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A comparative analysis on relationship maintenance strategies between official state tourism Websites and online travel agencies' Websites in the U.S.

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Abstract

This study investigates the application of relationship maintenance strategies in official state tourism Websites and online travel agencies Websites in the U. S. The content analysis of their Websites reveals that both of the two kinds of Websites are at low level on the application of RMS. Among six strategies, access strategy was enacted best and sharing of task strategy was enacted worst. The result presents that there are significant differences between the two kinds of Websites on executing positivity, openness/disclosure, and assurance strategies. Possible explanations and implications of the differences in RMS application between official state tourism Websites and online travel agencies Websites are discussed.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Statement of Problem

Today, the Internet users worldwide have reached 1.5 billion and the number is still growing (NUA, 2009). According to WSIS (World Summit on the Information Society) (2003), by the year of 2015, the number of people who have affordable and accessible Internet connectivity and computing capabilities will represent 50% of the world's entire population. Against this background, the Internet has been regarded as a potentially effective communication platform connecting the public for a variety of organizations. In the area of public relations, scholars have argued that public relations on the Internet (e-PR) can play a bigger role than they do in the "real world" (e.g., Haig, 2000), because on the Internet, corporations have the initiative to present content through Websites and have the chance to directly communicate with their stakeholders, which is crucial for organizations to build and maintain positive relationship with the public. As Esrock and Leichty (1998) mentioned, some obvious advantages, such as low cost for content development, easy accessibility, constant availability, and high transparency with the public, enable the Websites to obtain a high score in cultivating relationships with interested parties.

Tourism is one of the industries that are most impacted by the popularity of the Internet (Lee, Cai, & O'Leary, 2006). In the U.S., the Internet, due to its role of information provider, is becoming an increasingly important destination-marketing tool and image promotion tool for tourism organizations, including the individual U.S. state tourism offices and commercial travel agencies. "If information is the lifeblood of the tourism industry" (Sheldon, 1993, p. 633), then "the Internet is the heart that circulated

that lifeblood" (Lee, Cai, & O'Leary, 2006, p. 815). Reporting on travelers' use of the Internet in 2009, the U.S. Travel Association (2009) states that about 90 million American adults used the Internet to obtain travel information that year. Of these, approximately 76% have used the Internet to make plans for travel.

With this trend in mind, more and more online travel agencies have appeared in the market in hopes of attracting the public's eye and securing a part of tourism market. Furthermore, state tourism offices are paying more attention on the building of their official Websites. Kent and Taylor (1998) asserted that designing Websites strategically is likely to provide organizations an opportunity to engage in a positive relationship with their public. Undoubtedly, nowadays, e-PR is vital for tourism Websites. Hon and Grunig (1999), regarding how to build and maintain positive public relationships, proposed six communication strategies (positivity, openness/disclosure, access, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurance), by which organizations are able to facilitate quality relationship outcomes. Kelleher and Miller (2006) also found that there is a significant association between employing relationship maintenance strategies (RMS) and quality public relationship outcomes.

This study focused on two kinds of tourism Websites: the official U.S. states' Websites and online travel agencies' Websites. Each state has its own official tourism Website, which has been recognized as an important tool for state image promotion and the major channel for information distribution to domestic and international tourists (Lee, Cai, & O'Leary, 2004). The official state Website is an indispensable bridge linking the state and its interested public and potential tourists. Online travel agencies are defined as travel agencies providing travel-related information and delivering travel-related

products/services to potential customers only through the Web interface, such as *Expedia.com* and *Travelocity.com* (Kim & Lee, 2004, Kim, Kim, & Han, 2007). Differentiating from traditional (offline travel agents) and hybrid (offline travel agents have an e-presence) commercial tourism organizations, online travel agencies usually do not locate offline travel agents and most of their revenue comes from online sales (Kim, Kim, & Han, 2007). Their Websites are nearly the only channel for online travel agencies to communicate and interact with the public, they therefore will have to strive to offer advanced Websites that are more "humanized, uncomplicated, secure, and offer more customized services" (Kim, Kim, & Han, 2007, p. 592). The two kinds of tourism organization have common ground in that their Websites are the most important platforms used to connect with the public, as they rely heavily on the Internet to build up and maintain relationships with potential tourists.

No previous research has been done to discuss how to apply relationship maintenance strategies to assess the attributes of tourism Websites. This study, employing content analysis to 50 official U.S. states' tourism Websites and 45 online travel agencies' Websites, aims to measure and evaluate how these organizations use Web-based communication platform to nurture and sustain public relations through RMS and what are the differences between the two kinds of tourism organizations in applying RMS. These Websites will be examined according to the relationship maintenance strategies proposed in public relations literatures and the Website evaluation criteria in tourism literatures. Practically, the findings are expected to provide practitioners with several insights concerning adopting RMS for these organizations to proactively build and maintain quality relationship with the public.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Research Questions

This chapter first reviews the development and application of relationship maintenance strategies. Next, how prevalence of the Internet influences and changes the way that practitioners using RMS is examined. The chapter also discusses the previous research regarding Websites effectiveness and tourism Websites evaluation. The research questions then raised based on the literatures and theoretical framework outlined in the last section.

Relationship management and organization–public relationships

The relationship management perspective was first proposed by Ferguson (1984), who asserted that relationships between organizations and their key publics should be the focus center of public relations scholarship. Just right after this suggestion, Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985) pointed out public relations as "the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends" (p. 6). With continued development of public relations, more and more public relations scholars and practitioners are defining the function of public relations as relationship management (Botan, 1992; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Heath, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), and paying more attention to relationship management. Hutton (1999) considered that relationship management was capable to become a paradigm for the field. Ledingham (2003), regarding relationship management as a general public relations' theory, defined it involves "effectively managing organization-public relationships (OPRs) around

common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics" (p. 190). Nowadays, the area of relationship management has been expended to include "definitions, types and dimensions of OPRs, maintenance strategies, and models showing the development and process of relationship management" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 60).

Since relationship management theory regards the quality of organization-public relationships as a measure to judge success of public relations (Bruning, 2001; Ledingham, 2003, 2006), OPRs, surely, also became a researching keystone of plenty scholars. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) were the first to define OPRs, which is "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well being of the other" (p. 62). In public relations, studies of organization-public relationships involved three stages: (1) antecedents of relationships, (2) relationship maintenance, and (3) relationship quality outcomes (Broom, Casey, & Ritche, 1997). The antecedents of relationships were defined as "social and cultural norms, collective perceptions and expectation, needs for resources, perceptions of uncertain environment, and legal/voluntary necessity" (Broom, Casey, & Ritche, 1997, p. 94). It points out the underlying reasons of organization build relationships with their publics (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997). Relationship maintenance described the strategies that are applied to establish and maintain quality organization-public relationships (J.E. Grunig, 2006). Finally, Relationship quality outcomes, caused by effective relationship maintenance strategies, indicate the relationship quality (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000) and are used to judge how the

relationship maintenance strategies work. The second and third stages, therefore, are highly interrelated to each other.

According to Hung (2005), the conditions of presence of OPRs' are that: (1) there is an interdependence between organizations and their public; (2) this interdependence is supposed to lead to a consequences to both sides; and (3) it is necessary for organizations to manage those consequences constantly. Therefore, the mission of organizations is to create positive consequence in order to build beneficial relationship with the public (Bruning, 2001). Mutually beneficial relationships can offer organizations a competitive edge (Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006) and bring economic and societal benefits both for organizations and the public (Ledingham, 2006).

What are the factors that impact the OPRs? What are the methods for organizations to foster beneficial relationship with the public? To follow a logical train of thought, researches started pursuing the answers to these questions. Some scholars have pointed out five factors were related to the public's perceptions of their relationship with organizations and behavioral intent (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000). They are: (1) trust, is referred as the organization and their publics can count on one another; (2) openness, is explained as "frank communication between the organization and its key publics" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 61); (3) involvement: "the organization and public are engaged in furthering each other's interests" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 61); (4) commitment, represents both organization and publics voluntarily keep the relationship; and (5) investment, describes "parties' willingness to give time, energy, and resources to build the relationship" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 61). Huang (2001) also suggested that employing trust, control mutuality, relationship

satisfaction, relationship commitment, and face and favor as influenced factors to the quality of OPRs. Some scholars in their OPRs studies attempted to develop scales to measure quality relationships between an organization and its key public (Bruning & Legingham, 1999; Ferguson, 1984; J.E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992; Hon & J.E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001; Jo, 2003, 2006; Kim, 2001). They discovered that there is positive relationship between public perceptions of these five factors and their attitude toward an organization. In other word, the more positive the perceptions are, the more favorable attitude to an organization. From interactional aspect, Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) advised that transactional relationships involving the exchange of resources between organizations and their public are able to bring mutual benefit.

Therefore, how an organization does for positive and long-term OPR has attracted researches' attention.

Relationship maintenance strategies (RMS)

The evaluation to influenced factors about OPRs is mostly decided by how an organization does. A beneficial relational outcome is highly dependent on organizations' effort to cultivate and maintain positive relationships with the public (Ki & Hon, 2009). Back to the year of 1992, Grunig has suggested that public relations should pay focus on building relationships with the public, which benefit organizations to achieve goals (J. E. Grunig, 1992). Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) also emphasized the significance of effective relationship management in public relations by asserting that most public relations practitioners' consensus was that has "something to do with how to communicate with publics, in order to maintain a relationship with those publics" (p. 13). A new focus –

building, cultivate, and sustain relationships with the public – was placed on the study and practice of public relations.

Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) introduced relationship maintenance strategies into the field of public relations from sociological interpersonal relationships by adjusting the focus of communication strategies from individuals to the public. Both interpersonal and organization-public relationships have key relational characteristics in common, such as trust (L.A. Grunig et al., 1992), control mutuality (Burgoon & Hale, 1984, 1987; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Ferguson, 1984; Stafford & Canary, 1991), and commitment (Aldrich, 1975, 1979; Burgoon & Hale, 1984, 1987; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Canary & Stafford, 1992). In the study about a measure of relationship cultivation strategies, starting with organizations, Ki and Hon (2006) defined relationship strategies as "any organizational behavioral efforts that attempt to establish, cultivate, and sustain relationships with strategic publics" (p. 29). Inspired by Hon and J. E. Grunig, researchers, with the purpose of studying effect of RMS, found that these strategies, including access, positivity, openness, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurances, are more likely to produce better outcomes of relationship quality, such as trust, mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999).

Specifically, based on the study by Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999), six relationship maintenance strategies will be evaluated in the current project.

Access

Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) suggested access as one strategy in the organization-public relationship and identified access as follows:

> Members of publics or opinion leaders provide access to public relations people. Public relations representatives or senior managers provide representatives of publics similar access to organizational decision-making processes. Either party will answer telephone calls or read letters or e-mail messages from the other. Either party is willing to go to the other when they have complaints or queries, rather than taking negative reactions to third parties. (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 14)

In other words, access is a strategy that is used by an individual or an organization to reach the other party and express or share opinions and thoughts. Ki and Hon (2009) defined access as "the degree of effort that an organization puts into providing communication channels or media outlets that assist its strategic publics in reaching it" (p. 6).

Positivity

Interpersonal communication studies define positivity as "attempts to make interactions pleasant" (Canary & Stafford, 1994, p. 15). Positivity has consistently been found as an essential predictor of control mutuality (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Dainton, 1991; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Additionally, positivity was regarded as a proactive strategy in constructive maintenance action (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993).

Positivity was applied into public relations area by Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) who adopted it from interpersonal communication literature and conceptualized it as "anything the organization or publics do to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved" (p. 14). Positivity was defined by Ki and Hon (2009) as "the degree to which members of publics benefit from the organization's efforts to make the relationship more enjoyable for key publics" (p. 12).

Openness/Disclosure

Openness is also called disclosure and has been defined as "direct discussion about the nature of the relationship and setting aside times for talks about the relationship" (Canary & Stafford, 1994, p. 12) in interpersonal relationships. Guerrero et al (1993) found that, like positivity, openness represents proactive and constructive maintenance actions.

According to Hon & J. E. Grunig (1999. p. 14), openness in public relations indicates disclosing "thoughts and feelings among parties" in a relationship. Ki and Hon also gave openness a definition in their study, "openness is an organization's efforts to provide information about the nature of the organization and what it is doing" (2009, p. 8). More detailed, openness is needed for both organizations and the public to be open and honest with each other and more than willing to share their opinions about how they think, what concerns or problems they have, and how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with each other (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002). Additionally, openness is a necessity of trust (Dimmick, Bell, Buigiss, & Ragsdale, 2000).

Scholars regard openness as a significant indicator of relationship quality outcomes. L. A. Grunig et al. (1992) suggested that openness is an essential dimension for measuring relationship quality with an organization's strategic constituencies. Ledingham and Bruging (1998) argued that openness can result in satisfying relationships. J. E. Grunig and Huang (2000) proposed that monitoring openness can be an effective scale of relationship quality.

Sharing of tasks

Studies on interpersonal communication suggested that sharing of tasks is an important and reliable indicator of relational outcome, such as mutuality, commitment,

and satisfaction (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Huston, Muhale, & Crouter, 1986; Wilmot & Sillars, 1989).

Applying this strategy into the field of public relations, sharing of tasks is defined as "organizations' and publics' sharing in solving joint or separate problems" (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 15). Based on Hon and J. E. Grunig's definition, Ki and Hon, from the angle of organizations, defined sharing of tasks as "an organization's efforts to share in working on projects or solving problems of mutual interest between the organization and its publics" (2009, p. 14). As to the interests of organizations and publics, the tasks could be reducing environmental pollution, increasing employment opportunities, sponsoring charities, making a profit, and so on (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). Hon and Grunig (1999) suggested that sharing of tasks could be assessed by some reports related to social responsibility, from which organizations are able to demonstrate their efforts to respond to, work on, and solve problems of interest to the public.

Networking

It is usually used for the structure of ties between activists, who not only can be individuals, but organizations, industries, states, and nation as well (Nohria & Eccles, 1992). In interpersonal relationships, some behaviors, such as conversation, friendship, kinship, authority, economic exchange, information exchange, or anything that builds the basis of a relationship, can cause networking. (Nohria & Eccles, 1992). And Guerrero et al. (1993) claimed that this strategy could be proactive and nurture constructive in maintaining relationships.

Introducing networking into organization-public relationships, it's defined as "the degree of an organization's effort to build networks or coalitions with the same groups

that their publics do, such as environmentalists, unions, or community groups" (Ki & Hon, 2009, p. 9). As to how to measure organizations' efforts on networking, one effective method suggested by J. E. Grunig and Huang (2000) is documenting organizational contacts with external actors who engage with organizational publics.

Assurances

Interpersonal relationships scholars has found that providing assurances is one of the most effective approaches in building commitment and trust between individuals (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

When it comes to descried organization-public relationships, assurances is that "each party in the relationship attempts to assure the other that it and its concerns are legitimate and to demonstrate that it is committed to maintaining the relationship" (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002, p. 551). Focusing on organizations' efforts, Ki and Hon defined assurances as "any efforts by an organization to assure its strategic publics that they and their concerns are attended to" (2009, p. 20). The advantage of applying assurances strategy is that an organization can reinforce how it values its targeted publics (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999).

As aforementioned, scholars have applied relationship maintenance strategies to analyze the issues of public relations. They found that these relationship maintenance strategies are very effective for cultivating and maintaining positive and stable organizations-publics relationships (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). These relationship strategies are considered process indicators that are useful as communication strategies for producing desirable relationship quality outcomes, such as control mutuality, satisfaction, commitment, and trust (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon

& J. E. Grunig, 1999). Recently, with the appearance and popular of the Internet, public relations scholars found that in virtue of the Internet, the relationship maintenance strategies can be executed much easier and better (Ki & Hon, 2006; Hong, 2006, Kelleher & Miller, 2006), because the Internet's two outstanding advantages – dialogic communication and independent communication – are just the keys that influence effectiveness of relationship maintenance strategies (J. E. Grunig, 1989; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; J. E. Grunig & White, 1992; Ki & Hon, 2006, 2007).

Dialogic communication/two-way symmetrical communication

Besides relationship maintenance strategies, another popular and effective approach for relationship management is dialogic principles, which is being advocated by many public relation scholars (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Kent & Taylor, 1998). However, the RMS and the dialogic principles are not conflict with each other at all, but complementary to each other, meaning that the consequence in relationship management will be much better if adding dialogic method in applying RMS. In public relations, the most ideal application of rational strategies is in the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; J. E. Grunig & White, 1992, J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig, 1989). The two-way symmetrical model is regarded as a dialogic communication, which appear to be a normative ideal for public relations practice (Botan & Hazleton, 2006).

Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four models of public relations, press agentry, public information, the two-way asymmetrical model, and the two-way symmetrical

model, based on the PR effort's direction and purpose. Direction describes the extent to which the model is one-way or two-way. In public relations, one-way communication is the dissemination of information from organizations to its public; it could be regarded as a monologue. Two-way communication happens when practitioners give information to as well as obtain information from their public; it could be regarded as a dialogue. Purpose describes the extent to which the model is asymmetrical or symmetrical. An asymmetrical communication model presents an imbalanced relationship between the organization and the public tries to persuade and/or change. A symmetrical communication model is a balanced model that adjusts the relationship between the organization and the public.

Based on these four communication models, the Public Relations Excellence Theory, intending to explain "how, why, and to what extent communication affects the achievement of organizational objectives" (Botan & Hazleton, 2006, p. 24), was requested to develop in 1984. In his book, Grunig (1989) claims that the four models are able to serve as normative theories of public relations from which a practitioner could know how to be a press agent or a public information expert. In a later study, Grunig et al. (J. E. Grunig, 1992; Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) collected and analyzed data from 327 corporations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and trade and professional associations in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and finally conclude that the four models are both positive and normative and that the two-way symmetrical model was presented to be the best one.

The public relations theory states that excellent public relations programs should execute the two-way symmetrical model rather than the press agentry, public information,

or two-way asymmetrical models. Two-way symmetrical public relations aims at balancing the interests and relationship of the organization and its public and uses communication to deal with conflicts with strategic public. Consequently, two-way symmetrical communication "produces better long-term relationships with the public than do the other models of public relations" (Botan & Hazleton, 2006, p. 47).

Many have examined the utility of the excellence approach (e.g., Anderson, 1992; L. A. Grunig, 1992; Huang, 1994; Pavlik, 1989). Scholars have also explored two-way symmetrical communication using the case. Marra (2004), after analyzing the AT&T crisis and the University of Maryland crisis, among others, concluded that the two-way symmetrical model was superior to other crisis communication plans. The results of Huang's (2004) surveys support Grunig and White (1992) and Grunig et al. (1997) whose results suggest that symmetrical communication produce very favorable performance measures.

However, the model was not met by uniform acceptance by scholars. Murphy (1991) asserts that the two-way symmetrical mode is difficult to find in the real world. Similarly, Van der Meiden (1993) and Sun (1994) argue that the model is not realistic because it demands that organizations relinquish some vital objectives to make the model work. However, these criticisms of the model were lobbied before the prevalence of the Internet.

Public relations on the Internet (e-PR)

As mentioned before, the ideal communication model, two-way symmetrical communication was though too hard to be realized. However, the Internet provides the platform for public relations practitioners to do so, because it's more convinced that the

Internet is "a dialogue communication medium which satisfies the demand for two-way, interactive, and symmetrical communications" (Samsup & Jung, 2005, p. 24). The Internet represents a "paradigmatic shift in corporate communications, creating the opportunity for two-way communications between organizations and their publics" (Wright, 2001, p. 5), which is necessary to build strong relationships.

When comes to the change in public relations, Hazleton, Harrison-Rexrode and Kennan (2007) put it succinctly:

> Traditional methods of public relations (press releases and special events, for example) remain central to what public relations practitioners do on a daily basis. However, since individuals are changing the ways in which they communicate with each other, correspondingly, the methods used in public relations to create, maintain, and utilize relationships are changing as well. (p. 91-92)

The development of the Internet inspires new thinking for public relations efforts (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Matt Haig (2000, p. 6) distinguishes PR efforts through traditional mass media and through the Internet, "in the real world PR depends on an intermediary or gatekeeper, typically a journalist. On the Internet, you can communicate directly with your public via your Website, e-mail messages and discussion group contributions."

Haig (2000, p. 4) lists the Internet advantages: (1) "constant communication", through Internet, you could communicate with your audience at any time; (2) "instant response", when appearing questions or issues, you could respond instantly via the Internet; (3) ability to reach a global audience, Internet eliminated the geographical limitations. You can communicate with any client from any place who accesses the Internet; (4) "audience knowledge", here, the Internet gets rid of the guesswork by helping communicators better understand what audiences want; (5) "two-way

communication", the two-way communication between corporation and its publics is what PR practitioners are pursuing. It is beneficial to build strong and mutually relationships. The public relations functions that can be performed through the Internet, however, go beyond this list.

After the development of the past twenty years, the Internet truly has become a dynamic platform for exchanging information and experience, real participation and dialogue, and self-expression (Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009). Public relations professionals have more concentration on e-PR activities such as Website building (Kent et al., 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), maintenance and updating of blogs (Trammell, 2006), engagement in e-voting, e-mail sending, and creation of e-newsletters (Heath, 2001).

New technologies brought by the Internet, such as multi-user interactions, open and objective communication environment, present of multi-media content, blogging, and instant message and chat (Messinger et al., 2009; Pfeil et al., 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), all can be integrated into an organization's Website. Organizations' Websites, which is a controlled channel, are able to offer a precious opportunity for organizations and public relations practitioners to present how they serves their clients and stakeholders, to help increase the public's understanding of their products and services, and to build dialogue with the public (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Pinkham, 1998). Park and Reber (2008) found by researching that organizations' Websites is crucial in cultivating dialogue and maintaining relationship with public in order to develop mutually beneficial relationships. A theorizing also

suggests that the Website can promote the organization-public relationships more balanced and stable (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003).

Extensive researches on the application and models of the Internet in public relations have appeared in the last few years. Some studies focused on the Website's technological capability and applications to public relations practice. Liu (1997) found that the homepages of organizations' Websites are used to indicate their presence, to attract publics, to show products and services, to promote corporate positive image, to communicate with users, and to enhance public relations; Parker (1998), by content analysis of Websites, viewed that the written and printed material presenting in the Websites were from paper brochures, advertising, and existing corporate information. Some studies were interested in testing Websites according to communication theories. Samsup and Jung (2005), in the light of Grunig's public relations model (1992), had a comparison between the U.S. corporate Websites and South Korean corporate Websites and found that the best communication – two-way symmetrical model were not applied well in both of countries' Websites. Lately, Selzer, and Mitrook (2007) focus on the online relationship building by analyzing fifty environmental weblogs' content. McAllister-Greve & Taylor (2007) investigated the dialogic features of community college Websites.

A few of studies also have examined how relationship maintenance strategies have been used in the online communication of commercial corporations. Ki and Hon (2006) studied how Fortune 500 corporations used these strategies (access, positivity, openness, sharing of tasks, and networking) through their Websites. They found that openness strategy and access strategy are the most commonly used by organizations

among organizational Websites. After this, mainly for financial public, Hong (2006) explored how relationship maintenance strategies have been used in Forbes 200 Websites and found that openness, in the same way, was the most common strategy, and positivity was used least prevalently. Kelleher and Miller (2006) researched the relational maintenance strategies on organizations' blogs and discovered that relationship maintenance strategies with conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment significantly influenced the relationship quality outcomes.

Although the appearance of Internet can foster and maintain the positive organization-public relations, the technology itself does not lead to beneficial outcome for organizations. From previous researching results, it's obvious that there is a gap between public relations scholars' beliefs in the Internet's potential power and the practitioners' actual application of the Internet to build and maintain relationships with publics (Hill & White, 2000; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Therefore, it's necessary to keep investigating and researching the actuality of e-PR in all kinds of organizations, from which public relations practitioner could recognize their strengths and weaknesses so as to advance effective public relations.

Website Effectiveness

A necessity of effective Website communication is taking full advantage of the Internet as a communication channel (Brownlie et al. 1994; Cronin, 1995). In the past years, studies that try to identify and evaluate successful factors of Website have come out in various disciplinary areas, including tourism, information systems, marketing, advertising, etc. Parsons, Zeisser, & Waitman (1998) suggested that the factors of a successful Website include attracting the public, engaging the public's interests and

participation, retaining users and ensuring returning, finding user preferences, and relating back to users through customized interactions. Wang and Fesenmaier (2006), similarly, claim that the important indicators of successful Web-based destination marketing contain indentifying, developing, and analyzing the factors that can influence or even shape customer needs. Park and Gretzel (2007), conduct a meta-analysis to get many key factors into one comprehensive model of nine Website success factors: (1) information quality; (2) ease of use; (3) responsiveness; (4) security/privacy; (5) visual appearance; (6) trust; (7) interactivity; (8) personalization; and (9) fulfillment. Some scholars suggest that stickiness built into the Website is critical to the success of a Website. "Implying longer and more frequent visits by tourists to a Website, stickiness is based on providing unique content and specialized services to vertical market niches" (Business Wire, 1999). Beddoe (1999) defined stickiness as a Website's ability to retain users and attract them further browse the Website. The stickiness is an essential factor to build and maintain positive relationship with the public, because pleasure experience usually can drive users to stay longer on the Website.

More detailed, scholars have pointed out the concrete design for achieve Website effectiveness. As initiators, Gigglespie, Krishna, Oliver, Olsenm, and Thiel (1999) proposed the drivers of stickiness in a Website including content, customization, real-time interaction, and site promotion. Janal (2000) provided some suggestions to an effective Websites: (1) multi-language available; (2) be aware of colors; (3) make transactions easy and can be done in target zone; (4) text is correct and readable; and (5) proper number of image, audio, and video. From a number of practitioners and researchers, in Baggio's (2003) article of analyzing European Tourism Organizations, he

summarized a list of factors of successful Website, such as presenting actual and effective interactional function, easy use of navigation aids and other sections, correct and readable information (colors, size, fonts, grammar, style), content of high value to drive users to explore further and to return regularly, promoting the Website though traditional media and online resources, which are partly referred to this study.

Tourism Websites evaluation

With the appearance of effective Websites' standards, although currently there are no commonly accepted successful scales for tourism Websites in the field of tourism and hospitality (Law & Bai, 2006), many scholars have made some contributions to toward evaluating Website's success. In Beldona and Cai's (2006) studies about evaluation of rural tourism Websites, they adapted Gillsepie et al. (1999) framework to identify three key drives of stickiness: (1) content, (2) interactivity, and (3) promotional value, which were regarded as measurement for rural tourism Website. Rita (2000) investigated the situation of European Websites promoted and managed tourism destinations using a web-based destination marketing system. Benckendorff and Black (2000) evaluated the Websites of 16 regional tourism authorities in Australia with Website planning, design, content, and management characteristic. Lu, Deng, and Wang (2007) develop an index suitable for measuring the quality of Chinese tourism Websites based on three aspects of a Website: Website design, Website contents, and Websites effectiveness. Within each category, several sub-factors are further measured. Website design and contents and their sub-factors, such as navigation and linkage, multi-language versioning, transactional factor, and informational factor, will be applied into this study as part of indicators of relationship maintenance strategies.

Regarding tourism Website evaluation approaches, content analysis have been used by some researchers. Content analysis is an "observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications" (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991. p. 243). Weeks and Crouch (1999) conducted a content analysis of 20 Websites from six tourism and hospitality sectors in Australia. Park (2003) did a content analysis to evaluated the Websites of 23 large Korean travel agencies through measuring factors such as the availability of online reservations, a home page in English, tourism information and company background, electronic boards, interactive communication tools, product search engines, links, cyber events, special prices, and customized products. Blum and Fallon (2002), based on six groups of feature (product, price, promotion, place, customer relations, and technical aspects), examined 53 Websites of Welsh visitor attraction. Countryman (1999) utilized content analysis on all 50 official state tourism Websites in the U.S. to evaluate the application of marketing concepts in the design and creation of state tourism Websites. From a different angle, in same method, Lee, Cai, and O'Leary (2005) analyze brand-building elements in the U.S. state tourism Websites.

After reviewing these literatures from the two main areas – public relation and tourism and hospitality, one of overlapped parts of public relations and tourism and hospitality is to research how to build a positive relationship with Websites' users or the public. In the area of PR, there is a relatively mature theoretical framework – relationship maintenance strategies; while the studies in the field of tourism and hospitality provide more concrete indicators and measurements to evaluate effectiveness of Websites.

Therefore, based on the literature review, this study will research and try to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do the 50 U.S. states enact public relationship maintenance strategies through their official tourism Websites? Specifically, how do the 50 U.S. states enact positivity, openness/disclosure, access, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurance strategy through their tourism Websites?

RQ2. How do the U.S. online travel agencies enact public relationship maintenance strategies through their Websites? Specifically, how do the U.S. online travel agencies enact positivity, openness/disclosure, access, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurance strategy through their Websites?

RQ3: Do the two kinds of tourism Websites display different quality in applying relationship maintenance strategies? Specifically, what is the difference between the two kinds of tourism organizations on enacting each of the six RMS, including positivity, openness/disclosure, access, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurance?

Chapter 3

Methods

This study aims, first, examining the use of relationship maintenance strategies on official U.S. states' tourism Websites and online travel agencies' Websites; and second, comparing the differences between the two kinds of Websites in application of RMS. A quantitative content analysis of 50 official U.S. state Websites and 45 U.S. online travel agencies' Websites were conducted.

Data source and unit of analysis

The official U.S. tourism Website of each state was located through a web page: *http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Travel_Tourism/State_Tourism.shtml*, which provides all 50 official states tourism Websites' links. The online travel agencies' Websites was located through a web page "Online Travel Booking" in Yahoo! Directory (*http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Shopping_and_Services/Travel_and_Tran sportation/Online_Booking/?b=40*). The Websites listed in this directory includes all sorts of tourism Websites. This study chose the top 45 U.S. online travel agencies ranking by popularity in this list. The 45 online travel agencies account for over 90% of U.S. major online travel companies. A single tourism Website is used as the unit of analysis (Ki & Hon, 2006).

Variables and measurement

The variables in this study are the six relationship maintenance strategies adopted from Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999). Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) conceptualized all of the maintenance strategies for both organizations and the public, meaning that the two parties use these with each other. As a first step, however, this study concentrates on measuring

the efforts from organizational side, therefore, the definitions of the six strategies in this study partly borrow from Ki and Hon's (2009) research "A measure of relationship cultivation strategies". Every Website, finally, will be graded a score out of 20 for each of strategies under the guidance of coding scheme. (Seen in the Appendix)

Positivity: is operationally defined in this study as any attempt and effort from the organizations on their Websites to enable ease of Website use for the public.

Indicators of positivity are Website design and travelling contents.

Considering previous studies showed that creating positive user experiences is the major guiding principle in Website design (Nielsen & Norman, 2000; Shedroff, 2001), the first indicator "Website design" was measured by:

Page performance: applying *Yslow*, a Website evaluation tool, to give each Website a grade that ranged from A to F. *YSlow* can analyzes web page performance by examining all the components on the page based on 22 testable rules. (Seen in the Appendix)

Color contrast and color brightness: applying *AccessColor*, an online tool for color contrast, to evaluate if the color contrast and color brightness between the foreground and background of all elements in the Website meet the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) recommended standard of 500 or greater for the color difference and 125 or greater for color brightness.

Navigation: checking if there is/are label, operational links and search engine in the Website.

Multi-language version setting: checking whether the Websites provides the versions prepared with foreign languages and how many languages are available.

Fantom (1999) suggested that appealing Website (amount of easily accessible content, photos, sounds, streaming media, and special effects) is crucial to create a positive user experience. The second indicator "Website travelling content" was measured by:

The number of photos: how many photos, presenting in the way of photo gallery, are contained in the Website?

The length of video: how many seconds do all videos appearing in the Website last?

Logo and Slogan: checking if a logo or/and a slogan is/are presented in the Website.

Taking the state of Alabama's official tourism Website as an example:

The score of positivity strategy = [score of indicator 1 (the Website design) + score of indicator 2 (the Website content)] /2;

The score of indicator 1 = page performance (2) + color (0) + navigation (5) + multi-language (0) = 7 (out of 20);

The score of indicator 2 = [photo (1) + video (5) + logo & slogan (5)] $\times 20 / 15 =$ 14.67 (out of 20);

The score of positivity strategy for Alabama = (7 + 14.67) / 2 = 10.84 (out of 20).

Openness/ disclosure: this study operationally defined openness/disclosure as any attempt and effort from the organizations on their Websites to provide interactive and transactional opportunities for the public and present information about the nature of the organization and what it is doing.

There are three indicators to measure this strategy:

Interactivity: the measurement of interactivity is the number and the quality of interactive applications, such as *Email, Youtube, Facebook, Blog, Twitter,* and *Flickr* that can offer two-way communication between organization and the public. In the Internet environment, these social networks have been regarded as effective relationship building tools (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Transaction service: is referred as making reservation and payment, including reserving a room, booking flight, placing tickets and tour package, and renting a car.

Organization's information: includes an organization's overview, news releases, annual reports, and stock price.

Taking the state of Alabama's official tourism Website as an example:

The score of openness & disclosure strategy = score of indicator 1 (interactivity) + score of indicator 2 (service) + score of indicator 3 (organization information)

The score of openness/disclosure strategy for Alabama = 6 (out of 8) + 0 (out of 8) + 3 (out of 4) = 9 (out of 20).

Access: in this study, access is operationally defined as any attempt and effort from the organizations on their Websites to provide appropriate channels and information for the public to reach the Websites and organization's representatives.

One of indicator of access is *the ease of contact*, by examining presence of the organizations' contact information in their Websites, including telephone numbers, useful addresses, and staff email addresses. Another indicator is *the speed of site accessibility*, which is measured by the Websites Speedtester provided by LinkVendor professional seo tools. This Website evaluation tool can provide a Website speed check report for each Website, showing the length of load time by seconds.

Taking the state of Alabama's official tourism Website as an example:

The score of access strategy = score of indicator 1 (ease of contact) + score of indicator 2 (speed of site accessibility);

The score of access strategy for Alabama = 10 (out of 10) + 10 (out of 10) = 20 (out of 20).

Sharing of tasks: this study operationally defines sharing of tasks as organizations' social responsibility initiatives and their concerns to social problems showing on their Websites.

Integrating social responsibility report and/or concerns is regarded as the indicator of sharing of tasks in this paper. The social responsibility topics refer to help alleviate pollution, nurture and promote plant and animal life, end or decrease global warming, provide relief in times of natural disaster, and other topic that could be regarded as social responsible issue.

Taking the state of Alabama's official tourism Website as an example:

Containing each of the topics mentioned above earns one point for the Website, up to 6 point.

The score of sharing of tasks strategy = earning points $\times 20 / 6$

The state of Alabama's official tourism Website doesn't present any topic mentioned above, therefore, the score of sharing of tasks strategy for Alabama = 0 (out of 20).

Networking: is operationally defined in this study as any evidence on organizations' Websites of building networks or coalitions with any groups, such as environmental, union, and community group. According to Grunig and Huang (2000),

networking is manifested through the number and quality of contacts with networks of these groups. This study measures networking by the presence of collaborative efforts with other organizations through links on their home pages. 0 is graded to the Website if there is no friendly link; 5 is graded to the Website if there are 1 to 5 friendly links; 10 is graded to the Website if there are 6 to 10 friendly links; 15 is graded to the Website if there are 11 to 15 to the Website; and 20 as a full mark is graded if the number of friendly links on the Website is more than 20.

According the scale, taking the state of Louisiana's official tourism Website as an example: there are 9 friendly links found in the Louisiana's Website, therefore, the score of networking for the state Website is 10 (out of 20).

Assurances: this study operationally defines assurances as any attempt and effort from the organization on the Websites to assure its public's concerns are attended to. Many scholars (Kent & Taylor, 1998, Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Mcallister & Taylor, 2007; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Samsup & Jung, 2005) suggested that providing opportunity for the public to question organizations and respond to questions and problems is one of important principles of online communication. There are two indicators to measure assurances: if there is *"Question & Answer" page* and if there is *"Ask a Question" page* in the Website.

Taking the state of Alabama's official tourism Website as an example:

The score of assurances strategy = score of indicator 1 (Q & A page) + score of indicator 2 (ask a question page);

The score of assurances strategy for Alabama = 10 (out of 10) + 10 (out of 10) = 20 (out of 20).

Data analysis

To examine the RMS's application of official U.S. states tourism Websites and online travel agencies' Websites, the mean of each strategy's score for the two kinds of websites were calculated respectively, and then compared. Besides, because score is continuous variables, which can take on any value range from 0 to 20 in this study, in order to clearly illustrate the quality of each maintenance strategy's application, each strategy's score were meaningful broken into smaller subsections, employing a 5-ordinal level scale that range from zero to four, which was transformed from that score of out 20. Score 0 was transformed into "0", meaning nonexistent: this Website doesn't use this strategy; score 0.01 to 5 was transformed into "1", meaning low quality: this Website is using this strategy in a low quality; score 5.01 to 10 was transformed into "2", meaning middle low quality; score 10.01 to 15 was transformed into "3", meaning middle high quality, and score 15.01 to 20 was transformed into "4", meaning high quality.

To analyze the difference of RMS's application between states tourism organizations and online travel agencies, the mean of each strategy's score of each type Websites were compared using an independent-samples t-test.

Intercoder reliability

Two graduate students were recruited and trained to code for the variables of interest in this study. To check intercoder reliability, 15 Websites, approximately 16% of all samples were randomly selected as subsample to be coded by both coders. Intercoder reliability was determined according to *Scott's pi*. Table 1 lists the results of intercoder reliability for all the variables coded, which ranged from .86 to 1 indicating acceptable reliability values.

Table 1. *Inter-coder reliability*

Variable	Scott's pi
Positivity	
The Website design	1.00
The travelling content	1.00
Openness and disclosure	
Interactivity	1.00
Transaction service	0.93
Organization information	0.95
Access	
Contact information	1.00
Speed of site accessibility	1.00
Sharing of tasks	0.86
Networking	1.00
Assurances	1.00

Chapter 4

Results

This study examines 50 official U.S. state tourism Websites and 45 U.S. online travel agencies' Website in terms of relationship maintenance strategies. The objective is to find how these tourism Websites enact RMS and if there are significant differences between the two kinds of tourism organizations in application of RMS.

Research question 1

The research question 1 asks about how well the official U.S. state tourism organizations uses the relationship maintenance strategies of positivity, openness/disclosure, access, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurances through their Websites. A total of 50 state Websites were coded to answer the research question. A composite measure was created by summing up the items for each strategy, and descriptive statistics were computed for each composite measure.

As Table 2 shows, the official U.S. state tourism Websites using the relationship maintenance strategies, all in all, were judge to be middle low quality (M=8.33, SD=6.22). Focusing on each single strategy, the state tourism organizations applied access the best (M=16.8, SD=3.22) among all of the six strategies. 72% of state's tourism Websites were rated level 4, high quality; 96 % of Websites' quality of access strategy is middle high or above. Meantime, this kind of tourism organizations used sharing of tasks the worst (M=0.27, SD=1.13), even could say they hardly use this strategy. Among 50 Websites, only one Website was rated level 2, middle low quality and two Websites were rated low quality; the rest of Websites didn't show the application of sharing of tasks at all. Another strategy in low quality is networking (M=2.30, SD=5.27). Positivity,

assurances, and openness/disclosure received middle quality. The application of

positivity strategy is a little better than the application of assurances and openness

strategies.

Research question 2

This research question sought to find how the U.S. online travel agencies enact

the six relationship maintenance strategies through their Websites. As Table 3 outlines,

on a whole, online travel agencies applied the RMS in a middle low quality (M=8.32,

SD=6.42). Separately examining each of the strategies, access strategy received the

highest score (M=15.70, SD=3.62), means high quality. No Website was judge as low

level in this strategy and 60 % of 45 Websites were rated as high quality. Almost all of

online travel agencies didn't use sharing of tasks strategy, except one Website was graded

middle low quality. Similarly, networking strategy was not executed by most (80%)

online travel agencies; only one Website was doing well at this strategy. Assurances

(M=13.78, SD=6.50) and openness (M=11.91, SD=2.74) strategies were rated as middle

high quality; while positivity strategy, although received middle low quality, the score of

this strategy's application was just kind of higher than the score of low quality (M=6.14,

SD=2.31).

Table 2. *Official U.S. state tourism Websites descriptive statistics by strategies*

Strategies	Score Mean	Std. Deviation	Level	N	%
Positivity	12.73	2.96	4	13	26
			3	26	52
			2	11	22
			1	0	0
			0	0	0
Openness	8.86	2.53	4	1	4
			3	9	76
			2	38	18
			1	2	2
			0	0	0
Access	16.80	3.22	4	36	72
			3	12	24
			2	2	4
			1	0	0
			0	0	0
Sharing of tasks	0.27	1.13	4	0	0
			3	0	0
			2	1	2
			1	2	4
			0	47	94
Networking	2.30	5.27	4	3	6
			3	0	0
			2	3	6
			1	4	8
			0	40	80
Assurances	9.00	6.47	4	8	16
			3	0	0
			2	29	58
			1	0	0
			0	13	26
RMS Mean	8.33	6.22			

Table 3. *U.S. online travel agencies Websites descriptive statistics by strategies*

Strategies	Score Mean	Std. Deviation	Level	N	%
Positivity	6.14	2.31	4	0	0
			3	3	6.7
			2	23	51.1
			1	19	42.2
			0	0	0
Openness	11.91	2.74	4	3	6.7
			3	29	64.4
			2	12	26.7
			1	1	2.2
			0	0	0
Access	15.70	3.62	4	7	60
			3	12	26.7
			2	6	13.3
			1	0	0
			0	0	0
Sharing of tasks	0.15	0.99	4	0	0
			3	0	0
			2	1	2.2
			1	0	0
			0	44	97.8
Networking	2.22	4.83	4	1	2.2
			3	1	2.2
			2	6	13.3
			1	1	2.2
			0	36	80
Assurances	13.78	6.50	4	21	46.7
			3	0	0
			2	20	44.4
			1	0	0
			0	4	8.9
RMS Mean	8.32	6.42			

Research question 3

Research question 3 asked about whether there are differences between the official U.S. state tourism organization and the U.S. online travel agencies in using the six relationship maintenance strategies through their Websites, and what the differences are. Independent-samples t-test was applied to test the research question. The Table 4 shows that significant differences between the official U.S state tourism Websites and online travel agencies' Websites happened on three of the relationship maintenance strategies: positivity, openness/disclosure, and assurances.

The mean scores for positivity are significantly different between types of tourism organizations (t=12.02, $p<.001$). The quality of positivity in states' Websites (M=12.73, SD=2.96) is much better than the quality of positivity in online travel agencies' Websites (M=6.14, SD=2.31).

The mean scores for openness also presents significant different between the two types of tourism organizations (t=-5.67, p<.001). In this strategy, online travel agencies were executing a little better than state tourism organizations. Although both of them were rated as middle low, online travel agencies' score is closer to middle high quality (M=11.91, SD=2.74), while the official U.S state tourism Websites' score is just a little higher than the score of low level (M=8.86, SD=2.53). Therefore, the difference is still significant.

The last strategy showed significant difference between the two types of tourism organizations' Websites is assurances (t=-3.59, $p<.001$). For assurances strategy, the official U.S. state tourism Websites' execution was rated middle low quality (M=9.00,

SD=6.47), and the U.S. online travel agencies' Websites' execution received a higher

score (M=13.78, SD=6.50).

The rest of relationship maintenance strategies – access, sharing of tasks, and

networking didn't present significant difference between the state's Websites and online

travel agencies' Websites. Both of them are using access strategy very well; both of them

are almost not using sharing of tasks and networking strategies.

Table 4. *RMS used in states Websites and online travel agencies Websites*

Strategies Mean (SD)	State Websites	Online agencies Websites	T-test	DF	Significance
Positivity Mean (SD)	12.73 (2.96)	6.14 (2.31)	12.018	93	$p < .001$
Openness Mean (SD)	8.86 (2.53)	11.91 (2.74)	-5.644	93	$p < .001$
Access Mean (SD)	16.80 (3.22)	15.70 (3.62)	1.562	93	n.s
Sharing of tasks Mean (SD)	0.27 (1.13)	0.15 (0.99)	0.538	93	n.s
Networking Mean (SD)	2.30 (5.27)	2.22 (4.83)	0.075	93	n.s
Assurances Mean (SD)	9.00 (6.47)	13.78 (6.50)	-3.587	93	$p < .001$

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study makes an initial effort to compare the application of relationship maintenance strategies between the official U.S. state tourism Websites and the online travel agencies' Websites, aiming to advance the relationship management theory. This study also develop and validate the quantitative methods for evaluation of relationship maintenance strategies on Internet-based communication channels in hospitality industry, which may help practitioners identify the strategies to maintain and improve organization-public relationships.

The findings indicate that either official U.S. tourism organizations or the online travel agencies do not use the relationship maintenance strategies very well on their Websites. Both of them are at low level on the application of RMS. However, it does not mean that each of the RMS is not applied enough. As mentioned above, access strategy was executed best, while sharing of task strategy was executed worst. Furthermore, there are differences between the two kinds of Websites on enacting half of the six RMS.

Access strategy

Among the six relationship maintenance strategies measured here, the 95 sampled Websites most often enacted access strategy, including contact information and speed of site accessibility. As to "contact information", the official U.S. tourism Websites are little better than online travel agencies' Websites: each of the 50 official U.S. tourism Websites presents at least one method to reach the staff, and 60% of the Websites offer three or more contact ways, such as telephone numbers, useful addresses, and staff email addresses; while there are six online travel agencies which do not provide any contact

information for the public, and the rest of online travel agencies' Websites are doing well here. Comparing with other strategies, presenting contact information on their Websites is easy to execute, however, it is an effective relationship maintenance method, which expresses the organization's willing to communication with the public directly and truly. Another indicator of access strategy is the speed of site accessibility. Besides two official U.S. state Websites, all of the sampled Websites have high speed in loading content. The mean speed of official U.S. state tourism Websites is little slower than that of online travel agencies' Websites, which heavily rely on the official U.S. tourism Websites contain more photos and videos (more detail below). Although this indicator is more related to the Internet technology, it's crucial in impacting users' satisfaction with the Website. The longer the wait-time is, the less satisfactory is. (Kim, Kim, & Han, 2007).

Sharing of task strategy

Sharing of task, as one of the RMS, is rarely used by all of these Websites. The strategy aims to help organizations to show their involvement in social responsibility initiative. However, *Travelocity.com*, providing green travel deal, is the only online travel agency that shows their concern about social problem. Among the 50 official U.S. state tourism organizations, Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism, Tennessee, and Wisconsin tourism office are active communicators for particular social issues. For instance, on Massachusetts' official tourism Website, they advocate Green Tourism and have a long-standing tradition of taking steps to preserve the environment: they encourage visitors to go car-free; their hotels and restaurants are making determined efforts to reduce energy, water, and to provide a healthy environment for guests and employees; their chefs are teaming up with local farmers to present delicious locally-

sourced meals (*http://www.massvacation.com/green_guide.php*). There is a notable link

on Tennessee's official Website to Sustainable Travel with green itineraries and packages.

On Wisconsin official Website, Travel Green Wisconsin was highlighted with green

color among black so that it's easier to attract users' attention.

The results of this study indicate that the U.S. travel Websites are failing in

sharing of task strategy and the focused social issue is limited in environment only.

Badaracco (1996) have suggested that corporate social responsibility has become a

necessary part of pragmatic public relations. Esrock and Leichty (1998) proposed that

computer-mediated communication networks such as the Websites is a good channel for

organizations to communication their social responsibility. Therefore, tourism Websites

should be more proactive to showcase their participation in relevant social issues, such as

decreasing global warming, travelling security, and protect from terrorism.

Networking strategy

Networking with groups, communities, and unions is another RMS that was

applied shortly by both official U.S. tourism Websites and online agencies' Websites.

One of the Internet's merits is eliminating the geographic distance, which enable parties

to link with each other much more easily. As Coombs (1998) suggested, the Internet was

a creator of linkages with other link-minded stakeholders. Organizations should make the

best of the Internet's advantage to build friendly linkages with other groups on their

Websites. Networking not only can highlight organizational activities with groups they

work with, but benefit organization to increase the number of its target public as well.

In application of access, sharing of task, and networking strategies, the official

U.S. tourism Websites and the U.S. online travel agencies Websites present similar

characteristics, however, the two kinds of Websites are significant different in utilizing the strategies of positivity, openness/disclosure, and assurances.

Positivity strategy

Regarding enacting positivity strategy, the official U.S. tourism Websites are obviously better than the U.S. online travel agencies' Websites, no matter at Website design or at travelling contents.

Among the four dimensions of the Website design (page performance, color, navigation, and multi-language version setting), the difference on navigation lead to the mean score of online travel agencies' Websites design is lower than the mean score of official state tourism Websites design. In other words, in page performance, color, and multi-language version, the two kinds of Websites did not show obvious difference. Each of official state tourism Website has a navigation label, such as search engine and quick link; while only 35.6% of online travel agencies' Websites provide searching function. It's worthy to notice that neither of the two kinds of Websites performs well on multi-language dimension, which could be regarded as one of the important factors to build relationship with international travelers. The Internet is especially effective for distributing information without the limitation of distance. International travelers are therefore more depending on the Websites to obtain accurate and sufficient information for their overseas trips. Those tourism organizations which would like expand their target public to out of countries should make more effort to this aspect.

Regarding the travelling content, another indicator of positivity, likewise, the official state tourism Websites kept ahead in all of the three dimensions - photos, videos, and Websites' slogans and logos. Considering respective main functions of the two kinds

of Websites, it's not hard to explain the differences of travelling content between them. The official U.S. state tourism Websites are given more expectation for destination image building and branding. Photos and videos are effective and direct formats to distribute travel information; tourism slogans and logos were identified as one of the best ways to communicate and deliver the theme and the state tourism image to the traveling public (Lee, Cai, & O'Leary, 2004). Additionally, it is much easier for the state tourism organizations to determine the focus of communication, since they only deal with one state's information. However, it doesn't mean that online travel agencies do not need photos and videos to communicate travelling information. Online travel agencies are commercial organizations with the purpose of making profit. Usually, they attract public by lower price or special services, which are able to be better and directly delivered through simply text and numbers.

Openness/disclosure strategy

As to openness/disclosure strategy, although online travel agencies' Website was graded a higher mean score than official state tourism Websites, online travel agencies' Websites are not as good as the official state tourism Websites in two of three indicators of this strategy – interactivity and organization information. The official U.S. state tourism Websites are presenting more social interactive applications to fulfill two-way communication with the public; while online travel agencies are paying more attention on providing comprehensive and convenient transaction services for the public. Only one fifth of official state Websites offer online transaction services or links to make transaction. Today, planning and booking trips online has become popular within potential visitors (Kim, Kim, & Han, 2007). Undoubtedly, it's beneficial for official U.S.

state tourism organization to build and maintain more closer and positive relationship

with the public if they add booking travel services or provide friendly links to other

transaction groups or organizations. For the U.S. online travel agencies, they should pay

more attention on interactivity with their customers through some social network

applications, such as Facebook, blog, Twitter, and so on. The Internet technical

advancement offers organizations unique platforms to openly and directly

intercommunicate with the public, which is crucial to build trust. The significant

difference in the third indicator – organization information – between the two kinds of

tourism Websites primarily result from news release and annual reports. Majority of the

U.S. state Websites and half of online travel agencies Websites present news section,

such as "in the news", "press release"; half of states' Websites also provide annual

reports, while visitors could not find any related economic reports on most of online

travel agencies' Websites.

Assurances strategy

In enacting assurances strategy, online travel agencies are better than official state

tourism organizations. The public are given the opportunities to ask their own questions

to the organization on most of the sampled Websites, no matter on the official state

tourism Websites or on the online travel agencies' Websites. However, the online travel

agency also make more efforts on "question & answer page", since there are many

common and universal questions from visitors. It will save much more time if customers

are able to eliminate their concerns by looking through "Q & A" page first.

Implications

      This is the first study to focus on and empirically validate all of the six relationship maintenance strategies on the U.S. tourism Websites. Besides theoretical contributions, the findings have the following implications for the practitioners, tourism companies and organizations, as well as the public.

      First, the study presents a comprehensive analysis of the U.S. tourism Websites' current situation in applying relationship maintenance strategies, from which tourism organizations are able to compare their own Websites with others and find advantages and disadvantage.

      In addition, the reliable evaluation indicators for each of the strategy examined in the study can be guidance for practitioners and Websites' executives to enhance Website design and to achieve desired quality and purposes.

      Furthermore, results from the study can help potential visitors or the public to locate proper tourism Websites, save search time, and reduce search cost. Currently, for those who desire to know more about tourism information for certain place, the official U.S. state tourism Websites are good choices; for those who are looking for travelling deals and booking travelling services, online travel agencies' Websites are more useful.

Limitations and suggestions for future studies

      The study also has several limitations that suggest future research to develop. First, the methodology limits this study only focus on organizations' performance, but did not measure the actual effects of relationship maintenance strategies between organizations and the public. Future studies should consider more comprehensive multi-

method studies, which might include consumer surveys, focus groups, and interviews with Websites visitors.

The second limitation is that the insufficient number of indicators used for some strategies, such as networking and assurance, might lead to the lower reliabilities, although the reliabilities of all the indicators met an acceptable level. Therefore, future research should try to increase the number of indicators for these strategies so as to measure each strategy better and more accurately.

Third, most of the data for analysis in this study were collected from a single visit to each Website at one point in time. Considering the fact that many Websites are highly dynamic and constantly changing, content analysis of Websites at different times are likely to present different results. A longitudinal study is suggested for future research.

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Appendix

I. Content Analysis Coding Sheet

Tourism Websites Codebook (N=85)

Variable name		Variable label	Values	Codes
ID		ID	2 digital number (From 01 to 85)	
Coder		Name of coder	1. Lei Zhu 2. Yue Zheng	
Type of Website		What kind of type the tourism Website is	1. Official State Website 2. Online travel agency	
Date		The day the coder evaluate the Website	Enter as Month/Day/Year (e.g.01/30/2010)	
Positivity	The Website design	page performance	use Website evaluation tool to give a score that range from A to F	
		color contrast and color brightness	use Website evaluation tool to check if the web color meet the requirement;	
		Navigation: label, operational links and search engine	if navigation is available in the Website: 1=yes, 0=no	
		multi-language version setting	enter the number of languages that are available in the Website	
	The travel content	the number of photos	Enter the number of photos appearing in the way of photo gallery in the Website	
		the length of video	Enter how many seconds all videos last in the Website	
		Website's slogans and logo	If the Website has slogan and logo 1=slogan and logo 2=slogan 3=logo 4=no slogan, no logo	

(Continued)

Openness and disclosure	Interactivity and service	• Youtube • Facebook • Blog • Twitter • Email • Flickr • Others	For each of them, if it is presented in the Website: 1=yes 0=no	
		• To reserve hotel • To book flight • To place tickets and tour package • To rent a car • Others	For each of the transactions, If it can be carried out on the Website: 1=yes 0=no	
	Organization information	• Overview • News release • Annual reports • Stock price • Others	For each of organization's information, If it is presented in the Website: 1=yes 0=no	
Access	Contact information	The presence of: • telephone numbers, • useful addresses, • staff email addresses • other	For each of the contact way, if it is provided by the Website: 1=yes 0=no	
	Speed of site accessibility	The length of load time by seconds	Use Website evaluation tool to check the Website's load time	

(Continued)

Sharing of tasks	Integrating social responsibility reports: • Help alleviate pollution • Nurture and promote plant and animal life • End or decrease global warming • Provide relief in times of natural disaster • Travelling security • Protect from terrorism • others	For each of these social topics, if its report is presented in the Website: 1=yes 0=no	
Networking	The presence of collaborative efforts with other organizations through links	Enter the number of valid links to other organizations in the homepage of Website	
Assurances	Question & Answer page	If there is Q & A in the Website 1=yes 0=no	
	Ask a Question page	If there is Ask a Question page in the Website 1=yes 0=no	

II. Webpage Performance Rules

(From: http://developer.yahoo.com/yslow/help/)

Yahoo!'s Exceptional Performance team has identified 34 rules that affect web page performance. YSlow's web page analysis is based on the 23 of these 34 rules that are testable. These testable rules are listed below roughly in order of importance and effectiveness.

1. Minimize HTTP Requests
2. Use a Content Delivery Network
3. Avoid empty src or href
4. Add an Expires or a Cache-Control Header
5. Gzip Components
6. Put StyleSheets at the Top
7. Put Scripts at the Bottom
8. Avoid CSS Expressions
9. Make JavaScript and CSS External
10. Reduce DNS Lookups
11. Minify JavaScript and CSS
12. Avoid Redirects
13. Remove Duplicate Scripts
14. Configure ETags
15. Make AJAX Cacheable
16. Use GET for AJAX Requests
17. Reduce the Number of DOM Elements
18. No 404s
19. Reduce Cookie Size
20. Use Cookie-Free Domains for Components
21. Avoid Filters
22. Do Not Scale Images in HTML
23. Make favicon.ico Small and Cacheable