Exploring word-of-mouth influences on travel decisions: friends and relatives vs. other travellers

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Keywords
Word of mouth, travel decision making, personal information sources, organic information sources.

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Abstract
Travel research consistently shows the importance of word-of-mouth (WOM) information sources in the travel decision-making process. Friends and relatives have been identified as organic image-formation agents, and it has been emphasized that this WOM information is one of the most relied-upon sources of information for destination selection. While there has been recognition of the importance of WOM information sources on consumer behaviour in tourism, little has been performed to understand more specifically how and what behaviour is influenced. This study examined the differing influences of friends and relatives vs. other travellers on the travel choices and behaviours of 412 visitors to the North Queensland Region in Australia. More specifically, the present study compared the following four groups of respondents: those who indicated that they obtained travel information from friends/relatives and other travellers (n = 70); those who obtained information from friends/relatives only (n = 121); those who obtained information from other travellers only (n = 105); and those who obtained information from neither (i.e. no WOM) (n = 116). The results indicated that there were significant differences across the four groups with respect to demographic characteristics, other information sources used, accommodation and transportation used, and travel activities in the destination. However, the groups did not differ in their image of the destination.

Introduction
According to Maser and Weiermair (1998, p. 107), in tourism, ‘information can be treated as one of the most or even the most important factor influencing and determining consumer behaviour.’ Consistent with this claim is the central role given to travel information in tourism decision-making models. Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) provide a review of a range of different theoretical approaches to traveller decision making and note the centrality of information search behaviours. In this review, information search is seen as a critical variable in both traditional choice-set models and the more recent theoretical approaches suggested from qualitative research (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). This conclusion is consistent with that made by Prentice (2006) in his updating of choice-set models for travel decision making. In all these decision-making models, information searches are undertaken at various stages of the decision-making process, and the gathered information contributes to both the development of destination images (Kokolosalakis et al., 2006) and specific decisions, such as accommodation and activity choice (Prentice, 2006).

Despite the central role of tourism information sources in these destination choice and tourism marketing models, research specifically focused on the use of different types of sources has been limited (Gartner, 1993). According to Beiger and Laesser (2004), the research that is available can be classified under four main themes: studies that look at the relationships between trip type, the characteristics of tourists and information search behaviour; studies that examine user perceptions of different information sources; analyses of the use of information at different stages in the decision-making process; and marketing studies that segment tourists according to their information source usage.

Trip type, tourist characteristics and travel information search behaviour

Beiger and Laesser’s (2004) review of the literature in this area indicates that research has been conducted linking either the socio-demographic characteristics of individual travellers, or the features of the type of travel to different patterns of information source usage. A recent study by Alvarez and Asugman (2006) provides an example of research into the characteristics of the individual traveller, in this case the personality trait of novelty seeking. In this study, the results indicated that those travellers who scored highly on novelty seeking actively sought risk and adventure in their travel experiences and were less likely to use any information sources at all (Alvarez and Asugman, 2006). Those travellers who were risk averse in their personality were likely not only to use a wider range of information sources, but
also to choose certain types of holiday and accommodation choices (Alvarez and Asugman, 2006). Thus, the personality trait was linked to both type of travel and information source usage. Other individual traveller characteristics that have been found to be linked to travel information search include previous experience (Lehto et al., 2006), gender (Kim et al., 2007), culture (Gursoy and Chen, 2000; Money and Crotts, 2003), family life cycle (Alvarez and Asugman, 2006), socio-economic status (Alvarez and Asugman, 2006), and travel motivation (Bargeman and van der Poel, 2006).

Similar types of studies have been conducted examining the connections between the type of travel and information source usage. Research in this area has identified consistent differences in the patterns of information source usage between: business and leisure travel (Gursoy and Chen, 2000; Lo et al., 2002), package and independent travel (Decrop and Snelders, 2004), and domestic and international travel (Bargeman and van der Poel, 2006).

User perceptions of different travel information sources

An alternative way to view travel information source usage is to focus on the travel sources themselves and examine how they differ in terms of characteristics such as ease of access, cost and perceived reliability. Two sets of concepts have been dominant in studies in this theme – uncertainty and risk reduction, and purchase involvement. According to Beiger and Laesser (2004), patterns of travel information source usage reflect the need of the traveller to reduce uncertainty and risk in their travel purchases. Maser and Weiernair (1998) used a similar argument and demonstrated in a study of Austrian tourists that perceived risks associated with travel purchases were related to different patterns of information source usage. This particular study found that risk perceptions were also linked to the type of travel being considered and the individual characteristics. Cai et al. (2004) report similar results in their study of purchase involvement. Purchase involvement refers to the importance of the purchase ‘to the individual’s self-concept, values and ego’ and ‘the level of concern for, or interest in, the purchase process’ (Cai et al., 2004, p. 140). These studies suggest that both risk and uncertainty reduction and purchase involvement, could be key constructs linking the characteristics of individual travellers and types of travel to different patterns of information usage.

Information usage in the process of travel decision making

A third way to examine patterns of travel information source usage is to look at the different types of information that travellers need during the travel decision-making process. Vogt and Stewart (1998) argued that travellers need different types of information at different stages in both the decision to travel to a destination and then for all the decisions made while actually travelling. Thus travel information source usage is likely to vary at different stages in the travel experience from pre-trip planning to the return home. Beiger and Laesser’s (2004) study confirmed this argument, and found that the most commonly used information source for all travellers before the travel decision was made was word of mouth (WOM) from friends and relatives. In this study of Swiss tourists, WOM from friends and relatives was also used for more specific decisions within the chosen destination after the destination decision had been made; however, at this latter stage it was important only to a subsection of the sample.

Segmenting tourists by travel information source usage

The research in this final theme can be further subdivided into two types: studies that profile users of particular travel information sources, and studies that segment tourists by their pattern of travel information source usage. Typical of the first type of study is Goldsmith et al.’s (1994) description of users of travel agents. These researchers found that frequent users of travel agents were more involved in the travel purchase decision, were more frequent travellers overall, and were higher users of all information sources than those who did not use travel agents very much. Weber and Roehl (1999) provided an analysis of Internet users, showing that those who used the Internet for travel information and purchase were more likely to be experienced Internet users, with higher levels of both income and education.

A more sophisticated approach to segmenting tourists by travel information source usage is to conduct post hoc multivariate segmentation techniques that group travellers based on the pattern of their travel information usage rather than one source alone. The most commonly cited work in this style is that of Fodness and Murray (1998; 1999). These researchers cluster analysed travellers on their use of a range of different travel information sources and identified several different market segments. Of particular importance to the present discussion was their use of this research to build a general model of travel information source usage. The model, presented in Fig. 1, links characteristics of the individual traveller to information search strategies. These information search strategies are also influenced by what are called contingencies. These contingencies include the nature of the travel party and features of the trip. In this model, information search strategies then influence a set of travel decisions.

Linking travel information source usage and travel behaviours

All of the studies reviewed in the previous sections assume that there are links between differences in information sources used and travel decisions and behaviours, and this is reflected in the Fodness and Murray (1999) model, set out in Fig. 1. There is, however, very little evidence to actually support this assumption. That is, very few studies have been conducted linking differences of travel information source usage to the development of different images of destinations, or to the outcomes of travel decisions or travel choices. Some exceptions to this include the studies by Roehl and Fesenmaier (1995), linking use of information from State Welcome Centers to length of stay and expenditure in the destination, and Murphy (2001), linking WOM to a range of travel decisions made by young independent long-stay travellers. This study by Murphy (2001) is one of the few published analyses of the role and use of WOM from other travellers. While numerous
studies have identified WOM as a key information source for many
travel decisions (Andereck and Caldwell, 1993; Gursoy and Chen,
2000; Wong and Kwong, 2004; Hanlan and Kelly, 2005), the
primary focus has been on recommendations from friends and
relatives.

Aims of the study

The literature review revealed two key gaps. The first is a general
lack of research into WOM as a travel information source. In
particular, there has been little analysis of different sources within
this category, such as friends and relatives and other travellers.
Further, there has been little research specifically analysing
whether or not different travel information source usage is linked
to different destination images and/or differences in travel behav-
iours at the destination. The overall goal of the present study was
to investigate these two gaps. Figure 2 provides a simple concep-
tual framework which suggests that different patterns of informa-
tion source usage are related to different types of travellers. Different patterns of information source usage are also assumed to
result in different destination images and different choices and
behaviours at the destination.

Using this framework as a guide, the specific aims of the present
study were:

• to identify and describe the individual characteristics of travel-
ers using different types of WOM;
• to examine whether and how these WOM groups differed in
terms of destination-image perceptions; and
• to determine whether there was a link between WOM use and
travel behaviours at the destination.

Methodology

Setting

The data analysed in this study were collected as part of a joint
research programme conducted with a local government authority,
Thuringowa City Council (TCC), in North Queensland, Australia.
Thuringowa sits on the periphery of another local government
area, Townsville City, which is the main focus of tourism in the
region, being the location for all main transport terminals, the
main beach area, the access point for coastal islands in the region,
and the location of most of the tourist accommodation in the
region (see Fig. 3). The challenge for the TCC is to attract tourists
into their area to increase economic activity in the more peripheral
locations. A major aim of the overall research programme was to
better understand the factors that might contribute to increased
visitation to their area.
Sample selection and data collection

A total of 413 visitor surveys (response rate 56.8%) were collected in June–July 2005. The project was conducted with the assistance of a local ferry operator who takes passengers to nearby Magnetic Island, with previous research indicating that many of the visitors to the region take at least one day-trip to the Island. This location does not, however, allow for coverage of regional visitors who do not stay in Townsville. For this reason, a popular tourist ice-cream café located on the Bruce Highway, 60 km north of Townsville, was also used as a survey location. The highway is the main route along the North Queensland coast and links two popular international tourist destinations, Cairns and the Whitsundays. Some surveys were also distributed to visitors at key tourist sites in the Thuringowa region, including camping areas and some tourist accommodation establishments.

The questionnaire required approximately 15 min of respondents’ time for completion and was composed of a mix of open- and closed-ended questions, which collected both demographic and trip-related data, including previous visitation to the region, trip length, transport and accommodation use, traveller type, activity participation and image of the destination. Image was measured using two open-ended questions asking respondents to use three words to describe both their overall image of the North Queensland region and any characteristics that they associate with the region. Affective image was measured using the four semantic differential scales from Russel and Pratt’s (1980) circumplex model of affective quality as used by Baloglu and Brinberg (1997). The broader research agenda associated with this project includes the measurement of destination brand personality and, as such, respondents were asked to rate the region on 20 brand personality characteristics associated with Aaker’s (1997) brand personality scale. Importantly, given the focus of the present analysis, information source usage was measured by asking respondents to indicate from a list of information sources the three ones most used as sources of information about the North Queensland region.

Results

The section of results is organized into three main stages. The first stage involved an a priori segmentation of the tourist samples into four groups according to whether or not they listed friends/
Demographic differences across word-of-mouth (WOM) groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Friends and relatives WOM (n = 121)</th>
<th>Other travellers WOM (n = 105)</th>
<th>Both WOM (n = 70)</th>
<th>No WOM (n = 116)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age (F = 7.621)*</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (%) (n = 409, ( \chi^2 = 1.59 ))</td>
<td>Male 36.7</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female 63.3</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average income (F = 4.09)*</td>
<td>$62,936</td>
<td>$33,657</td>
<td>$33,750</td>
<td>$48,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin (%) (n = 405, ( \chi^2 = 31.94 ))</td>
<td>Australia 78.5</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overseas 21.5</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewpoint on social issues and trends (n = 362, ( F = 0.739 ))</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = Very traditional . . . 5 = very progressive)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to new ideas (n = 384, ( F = 0.3172 ))</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = very much attracted . . . 5 = very cautious)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant difference at \( P = 0.05 \).

relatives only (n = 121), other travellers only (n = 105), both friends/relatives and other travellers (n = 70), or neither of these WOM sources (n = 116), among their three most important information sources for their trip. It is important to note that these results indicate that 78% of respondents used some form of WOM information source in their trip planning, significantly higher than any other single source of information. These four groups were then profiled in terms of visitor characteristics to examine the relationship between different types of visitors and WOM usage. The second stage then analysed the link between the four WOM groups and a series of destination image variables. The third stage examined the relationships between WOM groups and travel behaviours at the destination, including activity participation, accommodation choices and visits to the locations within the destination.

WOM group membership and respondent characteristics

The first stage in the analysis compared the four groups on a series of variables measuring various characteristics of the individual travellers in the sample. Several significant differences were found across the WOM groups (Table 1). There was no significant difference in the proportions of male and female individuals across the groups; however, respondents who used both WOM sources (mean 38.4 years) and travellers only (41.4 years) were significantly younger than those who used friends only (46.7 years) and those who used no WOM sources (50.2 years). Those who used both WOM sources, and respondents who used travellers only, also had significantly lower incomes, especially when compared with respondents who relied on WOM from friends and relatives only. The travellers-only WOM group had a higher proportion of overseas respondents (52.9%) than the other three groups.

While there were no significant differences across the groups in education levels, respondents in the friends/relatives-only WOM group had significantly higher average annual income than those in the other travellers-only and both WOM sources groups. There were also some minor differences in general attitudes towards life, with the other travellers-only WOM group more attracted to new ideas (2.23) than the friends/relatives-only (2.54) and No WOM (2.59) groups.

It is important to understand how the overall pattern of information source usage differs across the four WOM groups (Table 2). The top three ‘other’ information sources for friends/relatives-only WOM group were previous experience (41.3%), the Internet (34.7%) and visitor information centres (17.4%). The top three other sources for the other travellers-only WOM group were books¹ Temp/library (39%), visitor information centres (26.7%) and brochures inside the region (23.8%). For respondents using both WOM sources, the top three other sources were visitor information centres (44.3%), books/library (38.6%) and the Internet (30.2%). Finally, the No WOM group used visitor information centres (40.5%), previous experience (32.8%) and travel agents (28.6%). They also exhibited the highest use of brochures accessed from both outside (25.9%) and inside (27.6%) the region.

There were also significant differences across the groups with respect to tourist type and general traveller characteristics (Table 3). For example, while all four groups of respondents were most likely to label themselves as general tourists, the other travellers-only and No WOM groups had higher ratings for cultural tourist (3.24 and 3.20, respectively) and wildlife tourist (3.73 and 3.68). The No WOM group also had the highest rating on eco-tourist (3.10) and nature tourist (3.94). The other travellers-only group had the highest rating on adventure tourist (3.00) and cultural tourist (3.24).

Consistent with the findings for other sources of information, the friends/relatives-only (71.7%) and No WOM (75.9%) groups were significantly more likely to be repeat visitors to the region, particularly when compared with the other travellers-only group (45.7%). The No WOM group was most likely to be travelling to the region with their spouse or partner only (53.2%), with a further 22.5% travelling as a family group. This contrasts to only 12.5% for the other travellers-only group, who were more likely to be travel guidebooks.

¹Note that the books referred to by respondents in this case are likely to be travel guidebooks.
travelling as a couple (48.1%) or with friends (26.9%). The friends/relatives-only WOM group were predominantly travelling as a family (38.3%) or a couple (32.5%). Respondents using both WOM sources were most evenly distributed across spouse/partner (41.2%), family (23.5%) and friends (26.5%).

The other travellers-only (18.8 weeks) and friends/relatives + other travellers (17.7 weeks) WOM groups were on significantly longer trips on average than the No WOM (10.7 weeks) and friends/relatives-only (6.6 weeks) groups. There was no significant difference with respect to length of stay in the region.

The tourist type ratings were subjected to a principal-components factor analysis, with the aim of reducing the number of variables for later multivariate analyses. A direct oblimin rotation was used in order to create independent factors to avoid problems with multi-collinearity in later analyses. Table 4 provides a summary of the results of this factor analysis. As can be seen, three factors were derived and these were labelled specialist tourist, adventure resort tourists and general tourist, reflecting the item loadings.

Discriminant analysis was then used to simultaneously examine the relationships between the WOM groups and multiple characteristics of the individual traveller. The independent variables used to predict membership in the WOM groups were the three tourist label factors, age, approach to new ideas, traditional vs. progressive in general views, length of stay away from home and in the region on this trip, and number of previous visits to the destination.

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**Table 2** Differences in other information sources used across word-of-mouth (WOM) groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information source (n = 412)</th>
<th>Friends and relatives WOM (n = 121)</th>
<th>Other travellers WOM (n = 105)</th>
<th>Both WOM (n = 70)</th>
<th>No WOM (n = 116)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Travel agent ($\chi^2 = 9.87$)*</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour operator ($\chi^2 = 3.34$)</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet ($\chi^2 = 9.633$)*</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles in newspapers/magazines ($\chi^2 = 3.08$)</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous experience ($\chi^2 = 27.5$)*</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitor information centres ($\chi^2 = 35.6$)*</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist signage ($\chi^2 = 5.17$)</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation ($\chi^2 = 7.09$)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile association ($\chi^2 = 10.63$)*</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochures picked up outside region ($\chi^2 = 22.2$)*</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochures picked up in region ($\chi^2 = 25.9$)*</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books/library ($\chi^2 = 21.9$)*</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant difference at $P = 0.05$.

**Table 3** Differences in tourist and trip characteristics across word-of-mouth (WOM) Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traveller type</th>
<th>Friends and relatives WOM (n = 121)</th>
<th>Other travellers WOM (n = 105)</th>
<th>Both WOM (n = 70)</th>
<th>No WOM (n = 116)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural tourist ($n = 372, F = 2.01$)</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure tourist ($n = 363, F = 4.72$)*</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resort tourist ($n = 363, F = 1.38$)</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature tourist ($n = 375, F = 2.81$)*</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco-tourist ($n = 358, F = 2.63$)*</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational tourist ($n = 362, F = 1.01$)</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife tourist ($n = 369, F = 3.11$)*</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General tourist ($n = 402, F = 0.274$)</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat visitors ($n = 411, \chi^2 = 27.3$)*</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>75.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant difference at $P = 0.05$. 

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Exploring word-of-mouth influences on travel decisions

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A check of the correlations between these variables failed to find any correlations greater than 0.4, suggesting that multi-collinearity was not a problem. Table 5 provides a summary of the results of the discriminant analysis. Overall, the solution was not a good one, with generally low canonical correlations. This suggests that other variables not measured in this study are also important in determining WOM group membership. The three functions together were, however, significantly related to WOM group membership, so the analysis does provide some indication of the relative importance of the variables that were analysed. In the present study, age and length of trip were the most important variables. The ‘specialist tourist’ factor also contributed to the second function, and the ‘general tourist’ factor contributed to the third function.

### WOM group membership and perceptions of the destination

The second stage of the analysis examined the relationships between WOM group membership and perceptions of the destination. Respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of the region on a set of 20 characteristics adopted from Aaker’s (1997) dimensions of brand personality. They were also asked to describe, using three words, their image of the destination, the unique features of the destination, a typical visitor and a typical resident. In addition, respondents rated their affective image of the destination on a set of 7-point semantic differential scales (i.e. awake–sleepy, gloomy–excited, pleasant–unpleasant and distressing–relaxing). The only differences that existed across these various measures of destination image were that respondents who used both WOM information sources perceived the destination to be less ‘imaginative’ and ‘spirited’ than those who did not use WOM sources, and had lower ratings than respondents who used travellers only on the ‘outdoorsy’ dimension. Finally, respondents who used friends and relatives only as WOM information sources were more likely to use the word ‘relaxed’ to describe their image of the destination than the other WOM groups (34.7% vs. 19.8% for No WOM, 18% for travellers-only and 14.3% for both WOM sources). For further insight into the meaning and measurement of brand personality, see Aaker (1997). Issues associated with its application to tourism destinations are addressed in articles by the authors of this paper in the special issue on destination branding in Tourism Analysis (2007) and on destination marketing in the Journal of Travel Research (2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourist label</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Factor 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature tourist</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife tourist</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco-tourist</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational tourist</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural tourist</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resort tourist</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure tourist</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General tourist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eigenvalue</th>
<th>% Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Summary of factor analysis of tourist labels

Table 5: Summary of discriminant analysis of word-of-mouth (WOM) group memberships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Function 1</th>
<th>Function 2</th>
<th>Function 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canonical correlation = 0.34</td>
<td>Canonical correlation = 0.28</td>
<td>Canonical correlation = 0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.670</td>
<td>0.223</td>
<td>0.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time away from home</td>
<td>-0.582</td>
<td>0.328</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay in region</td>
<td>-0.413</td>
<td>0.278</td>
<td>0.312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist tourist factor</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.792</td>
<td>0.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional vs. progressive</td>
<td>-0.272</td>
<td>0.344</td>
<td>0.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General tourist factor</td>
<td>-0.113</td>
<td>-0.190</td>
<td>0.547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resort/ adventure tourist factor</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.227</td>
<td>-0.462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance of new ideas</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>0.201</td>
<td>-0.389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous visits to the destination</td>
<td>0.155</td>
<td>-0.187</td>
<td>0.342</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Functions 1 through 3, $\chi^2 = 48.2, P = 0.007$

Functions 2 through 3, $\chi^2 = 22.3, P = 0.13$

Function 2, $\chi^2 = 4.7, P = 0.70$

Note: Figures in function columns are correlations between discriminating variables and standardized canonical discriminant functions.
WOM group membership and trip behaviour in the destination

The last stage of the results analysed differences between the four WOM group for the destination behaviour variables of activity participation, tourist site visits, accommodation choice and transport used. The friends/relatives-only WOM group was significantly more likely to have arrived in the region by plane (59.2%), particularly when compared with the other travellers-only group (22.3%), who were most likely to have arrived by bus/coach (31.1%). The No WOM group was most likely to have arrived in a plane (39.7%), motorhome/caravan (36.8%) or private vehicle (32.8%). Consistent with these findings, the No WOM group was most likely to be using a motorhome/campervan as accommodation (28.4%), while the other travellers-only group were most likely to be staying in a backpacker hostel (38.5%), and the friends/relatives-only group to be staying with friends and relatives (40.5%). Respondents using both WOM sources were the most evenly split across the accommodation options (Table 8).

A list of several activity options within the region was presented to respondents. The activities for which there was a significant difference across the groups with respect to participation are presented in Table 9. With the exception of visiting family and friends, the general pattern is that the other travellers-only group had the highest participation rate in most of the activities. For example, they were significantly more likely to have visited/gone swimming at a beach (73.3%), visited a national park (70.5%), gone bushwalking (54.3%), camping (41.9%), on a Four Wheel Drive tour (27.6%), snorkelling (38.1%), and to have visited an historical place (55.2%) and gone sightseeing (75.2%). The friends/relatives + other travellers group was most likely to have visited/gone scuba diving (27.1%), and, along with the other travellers-only group, to go sailing, fishing, on an organized tour and to a nightclub or disco. The friends/relatives-only group were most likely to visit family and friends (63.6%), and to play golf (13.2%). Along with the No WOM group, they had lower participation rates for most other activities.

There were also some significant differences across the WOM clusters in terms of specific tourist sites and attractions visited in the region. Those who used other travellers only as a WOM source were less likely to visit The Strand waterfront area (44.2%), Castle Hill Lookout (21.2%), Billabong Wildlife Sanctuary (1.9%) and Reef HQ aquarium (13.5%), particularly when compared with those who used friends and relatives only (42.5%, 18.2% and 21.5% respectively). However, the opposite was true for visiting the Great Barrier Reef, with the travellers-only group (41.0%) much more likely to visit than the friends/relatives-only group (18.2%).

The final multivariate analysis looked at the key question for the research partners, the TCC: which was what factors were associated with a visit to at least one place within their local government area? A discriminant analysis was conducted to look at which independent variables best distinguished between whether or not the travellers surveyed visited locations within Thuringowa. The independent variables included in the analysis were WOM usage, the destination brand personality factors, the tourist label factors, age, approach to new ideas and length of stay away from home. The correlation analyses conducted to test for problems with multi-collinearity identified a number of strong correlations between the destination brand personality factor ‘Successful’ and the three tourist label factors; therefore, this variable was not included in the analysis. The canonical correlation of 0.40 was not strong, and the function was not significant. Given these statistics, the pattern of results can only be seen as suggestive of processes.
that could be explored further in future research. Bearing these limitations in mind, the pattern of results suggested that the key independent variables for explaining whether or not the travellers visited Thuringowa were age, and whether the travellers used other travellers only, or friends and relatives only, for travel information.

Discussion and conclusions

Researchers in tourism often treat WOM as a homogenous information source and do not distinguish between friends and relatives and other travellers as information sources. Further, many studies that have included WOM have also tended to focus primarily on friends and relatives while ignoring the influence of other travellers. The results of this study indicate that there are differences between the four groups of WOM travellers. Given these differences, it may be wise to differentiate between friends and relatives and other travellers as distinct sources of WOM information when questioning tourists about their use of information sources. Considering Vogt and Stewart’s (1998) argument that different information sources are needed at different stages of the travel decision-making process, it is important to explore the relative contribution of friends and relatives and other travellers at the pre-travel stage as well as during travel.

Careful examination of the four groups suggests that they are broadly representative of particular market segments attracted to the destination under study. Respondents who used friends and relatives as WOM information sources generally appeared to represent travellers visiting friends and relatives, as indicated by their accommodation, transport and activities profile. This group seemed to contain many respondents travelling as part of a family group. The average income was higher than that of other groups, and they exhibited a high rate of repeat visitation. Given this profile, they were less likely to come into contact with other travellers and, therefore, did not identify this as an information source.

Respondents who received their WOM information from other travellers only showed a number of similarities to backpackers (or independent youth budget travellers), although it is acknowledged that they are not all backpacker travellers. This segment was younger, had a lower average income, and showed a preference for campervan or backpacker accommodation. Their favoured means of transport was by bus or coach. They exhibited the longest average trip length of any of the four groups. Respondents were more likely to originate from overseas. The transport and accommodation preferences of this group (possibly determined by their limited income) provided them with many opportunities to interact with fellow travellers.

The No WOM segment appeared to exhibit a number of characteristics that align with the ‘grey nomads’ segment, often discussed by researchers and operators (cf. Westh, 2001; Onyx and Leonard, 2005). Grey nomads are older and often retired travellers.
who travel as part of an extended itinerary. This segment was more likely to be Australian, to be travelling with their partner, and to be cautious about new ideas. They preferred planes, cars or motorhomes as modes of transport, and nominated campervans or ‘other’ as their preferred accommodation. A large proportion of travellers in this group were repeat visitors. Perhaps given their age and previous travel experience, these travellers had less need to rely on WOM sources of information. Instead of WOM information sources, this segment appeared to rely on information centres, previous travel experience and travel agents.

Respondents who indicated that they used both friends and relatives and other travellers as information sources were more difficult to align with existing market segments because they appeared to be a more heterogeneous group. They were comparatively young, tended to have lower incomes, and were more likely to come from interstate locations. They relied on a wider range of information sources, with information centres, books and the Internet supplementing information gathered by WOM. The segment was spread across a range of accommodation options, but showed clear preferences for planes and buses/coaches as transport modes.

Overall, it appears that there are significant differences across the four WOM groups with respect to demographic characteristics, non-WOM information sources used, accommodation and transportation, and travel activities at the destination. In particular, age and length of trip appear to be important determinants of WOM group membership. However, these characteristics may be proxies for other variables. For example, previous travel experience might be influenced by age, and may in turn influence decisions about trip length. In considering the impact of previous travel experience on information sources used, it might be useful to also consider the travel experience of friends and relatives, although this would be difficult to measure in practical terms. More broadly, the results suggest that risk aversion might be an important element to explore in future studies. Respondents were more likely to use other travellers, or both friends and relatives plus other travellers, when travelling for longer periods and when they had less experience with the destination. Despite the links between traveller characteristics, WOM information sources used and trip behaviour, the results from the multiple regression analysis did not support the notion that different types of WOM affected the image that travellers had of the destination.

With respect to the proposed conceptual framework, the results support the notion of a link between consumer or traveller characteristics and WOM usage. However, the link between WOM usage and destination image was not found to be strong. Finally, a link between WOM and travel behaviour was evident. However, what was not clear (and therefore requires further investigation) was the relative strength of the influence of WOM information sources vs. consumer characteristics on behaviour. A revised conceptual framework as presented in Fig. 4 could be used to guide further research in this area and to provide further insight into the role of information sources, and WOM in particular, in influencing travel behaviour.

The current study was constrained by several limitations. The sampling frame was limited to tourists visiting a regional destination in northern Australia. It would be useful to repeat this research in other locations to test some of the outcomes presented. The results indicated that other variables not considered in the study are also important in determining WOM group membership. This provides opportunities for further research. It may be the case that the type of WOM used by travellers is related to the convenience of accessing particular information sources. WOM information use might also be related to characteristics such as an individual’s ‘hunger for information’, which in turn may be related to concepts like risk aversion and self-efficacy. Characteristics such as trip type, family life cycle, cultural differences and travel motivation may be useful to include in future research efforts.
Despite these limitations, the study addresses a shortcoming in the literature by providing a useful and detailed insight into WOM as a travel information source. It confirms that different patterns in WOM information source usage are linked to different choices and travel behaviours at the destination, but that these differences do not influence destination image. The findings suggest that further research in this area is necessary and warranted.

Acknowledgements

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References