



## Exploring destination advocacy behavior in a virtual travel community

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### ABSTRACT

The use of social media to engage in travel-related discourse plays an increasingly important role in destination choice as users turn to virtual communities where exchanges between visitors and residents thrive. There is growing recognition of the local resident as destination advocate, yet research of online advocacy behavior is limited. This study analyzes 1,226 messages exchanged among members of a Facebook travel community using netnography, supplemented by several in-depth interviews, to reveal behaviors including sentiment expression, advocate-focused and visitor-focused. The findings extend our understanding of destination advocacy, building on social identity theory to identify unique patterns of co-created social participation.

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### Introduction

As the phenomenon of social media continues to permeate our economic and social lives, so has the reliance on other users' recommendations in our decision-making (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). In a tourism context, social media can influence how potential visitors identify, build an interest in, and ultimately choose a destination, competing with traditional marketing channels in terms of importance and effectiveness. Social media not only offer a powerful platform for engaging in travel dialogue, but for community sharing, relationship building and identity formation.

The online interaction and engagement with one's social network, co-creating the information dissemination process (Hollebeek et al., 2014), has changed the relationship between destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourists (Lam et al., 2020; Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012). This shift has enabled social media users to share their own perspectives, often taking on the role of advocates for destinations (Mulvey et al., 2020), sharing personalized stories, ideas and experiences through text and photos (Oliveira et al., 2020), and creating impressions of place for a virtual audience (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Research has identified several antecedents of advocacy, from high involvement to brand engagement (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). However, the form or pattern of destination advocacy behavior is largely unknown.

Drawing on social identity theory, which examines one's role and relationships within a community (Tajfel,

1974), this study explores the multidirectional interactions among a DMO, residents, and potential visitors. Since advocacy impacts visitors' identification with a place and subsequently their visit intention (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011), it is important to understand how advocacy manifests in today's social media-influenced world from both the visitor and resident perspective. Given that members feel a sense of belongingness to their communities as expressed through a range of pro-group behavior, it is proposed that residents are most likely to take on the role of destination advocate within their online social networks. The objective for this exploratory study is to extend social identity theory within a contemporary context to explore engagement between visitors and residents to advance our understanding of destination advocacy behavior in a travel-based virtual community.

### Literature review

#### *Social identity theory*

Social identity theory views individuals from the perspective of their collective identities rather than their individual ones, specifically in regard to perceived group belongingness and personal value in relation to others (Lee & Gretzel, 2014). At its core, social identity reflects "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). Social identity theory underlies a range of tourism research

related to group-based identification including the influence of social representations on behavioral intentions (Hahm et al., 2018), losing collective face (Zhang et al., 2019), seeking and escaping motivations (Frankel et al., 2019), and destination experience (Rather, 2020) to better understand the social dimensions of tourist behavior.

Of particular relevance to social media-based advocacy behaviors are social identity theory's mental processes of social categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in-group identification (Karasawa, 1991), and symbolic interactionism (Hogg et al., 1995). Social categorization involves dividing the social world into referential categories. An individual's behavior is influenced by their social identity process, dependent on the category they associate themselves with (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In tourism, this may be based on travel intentions (e.g. leisure vs. business), travel lifestyles (e.g. relaxed vs. adventurous), or in the case of this research, community role (e.g. advocate vs. visitor). In-group identification describes the judgements, both positive and negative, of other members (Karasawa, 1991). Group membership can form a significant part of one's overall identity, shaped by interactions with other members of the same in-group (Jans et al., 2015). Interactions in a social media context include "liking", "sharing", commenting on posts, and replying to others' comments. Lastly, symbolic interaction reflects the influence of others in the environment shaping one's perceptions, allowing an individual to feel part of the experience, thus developing their social identification (Hogg et al., 1995). Social identity theory will inform the exploration of how the social categorization, identification and interactions of virtual community members manifest as destination advocacy.

### *Engagement and advocacy*

From a marketing perspective, advocacy acts as an extension of the search to engagement to loyalty process – a unique combination of attitudinal loyalty and behavioral engagement in which there exists both a history of recommending a good or service as well as an intention to do so in the future (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018). If individuals feel a strong sense of motivation and have a positive search experience, they may move to engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014), spreading positive word-of-mouth (WOM) or electronically (eWOM) through blogs, virtual communities, or by posting reviews. Engagement is multidimensional, comprising cognitive, affective and, behavioral dimensions, including purchase decisions, referrals and recommendations, in other words, advocacy (Bilro et al., 2019).

Advocacy is beyond loyalty both in terms of active brand dissemination, and unwillingness to support substitutes. Accelerated by advancements in digital technologies, consumers gravitate toward information from those in their online social networks that they consider to be more objective and reliable (Kang & Schuett, 2013). As consumers gain increased control over what information reaches them virtually (Urban, 2005), marketers must understand the influence of online advocacy.

### *Destination advocacy*

Despite extensive research in the marketing field, the consideration of advocacy in a tourism context has just recently emerged as significant to the relationship between a tourist and a destination, blurring traditional marketing roles by enabling the tourist to offer and receive unofficial and unsolicited promotion (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). In some cases, official sources of information are incongruent with a resident's identity, preventing advocacy behaviors from occurring (Palmer et al., 2013). Alternatively, a co-created relationship is capable of fulfilling the advocate's desire for social identity as well as the destination's desire for increased visitor spending (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017). As positive WOM exchanges more frequently than negative WOM (Palmer et al., 2013), more DMOs are moving toward facilitated pro-social community exchanges.

Determinants of residents' intentions to advocate include destination trust and relevance to their own self-concept and identity (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017), destination personality (Sahin & Baloglu, 2014), environmental concern (H.-C. Wu & Cheng, 2017), level of involvement with the destination (Palmer et al., 2013), calculative commitment (Sashi et al., 2019), and attraction familiarity (Kesgin et al., 2019). Kesgin et al. (2019) uses an attraction familiarity index to measure a resident's advocacy, classifying residents with a high favorability, a positive perception of the destination, and an interest in bringing tourists to a place, as advocates. Kumar and Kaushik (2017) sub-divide advocacy as social (recommending to others) and physical (consuming the offering again). The authors measure advocacy as a form of destination brand identification and trust using both attitudinal and behavioral measures: "I would recommend visiting this destination to others" (attitudinal), and "I love to talk about the good points of brand X to people I know" (behavioral). Palmer et al. (2013) examined the advocacy of Welsh residents through the cognitive, emotional and evaluative dimensions of social identity theory and found cognitive identity resulted in strong advocacy behavior.

In sum, destination advocates maintain a strong intention to recommend, and to engage actively in positive WOM (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). While research has demonstrated advocacy's power to influence visitor attitudes (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017), identified its antecedents (Palmer et al., 2013) and characteristics of advocates (Kesgin et al., 2019), little is known about the form of destination advocacy, nor the role of cognition and affect. Uncovering behavioral patterns will provide a more comprehensive view of destination advocacy as they unfold within a social media context.

## Methodology

To explore engagement among DMOs, visitors, and residents, and to identify destination advocacy behaviors in a social media context, a netnographic method was chosen for its suitability to a virtual setting and qualitative analysis. Netnography is "a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media" (Kozinets, 2019, p. 14). Netnography adapts ethnographic research to an online setting to better understand online cultures through users' content (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). Given the aim of this research to identify the pattern of advocacy-related behaviors within social media, netnography was selected as the most appropriate method.

The decision to use netnography was supported by its strengths across all research stages, from the initial "entrée" (in which the study site is selected) to the final data interpretation. Among the notable advantages are the strength of netnography in gaining an insider's perspective within a culture, enabling the researcher access to a larger and harder to reach population, adherence to strict ethical considerations, and the relative time and cost savings as compared to traditional ethnographic research (Kozinets, 2019; M.-Y. Wu & Pearce, 2014). Although potential disadvantages exist, they are largely limited to what the researchers can do within the community and the design of the media being investigated. For instance, researchers are not able to direct the text of the participants in any way, nor can they confirm the true identities of those within the community. Additionally, researchers are only able to access written information, while any non-verbal communication is not available. Finally, the researcher is largely at the mercy of the platform's design, in that if certain information is not clearly presented or available, it may go unnoticed. Fortunately, M.-Y. Wu and Pearce (2014) have provided a helpful checklist of techniques to build on the method's strengths while downplaying

the potential effects of these disadvantages, which were fully applied to this study.

## Community identification and selection

Destination Canada's (DC) 'Canada Keep Exploring Facebook Group' (hereafter referred to as the "DC Facebook group") was chosen as the community site for this research. DC is Canada's national and largest DMO, and its Facebook group has over 1 million active members. To join, a user simply clicks "like" on the group. Users have the option to "follow" the group, which gives them a greater amount of posts to view. A group moderator creates and schedules posts and manages the DC brand and tagline, *For Glowing Hearts* at: <https://www.facebook.com/ExploreCanada/>.

DC Facebook group's membership is mostly residents of Canada, but any Facebook user in the world can join and post comments. To focus this research on interactions between Canadians and visitors, the authors checked the hometown of post creators to ensure that they were current residents of Canada (advocate perspective), or residents from another country directly interacting with a Canadian resident (visitor perspective). The visitor perspective also included posts by Canadians seeking to travel within Canada, for example, from one province to another. Posts by Canadian residents about travel outside the country were beyond the scope of this research.

## Ethical considerations and guidelines

To protect members' identities, a moderate cloaking technique was used, whereby the actual group's name is used, but the specific comments and/or posts are paraphrased or aggregated in a way that identification of specific members is impossible (Kozinets, 2019). This was confirmed by "backtracing" the paraphrased data (i.e. copying and pasting them in a Google search) to ensure that a search did not return any results. Interviewees were made aware of their rights as participants, signed an agreement, and informed of audio recording.

## Pre-community interaction

Five steps in preparing to engage with the DC Facebook group were followed: (1) Built, reviewed, and refined questions for member interviews; (2) Prepared guidelines to ensure alignment with the research objectives. Consent was sought for interactions such as interviews or direct quotations; otherwise, consent was implied given the members' postings in a publicly-available

forum (Xun & Reynolds, 2010) and the use of non-identifying cloaked aggregate data in the final results; (3) Informed DC of the research purpose and received consent; (4) Created and maintained an immersion journal; and finally, (5) Coded the data (likes, shares, posts and comments/replies) using extensive journal notes until the point of saturation (Mkono & Tribe, 2017).

### *Data collection procedures*

The study examined interactions among members of the DC Facebook group including posts from the DMO to the group, comments/replies in response to a post and likes, reflected through six reactions: thumbs-up (approval of the comment), heart (emotive approval), and four face emojis: laughing, surprised, sad and angry.

The research combined an intellectual engagement strategy, gathering relevant information, and a social engagement strategy, connecting with the members of investigation (Kozinets, 2019, p. 250). To gather information, the authors were present within the group for six months (September to February 2020), recording observations in detail. The process involved logging in, noting the content of the DC post, how it was received, and recording comments and interactions. On average, five days per week and three hours per day were spent exploring the content.

### *Supporting interviews*

To further support the understanding of dynamism and behaviors uncovered through the netnography, select members of the group were interviewed. Potential participants were contacted through Facebook's Messaging feature. A range of telephone, voice-over internet chat, instant messaging through Messenger, and instant messaging through WhatsApp were used. Participants were recruited after exhibiting some advocacy behavior based on active involvement (notably, Facebook's identification of frequent posters as "Top Fans") and favorable promotion of Canada. Eight respondents matched the criteria. Two did not respond, resulting in 6 confirmed interviews. Interviews were conducted in December 2019 and lasted 10 to 78 minutes. The 10-minute interview was subsequently discarded due to lack of depth, leaving five interviews: Helga, Kathy, Lucy, Kimber and Min (pseudonyms to protect identities). The focus of the interviews was advocacy – why they advocate for Canada as a destination, what aspects of Canada they promote, and how they use Facebook as a tool to advocate. Participant profiles are summarized in Table 1.

## **Data analysis**

Data were transferred to a computer-assisted analysis program, NVivo12 Pro, designed for qualitative research and allowing the researcher to store, organize, categorize, analyze, and visualize data. Inductive manual coding procedures were the dominant form of converting user traces into relevant data. Coding was highly iterative and evolved throughout the collection process, using Kozinets (2019) method: reconnoitering (mapping the data), recording (chronicling answers), researching (linking answers to theory), and reflecting (reflective writing). The codes were refined over time and across iterations to better understand advocacy behaviors of social media-users.

### *Data analysis operations*

#### *Collating*

Next, the data were collated with unnecessary information removed (e.g. page categories). Interviews were also collated so they could be compared. After building a standard "interview template" in Word, each interview was transcribed into a similar format. By the end of the process, all traces and interview data were structured in NVivo to be compared and contrasted.

#### *Coding*

To code the data, grounded theory principles were followed by seeking both comparisons which look for convergence and divergence among categories, and generalizations to explain the occurrences and construct new theory. In total, 1,226 messages were collected (largely comments, but also shares, emojis and tags) across 42 DC posts. A total of 690 traces were coded, at which point the data were saturated and new behaviors were no longer surfacing. An initial 94 open codes emerged.

#### *Combining*

Codes unrelated to relevant behaviors were removed (e.g. promotional posts for financial gain) leaving 73 open codes, representing 554 traces. They were then visually sorted in an "explore diagram" in NVivo based on meaningful connections to key aspects of social identity, focusing on social interactions (e.g. member impacting another, such as sharing trip information), from the perspective of advocate or visitor. From this procedure of sorting traces, a total of nine pattern codes across four broad categories were identified: (i) sentiment expression-behaviors (i.e. positive affect expressions), (ii) advocate-focused behaviors (i.e. affective, cognitive and



**Table 1.** Interview participant profiles by pseudonym.

	"Helga"	"Kathy"	"Kimber"	"Lucy"	"Min"
<b>Interview date, duration, medium</b>	12/4/2019 25 minutes Telephone	12/5/2019 46 minutes WhatsApp	12/10/2019 78 minutes Facebook Messenger	12/5/2019 78 minutes Facebook Messenger	12/3/2019 21 minutes Telephone
<b>Length of DC Facebook group membership</b>	Can't remember, more than at least a month ago	A few years	One year	Can't remember, long time	Just over a year, approximately
<b>Motivation for joining</b>	Both for planning a specific trip and to see photos of Canada	For deals, to see photos, and to discuss travel	Keep up with friends and family	Travel inspiration	Saw a friend share a photo and wanted to be able to share some herself
<b>Current residence</b>	Port Colborne, ON	Vancouver, BC	Lamont County, AB	Hamilton, ON	Ottawa, ON
<b>Profession</b>	Retired photographer and media professional	Undisclosed	Homemaker; works on family farm with husband	Part-time travel advisor	English-as-a-second-language teacher
<b>Past Travel Experiences</b>	Frequent traveler within Canada, prefers car travel over airplane to avoid being "treated like cattle"; has been to every province except Nunavut.	Brazilian who recently immigrated to Canada; has traveled the Vancouver area but not much else in Canada so far.	Mostly travels within Canada and encourages others to choose Canada as their destination when she can.	Enjoys frequent travels with her young family (has traveled with her 12-year-old since he was 3).	Big proponent of doing non-touristy type travel, avoids big and crowded areas of Canada to focus on less known destinations.
<b>Social Media Usage</b>	Heavy Facebook user – 7 days/week, 18 hours/day, for 3 ½ years (after she retired); very familiar with other social media as well (e.g. Wix).	Frequently uses social media, including Facebook and WhatsApp.	Considerable focus on socializing with family and friends, otherwise strongly against other possible uses.	Heavy social media user that follows at least 10–15 travel groups through various sites.	Average daily use of various social media, including Facebook and Instagram

cooperative advocacy), (iii) visitor-focused behaviors (i.e. clarification-seeking, bucket listing and missed opportunity lamenting), and (iv) other notable behaviors (i.e. tension creating and alternative context associations).

### Counting

Table 2 breaks down the 554 traces across the nine codes. The largest themes relate to the role of affective advocacy (advocate-focused), positive affect expressions (sentiment-focused), and bucket listing (visitor-focused). Of particular importance is the advocate perspective, accounting for three themes – affective advocacy, cognitive advocacy, and cooperative advocacy – derived from the analysis. The most popular expressions of advocacy included tagging others (126), providing more information (24), and recalling and describing past destination visits (19).


## Results

### Final themes

Based on the netnographic analysis, interaction between advocates and visitors was common, from advocating to one member, to advocating to all. Additionally, perceptions of place were prominently shared, with posts of images encouraging an abundance of positive expressions (e.g. "Beautiful!",

"Breathtaking!", "I have goosebumps!"). Next, the behavioral themes that emerged from the aggregated user data were combined with the interview data to develop each theme comprehensively.

### Positive affect expressions

The use of positive texts and visuals (i.e. emoji) occurred frequently across posts, described as positive affect expressions. The dominating behavior of this theme, likely due to its simplicity, was a brief expression of positive sentiment to a post. Expressions typically included a few words such as beautiful or magnificent, or an emoji (e.g. ) as affirmation of an emotion, and a marker of appreciation of photos or comments about a familiar place, whether home or a visited destination. "Beautiful" was the most frequently used term to describe the content of photos, expressed 61 times across the 42 posts. Figure 1 depicts an example of a post showcasing photos of Canadian landscapes that received a large number of positive expressions, including emojis. Often expressions suggested a deep affective appreciation, with members indicating their love for Canada, stating that the images touched their hearts, were purely magical, stunning views, memories to be treasured, and in the extreme, stirred a spiritual awakening.

When discussing motivations for advocating with an interviewee, Kimber stated:

**Table 2.** Content analysis of open/pattern codes.

Behavioral Perspective	Pattern Code	Examples	Number of Traces by Code
Sentiment Expressions	Positive Affect Expressions	Sharing positive sentiment (e.g. "Beautiful!"), appreciation of home area featured, confirming appeal of destination	177
Advocate-perspective	Affective Advocacy	Tagging, inviting member to destination, recalling past social gatherings	188
	Cognitive Advocacy	Providing more information and itineraries, noting change since last visit, adding specific recommendation, linking to other travel sites	44
	Cooperative Advocacy	Members poking fun at each other, informal planning for future visits, agreeing to trip short notice	22
Visitor-Perspective	Bucket Listing	Expressing interest in visiting, creating "bucket list" plans, excitement to go someday, Early "dream" phase	63
	Clarification-seeking	Seeking clarification, looking for things to do, confirming location details, seeking guidance for trips	21
	Missed Opportunity Lamenting	Disappointment for missing the destination, expressing frustration with distance to destination, financial inability to travel	16
Other Notable Behaviors	Tension Creating	General member tensions, sarcasm, negative expression of tourist impact	14
	Alternate Context Associations	Connecting to their job or other aspect of their life, linking to other products, recalling childhood experiences	9

Why we travel in Canada? It has so many vastly unique places. The difference between southern Saskatchewan and northern Saskatchewan is unbelievable. The Yukon's history is fascinating. Alberta is such a young province, to see the older ruins of Manitoba is awesome. The people are amazing. You can't imagine the characters you'll meet. Why we share and encourage others to see Canada? We love it. Our kids love it. If you ask our kids what they're favourite holiday was, they won't tell you Cuba. They'll tell you our trip to Dawson City, the Moose Jaw tunnels or Winnipeg. It is easy to promote something you love.

### *Advocate-perspective*

Destination advocacy took different forms within the group, with a focus on interactions between destination promoters and recipients as opportunity for advocates to present themselves as area experts. From this perspective, three themes related to advocacy were identified: affective advocacy, cognitive advocacy, and cooperative advocacy.

**Affective advocacy.** Affective advocacy was the most frequently recurring theme, with 16 unique behaviors including: recalling positive past visits, expressing a desire to return, inviting members to visit the destination with them, recalling social gathering, reminiscing about trips with friends, inviting outside members to join, encouraging non-members to visit, and expressing an overall sense of joy regarding their social connectedness to the group. This theme is differentiated from others by its emotionally fueled approach to advocacy beyond giving recommendations when asked. This theme encompasses the unsolicited promoter, inclined to share their opinions and push others to visit a destination irrespective of any request. Specific behaviors show that members often spoke of the feelings

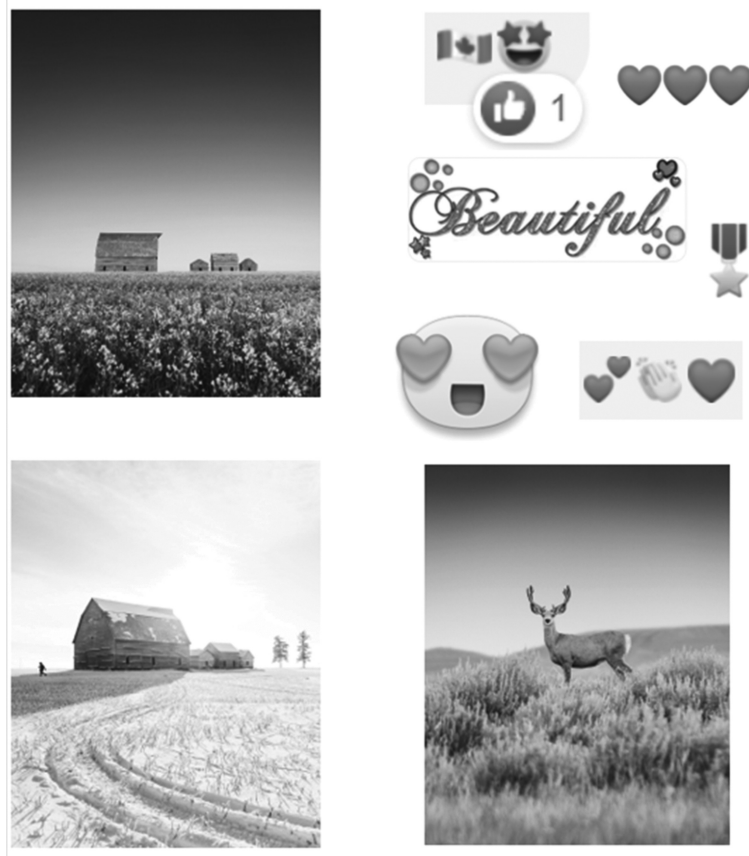
associated with their experiences at a destination, referring to their trip as spectacular, full of beautiful sights and breathtaking views. This drive to promote Canada because of one's deep appreciation was captured eloquently in the interview with Lucy, who recalled a positive visit and how that encouraged her to comment on posts about the place she had been:

I do comment a lot on posts, especially if its somewhere I have been (and have knowledge of) or somewhere I want to go. Or somewhere that a client of mine might really love. I might share the picture or link with them

To better understand what drives this behavior, she was asked why she invites other group members to visit destinations in Canada. Lucy thought it may have to do with pride:

Well, I am proud to be Canadian. I feel very blessed to have been born here. I think it's a beautiful country with many different places to visit but I feel like a lot of people don't realize how much Canada has to offer and so I like to share it with them

**Cognitive advocacy.** In contrast to the affective advocacy behaviors characterized by highly emotional/personal connection to place, cognitive advocates seek to provide a positive perspective of the destination in a more factual way, answering potential visitors' questions, correcting mistakes made by others, adding specific ideas or itineraries, linking to their own personal social media pages or to related websites, and providing travel warnings to prepare visitors for certain aspects of the experience. This provision of information was often quite specific, such as telling members the exact location of a DC photo so others could recreate it. Cognitive advocates also provided additional information to ensure visitors would bring the necessary resources to



**Figure 1.** Sample photos and emojis from DC Facebook group (all necessary permissions have been obtained for the use and publication of these images, © *Photos by Herry*).

certain locations, such as firewood for a highlighted camping trip, or specific flights, accommodations, places in the area to eat, and even the most appropriate clothing for a winter getaway. During Lucy's interview she described such a recommendation:

Okay just a sec, let me see. So it seems like a lot of people are interested in Banff ... I have responded to quite a few posts about traveling to Banff, things to do, best time to go, etc. I have been twice in the winter so I can always give that perspective, vs. most people who go there in the summer.

Similarly, Helga, a "Top Fan" since December, was driven by a need to share specific locations given her familiarity with the area:

Well, obviously Niagara Falls but that's my neighbourhood, right? Obviously. And so South Niagara has a push on for tourism and developing tourism as well, and we have some of the most beautiful, beautiful beaches here. So that kind of thing, yeah, I've shared where to stay, that type of thing. When people ask. And whatever, whatever comes up on the site I'll share in a heartbeat.

Interestingly, participants were such enthusiastic sharers, that a few of them insisted on sharing particular

information and images with the author during interviews! For example, Helga shared photos taken during her many travels across Canada that she was particularly proud of. When Kimber expressed *why* she provides these details, she responded:

My husband and I think that most Canadians have no idea how wonderful Canada is. We mostly travel in Canada. And anytime we can we try to encourage others to experience Canada.

The drive to share the wonders of Canada above all, exemplified by Kimber's comment that they mostly travel in Canada and encourage others anytime they can, aligns with the concept of destination advocacy versus other WOM constructs. These members not only promote Canada, but they also recommend it over other destinations and choose it for their own travel.

When posting about a featured place of personal connection close to where they live, advocates were quite vocal. The benefit for destinations is clear. As DMOs promote the bigger attractions to drive visitation, residents are able to share local features with which they are most familiar. For instance, DC may show an image of the CN Tower, sparking an interest

by a potential visitor to go to Toronto. Once they have decided to visit, however, they not only need more specific recommendations – restaurants, accommodation, etc., but granular-level details such as public transportation, local dishes, or the best time to visit attractions. It would be impractical for the DMO to give such a hyper-detailed view of the destination for each individual visitor, and even if they tried, they would risk alienating certain businesses over others, and come across as less authentic to visitors. A more symbiotic system would enable the DMO to create the initial interest, and the resident to take over the details of the trip. Min effectively did this, as she explained in her interview that it was her desire to encourage others to visit the less "touristy" places, or those places with fewer visitors, given the vastness and diversity of Canada and her frustration that visitors seem to only be interested in visiting certain areas. She felt that:

... people should also see what we have available, and I mean they often go to the really touristy places and I think that's great but there's lots of lesser-known places that they should know about, so I think that's where I want to share that information for them."

Another form of being a local expert was the action of providing travel warnings to potential visitors. Min provided a detailed account of her efforts to steer others away from "touristy places" at times when they experience crowding. Her self-described sense of duty to ensure that her recommendations are objectively provided to give a more holistic portrayal of the destination strongly aligns with the concept of advocacy.

**Cooperative advocacy.** This form of advocacy was less common, but distinct. Blurring the line between advocate and visitor, these promoters provided a more laid-back approval of the destination, often using sarcasm or humor, but in a positive manner. The term "cooperative" reflects an emphasis on strengthening alliances and working alongside others to advocate for the destination, rather than from a "soapbox" stance. For instance, cooperative advocates might playfully mock, while simultaneously promote, a featured destination.

What makes this form of advocacy particularly cooperative is the discussion following a humorous post, where members may invite others to come and engage in extreme activities like cold-water surfing, or as a springboard for impromptu planning of visits by friends or family of the group. This was also a pro-social approach to connect with members from different geographic or cultural locations, where, to use the previous example, surfing a frozen ocean is not

possible. Judging by the positive responses to these collaborative comments, they would appear to motivate members to visit.

### *Visitor perspective*

In contrast to advocacy, this perspective considers the visitor's role in the exchange. The main themes identified within the DC Facebook group community were: clarification-seeking, bucket listing, and missed opportunity lamenting.

**Clarification-seeking.** If the cognitive advocate answers visitors' questions and clarifies the trip experience, on the inverse side of this relationship are those asking questions and seeking clarification. Most common in this theme was the behavior of seeking clarification from members: confirming the location of an attraction in a photo, asking details regarding a featured activity (e.g. cost of renting skates or best route to a particular place), or follow up questions directed to advocates who suggested activities (e.g. "Why's that?", "Have you ever been?", "What is this place called?"). The interviews helped to understand what an advocate might think when asked for clarification. Lucy, for instance, pointed out the following:

I have had many online exchanges with people from other countries who are interested in Canada, and I will always tell them they should come.

Kathy enjoyed helping members seeking a better understanding of places visually depicted. When asked what she recommends, it is the inspirational aspects that she prefers to promote:

Recomendaria tudo pois tudo é maravilhoso. Montanhas lugares lindos que inspiram [I would recommend everything because it is all so marvelous. Mountains, and other beautiful places that are inspiring].

On occasion, clarification-seekers would ask specifically for a local perspective, and even a local guide to accompany them on future travels.

**Bucket listing.** Having entered popular culture thanks to the 2007 film of the same name, a "bucket list" is a "list of experiences and achievements an individual wishes to complete before they die, or 'kick the bucket'" (Thurnell-Read, 2017, p. 58). Although the definition mentions death, the focus is on ensuring that one does not miss an opportunity before it is too late. Explicitly mentioning that this experience is on their bucket list, or more implicitly expressing their deep-seated interest in visiting, fear of missing out, early planning (dream) phase, and expressing a desire to escape their current routine



were important elements of the bucket list theme. The textual data focused on the abstract notions of "hope", "one day", "next time", "dream" and "wish", referencing the photos as a source of travel inspiration, should they ever get the opportunity to visit. Dreaming was complementary to this perspective, as many said that traveling to Canada or the featured destination was their ultimate dream or wish come true.

**Missed opportunity lamenting.** When the visitor has missed an opportunity for some reason, they move from the "hopeful" bucket listing behavior to "disappointed" or missed opportunity behavior. Rather than a desire not to miss out, they actually did. This missed opportunity was expressed in a number of ways, particularly through frustration (for instance, a destination was too far geographically or too costly), false statements about a destination perhaps to alleviate disappointment, or by expressing sadness.

Members lamented when they had been to the specific destination but missed a featured attraction. Others could relate, recommending they return to see it. One user lamented being at a destination with an unfinished bridge overlooking a vast valley. The photo sparked their desire to see the view from the now completed bridge. Finally, seasonality played a role in members' feelings of missing out. One member mentioned arriving a few weeks too late for the fall colours, while another was disappointed that a popular wildlife attraction – goats grazing on the roof of a restaurant where they had eaten – were not scheduled to arrive until later.

#### **Other noteworthy behaviors**

Finally, other noted behaviors included associations made by members to their offline lives and tensions within the group when members were not getting along.

**Alternate context associating.** Connecting the group dialogue to other contexts sometimes hinted at the desire of members to blend their online and offline selves, relating a post to their profession, childhood experiences, or past events. Occasionally political views entered interactions, supporting research on the role of political orientation in shaping one's identification (Roccas et al., 2006). The relation between vocation and advocacy also surfaced in the DC Facebook group.

**Tension creating.** The final theme relates to tensions among members during interactions. Although uncommon, there were enough to include this theme and to caution DMOs who provide spaces for members to interact in an unmoderated environment. Tensions included

challenging a comment (e.g. claiming a member was wrong about a geographic feature), telling others to leave the destination, or suggestions that someone was ill-informed. This might result in a heated disagreement between parties. Tension also presented in posts about the negative impacts of tourism at featured destinations. For example, a post showcasing a dog-sledding activity provoked a few members who felt this was a form of animal cruelty and inappropriate for the site to share.

#### **Discussion of findings**

Deeply analyzing the DC Facebook community discourse reveals behavioral patterns in the exchange among DMOs, visitors, and residents that influence destination attitudes and interest. There is an authenticity, positivity and personal connectivity that permeates the community, a highly engaged form of communication vastly distinct from traditional destination messaging. Potential visitors can identify not just with a place, but with a person who is responding, sharing, connecting. The analysis of over four hours of interviews and 1,226 messages reveals nine unique patterns of behavior. Almost half the coded traces represent a type of advocacy behavior – either an affective emotive appeal, a cognitive informative appeal, or a cooperative connection – all with an underlying element of persuasion to positively position a featured destination.

Affective advocacy, the most common behavior, reflects expressions of desire to return to a destination, reminiscing about trips, encouraging visits, sharing positive experiences, and rich language to describe spectacular sights, breathtaking views, beauty and appreciation. The affective advocate appeals by emoting, conceivably because they are "proud", "feel very blessed", "feel like a lot of people don't realize how much Canada has to offer", and "like to share" (Lucy, interview #4). Cognitive advocacy, while a smaller portion of traces, is noteworthy for the factual approach to sharing information, in some cases adding very specific details, suggested itineraries, additional resources, and even travel warnings. Helga (interview #1) will "share in a heartbeat" site and accommodation recommendations, Lucy (interview #4) will provide her perspective about visiting Banff "in the winter", and Min (interview #5) will steer others away from overcrowded "touristy places" out of a sense of duty. The cognitive advocate takes time and effort to provide informative tips and details that go beyond the original DMO post, adding value for their community members. Cooperative advocates, a relatively small portion of traces, nonetheless provide their positive promotion of featured

destinations using humor, impromptu suggestions, and other lighthearted but heartfelt appeals. These authentic expressions of advocacy carry a weight a marketing agency is unlikely to replicate.

In line with the advocates positivity, one-third of traces reflect positive affect expressions through text and the seemingly ubiquitous emoji as a marker of appreciation. While these expressions are brief, they represent an engagement and sharing with others in one's community. Even the communication of one word – most commonly, "beautiful", but also deeper expressions of "love", "magic", "spiritual" – signify a public appreciation of place that is close to advocacy. From the perspective of members seeking information, the most frequent behavior was bucket listing, in other words, expressing a desire to "one day", "next time", before it's too late, visit! Interestingly, relatively few members seek clarification about featured destinations, though some specifically ask for a local perspective or guide, prompting an advocate to quickly respond.

The relevancy of these findings must be considered in light of COVID-19, declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. While its disruption of the industry, from airlines to tour operators, is undeniable, its impact on the traveller psyche is less certain. Sentiment research suggests that consumer confidence will return (McKinsey & Company, 2020), and that technology, including social media, will play an increasingly important role in the tourism industry's response, recovery and reset (Sigala, 2020). During COVID-19 lockdowns, the popularity of social media-related leisure spiked (Van Leeuwen et al., 2020) and served as a positive distraction to buffer effects of psychological distress caused by the pandemic (Yang & Wong, 2020). As barriers lift and travel resumes, social media present a strong platform for travel-related discourse where DMOs can facilitate authentic and positive communication to build back, supported by an understanding of resident advocacy behavior.

## Conclusions

The study findings contribute to the destination advocacy literature by revealing meaningful behavioral patterns of destination advocates within a virtual community. To begin, social identity theory examines roles and relationships within a community and the shaping of one's identity, group belongingness and value in relation to others (Hogg, 2020; Lee & Gretzel, 2014). By the volume of advocacy posts in comparison to information seeking posts, it suggests that there is greater social value gained from the community in sharing than in seeking, an insightful finding with

implications for DMO hosts to support member advocates. Next, it is significant to note that not only do residents advocate, but past visitors to the featured destination also advocate. The importance of relevance to one's own self-concept and identity (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017) supports the observed advocacy of Canada by Canadian residents. Interestingly, results suggest that relevancy extends to visitors whose travel experience has potential to elevate them to the role of destination advocate. Finally, analyzing the exchange between visitors and residents reveals both affective and cognitive patterns of advocacy behavior. These new insights to destination advocacy have implications for theory and practice, and methodologically, the research contributes to the growing body of netnographic studies in the tourism literature.

## Theoretical contributions

The research is the first to draw from social identity theory in the context of social media travel-based advocacy. Using netnography, it identifies behavioral patterns exhibited by members when sharing information and promoting a destination that they identify with – whether it be their home or a visited destination – within their digital community. Patterns of behaviours were revealed among the DMO, advocates, and visitors, whereby varying degrees of interactionism took place, from advocating to one member, to advocating to all. Additionally, the identified themes add to the understanding of the ways in which destination advocacy is expressed through social media. Advocacy can be emotional (affective), informative (cognitive), or conversational (cooperative). From both the advocate and visitor perspectives, cognitive advocacy and clarification seeking behaviors demonstrate aspects of members' beliefs and attitudes that reflect specific knowledge (or pursuit thereof) of the destination. When an advocate provides more information beyond that provided by the DMO, or the visitor requests clarification of a posted destination of interest, both are prioritizing knowledge attainment. Conversely, affective engagement relates to the amount of subconscious emotions one conjures as a result of their processing of a particular situation (Bilro et al., 2019). These findings identify classifications of advocacy-based behavior that relate to the emotions one experiences, including positive affect expressions, affective advocacy, bucket listing, and missed opportunity lamenting. In each case, there is a link to one's feelings toward the destination featured in the social media post, referring to the destination as beautiful or breathtaking, describing the pain of missing out on being able to go themselves, or recalling a past

meaningful experience shared with friends or family. Finally, the patterns of advocacy also reflect conative attitudes toward the destination, particularly through the behaviors identified as cooperative advocacy. As conative loyalty relates to actions (Yuksel et al., 2010), so too does cooperative advocacy, exhibited largely by those who were making plans for future visits, or agreeing to go on short-notice with others in the group.

Another consideration in the social identity literature is whether intergroup and interpersonal dynamics occur at opposite ends of a spectrum (Hornsey, 2008). Here, it was found that rather than being dichotomous, one's interpersonal context (e.g. their work, for instance) was an effective bridge to their intergroup role as a member of the DC Facebook group community. Thinking of this as three levels of categorization – superordinate, intermediate, and subordinate – the results suggest a concentration at the intermediate level of the self, and explain the presence of functional antagonism, demonstrated as one's social identity becomes more salient than their personal identity. The blending of social groups by trying to "bring in" outsiders from other contexts (friends, family, or co-worker) to the in-group through the use of "tagging" was also observed. Social identity influences the ways in which individuals from different intergroups may work collaboratively to strengthen the profile of each group. Rather than seeing the out-group as homogenous, social media allow members to carefully select others to join a new context.

Further, members' voices were captured through the supportive interviews, providing a deeper view of destination advocacy directly from the advocate perspective. This extends existing knowledge related to social media user characteristics. Del Chiappa et al.'s (2015) social tourists were particularly active and heavily influenced by discussions held in their travel-based social media. Knowing that social tourists are influenced by their social networks, this research captures specific behaviors, thus providing a clearer understanding of social tourists' online engagement. Some socially active members enjoy adding detail to the information provided by a destination marketer to influence visitation, while others prefer to recount their own vacation experience. Future research could build on these differences to determine the impact of advocacy style on travel intentions to see if one form of advocacy is more effective than another.

As relatively few tourism scholars utilize netnography (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019), this research contributes methodologically. Strictly following the guidelines set by the method's creator, including using an immersion journal, building a researcher webpage, adhering to stringent ethical guidelines, and following the steps of

initiation, interaction, integration, and incarnation, this detailed process can be of value to future netnographic researchers in tourism. Further, to date most research focuses on a textual analysis of data, without considering other elements such as emojis or photographs (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019). Including visual elements has provided a more well-rounded view of advocacy behaviors as they naturally occur in a social media setting which is ubiquitously present both textually and visually.

### *Managerial implications*

Given the digital "real-world" context for this research, completed through DC's Facebook page with over 1 million members, the implications for DMOs are timely and salient. Sharing opportunities within a group is important to members, indicating DMOs should consider building separate "member pages" to post exclusive photos for members only. Existing "community" pages often lack meaningful engagement. Many posts are by third-party marketers, private tourism operators or unrelated posts (e.g. join the great Brotherhood!) rather than travelers. DMOs must improve their organized communities to encourage both residents and visitors in a positive space, more carefully considering requests to join (perhaps requiring rationale before acceptance into the "club"). Users build their social identities through group membership and belongingness and become stronger proponents of the mandate of the group by being members. The establishment of virtual communities for meaningful exchange and discourse would enhance the desire of residents and all members to advocate to potential visitors, a win-win outcome. DMOs have opportunity to enhance their destination appeal, and members to enhance their social value by contributing in a pro-social way toward the mandate of the group.

### *Limitations and future research*

To minimize subjectivity, a rigorous process to the netnographic methodology was followed to provide new insights to our understanding of destination advocacy. As a method, netnography can be cost effective and timely in comparison to other more traditional methodologies. However, without subject identifiers to more fully understand the characteristics of the DC Facebook group membership, the generalizability of results is limited. To address this acknowledged limitation, a theoretical foundation was established for the study, and past research supported both the study direction and the interpretation of the results. Additionally, the

research focusses on web 2.0 technology. As web 3.0 to 5.0 opportunities evolve (e.g. virtual reality travel, artificial intelligence robots), new research techniques will be needed to continue the advancement of theoretical knowledge of identity and advocacy in the digital age. DMOs continue to adopt new platforms and technologies, signaling that Netnographic analysis of virtual travel communities holds much promise.

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