This study analyzes how travelers use the information of travel destination related discussion boards to help make decisions with their vacation purchases. Fifty discussion threads in the large community forum known as DISboards underwent a thorough analysis with the help of the American Library Association's information literacy standards to understand what criteria for author credibility and information quality were used and how they were used in order to decide whether the information should be taken into account to assist with purchase decisions. Conclusions could not be reached as results were varied, however, a general trend begins to form showing that DISboard members tend to look for the author’s credibility. If the criterion for credibility is positive, the member will learn to trust the author and, therefore, conclude the information pertains a high quality and may be deemed helpful.

Headings:

Web 2.0-Electronic Discussion Groups

Information Literacy Standards--Research

Word of Mouth Advertising
EWOM AND DISCUSSION BOARDS: HOW TRAVELERS OBTAIN INFORMATION USING WEB 2.0

by

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A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Information Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

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Approved by

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Robert Losee
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**Introduction**

Evaluating the quality of information provided in sources in order to conclude whether the source is relevant enough to meet information needs has been taught to society from grade school as part of information literacy. Information literacy skills are then further drilled into the Undergraduate Curriculum with an emphasis placed upon academic research. While there has been plenty of research performed on the source evaluation of students in an academic setting, there is little research provided in the interaction of everyday information gathering. Out of the vast amount of topics sought on the web daily, travel related information takes precedence. Planning a vacation also tends to be the most complex and time consuming outside of academic research, as consumers will acquire information from multiple sources in order to reduce information asymmetries when compiling all information needed for planning. Therefore, consumers will often navigate towards social media and user-generated content to gather enough information to make travel purchase decisions. While there are studies on how social media platforms such as Facebook and TripAdvisor are used to influence travel decisions (Litvin), there is not a study available that evaluates what causes travelers to make decisions based upon posts in tourism related online discussion forums. In order to contribute a more naturalistic approach to source evaluation of social media tools I propose that:
Users of travel discussion forums are more likely to be influenced by information from posts in discussion threads that meet positive criteria when judging the quality of the information and credibility of the author than those posts that meet negative criteria of the credibility of information when making a purchase decision.

To support the proposed thesis the following questions will need to be answered:

- **Question 1**: What criteria are used in the judgment of the information quality and information credibility in this context?

- **Question 2**: Do users explicitly indicate whether they believe the post has met positive or negative outputs of the criteria.

- **Question 3**: Does the positive evaluation of the source influence whether a user takes their advice and makes a purchase decision?
Literature Review

Back in 2010, a survey was conducted at the World Travel Market Trade Fair in London. Out of the 36% of tourists that indicated they used social networking as a source for travel planning, 28% of these used online discussion forums, placed behind only TripAdvisor and Facebook (Munoz-Leiva et al., 882). Since then, the use of social media as a source for destination information is assumed to have increased significantly by various researchers.

This particular study's methodology is loosely based upon an exploratory study composed by Rejo Savolainen. When the study was published in 2011, Savolainen noted that while there was research conducted on the judgment of information relevance based upon assigned search tasks, there was little to no information provided on the information interaction with online discussion forums (1243). In the framework of his study, Savolainen argues that a user will post an answer or message in reply to a question or topic at the beginning of the discussion thread. From this post, another author will read this post and analyze it based upon the criteria used for information quality while also analyzing rather the author of the post is credible. From this analysis, this author will contribute another post that provides explication for the judgment made regarding the evaluation of information quality and author credibility for the first post. Each poster after will follow the same evaluation process before posting (2011, 1246). The methodology used in this
study was to complete a thorough analysis of about 4,739 posts within 160 different discussion thread. These threads varied in topic, from health to climate change, and were not analyzed unless they contained 10 or more messages. Savolainen found that the information found in online discussion forums could be grouped into facts, opinions, and advice. The opinionated posts caused a brief problem, however, was solved with the location of T.D Wilson’s (1981) definition of information that includes the forms of facts, opinions, and advice. Of the posts analyzed, 20.5% were found to have contained explicit judgments regarding information quality and author credibility. Thirteen different types of criteria were measured using both negative and positive attributes. Out of these messages, the majority drew upon negative criteria, lack of expertise of the author, lack of provision of evidence, invalidity of information, etc., in the evaluation of the relativeness of these messages to meet their information need (1250). Participants also analyzed information quality based mostly upon the usefulness/uselessness of information and the credibility of the author based upon author expertise/or lack of (1252). However, one of the most interesting finds was that both information quality and author credibility often co-occurred with each other when users evaluated the source of information (1253).

Both usefulness and reliability are found among criteria in the evaluation of posts for information quality. These criteria found among the posts of a discussion thread can carry a complexity of its own. In multiple studies regarding online communities, usefulness is often correlated with the idea of trust within the online community. Having a sense of reliability and trust in the community has been
shown to help lead a user in following the information presented by the author of the post (Munoz-Leiva et. al., 882; Casalo et. al., 623). This sense of trust can also bring about a perceived usefulness of the forum for the user in which the user believes that participating in the forum will provide them with more benefits as opposed to if they did not participate in the community (Casalo 623). This research supports the proposed hypothesis that positive criteria used to analyze the posts for information quality will ultimately lead to the positive outcome of a purchase decision being made in the travel plans.

In addition to the ideas of information quality and credibility use within travel related discussion boards, another idea has importance within the new web 2.0 and travel destinations. This idea is known as word of mouth (WOM). This idea comes mostly from the business and hospitality fields and is ranked as the most important information source to influence a consumer in making a purchase decision. The reason that word of mouth or WOM is so influential is based upon its interpersonal communication between consumers. In other words, the company that promotes the product does not give the information. There is a big difference between traditional Word of Mouth (WOM) and word of mouth that is produced electronically (eWOM). eWOM comments are usually given from anonymous web posters as opposed to the traditional WOM, where the consumer is usually receiving comments from a person they know and/or come in contact with (Bronner et al.). This can leave an eWOM travel consumer to have trouble in determining the credibility of the author. However, the information shared on eWOM platforms, discussion boards, Facebook, and Twitter, has found to be more powerful than WOM
Despite its less personal means of information sharing. This is most likely due to the fact that the reach of a viral network is large, the information posted can be read and not just heard by a passing acquaintance, and information can be accessed the time the person is experiencing an information need. Also the information may be deemed less personal, however, the information found in eWOM is usually deemed more important to the traveler, especially when the information is found within a community that shares the same interests (O’Reily et al. 333-334).

Litvin et al. discusses this idea as eWOM or electronic word of mouth. In a proposed figure, word of mouth is contributed to the listener who must take the information and evaluate the information for quality, the variable. The source evaluation will determine the outcome, or purchase decision (Litvin et al., 460). This is where the idea of online travel discussion forums comes in. As more information is shared online, travel decisions are often made based upon user-generated information. People tend to want the unbiased information on destinations they do not find on traditional travel sites and, therefore, will turn to various resources such as social media.
Methodology

Due to the fact that the Savolainen study is one of the rare few providing research on the evaluation of information quality and credibility in online discussion forums, it seems that it is befitting to use some of the methodology used within the study. A travel destination related online discussion forum will undergo scrupulous analysis regarding how people tend to evaluate information provided on various posts as to whether the content is relevant enough to meet to their needs. Since the evaluation of the information source for relevance seems to include both information quality and author credibility, it is assumed that both should be taken into consideration when analyzing the multiple discussion threads within the travel oriented online discussion forum. Fifty discussion threads will be chosen at random and will need to be analyzed with each thread containing more than ten posted messages in order achieve a broader understanding of what participants use in source evaluation. These threads will need to consist of an information need posted within the discussion in order to reach the conclusion that the user finds the source relevant to their information needs.

The discussion forum chosen to undergo thread analysis is DISboards, a large discussion forum that is free for any user to register. Those who choose not to register may still access the threads for reading but are unable to comment on any of the posts. The particular forum is known to be one of the largest with more than
forty different forums that cover everything a travel planner needs for a trip to various Disney owned attractions and destinations. This includes the Disney theme parks in Florida, California, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and, soon, Shanghai, the broad range of restaurants and resorts that surround the parks, Disney Cruise Lines, and Adventures by Disney. This popular online community currently boasts over 453,000 members and over 3 million threads. Choosing a forum with such a large size allows for more variety of posts and types of users. These users vary in age with authors within the online discussion forum ranging anywhere from sixteen years old to seventy years old. However, the majority of users seems to consist of younger to middle aged parents of children. While the forum holds such a variety of members, all members hold a shared interest in one destination brand, The Walt Disney Company. Having a shared interest within the community may bring about an idea of trust, which in turn can have a positive effect on the perceived usefulness of information found in other member’s posts, therefore, resulting with the traveler wanting to follow community members advice. Due to the vast size of the discussion community, discussion threads are chosen from three of the forty forums. Many of the forums range in topic from information for planning vacations to favorite Disney owned destinations, however, there is also information given regarding diet and exercise planning, medical coping, and photography/videography tips. However, the three forums, Theme Park Attractions and Strategies, Disney Resorts, and Disney Restaurants boast the highest number of discussion threads and posts under the category of Disney Trip Planning,
as well as, the entire community. These forums cover only the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida, Disney’s most visited theme park destination.

Firstly, the posts of each thread will be evaluated to see if there is any externalized indication that the author of the posts has evaluated the information created in previous message for quality and the author for credibility. This could potentially be presented in the receding message with a comment that thanks the responder for helpful information because they deemed the content of the post useful. In regards to credibility, the idea is that the user may explicitly state how the author of the information seems to know a lot about the topic at hand of explicitly states that they should know better since they have traveled to a certain destination for some time. The criteria for both information quality and credibility will need to be defined in order to process the analyses. The following criteria was taken from the suggested criteria located in both the American Librarian Association’s Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and from Savolainen’s study. While Savolainen’s study proposes thirteen different criteria for the evaluation of information quality and credibility of the author, not all of the criteria are placed into account for this study.

Instead, the American Library Association’s *Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* was considered to be a good source for criteria in evaluating a source for relevance as they are well-cited standards that are written to be used to educate society in evaluating information. It should be known that the lists provided between the two sources are very similar. The criteria listed below is
assumed to be the most prevalent in regards to the source evaluation of online
discussion threads relating to travel planning and meeting ones information needs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Quality Criteria Positive/Negative</th>
<th>Defined for Research Purposes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness/lack of usefulness</td>
<td>Whether the content is perceived as helpful to the information need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable/unreliable</td>
<td>The user deems the content of the post to be trusted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity/deception</td>
<td>Whether the user deems the information to be truthful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currency/non-currency</td>
<td>The content of the post is up-to-date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy/lack of accuracy</td>
<td>The information is focused on what the user needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Credibility Criteria Positive/Negative</th>
<th>Defined for Research Purposes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author’s expertise/lack of expertise</td>
<td>The author has shown extensible knowledge of the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s reputation</td>
<td>The author is known to report useful information within the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbiased/Biased</td>
<td>The author may express his or her views in an impartial manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not persuasive/persuasive</td>
<td>The author is capable of giving information without trying to send the user one way or the other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refers to additional sources/ does not refer to other sources</td>
<td>The extent in which the author can support their view with information other than their own.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of these criteria listed are not only covered in the evaluation of sources used for education purposes at upper level institutes, but also are useful during the analysis of a consumer created discussion board. All criteria, one way or another,
fall into Casalo et al.’s depiction of trust in the analysis of information found in online sources. In the behavioral state of the definition of trust, after distinguishing what criteria tend to be used through externalized indications found within the post thread, it will be concluded whether more users tend to post a follow up message once they have evaluated the previous message as containing relevant information.

In addition to the meticulous analysis of posts within travel related discussion forum threads to conclude whether or not positive criteria found during source evaluation will lead a user to make a possible purchase decision within their travel plan, a questionnaire is posted on the DISboards site asking for registered members to voluntarily participate. The ten-question survey was developed using the application, SurveyMonkey and was constructed entirely out of multiple choice questions, many of which use the Likert scale. This was created in order to provide better quantitative data for research than open-ended questions. The structure of the questionnaire, first, boasted an understanding of the experience level for the member based upon how long they have been a member and how many Disney Destinations they have traveled to. This was to provide a more logical way to group the members. This questionnaire, then, followed up with the majority of questions containing a gradient scale that would provide insight into how users typically analyzed posts before providing a response, make any travel decisions, or if they, in fact, analyzed the messages for information quality and author credibility. These questions included an understanding of whether consumers thought they could trust the information provided by members of the community and if they found use of information posted by fellow responding members. An additional question was
asked correlating with the idea of eWOM. Since user-generated content had seen a significant rise in contributions towards purchase decisions in the tourism industry, it would be important to conclude whether a user made their purchase decisions for their travel plans based upon information they received from discussion forums or if the majority of their information was received from other sources.
**Results- Discussion Board Analysis**

A total of fifty discussions threads were chosen at random from the most frequented three trip planning forums available for use by Walt Disney World Resort vacationers. Of these three forums eighteen were chosen from the forum titled “Theme Park Attractions and Strategies,” seventeen were from “Disney Resorts,” and fifteen were from “Disney Restaurants.” Each discussion thread contained anywhere from ten posts to sixty posts or messages, leading up to a total of 1,229 messages. Since this is an exploratory study and did not aim to produce any conclusive generalizations, the sample of the discussion board posts was thought to be sufficient enough to meet the purpose for this study. Many of the discussion threads within DISboards contained information that was posted recently with the longest span of information beginning in June 2013 and ending in October with the shortest span of meeting an information need concluded within one day.

During the content analysis of the discussion threads a few outside influences were noted that were not considered before the analysis was performed that could have hindered or assisted a DISboard member in locating their information need. The, first thing noted was that several DISboard members were involved in moderating each of these three large forums within the DISboard community. These moderators policed each of the three forums relatively well with
the evidence shown on the first page of discussion threads. The link of a thread that was deemed irrelevant to the topic would be listed as moved from the current forum. This was done because it was believed the original poster (OP) would be more capable at finding their information. However, it was also performed in order to keep relevant information within the forum’s pages, in order to enable a member to sort through the vast amount of information available. For in instance, in the
“Theme Park Attractions and Strategies” forum it was common for threads that were applied to the board on a single day to expand among several pages of information. The importance of the policing of the threads to maintain relevant information was further noted when my questionnaire was moved within a day from the front page of the “Theme Park Attractions and Strategies” forum to a sub-forum labeled “Theme Park Community.” This particular forum contained miscellaneous information or anything that was felt to be relevant to travel destination planning. Moderators were also present inside discussion threads. One was quick to stop a fellow DISboard member from sharing unethical information to cheat the Disney system in order to save money.

The second major influence that could have hindered resolving of a member’s information need was that many of the DISboard members used various acronyms to describe Walt Disney World attractions, events, resorts, experiences, restaurants, and even their family members. These popular acronyms were assumed to be commonly known among Disboard members, however, to someone who is new to the community or to the Walt Disney World Resort would have trouble deciphering the information given to them by fellow DISboard members.
Acronyms such as DH (dear husband), DW (dear wife), DD (dear daughter), and DS (dear son) were the most commonly used. Other language common to discussion board applications included OP (original poster) and PP (Previous poster). This language did not seem to be exclusive to DISboards as it has been found on other various forums. Disney specific acronyms discovered through the analysis included, BOG (Be Our Guest Restaurant), POFQ (Port Orleans French Quarter Resort), and MVMCP (Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party). Despite the common usage of acronyms in member posts, there were very few to no instances within the discussion threads requiring assistance with the acronym definitions. The only one that seemed to give a member trouble was GFV (Grand Floridian Villas). This could be due to the fact that the new resort has not yet opened and a common acronym has not been agreed on within the community.

During the assessment of the discussion threads, it was noted that underneath a person's chosen avatar, usually a Disney character, was listed the member's status within the community, the date they joined, their location, and the number of posts they had contributed. These could all be used to assess the credibility of a DISboard member when making the decision of whether or not to use the poster's information to meet the information need. The three major groups are “Earning my Ears” who involve members that have contributed zero to one hundred postings, “Mouseketeers” that have contributed one hundred to five hundred posts, and “DIS Veterans” who have written over five hundred posts. Some DIS Veterans exhibited that they had contributed over ten thousand posts. However, some people deleted these “labels” and created their own. The number of
posts a person has contributed does not necessarily make them an expert as shown within the analyzed discussion threads. In fact, out of the fifty analyzed discussion threads the group of members that were labeled as “Earning their Ears” had only sought out information needs as original posters, OPs, on 10 discussion threads with 18 of the OPs labeled as DIS Veterans and 22 OPs labeled as Mouseketeers. Within each discussion thread, responders to the OP consisted of a majority presence of Mouseketeers and DIS Veterans.

Out of the 50 analyzed posts, 74% of the posts were analyzed as explicitly helpful. It was common for the original poster, known as the OP on discussion boards, or other posters to show that that the given information was helpful was for them to express their gratitude to the information received and follow up by stating the decision they have made. In fact, the most general structure found within the Disboards threads often consisted of the original poster, OP, inquiring about a decision on a resort, restaurant, or other travel plan. Based upon the information given, fellow DISboard members would give the OP information. Following a number of posts, the OP would either ask an additional question to try to receive more specific answers or if his or her exact information need was not met. In the end, they would typically state that they were satisfied with the given information. The information givers tended to challenge the previous posters, PPs, ideas for the OP, thus resolving in a polarity of posts within each discussion thread. However, the OP would still be able to come to some kind of conclusion. The remaining 26% of the posts, however, did not reach a definite conclusion depicting as to whether the OP was assisted in their information need.
Result--Online Questionnaire

The questionnaire used was meant to support the evidence found within the discussion board analysis. Out of the thousands of DISboards members, 19 volunteered to participate in the questionnaire created through SurveyMonkey during the two-week period. The majority of the participants have been DISboard members for one to five years, 9 members, with the second greatest number of members, 7, have been members for more than five years. The majority of the participants, 14, had a lot of experience with travel destinations offered by the Walt Disney Company by traveling with them eleven or more times. Posting questions as an OP, original poster, in the discussion thread was not a very frequent activity among surveyors. The majority of members (53%) stated they only sometimes asked DISboard members for information. The majority of those who had been a member of DISboards for less than one year stated that they began a discussion thread often. One person stated that they never ask for information on DISboards. It was noted that this member had been a member of DISboards for five or more years and had experienced Disney destinations more than eleven times. All of the surveyors had at least posted answers within the discussion threads with the majority only posting sometimes (63%) and the remaining 37% posting often. The majority of the DISboard community members (58%) believed that the information given by fellow community members was helpful. 32% of those who took the
survey stated they would strongly agree the information was helpful, while 10% disagreed with their fellow surveyors. To understand what criteria members used to assess the credibility of the authors, Disboard members were asked whether they looked at the number of posts a author has contributed or how many vacations with Disney is listed in their signatures. The results to both questions were very similar with approximately 62% agreeing with the statement, while the remainder did not. The last few questions supported whether the members felt they could trust the information they received through DISboards travel planning forums and used that information to make their decisions. It was unanimous that DISboards had the surveyors vote as a source of information for their travel planning. Other sources that were popular included Disney's travel destination website and unofficial websites specific to Disney destinations in a tie at 74% of the surveyors. It was also found that all of the surveyors agreed or strongly agreed that they trusted the DISboard community. However, when asked whether the poster’s advice was used to make decisions in travel, the answers were a little more across the board.
Discussion

It is argued that the criteria of credibility is hard to assess within discussion boards because posters are anonymous. However, it was apparent that the OP, original poster, typically looked for the credibility of the author when deciding whether the information should be considered. The first criterion of credibility, author’s reputation, was assessed based upon the label of rank given to the author based upon the number of times he or she had posted. The fact that most posters, both OPs and those who provide answers, have a good number of posts displayed under their avatar points to the assumption that Mousketeers and DIS Veterans have learned to trust of the community and feel comfortable to ask for their fellow DISboard members for information.

OPs who were “Earning their Ears” tended to ask more generalized questions and get quickly intimidated by those deemed more knowledgeable from the number of posts exhibited under their avatar. Their intimidation could also be brought on because they are new to the community and may lack a sense of trust that the DISboard members will assist them with their information needs. For instance, one original poster (OP) felt nervous about asking for information regarding Disney resort choice, “Hello there - first time poster so please be kind! “ Another stated, “forgive me for my ignorance...” before moving on with her question, making the assumption that it has been answered before and would not receive a valid answer
again. Out of the small sample of members who completed the questionnaire, the majority agreed or strongly agreed, about 64%, that they look for the number of posts a member has contributed when considering the information that has been given. This was also see throughout the discussion. Thus, showing that the given labels established a great deal of credibility among DISboard members.

However, these ranks given to community members based upon the number of posts submitted cannot attest for all of the criteria used to assess the credibility of the information poster. One discussion thread that stands out involves an OP asking legitimately how to get the best deal on the most expensive resort at Disney. A frequented poster, with almost 16,800 posts and holding the esteemed rank of DIS Veteran, did not offer to assist the OP with helpful information but instead joined in one the banters of a previous poster, PP:

“Originally posted by _______: “Do you have anything to sell?”

(Veteran)="… like the rights to your first-born?
... or, your car title?”

Another high acclaimed DIS veteran community member came to the OP’s in with actually answering the OP’s question. The member not only has a plethora of posts listed underneath their avatar, but also displayed that he or she has stayed in to resort of question and was returning there in a few months based upon their ticker. Upon receiving the information, the OP immediately follows with: “I think that the post above is our most likely scenario...”. The criterion of author’s reputation is also found within posts. For instance, in one discussion thread regarding a special tea at a resort that involves planning for reservations months prior to the event. An argument breaks out among members regarding the times the tea can be scheduled
for. One of the DIS Veteran members, a frequent poster on the restaurant forum, is tested on his knowledge about the hours. A member states:

“[DIS Vet member] actually works at WDW, so he knows things. The issue is that there is at least one person on this thread who has been many times in December and has never experienced an opening before 2.”

A response is provided as follows:

“I would absolutely put my trust in any of [DIS Vet member] information. I believe that he knows what he is talking about. I was just commenting because it would seem that most people who have commented on this thread that have been to Afternoon Tea simply do not believe that tea time could be scheduled before 2pm and be accurate.”

It is shown in this particular thread that even though the DIS veteran may have believed to have been credible based upon a good reputation, those seeking information from this discussion thread believe that others have better expertise than the DIS Vet member based upon others’ stated experiences.

More often than not, those seeking information would look at the information within the post to see if the author met positive criteria for their expertise. This was displayed through their explicit statement of their experiences with the destination and the Disney Company. Some original posters looked for expertise that pertained directly to their information need, not just their experience with the company. For instance, one OP asked for advice on the best hotel for five adults that included two people who snored. The majority of posters recommended two separate rooms or a villa with multiple rooms. Others go off on tangent and suggest the OP to get a sleep apnea test. However, the OP seems to not really consider the other posts until one member states:
“My mother snores and grinds her teeth. She came with DD and I on a recent trip and we all stayed in the same room. I used "Flent's Quiet Contour" ear plugs and they worked perfectly. Blocked out all sound and buying a pack of those was much less expensive then paying for an extra room."

It is after this that the OP explicitly states:

"Thanks everyone for the advice!!! We are going to go with ear plugs and nasal strips! Staying CL at the BC!"

However, some original posters did not seem to come to a conclusion based upon the posted information within the discussion thread. This was often caused by too much polarity, or more than often, some of the members of the discussion thread would go off on their own tangent, thus, causing the OP to not have their information needs met. For instance, one OP asked for the best vegetarian options at counter service restaurants at the Magic Kingdom Park. While the first few posts gave a few suggestions, the thread immediately spiraled into an argument on defining what it meant to be a pescatarian, vegetarian, and vegan. Other threads included arguments between two or more members regarding their opinions. In reply to the PP, previous poster, a DISboard member gets agitated with the majority going against his opinion on a resort choice:

“To be fair, the Boat to DTD [Downtown Disney] IS very nice, but it is not at all fast. How you could complain about the walk at CSR [Coronado Springs Resort] being way too long (and 10 mins is an overstatement most likely) The boat ride to DTD is actually 20+ mins…"

“There is a certain irony to some of the general thrusts of posts I see here (and be aware the DisBoards are POR [Port Orleans Riverside Resort] and FQ [Port Orleans French Quarter Resort] army strongholds) …."

There were a number of posts similar to these in which the criteria for assessing the credibility of the author and, therefore, the information quality are seen as negative. The author may have a positive reputation and good expertise in the information
provided, however, the author meets negative criteria by being extremely biased to the Coronado Springs Resort. He or she, therefore, attempts to persuade the author to choose their favorite resort over the other by providing negative comments and does not contain any outside sources to support the duration of the Downtown Disney boat ride. Therefore, this post is an example of what information seekers would not consider to meet positive criteria in the assessment for credibility and, thus, would not consider the information helpful in making their travel decisions.
Limitations

This study was performed over a relatively short period of time. Stronger research and analysis would most likely take years to accomplish, not several months. This particular study was also not funded or sponsored by an organization. The administration for DISboards was also not entirely supportive of my research as I did not receive any contact from them despite reaching out to them for help with getting members to volunteer for my survey. The biggest limitation of this study involved the distribution of the questionnaire. Not wanting to be too evasive to the community of DISboards and to respect the privacy of its members, I chose to post my a letter of content to the DISboard members asking them to voluntarily offer their time to fill out the online questionnaire. I asked them to send me a private message through my member name and I would provide them with the link to the questionnaire on SurveyMonkey. I chose to place the survey within the forum, “Theme Park Attractions and Strategies,” due to the high frequency of readers and posters within the forum. I received about twelve replies within the one night. The next day, the forum’s moderators moved the the survey post to the sub forum within “Theme Park Attraction and Strategies” known as “Theme Park Community.” After two days in this much less frequented forum, I only received one inquiry. When asking the moderators for permission to keep the survey elsewhere, I was denied due to the lack of relevancy to the information members were seeking out. While I
understood the reasoning of the moderators, my countless attempts to gain volunteers within the Theme Park Community forum was not successful and I was, thus, stuck with only 19 responses out of such a large community over a two week period. Not only were members, I assume, not wanting to take the time to send me a personal message, they had trouble discovering how to do it, as evidence from one volunteer. Had I allowed myself more time to administer the questionnaire, I may have been able to change the way in which the survey was advertised in the hopes of receiving far larger numbers of respondents.
Conclusions

Through the analysis of the fifty discussion threads relating to travel planning on DISboards and the data given from the online questionnaire, the assumption can be made that DISboard members look for positive criteria of credibility when deciding to take the poster’s advice in their destination plans. Members tended to trust information as valid when it was given by a fellow member who had contributed many posts, had a number of Disney destinations listed in their signature, and stated their experience with a certain aspect of the Disney vacation before continuing to give their advice. Once positive criteria for credibility has been established, the original poster, OP, is able to build trust with the members in the DISboard community. Therefore, giving an information seeker the sense that the information contains a high quality and is deemed useful to assist them with their travel plans. According to the questionnaire it seems that trust in the community of DISboards drive information seekers to take the advice of fellow members.

However, this particular study was a highly exploratory one. More studies will need to be performed to truly understand the information seeking practices of travel planners using a discussion board platform. These studies would greatly contribute the information science research in understanding how people assess the credibility and quality user generated information in web 2.0 applications. It would also help the hospitality and tourism business understand how travelers plan their tourist
destination using eWOM through user generated discussion threads. In order for research to continue it may be wise to analyze longer discussion threads within a forum as sometimes it was noted that it was possible for an OP, original poster, to take much longer than other members to make a decision based on the given information. More posts should be analyzed and across numerous travel destination discussion boards to get a broader understanding of all types of information seekers. Further research could be done using the standards of criteria similar to those found in the American Library Association’s *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* in order to understand how people assess whether information meets their needs on other Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and other discussion boards.
Works Cited


Munoz-Leiva, Francesco, Janet Hernandez-Mendez, and Juan Sanchez-Fernandez. "Generalising User Behaviour in Online Travel Sites through the Travel 2.0


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Appendix: Questionnaire

1. How long have you been a member of DISboards.com? (Please Choose One)
   - Less than one year
   - One to five years
   - More than five years

2. How many times have you been to a Disney Destination, including parks, cruises, Adventures by Disney and other Disney owned hotels? (Please Choose One)
   - None
   - One to Five times
   - Six to Ten times
   - Eleven or more times

3. How often would you say you begin a discussion thread with a question? (Please Choose One)
   - Never
   - Almost Never
   - Sometimes
   - Often
   - Always

4. How often do you post an answer to another member's question in a discussion thread?
   - Never
   - Almost never
   - Sometimes
   - Often
Always

5. Most answers to the questions posted in a discussion thread on DISboards are helpful. (Please Choose One)

Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree

6. I look at how many posts a member has contributed when deciding whether the author's information should be considered. (Please Choose One)

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree

7. If the information is provided, I look at how many times a member has been to a Disney Destination when considering whether a post provides good information. (Please Choose One)

Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree

8. When planning a vacation to Disney where do you gather the most information to help with your planning decisions. (Check Multiple Answers)

DISboards Discussion forum
WDWInfo
Other websites that cater to Disney information (not owned by Disney)
General Travel Websites (i.e TripAdvisor)
Disney Travel Agent
Travel Agent (not Disney)

Disney.com

Friends or Family who have been to Disney

9. Other DISboard members' opinions have influenced my travel decisions. (Please Choose One)

Never

Sometimes

Fairly Often

Often

Always

10. I trust the information provided by members on DISboards. (Please Choose One)

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree