



**UNIVERSITY OF TAMPERE**  
Department of management studies

**Analysing User Created Content in Blogs:  
A Case study of Fashion Bloggers' PR-Trip to Stockholm**

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Master's thesis

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## **ABSTRACT**

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In this study I focused on a PR-excursion organized by an Domestic Marketing Organization (DMO) of Sweden, VisitSweden. This PR-excursion was arranged for Finnish fashion bloggers. I have analysed how the sponsors of this excursion appeared in the content. I went through the material and analysed how this User Created Content was structured after these PR-tactics influenced the bloggers. I even asked the representatives of these sponsoring organizations about their objectives for this excursion and how they attempted to manipulate the content created by bloggers? In conclusion, I have attempted to discuss the findings and what implications they might have for Tourism Organizations (TO).

When it comes to the appearance of the sponsors of this excursion it can be argued that the more popular the blogger the more times the sponsors seemed to appear in the content. When I asked these sponsors before the excursion, the expectations and the means of influence that most of them have, they did not really know what to expect or how to try to influence these bloggers. One of these sponsors differed from the others because they could give me exact expectations and actual means to accomplish them. This organization was also praised the most and all the bloggers thought that it was the best thing on the excursion.

I would argue that blogs, even though they are a universal phenomenon are highly attached with the local culture. These blogs that I have been going through the past months represent Finnish way of blogging and their views on what is ethical when it comes to sponsored excursion or advertising in general. Measuring the outcomes of this PR-excursion is difficult since there is no consensus on what the desired outcome is. I have presented some rough figures that hopefully contribute in some way to the discussion about how to measure the successfulness of PR-excursions for bloggers, but further research is certainly needed. Although I didn't pose explicitly the question of whether it was possible to manipulate or influence the content that was created online it is obvious that at least some form of manipulation could be done by offering a PR-excursion to bloggers.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Relevance of the study**

Virtual communities, blogs and social media applications have changed the rules of the Tourism sector. Internet has evolved from purely information-seeking device to a global communication channel. Information-seeking process of the customer is more complex than before and organizations interested in marketing their services need to acknowledge customer driven marketing. Word of Mouth –marketing is not a new phenomenon but never before it could be statistically measured, manipulated or intended for masses.

Tourism sector is heavily influenced by the new form of social interaction on the Internet. Customers can now share their experiences with a global audience. When booking a hotel for example anyone can go through the numerous customer created reviews online before making the purchase decision. These customer created reviews are no longer hard to find. If one would search for a particular hotel with Google's search engine it is most likely that one or more of the top matches would lead to a virtual community site. Tripadvisor.com for example has over 20 million posted reviews about different hotels around the world.

Although blog postings are harder to come across while searching the Internet it is known that popular bloggers may well influence the consuming behaviour of their readers. Blog readers follow their favourite bloggers frequently and are arguably influenced by the blog content. Organizations have even started to promote their products through popular blogs. Some bloggers even make their living from these advertising fees. At least in Sweden popular bloggers have become celebrities and blogging has become a popular activity of the masses.

In this study I will be analysing a case where a Domestic Management Organization (DMO) of Sweden called VisitSweden organized a PR-excursion for Finnish fashion bloggers. Along with VisitSweden, five other organizations quickly demonstrated their willingness to sponsor this excursion.

## **1.2 PR-work and Tourism**

Public relation or PR, as it will be used in this study, has many definitions and these definitions change constantly. Broadly defined PR means an organization's communications with its various Stakeholder groups (Heath 2001, 192). I would argue that Destination Management Organizations (DMO) focus on building relationships with media organizations. The work includes informing various media parties about the possibilities of a destination, its services and attractions. Widely used form of informing media about an event or theme at a destination is done by sending newsletters and inviting journalists to participate in press trips.

Heath (2001) argues that the shift from purely tactical to strategic PR-work has been taking place in the last decades. Some definitions of PR focus on the particular activities of Public Relations rather than looking at PR from a strategic point of view. PR is not just about informing the public about random destination news. The essence of PR from the strategic point of view is thus to keep the management of PR-activities in line with the organization's goals. DMO's do this by coordinating the promotion campaigns with the PR-activities. Sometimes it feels like destination information of a particular place is advertised everywhere, such as when you have seen an ad in a newspaper or on TV and just happened to read about it in your favourite magazine. The goal is to position a destination through Media at the same time, before or after the marketing efforts have been put in place.

The PR-function can be reactive or take more a proactive approach. The traditional PR-work has been focused on reactive efforts and the goal of PR has been and still is to react to a piece of news. Rather than waiting for something to happen in a destination, proactive PR-work can be defined as trying to pitch the "same old thing" with a different angle.

The traditional media in PR-work are printed media, radio and TV. They all are one-way media with no or little interaction with their audience. Even if the message that the PR-function conveys is something the primary target group is excited about and the media is keen on publishing, there is no means for the target group to interact or discuss the received message in the media. Traditional media use professional journalists to publish any messages. Blogs on the other hand are

created by non-professionals who interact with their audience, but they have some characteristics of the traditional media. How is the message sent in the blogosphere and how do the bloggers write about the desired message? How is this interaction changing the PR-efforts and what kind of things do PR-specialists need to consider when interacting with bloggers?

### **1.3 Research task and questions**

In short the research task is to describe how the blog content is structured after PR-measures. My aim is to present what the bloggers are saying about this sponsored excursion and how these sponsoring organizations appear in the content.

The research questions are the following:

1.) How is the blog content structured when PR-Excursion is offered?

Sub-Question is how do the sponsors appear in the blog content?

The empirical task of the study is to go through what these bloggers have written about the excursion and to describe how the content appears to be constructed.

2.) What are the objectives of these sponsors?

Sub-Question 1. Were these PR-Tactics successful in manipulating the content?

I asked the representatives of the sponsoring organizations in an e-mail to tell me their objectives for this PR-excursion and how they intended to influence or manipulate the bloggers so that they would write according to their objectives.

3.) How could blogs be used as part of proactive PR-work in the future?

Sub-Questions: 1. How do blogs differ from traditional PR-work?

2. What does the future of blog related PR-work look like?

Based on the content analysis my goal is to present some key issues that arise from this particular case. Are blogs just a normal PR-channel or do they present something new and intriguing? In the last chapter of this thesis I will contemplate the empirical findings and present some suggestions for the future of PR-work in social media.

#### **1.4 Research methodology**

This study is by nature qualitative. None the less, I have quantified some of the findings. By quantifying the empirical material I'm attempting to increase the credibility of this study. The opinions that are being analysed in this thesis are subjective, everyday thoughts and experiences, but they are expressed through the most powerful media that exists today. Although very subjective in nature, these expressions can be highly influential in shaping tourists' opinions.

It is crucial that the bloggers who participated in the excursion were not informed about this research project. Eskola (1975) has categorized written information sources as private documents and mass-communication (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2006, 86). Blogs are published on the Internet and thus could be arguably defined as mass-communication. On the other hand they do include some of the elements of private documents since they are usually created by a single person writing in a personal journal type of format.

The bloggers aren't mentioned in the analysis by name, but they are each categorized by codes. Engaging the bloggers and making them aware of the research could damage the credibility of the results. Earlier research backs up this choice. In none of the related studies presented in chapter 2.2.1, were the bloggers, or thread and/or review writers informed that their content has been included in a study.

To get the sponsoring organization's view into the analysis, the objectives of sponsoring organizations will be gathered. The representatives of these organizations have been sent an e-mail asking them to write down what are their objectives for the excursion were. These objectives will be then compared with the findings from the blog content.

#### **1.5. Outline of the study**

This study is loosely comprised of three parts: An Introduction, Empirical explorations and Concluding remarks. The introduction introduces and explores some related studies on tourism blogs, as well as presents my goals for this research project. The introduction spans chapters 1, 2 and 3. Chapter 1 describes the research



goals and methodological approach. I will be presenting some previous research on Tourism Blogs. My goal is to engage the reader so that he or she can better understand the empirical phase of my study. Chapter 2.1 will give the reader an overall picture of Tourism Blogs. Chapter 2.2 will define how this User Created Content (UCC) that these bloggers produce can be defined. Chapter 2.3 will focus on individual studies on Tourism Blogs that are relevant for this Master's thesis. Chapter 2.4 will discuss the electronic Word of Mouth effects associated with User Created Content. Chapter 2.5 gives examples on how organizations have attempted to manipulate the UCC. In chapter 2.6 I will summarize these previous studies and introduce the content analysis that will be performed in the master's thesis.

Chapter 3 will describe the research process and the categorization choices made to perform the content analysis. In this chapter I will describe the data gathering process and some aspects of credibility to consider. Chapter 4 is the empirical core of this study. The case will be presented using numerical and actual contextual information. The chapter is divided in to four sections. Chapter 4.1 is an introduction to the actual excursion presented here. Chapters 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 form the categories by which the case is analysed. Chapter 4.5 summarizes these categories and attempts to make an overall picture of the excursion.

In conclusion, in chapter 5 I will attempt to measure a return on blog –ratio (ROB) by considering the information from the empirical section and use monetary costs of the excursion to measure if the attempt to manipulate blog content was successful. To further measure the successfulness of the excursion I'm also comparing the objectives of the organizations that sponsored this excursion to the actual outcomes. The chapter ends with some thoughts on the future of PR-work in social media forums.

## **2. Previous research on Blogs**

### **2.1 Introduction to Tourism Blogs**

The Term *Blog* is a universally used contraction for Weblog. Blogs present web content in journal style, usually in reverse chronological order. A person who writes a blog is called a blogger and the collective activities of bloggers has become know as the blogosphere. Blogs are currently predominant in travel-related virtual

communities where users share their experiences in journal style format (Adam et. al, 2007). Fashion related blogs have been around since 2002 and many designers are keen on having bloggers review their designs. In this research both of these elements of the ever growing blogosphere are combined. In this study the focus is on fashion blogs and how they are writing about their sponsored excursion to Stockholm.

Personal blogs make up a huge portion of the blogosphere. It's estimated that there are over 20 million personal blogs on the World Wide Web and the amount doubles every 5.5 months (Mack, Bose & Pan 2008, 134). In the travel industry numerous publicly maintained communities specialize in hosting individual blogs. The most influential of them are [travelpod.com](http://travelpod.com), [travelblog.com](http://travelblog.com), [realtravel.com](http://realtravel.com), [yourtraveljournal.com](http://yourtraveljournal.com) and [travelpost.com](http://travelpost.com). Virtual communities such as [Virtualtourist.com](http://Virtualtourist.com), [Tripadvisor.com](http://Tripadvisor.com), [igougo.com](http://igougo.com) and [realtravel.com](http://realtravel.com) publish some blogs along with a vast customer review collection. Well-known travel guides have also provided customers with a free space to post their travel experiences. It's estimated that there are more than 26 million English language travel blogs that can be identified and 1.5 million postings are made every day (Puhringer & Taylor 2008, 179).

The content that bloggers are creating is called User Generated Content or User Created Content (UGC/UCC). It can be defined as being publicly posted, outside of the professional routines and that the creation of this content requires some form of creative effort. UGC is already influencing about US \$10 billion a year in online travel bookings and over 20 percent of consumers rely on UGC when planning a trip (Schmallagger & Carson 2008, 100). In Europe, 60 per cent of internet users have experience with UGC, such as reading or writing blogs, listening to podcasts, setting up RSS feeds or reading and writing online reviews (Carrera et. al. 2008, 94). Almost half of the people making travel purchases online use consumer generated content in their travel planning (O'Connor 2008, 51).

The 20 million blog users seem to think that blogs are more credible than mainstream media. According to Johnson & Kaye (2004, 630) 73.6 percent of the blog readers consider blogs moderate to highly credible. The same study showed

that the credibility of online newspapers was only 42.7 percent. Bloggers have become so influential that they are being invited to the New York Fashion Week and lately Stockholm's Fashion Week has been showing interest in blogs as the Fashion blogging phenomenon has gained wider popularity in Sweden. Designers have become so closely related with fashion bloggers that they want bloggers to be among the first ones to post comments about their collections (Thomas & Peters 2007, 588).

Gretzel and Yoo (2008) studied the online review portal Tripadvisor.com and found that most of the information the users of the community search for is about where to stay. 77.9 percent of the users who filled out the survey rated the review information concerning where to stay as extremely important. It could be argued that blogs and reviews are viewed as credible source of information. The main reasons are that the UCC is usually up-to-date, reliable and enjoyable (Gretzel & Yoo 2008). The reviews also increase confidence of travellers in the decision-making process, reduce risk of choosing and help avoiding places travellers wouldn't enjoy (Gretzel & Yoo 2008, 42).

Lonely planet's guide books have been useful for a long time and many travellers have taken the advice of the readers when they've booked a hotel or visited a sight. Lonely Planet has a busy discussion forum where travellers can give and share their advice with others. 23 of 81 discussion threads included in a study of Lonelyplanet.com's threads show a clear influence. This means that out of 81 questions posed by people wanting to travel to a certain destination 23 of the answers to these questions were considered useful by the original thread creators. (Arsal, Backman & Baldwin 2008, 90).

Although blogs can be seen as a credible source of information to those who use the internet, nothing can beat traditional Word of Mouth, according to Mack, Blose and Pan (2008). People who don't post blogs perceive the authoritativeness of personal blogs as being significantly lower than recommendations from a friend or a family member. On the other hand, people who post blogs place greater authoritativeness on personal blogs than traditional word of mouth. This implies that even blogs are

no match for traditional Word of Mouth, but there are audiences that are responsive to blogs. (Mack, Blose & Pan 2008)

Blogs that are perceived as familiar or in which the blog writers present their first-hand experiences to make them more personal could be perceived as more credible. Studying the comments could also reveal some ideas that will show the closeness of the blog writer and the readers. It could also be argued that an increase in use of the web as a social device will make the web content more credible, thus increasing the familiarity aspect of electronic word of mouth.

The common belief is that bloggers are predominantly young singles without children who have relatively stable incomes. It could be argued also that men are the dominating gender when it comes to technology and the Internet. Technorati's recent "State of the Blogosphere 2008," argues that although it's a matter of global phenomenon, nearly half of the bloggers reside in North-America and combined with Europe, 75 percent of the bloggers live in the Western world.

The statistics in some of the surveys relating to UGC, blogs and virtual communities present a different picture, challenging the common belief that men are the dominating gender when it comes to technology.

Some questioners show that women are the majority of users when it comes to travel related UCC. Almost 60 percent of the users of blogs and virtual communities are females (Mack, Blose & Pan 2008; Wenger 2008; Gretzel & Yoo 2008). Based on Gretzel & Yoo's survey (Gretzel & Yoo 2008, 39) 64 percent of users who responded to their survey on Tripadvisor.com were female. Carson also points out (Carson 2008, 115) that many travel journals are written by couples. Surprising was the fact that 78.5 percent of the respondents reported having children under 17 living in their house. The majority of the respondents also reported to have an income of over \$90,000 US. 64.2 percent of the respondents read travel-related blogs.

Similar to Gretzel & Yoo's research Mack, Blose and Pan (2008, 138) found while studying credibility of blogs in Facebook.com that the majority of respondents

(56.5%) were female. A third of the respondents said that they are reading blogs and 14 percent indicated that they actually post blogs. Also Wenger reports that almost 60 percent of *travelpod.com*'s blog creators were female. Her study indicates that it's difficult to estimate the age of bloggers on *travelblog.com* but it seems that the majority of bloggers are aged between 20 and 40 years old. Although there is evidence that users of social network societies are living with a spouse, Wenger's research shows that a majority of people writing blogs about Austria were solo travellers. (Wenger 2008)

The use of the internet to gather destination information is increasing all over the world. Since virtual communities and blogs have become more commonly used, centralized control over destination information dissemination has become almost impossible (Choi, Lehto & Morrison 2006). Boarder interview surveys in Finland from 2002 until 2007 also show that use of the internet as a source of information has risen 5 per cent from 2006 to 2007. From the year 2002 until the year 2006 there isn't any differentiation in percentages (Finnish Tourist Board & Statistics Finland 2008, 134). It could be argued that the increased percentage in the use of internet as an information source shows that social media applications and blogs are gaining more users. For Destination Marketing Organizations such as Finland's MEK or Sweden's VisitSweden this could imply a more proactive approach to blogging and social media.

People blog for many reasons. The main reason tends to be self expression in its different forms. It's important to understand the motivations of bloggers to facilitate customer driven marketing (Chung & Buhalis 2008, 71). Bloggers' motivational factors include connecting with peers, self-expression and achieving a certain level of fame, notoriety or prestige. Users also engage in building upon existing knowledge and evaluation of current information through reviews and recommendations (OECD 2007, 10).

Bauman (2007) argues that even though the society is divided into the things to be chosen and their choosers, the consuming society has nothing to do with consumers and the commodities they consume. The society of consumerism is blurred and the divide between the previous is no longer there. For all kinds of commodities it is

essential to be recognised, noticed and to stand out from the masses. It is fame and notoriety that, in Bauman's words, the bloggers are motivated by (Bauman 2007).

If you look at blogs, there are some bloggers that have risen to fame, and certainly they have become a talked about commodity. Tripadvisor.com is a social network society where people rate commodities and are themselves commodities that are being promoted. Tripadvisor.com promotes the members that are posting "unbiased" information and the members that are promoting the various tourism sector commodities. The goal of any social network society, relating to Bauman's perspective, is thus to lift the reviewers from the mass of indistinguishable objects.

Swedish fashion blog writers Ebba von Sydow or Blondinbella are undeniably the stuff of which dreams are made. The young chief editor of a Swedish Veckorevy, Ebba Von Sydow, has climbed into stardom with her fashion blog. When she recommends a fashion commodity the retail stores are emptied of the goods. A blogger called Blondinbella is probably one of the most talked about new celebrities in Sweden. Now at the age of 17 she has made huge sums of money by selling advertising rights to organizations. These fashion bloggers are usually related to the fashion industry or strive to be noted, thus promoting designers, trends and retailers is the essence of fashion blogging. In Bauman's (2007, 13) views this dream could be described as follows:

*"Beneath the dream of fame, another dream, a dream of no longer dissolving and staying dissolved in the gray, faceless and insipid mass of commodities, a dream of turning into notable, noticed and coveted commodity, a talked-about commodity, a commodity standing out from the mass of commodities, a commodity impossible to overlook, to deride, to be dismissed. In a society of consumers, turning into a desirable and desired commodity is the stuff of which dreams, and fairy tales, are made."*

On the other hand, bloggers view advertising in a somewhat critical manner. One of the bloggers on a PR-Trip studied in this thesis posted a blog entry about blogs and commercial activity a few weeks after the excursion. In this post she argued that the readers of the blogs fear that they are submitted to stealth marketing when bloggers

are appraising a service or product without the readers' knowledge of it being paid advertising. Blogger B2, as identified later on in the empirical part of this study, further writes that it would be considered ethical if the blogger reveals to his or her audience the source of inspiration behind his or her story. Thus, In her words it would be considered ethical if the blogger separates his or her self from the commodity she is promoting.

The mere size of the phenomenon is increasing along with the interest of marketers and PR-specialists in engaging in relationships with popular bloggers. In the past year numerous studies have been tackling the themes of Travel 2.0. The essence of this relatively new phenomenon is online information sharing.

In this study the focus is on the top fashion bloggers from Finland and the content that they are creating. This study hopefully further increases the knowledge of professionals working in tourism, about the possible interaction with the creators of this highly talked about commodity.

## **2.2 Defining User Created Content**

UCC can be defined as creative effort which is made publicly available over the internet and is created outside professional routines and practices (OECD 2007, 9). UCC includes various forms of media creation. Blog content consists mainly of text, images and audio. The blogs come in many shapes and sizes. The contents can be categorised into different topics and posts can be further grouped using tags, which are words relating to the content in question.

There are three characteristics that determine UCC. Firstly, the content must be **made public**. When creating blog content, there are various ways to make your content available. Blog content in various travel related virtual communities or social network societies, tends to focus on reviewing services, or goods and/or depicting travel experiences in journal type format. The length of these reviews and posts varies from single characters to a booklet review. Posts concerning fashion in My Spaces FASHIONlovers community, for example, reveal that when information concerns personal styles, brands and designers, tips, advice and retailers where the most important categories. Members of the community are anxious to share their

own personal sense of fashion, while knowledge of brands seems to be an important community value (Thomas & Peters 2007). Technological drivers of UCC will be discussed later in more detail.

For finding further information on their topics of focus, blogs are commonly linked to each other and to other related websites. Research on YouTube shows that popular videos are most likely to be linked and these linked videos form 90 % of the total views (Cha et al. 2007, 3). To search for blogs there are various search engines available. For example, Google's search engine can be accessed at [blogsearch.google.com](http://blogsearch.google.com). As the leading blog search engine and most comprehensive source of information on the blogosphere, Technorati.com indexes more than 1.5 million new blog posts in real time and introduces millions of readers to blog and social media content.

The second characteristic of UCC is **creative effort**. According to the OECD a certain amount of creative effort must be put into the creation of UCC (OECD 2007, 18). Simply copying existing information doesn't require any creative effort thus, posting an article from a newspaper isn't increasing UCC, but commenting on that article is seen as creating content.

A case study conducted by Lin & Huan reveals the creative efforts of a Taiwanese engineer. Justin's blog "I left my heart in the Aegean sea" seems to have inspired a TV-program, a range of design formats to capture the image of Aegean Sea, while additionally creating a growing interest for Taiwanese people to travel to Greece. Returning from the Aegean Sea, Justin decided to post 124 photos from the 1400 photos he took on the web site of Yahoo-Kimo in May 2003. His intention was to share these images with some friends, but on the first day the website attracted 6.000 visitors. Shortly the amount of visitors increased to tens of thousands a day. Over one million visitors visited the blog during the first month (Lin & Huan 2005, 1201).

Thirdly, User generated content has begun as a grassroots movement. It is seen as a **separate function from professional routines and practices**. It is usually created without the expectations of remuneration. It is a growing trend that some users in



virtual communities and social network societies are remunerated based on their content. Still, the fact that content in blogs is created outside the usual organizational routines makes it a useful characteristic to separate blogs from commercial entities (OECD 2007, 18).

### **2.3 Previous research on Tourism Blogs**

Douglas & Mills have studied blogs and their importance to destination brand. They researched Middle Eastern and North African destinations (MENA) on Travepod.com. They used Aaker's Brand Personality Dimensions and Traits to structure the content analysis. They used qualitative data mining to find words that correspond to these brand personality traits. The most frequent word found in these blogs relating to MENA was "transport" accounting 11.6% of the total keywords. "Great" was the second most popular word that appear 8.6% of the total words. "Excitement" that is one of the brand personality key words could be associated with the word "great". The other word in this personality model was rugged and it could be seen that the word transport was associated with "rugged". These keywords could possibly be translated into an effective marketing program relating to the image representation of MENA. The researchers note that blogs could be used as an essential new form of market research. (Douglas & Mills 2006)

Waldhör & Rind (2008) have classified Tourism Organization's aims in assessing blogs. They categorize blog types into target groups, blog target, goals of the analysis, tourism sector and provider of the blog. Target groups refer to the blogs dealing with C2C, C2B or B2C relationships. It is essential to know who the blog writer is targeting. When assessing the blog target, TO's must understand whether they are interested in the content that relates to them selves or if the focus of the analysis is competition. Goals of the analysis can be varied. TOs have to determine whether they are interested in analysing quality management, marketing, trend analysis, market research or comparisons. If a hotel which is a primary tourism player wants to know weather their services please their customers or not then they will probably want to assess virtual communities' ratings. These virtual communities can bring great value to hotels' market research efforts. Tourism sector categorization defines the field of industry which the blogs are relating to. The analysis can be focused on finding out transportation gaps, travel agency

appearance online or destination image representations, as in the previous Douglas & Mills' (2006) research. (Waldhör & Rind 2008)

What these researchers are suggesting is that a software support tool is needed to do all this. A software tool that these researchers have been working on collects the new posts automatically by taking advantage of RSS-feeds. It then transforms these blog posts into suitable documents and performs linguistic analysis and information extractions. After the analyses phase the software tool would also perform a basic evaluation of the data. These evaluation results could then be transferred into reports. The researchers argue that manual analysis will take time from a single person to perform and still, it is impossible to cover the blogosphere. This kind of manual analysis is only performed at certain times. A software agent works permanently and visits most of the available blogs. Secondly, computers outperform humans in routine analytical tasks. A person will probably get bored when performing these analyses and is always basing their search on their own assumptions. (Waldhör & Rind 2008)

Carson (2008) performed a market research study on what can be found in blogs concerning Australia's Northern Territory. Carson points out that "monitoring the attitudes of visitors is a problematic task for destination marketing organizations (DMO)." Blogs can reveal the attitudes of visitors towards a region in more depth than "tick box" –surveys, says Carson. In contrast to surveys, blogs can be thought as representing the "real or unbiased" feelings of customers. Carson wanted to locate individual blogs that wouldn't be commissioned or written for on behalf of an organization. He used two strategies to search for these blogs. First he searched with the three major blog search engines for "Northern Territory Australia". These search engines were [blogsearch.google.com](http://blogsearch.google.com), [Tecnocrati.com](http://Tecnocrati.com) and [bloglines.com](http://bloglines.com). The first 100 results were then surveyed. The second strategy involved searching relevant blogs in hosted blog sites to find out blog entries relating to Northern Territory. This was done by using the three most popular blog sites, [travelblog.com](http://travelblog.com), [travelpod.com](http://travelpod.com) and [travellerspoint.com](http://travellerspoint.com). (Carson 2008)

<b>Table 1 Searching for blog content Adapted from Carson (2008. 114-115)</b>		
<b>Results</b>		
<b>Search method</b>	<b>Links</b>	<b>Relevant</b>
Blogsearch.google.com	12 817	14
bloglines.com	8060	4
tecnocrati.com	5437	5
travelblog.com	3611	217
travelpod.com	10963	572
travellerspoint.com	982	39

Carson's (2008) research showed that a large number of blogs about travel to Northern Territory could be found. There was a lot of "noise" in the search results as can be seen from the table 1. Most of the noise came from commercial or news feeds. Blog creator profiles were limited and rarely included any personal information. This was the same for the blog readers who posted comments. Carson (2008, 117) states that the blog content that could be considered relevant was "relatively shallow, and provided little information on satisfaction, expectations or recommendations."

Another study where aspects of blog content have been revealed is Thomas & Peters' (2007) research on the MySpace community. Their interest was to find out what consumers are saying about fashion. Most fashion blogs involved members sharing their own personal sense of fashion. In fact, 21.7 percent of the analysed blogs focused on personal style. Shared personal evaluations in the form of brands and designers gained almost as much attention. 20.6 percent of the bloggers in the FashionLOVERS community were focusing on informing others on brands and designers. Surprisingly self promotion in form of marketing was low. Percentage of the total discussions where designers or sellers of fashion were promoting their goods was only 3.6 percent. Members of MySpace.com are hungry to gather, evaluate and share a variety of fashion related information. Fashion marketers are encountering an untapped resource with these virtual communities. The issues relating to the content of blogs reveal that it is the customers that are drivers of marketing.

In the case study of Justin's blog described earlier, while describing the UCC the researchers analysed the comments that were left on this blog using the classic AIDA-model. AIDA comes from the words Attraction, Interest, Desire and Action. This model has been used intensively in marketing studies. The data gathering

period lasted from the 1<sup>st</sup> of July until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November. The messages were categorized according to the AIDA model. It seems that Attention and Desire form a major part, namely 83.7 percent of the total comments. This Taiwanese blog received readers from outside Taiwan, although the site was run in a Taiwanese server. Some of the comments these authors revealed in the short research paper included, “Those pictures are gorgeous,” “After browsing the web site I want to visit Greece,” “I have decided to visit Santorini next month.” All the previous comments reveal something about the effectiveness of the electronic word of mouth. A desire to visit a place might turn into action in the future. Can you imagine that this blog was created by a Taiwanese engineer? The pictures were so amazing to these readers that one person even commented that “The Greek National Tourism Organization should make you an ambassador because my co-workers and friends are now all looking forward to seeing the legendary Aegean Sea with their own eyes.” (Lin & Huan 2005, 1203-1204)

#### **2.4. eWOM**

Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan (2006) discuss online interpersonal influence (eWOM) as a cost-effective means to marketing tourism and hospitality. They define electronic Word Of Mouth as all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or other sellers. Electronic Word Of Mouth can also be described as positive or negative statements made about a product or company that are made public over the Internet (Thorson & Rogers 2006, 40).

Blogs are considered informal communication and could be categorized according to the scope as Many-to-Many and being asynchronous in interactivity. This means that there are varieties of sources of information available and that this information can be accessed at any given time. (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan 2006)

How is this new form of Word Of Mouth different from the old one? Dellarocas (2003, 1410) suggests that the scope of the new applications is essential to the effectiveness of the networks. The scope of the phenomenon is influencing higher levels of cooperation, giving birth to influential institutions and turning traditional ineffective Word Of Mouth in to a large scale marketing device. The Internet is

allowing the Word Of Mouth to be measured when in the Pre-Internet era it was difficult to control. Mediating devices play a crucial role in monitoring the flow of Word Of Mouth. For instance, Tripadvisor.com has hired a team of supervisors to eliminate the fake reviews and ensure that the reviews are unbiased in nature. There are challenges that arise from the higher involvement in social media application. Most of the cues linking electronic Word Of Mouth to the traditional form are gone (Dellarocas 2003, 1410).

eWOM serves two purposes: It provides *information* about services that the viewer could be considering and *recommendations* whether the services or products should be bought. This implies that the increasing use of Internet within all the demographic segments could increase the possibility of customers or users actively driving some marketing efforts usually done by the organizations. (Litwin, Goldsmith & Pan 2006).

Information overload can decrease the effect in tourism eWOM. According to Park & Lee (2008, 10) high involvement services such as tourism could suffer from information overload and this might result in diminished customers' purchasing intentions. High involvement service seems to be more dependent on the informative role of the eWOM while customers of low involvement products seem to rely on recommendation facts. Thus, while low involvement customers can overcome the overflow and focus on popularity, the customers of high involvement service tend to focus on the informative aspects of the message.

The informative role that eWOM serves for travellers to help evaluate alternatives and avoid places that they wouldn't enjoy. Also, reviews can serve as providing ideas and learning about a travel destination, product or service (Gretzel & Yoo 2008, 42). Threads seem to influence mostly suggestions on what to eat or drink, where to go, what to do and general information on destination (Arsal, Backman & Baldwin 2008, 90).

It could be argued that blogs and reviews are viewed as credible sources of information. The main reasons are that the content is usually up-to-date, reliable and enjoyable (Gretzel & Yoo 2008, 43). The reviews also increase the confidence

of travellers in the decision-making process, reduce the risk of choosing and help avoid places travellers wouldn't enjoy (Gretzel & Yoo 2008, 42). 23 of 81 threads included in a study of Lonelyplanet.com's threads show a clear influence. The influencing effect was determined by original thread posters' comments on the recommendations they received and thought were useful (Arsal, Backman & Baldwin 2008, 90). It's suggested that online communities become a key medium in tourism marketing on the Internet (Arsal, Backman & Baldwin 2008, 84).

Although blogs can be seen as a credible source of information to those who use the internet, nothing can beat the traditional Word Of Mouth. People who don't post blogs perceive the authoritativeness of personal blogs as being significantly less than recommendations from a friend or a family member. On the other hand people who post blogs place greater authoritativeness on personal blogs than traditional Word Of Mouth. This implies that even blogs are no match for traditional Word Of Mouth, but there are audiences that are responsive to blogs. (Mack, Blose & Pan 2008)

## **2.5 Manipulation implications**

There is growing evidence that consumers are influenced by opinions posted on online forums as could be noticed from the previous chapters. Getting these bloggers or review writers to create informative or suggestive content about a service is probably on the minds of everyone working in tourism. If not, it should be!

The most simple, but criticised form of manipulation is to anonymously post online reviews praising company's own services. Dellarocas (2006, 1577) argues that there is ample evidence that this type of manipulation occurs. In February 2004, for example, Amazon.com mistakenly revealed the true identities of some of its book reviewers. It turned out that a sizable portion of the review writers were the books' own publishers, authors and competitors.

Another form of manipulation that doesn't include harsh unethical actions is to offer customers rewards for starting favourable discussions in social forums or to invite friends by sending them invitations to join. For example, Gilt Groupe which

is an invitation-only membership site that sells designer clothing by holding daily sales on various designer products, offers the following:

*For each friend you invite, Gilt Groupe will credit your account with \$25.00 after your friend's first purchase. Gilt Groupe offers two ways to invite your friends to join:*

- *Email*
- *IM your Personal Invitation Link:*

You can post your Personal Invitation Link to a social forum like Facebook.com and hope that people join through your invitation. They have been promoting their members-only site in top fashion blogs such as the Sartorialist.

Other firms monitor social media forums to identify influential members. The organizations then target these influential people directly and persuade them to write positive feedback about their products by offering them free samples or inviting them to special events. (Dellarocas 2006, 1578)

One example of a company inviting bloggers to a special event was done by the Coca-Cola Company. When Dr. Pepper was launching its dairy based soft drink the Coca-Cola Company invited “well-read” young bloggers and their parents to their Dallas headquarters for a week of “orientation.” In return for blog posts the young recruits received promotional material and free product samples. (Litvin et al. 2008, 464)

Monitoring virtual community feedback is another way of managing UCC. Tripadvisor.com offers an affiliate program to hotels so that they can get instant reservation services through an online reservation engine from their Tripadvisor.com review site. However, the best way the hotel managers can influence the expectations and satisfaction of their customers on this site is to post management responses on customer reviews. Even when customers are writing positive comments! Here is an example of a management review from the staff of Nordic Light Hotel in Stockholm. The screenshot was taken from Tripadvisor.com. It is amazing how unused this service that Tripadvisor.com offers is, even though, according to Schmallagger & Carson (2008, 105) “travel products and services are

the sector most at risk from negative comments made in social online networks compared to other business sectors, such as electronics or financial services.”

**“Treat guests like valued customers”**



**celusnek**  
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Save Review

Jan 1, 2009

We choose this hotel based on the good reviews, location, and mostly for the special deal; stay 3 nights and pay for only 2. It worked out to be \$115/night all inclusive with breakfast. Indeed it is steps from the Arlanda Express Train and Central Station and a 10-minute walk to Gamla Stan (Old Town). We arrived on Christmas Eve... [more](#)

2 photos

**Management response from NordicLight, Hotel Manager**

Dear Celusnek, Thank you for staying with us for Christmas. I hope you had a nice stay in Stockholm and I am happy that you liked our hotel even if we have decided to just have our usual design the whole year around. Even the Christmas tree is missing. Hope to see you soon again. Martin Åkesson

One manipulation strategy is to invite professional bloggers to write about their trip. Pennsylvania Tourism Office started using this strategy in 2005 by inviting bloggers to tour the region and write about their trips and travel experiences. The aim of this strategy was to get a variety of comments about the regions’ attractions. Holland has also invited renowned bloggers from the USA to tour around Amsterdam. The benefits these bloggers received covered at least all travel-related expenses. Even though sponsored blogs might bring positive results it still raises some ethical issues. Sponsoring organizations will certainly have to deal with the possibility of being tagged as stealth marketing organizations. (Schmallagger & Carson 2008, 102-103)

## 2.6 Summary

I have attempted to narrow down the previous research so that it would give the reader a better understanding of the phenomenon before moving on to the empirical phase of this study. Never the less, a summarization of these previous studies is in order.

A goal in this study is to describe how the content is structured after PR-measures have been offered to a group of bloggers. I also want to know what objectives the sponsoring organizations have and how they are trying to influence the bloggers so



that they write content that meets these objectives. The content analysis performed in the empirical chapter will provide some insight for the future of PR-work in the blogosphere.

When it comes to the structure of the content the article by Lin & Huan (2005) gives an extraordinary case example of an influential blog. They used the AIDA-model to capture the marketing value of a Taiwanese blog that described with pictures the amazing Islands of Mykonos. Although this example gave me some insight on how blogs could be analysed, the missing link between my study and this one was that in the study of Liu and Huan the blogger called Justin never got any reimbursement from Greek Tourism officials to post this blog. The purpose of my case example is to find out how the content is structured when these efforts at manipulation influences the bloggers.

For this study it is crucial to explain the definition of User Created Content. According to the OECD-study it is something that involves some creative effort, it's created outside of the working environment and it is published in a public forum. This definition works well in this study because these definitions still uphold some of the grassroots movements' ideology. I would argue that this ideology aims at the creation of this content *by everyone for anyone* and this is still very valid in the blogosphere. These kinds of definitions also leave the professional blogs such as executive blogs and editors' blogs from a media source outside of the study. Blogs do also include some creative effort even if the content is retrieved from another source, and in the case of fashion blogs the whole idea is that these individual bloggers present their personal sense of fashion.

These previous studies have certainly helped me in making decisions about how to approach the PR-excursion for bloggers that I will be analysing in this master's thesis. But what will be discussed in this thesis that hasn't been covered in the previous chapters is the actual manipulation effects to influence the UCC. I will be presenting how the content is structured after the manipulation efforts and reporting whether these efforts actually succeed. This is something that hasn't been researched in the previous studies, but this study will certainly add on to the

growing field of study and provide insights to PR-specialists and Tourism professionals about how to interact with the blogosphere.

### 3. Describing the research process

#### 3.1 Content analysis as a method

In Figure 1 I've tried to simplify the research process of my study. The figure is a loose adaptation from Hakala's (2003, 8) book, where she has illustrated content analysis in an advertising context. For the purpose of this study it is essential to note that it is the content of these blogs that represent the message, and organizations want to influence it by offering this excursion for these fashion bloggers. Thus, the message of these organizations is meant to come from the content of these blogs, given that the organizations are successful in their attempts to influence the content.

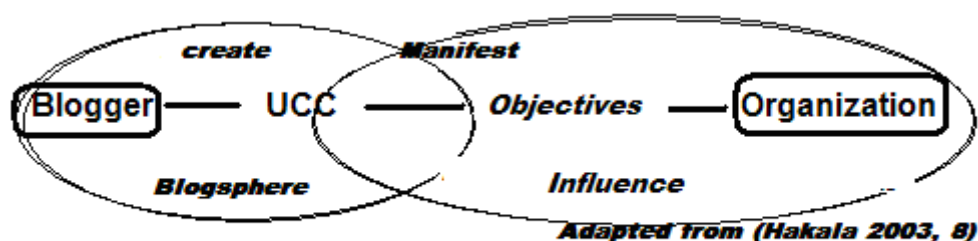


Figure 1. Describing the research process

An intention of advertising or in this case public relations is to influence attitudes or to seek an impact on sales. It could be argued that when people become more aware or inclined towards a service or brand the sales will also be influenced (Hakala 2003, 11)

Hakala argues that content analysis involves three basic steps: design, execution and reporting (Hakala 2003, 22). The design phase includes the selection and categorization of data. I have chosen to categorize the data in the chronological order that they appear in the content. The category selection is arguably a major part of any content analysis. It can be done based on prior theories or by establishing the categories after preliminarily exploration of the data (Wheeler 1988, 36; Hakala 2003, 23). In this case I have selected the categories by reflecting the prior theories but also by going through what these bloggers have written. It seems the most

natural way to present the content in chronological order since this is the way blogs are written.

There are two levels in the categorization phase of this study. The data has been grouped in three groups: pre-excursion, on-excursion and after-excursion categories. Inside these categories a divide has been made between the actual blog content and the comments relating to these contents. These categories will be described according to two simple frames. Firstly, the appearance of sponsors is important for all the organizations involved in this excursion. In essence the appearance includes how and how many times the organizations are mentioned in the content. The second category is more qualitative. It involves actual content made by the bloggers and the readers of these blogs. I'm trying to identify some of the most important content that could be seen as relatively influential and that meets the expectations of the sponsoring organizations. The organizations arguably want to know what the bloggers wrote about them. Describing the influences that these blogs had on the reader is also important. These two things, the content that includes the sponsoring organisations and the comments that show the attitudes of the reader are the most important pieces of information that can be abstracted from these blogs.

There has been much discussion about whether content analysis is a quantitative or a qualitative method (Hakala 2003; Neuendorf 2002; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002). Although this study is by nature qualitative, there are some elements of quantitative analysis involved. The quantitative matrices give more credibility to the qualitative aspects of the study. I don't see the divide between the two methods as exclusive, but rather see them as complimentary methods that can help to reach a better description of the case.

The information from the blogs has been copied and saved into word documents during the 15<sup>th</sup> of October and 14<sup>th</sup> of November to include pre-trip expectations and feedback created after the excursion. I have observed the blogs so that only those posts that talk about the excursion have been included. The blog posts can include other things as well but I have selected the posts that have only mentioned the excursion. My intention was to limit the data gathering period into two weeks,

but as it turned out most of the writing occurred after the excursion and the last blog post concerning the excursion was posted two weeks after the excursion. All of the data extracted from these blogs was printed out.

I have used qualitative data analysis software called Weft QDA to process the data into these categories. Weft QDA is a software tool for analysing textual data such as interview transcripts, documents and field notes. The software is easy to use and doesn't predetermine any analysis for you. It's available free under a public domain licence.

The data extraction was performed with WEFT QDA. This software was useful for written data. I could choose to look for a single word or a sentence. The appearance of the sponsors' appearance was easy to execute since I could look for the names of these organizations. To review the words Stockholm or shopping which I have used for comparative words to the appearance of sponsors names, was more difficult. I chose to look for not only the word Stockholm, but also the slang word that people use in Finland. The same applied for the word shopping. In Finnish there at least two verbs that can be used for shopping. Both of these words were used to extract information.

Pictures were manually reviewed from the printed out word-documents containing the content from these blogs. Those pictures that were taken from sponsors' facilities were extracted. Any unclear pictures were not taken into account even if I could've personally identified them.

To calculate the commenting activity in these blogs I have chosen to count the time in hours from the first comment to the last comment. These hours were then summed and divided by 24 to get daily averages. This process was done manually from the printed out word documents.

My assumptions prior to this case were that the bloggers write mainly about the itinerary created for them by the host-blogger. Some bloggers would probably mention the ferry line that is arranging the transfer to the location. At the accommodating hotel free wireless internet was provided to all the bloggers which

enabled them to write about their journey during the trip if they chose to do so. The bloggers spent one evening at a Japanese Spa close to the capital. The Spa entices all the senses and also offers exotic choice for accommodation and meetings. It was interesting to see what kind of expectations this resort had and how the bloggers responded to this place in their writings. As for VisitSweden, who arranged the excursion, their goal is to promote the destination's image, the touristic activity in the location and the availability of information on the location. A positive attitude in these blogs concerning the destination was desired.

Although I was planning to only analyse the posts that these bloggers write it seems that the fashion bloggers form an interactive community in Finland and that the posts keep these blogs alive. For this reason I included all the comments posted by readers of these blogs in this study. The comments could reveal some interesting aspects of this new phenomenon and particularly about the possible Word of Mouth effects.

Discussions about the PR-excursion prior to the excursion are a good starting point for this study. The bloggers also had the possibility of writing during the excursion and were provided with USB-memory sticks and free Wireless Internet or broadband connections throughout their excursion. Since most of the bloggers wanted to spend their limited time on shopping, not on blogging, most of the writing happened after the bloggers returned home.

#### **4. A Study of Fashion Bloggers' PR-Excursion**

VisitSweden's PR-manager and a fashion blogger in Stockholm came up with an idea to organize a PR-excursion for Finnish fashion bloggers in the spring of 2008. In October 2008 eight Finnish bloggers visited Stockholm. The excursion was hosted by a blogger residing in Stockholm. She had planned the itinerary and selected the bloggers while the PR-manager acquired the sponsoring organizations.

Five other organizations quickly responded to VisitSweden's initiative and wanted to sponsor this excursion. These organizations provided the fashion bloggers transportation, accommodation, spa treatments and meals along with some gift merchandise.

#### **4.1 Introduction to the Case**

The bloggers that were selected for this excursion were all women. Although it's difficult to assess the average age of the bloggers, based on some of the bloggers accurate profile descriptions and some generalizations, I would estimate that the average age is around 26 years. One of the bloggers is according to her profile 42 years old but most of them are in their 20's.

Some of the bloggers are studying fashion, but most of them are just fashion enthusiasts who want to share their personal style and suggestions. All of the bloggers are using some sort of blog software. The most common one was the blogger.com. All the bloggers besides one use this service. The odd blogger software is called vuodatus.net. Seven out of nine bloggers write in Finnish and two of them keep their blogs in English. All the quotes from these seven blogs that appear in Finnish have been translated into English.

For categorization and readability these blogs are given a letter code B for Blogger. The bloggers are then categorized in numbers from 1 to 9. The two blogs where the contents are in English are the blogs B3 and B7 thus from these two blogs the quotes presented in this thesis are direct quotes without translation. The blogger who is given the code B8 is the blogger involved in organizing this excursion. The table 1 shows bloggers' demographics and statistics. Popularity indicators are retrieved from blogilista.fi which is a Finnish internet site that retrieves the popularity data of blogs. The position data in this table refers to a categorization of Finnish bloggers by blogilista.fi. It seems that five of the bloggers are in the Top Ten of Finland's bloggers and the rest of them beyond Top-30. The number one fashion blogger attracts 13 times more visitors per week than the least visited blogger on the excursion. Most of the blogs are relatively new and there is even one blogger that according to her blogger.com profile started blogging just recently in January 2008.

<b>Table 2 Blogger statistics</b>	B1	B2	B3	B4	
STARTING DATE	13.3.2007	14.5.2007	21.11.2007	7.09.2007	
VISITORS/WEEK	1564	n/a	1744	10123	
SUBSCRIBERS	390	n/a	494	979	
POSITION	33	n/a	31	2	
AGE	26	24	~20	27	
	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9
STARTING DATE	12.12.07	6.9.2007	15.11.2007	11.11.2007	1.1.2008
VISITORS/WEEK	7568	11100	838	4865	6666
SUBSCRIBERS	1094	1286	257	556	707
POSITION	4	1	55	9	5
AGE	~20	26	26	42	21

As mentioned earlier in the chapter 2.2 while discussing the eWOM phenomenon, there are many aspects that take the informative power from the Domestic Marketing Organizations and place it in the hands of consumers, users and communities. These communities are already powerful influencers of consumer behaviour. In this particular case it can be seen that indeed even these fashion bloggers in Finland form a loose community and that ideas spread across the community faster than any traditional Word of Mouth ever could. Throughout these blogs a clear evidence of interlinking voices can be seen. The bloggers can send particular messages to a particular member of the community while posting a blog about their daily outfits. Commenting is essential for any blog and these comments keep the blogs alive. There is also clear evidence that the fashion bloggers form a community by commenting on what other members are writing.

#### **4.1.1 Sponsors' expectations**

Before the excursion I asked the representatives of the sponsoring organizations what their expectations were concerning this excursion. Most of them didn't have a clear understanding about how they could approach this new social media. I asked them to tell me their expectations and how they are trying to influence the bloggers. The e-mail questions can be found in the appendix. These questions were sent to all except the department store representatives. The department store was sponsoring the excursion but this sponsor was acquired by the blogger residing in Stockholm.

For VisitSweden all kind of positive content about the destination was what they wanted to get out of this excursion. Here are some comments that the PR Manager

of VisitSweden hoped to see in the blogs: “great shopping”, “great experience” “I will return” and “worth the visit”.

The PR Manager of the ferry line was hoping that the bloggers would mention the duty free products and especially promote the new range of clothing that are offered at lower prices than onshore in Sweden or Finland. Also, they offer a wide range of perfumes that they hoped the bloggers would promote.

The representative of the Japanese Spa hoped that the bloggers would write about their out-of-the-ordinary experience. The representative seemed to have a plan for how to influence these bloggers. Here are some direct quotes from the Japanese Spa:

*Something that is a contrast to fashion and shopping - your inner wellbeing. We hope that they will understand how a full stay here could make a person relax. A way to find wellbeing for both the body and the senses. We will do our best to give them a nice experience. We will give them an introduction to our facilities as a whole and to what the Japanese bath can do for a person in terms of wellbeing. They will get a guided tour of the hotel and after that spend some time in the Japanese bath. The evening will end in our Teppanyaki restaurant. Upon leaving they will get press information about our resort and about our web shop as well as a small gift from our products.*

The hotel was curious about the new media aspects but couldn't provide any expectations for what they'd wish the bloggers would write about. The lack of expectations could've been caused by some personnel changes happening at the hotel right before the excursion.

#### **4.1.2 The excursion in detail**

I asked VisitSweden's PR-Manager to write a journal while on the excursion. The excursion is described below based on her notes. The excursion lasted from the evening of 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2008 to the morning of 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2008.



## **28<sup>th</sup> of October**

The ferry line gave all the bloggers their own cabins with queen-size beds. A small contest was organized onboard for the bloggers. The bloggers had to choose three items from the Tax-Free shop to wear. The bloggers were then photographed wearing these selected items. This contest was posted on blogger B8's blog site. The voters could win a luxurious cruise and the blogger who will be voted the best style will get a free night at the hotel.

Representatives of the ferry line gave a presentation on the range of Tax-Free products in the ferry's conference room in English. Some bloggers posted entries since there is was a broadband connection onboard. Later that evening bloggers were offered a dinner at one of the ships restaurants.

## **29<sup>th</sup> of October**

From the harbour the group headed to the hotel. All the rooms were not ready so some of the bloggers needed to leave their belongings in others' rooms. The Hotel presentation was conducted in English. The bloggers toured around the hotel and they were shown the design and different rooms in the facility.

From the Hotel there is a straight passage to the department store. The department store was presented in Swedish in a noisy environment. The introduction lasted for half an hour. The department store offered lunch and gave some promotional items including a USB-memory stick.

The excursion continued on to two designer shops: The Grocery and Camilla Norrback. At the Grocery the designers provided the bloggers with their upcoming catalogue. Camilla Norrback's collection of eco-design seemed to make an impact on the bloggers as well.

After the visits to the designer boutiques the bloggers returned to the Hotel. It seemed that the bloggers had done their homework since most of them headed out to the city to do some shopping before the planned event in the evening.

At 6 PM the group headed to the Japanese Spa. VisitSweden's PR Manager described this resort's customer service as very caring. As soon as the bloggers stepped in to the place some snacks were offered. Some bloggers who didn't want to go to the spa were even offered some treatments instead. The dinner was the peak of the visit for some. The experience seemed to be great for everyone.

### **30<sup>th</sup> of October**

After breakfast the bloggers' luggage was moved to the harbour so that they could have the last day for shopping. The group divided into two as some wanted to shop in the city centre, while some preferred shopping Södermalm, a suburb of central Stockholm.

In the evening the ferry headed back to Helsinki. The atmosphere among the group seemed good and everyone was talking about their finds and blogging in general. It seemed that the excursion was a success. The ferry line got good direct feedback from the bloggers and it seemed that the attitude towards the company had changed among the bloggers.

## **4.2 Pre-Excursion**

### **4.2.1 Blogs**

The first mentions of the excursion were on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 2008. Two of the bloggers revealed that they are taking part in this excursion. Their posts included some possible shopping experiences in Stockholm. Four clothing stores that don't have outlets in Finland were discussed in these blogs. These stores were: Monki, Topshop, BikBok and Weekday. Both of the blogs that were posted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October had posts describing desired outfits and the content included photos of these outfits. The posts also described the excursion and both of the bloggers expressed their excitement and enthusiasm concerning the forthcoming bloggers excursion to Stockholm.

*The reason why I'm dreaming about these lovely outfits outside of Finland is that I'm soon going to Stockholm to shop. It's not just an ordinary trip but something special. I'm going with seven other bloggers! You can just guess how excited I am?! I will be telling You more about this trip in the future but I just wanted to tell You this now since I couldn't keep quiet anymore ;)*

*Blogger B5*

*In few weeks there is going to be a bit different trip to Stockholm. Onboard will be seven other bloggers besides myself. You will hear more about this trip closer to the trip. It will surely be an amazing trip.*

*Blogger B4*

It's obvious that the fashion bloggers that were invited to participate in this excursion were fascinated by this opportunity. As the excursion date came closer more bloggers revealed their participation to their audiences and started posting more detailed information about the excursion and how they were invited to take part in this excursion.

*Now it's so that I'm going to disappear from the Blogosphere for four days 28.-31.10. Blogger B8 decided that I and seven other bloggers have worked hard for our appearance and we deserve a reward for our efforts.*

*Blogger B9*

*I got a nice e-mail from blogger B8 where she invited me to come for a shopping trip to Stockholm. Guess if I had to think twice?! Immediately I went to ask those dates off from work and now I'm shaking from excitement and travel fever.*

*Blogger B6*

*I guess some needed rest is in place considering next week I and seven other Finnish fashion bloggers are conquering Stockholm. The trip is organized by VisitSweden (kind of ironic that Sweden supports us Finnish bloggers this way and not Finland) and Blogger B8 who is a Finnish blogger living in Sweden. I have to say I am really psyched about this trip! My brain is scanning though outfit options and what to wear during the trip and yes, I am a bit nervous too.*

*Blogger B7*

*I have to say that I'm really excited about this trip which is coming at a convenient time in the middle of autumn.*

*Blogger B2*

As the goal of this study is to describe how the sponsoring organizations appear in the blog content, Table 3. shows the appearance of the sponsoring organizations in the pre-excursion postings. The sponsors are mentioned only a few times before the excursion. It seems though that most of the bloggers recognize VisitSweden as the organizer of this excursion since seven out of nine bloggers mention VisitSweden in their pre-excursion postings. There is a correlation between the blogs B8 and B9 which can be explained by copying of the excursion itinerary. As mentioned earlier

blog B8 is the blogger involved in organizing this excursion. Sharing of information is common in the blogosphere and most of the itinerary presented in the blog B8 was also presented in the blog B9.

<b>Table 3. Written Blog Content Pre-Excursion</b>									
<b>BLOGS (B1-B9)</b>									
<b>SPONSORS</b>	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9
VisitSweden	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	2	1
Ferry line	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Hotel	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Japanese Spa	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Department store	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2

To compare these results in the table 3 we need some other words that describe the excursion. The purpose of this excursion was that bloggers travel to Stockholm to shop and experience Stockholm and the attractions they were offered. In short the words extracted from the purpose of this excursion are STOCKHOLM and SHOPPING.

The word Stockholm appears in the pre-excursion content 32 times. It is mostly associated with the shopping possibilities, clothing stores that exist in Stockholm, with the actual trip to Stockholm and who is participating and when this excursion is taking place. Shopping appears in the pre-excursion content 21 times. It's related to what the bloggers are going to be doing and experiencing on this trip.

*While in Stockholm I'm at least interested in Monki's and TopShops's clothing stores which we don't have in Finland.*

*Blogger B6*

*The trip is going to include shopping, getting to know some fashion designers and their catalogues*

*Blogger B1*

*Hopefully, I'll have some time for blogging while in Sweden; however, our schedule is rather busy with designer visits, shopping and fine dining.*

*Blogger B7*

Overall, Stockholm and its shopping possibilities were well presented. It really felt like these bloggers know exactly what to look for and where to find it. Most of the bloggers could specify the places they wanted to visit and if their collections were available in Finland. It can be argued that at least in the pre-excursion UCC the sponsoring organizations were not mentioned often and if they were mentioned they were identified as the sponsors of this excursion. For example VisitSweden was mentioned as the main sponsor and organizer of this excursion.

*VisitSweden has organized this trip to us along with blogger B8.*

*Blogger B5*

*The main sponsor of the trip is VisitSweden that has gathered the rest of the sponsors for this trip.*

*Blogger B6*

*The Organizer of this trip Blogger B8 clears out in her blog so well what is this trip all about so I wont repeat the same things here =)*

*Blogger B2*

*VisitSweden has sponsored a trip for us to the beautiful Stockholm...I'm so excited about the trip that I can't wait to gossip all about the trip.*

*Blogger B9*

These posts reveal that the bloggers are aware who the sponsors of this trip are and that they are committed to writing transparent posts. For the bloggers it seems to be a question of ethics to let the reader know if they have been given something for free. Also this shows that blogger B8, who has invited the other bloggers to this excursion, has sent them a detailed itinerary of this excursion.

Content that can be viewed as informative in these Pre-Excursion posts focuses on fashion and Stockholm. Most of the influential expressions discuss clothing and stores in Stockholm.

*I found some beautiful dresses and skirts from Topshop's Online catalogue and there was nothing to complain about in the shoe department either.*

*The last woollen knit I just have to get!*

*Blogger B5.*

*One of the most interesting boutiques that we still are missing in Helsinki is Weekday... The MTWTFSS-catalogue seems reasonably priced and quality seems to be quite good.*

*Blogger B4*

*Stockholm is one of my favourite places and it's always nice to go there.*

*Blogger B2*

#### **4.2.2 Comments**

Comments can reveal if the content created by these bloggers is influential and if it creates positive eWOM. As discussed earlier in chapter 2.2 eWOM can be informative or include recommendations. In the case of blogs it is mostly a question of informative aspects but some recommendations can also be seen. The pre-excursion blog posts described online catalogues of some clothing stores that only have outlets in Sweden. Many of the comments posted to these blogs by the readers are showing some positive influence towards these shops and their products. Stockholm was being commented on as an attractive shopping destination and that many readers wanted to visit Stockholm themselves.

I fell in love with that grey knit  
I want to go to Stockholm  
Wow, what a trip! I'm so jealous  
I want to go to Stockholm again  
Sweden has some good clothing stores

**Comments on blogger B5's post**

The bloggers trip sounds incredible  
To Stockholm! These stores made an impression...  
You and your blog or the perfections on Topshop did it again!

**Comments on blogger B4's post**

I would like to visit Stockholm and specially Topshop.  
I would also so much like to visit Stockholm  
That skirt is just something I'd need. Should get to Stockholm!  
Stockholm is certainly my favourite city!  
I would like to go shopping in Stockholm  
Stockholm is so nice city

**Comments on Blogger B6's post**

I also want to visit Stockholm  
I would like to go to Stockholm as soon as possible  
Desiring a trip to Stockholm

I have a Stockholm fever!  
I want to get a guided shopping tour in Stockholm  
I have the travel fever!  
I also want a trip like yours  
I would go to Stockholm any time  
Stockholm is very beautiful city  
There are shops for everyone in Stockholm  
I've been dreaming of a trip to Stockholm since this summer.

#### **Comments on Blogger B9's post**

Also it is important to notice that when it comes to eWOM it is essential that there exists some form of connection between the creator of content and the reader. The bloggers were wished to “have a nice or fun trip” in the pre-excursion postings an astonishing 87 times, and most of these readers also commented that the “trip sounds great” or that they are jealous that they themselves are not going. When it comes to influence, these kinds of comments certainly reveal the familiarity between the blogger and the reader.

Most of these comments show that the readers are extremely curious about this excursion. Some readers are wondering why these particular bloggers were invited for this excursion and who selected the participants. There are some comments pointing out the fact that these bloggers who were selected are not the most popular or most influential members of the community. Some of the bloggers who were invited to this excursion also defended their selection. This kind of conversation could point out the interactivity in the community and the need for transparency from the arranging organizations' part. The following conversation is from a blog post where the host blogger H discussed the forthcoming excursion on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October. The discussion was sparked by the blogger B8 when she said that this excursion was organized for the front row bloggers of Finland. The discussion lasted less than two days. All the comments are translated from Finnish to English. The bloggers participating on the excursion are named as “Blogger BX” all the other readers that posted their comments appear with their given nicknames.

*Blogger B9 said...*

*Don't increase my travel Panic! I'm so excited here!<3 Thanks for inviting me \*hug\**

*16:31*

*Blogger B8 said...*

*Blogger B9: I also have to be able to show my enthusiasm!! It's so incredibly nice to meet on Wednesday! :)*

*16:38*

*sugar kane said...*

*The readers are anxious to hear some reports about your trip.*

*16:40*

*Blogger B5 said...*

*Help, I'm starting to get nervous here! :D*

*17:02*

*patentti said...*

*This trip sounds incredibly fun. I'm already expecting the reports :)*

*17:38*

*Kate said...*

*It's incredible that this kind of trip is coming true and that so many organizations are participating! I'm surprised since I thought that blogging isn't appreciated. Really great!*

*17:47*

*Minna said...*

*Can I ask why these trips are only for the front row bloggers? I'm an enthusiastic reader of blogs and I would've wished that some more unknown bloggers would've been selected. I think it's sad that bloggers have been put in casts in this way.*

*18:18*

*getpalmd said...*

*minna, Most readers = More advertising for the companies?*

*18:25*

*Blogger B6 said...*

*I think it's funny that my hobby blog is one of the front row blogs. I'm just an ordinary girl from XXXXXX. I would have never thought that anything like this could happen when I started blogging.*

*21:02*

*Liisa said...*



*"I think it's sad that bloggers have been put in casts in this way." I agree. It's sad that things are heading towards the Swedish way.*

21:08

*Blogger B4 said...*

*I'm so in need of this trip! I'm waiting for Tuesday to come. Me and blogger B6 are starting our trip together from XXXXX :D*

21:09

*Blogger B4 said...*

*It's funny how some people misunderstand the "front row" fashion bloggers expression. I take the expression as a joke. I don't think that it is anything to do with cast systems if it's a matter of one trip where only a limited amount of people could be invited. I think "us" who have been invited are friends of blogger H and some of the bloggers that she herself follows. Am I right?*

*But yes, blogger B8 is in position to divide the bloggers in to different casts =D*

22:37

*Blogger B8 said...*

*Minna: The trip is meant for the front row bloggers of Finland but there were only a limited amount of places. Thus, the bloggers invited are the front row bloggers but it doesn't mean that only they are the only ones. We would've gladly invited more but we got only 8 places.*

*Getpalmd: Yes it is so, but the amount of readers isn't the only determining factor.*

*slux said...*

*It is quite obvious that when the Swedish government/companies organize this kind of trip they want to reach as many people as possible. They don't do this just for fun but they have their motives. And there is nothing wrong with that that's the way organizations work.*

13:26

*Liisa said...*

*"Occupying the top places at Blogilista.fi and the bloggers who have posted their blogs the longest are invited." (citing Blogger B8's post) – just this point amazes me! Not everyone going is in the top ten, not even in the top 50. It seems that the selection has been done quite randomly.*

16:55

*Blogger B8 said...*

*Liisa: I'm sad to hear that the trip that I and VisitSweden's PR-manager have planned with enthusiasm is such a negative thing to you. It is not a question of grouping people in different casts. Isn't it proof enough that there are not only the top bloggers but also bloggers who are diverse and from different parts of Finland. We thought that the audience that follows fashion blogs would also appreciate these diverse bloggers posts from this trip. I'm sincerely sorry if your favorite blog is not involved in this trip. . .*

18:31

*Anonymous said...*

*Sorry, but I'm not envious. More than that I'm amazed and shamed of the image some of these bloggers present of Finland. We are already couple of years behind Sweden.*

16:21

*Blogger B1 said...*

*Yeah. I think blogger H made a huge mistake. She should have arranged for a national voting on this matter :D*

25.10 00:38

*Blogger B8 said...*

*Anonymous & Tuhlaus: Yeah right... The meaning wasn't that the bloggers would make an impression on Stockholm but that Stockholm would make an impression on them. =)*

25.10 21:04

While blog posts are permanent by nature if they are not deleted by the creator it could be argued that the activity of a single blog post is limited. The time that these blog posts remain active could be described by observing the time span of comments. In the Pre-Excursion data there were in total 18 blog posts relating to this excursion and exactly 400 comments on these blogs. It seems accurate to measure the time blogs are commented. Did how long the posts keep people wanting to interact with each other related to a particular theme? The average time people keep commenting on these blogs in the Pre-Excursion posting is 2.6 days. Thus, it could be argued that a certain message in the blogosphere is actively transmitted only a limited time period and after that it sinks in the endless mass of personal opinions.

### 4.3 On-Excursion

#### 4.3.1 Blogs

Only three of the bloggers wrote blogs during the excursion. There were photos taken with camera phone and some images from the sponsoring organizations web pages. Some of the blog posts were short and included only one sentence. Blogger B8 wrote mostly about the itinerary while B1 and B5 described their experiences. There were in total 13 blog posts that discussed the excursion. Some of the other bloggers had written their blogs beforehand and had an automated poster on during the trip. The Japanese Spa that the bloggers visited was highly rated among the few bloggers who wrote blogs during the excursion. All of the bloggers mentioned this Spa and posted positive feedback of the place in their blogs. Table 4 shows the few mentions that the sponsors received during the excursion. To make a comparison to the table below the word Stockholm appeared 11 times and Shopping five times.

<b>Table 4. Written Blog Content On-Excursion</b>			
<b>BLOGS</b>			
<b>SPONSORS</b>	B1	B5	B8
VisitSweden	0	0	0
Ferry line	1	0	1
Hotel	0	0	0
Japanese Spa	1	1	2
Department store	0	0	3

The organizations involved appeared in a positive light in the blogs that were posted on the excursion. Here are some expressions that show the appearance of these organizations in the blog posts during the excursion.

*There was a pleasant surprise right in the beginning of the trip. We had been booked our own cabins with queen sized beds.*

*It was amazing that we didn't have to wait for a shower turn and everyone had their own cabin.*

*We have been searching through the Tax-Free shop for apparels for a nice contest and listening to a presentation about the ferry lines shopping possibilities.*

*An amazing but tiring day behind us here in Stockholm.*

*The best thing so far has been absolutely the visit to the Japanese Spa. I can't even form the experience into words right now.*

*My plate included marinated garlic, that according to the chef were marinated about two and a half years. Yam!*

#### ***Posts by Blogger B1***

*Wearing the Kimono's to dinner! (photo sent from a mobile phone)*

*After a hectic day the bloggers get to enjoy a Japanese Spa and dinner.*

*We are having lunch at the PUB's third floor restaurant called Public. The food there is incredibly good.*

*First we are touring the redesigned PUB-department store with it's owner presenting the different departments.*

*The idea of the Japanese Spa is to relax and offer a quiet place for modern busy people where they can relax after a stressful day.*

*Yesterday in Stockholm was a success.*

#### ***Blogger B8***

*There has been so much going on here in Stockholm that I can't tell you about the experience spontaneously. A lot of pictures and stuff is coming ones we get back home. The trip has included a lot of pampering and gift bags. We just got back from a Japanese Spa that was just incredible.*

#### ***Blogger B5***

### **4.3.2 Comments**

In many comments on the excursion as well as before the excursion readers wished the bloggers a nice or exciting trip. Many also wished that they could have participated in the trip or commented that they are excited to read more about the trip. It's difficult to categorize these kinds of comments since they are not particularly clear in demonstrating influence. There were 86 posted comments to these blogs and 40 times the words "fun" or "nice" appeared. Although these comments can't be directly associated with influence or appearance, they present an overall acceptance and a positive attitude of the readers towards this excursion. Some of these comments are listed below. The commenting stayed active for less time than before the excursion. The average time readers continued to post

comments to these on-excursion blogs was 0.92 days. Some posts had only few comments and they were made immediately after the original blog post.

*It sounds that you are having fun!*

*I would've loved to be there.... =D*

*Sounds like a dream <3 I'm waiting to hear more .D*

*I got a nice vibe out of your postings.*

*Nice pictures!*

*We want a lot more pictures when you come home!*

*Curious people are checking after a days work what is happening on your trip!*

Some readers were influenced by the content created in these blogs. Blogger B1 posted a picture of one of the cabins that the bloggers stayed during the trip to Stockholm. A comment was left to her blog saying: "Wow, What a cabin!" Just like in the case of pre-excursion comments showed interest in visiting Stockholm. A comment on Blogger B5's blog revealed: "I want to visit Stockholm my self now!" The Japanese Spa received a lot of positive writings in the blogs and although these are all fashion related blogs, some of the readers left some comments that could be identified as having been influenced by what the bloggers actually wrote about the place: "I have heard good things about this place before. I have to absolutely visit one day!" "It looks like a lovely and relaxing place" "Those Kimono's are lovely!"

### **4.3 After-Excursion**

#### **4.3.1 Blogs**

Most of the writing and commenting occurred after the bloggers had returned home. There were 28 blog posts that described the excursion. The bloggers seemed to identify two main sponsors. The ferry line was credited mostly on offering luxurious cabins with queen sized beds. Some bloggers also wrote positively about the dining possibilities onboard. The design and decoration of the hotel rooms aroused some positive feelings in the bloggers but some made comments about the noise coming from the street and plumbing problems while taking a shower.

<b>Table 5. Written Blog Content After-Excursion</b>									
<b>BLOGS (B1-B9)</b>									
<b>SPONSORS</b>	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9
VisitSweden	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	3
Ferry line	2	1	0	2	3	2	0	13	8
Hotel	3	1	0	3	2	1	0	2	4
Japanese Spa	1	2	0	3	1	4	1	2	2
Department store	1	2	0	4	4	6	3	1	7

Overall the main positive characteristic that was associated with the hotel tended to be the access to the department store housed in the same building. This department store gave a presentation of its possibilities in Swedish which was much to the dislike of the bloggers. Many of the bloggers seemed annoyed by this fact that the presentation wasn't in English. The fitting rooms of the department store were highly appreciated and even one video was posted on Youtube.com from the fitting room. The best feedback from the bloggers went to the Japanese Spa. Most of the bloggers wrote that it was the highlight of the trip and would consider returning to the place with time. The dinner was highly praised. The facilities, treatments and pools were also appraised by virtually all the bloggers. There wasn't a single negative comment made about the Japanese Spa. Table 5 shows how many times the sponsoring organizations were mentioned in these blogs by the bloggers.

The word Stockholm appeared in the blogs 29 times and many times it was the headline for the blog post. Here are few examples of the headlines: "Dresses from Stockholm" "Fashion bloggers in Stockholm", "Bloggers in Stockholm" and "Shopping from Stockholm" The word shopping was mentioned 35 times.

Here are some citations that the bloggers made about these sponsors. These UCC taken from these blogs is categorised by the sponsoring organization.

***Ferry line***

*The ferry line one of the two main sponsors treated us like important VIP-guests.*

*In blogger B6's blog there was a picture of the cabin we all got for our private use.*

*We got to enjoy all sorts of snacks and there was nothing wrong with the dinner either.*

*The challenge onboard was to find three items to wear from the Tax-Free shop. This was challenging since there aren't a large selection of urban clothing in the tax-free shop.*

#### ***Blogger B4***

*I have never stayed in as huge cabin as we did! We all had been booked our own cabins with a queen sized bed.*

*Våga's jewellery was lovely. On the way back I bought one*

#### ***Blogger B5***

*Every one of us received their own cabin with a queen sized bed. It was a nice surprise.*

#### ***Blogger B6***

*Våga jewellery line charmed me on the way to Stockholm and on the way back I decided to buy one for my self.*

#### ***Blogger B9***

*On the boat there was a pleasant surprise for us. We got our own cabins with a sea view.*

#### ***Blogger B2***

#### ***Hotel***

*The Hotel one of the two main sponsors provided us with a luxurious accommodation in the middle of the city centre. Bright and elegant rooms made an impression but even more impressed I was when there was a direct access to the department store from the Hotel.*

#### ***Blogger B4***

*The Hotel is conveniently located right in the city centre and connected to the department store. They gave us lovely and newly renovated rooms.*

#### ***Blogger B5***

*We shared rooms that were recently elegantly renovated.*

*The only problem with the rooms was that when you took a shower there was a loud noise coming from the pipes.*

*The department store was conveniently in the same building as the hotel. It's a good idea to combine hotel and shopping under the same roof.*

### ***Blogger B6***

*The hotel where we stayed at was situated in the city centre next to Hötorget. This hotel was in the same building as the department store and there was even an entry directly from the hotel to the department store. The décor of the hotel rooms was to my liking and I could take the same elements back to my home.*

### ***Blogger B1***

*The decor of our room charmed me immediately. The mix of black, white and red looked amazing.*

*The windows in the rooms were huge but the noise from the street bothered a little bit during the night.*

### ***Blogger I***

*The decoration of the hotel rooms charmed many of us.*

### ***Japanese Spa***

*The Japanese Spa aims to offer a calm place to relax in the middle of our hectic lives and I have to say that the place fulfilled their goal even in one evening. Incredible place!*

### ***Blogger D***

*I have to agree with the rest of the bloggers that this was absolutely one of the highlights of the trip.*

### ***Blogger E***

*I could even say that the Spa was the best experience of the whole trip.*

*The best thing in the excursion was the Japanese Spa. I have never been so assured of the service level than in this spa. We were treated kindly and received a warm welcome by the staff.*

*The place makes you calm down even with its decoration. It's a getaway paradise for adults.*



*I am definitely returning to this place! It would be great to spend a weekend in the Japanese spa bathing and especially eating.*

**Blogger B6**

*The bathing at the spa was soothing and relaxing.*

**Blogger B8**

*The Japanese Spa was a fulfilment of a dream! I felled a sleep relaxed.*

**Blogger B9**

*After all the shopping we got to experience something that can't be compared with anything that I have experienced before.*

*The Japanese Spa was an incredible experience.*

**Blogger B2**

**Department store**

*The fitting rooms were the best thing at the department store.*

*My image of the department store in general was lame since the presentation was in Swedish and most of us couldn't understand anything.*

**Blogger 9**

Most of these postings were also illustrated with pictures. When the bloggers talked about something that caught their attention there were usually pictures illustrating their written content. There were 142 pictures that corresponded to the sponsoring organizations. The most pictures were taken from the department store which is no surprise since the main interest of these bloggers was fashion. Table 6 summarises the photos taken on the excursion and of the sponsoring organizations.

<b>Table 6. Photos in Blog Content</b>									
<b>BLOGS A-I)</b>									
<b>Sponsors</b>	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9
Ferry Line	2	1	0	11	4	6	0	N/A	11*
Hotel	4	2	0	0	2	1	0	2	11
Japanese Spa	6	0	0	8	3	7	0	9	0
Department store	0	9	0	11	5	10	1	2	14
*Posted a Youtube video from the cabin									

#### **4.4.2 Comments**

Many of the bloggers discussed the items they bought in Stockholm and the readers commented mostly on these items. There were numerous comments saying that they want to visit Stockholm themselves, much in the same manner as in the pre-excursion comments when the bloggers talked about net-shops in Stockholm. Many of the readers had visited Stockholm and wanted to visit again after reading these blogs. Some bloggers also commented that they have already planned a trip to Stockholm and want to visit some of these stores. Some readers asked about how they could find a particular shop or if the bloggers could recommend some stores to visit. Some readers had visited the same stores as the bloggers and wanted to share their views of these stores.

The average time people kept commenting on these blogs was exactly 2.00 days. I counted the average time by calculating the time by hours from the first post to the last posted comment on each blog entry that related to the excursion. It seems that the bloggers who wrote frequently had their posts commented less time than those bloggers that wrote seldom. Most of the time the commenting occurred for the most recent blog entry and older posts rarely attracted commenting after a new blog post had been written.

The comments focused on the shopping side of the excursion and not so much on what the sponsors had offered to the bloggers. There were odd comments about the nice hotel room or that someone had visited the same Japanese Spa, but mainly the comments focused on Stockholm as a shopping destination. Some bloggers even held competitions for their readers and this increased the commenting volume by a significant amount. While the average amount of comments per blog post after the excursion was 42.25, two of the blog posts gained an incredible amount of comments by hosting contests. If you take out these high scores the average comment rate would be 21.58 comments per blog post. Two of the highest commented blogs had 365 (post by Blogger B5) and 257 (post by Blogger B4). There were two interesting comments posted on Blogger B4's blog. As eWOM's aim is to gain influence in a broader audience and that common people market the products of organizations, these following two comments support as evidence:

*After reading your appraisals of Flippa K and looking through Flippa K's website I have determined to buy some of their products.*

*I just bought my first Flippa K knit. It's so lovely! And the reason why I bought it was your blog!*

Although these comments don't relate to the sponsors it is important to illustrate them since they show that there is definitely a wider audience reading the blogs and that these bloggers do have influence on consumer behaviour. There are comments that show the interest of the readers to visit Sweden and this interest could possibly transform into action. Here are some examples of desire demonstrated by the readers to visit Stockholm.

*Now I really have to consider a trip to Sweden since all the bloggers on this excursion have found some real treasures.*

*I have to reserve a trip to Stockholm*

*"I should start considering a trip to our neighbouring country."*

*What nice things you have bought! Now I have a Stockholm fever...*

*I wish I could go shopping in Stockholm!  
Reading your blog makes me want to visit Stockholm.*

*I have to get to Stockholm =)*

*Now that I have read about the trip from all the bloggers I really want to visit Stockholm*

*Your travel blog makes others want to visit Stockholm.*

*I'll start planning a trip to Stockholm*

### **4.3.3 The contest**

The ferry line organized a contest onboard the ship for these fashion bloggers. They had to choose three items from the Tax-Free –shop to wear and get their photo taken by a professional photographer. These photos were posted on Blogger B8's blog and everyone could vote for the best style and win a trip to Stockholm. After the excursion all together 2762 people voted for their favourite style. Table 7 shows the total votes and percentage each blogger received from the public. As the contest

was posted on Blogger B8's blog and she wasn't onboard the ship since she lives in Sweden, there were no photos taken of her.

	Votes	%
B1	195	7
B2	148	5
B3	188	6
B4	662	23
B5	280	10
B6	948	34
B7	242	8
B8	N/A	N/A
B9	99	3

#### 4.5 Summary

There were all together 59 blog posts that discussed the excursion. The majority of the posts came few days after the excursion. There were 1669 comments to these 59 blogs and most of them were posted on blog entries after the excursion. The average time these blogs kept active was 1.95 days on average. Table 8 summarizes these blogs, comments and active commenting time per average days.

	Pre-Trip	On-Trip	After-Trip
Blog posts	18	13	28
Comments	400	86	1183
Active commenting time (days)	2.62	0.92	2.00

In written blog content the ferry line and the department store received the most mentions by the bloggers. The ferry line received the most of its mentions from the contest that was posted on blogger B8's blog. The ferry line was mentioned in total 35 times in the written blog content. The department store got the most negative feedback because their presentation was held in Swedish. Never the less, most of the bloggers mentioned the easy access to the store from the hotel. The department store was mentioned in total 34 times.

The best thing in the excursion was the Japanese Spa according to the bloggers. Although the Japanese Spa didn't get as many mentions as the ferry line or the department store all of these mentions were extremely positive. The Japanese Spa was mentioned in total 21 times. The hotel got some negative feedback from the bloggers when it came to the noisy environment and plumbing problems. The rooms were elegant and new according to the bloggers and the best thing about the hotel was the easy access to the department store. As for VisitSweden, one can't simply measure the appearance of its name since it's a Destination Management Organization whose goal is to promote the destination.

Never the less VisitSweden was mentioned and appraised because of a well executed excursion. Most of the bloggers recognized VisitSweden as the organizer of the excursion, although the invite to participate had come from the blogger B8. In total VisitSweden was mentioned 15 times. Table 9 combines these results and shows how many times individual blogs mentioned the sponsors.

<b>Table 9. Written Blog Content Combined</b>									
<b>BLOGS (B1-B9)</b>									
<b>SPONSORS</b>	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9
VisitSweden	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	4
Ferry Line	4	1	0	2	3	2	0	15	8
Hotel	3	1	0	3	2	1	0	3	5
Japanese Spa	2	2	0	3	2	4	1	4	3
Department store	1	2	0	4	4	6	3	5	9

If you look at these blogs in relative order from the most popular to the least popular it seems that there is some correlation between the popularity of the blog and the amount of times sponsors appear in the content. In figure 2 on the vertical scale you can see the amount of appearance either in written and photographic content. On the horizontal scale you have the blogs and the popularity position they hold according to Blogilista.fi. The position status here is relative and only reflects the ordinal scale between these blogs. Actual positions can be found from the table 1. in the chapter 4.1.

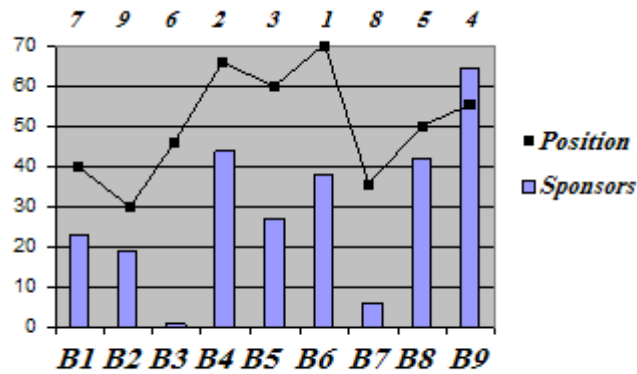


Figure 2 Appearance & position

## 5. Conclusions and practical suggestions

### 5.1 Return on Blog

When it comes to measuring the outcomes of this excursion there are some major obstacles that arise. First of all, it is difficult to assess what the costs of arranging this excursion were. There was labour efforts put into it that can't be adequately measured. Thus, these kinds of efforts can't be taken into consideration. When it comes to setting a price on the services that the bloggers received it is a question of how to set the price. The easiest way is to take the actual consumer prices and add them together.

What are the outcomes then? I have described the content that these bloggers have created (UCC) and how the sponsors appear in this content. We can calculate the returns that these individual posts generated. We can roughly estimate how many people read these blogs per week and assume that people who read these blogs in that week also read the postings concerning this excursion. This kind of measurements can't be accurate and valid, but they can give some more information as to the impact these blogs have on their readers than just the cost per post -ratio.

To measure the outcomes I have chosen to include only the sponsored costs. These costs are the actual going rates at the time of the excursion found on the websites of these organizations. Although for these sponsors these costs aren't exactly monetary but a service they give, and are able to give, these kind of costs are the easiest and most reliable in this situation.

The total costs of the excursion would then include the meals, ferry services, hotel accommodation and the entry fee to the Japanese Spa. The meals at the ferry were 63 Euros per blogger two ways. The lunch at the department store was 10 Euros per blogger. The cabins cost 135 Euros per blogger for one way. The rooms at the hotel were 190 Euros per room. The bloggers shared the rooms and one of the bloggers lives in Stockholm, so she didn't stay at the hotel. The Japanese Spa cost 130 Euros per blogger, including the dinner.

These costs sum up to be:

- The Japanese Spa 1170€ (9 Bloggers)
- The Hotel 760€ (4 rooms)
- The Ferry 2160€ (16 x one way)
- Lunch onboard 1008€ (8 bloggers)
- Lunch at the department store 90€ (9 bloggers)

=Total of 5188€ / 576,44€ per blogger

Let's first compare these costs with the weekly visitors that these blogs have. These weekly visitor rates are from the web site [www.blogilista.fi](http://www.blogilista.fi). These statistics were retrieved on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2008. These rates show the Return on Visitor – ratio if one would estimate that everyone who visits the blog on a particular week at the time of the excursion and each visitor sees the blog posts that discuss this excursion. These rates are valid only if we assume that the excursion was limited to one week and visitors only could get the information during that one week period. These visitor rates also include people who visit the blogs daily. Although these figures are basic ratios they reveal that per visitor the return rates varied almost 63 Euro cents per visit between the most popular blog and the least visited blog. Also Blogger B2 hasn't included her blog in blogilista.fi so estimating her weekly visitor rates is impossible. Table 10 shows the Return on Visitor –ratios for each blog.

<b>Table 10. Return on Visitor</b>	B1	B3	B4	B5
VISITORS/WEEK	1564	1744	10123	7568
ROV	0,369€	0,33€	0,057€	0,076€
	B6	B7	B8	B9
VISITORS/WEEK	11100	838	4865	6666
ROV	0,052€	0,68€	0,12€	0,086€

The bloggers wrote about the excursion more than on a particular week and some posted more stories about the trip than others. In the previous chapter the main focus was on the appearance of the organizations. It could be argued that what these sponsors are paying for is for the appearance. If we combine both the written and illustrated appearance and divide it by costs that each sponsor has provided, we could get an estimate of how much they are paying for appearance. As pointed out, there are differences in how much these bloggers created content that matches with the sponsor, and by no means are these appearance ratios equal when it comes to individual blogs. Figure 2 in chapter 4.5 shows the differences on individual blogs and how many times the sponsors appear in them, either in photos or in written content. Here, on the other hand, I have combined these blogs and below you can observe the Return on Appearance –ratios on the overall appearance of the sponsors. Bear in mind that these costs do not include labour costs and they are the going rates of the services that these bloggers consumed.

<b>Sponsors</b>	<b>ROA</b>
Ferry Line	45,26€
Hotel	19€
Japanese Spa	21,67€
Department store	1,05€

It appears that the department store got the best deal out of these sponsors. For a small one Euro investment they got their store name or a photo included in the UCC. On the other hand not all the mentions were positive when it comes to the department store. The bloggers unanimously criticised the presentation of the department store since it was only in Swedish, and that the presentation lasted too long leaving the bloggers with less time for shopping. Table 11 summarizes all the Return on Appearance –ratios.

## **5.2 Future of PR-work in social forums**

When it comes to destination information distribution, Internet holds many key channels that go beyond the traditional ways. Not only the DMO websites, but other channels can be effective in achieving targeted groups of people who wouldn't



necessarily seek destination information from the traditional channels. Blogs and virtual communities are offering a way to tap into these information seekers in their own environment.

Destination, or service information, can be distributed in a form of sponsored PR-excursions. This case has illustrated that bloggers do include aspects of desired content when they are given incentives. They write about the services they were provided, the accommodation they received and the means of transport. They even give positive feedback and recommend these services to others. In the blogosphere commenting is the way of communication. Many of the readers of these blogs also expressed their desire to visit Stockholm. They wished the bloggers an enjoyable trip and showed envy for not being with them. There is a connection between the reader of the blog and the creator of the content. This communication can be seen as a channel of electronic Word of Mouth. It is difficult to measure but some of these examples presented in this thesis show that there are close relations between the blogger and the reader. The readers show emphatic expressions in their comments which aren't possible when it comes to printed media. The readers are also influenced by what their favourite bloggers are commenting about. They ask advice and comment back on their experiences.

Based on this thesis it can be argued that there is a correlation between the popularity of the blogger and the amount of content they create. When it comes to the appearance of the sponsors of this excursion it can be also argued that the more popular the blogger the more times the sponsors seemed to appear in the content.

There also seems to be a reciprocal relationship between this excursion and the popularity of the bloggers on this excursion. For example blogger B9 who posted the most photos and writings about the sponsoring organizations has risen from the earlier 5<sup>th</sup> place into being the second most popular blog in Finland and her blog attracts over 10 000 visitors each week.

It was also interesting to see that the commenting activity on these blog posts was quite low. In the case of on-excursion comments it was as low as less than a day on average. Before the excursion and after the excursion the commenting activity was

between 2 and 3 days. This means that these blogs do not stay active for a long period of time. This is mostly due to the fact that the most productive bloggers can post many times a day and the commenting usually transfers to the freshest posting. This simply means that whatever you are trying to market through blogs probably will vanish into the blogosphere quickly. It is possible that these older posts are lifted up again or that someone else links to these older posts, but to ensure that organizations get the most out of these manipulation efforts, blogs could probably be best used when combined with traditional PR and marketing strategies. Blogs can probably be the buzz creator and can be used in the marketing efforts by boosting the blogs in other Medias. These blog excursions could also be used as promotion material in events and tourism fairs.

Although these blogs remained active for a limited period of time those readers who commented on these postings were arguably influenced by this trip. Many people posted comments saying that they want to travel to Stockholm. We cannot verify if these statements actually came true and that these readers travelled to Sweden. But these comments reveal that at least the attitude to visit Sweden is there and many people see Stockholm as a great shopping destination.

Planning for an excursion like this is crucial not only for the organizing party, but for the sponsors as well. When I asked these sponsors before the excursion, the expectations and the means of influence that most of them have, they did not really know what to expect or how to try to influence these bloggers. One of these sponsors differed from the others because they could give me exact expectations and actual means to accomplish them. This was the Japanese Spa, which eventually became the favourite of all the bloggers and received the best reviews, by far. The reason for its success was probably because it was out of the ordinary and that they could deliver their promises. I also believe that a crucial reason was that they had something simple to offer. It was the service of relaxation. I would argue that a single product, such as a new fragrance from the Tax-Free –shop, could serve as a similar simple entity. What if the ferry line would have concentrated in one product and one product only, instead of the whole ship? Soon after the excursion I noticed a perfume campaign that this particular ferry line was promoting vigorously, onshore. What if they would have turned this perfume into an experience, built the

whole cruise experience based on this design perfume and presented it to the bloggers? I would argue that when it comes to blogs something out of the ordinary could've worked better than trying to focus on the whole. By focusing on a simple experience such as a relaxing experience or the image of a perfume, the larger entity would've shined through better than offering the obvious.

When it comes to the role of Domestic Marketing Organization (DMO), like VisitSweden, I would argue that it functions in a particularly good position when it comes to organizing trips like these. There was not a single comment that would have accused the arranging organization of stealth marketing. VisitSweden is in between the consumer and the tourism industry. It is the link between the consumer and the business-side of travelling. Not a travel agent by any means.

For any DMO it could be argued that it is pivotal to ensure that they handle the relationships with the bloggers with transparency. For at least the Finnish bloggers, it seems that the main ethical concern is that these bloggers will feel that they are presenting their posts in an unbiased manner. They should be able to tell the audience who the sponsors were. This can be observed from the UCC created prior to the excursion.

VisitSweden provided these sponsoring organizations a change of a life time. They were provided with a chance to shine, to prove to the customer, in this case to the blogger, that their service really is something out of the ordinary. This case has proven that these bloggers didn't mind the sponsored services as long as they could mention that they were provided them. There was no evidence that would suggest that sponsoring of these kinds of excursions would result in a more critical approach by the bloggers towards these services. It could be pointed out though, that the bloggers who were writing in English, not their native language, created almost no content that included the sponsors.

When it comes to the selection of the participants it was in this case a successful cooperation between the PR-manager of VisitSweden and the blogger from Stockholm. Although some of the bloggers didn't deliver any results it was this inside contact that made this excursion successful. The jealous comments were

quickly rejected by the unified front of bloggers participating in this excursion. Arguably it was easier for the bloggers to do so because they had been selected by an insider. These relationships that have been made between VisitSweden and these bloggers must be maintained. After the excursion the visitor amounts on these fashion blogs have increased. The site blogilista.fi just recently got its 20 000<sup>th</sup> registered blogger. How many visitors will these bloggers have in a year or two?

Even though these bloggers write mainly about clothing, these blogs aren't only about fashion. What about design? I'm sure the bloggers would be also interested in Swedish design and even cities and places besides Stockholm. It is clear though that Finnish bloggers can't be travelling to Sweden every other week, but more likely a few times a year in varied participant combinations and with different itineraries. Keeping the Finnish blogs updated with the latest travel information for Sweden isn't a bad idea.

When it comes to manipulation implications discussed in the chapter 2.5, I would argue that DMO's would benefit from their position in building social forum groups and interacting with blogs. Collaborative efforts by DMO staff, potential visitors and service providers can enhance information exchange right in the core of the supply chain, namely in online forums and blogs.

### **5.2.1 Blogosphere - An Interactive PR-channel**

PR-Managers of organizations need to build relationships with bloggers that aim for transparency and honest representation of the service or product that is being promoted. This means that PR-Specialists need to understand the motivations of these bloggers as well as the underlying assumptions about ethics in the blogosphere. We have covered both of these aspects in this thesis. When it comes to the blogger motivation it seems that these bloggers thrive to be a noted and talked about commodity, but at the same time, they are individuals who perceive the marketing efforts by various organizations in a conscious way. To become affiliated with popular bloggers needs to be done with transparency and honesty as has been exemplified and witnessed in this study.

Blogosphere is a new PR-channel. Interactivity is the key factor that differentiates it from the traditional PR-channels. Interactivity has been witnessed here in many instances. For example, when the bloggers discussed in chapter 4.2.2 asked why these particular bloggers were chosen for this trip, it was clear there is considerable interaction between these bloggers and their respective audiences. Throughout this analysis we have witnessed an urge by the readers as well as by the creators of the content to interact with each other. As has been argued, the blogs stay alive through the comments. After the original blog post the creator usually joins the discussion by responding to these comments. This interaction is the major change compared to the traditional PR-work and it is this interactivity that makes the blogosphere an intriguing new channel for PR-activities. Arranging PR-trips for bloggers is certainly proactive PR-work. It involves thinking about what the bloggers would be interested in presenting in their blogs and how the readers of these blogs will react to this message.

### **5.2.2 Primary target group**

It is difficult to estimate what the primary target group of these fashion blogs is, but after going through the data I would argue that the age of the readers is between 16 and 28 years. Most of the readers are girls who are still studying or have just started working. This group could be included as a subgroup to DINKs (Double Income No Kids). It is hard to estimate if these girls are living with a significant other, but they have shown a willingness to spend money on fashion and travelling in this study.

These girls are interested in Fashion and want to see what kinds of personal styles other girls have. They follow these blogs to be inspired and get hints on what to buy, and from where. Many of the readers who post comments use their blogger-ID when posting a comment. Almost all of the people commenting on these blog posts have their own blog and they aspire to be noticed. They want to be part of the community and engage in information sharing with other bloggers. This means that inside the target group information is shared rapidly. If the target group likes the message it can become a powerful media for promoting a destination. The empirical part of this thesis was divided into pre, on and after excursion categories and further inside these categories blog posts and relating comments were separated. In every category of comments, but mostly in, before and after excursion comments, there

appeared to be many occasions where influence was shown. If you turn back to chapters 4.2.2 and 4.4.2, you will notice that there are comments expressing the desire to visit Stockholm by the people commenting on these blogs.

Although I have decided to focus this study on the amount of comments, not the amount of visits, I would like to point out that not all the people who read these blogs post comments. To illustrate in rough figures just how many people post comments and how many just read the blogs, I will compare the weekly visitor account and calculate the daily visitor amount and compare it to the amount of comments. I have chosen Blogger B6's blog to make this comparison. She was voted to have the best style in the contest held onboard and she is also one of the top 3 bloggers in Finland. From table 2 we can get the weekly visitor amount of Blogger B6, which is 11,100 visits. I have chosen to count the amount of comments on her blog from the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November, until the 9<sup>th</sup> of November. She posted a new blog every day during this time period. There were 315 comments posted during this week on her blog. Only 2.8 % of the people who visited her blog posted comments. The rest of these visitors just got the information from the blog. It could be that they were influenced by the message but there is no way of knowing if this is the case.

	Visits	Comments	Percentage
B6	11100	315	2.8 %

This leads me to think that the audience can be divided in to those who want to interact with the creator of the content and those who seek information from these blogs. Those who only seek information are the majority. When they seek information they are pitched with the ideas of the blogger as well as those who comment on these blogs.

### **5.3 Summary**

In this study I have been knowingly searching for certain categories. I have identified how and how many times sponsoring organizations appear in the content. However I would like to point out that I have not included those blog postings that do not mention the excursion. By emphasising the appearance, thus the quantity, I

have simplified the results. The more the organizations appear in the content isn't necessary what is desired but it has helped in measuring and presenting the results in more credible way than by forcing the content into value charged categories.

Further more, this study is constructed using a chronological framework. This is a subjective construct which I have decided to use. I have also analysed these blogs without the knowledge of their creators. As I argued earlier in the chapter 3 bloggers knowledge of this study could've jeopardized the credibility of this study. Even so I do recognise the ethical dilemma that lies behind this kind of analysis. I have made the choice to keep the bloggers' identities as well as the sponsors anonymous. By doing so I have attempted to keep the focus on the content and put aside any personal information that would make this study seem unethical.

I have decided to focus on describing the content neutrally rather than categorizing the content based on value charged categories, such as in the case of Justin's blog that was discussed in the chapter 2. In that particular case the AIDA-model was used. I didn't use any such model since I felt that making such highly valued assumptions such as if a comment is revealing action or desire could lead to making judgements that will only be subjective.

I would argue that blogs, even though they are a universal phenomenon are highly attached with the local culture. These blogs that I have been going through the last months represent Finnish way of blogging and their views on what is ethical when it comes to sponsored excursion or advertising in general. The Finnish bloggers views are arguably different from those bloggers in the neighbouring country Sweden where making money with blogs is considered normal act of blogging.

I would also argue that there is a need for research that focuses on the relationships between the blogger, the organization and the reader. In this research I have not touched the ethical dilemmas of advertising through blogs although I would argue it is one of the topics that should be heavily researched now that it seems that blogging is becoming more popular. I would like to point out that it is not just the ethical relationship between the organization and the blogger but that the persons reading these blogs also play a key role.

Measuring the outcomes of this kind of excursion is difficult since there is no consensus on what the desired outcome is. I have presented some rough figures that hopefully contribute in some way to the discussion about how to measure the successfulness of PR-excursions for bloggers.

Although I haven't posed explicitly the question of whether it was possible to manipulate or influence the content that was created online it is obvious that at least some form of manipulation could be done by offering this excursion. Now what is essential to know when organizations have recognized the value of blogger driven marketing, what are the rules of engagement and the role of the organization in the blogosphere and how could organizations measure the results?



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## **Appendix**

Hey XXXX!

I'm doing my Master's Thesis on the possibilities of blogs for Tourism Organizations. As the PR-Manager of VisitSweden has mentioned in her e-mails, the fashion bloggers PR-Excursion is the case that I'm studying.

Here are two questions that I wish you will have time to answer. I'm hoping that you will use your imagination when answering these questions. The more inside on these questions you can provide me with the better I can analyse the content of the fashion blogs and what they are actually saying about your organization.

The results of this study will hopefully help you to understand your own expectations and influence strategies better in the blogosphere and shed light to the possibilities blogs can offer to Tourism Organizations.

**1) What kind of expectations does your organization have concerning the content of the fashion blogs?**

(You can list these expectations or write an essay type answer which ever you feel better doing)

**2) How are you planning to influence the bloggers?**

(What kind of actions or activities will you be doing and how do you think they will be influencing the bloggers?)

Thank you for your efforts and if you have any questions concerning these particular questions or the thesis work please don't hesitate to contact me. All your answers will be handled confidentially and your organizations will be kept anonymous at all times.

I wish you all the best with the Blogexcursion =)

Yours kindly,

--

Joonas Halla

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