 1. Techniques adopted to enhance the power of netnography.

Research stages	Techniques adopted in this study
Entrée	• Consider all the relevant virtual communities and select the most specific, relevant and non-commercial ones with high traffic. This selection can lessen the criticism that much of the material is irrelevant to the researcher
Data collection	• Focus on the voices from the 'devotees' and 'insiders', rather than 'lurkers' and 'minglers'
	• Once the informants' online demographic profiles are assessed, there can be researcher-led interactions and requests for information if some data are missing
	• Both textual and visual information relevant to the research questions should be collected
	• A profile is built for each informant, covering their demographic issues and the aspects of interest to this study. This approach organises the text efficiently
Data analysis	• Content analysis is conducted manually so the researchers retain a close familiarity with the original postings
	• Both quotes and insightful images are analysed
	• Reliability checks by a research assistant can be employed to enhance the confidence in the codes and build the overall credibility of the study
Research ethics	• Choosing websites that permit academic use of their contents
	• Considering all the blogs are publically accessible, the researchers do not necessarily have to disclose their identities
	• Non-disclosure helps ensure the material being considered is unaffected by the researcher's own online involvement if they have chosen to be a participant in the communications of the group
	• When interaction is necessary to identify missing information, the researchers can approach the blog posters with their identities fully revealed and explained
	• Whenever the original images (either with people or without people) and direct quotes are used, permission from the informants can be obtained
Member check	• A member check is adopted with the key informants, especially those whose travel information is discussed in the study
Data interpretation	• Original quotes and images (if necessary) from the insiders are widely used to effectively communicate the information
	• Comparison with other data sources are used to build contrasts and highlight study insights

and interconnected topics for future inquiry, for example, driving safety with an unfamiliar vehicle in an unfamiliar country. These additional themes and topics of interest may not have occurred to researchers especially when culturally different frames and perceptions are being studied. In contrast to the positive features of netnography identified through the case study, some commentators have noted difficulties with the technique. Mkono (2012, p. 554) reviewed previous research and summarised four major disadvantages of net-nography: (1) researchers, as participant observers, cannot direct the content of participants' text; (2) the researcher cannot verify the authenticity of the participants' claim (e.g. age, residence, the truth of the experience and other reported issues); (3) researchers do not have the access to nonverbal communications, and have to rely entirely on written text, a condition that may limit the interpretation of the data and (4) some websites, especially the corporate ones, might be manipulated for various ends, thus making it challenging to access genuine voices. In this case study, several techniques were undertaken during netno-graphic work to maximise the merits of the approach while minimising the kinds of short-comings which have been noted (Table 1). These tips can also be applied to other netnographic based studies as well.

Based on the kinds of attentive research procedures listed in Table 1, the researchers argue that while netnography is not a new, nor of course a perfect method, it offers the potential to enrich tourism studies. The kinds of application of particular promise include understanding an emerging market, researching new activities and working in cross-cultural contexts. As there are now one billion international travellers a year (UNWTO, 2012), it would seem particularly worthwhile to add to our tools and technique to research the expanding digitally connected travel marketplace.

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