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Word of Mouth Communication in Destination Marketing:  
A Comparative Study of the Caravan and Backpacker  
Markets in Cairns

by

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A thesis submitted to James Cook University  
in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

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- AH





## **Abstract**

Increased global competition between destinations has given rise to sophisticated marketing to potential visitors. At the same time, consumers are increasingly sceptical of organisation generated marketing messages, instead turning to their own personal networks for timely, accurate and credible information through word-of-mouth (WOM). WOM is a communication phenomenon which occurs in a social context. On one level the basic premise of WOM is widely understood by academics, practitioners and consumers alike. Word of mouth exchanges provide a balance of information and opinion, in a setting that provides the flexibility to 'tailor make' the message in terms of detail in a highly efficient and congruent way. However, how and why these exchanges unfold within the context of travellers and those with whom they interact during travel remains an under researched area.

Following a review of literature from sociology, social psychology, marketing, communications, tourism and other relevant areas, the theoretical, empirical and methodological gaps were identified. The lack of research into WOM between visitors at a destination directed the focus of the thesis which explored how the interaction between travellers at a destination impacts the WOM dynamic. Specifically, the thesis examines the relationship constructs of homophily (similarity) and tie-strength (closeness) with communication and settings to address these gaps.

A case study methodology was used to better understand the richness of the WOM phenomenon as it applies to travellers during their visit in the context of their network of relationships. Two groups of traveller were selected, caravanners and backpackers, due to the similarities (flexible itineraries, motivation to socialise, communal accommodation and homogeneity of each group), but also due to the differences between the groups (mode of travel, travel party, demographics) – necessary for the purpose of comparison. Cairns in Far North Queensland was selected as the research site because it is a major destination for both groups.

The research comprised four phases; observation of travellers in-situ, semi-structured interviews with destination based industry representatives, focus groups with participants from each of the two traveller groups and then surveys of each traveller group. An iterative process of data collection and analysis was used whereby each

phase shaped the subsequent phase. Key ideas emerged from the iterative process of collection and analysis with reference made to the existing literature.

The emergence of relationships, settings and communication bounded in time were the key themes. Based on these themes an explanatory model of at-destination WOM is proposed and detailed. The nested model shows the interrelated nature of these themes and examines both the elements of the model and explains the model as a whole. The findings also indicate a shift from the traditional thinking of independent travellers influenced by external forces, such as the destination marketing organisation, to a new 'networked independent traveller' who is constantly connected both in a corporeal and virtual sense to others. Finally, the research dismisses the widely held view in the academic literature that WOM is solely an output of social interaction between visitors at a destination. Instead, the study finds that WOM is both a contributor to and a consequence of travellers' social interactions at a destination.

The study broadens the current view of WOM, the travellers who use it and how it fits in the social interaction of travellers at a destination. It builds on what is already known and offers researchers and marketers valuable insights into the human side of WOM but one that also incorporates technology as a key communication media. The study progresses research by tying the intricate and complex micro WOM episodes to the macro WOM phenomenon. It offers an approach which captures the nuance, reveals the episodic meaning, addresses research gaps and builds on existing tourism communication network theory.

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## Peer reviewed publications

- Lagos, E., Harris, A., & Sigala, M. (2015), Emotional language for image formation and market segmentation in dark tourism destinations: findings from tour operators' websites promoting Gallipoli, *TOURISMOS: An International Multidisciplinary Journal Of Tourism*, 10(2) – in print.
- Caldicott, R., & Harris, A. (2015), Freedom camping, is it changing the face of caravanning in Australia? (working paper) CAUTHE 2015: Rising Tides and Sea Changes: Adaptation and Innovation in Tourism and Hospitality, 2-5 February 2015, Gold Coast.
- Harris, A. (2014), *Word of mouth in tourism: Reflections and directions*. CAUTHE 2014: Tourism and Hospitality in the Contemporary World: Trends, Changes and Complexity, 10-14 February 2014, Brisbane
- Harris, A. (2013), *Like me or like me? The role of similarity and compatibility in backpacker networks*, Asia Pacific Tourism Association conference, 1-4 July, Bangkok.
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- Harris, A., & Prideaux, B. (2011), *Towards a conceptual framework of visitor-to-visitor word-of-mouth*. World Research Summit for Tourism & Hospitality, 10-13 December 2011, Hong Kong.
- Harris, A., & Prideaux, B. (2011), *Trouble in paradise? The impact of changes to the working backpacker market to a regional destination*, in J. Chen (Ed.) *Advances in Hospitality and Leisure*, (Vol. 7, pp.71-88), UK: Emerald Publishing.
- Iles [Harris], A., & Prideaux, B. (2011), *The Effect on a Peripheral Destination from Changes to the Working Backpacking Market in Australia*. CAUTHE 2011: Tourism: Creating a Brilliant Blend, February 8 – 11, Adelaide.

- Iles [Harris], A. & Prideaux, B. (2011), *The Savannah Way: Developing a successful touring route*, in Carson, D. & Prideaux, B. (Eds.), *Drive Tourism – Trends and Emerging Markets*, (Vol.17) Routledge, UK.
- Iles [Harris], A. (2010), *Social networking between backpackers and the implications for at-destination word of mouth*, Asia Pacific Tourism Association conference, 13-16 July 2010, Macau.

## List of Abbreviations

DMO	Destination Marketing Organisation
eWOM	Electronic word-of-mouth
FIT	Free and Independent Traveller
GPS	Global Positioning System
NIT	Networked Independent Traveller
TNQ	Tropical North Queensland
TTNQ	Tourism Tropical North Queensland
VFR	Visiting Friends and Relatives
WOM	Word of mouth

# 1 Introduction

The research undertaken in this PhD will investigate how groups of travellers engage in word of mouth (WOM) activity to communicate their destination experience during their stay. Word of mouth (WOM) is a manifestation of traveller connectedness and this thesis will explore how the relationships that form within mobile social networks of travellers facilitate WOM activity.

The study aims to better understand the WOM phenomenon by investigating two cases (backpackers and caravanners) within the context of a destination (Cairns, Queensland). In doing so it aims to make theoretical contributions to WOM by challenging and offering alternative approaches to existing WOM research and expanding the application of social network theories in the new mobilities paradigm. Emerging from this theory will be an explanatory model of WOM and practical contributions for destination marketers. These include a contribution to the debate around whether WOM exchanges can be “managed” by practitioners and also an approach for destination marketers to identify and understand how WOM may develop within ever-evolving groups of travellers during their stay.

The following chapter will introduce the scope and direction of the research. Firstly the research topic and its significance are outlined then the specific research problems are detailed. The gaps in the literature are reviewed and the justification for and limitations of the research are detailed. There is also an introduction to the methodology and the definitions, limitations, scope and assumptions within which the research will be conducted.

## 1.1 WOM overview

A detailed review of WOM including its forms, functions and structures, is outlined in Chapter 2 but a brief outline is offered here. Word of mouth (WOM) is widely understood in principle by academics and non-academics alike and, as Nickels (1984 p.279) noted, ‘Word of mouth information is freely given and is widely sought by everyone’. It is a socially constructed communication phenomenon (Harris & Prideaux, 2011a) which takes place between individuals (Brown & Reingen, 1987), or between individuals and a group (Assael, 1987; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). WOM involves a combination of trust, expertise, likability and credibility from those involved and



results in a communication piece that is flexible, multi-purpose and effortlessly woven into the fabric of even the most simple social exchange. However, how and why these exchanges unfold within the context of travellers and those with whom they interact during travel remains an under researched area.

The literature suggests that WOM comes in a number of forms (either independently or a combination within the same encounter): discussion of a brand name (Bayus, 1985; Belk, 1971), informational, descriptive information which may include attribute details (Belk, 1971; Rosen & Olshavsky, 1987) and evaluative, providing opinion (Belk, 1971), based on personal experience (Assael, 1987; Rosen & Olshavsky, 1987). This outline provides a picture of the capacity of WOM to be used in different ways between groups and individuals to both influence and inform and have long been the focus of marketers attention. The discussion in Chapter 2 argues that WOM exchanges rarely neatly fit into these discrete categories rather tend to be used in combination.

The WOM exchange is widely accepted as being an informal, two way communicative process between two or more people (Assael, 1987; Harrison-Walker, 2001; King & Summers, 1970; Kotler, Makens, & Bowen, 1996; Nickels, 1984; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). Key to the power of WOM in its capacity to influence and inform is the perception that it is unbiased in nature and comes from a credible source (Arndt, 1967; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Dichter, 1966).

## ***1.2 Importance of WOM in Destination Marketing***

Word-of-mouth's capacity to inform potential visitors and influence their decision making process lies at the heart of the long-standing interest in WOM (Confente, 2014; Lang & Hyde, 2013). In many ways WOM is seen as a panacea that addresses some of the key complexities and challenges of marketing destinations. For example, Hanlan and Kelly (2005) noted that one of the challenges with marketing any tourism destination is that the actual delivery of service lies in the hands of a number of small, independent operators. These operators are often competitors from a number of different industry sectors. Unlike conventional services marketing (upon which much of WOM research is based) those responsible for marketing destinations have little or no control over the actual experience delivery to tourists but there is a desire to manage the messages communicated about the destination as a whole.

Another challenge is that destinations are simply a place with physical, political or market-created boundaries where people travel (Kotler et al., 1996), but are complex in their composition and management. To address such obstacles, much of traditional destination marketing activity has focused on image formation (Gartner, 1994; Ortega & Rodríguez, 2007; Tasci & Gartner, 2007) and branding (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005; Rosen & Olshavsky, 1987) to attract or appeal to potential visitors. Recent trends, however, show that consumers are ‘shunning marketing messages and turning to their own networks for advice’ (Apostolou, 2008). Increased sharing of advice, opinions and expertise on a consumer-to-consumer level has also given rise to the growing importance of WOM (Lang & Hyde, 2013).

From the destination marketers’ perspective, WOM offers a cost effective means of communicating to potential travellers in an increasingly competitive environment which has seen growth in tourism arrivals and greater destination competitiveness (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013). WOM is not ‘commercial’ or paid and, hence, has the potential to yield a substantial return than traditional areas of marketing. A better understanding of WOM offers destination marketers the opportunity to cut through marketing ‘noise’, particularly in a climate where travellers are becoming sceptical of organisations and advertising (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010; Nickels, 1984; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). Moreover, WOM has the potential for destination marketers to navigate the complexity of the destination experience when the delivery lies outside their control.

### **1.2.1 A question of measuring WOM**

Technology has offered some new opportunities for understanding the WOM phenomenon, at least in terms of identification and measurement. Traditionally, WOM has been considered a verbal exchange, usually undertaken in a face-to-face context (Lang & Hyde, 2013) but with the advent of technology, particularly the internet where a voice can be heard by millions in every corner of the globe, the context of its use must be reviewed. The fundamental difference between the two is that electronic communication can take place in ‘real time’ (like traditional face-to-face) regardless of spatial or temporal distance (unlike traditional face-to-face WOM).

This impact is not lost on practitioners or academics. Buttle (1998) highlighted this significance of technology (electronic bulletin boards, websites & electronic

communities) to WOM but identified an important difference between the traditional and virtual forms. Buttle (1998 p.243) contended that in its verbal delivery WOM occurs in a spontaneous manner and disappears as soon as it is uttered, whereas 'electronic WOM is traceable through archival threads'. This is important for two reasons, firstly travellers can draw on more views and opinions about a destination than they can with 'traditional' WOM (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2011) and secondly, they can seek specific expertise to meet their information needs from another traveller with whom they affiliate. How e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) applies in tourism destination marketing is an area of growing interest for researchers. Examples of e-WOM in the tourism context are diverse and include: investigation of travel blogs (Carson, 2008), user generated content (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013) and reviews (Jiang, Gretzel, & Law, 2010), and trustworthiness and value studies (Akehurst, 2009; Burgess et al., 2011; Dickinger, 2011; Inversini, Marchiori, Dedekind, & Cantoni, 2010).

The interest from practioners and researchers is not surprising. The on-line environment offers a means of quantifying WOM activity. Where WOM has traditionally been 'in the moment', difficult to identify and hard to measure, eWOM is easily measured by numerous variables (such as hits, reposts, keywords, shares, replies) – with little cost, time or organisational research resources required. It could be argued, however, that ease of measurement does little to contribute to the advancement of knowledge around 'how' the WOM phenomenon works. While WOM channels and delivery have been receiving more attention from scholars (Dickinger, 2011), Brown, Broderick & Lee (2007) argue that offline theory is inappropriate to describe eWOM and its influence. This makes sense as the social networks from which an individual can draw information and ideas (in a traditional sense) has expanded from a finite one where all members are known to the traveller, to an almost infinite one where proportionately very few may be known personally. This is important because it is the relationships between individuals, rather than the channel that are the core of the WOM phenomenon.

So while these advances allow the identification and measurement of WOM in the on-line context, they do little to further the understanding of the WOM phenomenon overall. Furthermore, a dichotomy of WOM between the on-line and the off-line WOM is assumed when it does not exist. An assumption that WOM is based solely on on-line

sources without drawing from personal sources narrows, rather than broadens, the understanding of WOM.

Nevertheless eWOM must be acknowledged in any enquiry in WOM. Chapter 2 provides the context for eWOM. In essence, eWOM differs from the traditional form in terms of the delivery channel (multiple on-line), timing (real time and historic), presentation (may be written or verbal) and reach (the capacity to tap into a network where most relationships are anonymous). It is different but is widely used alongside and in conjunction with face-to-face WOM.

### **1.2.2 A question of managing WOM**

While marketers can partly address the identification and measurement of WOM (at least in the on-line sense), significant theoretical debate sits around the issue of whether the WOM phenomenon can actually be managed. In essence there are three schools of thought on the matter:

- 1) WOM is a message generated by the traveller but is uncontrolled and unmanaged by the organisation or destination (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Hsieh & O'Leary, 1993; Tourism Research Australia, 2008).
- 2) An alternative view is that of WOM being an outcome or antecedent which contributes to a marketing process as a discrete marketing strategy in of itself (De Bruyen & Lilien, 2008; Haywood, 1989; Tasci & Gartner, 2007)
- 3) A third school of thought suggests that marketers can foster WOM communication (Goldenberg, Libai and Muller, 2001).

These academic debates are fleshed out in Chapter 2 but it is important to acknowledge that marketing is a process and one that is managed externally from the traveller, whereas the spontaneous act of WOM occurs voluntarily by the traveller (Lang & Hyde, 2013, p. 8). Regardless of the viewpoint taken, the commonality of these schools of thought are synthesised in Figure 1.1. In essence the 'tourism product & experiences' and the 'destination image & expectations' coupled with the interaction between travellers (or traveller and potential traveller) result in WOM exchange. Moreover, resultant WOM exchanges contribute to the 'tourism product & experience' and the 'destination image & expectations' (Gartner, 1994). Importantly, this can be applied in both the on-line and off-line sense, separately or in conjunction.

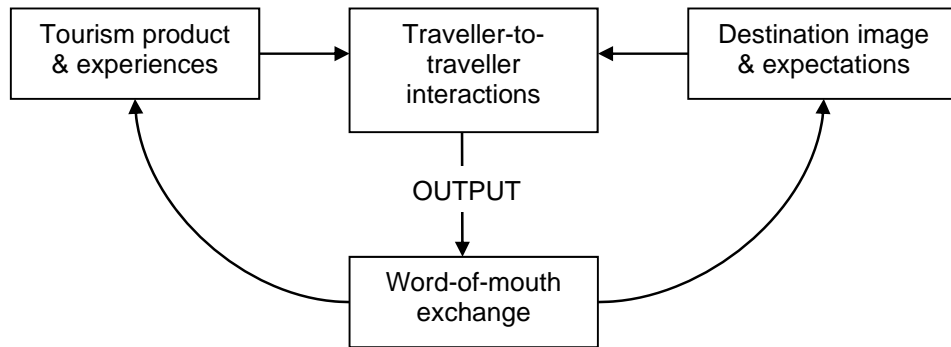


Figure 1-1 – Overview of the word-of-mouth exchange

Significant changes in the tourism landscape including increasing destination competition and rapid changes in technology has required a shift away from the broad services marketing view to a tourism specific one. These combined consumer and environmental factors present a need for destination marketing organisations (DMOs) to examine the dynamics of WOM exchanges to utilise it effectively in the future. Simpson and Siguaw (2008, p. 177) suggested that there is

*a need for tourism boards and hospitality businesses to have a sophisticated understanding of their market segments and which variables will facilitate WOM for each market segment to better focus their limited resources.*

Facilitating WOM on the basis of market segment is critical as travellers seldom make decisions in isolation. The tourism literature has a long tradition of identifying the importance of WOM (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Haywood, 1989; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008), particularly in terms of the tourist decision making process (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008; Weaver & Lawton, 2011) and to a lesser extent destination image (Gartner, 1994; Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007; Hanlan & Kelly, 2005; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). This supports the idea that there is an important role for WOM in focusing a DMO's limited resources to target specific market segments.

Tourism experiences are comprised of a number of complex service and social encounters (see Figure 1-1) rather than the discrete service exchange encounters

examined in the existing services marketing literature. This combination of service and social encounters over a period of time (during visitation) allows the WOM phenomenon to contribute to and impact the visit itself. While WOM is relied on more than any other source in consumer decision making (Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger, & Yale, 1998), there are some nuances to the tourism decision making process which make WOM particularly important (Lang & Hyde, 2013). For example, Hyde (2007) noted that repeat travellers can draw on previous experience, VFR (visiting friends and relatives) have their family and friends to rely on, and business travellers needs differ again. But, for the first time traveller to a destination the information sources used are very influential in their decision making (Gartner, 1994; Hyde, 2007; Snepenger, Meged, Snelling, & Worrall, 1990; Weaver & Lawton, 2011).

Where WOM fits in the decision making process is further explored in Chapter 2, however two points are worth of mention. Firstly, like WOM and destination image, existing research does not adequately explain the extent to which WOM contributes to actual traveller behaviour. Secondly, beyond acknowledging its influence, the literature does not explain the dynamics of WOM. This is probably because many studies treat WOM as an antecedent (de Matos & Rossi, 2008; Govers et al., 2007) or an outcome (Pritchard, 2003) or both (Tasci & Gartner, 2007) rather than focusing on the WOM phenomenon itself, although there have been a few exceptions (Litvin et al., 2008; Ozcan, 2004; Simpson & Sigauw, 2008; Stokes & Lomax, 2002).

Much of the research has seen the WOM phenomenon treated as an outcome or post travel behaviour which then contributes to the expectations of potential visitors and assists in their decision making process (File, Judd, & Prince, 1992; Gartner, 1994; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The literature supports the roles of WOM in trip planning and tourist decision making behaviour but studies have dominated in the pre-trip and post-trip temporalities. The essence of much of the research that takes this view can be represented as follows:

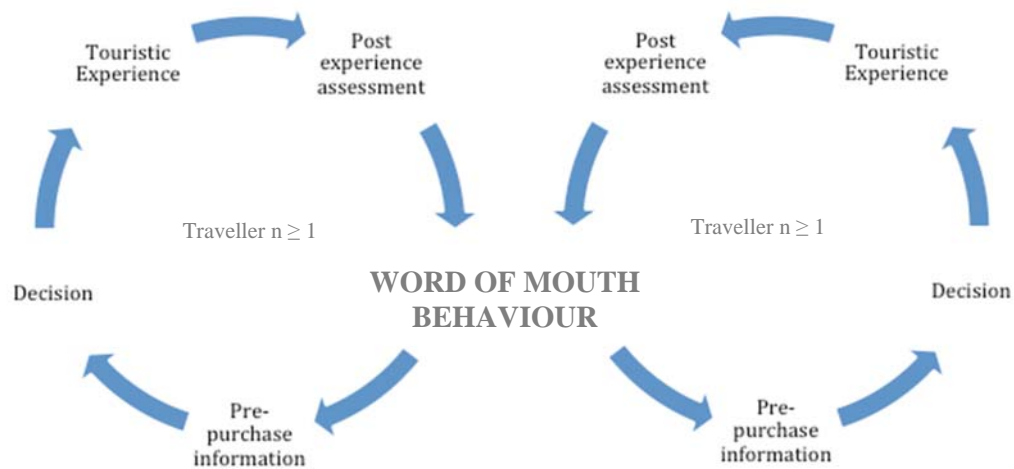


Figure 1-2 – Cycle of tourist word-of-mouth behaviour

Figure 1-2 shows WOM as an outcome from the touristic experience of one (or more) travellers resulting from an assessment of that experience or destination. The supposition is that this is then communicated to potential consumers of the experience or destination via WOM. In effect this sees WOM as a resultant activity and part of the information seeking behaviour at the same time.

Emerging from the literature is a view that there is a need to further understand the decision making process in terms of decisions made ‘en route’ or upon arrival at the destination (Moore, Smallman, Wilson, & Simmons, 2012). Hyde (2004) and later Grøflaten (2009) discussed decision making as a duality, that is pre-arrival and upon arrival decisions. Development in this thinking has been reflected in the tourist decision making literature with the relationships between travellers and different interpersonal connections being explored. Others have investigated the relationships between travellers and locals (DiPietro, Wang, Rompf, & Severt, 2007; Rompf, DiPietro, & Ricci, 2005; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). More recently, some attention has been paid to the relationships between travellers (Grønflaten, 2009; Murphy et al., 2007; Prideaux & McClymont, 2006), but as Huang and Hsu (2009, p. 79) noted, ‘tourist-to-tourist interaction and its unique impact on the tourist experience remains to be fully explored’.

### ***1.3 Traveller social networks***

An idea has emerged from the research that touristic encounters between travellers from the same markets may offer an insight into the dynamic of the WOM phenomenon during a traveller's stay (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005; Murphy et al., 2007; Simpson & Sigauw, 2008). The sourcing of information from travellers with whom a traveller affiliates represented a substantial gap in the literature for some time (Stokowski, 1992). This gap may continue to exist due to the view that markets are grouped (both by academics and practitioners) as individuals who share common characteristics (Bigné, Gnoth, & Andreu, 2008) rather than being linked by different relationships and associations. These linkages, in the form of relationships facilitate the dispersal of WOM. Additionally, the focus on relationships shifts the view from clusters of individuals (market segments) to networks of travellers. A detailed explanation of the network relationship constructs of homophily and tie-strength is provided in Chapter 2 but an overview is pertinent here.

The decision making literature discusses the similarity between individuals in terms of characteristics, attitudes and demographics. Termed homophily (Gilly et al., 1998; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), this construct has strong roots in consumer behaviour literature and is considered to be very influential in the decision making literature (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers, 1995). The degree to which perceptual similarity (or homophily) influences the WOM process is discussed in detail in Chapter 2, but recent studies in tourism are beginning to explore the WOM dynamic between 'like' or similar travellers, within market segments (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005; Kain & King, 2004; Murphy, 2001; Murphy et al., 2007).

Another important relationship construct is tie-strength; the strength or closeness of the relationship between individuals (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973). Chapter 2 reviews studies that explore the tie-strength and the degree of influence it brings to bear in a WOM exchange. While the studies suggest that strong ties (such as familial bonds) influence destination selection in the pre-decision process, weak ties (such as affiliations with other travellers) appear to play an important role in providing information and detail upon arrival to the destination. The degree to which this occurs has not been fully explored in the body of reviewed research.



### ***1.4 Research landscape of WOM in tourism***

A review of research from product marketing, services marketing, advertising, tourism, consumer behaviour and destination management (discussed in Chapter 2) allows for certain baseline statements to be made with respect to WOM.

- 1) WOM is two way, non-commercial communication and is perceived as being credible (Assael, 1987; Buttle, 1998; Dichter, 1966; Gartner, 1994; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004; Tham, Croy, & Mair, 2013);
- 2) WOM is used at all stages of decision making and is considered to be the most powerful and influential factor in the decision making process (de Matos & Rossi, 2008; Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, & Harrell, 1997; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Pritchard, 2003; Weaver & Lawton, 2011)
- 3) Technology has escalated the reach of WOM messages (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Brown et al., 2007; Huang, Lin, & Lin, 2009; Litvin et al., 2008);
- 4) All travellers will research and explore their destination upon arrival (Grønflaten, 2009; Hyde, 2000; Hyde & Lawson, 2003; Moore et al., 2012)
- 5) A proportion of touristic elements will be selected upon arrival to a destination (Huan & Beaman, 2004; Hyde, 2000; Hyde & Lawson, 2003; Moore et al., 2012)
- 6) Travellers will socially interact with other travellers during their visit to a destination (Decrop, 1999b, 2006; Holloway, Green, & Holloway, 2011; Reichenberger, 2014; Stokowski, 1992; Tsiotsou, Mild, & Sudharshan, 2012).

Along with the gaps identified in the literature (detailed in Chapter 2), these statements will act as parameters within which the study will be focused. The design of the research is further detailed in Chapter 3.

### ***1.5 Research Aim***

Word of mouth has often been treated in the literature as a pre-decision making information search behaviour or post travel behaviour with little attention paid to the impact of WOM during travel. Also, much of the existing research on WOM in tourism is focused on the use of family and friends as information sources, largely overlooking other travellers with whom a traveller may affiliate. While academics and practitioners recognise the advances in technology in relation to WOM the applicability to groups of

‘like’ travellers has not been explored. Further, no research is evident in relation to whether groups of ‘like’ travellers communicate in the same way.

To address some of these issues, this research aims to explore the use of WOM by travellers during their visit to a destination. The relationship dynamics between travellers (that is, the constructs of homophily and tie-strength) will be investigated, along with the communication channels used and the situational circumstances under which they engage in WOM activity. The study will then compare the characteristics, relationships and subsequent WOM behaviour of two groups of travellers to determine differences and similarities between groups to the same destination. The findings will be discussed within the framework of the existing literature to develop a model of at-destination word of mouth. A comparison of how WOM works across different groups will contribute to both destination marketing literature and WOM scholarship. To achieve this goal, the main research question is;

*How does interaction with other like travellers at a destination impact the WOM dynamic?*

### **1.5.1 Research Objectives**

A case study design using two groups of independent travellers, backpackers and caravanners, has been selected for the research, with the Cairns region chosen as the research site. A detailed justification for the selection of these segments as networks of travellers and the site is outlined in Chapter 3, but these groups are significant (in terms of numbers) in their visitation to the Cairns region. The term ‘traveller’ is used in this research because the UNTWO limits the term ‘visitor’ to ‘not more than one consecutive year’, (UNWTO, 2007) whereas both the groups in this study often travel for periods longer than one year.

Figure 1-3 provides a direction for the research and a framework from which the research objectives have been developed. The research objectives have been formulated from analysis of the gaps in the literature. In addressing these research objectives, this study will develop a model to explain the dynamics of WOM in a destination setting.

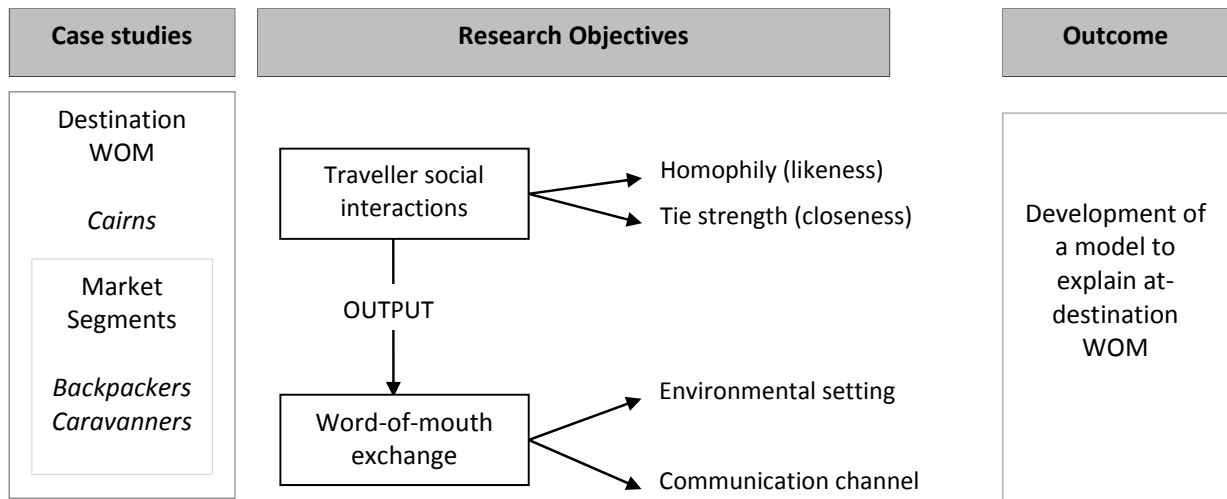


Figure 1-3 – Research framework for the study

The research aims to answer the guiding research question, ‘how does interaction with other like travellers at a destination impact the WOM dynamic?’, this will be achieved by meeting the following objectives:

1. Investigate how similarity (homophily) between travellers in a network contributes to WOM engagement in a destination setting;
2. Investigate the role strong and weak ties have in the WOM phenomenon between a network of travellers at a destination;
3. Identify different settings (social and spatial) that contribute to WOM exchange;
4. Determine which communication channels are used for WOM by a network of travellers at a destination; and
5. Develop a model of at-destination word-of-mouth.

These objectives will be explored in the context of each of the case studies. An analysis of the findings will contribute the development of a model explaining at-destination WOM dynamics.

### ***1.6 Justification of research***

The research aims to address gaps identified in the literature particularly pertaining to the networked relationships between travellers during their stay and how relationships between travellers impact WOM activity at the destination. The literature suggests links between WOM activity and the levels of participation of travellers to a destination.

Word of mouth is accepted in the literature as influencing decisions and behaviour at all levels, from destination image formation (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005; Ortega, Rodríguez, & Kitchen, 2014; Tasci & Gartner, 2007) to mode of travel (Fodness & Murray, 1999), selection of tourism products (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Kain & King, 2004; Murphy et al., 2007; Ortega et al., 2014; Stokes & Lomax, 2002) and duration of stay (Tideswell & Faulkner, 1999). While these studies link WOM and access to information with individual decisions made at the destination, the research on how this occurs is very limited. An understanding of the WOM dynamic during the visit to a destination may offer some explanation for this and provide marketing management opportunities for the DMO's in the increasingly competitive global tourism market.

From an academic perspective, the research will contribute to the existing body of research on WOM and will begin to address the voids that exist in relation to how travellers engage in WOM and the construct of WOM at-destination. It will provide insight into existing decision making models which mention WOM (but do not explain it), deepen the knowledge of the WOM phenomenon in the mobility context and broaden the methodological approach to the study of the WOM.

### ***1.7 Methodology***

The purpose of this research is to understand how interactions between like travellers at a destination impacts the WOM dynamic. Using the mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) the research will explore the phenomenon of WOM through the cases of backpackers and caravanners with the Cairns region as a research site.

Case studies can capture the complexities of the phenomenon under study within the context of the case (Woodside, 2010) so a case study design was considered appropriate. Additionally, the research design uses cases bounded by social groups to limit both the size and scope of the research, in-situ data collection ensures that the phenomenon is observed in a naturalistic way and procedures have been adopted which ensure issues of reliability and validity can be upheld. Consistent with case study methodology (Yin, 2009) the research draws on the following forms of evidence: secondary data (including academic and government studies and findings), semi structured interviews with tourism industry respondents, observations of travellers from each group interacting, focus groups

from each of the two groups and questionnaires from each group. A detailed description and justification of the research methodology is detailed in Chapter 3.

### **1.7.1 Case selection**

Backpackers and caravanners were selected because they have many parallels (Holloway et al., 2011). Both groups: are cost conscious but not too restricted, have time to explore options recommended to them, belong to communities which share a culture and are mobile (Holloway et al., 2011; White & White, 2008). They are also drawn to the social element of travelling in these groups. Moreover, both these market segments are significant to tourism in Tropical North Queensland (TNQ) and are actively targeted by the DMO, Tourism Tropical North Queensland (TTNQ). The Cairns region is a major destination and provides the quantity and diversity of tourism product to satisfy the needs of both segments. This is supported by statistics indicating longer duration of stay subsequent increased expenditure by both backpackers (Tourism Research Australia, 2006) and caravanners (Tourism Research Australia, 2007a). For both markets Cairns is usually on the ‘must see’ list for first time travellers to the area. Research also suggests that the independent ‘destination naïve’ traveller is more likely to engage in information seeking behaviour upon arrival (Hyde, 2007; Snepenger et al., 1990; Weaver & Lawton, 2011) and, therefore, the lack of experience with the destination is likely to result in greater engagement in WOM activity (Weaver & Lawton, 2011).

From a practical perspective, existing data for each case is readily available and the cases can be easily identified for the purpose of primary data collection (see Chapter 3 for details). The data from these cases will be analysed to meet the research objectives. To address the criticism that attempts to theorise WOM have been ad hoc and are ‘insufficient to capture the potential richness of the WOM construct’ Harrison-Walker (2001 p.61), the research will develop theory grounded in the data from these cases and develop a model.

## **1.8 Definitions**

The following definitions are outlined for the purpose of setting the parameters for this research.

## **Word of Mouth**

The key concept in this study is word of mouth. The term WOM is frequently used interchangeably with the following terms; referral marketing, personal recommendation, social network marketing. The research aims to more clearly define word of mouth by better understanding the nature of the activity. The following definition has been adopted; an informal, person-to-person communication which is considered to be non-commercial in nature (Arndt, 1967; Assael, 1987; Belk, 1971; Brown et al., 2007; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Buttle, 1998; Dichter, 1966; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955; King & Summers, 1970; Kotler et al., 1996; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). While these messages can take place on a dyadic level (Brown & Reingen, 1987), that is between two individuals, WOM can also take place between an individual and reference group (Assael, 1987; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955). This definition largely reflects the basic tenet of WOM but is not limited to 'face-to-face' communication.

## **e-Word of Mouth**

With the advent of technology, particularly the internet, a voice can be heard by millions in every corner of the globe. This impact is not lost on practitioners or academics. Terms like 'word of mouse', e-WOM, buzz marketing and viral marketing, are linked to the technology that underpins the movement of communication. This research will use the term e-WOM as defined by Litvin, Goldsmith et al. (2008 p.461) as being, 'all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers'. This definition was selected as it incorporates the key components of 'traditional' WOM (informal, usage or characteristics, product or brand, goods or services), moreover it can accommodate consumer-to-consumer not just business-to-consumer communications.

## **Social Network**

A network is considered a defined number of elements or nodes and the number of relationships or edges between them (Aubke, 2014). It is a system, usually represented diagrammatically by a series of dots and connecting and intersecting lines, which represent the exchange and relationships between those 'dots'. These 'dots' are the 'actors' or 'nodes' and the lines are 'ties' or 'arcs', depending on the theory, the former

from sociology, the latter from graph theory. From a tourism perspective it is an entire system of social relationships, the structures of which are complex and have ‘diverse outcomes for social relationships’ (Stokowski, 1992). The inter-relationships, or ties, in a network of mobile travellers can be defined as:

*The strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie. (Granovetter, 1973 p.1361)*

### **Caravanners**

As noted by Mikkleson and Cohen (2015, p.8), ‘Caravanning is difficult to define and delimit as it takes on a range of different meanings depending on context’. In Australia, such travellers are usually travelling away from home for over a month and tend to be domestic travellers (Holloway et al., 2011; Onyx & Leonard, 2005, 2006; Patterson, 2007a). For the purpose of this research, caravanners are considered to be travellers whose trip ‘was experienced at the caravan sites, as people travelling in camper trailers, pop-tops, caravans, tents or RV’s’ (Mikkleson and Cohen, 2015, p.8). Acknowledging that terms such as ‘RVers’ and ‘motorhomers’ are also used interchangeably in the literature, the term ‘caravanner’ has been used for consistency.

### **Backpackers**

In the context of this research backpackers are; English-speaking, international travellers who identify themselves as being a backpacker in terms of choice of accommodation and travel style. Similarly, TTNQ has long recognised the importance of this market and the backpacker market continues to be identified and targeted for the region (Hajkowicz, Cook, & Boughen, 2013; The Possible People, 2014).

## ***1.9 Parameters of the study***

### **1.9.1 Scope**

The research is limited to the Cairns region and to the backpacking and caravan markets visiting the region for the purpose of comparison. Other groups of travellers were considered for the study but were dismissed. The groups and their reason for exclusion are summarised below:

- inbound group travellers – language and cultural barriers could present challenges, furthermore limited access to these travellers and an inflexible, restricted itinerary does not present these travellers with much opportunity to alter arrangements based on WOM;
- conference attendees – travel decision making is usually made at an organisational level and these travellers do not have the time flexibility to act on WOM from other travellers; and
- Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) – whilst a substantial visiting market to the Cairns region who have flexibility with their arrangements, this group was considered unsuitable due to the influence of the family and friends with whom they stay. Lack of engagement with other ‘like’ travellers would not meet the aims of this study.

Moreover, to attempt this research across all market segments to Cairns is outside the resources of the research both in time and cost.

There are different means of segmenting markets and the selected markets for the research are limited to the definitions outlined above. The discussions of the market segments that represent the mobile networks of travellers used in this research are detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. It should be noted that the language and cultural frameworks of the subjects may restrict the data obtained.

The research is also limited within the timeframe of the 2010-2014. Given the number of factors that can impact Cairns (or any destination) including political, economic, social and natural shocks which have a direct bearing on travellers’ views it is necessary to restrict the context to Cairns as a destination (including its tourism product offering at the time) to this timeframe.

### **1.9.2 Limitations**

There are limitations on the research outside the control of the researcher, which must also be acknowledged. Firstly, there are extraneous factors in the decision making process. Broader marketing activity by a destination and competing destinations including advertising and sponsorship will influence perceptions of travellers. Also cost and time will always have a bearing on touristic choices regardless of desire to travel. Within this: airfares, fuel prices, taxes and exchange rates will influence the destination decision.



Importantly, the rapid advances in technology presents a limitation to the study. In very recent years the incorporation of technology (devices, access, information) has significantly impacted all aspects of tourism, including tourist behaviour. It is important to acknowledge technology but, at the same time, recognise that its developments cannot be fully addressed in any study.

From a theoretical perspective, the focus of the research draws on WOM theory with an emphasis on social interaction within mobile networks. While theory will be drawn from destination image, technology use, market segmentation and other areas, these will only be discussed to the extent that they relate to WOM theory or empirical studies.

Moreover, the language and cultural frameworks of the subjects may restrict the data obtained. The research was conducted with those who spoke (or were prepared to speak) in English for the purposes of data collection. The design and collection of the data is bound within the cases selected for the study. The research approach, methods and selection of respondents will all have an influence on the data collected and the interpretation of that data, this is outlined in specific detail in Chapter 3.

The nature of WOM activity itself also presents limitations. The research acknowledges that the complexities of the WOM phenomenon combined with the human condition does not allow for every facet to be accommodated. For example, WOM has no expiry date; travellers to a destination may have heard something about it based on an old experience. Also memories and recollections change over time, they can become stronger or weaker. The research will explain the dynamics of WOM within the two groups in the study. It will not, however, fully explore the cultural contexts which influence particular behaviours. To do so would shift the focus from the dynamic of WOM to the moderating effects.

Finally, it is acknowledged that destinations also change over time. Word of mouth may still be used in relation to a destination or product therein which is no longer relevant. WOM has no time limit but may lose accuracy or relevance over time.

### ***1.10 Outline***

This chapter has introduced the research problems and the context within which they will be investigated by identifying limitations and setting parameters.

Chapter Two reflects on the development of WOM literature. It also provides an insight into the current literature surrounding WOM with a focus on tourism marketing and identifies the gaps in both research and practice. A critique of the body of existing research will additionally provide the foundation for the methodological approach to this study.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology of the research and details both case study research design and the survey instrument, with an emphasis on data collection and analysis.

The findings of each case are presented in Chapters Four and Five. Data drawn from across both cases is then analysed and discussed in Chapter Six. Chapter Seven includes reflections on the common themes from each case and the explanation of the proposed model of at-destination WOM.

Finally Chapter Eight presents a summary of the thesis, addressing each of the research problems presented in Chapter One, areas of further research and reflections on the methodological approach taken to the research.

### ***1.11 Summary***

Word of mouth has long been accepted as the most powerful form of marketing in terms of influencing the decision making process (Assael, 1987; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Bayus, 1985; Dichter, 1966; Lang & Hyde, 2013), more so than advertising (Baggio, Cooper, Scott, & Corigliano, 2009; Goldenberg, Libai, & Muller, 2001) where DMOs have traditionally spent their money to attract travellers. Coupled with the trend of leaving more decisions until travellers reach their destination (Grønflaten, 2009; Hyde, 2004; Moore et al., 2012) there are implications for how DMOs can influence travellers' decision making. This thesis contends that against a backdrop of an increasingly competitive global tourism environment (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013), rapid changes to technology and the growing trend to market to niche segments, there is an increasing need to better understand the traveller-to-traveller WOM phenomenon as it applies to destinations. By exploring the WOM dynamic within and across two selected networks of travellers in one destination, implications for WOM marketing of destinations will be discussed.

## 2 Literature Review

This chapter will review the existing body of literature in three parts. Firstly it will explore the theoretical foundations of WOM research and place it in the tourism context. Then it will review how the theory has been applied in the field of tourism research, specifically destination marketing. Finally, gaps in the existing research will be identified with particular focus on traveller-to-traveller WOM at destination (during travel). The chapter explores the dynamics of WOM exchanges and argues the need to broaden the approach to more meaningfully understand how relationships, situational context and needs impact the degree to which information exchanged during WOM influences decisions.

The development of WOM theory, including the definitions, functions and characteristics of the message set the parameters for the review. This is followed by a summation of the motivating factors behind the engagement in WOM exchanges. The development of WOM models will then be analysed, exploring the change in thinking from manipulating the level of influence to fostering increased WOM activity. The contemporary shift in the research from a dyadic perspective to a social networking approach will lead to the identification and discussion of the key relationship constructs of homophily and tie-strength. Additionally, the importance of social setting and changes to communication channels will be reviewed in the WOM theoretical context. Finally, the synthesis of the inter-personal traveller communication in the context of destination marketing will reveal the gaps in research and formulate an approach for addressing these gaps. The main areas and key points within are highlighted in Figure 2-1.

A series of baseline statements are presented throughout the review (Hyde, 2004). These statements outline what is known and accepted in relation to WOM. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a synthesis of research gaps. These gaps will be presented as theoretical gaps, which will provide the basis for the research questions, empirical gaps, to inform the context of the study, and methodological gaps, which will drive the research, design for the subsequent chapters.

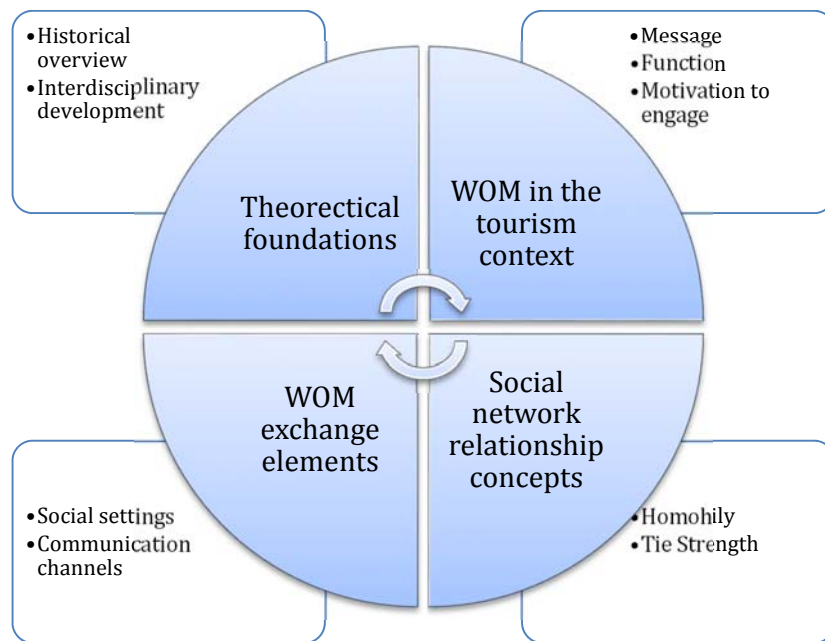


Figure 2-1 – Framework of the literature review

Word of mouth (WOM) is a complex communication phenomenon but often treated in the literature as a simplistic exchange of measurable factors. As Harrison-Walker (2001 p.61) observed, attempts to develop measurements in the literature have been ad hoc and are ‘insufficient to capture the potential richness of the WOM construct’. Discussion of any singular element of the phenomenon at the exclusion of other parts is to oversimplify and remove the context within which the body of research has developed. This review will reveal that the breadth of vast and well established literature drawn over time from psychology, sociology, marketing, communications and tourism areas of scholarship. Despite this, however, there appears to be an absence of research in the ‘procedural’ aspects of WOM (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Rogers, 1995). As such, the message and functions are discussed and highlighted in terms of their relevance to tourism scholarship but it is the WOM dynamic that lies at the heart of this review.

## 2.1 WOM Theory

Word of Mouth (WOM) is an important and powerful form of marketing in terms of influencing the information acquisition and decision making process (Assael, 1987; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Bayus, 1985; de Matos & Rossi, 2008; Dichter, 1966; Lang & Hyde, 2013), and this is particularly true in tourism (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012;

Weaver & Lawton, 2011). Very rarely do tourists make decisions in isolation rather they select sources and information which they perceive as useful, trustworthy, offer expertise, will be socially acceptable and are easily accessible.

Upon reflection of the historical research the focus on 'influence' and the relationship with others becomes apparent. Early philosophical writings, followed by scholarly work in sociology, psychology and then marketing sought to understand the role of the influencer in the WOM process. As shown in Table 2-1 the body of research has developed and there have been shifts from this view of managing the influencer to understanding the process and recognising the equally important roles of both the sender and recipient in the relationship that facilitates WOM. The following section will explore interdisciplinary evolution of thinking in terms of the underpinning principles, which have contributed have provided the foundations for much of the contemporary WOM research.

As early as 4th Century BC, Aristotle (see Aristotle) identified three key elements of influence on behalf of the speaker;

1. the ethos, the personal traits which elicits a sense of credibility,
2. the pathos, the capacity to appeal emotionally to the listener and
3. the logos, the use of examples to support reasoned argument.

While discussed in terms of discourse rather than commercial application, Buttle (1998 p.242) argued that Aristotle would have recognised the speaker's independence as an ethical appeal and these remain the cornerstones of what is now understood about WOM. McPherson et al. (2001, p. 416) also observed that the relationships within discourse have been seen in the Western philosophical writings of Aristotle ('love those who are like themselves') and Plato ('similarity begets friendship'). They noted, however, the contradictions of these philosophers who also suggested that opposites attract. This highlights a longstanding challenge of understanding the relationship dynamics in the role of interpersonal communication exchange and WOM theory.

Table 2-1 outlines how many of the developments in WOM theory, particularly in terms of influence, can be attributed to sociology (Aubke, 2014). The work of Georg Simmel (Simmel, [1908] 1950) focused on the investigation of social ties between

individuals and the understandings drawn from detecting the similarities and differences between these relations. A number of sociological and social-psychological theories developed in the late 1940s and 1950s (particularly Festinger and Merton, see Table 2-1) that have influenced WOM theoretical development. The central tenant of much of the thinking at the time was that people make social groups (referred to as reference groups) and their connection to and position in that group will have a bearing on communication exchange. This thinking was then extended into the marketing and communications literature where the relationships between individuals, networked social structures and communication patterns began to emerge. First with Rogers in the 1960s, Granovetter in 1973 then Turner in 1991 as scholars began to explore the implications communication between individuals in the context of groups. This then lead to a more focused attempt at understanding what elements of communicative social exchange could be influenced and by whom.

An early contribution to WOM theory was the social ‘Trickle down’ theory of personal influence. This is based on the premise that lower classes often emulate the behaviour of upper classes (Engel et al., 1995). This vertical transmission of influence is hardly used in economically developed countries, rather this form of social influence is more common among peers (Rogers, 1995). In the 1930s, professional rumour mongers organised campaigns to generate positive WOM around products and discredit competitors (King & Summers, 1970), sometimes referred to as the ‘Ripple Effect’. This was an important step in linking planned communication with the theory of influence, although it could be argued that this ‘scattergun’ approach was largely ineffective at targeting specific audiences. Such early attempts at generating ‘passed on’ communication were rudimentary, ad hoc and lacked a theoretical underpinning. This highlights an important and often overlooked point that WOM is primarily a social phenomenon, rather than simple communication exchange. Table 2-1 provides a summary of significant contribution to WOM theoretical development over time. Although this list is not exhaustive, it shows the interdisciplinary development over time and a number of particularly significant aspects have been identified and discussed in more detail in the section that follows.

Table 2-1 – Multidisciplinary contribution to WOM theoretical development

AUTHOR	YEAR	PUBLICATION	DISCIPLINE	THEORY DEVELOPMENT	CONTRIBUTION TO WOM THEORY
<b>Simmel</b>	1908	The Stranger	Sociology	Social distance within a group	Structures of social groups and the relations between group members
<b>Merton</b>	1949	Social theories and social structures	Sociology	Reference groups	Using the social norms of groups to support decisions & behaviours and form attitudes
<b>Festinger, Schachter, &amp; Back</b>	1950	Social Pressures in Informal Groups: A Study of Human Factors in Housing.	Sociology	Propinquity or proximity effect	Passive contacts are more likely to occur when there is close physical or function distance between people
<b>Festinger</b>	1950	Informal Social Communication, <i>Psychological Review</i>	Psychology	Intragroup communication	Communication is influenced by pressures of uniformity within a social group and pressures to communicate will increase to maintain group cohesion
<b>Festinger</b>	1954	A theory of social comparison processes. <i>Human Relations</i>	Sociology	Social Comparison theory	Similar others provide an appropriate reference group for social validity testing
<b>Lazarfeld &amp; Merton</b>	1954	Friendship as a social process: A substantive and methodological analysis. <i>Freedom and control in modern society</i>	Sociology	Demographic homophily	Demographic similarity and social interaction
<b>Katz &amp; Lazarfeld</b>	1955	Personal Influence: the part played by people in the flow of mass communications	Sociology	Two-step flow of communication	Face-to-face interaction is more influential than traditional media
<b>Festinger</b>	1957	A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance	Psychology	Cognitive Dissonance	Information is disseminated to alleviate post experience uncertainty

<b>Rogers</b>	1962	Diffusion of Innovations	Sociology	Adoption of products or services over time	How communication influences the role of adoption of products or services
<b>Arndt</b>	1967	Role of product-related conversations in the diffusion of a new product	Marketing	WOM influences consumer behaviour	Influence of WOM on product purchase
<b>Merton</b>	1968	Social Theory and social structure	Sociology		
<b>Rogers &amp; Bhowmik</b>	1970	Homophily-Hetrophily: Relational concepts for communication research	Sociology	Relational homophily-hetrophily continuum	Proposed links between credibility, likeability and trust with dyadic relationships
<b>Granovetter</b>	1973	The Strength of Weak Ties, <i>The American Journal of Sociology</i>	Sociology	Interpersonal ties, tie strength	Information transmission throughout social network structures via weak ties (those where there is a loose social association)
<b>Brown &amp; Reingen</b>	1987	Social Ties and Word-of-Mouth Referral Behavior, <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	Marketing	Measured referral network of weak and strong ties	Use of tie-strength and the influence on WOM
<b>Turner</b>	1991	Social Influence	Psychology	Self categorisation theory	Group memberships and norms and the influence of groups on the individual
<b>Stokowski</b>	1992	Social networks and tourist behaviour, <i>The American Behavioral Scientist</i>	Tourism	Social networks of visitor relationships	The importance of transient relationships between travellers during travel and the influence of these on decision making at-destination
<b>Gartner</b>	1994	Image formation process, <i>Journal of Travel &amp; Tourism Marketing</i>	Tourism	WOM in destination image formation	Concepts of ‘solicited organic’, that is sought information, and ‘unsolicited organic’ or acquired information transmitted via WOM



AUTHOR	YEAR	PUBLICATION	DISCIPLINE	THEORY DEVELOPMENT	CONTRIBUTION TO WOM THEORY
<b>Buttle</b>	1998	Word of mouth: understanding and managing referral marketing, <i>Journal of Strategic Marketing</i>	Marketing	Model of WOM in referral marketing	Identified intrapersonal and extrapersonal variables where WOM is both an input and an output of process
<b>Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger &amp; Yale</b>	1998	A dyadic study of interpersonal information search	Marketing	Homophily construct within WOM dyads	Tied perceived expertise and opinion leadership with similarity between individuals in the WOM exchange
<b>Monge &amp; Contractor</b>	2001	Emergence of Communications Networks, <i>The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods</i>	Communication	Network communications	Linked families of theories to theoretical mechanisms to explain network dynamics
<b>Urry</b>	2003	Social networks, travel and talk1	Mobilities	Meetingness	Mobility and the connection, disconnection and reconnection with a social group over time and distance
<b>Brown, Broderick &amp; Lee</b>	2007	Word of mouth communication within online communities: Conceptualizing the online social network	Communication	eWOM conceptual framework	WOM constructs (homophily, tie strength, source credibility) are different in the online context
<b>Litvin, Goldsmith, Bing</b>	2008	Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management	Communication	Typology of eWOM	eWOM channels have a scope (one-to-one & one-to-many) and level of interactivity (asynchronous & synchronous)
<b>Simpson &amp; Siglaw</b>	2008	Destination Word of Mouth: The Role of Traveler Type, Residents, and Identity Salience	Tourism	Segmenting destination visitors to facilitate WOM	Link between satisfaction of longer-stay visitors to a destination and their area-promotion capacity

<b>AUTHOR</b>	<b>YEAR</b>	<b>REVIEW PUBLICATION</b>	<b>DISCIPLINE</b>	<b>THEORY DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>CONTRIBUTION TO WOM THEORY</b>
<b>Aubke</b>	2014	Applying a network-lens to hospitality business research: A new research agenda	Hospitality	Outlines potential applications of social network analysis	Network theory based agenda for tourism and hospitality research
<b>Confente</b>	2014	Twenty-Five Years of Word-of-Mouth Studies: A Critical Review of Tourism Research	Tourism	Outlines empirical, analytical methods, specific theory & core assumptions	Review in the tourism context and outlines directions for future research
<b>Harris</b>	2014	Word of mouth in tourism: Reflections and directions	Tourism	Offers a framework of communication network theory to view WOM	Review of WOM, information acquisition and at-destination decision making
<b>Tang</b>	2014	The application of social psychology theories and concepts in hospitality and tourism studies: A review and research agenda	Tourism & Hospitality	Application of social cognition, social comparison, social reinforcement & self	Review of studies through a social psychology perspective

### 2.1.1 Emergence of sociological theories

Contemporary WOM has developed from the work of sociologists Katz & Lazarsfeld in 1948 (see Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) who first used the term ‘opinion leaders’ and introduced the ‘2 Step Communication Model’. This model went some way in explaining how the mass media could convey influence to an audience through these targeted opinion leaders.

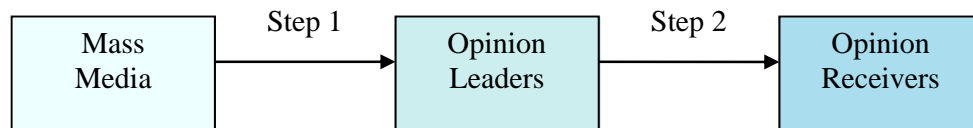


Figure 2-2 – Two Step Communication Model (Kotler et al 1996)

While considered to be a breakthrough in understanding mass communication the model did not adequately explain the phenomenon of WOM. Some attribute this to the simplicity of the model (Rogers, 1995), others proposed that the receiver or audience is not as passive as the model assumes (Belk, 1971; Engel et al., 1995). Nor did it explain how the receiver acquired information or reflect the true flow of information and influence (Belk, 1971). Subsequent research (particularly in the area of information diffusion) identified that mass media affects both the influencer and information seeker (Engel et al., 1995; Rogers, 1995) which later developed into the multi-step communication model.

Again the focus of the literature was on influence and the targeting of influencers or opinion leaders. In their 1970 study King and Summers (1970) identified differences between personal influence and interpersonal communications and acknowledged that ‘interpersonal communication helps influence most decisions’ (King & Summers, 1970 p.44). Despite this, the research from the subsequent decade followed the path of opinion leaders and how marketers could identify these individuals then implement tactics to have them engage in WOM on behalf of the firm.

The literature offers four main methods for identifying opinion leaders (Engel et al., 1995; Rogers, 1995; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004):

- Self designating method, where people are asked to determine the extent to which they are sought out for advice. The ease of administration sees this method used most frequently in the research (see King & Summers, 1970 for example using a range of consumable goods);
- Sociometric method, where consumers identify other consumers from whom they seek advice or information (see Brown & Reingen, 1987 for example using referrals to piano teachers);
- Key informant method, where consumers are used to identify influentials within a social system (see Engel, 1969 for example using car diagnostic service), and
- Observation method, where communication links within a social system are identified and recorded as they occur (although these work best in very small systems).

While these theoretical approaches were directed at identifying opinion leaders, subsequent research has revealed that the accurate identification of such individuals has proven difficult (Jamrozy, Backman, & Backman, 1996; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). These methods do, however, provide an insight into the development of the WOM theory, particularly the recognition of influencers within a social system.

### **2.1.2 Emergence of network theory**

At the same time that the marketing discipline was grappling with opinion leadership, an interest in social networks emerged particularly in relation to communication (Monge & Contractor, 2001). The earlier work of Granovetter (1973) saw a significant development which contributed to WOM theory. He identified the weakness of sociological thinking at the time by relating micro-level interactions with macro-level patterns. While identifying the macro phenomena as social mobility, community organisation and political structure, his model has been adopted and applied to the WOM phenomenon as well. An explanation for the wide adoption of Granovetter's model is that it presents a more realistic framework within which WOM exchanges can be explained, both in terms of influence between individuals and diffusion (or spread) of WOM across groups.

This network approach has since developed across a wide range of disciplines including sociology, social psychology, mathematics, communication, geography and communications with each developing different research methodologies. It is a system, usually represented diagrammatically as a sociogram as illustrated in Figure 2-3, where nodes represent the actors (individuals) and the edges represent the relationships between them (Aubke, 2014; Baggio, Scott, & Cooper, 2010).

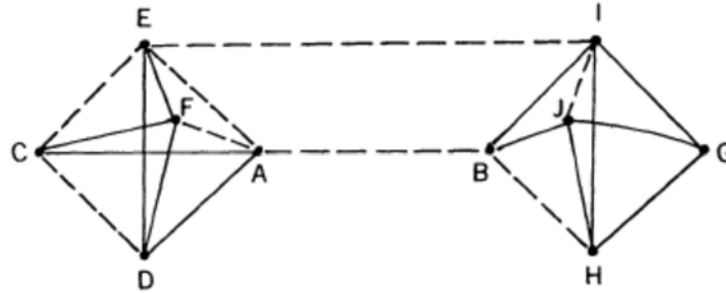


Figure 2-3 – Model of tie-strength (Granovetter 1973)

The model above represents two groups, the relationships within the groups are shown by ‘\_\_\_\_\_’ as a strong tie relationship and ‘-----’ as a weak tie relationship. While both operate within a given reference group, it is the weak tie relationships which allow transmission from one group to another. The relationships within a network has more recently been applied to tourism and hospitality research (Baggio et al., 2010; Li & Petrick, 2008; Ryley & Zanni, 2013; Steffes & Burgee, 2009), yet linking the relationships of travellers (networks), their interactions (sociology and social psychology) and communications still presents a void in the literature.

### 2.1.3 Emergence of communication theory

In 2001, Monge and Contractor categorised many of the preceding theories in to ‘Families of Theories’ with ‘Theoretical Mechanisms’. In doing so, they consolidated many of the sociological and social psychological theories and put them into a communications context. Since that time the significance of electronic WOM (eWOM) has been recognised as being just as influential on decision making and knowledge acquisition. There has been a proliferation of electronic communications and eWOM studies including but not limited to: blogs (Carson, 2008), models of on-line communication networks (Litvin et al., 2008), on-line reviews (Jiang et al., 2010),

information seeking behaviour (Chung & Buhalis, 2008) and studies on recommendation websites and user generated content (Ayeh et al., 2013). Arguably, the concept of ‘social networking’ conjures in the minds of many the verbose communication on Facebook. While the abundance of information, opinion and perceived expertise offered on-line appears to mirror many of the characteristics of face-to-face WOM, the degree to which these relationships, reference groups and communication channels and network dynamics influence decisions or contribute to knowledge acquisition remains unclear (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Libai et al., 2010; Tham et al., 2013).

## ***2.2 WOM in tourism***

Building on these theoretical underpinnings, this next section will link WOM theory to tourism research. A more fine-grained approach will explain the types and functions of WOM in the context of tourism. Accepting tourism as a social phenomenon, specific concepts of social networks will be explained in relation to tourism research. The identification of shortcomings of existing body of research to adequately entwine those concepts to provide a complete picture of WOM will also be discussed.

The literature suggests that WOM is widely considered to be the most utilised information source for independent travellers to a destination (Andereck & Caldwell, 1993 ; Confente, 2014; Fall & Knutson, 2001; Fodness & Murray, 1998; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Hsieh & O’Leary, 1993; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005) and almost any visitor survey will indicate that destination information was sought from ‘family and friends’ as a key source. The concept of WOM is widely understood by academics, practitioners and consumers and provides a balance of information and opinion, expressed in a setting that provides the flexibility to ‘tailor make’ the message. Moreover, the level of detail required and provided makes WOM a highly efficient way of obtaining information.

The literature defines WOM as; an informal, person-to-person communication which is considered to be non-commercial in nature (Arndt, 1967; Assael, 1987; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Belk, 1971; Brown et al., 2007; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Buttle, 1998; Dichter, 1966; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; King & Summers, 1970; Kotler et al., 1996; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). While these messages can take

place on a dyadic level (Aubke, 2014; Brown & Reingen, 1987), that is between two individuals, WOM can also take place between an individual and reference group (Assael, 1987; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955). Regardless of the manner of exchange, it is considered spontaneous and informal (Bruwer & Thach, 2013) and offered freely, rather than planned or contrived.

***BASELINE STATEMENT***

WOM is two way, non-commercial communication and is perceived as being credible

The literature supports the notion that the sender is independent of the market (Sweeney et al., 2008) and that this provides the receiver with a sense of trust (Gartner, 1994; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970; Tham et al., 2013). Further, the expertise of the sender is also critical. As early as 1966, Dichter identified two criteria which underpin the value of WOM: the person who recommends is interested in the receiver and the receiver's well-being and the speaker's experience and knowledge on the subject is convincing. In effect, WOM from a trusted source acts as a proxy for personal experience in the decision making process. This is reflected in the research:

- Gitelson and Crompton (1983) found that family or friends were the primary source of information used by travellers (72%):
- Fodness and Murray (1999) found 'friends and relatives' was ranked highest as an information source in their study of auto travellers to Florida. In the instances when only one information source was used, it came second only to personal experience;
- Fall and Knutson (2001) found that 'friend or relative' was ranked as the most useful source of information (at 66%) in their study of mature (aged 55 years or older) travellers in Michigan. This source exceeded all other mass media and tourism specific media sources, and
- Grønflaten (2009) found 'Friends or family' were ranked first as an information source before departure and second (only to information centres) upon arrival for leisure travellers to Oslo, Norway.

Interestingly, some studies rank WOM as more important than personal experience:

- Capella and Greco (1987) found that ‘family’ were ranked first, then ‘personal experience’, followed by ‘friends’ in their information sources for elderly travel consumers;
- Andereck and Caldwell (1993) found ‘word-of-mouth’ was the most important information source, followed by past experience for travellers choosing to visit the North Carolina Zoo;
- Hsu, Kang & Lam (2006) found that the degree of reference group influence on Chinese travellers intention to visit Hong Kong didn’t vary based on respondents’ past travel experience to Hong Kong;
- Jacobsen and Munar’s (2012) study of Danish and Norwegian travellers to Mallorca saw 58 travellers rank WOM as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ compared with 46 who ranked personal experience the same way, and
- Bruwer and Thach’s (2013) study into sources of information used by wine visitors to Finger Lakes Wine Region (NY, USA) found that 59% used WOM information sources (family, friends colleagues etc), exceeding previous experience to a winery elsewhere (27.5%) or previous visits to the Finger Lakes Wine Region (25.7%). This supported a similar study by Bruwer and Lesschaeve (2012) into the information sources of travellers to the Niagara wine region which also found use of WOM (32.2%) was greater than previous experience to the region (16.7%).

These examples suggest that the influence of WOM stretches across markets, segments, destinations and attractions, not being limited to a specific context. These findings also demonstrate that WOM can be just as influential in the decision making of tourists as their own previous experience, if not more. The question about the link between trust and credibility of sources is raised, more particularly why the findings suggest that there is sometimes greater trust in the views of others than of the individual’s personal experience (Dann, 1996a; Dickinger, 2011; Yoo, Gretzel, & Zanker, 2013). Also these studies show that research over a considerable period of



time does not provide a definitive answer as to which is more influential or, for that matter, the degree of influence.

### **2.2.1 Functions of WOM**

Much of the literature categorises WOM as being positive or negative and focuses on influencing this behaviour from a management perspective. However this is an oversimplification of a complex piece of communication. The research considers WOM in a number of forms (either independently or a combination within the same encounter).

#### *Discussion of a brand name*

This WOM relates directly to brand names raised in discussion (Assael, 1987; Bayus, 1985; Belk, 1971; Huang et al., 2009) and comes from the early research which focused on WOM in relation to product marketing (see Belk, 1971 study on Maxim brand coffee). Harrison-Walker (2001) identified the shift away from WOM research regarding new, tangible products towards services marketing and this may explain why brand specific WOM is not used as widely. However examples in tourism might include some multi-national tourism products such as hotel chains, for example Hyatt, Sofitel, Accor, or some theme parks, for example Disneyland or Seaworld.

#### *Informational WOM*

This refers to descriptive information which may include attribute details (Belk, 1971; Rosen & Olshavsky, 1987). In the tourism context this might include information such as pricing, opening hours, parking, food availability, directions, weather, access and other such details.

#### *Evaluative WOM*

Where opinion is provided (Belk, 1971) which is often based on personal experience (Assael, 1987; Rosen & Olshavsky, 1987). This is particularly important for services (tourism especially) as the trusted opinion of another person often acts as a proxy for a consumer who lacks experience during the decision making process.

This outline provides a picture of the capacity of WOM to be used in different ways between groups and individuals to both influence and inform. WOM can take the

form of general recommendations or specific detail, both of which can be used for decision making.

Marketing literature also makes reference to positive and negative WOM (Confente, 2014). A commonly cited report in the literature of Coca Cola customers found that dissatisfied customers told a median of 9 to ten people, whereas satisfied customers told a median of 4 to 5 people (Technical Assistance Research Programs, 1982). This oft cited statistic has almost become an accepted truth of WOM, however as far back as 1969 Engel et al found 40 dissatisfied customers showed no greater use of WOM than satisfied customers. While the research on the positive or negative nature of the message is debated in the literature, the WOM phenomenon is not that clear cut. In reality, WOM exchanges use one (or a combination) of the aforementioned forms and, hence, often deliver both positive and negative messages within the same exchange (Goldenberg et al., 2001). If this is true of products or services then this could also be said of tourism experiences which are complex, comprise of multiple service encounters and are rarely 'all good' or 'all bad'.

### ***2.3 The purpose of engaging in WOM***

Previous research has also had a heavy focus on WOM seeking, WOM dissemination and influence on decision making. De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) classified the WOM literature into the following three streams: why consumers disseminate WOM activity, information seeking behaviours and why certain sources are more influential than others. Confente (2014) reviewed 46 tourism WOM studies from 1987-2013 and also found this trend among 21 of the studies. The following section reviews the literature in light of these streams with a focus on the applicability within tourism. The motivating factors behind consumers' desire to engage in WOM encounters are well established in the literature. In essence, the research accepts that both parties (the sender and receiver) in the encounter gain benefit from the exchange. Much of the literature was grounded in the psycho-sociological literature, developed in the marketing and advertising discipline then been applied to tourism research.

#### **2.3.1 Motivation to disseminate**

Consumers are unlikely to share their experiences with others unless this exchange results in some form of gratification for doing so. As early as the 1960s, these

motivating factors have been identified and developed in the research and can broadly be categorised as follows (Dichter, 1966; Engel et al., 1995; Nickels, 1984):

*Product involvement*

Where the distinct pleasure or dissatisfaction of an experience requires expression of those feelings as an outlet or ‘release’. Dichter (1966) offered a European boat trip as an example where this would apply.

*Self involvement*

Where the speaker uses communication for reassurance purposes. More specific subsections apply; gaining attention, showing connoisseurship, feeling like a pioneer, having inside information, suggesting status, spreading the gospel, and asserting superiority (Dichter, 1966 p.150).

*Dissonance reduction*

The process by which the consumer engages with others to reduce or elevate doubt resulting from decisions made. The use of cognitive dissonance as part of post-purchase behaviours in tourism decision making models is well established (Litvin et al., 2008; Moutinho, 1987; Riley, 1996).

*Other involvement*

The genuine desire to help others make a better purchase decision. The concept of ‘helpful strangers’ has developed in the tourism literature (Adkins & Grant, 2007; Bronner & de Hoog, 2011), which reflects this concept of altruistic helping behaviour.

*Message involvement*

The aspects of an advertising or marketing message are entertaining, clever or controversial consumers are often motivated to discuss the message itself. Tourism examples are plenty, the widely publicised Tourism Australia ‘Where the Bloody Hell are you’ (Campbell & Saurine, 2013) campaign generated enormous worldwide discussion purely on this basis.

The first four motivating factors are considered to be personal, whereas the last is general. Importantly, the management of WOM from a tourism destination

perspective has focused more on the ‘message involvement’ than the preceding factors.

### **2.3.2 Motivation to seek WOM**

There is also a vast body of literature on the ‘recipient’ end of the WOM exchange equation (Harrison-Walker, 2001). This may be attributed to the fact that opinions, advice and information are often sought and, therefore, the WOM exchange is instigated by the recipient. Services, broadly, and tourism services, in particular are often considered to be high risk purchases (Ryley & Zanni, 2013). Much of the research regarding risk and reduction strategies comes from the services marketing literature. The unique qualities of services: intangibility, inseparability, perishability and variability, means consumers perceive them as risky (Bayus, 1985; de Matos & Rossi, 2008; Decrop, 2006; File et al., 1992; Lovelock, Patterson, & Walker, 1998; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; Weaver & Opperman, 2000). The literature categorises perceived risk into four types; financial, performance, physical and socio-psychological (Lovelock et al 1998). All of these risks can be associated with the purchase of tourism products. There may be the financial risk of paying too much (Lovelock et al 1998), the performance risk of not getting what was promised (Haywood 1989), the physical risk to personal safety (Parasuraman et al., 1985), or the risk that the decision is not accepted by the consumer’s peers or consumer’s self image.

As such, consumers draw on a greater variety of information sources to minimise the risks associated with the decision making process (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Bartle, 2011; Fodness & Murray, 1999; Patterson, 2007b; Ryley & Zanni, 2013; Wong & Yeh, 2009), including WOM activity. Dichter (1966 p.166) first stated that for ‘products whose risk value is high, that Word-of-Mouth recommendation is a strong, if not the strongest, ally a producer can have’ in reference to advertising. Bayus (1985) concurred that consumers with product experience can reduce the perceived risk associated with purchase decisions. File, Judd and Prince (1992) then suggested that consumers use WOM to manage two elements of risk; adverse consequences and uncertainty of positive outcomes both of which are directly applicable to touristic decisions (Sirakaya, McLellan, & Uysal, 1996; Smallman & Moore, 2010).

Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox and Harrell (1997) further extended the literature by presenting a model which took into account prior levels of knowledge, availability of evaluative cues and perceived difficulty in decision making in their study of consumers seeking medical services. The research supported Brown and Reingen's (1987) earlier contention that consumers select information sources with whom they have a strong-tie or weak-tie relationship depending on the circumstances. Bansal and Voyer (2000) developed the theory further by tying perceived risk, expertise and strength of relationship to decision making in service situations.

Tourism studies have also reflected the influence on the traveller's decision making based on the strength of the relationship from where information has been sought, see Hsu, Kang and Lam (2006) who segmented travellers to Hong Kong based on group influence. The literature has a long tradition of studying WOM activity during the information search process as a part of pre-trip decision making (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Snepenger et al., 1990).

Moreover the literature's focus on the use of WOM in the pre-decision making stage is reflected in a review by Grøflaten (2009) of 28 tourism studies from 1976 – 2007. Of those 28 studies, 10 categorised 'family and friends' as the most important information source, with a further two categorising 'word of mouth' as the most important information source. Beyond this, the research reflects that travellers engage in on-going information search activity was to create a 'bank' of knowledge for future decision making (Fodness & Murray, 1998). Fodness and Murray (1999) later discussed the temporal dimension of information search strategies. They proposed that the search can be on-going (to acquire information for later use) or pre-purchase (in response to a current purchase problem). While the focus of these studies was on the pre-trip information search, it could be argued that travellers to a destination may use both strategies during their stay.

#### ***BASELINE STATEMENT***

WOM is used at all stages of decision making and is considered to be the most powerful and influential factor in the decision making process

### 2.3.3 Passively exchanged WOM

The literature also outlines that consumers can be motivated to engage in WOM purely for the satisfaction of the thought or discussion itself. In this instance WOM is exchanged passively and in the absence of a specific decision making goal. This is particularly true of tourism destinations and travel plans, whether real or fantasy. Crotts (1999) supported this contention of on-going acquisition, noting that the search activity itself was pleasurable. Decrop (2006) concurred, adding that information acquisition could serve the purposes of collection, daydreaming and reconnaissance. More recently Jacobsen and Munar (2012, p. 40) noted, 'For some people the information search will continue also in situations when there is no obvious functional benefit, as it is perceived to be of interest in its own right'.

Further, a study by Daniels, Loda and Norman (2005) reflected the 'front of mind' presence of destination information acquisition. Their study into the recall of daily occurrences of travel related stimuli (advertising, on-line, interpersonal, intrapersonal thoughts, purchase behaviour) found 53.8% of respondents had talked to family members about future travel within a 24 hour period. A further 48.3% had discussed past travel with family members, 39.1% had discussed future travel with friends and 38.8% had discussed past travel with friends. Discussions with co-workers about past travel (18.5%) and future travel (16.7%) were also significant. These findings are not surprising; tourism products are recognised as being 'chat-worthy' (Nickels, 1984). Haywood (1989 p,58) stated, 'experiences with popular services such as travel and food seem to generate significantly more interpersonal communication than to experiences with more mundane products'.

Woodside (2010) offered another perspective in his discussion of storytelling. He suggested that large amounts of information stored (and retrieved) from memory are episodic and that storytelling including incidents, outcomes, experiences, evaluations and nuances, can be played out in the context of the situation. He further noted that storytelling has the function of providing the storyteller with pleasure and allows for clarification, all of which apply to the motivation to disseminate WOM.

The literature suggests that consumers acquire information that is problem specific, that is, to aid in a decision about travel (see Gursoy, Wang, & Pizam, 2011 for example). Passive, on-going acquisition of travel related information appears to be

evident in the literature, even when it is not directly associated with direct functional benefit (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). The research reflects that travellers engage in on-going information search activity was to create a 'bank' of knowledge for future decision making (Fodness & Murray, 1998). Importantly, in terms of the research, this is not limited to individual pursuits, rather the general discussion of travel and 'far away places' provides conversation stimulation between a range of individuals and groups which often includes WOM exchanges which appear motivated purely for the satisfaction of the thought or discussion itself.

Vogt, Fesenmaier, and MacKay (1994) and later Hyde (2000) explored information seeking activity to meet the hedonic, social and aesthetic needs in the tourism context, suggesting that leisure travellers motivations extended beyond that of simple problem solvers. The discussion of WOM activity in tourism research has progressed from a position where individuals intentionally engage in WOM activity for a specific reason (such as risk minimisation and decision making) to acknowledging there is organic WOM which comes from social interaction. Blazeovic et al. (2013) made reference to 'intentional' and 'unintentional' WOM in the services marketing literature and Bartle (2011) distinguished between 'active' and 'passive' information acquisition in the tourism context. This serves as a useful approach for reviewing WOM.

- a. Active WOM – where the motivation to seek or disseminate messages serves a specific purpose, motivation or outcome at a point in time
- b. Passive WOM – where information is unintentionally and naturally acquired over a period of time

Exploration of the literature reveals that both 'Active' and 'Passive' WOM are used by traveller and both will influence and inform. Whether reminiscing, fantasising or planning the studies reflect that WOM contributes to passively acquired knowledge (through conversations) and actively plays a role in the decision making process. This suggests that the literature has developed a view of WOM from specific and purposeful typology to nuanced and contextual (Moore et al., 2012). While this provides a picture of the capacity of WOM to be used in different ways between groups and individuals to both influence and inform, it is necessary to understand the roles of those in the WOM exchange.

## ***2.4 Tourism WOM and social network theory***

Reflecting on Table 2-2 a number of review articles have recently been published that consolidate the streams of theory from sociology, social networks and communications in tourism studies. Tang (2014), linked social psychology theories to tourism studies, Aubke (2014) applied network theory to develop a research agenda in hospitality, Confente (2014) reflected on 25 years of WOM studies in tourism and Harris (2014) identified communication network theory as a means of addressing research gaps in at-destination WOM. From this, the concept of a network emerges as a means of framing WOM as a socially constructed phenomenon. Aubke (2014) observed that there are only a handful of network studies in hospitality and that network analysis has been identified as a priority research methodology so it is necessary to review the components of these networks in the tourism context.

### **2.4.1 Social aspects of tourist behaviour**

Tourist behaviour has traditionally been represented in literature in systems-type diagrams (Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Weaver & Lawton, 2002). Pearce (2005, p.9) argued that earlier systems which implied lineal change have shifted to consider ‘discontinuous, episodic and chaotic change and mechanisms’. Certainly, the social interactions with other tourists by way of WOM exchanges represent episodic change so it could be argued that WOM not only influences and informs but also contributes to the at-destination experience of travellers.

Pearce (2005 p.10) noted that ‘the deeply personal reactions and sometimes the socio-environmental consequences of the tourists on-site behaviour is distinctive’. Huan and Beaman (2004) also observed of travellers, that meeting people and making decisions are sequential. That is, talking with someone can result in a decision that would not have been an option without the social contact. Huan and Beaman (2004) further posited that social interaction does not receive adequate attention in the decision making literature, a point echoed by Hyde (2004). This gap is significant as there are implications for the marketing of a destination that are reliant on both the social nature of the travellers and the decisions made as a result of those social interactions. In effect, the social mores with which a traveller makes decisions is coupled with information needs, opportunism and the interaction with others to make decisions that are both socially acceptable and individually fulfilling.



This supports the need to move from systems approach to a network approach. The social nature of tourists and the need to explore these inter-relationships in a context of social networks of mobile travellers is important in furthering understanding of WOM.

#### **2.4.2 Homophily**

The concept of homophily is grounded in the idea that similarity breeds connection (McPherson et al., 2001). Historically, Burton (1857, p. 433) stated,

*that similitude in manners, which ties most men in an inseparable link as if they be addicted to the same studies or disports, they delight in one another's companies – birds of a feather will gather together.*

The modern concept developed from the work of sociologist Lazarsfeld in the 1950s and refers to the degree to which pairs of individuals share attributes such as demographics and socioeconomic status (Engel et al., 1995; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; McPherson et al., 2001; Rogers, 1995). This work was extended by Gilly, Graham, Wolfenbarger and Yale (1998) who included the attributes of beliefs, norms, values, likes and dislikes, broadening the scope to perceptual homophily. The literature suggests the 'like me' principle (as it is sometimes referred) has a significant role in influencing WOM communications (Gilly et al., 1998; Sweeney et al., 2008; Weenig, 2004). The crux of the concept is that individuals who are heterophilous (that is dissimilar) will receive messages that are incongruent with their own beliefs and values, whereas the opposite is true in a homophilous situation.

Research into homophily presents some contradictory results. Rogers (1995) review drew a number of generalisations in terms of homophily; of 62 studies reviewed, he found 22 supported the generalisation that interpersonal diffusion networks were mostly homophilous (13 were not). Rogers also found 9 studies supporting the generalisation that individuals tend to be linked to others who are close in both physical distance and relatively homophilous socially (there were no studies finding to the contrary).

This echoes the observation of the early philosophers, Aristotle and Plato, who also held contradicting views and this has continued to unfold in the research. For example,

Brown and Reingen (1987) hypothesised, that an increase in the homophily of a tie will increase the influence of information provided, this hypothesis was not supported, Gilly et al (1998) later hypothesised that homophily will increase the source's influence on the information seeker's behaviour. They found that by treating demographics and perceptual homophily as separate constructs that the former (demographic homophily) was unrelated to behaviour and the latter (perceptual homophily) was positively related to episodic influence.

In the tourism context, there is tacit recognition of this 'birds of a feather' idea behind homophily. While the terminology is not widely found in tourism studies the research does reflect a tendency to segment travellers in a variety of ways that represent the concept (for example demographic, psychographic, country of origin, purpose of travel, sources of information, size of travel party, mode of travel). A more detailed discussion of segmentation along the lines of shared characteristics is undertaken in Chapter Three.

An interesting difference appears between tourism and the broader applicability of homophily. Where some academics contend that the stronger the social tie, the more similar individuals tend to be (Granovetter, 1973; Rogers, 1995; Sweeney et al., 2008), this does not necessarily apply in the tourism context. For example, niche or segmented groups of travellers (such as backpackers) may share very similar characteristics and traits yet, at the same time, be total strangers. Timing, social settings and environmental factors combine to create an environment where such like travellers encounter each other, yet little research explores how these constructs influence the WOM exchanges that result from such encounters.

### **2.4.3 Relationship ties**

Critical to understanding the relationships and exchanges within in a network context is the concept of relationship ties. A 'tie' is the relationship of one individual to another (Weenig, 2004). Katz, Lazer, Arrow, and Contractor (2004, p. 389) summarised ties as:

- 1) Communication ties – who talks or give information to whom
- 2) Formal ties – who reports to whom
- 3) Affective ties – who likes and/ or trusts whom
- 4) Material ties – who shares money or resources with whom

- 5) Proximity ties – who is spatially or electronically close to whom
- 6) Cognitive ties – who knows whom

In reality the relationships in a network are often formed with a number of ties. From a WOM perspective it is not difficult to make associations with most, if not all, of these ties. Granovetter (1973 p.1361) defined the strength of a tie as being, 'a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie'. Subsequent WOM studies have applied this definition in their research, for example Rogers (1995) in his work in diffusion, and Brown & Reingen (1987), then Duhan et al (1997) who categorised recommendation sources into 'weak tie' and 'strong tie', based on the strength of the relationship between the consumer and the source.

Granovetter's model shows that strong ties link together individuals in a group. In the marketing field of scholarly research these groups are referred to as reference groups. Assael (1987) defined word-of-mouth as being, 'interpersonal communications between two or more individuals such as members of a reference group'. The literature shows that the use of reference groups supports the decision making process because an individual can draw on a framework of beliefs and attitudes to which they can relate. These reference groups provide a structure within which acceptable decisions can be made, as Nickels (1984 p.62) stated, reference groups provide 'a frame of reference in forming his or her ideas about the "right" way of thinking or behaving'.

Primary reference groups are characterised by regular face-to-face contact within a small group (Assael, 1987; Decrop, 2006; Nickels, 1984) such as 'family and friends' (Murphy et al., 2007; Stokowski, 1992) or 'near peers' (Rogers, 1995; Weenig, 2004). Duhan et al. (1997 p.284) categorised primary groups as having a 'strong tie relationship' with the consumer as the source is 'someone who knows the decision maker personally'. The literature also identifies secondary groups which may be used as a source. The relationship between consumers and secondary groups is not as strong and the source is 'merely an acquaintance or one who does not know the decision maker at all' (Duhan et al., 1997 p.284). Secondary groups are characterised by occasional interaction where members provide less influence on the consumer,

such as colleagues or associates (Assael, 1987; Decrop, 2006; Nickels, 1984; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004).

From a sociological perspective, Granovetter (1973) reviewed several studies to theorise that weak ties provide a link from one group to another. Weenig's (2004 p.421) psychological perspective concluded that 'weak ties are important to the flow of information whereas strong ties are important with respect to the flow of influence' and Goldenberg, Libai and Muller (2001) found quantitative support for this contention using a complex systems modelling technique to measure speed of dissemination of information versus advertising messages. Further, Katz et al. (2004, p. 309) noted,

*Strong ties are particularly valuable when an individual seeks socio-emotional support and often entail a high level of trust. Weak ties are more valuable when individuals are seeking diverse or unique information from someone outside their regular frequent contacts.*

From a marketing perspective, studies have linked the concept of tie strength with the motivations and behaviours of the consumers within the WOM exchange:

- Bansal and Voyer (2000) found that strong tie relationships are likely to influence purchase decisions and that when WOM is actively sought it has greater influence on the receiver's purchase decision than when it is not actively sought;
- Duhan et al. (1997) and Brown & Reingen (1987) found the weak tie sources are more likely to provide expertise and, hence, information, whereas strong ties are more likely to influence;
- Wirtz and Chew (2002) later supported these findings where they found that there was significant effect for tie strength on likelihood to generate WOM, particularly the relationship between high satisfaction, tie strength and favourability of WOM, and
- Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol (2008) observed that WOM could be favourably received from within 'weak tie' relationships, particularly when the receiver respects the sender's view.

In a tourism context, Bieger and Laesser (2004) found in their study of the Swiss leisure market that the influence of family and friends in destination decision making was significant across all groups prior to committing to a destination decision. Stokowski (1990 cited in Stokowski 1992) also found with elderly winter travellers to Texas that strong tie relationships were used for acquiring destination information and weak tie for the general informational needs of travellers. Hsu, Kang and Lam (2006) found that Chinese travellers who selected Hong Kong as a destination were more likely to comply with their primary rather than secondary reference groups (that is, strong tie over weak tie). The literature also provides many other examples where primary groups are used as a main source of WOM; for destination selection examples see (Fodness & Murray, 1999 for Florida; Tideswell & Faulkner, 1999 for Queensland) and major attractions (Andereck & Caldwell, 1993 for North Carolina Zoo; Fall & Knutson, 2001).

The significance of these relationships has broader implications for destination marketers. Several academics have identified the significance of weak tie relationships as having the potential to unlock interpersonal networks and allow the spread of information via individuals in distant networks (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Goldenberg et al., 2001; Katz et al., 2004; Rogers, 1995; Sweeney et al., 2008; Weenig, 2004) but this is not reflected widely in tourism research literature. The research does support the notion that strong ties can influence destination choice in the pre-trip decision making process and that weak tie relationships can be utilised widely to fulfil informational needs once a destination decision has been made. The degree to which weak tie relationships (at destination) are used to either inform or diffuse information remains an unanswered question. To better understand the exchange of WOM between individual travellers within a reference group, the literature not only considers the strength of the relationship (tie strength) but also the similarity of those players in the relationship (homophily) within reference groups.

#### **2.4.4 Settings**

De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) argued there is a correlation between similarity (homophily) and physical proximity with tie-strength insofar as being alike and in close vicinity tends to lead to stronger ties, but noted that tie-strength wasn't as influential after the 'awareness' stage of the decision making process. This raises the

need to explore the concept of proximity. The discussion of eWOM often makes reference to electronic proximity and traditional (or face-to-face) WOM to physical proximity (Monge & Contractor, 2001) and it is this view of proximity that largely diverges the literature. While the literature review in this thesis accepts the importance of electronic proximity, it is limited to the role in terms of face-to-face WOM. The overarching concept of proximity is widely recognised in the literature. Libai et al. (2010) observed that the geographic, temporal, and social distance may be much more important than customer characteristics in WOM.

The environment in which WOM is exchanged holds an important role, Weenig (2004 p.422) suggested that ‘in the immediate geographic environment, spatial distance appears to be a decisive factor’. Monge and Contractor (2001, p. 228) pointed to a number of studies supporting the contention ‘that face-to-face communication decreases significantly with as little as 100 foot of distance’. They offer the explanation that ‘individuals who are not proximate are deprived of the opportunity to explore these common interests and hence are less likely to initiate communication links’. McPherson et al. (2001) suggested that even trivial arrangement of physical spatial layout can impact the formation of weak ties.

Brown and Reingen (1987 p.358) found their hypothesis that ‘active information seeking is more likely to occur from strong-tie than weak-tie sources’ was not supported. The researchers found the opposite was true, attributing this by stating, ‘although no decisive evidence can be offered, it appears that situational or environmental cues prompted these WOM instances’. This was consistent with Belk’s (1971) earlier findings that WOM exchanges are dependent on conversational and environment context (cues). Belk went on to suggest that the relevant topic or setting for discussion could be created. Murphy (2001) concurred in her study of backpackers in Australia, noting that environment or settings in hostels are a conducive factor in fostering WOM. The relationship between spatial proximity and traveller-to-traveller interaction also seen in a cruise environment (Huang & Hsu, 2009), wineries (Bruwer & Thach, 2013) and campgrounds (Gerard & Chick, 2004) where travellers are spatially confined.

The reality of the modern traveller is such that the environment has extended to the on-line setting as well but Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) noted that existing

interpersonal communication theories were not appropriate for the on-line environment due to the absence of close proximity and social and environment cues. Tsiotsou et al. (2012) and Tham et al. (2013) more recently identified this difference and separately addressed the online and offline social interactions between travellers. This will be further discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of the mobilities paradigm.

The social settings of travellers and the opportunistic nature of WOM communications is an under-researched area of the literature. Di Pietro et al (2007 p.176) observed that the lineal approach to traveller decision making models 'failed to recognise the dynamics of the traveller experience, as well as the differences among travel segments that necessitate a traveller to respond to situations as they arise during a trip'. Coupled with Murphy et al's (2007) contention that the type of WOM used by travellers may be related to the convenience of accessing the information source suggests that there is scope for research to take place which takes into account the information needs and capacity to easily fulfil those needs by taking advantage of social circumstances.

#### **2.4.5 Communication**

Key to WOM is the bi-directional nature of the communication. This makes the channel of communication very important. The WOM exchange is constructed by the two parties (Gilly et al., 1998) and the channel selection is reflective of shared norms. Word of mouth has, traditionally, been considered a face-to-face verbal piece of communication (Arndt, 1967). Early research, however, did identify alternative means of verbal communication; for example King and Summers (1970) proposed further research into the 'dynamics of transmission' such as a study into face-to-face versus the telephone. Libai et al. (2010, p. 270) observed 40 years later that 'relatively limited attention has been given in recent years to the diversity of interaction types in offline environments' suggesting that mobile phone use is a worthy channel of exploration.

In the tourism context, a study by Grønflaten (2009) showed that the use of telephone (but did not specify mobile phone) was not considered to be an important channel of communication of information by travellers, with the internet the most important before departure and face-to-face the most important upon arrival (telephone was ranked 4th, behind print, internet and face-to-face in both circumstances). Grønflaten

(2009, p. 49) also observed that there is ‘no consistent distinction between who is providing the information and how it is communicated’ and argued the importance of timing, source and communication channel selection.

These scholars’ views of WOM and channel selection are becoming increasingly important. From a tourism perspective there is value in understanding the channels of communication for WOM, particularly after arrival to a destination. While Grønflaten’s study highlighted the importance of face-to-face, it is the on-line environment and the subsequent spread of WOM which has commanded the recent attention of researchers. With the advent of technology, particularly the internet, a voice can be heard by millions in every corner of the globe. This impact is not lost on practitioners or academics. Terms like ‘word of mouse’, e-WOM, buzz marketing and viral marketing, are linked to the technology that underpins the movement of communication. However, given the lack of empirical evidence to substantiate that this channel is overtaking face-to-face, the focus on this area of research appears to be disproportionate. Indeed Tan and Tang (2013) recently found that face-to-face WOM was considered a more useful source of information upon arrival at a destination than online sources in their study of Taiwanese travellers.

It is, however, important to acknowledge the role that eWOM plays in the modern communicationscape of WOM in tourism, it has an integrated and supplementary role to face-to-face WOM although the degree to which is not evident from the literature. De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) made two interesting observations with respect to eWOM and WOM. Firstly, they noted the precision with which data can be collected in the eWOM context in real time. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 4 but it is useful in the context of a review of the studies in this field to note that data obtained through hits, clicks, messages, on-line ratings, comments and the like can provide plentiful and objective data within strict measurement parameters for the purpose of testing hypotheses in real time. Secondly, the scholars note that, ‘the physical world has several properties that do not translate into the context of an electronic referral, such as repeated exposures (electronic referrals are usually one-time communications) or joint consumption settings (the distance and electronic nature of the communication make that unlikely). These characteristics all predict a greater interpersonal influence offline than online’ (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008, p. 162).



***BASELINE STATEMENT***

Technology has escalated the reach of WOM messages

#### **2.4.6 Temporal aspect of WOM in Tourism**

This raises an interesting and important point regarding setting the temporal parameters for the discussion of WOM in tourism (Katz et al., 2004). In effect, the post decision making of one individual has the capacity, via WOM, to impact the decision making of an other (or others) over an unspecified period of time. This impact can occur immediately or long after the experience. There is a substantial body of literature acknowledges the role of WOM in the pre-trip (such as risk minimisation and decision making) and post-trip (including cognitive dissonance, helping behaviours) arenas but this next section will explore the immediacy of these within the setting of the destination. In doing so the temporal aspect will focus on the WOM research at-destination (that is, during travel). While the influence of close and familial relationships has a role to play, this section will explore the relationships during travel which contribute to WOM. The research suggests there is much to benefit from in looking more closely at the WOM dynamic among travellers upon arrival.

### **2.5 Traveller information**

The literature supports the link between information acquisition and increased destination activity during a traveller's visit to a destination, yet the role of WOM in this process remains under-researched (Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014). Ortega and Rodriguez (2007 p.151) noted in their study that information at destinations 'has a positive effect on the length of stay in order to visit those attractions that the tourists were previously unaware'. Tideswell and Faulkner's (1999) research into international travellers to Queensland also found that WOM, when used in conjunction with other information sources, saw an increase in the number of overnight stopovers. Other research in this area supports this contention, Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff (2007) found that WOM information source usage was linked to an increase in activity participation at the destination and Murphy's (2001)

earlier research into backpackers' influence on the touristic decisions of other backpackers around Australia found that over 46% of respondents were 'often/frequently' influenced by the information provided by fellow backpackers. Kain and King's (2004) replication of Murphy's (1999) study found that 56% of backpackers cited recommendations from other backpackers as being 'influential or very influential' in their tourism purchase decisions.

Such findings have also been reflected in the tourism industry with research by Australia coach operator AAT Kings showing that 40% of their day tour passengers do not book their tours until arrival at their destination ("Agents missing out on commission," 2008). A finding echoed by a Queensland regional strategic study (Tourism Research Australia, 2007b) which found the majority of travellers booked attractions (69%) and tours (73%) upon arrival to their destination, and a significant number of travellers (23%) also booked accommodation after arrival.

***BASELINE STATEMENT***

All travellers will research and explore their destination upon arrival

One of challenges in WOM research is that tourism researchers have traditionally clustered 'WOM' as one single information source (or more broadly, used 'family and friends'), rather than segmenting WOM into discrete sources. There has been a shift on this front with some recent studies providing more specific categorisations of WOM sources upon arrival to a destination. For example:

- Murphy (2001), whose qualitative study explored backpackers use of fellow backpackers in Queensland;
- Murphy et al (2007) who measured the use of 'family and friends', 'other travellers', 'both' and 'none' as sources of WOM in destination decision making in Townsville, Queensland;
- Tourism Western Australia's (2007) research report into caravan park users in Western Australia categorised travel information sources as: discussion with other travellers en-route, state motoring guides, family and friends, caravan and camping guides, visitor centres, guide books, internet, chain loyalty;

- Tourism Research Australia's (2007b) report into trip planning and decision making of travellers to Queensland prior to arrival, during transit and upon arrival categorised recommendations into 'family and friends' and 'other travellers', and
- Grøflaten (2009) measured and ranked, 'family and friends', 'other travellers', travel agents, service providers, journalists and information centres, before and after arrival to Oslo, Norway.

The limited number of studies is curious given that all travellers, regardless of advanced purchases and prior decision making, will make some decisions at the destination itself whether it be shopping, restaurants, accommodation, attractions or duration of stay, multiple destination (Moore et al., 2012). Moreover the social element of travel and the desire to communicate experiences with others is largely overlooked and further research is warranted on the relationships between travellers and the communication which takes place within these relationships at the destination.

#### ***BASELINE STATEMENT***

A proportion of decisions will be upon arrival to a destination

### **2.5.1 Traveller to traveller interaction**

The degree to which the research addresses WOM influence on other travellers during their stay is limited. Not surprisingly research shows that WOM in relation to VFR (visiting friends and relatives) travellers is sourced, significantly, from family and friends (Murphy et al., 2007; Snepenger et al., 1990). This is both logical and practical for the traveller; however a limitation of the tourism WOM literature identified by Stokowski (1992) is that tourism research has centred on relational ties of 'affiliation, liking and sentiment' among family and friends rather than analysing other relational contents such as casual or transitory relations. Some 15 years later Murphy et al (2007) contended that this gap in the research still existed and that much of the research identifying WOM as an information source for decision making remained focused on friends and relatives.

In essence the casual or transitory relationships which are most likely to have influence over decision making at the destination are those:

1. between the traveller and locals (Rompf et al., 2005; Tasci & Gartner, 2007);
2. between the traveller and service provider (Escobar & Harris, 1997; File et al., 1992; Haywood, 1989; Yang & Mattila, 2012);
3. between the traveller and other travellers (Murphy et al., 2007; Prideaux & McClymont, 2006).

The casual and transitory relations are particularly important regarding the dynamics of WOM whilst at the destination. As individuals are connected to more people – even strangers – their access to information has increased, but information overload and conflicting information means that these individuals need others in their network to assist them in navigate this information (Blazevic et al., 2013, p. 295).

Rompf et al (2005) contended that family and friends have influence before departure and added that expertise is sought opportunistically while travellers are at their destination, suggesting members of the local community could fulfil that role. Decrop (2006, p. 111) also found that ‘information accumulates naturally, growing from one source of information to the other, without much searching effort’, adding that information provided by friends and relatives are intermediary rather than terminal and stimulate more information search. Later, Grønflaten (2009, p. 51) was more explicit stating that ‘WOM from other tourists was seen as a typical ‘during travel’ source.

More recently, with the emergence of eWOM (electronic WOM), an additional category could be added:

4. between the traveller and on-line advisors (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Burgess et al., 2011; Tan & Tang, 2013)

The anonymous relationships established in the virtual world can be just as influential on decision making and certainly contribute to knowledge acquisition. Even with the abundance of opinion and perceived expertise offered on-line, the degree to which these relationships (or the aforementioned relationship types) influence decisions or contribute to knowledge acquisition remains unclear (Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, &

Backman, 2010). Significantly, this shows a gap in the existing and emerging research into the roles and relationships within the WOM dynamic at-destination.

***BASELINE STATEMENT***

Travellers will socially interact with other travellers during their visit to a destination

### 2.5.2 Traveller WOM sources

Table 2-2 summarises the various sources of WOM. While this summary cannot be held true of all relationships, it largely reflects the direction of the literature.

Table 2-2 – Summary of travel WOM source characteristics

SOURCE	TIMING	HOMOPHILY	TIE STRENGTH	PERCEIVED EXPERTISE	CREDIBILITY LEVEL
<b>Family &amp; Friends</b>	Pre-travel	High	Strong	Varied	High
	Post travel				
<b>Locals</b>	During travel	Low	Weak	High	Varied
<b>Service providers</b>	During travel	Varied	Weak	High	Low
<b>Online advisors</b>	Pre-travel	Varied	Weak	High	Varied
	During travel				
<b>Other like travellers</b>	During travel	High	Varied	Varied	High

Family and friends provide influence due to closeness of the relationship. Homophily is usually high due to culture, upbringing and other aspects of familiarity. Implicit in this is also a level of trust. Underlying the premise of close relationships such as those with family and close friends is a sense of reciprocity of good will. Moreover this group is characterised by frequent and close contact, in the physical sense prior to travel and electronically during travel.

Locals at a destination are considered experts and credible but the literature shows that the opportunity for transient travellers to mix and develop relationships with locals are limited. Underlying the relationships between travellers and service providers is the commercial nature of the exchange. The literature illustrates that commercial aspects erode the credibility of WOM. Despite the fact that service

providers are considered experts, information provided may be treated with scepticism or could simply contribute to a 'knowledge bank' for later verification.

Online advisors are, more frequently, anonymous. The contact may be indirect or asynchronous and without context. WOM from such sources may contribute more to a 'knowledge bank', foster fantasy or address very specific questions but is less likely to have the rich, nuanced detail (embedded in storytelling) or opportunistic happenstance that can influence an immediate decision. The sought expertise usually relies on the trust from the channel (website, forum, social media platform), rather than the individual behind the message (De Bruyen & Lilien, 2008).

Other like travellers, however, can be selected on the grounds of similarity to ensure that views and communication is congruent (Katz et al., 2004; McPherson et al., 2001). This source also has the potential to develop a relationship over time allowing electronic proximity to take over when physical proximity ends due to a traveller moving on. Trust can be developed and, with time spent during travel, expertise can be determined. As Tsotsou et al. (2012) noted,

*during a trip, tourist-to-tourist offline interactions can have a significant impact on tourist experiences' including finding and sharing information and the affirmation of mutual understandings of shared common experiences and landscapes. In other words, these interactions don't just contribute to the experience but give shared meaning to the tourist experience.*

In reality, multiple sources are used for WOM at varying times, in different forms and for different purposes but given the limited number of studies that actually distinguish these sources, it is challenging to know to what extent. This is important for destination marketing if WOM is going to be considered in planned marketing communication activity.

## **2.6 Word of Mouth in destination marketing**

There has been a proliferation of academic and industry research into the electronic realm and the temptation to further explore eWOM as a channel is understandable. Certainly, from practitioners' perspectives it appears to be the panacea that couples economic efficiencies with maximum reach. In terms of spread or diffusal, studies

show that WOM is more effective than advertising (Dichter, 1966; Goldenberg et al., 2001). More recently a tourism study by Baggio et al (2009, p. 13) found this to also be true for a simulated test with tour operators, noting that ‘a more intense advertising effort is needed to reach the same level of informed people than for WOM’. Underlying these studies is the process of WOM in information diffusal, or what Monge and Contractor (2001) referred to as theories of contagion, the following section reviews standpoints and strategies regarding the management of WOM.

### **2.6.1 WOM cannot be managed**

There is a widely held view that WOM is a message generated by the traveller but is uncontrolled and unmanaged by the organisation or destination (Hsieh & O’Leary, 1993; Tourism Research Australia, 2008). This is a view that has evolved from services marketing research that argues that a satisfactory or exemplary experience will automatically result in positive WOM activity.

Lovelock, Patterson and Walker (1998) suggested that delighted customers spread positive WOM and, effectively, become walking, talking advertisements. Nickels (1984) discussed the effective handling of complaints and consumer responsiveness as a means of boosting reputation and WOM. Harrison-Walker (2001) also found an increased likelihood of engaging in WOM particularly when service quality is low.

This line of research also extends to tourism literature. The literature offers a substantial number of examples where destination satisfaction has been correlated with intention to recommend (and intention to return):

- González, Comesaña, and Brea (2007) studied visitors to a spa region of Spain and found that positive perceived quality saw an increase in WOM communication intention;
- Prebensen (2005) clustered Norwegian package tour travellers who visited warmer climes and found support between satisfaction and intention to engage in WOM activity;
- Kau and Lim (2005) clustered Chinese nationals visiting Singapore by motivation and found a strong relationship between destination satisfaction and likelihood to recommend to others;

- Pritchard (2003) found a strong relationship between satisfaction with the attributes of Western Australia as a destination among domestic travellers and likelihood to engage in positive WOM, and
- Kozak (2003) researched British and German tourists' satisfaction with Mallorca in Spain and Mugla in Turkey and found significant correlation between all 8 attributes of the destinations and intention to recommend.

However, there is a methodological flaw in this approach. As de Matos and Rossi (2008, p. 593) pointed out, 'most consumer researchers grapple with the question of whether to use intentions or behavior in measuring behavioral constructs like WOM. Our review suggests a large and significant difference (.42 versus .18) between these approaches in the WOM context'. This is a challenge to marketers who want to take the lesson from these studies that 'satisfaction', 'WOM' and positive behaviours (such as recommending, returning, loyalty) are simply linked. In fact, the gap between intentions and actual behaviours casts doubt on whether a satisfactory tourism experience will result in any outcome at all. Moreover, as Lang and Hyde (2013) point out, WOM behaviour is a voluntary act.

### **2.6.2 WOM can be managed**

More recently, however, the literature has shifted from this view of WOM being an outcome or antecedent that contributes to a marketing process to WOM being a discrete marketing strategy in of itself. This may be attributed to findings of studies that do not support the view that WOM is a natural outcome of met expectation. For example, Wirtz and Chew (2002 p.141) found that 'satisfied customers are a necessary but not sufficient condition for getting positive WOM'.

Dobele and Ward (2002) categorised WOM management into two groups; those who believe that WOM is generated from consumers with no immediate means of control or management and those who 'at least hint at a measure of control and influence' which sees control as a function of the WOM process. De Bruyen and Lilien (2008 p.151) also noted that WOM is 'dissemination that cannot be easily controlled by marketers or brand managers'. From this thinking has emerged two streams of research, firstly in relation to destination image and, secondly, how WOM can be managed at the service provider level.



Research into the role of WOM in destination image is contradictory. A study by Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff (2007 p.527) found that different patterns in WOM source usage were linked to different travel behaviours and choices at the destination 'but that these differences do not influence destination image'. This contradicted previous research by Tasci and Gartner (2007) who noted that the organic formation of destination images results from the experience of the visitor and will result in WOM 'once the tourist returns home', and Hanlan & Kelly's (2005) contention that visitors' initial image of a destination is developed through WOM from members of the market segment who have acquired experiences from tourism service providers beyond the control of the DMO. The reason for this difference may be that Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff's study was undertaken while the subjects were visiting the destination rather than postulating their potential behaviours (as per the model in the previous section). Chapter 3 discusses more fully the literature in terms of in-situ research, the above example does, however, demonstrate the benefit in researching WOM of travellers during their stay to examine actual behaviours rather than potential behaviours.

In their model, Tasci and Gartner (2007) categorised WOM as 'semi-dynamic/semi controllable' in their model of destination image. While noting that WOM is not the static result from a chain of touristic encounters, their research did not identify the specific factors which are controllable and those that are not, this is a significant gap in the research. Similarly, Hyde (2007) suggested that tourism marketers should continue to use tactics to encourage WOM from their satisfied customers in his study of independent visitors to New Zealand, but did not specify what tactics should be employed. Baggio et al. (2009, p. 28) found in their simulation study of advertising and WOM that 'the process [of WOM] is almost independent from the efforts of the informing organization and depends only on the set of relationships between the members of the social group', suggesting that WOM is not completely independent of the DMO's efforts.

Some tourism marketing literature has offered tactical measures which can be undertaken by operators to manage WOM activity; Haywood (1989) outlined WOM strategies which could be used to influence WOM in the tourism and hospitality industry and Stokes and Lomax (2002) analysed tactics used in one particular hotel to

harness WOM. These findings, however, do not explain why such tactics for operators would be successful nor propose the extent of the success.

At the destination level there appears even less research. Hanlan and Kelly (2005) suggested that focusing on the specific market segment coupled with on-line tactics may facilitate the management of WOM for a destination. Later Simpson and Siguaw (2008) suggested that destination managers encourage tourists to stay longer in the destination, not only for economic reasons, but increased propensity to promote the area. With the exception of these two studies, there has been little research specific to managing WOM at the destination level.

### **2.6.3 WOM can be fostered**

Some academics have suggested that the best option available to marketers is fostering WOM communication. Goldenberg, Libai and Muller (2001, p. 221) posited that ‘fostering inter-network ties may be one of the few options available’, this supported King and Summers (1970) earlier suggestion that interpersonal communication itself is the most significant influencer on decisions.

The literature offers a variety of strategies and tactics that have been implemented in an attempt to manage the process of WOM in the tourism context. The focus of these studies has been largely on managing information diffusal, that is, the communication process, with very little attention paid to the interpersonal relationships that underpin the communication. Nevertheless, an understanding of strategies offered in the research will reveal gaps for further exploration.

### **2.6.4 Existing WOM strategies**

Strategies to manage WOM, drawn largely from the services marketing literature, have been utilised in the tourism industry. It is worthy of noting that most of the studies which outline tactics are set in the context of small businesses (Haywood, 1989; Stokes & Lomax, 2002) or market segment (Fick & Ritchie, 1991) with little done on traveller segment (see Murphy, 2001 for a backpacker example) or destination (see Hanlan & Kelly, 2005 for Byron Bay). A further observation is the heavy reliance on the influencer (identification and use of opinion leaders) and the ‘chat-worthy’ value of the message.

From a strategic perspective, four main themes are revealed in the tourism literature;

1. Stimulating WOM – encouraging discussion by consumers
2. Simulating WOM – present a representation of WOM activity
3. Curbing WOM – damage control
4. Monitoring WOM – keeping abreast of stakeholder views

It would appear that the literature supports the idea that WOM can be used at the tourism operations level and, indeed, many tourism operators have implemented such concepts to their individual enterprises. Haywood (1989) discussed opinion leaders in travel and gave the example of a conference venue providing a kit on running conferences as a means of stimulating inquiries. Additionally he outlined familiarisation tours of hotels as a means of stimulating WOM and this has been one of the clearest and longest used forms of WOM promotion in the travel industry. Hanlan and Kelly (2005) also discussed familiarisations aimed at intermediaries, journalists and opinion leaders as a means of stimulating WOM for a destination and added whisper marketing and on-line, viral marketing tactics as further methods that could be employed. Pritchard (2003) suggested the use of online e-postcards and sending digital photos as tactics being used by some destinations to foster WOM.

More recently there has been an acknowledgement of the growing influence of the travel in the electronic domain. Blazevic et al. (2013, p. 295) observed that, ‘consumers have much more information available when pursuing their purchase decisions. As they are connected to more people – even strangers – their access to information has increased’. A destination example of this, which acknowledges the reach and significance of technology, was the announcement by Tourism Australia that one of the world’s most influential bloggers was to visit Australia as part of their new initiative to target social media opinion leaders.

Much of the research on simulating WOM stems from advertising literature based on Dichter (1966), which categorises this type of advertising as ‘slice of life’ or testimonial (Nickels, 1984). File, Judd and Prince et al (1992) discussed the use of testimonials for increasing WOM, and this is perhaps the most frequently used WOM tactic when marketing a destination. Over the years Australian destinations have used a variety of popular celebrities to endorse destinations, Daryl Somers with the Northern Territory, Elle Macpherson with Western Australia and Ernie Dingo for the

See Australia domestic travel campaign and more recently, Oprah Winfrey's visit to Australia. The potential problems with such campaigns are; the risk of overexposure, lack of credibility of the source and an awareness of a commercial arrangement between the destination and individual endorsing it; all of which erode its value. Word of mouth, by definition, is non-commercial in nature so the degree of effectiveness of such campaigns is probably questionable from the outset.

The literature offers little in terms of curbing WOM, and destination examples are few. Both Bayus (1985) and Haywood (1989) addressed this issue from the firm's perspective with a two pronged strategy; firstly, a 'lay low' approach, that is reducing public visibility of the firm and secondly, effectively dealing with complaints. Such strategies can be difficult to implement at destination level, for example a 'lay low' approach in Cairns after Cyclone Larry in 2005 or New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2007 would not have been realistic. Similarly, a customer feedback mechanism (such as a toll free number or customer service email), commonplace in tourism and hospitality businesses for monitoring potential WOM, is unlikely to provide a satisfactory outcome for a traveller unhappy with the weather, cost of dining or attitude of locals. These examples highlight the challenges to WOM management and might go some way in explaining why this particular area of WOM research is lacking.

A range of strategies have been undertaken by destinations to monitor WOM. Haywood (1989) discussed; talking to consumers, suppliers and agents, market research, debriefing staff, remedying complaints and after-service follow-up. From a destination marketing perspective, surveying visitors, training industry, communicating with industry and use of focus groups is standard practice. The degree to which this translates to the on-line environment is not as apparent. One example is Carson (2008) who researched the 'blogosphere' (referring to the collective activity of on-line journals or 'weblogs') as a means of measuring visitor attitudes in the Northern Territory. More recently, DMOs have incorporated monitoring the social media landscape but this does little to provide insight into the face-to-face exchange.

Unlike previous attempts where WOM management has been considered 'more art than science', technology does offer DMOs the opportunity to yield measurable results. Moreover, as Buttle (1998) then later (Tham et al., 2013) pointed out, WOM

voiced electronically leaves archival threads, this also presents DMOs with the opportunity to measure change in views from those contributing opinion.

From the research perspective attempts to link the management of destination WOM with the communication behaviour of travellers (as individuals or groups) has been ad hoc. The focus of much of the research in this area being on tactics of the firm (Haywood, 1989; Stokes & Lomax, 2002), or from the service satisfaction by the traveller (Chadee & Mattsson, 1996; González, Comesaña, & Brea, 2007; Lang & Hyde, 2013; O'Neill, 2000).

## ***2.7 Research Gaps and Baseline Statements***

The baseline statements will act as a foundation for the research approach and the research gaps will drive the development of the research objectives. The gaps revealed in the literature can be categorised as theoretical, methodological and practical gaps. The following summation of these baseline statements and gaps provides a focal point for further research.

### **2.7.1 Baseline Statements**

No one single theory relating to WOM in tourism was revealed in the review of the literature, this is consistent with Confente's review of the theoretical studies (Confente, 2014). While contradictions and gaps have emerged, so to have a number of tenants which appear to be supported by the broader body of research. These were identified through out the chapter and have been summarised below:

- WOM is two way, non-commercial communication and is perceived as being unbiased;
- WOM is used at all stages of decision making and is considered to be the most powerful and influential factor in the decision making process;
- Technology has escalated the reach of WOM messages;
- All travellers will research and explore their destination upon arrival;
- A proportion of touristic elements will be selected upon arrival to a destination, even if they are as insignificant as souvenir shopping, and
- Travellers will socially interact with other travellers during their visit to a destination.

### 2.7.2 Theoretical Research Gaps

Theoretically, the development of WOM theory has been ‘ad-hoc’ (Confente, 2014; Harrison-Walker, 2001). The review of the literature identifies the role and importance of WOM before, during and after travel in terms of the decision making process. A large number of studies, however, have focused on the pre-tour information seeking and post-tour behaviours (or intended behaviours). This gap presents a void in empirical research on travellers during their stay.

- 1) Lack of research into WOM communication between travellers at-destination.

Much of the tourism literature has explored close or familial relationships (family & friends) and other transactional relationships on site but there is acknowledgement that the closeness of the relationships (tie strength) and the similarities between individuals (homophily) will have a bearing on the degree of influence.

- 2) Lack of research into the relationships between travellers which contributes to WOM at a destination.

Brown and Reingen (1987) suggested that an analysis of WOM at the individual level would present understanding of several important issues; including how WOM exchanges precipitating from social networks impacts attitude formation or change and, also, how subsequent decision making behaviour affects the network structure. This is particularly important for better understanding WOM among groups of like travellers.

- 3) The role of weak tie relationships between travellers in informing and influencing at-destination decision making.
- 4) How travellers within market segments communicate between each other.

The social psychology literature supports the contention that close physical proximity increases face-to-face communication activity. There is a suggestion that particular social settings support engagement in WOM activity among groups of travellers:

- 5) Situational circumstances within which WOM takes place.

At the same time, much tourism research has shifted the focus to the ‘virtual’ space and ‘electronic’ channels without empirically testing the appropriateness to do so.

- 6) The selection of communication channels used by travellers to engage in WOM exchange.

### **2.7.3 Empirical Research Gaps**

When reviewing WOM at both the traveller level and destination marketing level it is apparent that attempts to marry the two have been limited, an observation made of the broader literature (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Dichter's (1966) early work endeavoured to explore how WOM at consumer level impacted advertising effectiveness. Goldenberg, Libai and Muller (2001) found that the effects of external marketing efforts (including advertising) have less influence on information dissemination than either strong or weak tie relationships.

From a tourism perspective, research suggests that there are tactical measures which can be undertaken by the firm to manage WOM activity (see Haywood, 1989; Stokes & Lomax, 2002). With the exception of Halan and Kelly's (2005) study on Byron Bay, there has been little research specific to managing WOM at the destination level and there are no evident studies linking the WOM activity at the traveller level to the management of WOM at the destination level. This highlights the need for further research with respect to:

- 1) how specific segments (networks of weak-tie relationships) impact WOM activity during travel to a destination;
- 2) whether the WOM phenomenon is specific to a segment of travellers (network) or can be applied to a destination, and
- 3) having a better understanding of the WOM phenomenon at a traveller level can be managed to as part of the destination marketing activity.

### **2.7.4 Methodological Research Gaps**

The literature revealed methodological gaps in the scholarly body of research. In short, much of the existing WOM research hinges on 'recommendation' or 'information source' taking a quantitative approach to singular elements of the exchange often disregarding the integrated nature of WOM in communication and the varying contexts:

- 1) reliance on post-travel research (often tying destination satisfaction with intent to disseminate WOM) where evidence shows that there is a gap between ‘intent’ and ‘actual behaviour’;
- 2) an assumption that WOM is a dyadic exchange with known, static variables which can be measured and quantitatively extrapolated in a predictive manner;
- 3) dearth of research focusing on the WOM phenomenon which captures the nuances and interactions during the exchange, and
- 4) insufficient detail on the content of WOM exchanges, particularly at the destination (limited to ‘day to day’ decision making).

## 2.8 *Summary*

Considerable tourism WOM research has been directed at attracting travellers to a destination, allowing the marketing efforts of the individual firms to influence travellers’ decision making with respect to tourism products. The focus of WOM on tactics of the firm would support this view. Additionally, the body of research has also examined WOM as a result of touristic behaviour although studies largely analyse this from a post-travel perspective.

Upon arrival at a destination, the literature indicates that there is social interaction between travellers. The research also indicates that this social interaction results in exchange of information and that there is a relationship between information on-site and increased touristic activity. At the same time, the capacity to share information on site has expanded with the use of new technological communication channels. The interplay of these people, settings, communication and time is worth further exploring to understand how the interaction between travellers at a destination may impact the WOM dynamic. In particular, a closer examination of the constructs of tie-strength and homophily within the context of traveller networks may provide insight into the management of the WOM phenomenon at a destination level.



### 3 Methodology

The aim of this research is explore how interaction between like travellers at a destination impacts the WOM dynamic. Unlike previous research which simply acknowledges influence of WOM in either the pre-visit (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Snepenger et al., 1990) or post visit (Cleaver, 2000; Moutinho, 1987) arenas or attempts to measure it (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Tan & Tang, 2013), this research seeks to understand the WOM phenomenon in situ (during travel). Moreover, this research will draw on the existing research on WOM relationships (tie-strength) and the perceptions of others within these segments (perceptual homophily) to better understand the relationship dynamics between travellers as they seek and acquire information that has expertise, credibility and trustworthiness. Additionally, the emerging research on technology and social networking will underpin the exploration of the communication channels used to engage in WOM activity by these populations.

The following chapter outlines the research methodology adopted in this thesis. This chapter will discuss the following methodological approach and concepts and, in doing so, provide a clear and appropriate framework to address the research questions:

- Identification of gaps in the literature, in terms of findings and methodological approach;
- considered research paradigms;
- justification of mobilities paradigm;
- inductive and deductive approaches to theory;
- qualitative and quantitative research;
- the role of the researcher;
- the selection of a case study method;
- justification for the research procedures selected within the research framework, and
- outline of data collection and analysis process.

#### 3.1 *Research Gaps*

The literature review identified a number of baseline statements and gaps in previous research. Addressing all deficiencies of the body of research is beyond the scope of this thesis; however Figure 3-1 shows how theoretical gaps have formed the basis of

the research question and objectives (Chapter 1), the empirical and methodological gaps outlined below will direct the design and conduct of the research.

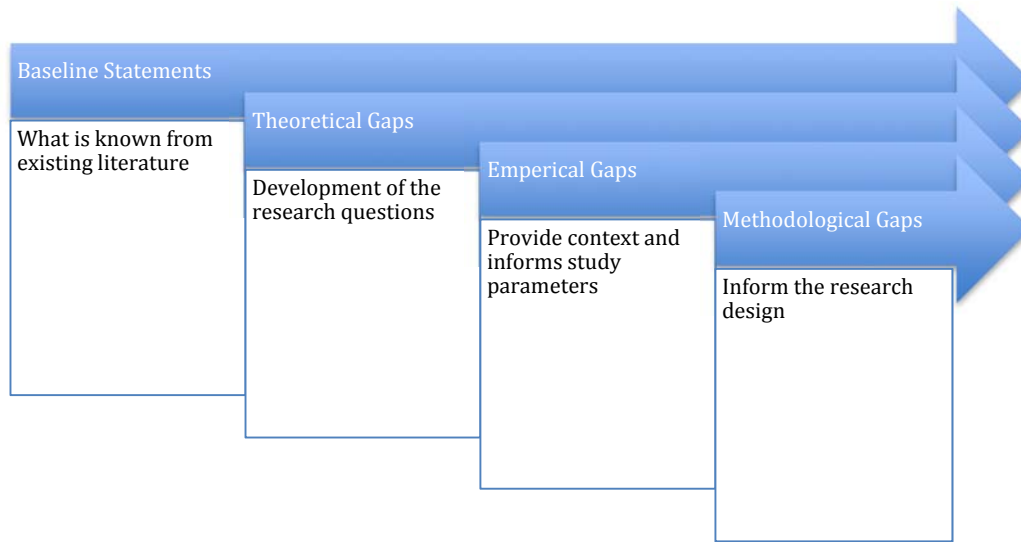


Figure 3-1 – Basis of the research design

#### *Theoretical research gaps*

- Lack of research into WOM communication between travellers to a destination.
- Lack of research into the relationships between travellers that contributes to WOM at a destination.
- The role of weak tie network relationships between travellers in informing and influencing at-destination decision making.
- How travellers within market segments communicate between each other.
- Situational circumstances within which WOM takes place.
- The selection of communication channels used by travellers to engage in WOM exchange.

#### *Empirical research gaps*

- The impact of specific segments' (networks of weak-tie relationships) WOM activity during travel to a destination.
- Whether the WOM phenomenon is specific to a group of travellers (network) or can be applied to a destination.

- Whether better understanding of the WOM phenomenon at a traveller level can be managed to as part of the destination marketing activity.

*Methodological research gaps*

- Reliance on post-travel research rather than in-situ.
- An assumption that WOM is a dyadic exchange with known, static variables which can be measured and quantitatively extrapolated in a predictive manner.
- Dearth of research focusing on the WOM phenomenon which captures the nuances and interactions during the exchange. Insufficient detail on the content of WOM exchanges, particularly at the destination.

While these gaps will direct the design of the research, some consideration needs to be given to some of the philosophical worldviews within which the research will be framed.

### **3.2 *Worldview research considerations***

The interrelationship between time, settings and people is complex, but very important in tourism WOM research. Altman and Rogoff (1987) discussed these elements in terms of psychology, the environment and philosophical worldviews. Two worldviews posited by the scholars evident in the reviewed literature are interactional and transactional worldviews. The focus of the former is behaviour, environment and time as independent elements, where the change in one element (such as environment eg. positive service experience) will result in the change in another element (such as behaviour eg. positive WOM), usually in a linear fashion (time). Examples of this view in the body of tourism WOM research are plentiful (see Chapter 2).

The latter view suggests that time, setting and people are interrelated factors that contribute jointly to the experience and cannot be viewed individually as no one factor can be extracted from the human experience being researched. The nature of such ‘all encompassing’ research is such that it has not been widely applied in the field of tourism research. A notable exception is the work of Alain Decrop (2007) who effectively collected, analysed and discussed vacation information seeking and decision making behaviours of participants considering the interrelated concepts of time, settings and people. Examples in WOM research, however, appear to be lacking.

While both views are applicable to tourism research, it is the interactional worldview that provides the overarching framework for this research. The complexities of tourist behaviour, their unique environment during travel, the variation of timeframes along with time constraints and social interactions cannot be disentangled for the identification and measurement of communication variables. As Cresswell (2006 p.4) noted, 'any consideration of movement (and mobility) that does not take time and space into account is missing an important facet'. The following sections will discuss research considerations from the broader literature and set the parameters of this research within the context of this transactional worldview.

There are limitations of post-hoc visitor behavioural research which substantially revolve around the capacity of the cognitive process. Firstly research of this nature imposes a need to reconstruct the experience, the ability to recreate elements such as state-of-mind, feelings, motivations and perceptions in a valid and accurate manner requires substantial cognitive capacity (Cleaver, 2000). Creating a design flexible enough to allow for variance of this capacity among subjects is challenging. Secondly, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that travellers will make psychological adjustments to accommodate social and environmental circumstances (Bartle, 2011; Cleaver, 2000; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). Reflection, reminiscing, daydreaming (Tourism Queensland, 2007) have been identified as post travel behaviours which also reflect this theory of psychological flexibility.

These considerations of traveller reconstruction and reflection highlight the limitations in valid post hoc research where each of the elements (time, setting and people) play an interactive role in the experience and are manifested in the communication within this setting. As such this research will investigate the WOM phenomenon as it unfolds, in-situ. Related to timing, is the setting and this research will be conducted at the destination. Moreover it is intended to gather insight into communications 'at destination' rather than simply measuring intent to engage in WOM activity. Tourism studies which have used this in-situ approach to capture the feelings, satisfaction, images and impressions at the destination that are then conveyed to others (including travellers) include:

- Moore et al. (2012) interviewed 140 visitors during their visit to New Zealand to determine micro level decision making at various stages of their trip;

- Guthrie and Anderson (2007) interviewed visitors at three different locations within Edinburgh and Greenwich World Heritage sites and found that the presence of other tourists has an impact on destination experience; and
- Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff (2007) surveyed visitors during their visit to one of two locations near Townsville to determine their sources of WOM (family & friends versus other travellers) in decision making for that trip.

These examples of in-situ studies capture the essence of the tourist experience during their visit to specific destinations. The use of in-situ research at the destination was considered appropriate for this research in keeping with the transactional worldview. Moreover this worldview proposes that the behavioural phenomenon is part of a constant and dynamic setting. The people in that setting both contribute to the dynamism of the destination experience and exhibit the WOM communication behaviour being studied.

### ***3.1 Selection of a research paradigm***

An inquiry or research paradigm is broadly a basic set of beliefs that guides actions (Guba, 1990). In the tourism context Botterill and Plantenkamp (2012, p. 138) noted that the term is used as a ‘container-concept for new theories and empirical generalisations, especially in relatively new fields such as management or communication studies’. While terminology and suitability of paradigms in post-modern research could be argued, the next section will explore the two paradigms that have dominated the tourism and WOM areas; the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. The consideration of their suitability and the need for an alternative paradigm for this research is then outlined.

The positivist paradigm is drawn from the physical sciences where universal laws and truths apply. It focuses on facts that can then be used to extrapolate generalisations with regard to behaviour, which can then be developed into models or theories to explain cause or predict outcomes. Positivism relies on the hypothetical-deductive approach as a research strategy, hypotheses are generated from experience, existing knowledge and/or intuition then verified (Botterill & Plantenkamp, 2012; Veal, 2011). Some examples highlighted in the literature that take a positivist or post-positivist, deductive (hypothesis based or model testing) approach to WOM research in tourism destinations include:

- Jacobsen and Munar (2012) who found high levels of internet use by Scandinavians both before and during their travels to Mallorca;
- Rompf et al (2005) who found partial support for their model of Visitor Purchase Behaviour for At-Destination Decisions;
- Fodness and Murray (1998, 1999) whose research segmented leisure travellers by information source and information search strategies; and
- Tideswell and Faulkner (1999) who found support for their hypothesis that those visitors to Queensland who seek more information are inclined to visit more destinations.

The literature review has revealed that much of the body of relevant tourism research, and subsequent gaps in that research, has been developed within a framework of a positivist and post-positivist paradigm. Criticism of this approach has been levelled at both the WOM research (Harrison-Walker, 2001) and destination decision making research (Dann, 1996b). Huan and Beaman (2006 p.156) further noted that demographic data and numbers 'do not address the importance of a particular social contact occurring or some particular information being obtained at a given time'.

Given the social and situational context of WOM communication, the gaps identified in the literature and limitations in quantifying this behaviour, an interpretive paradigm was considered. The interpretive paradigm asserts that there may be multiple realities to explain a phenomenon. It is one that seeks to uncover meanings and the inter-relationships within the situation being researched (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Veal, 2005), recognises that there may be multiple realities rather than a single casual relationship or theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Jennings, 2001) and acknowledges the role of the researcher as being involved with the subjects. However, examples in tourism WOM research reflects an assumption that 'place' is fixed or the focus is on the traveller at the exclusion of the time, setting and people research considerations outlined in the previous section. Empirical examples using this paradigm include:

- Guthrie and Anderson (2010) explored the visitor's experience of a destination and how this contributes to the retelling of their experiences, and
- Gerard and Chick (2004) analysed reflective, narrative views of visitors to a campground for an annual fair to model enduring involvement with a leisure experience.

These take a phenomenological approach, a term often used interchangeably in the literature with ‘interpretivism’, to describe the social phenomena from the participant’s view. While this approach provides depth of findings it does not overcome the dynamism issue with at-destination WOM and social interactions. Furthermore, phenomenology is, by its nature, reflective and as such was also deemed unsuitable to address the research context of time, setting and people.

### **3.1.1 Mobilities paradigm**

The research aims to better understand the interrelationships between travellers and the resulting communication, in a variable environment that is entwined with the mobile and fixed. As such an alternative paradigm was appropriate. The mobilities paradigm, or New Mobilities Paradigm (NMP) as is sometimes referred (Büscher & Urry, 2009; Mavric & Urry, 2009; Sheller & Urry, 2006), accepts the movement of individuals and the dynamism of social groups resulting from this movement and assumes actual, virtual and imagined mobility is critical to modern life. Based on the thinking of ‘liquid modernity’, it assumes that people, objects, images and information are all moving and that there is an interdependence of these movements. The paradigm assumes a network approach of the mobile (travellers, stories, experiences) and the fixed (infrastructure, accommodation). Furthermore, that there is not a single network but complex intersections of ‘flow’, moving at different speed, scale at viscosity (Sheller & Urry, 2006).

According to Mavric and Urry (2009, p. 652) the key features of the mobilities paradigm are:

- People and places are not separate entities but are constantly creating and shaping each other;
- Experiences of people are negotiated through practices or performances;
- Body and senses play a paramount role in tourist experience;
- The co-presence of others plays a significant role in tourist experience;
- Mobility/ movement is embodied and is a significant part of the whole experience.
- Places consist of networks of mobilities and immobilities and come to life as and when they intersect, and
- Places are not fixed and static but can exist in other spaces and temporalities.

The mobilities paradigm particularly focuses on the causation of co-presence and addresses the two issues with social sciences research that have been problematic in the development of tourism WOM theory. Firstly, it addresses the sedentary issue that sees research set in place. A limitation of other paradigms for the research of tourism WOM is that they are bounded by place, that is, the destination. Cresswell (2006) considered tourist places as systems of mobile and material objects, technologies and social relations that are produced, imagined, recalled and anticipated. Sheller and Urry (2006) posited that tourist places exist and develop around the intersection of mobilities. The mobilities paradigm is concerned with the patterning, timing and methods offered to provide insight into the points of intersection between individuals. These points of intersection are where WOM episodes occur and contribute to the production of place by those visiting the destination. Secondly it addresses the static nature of social science research. Much of the existing tourism WOM research reflects a point in time and that findings from that point in time can then be extrapolated to any other given point in time (see Chapter 2).

The mobilities paradigm is considered appropriate in in terms of the transactional worldview proposed where time, setting and people and interconnected. Time is significant to tourism WOM as experiences are accumulated and contextualised prior to, during and after travel. Moreover, reflection, dissonance, circumstance and social adaptability all influence WOM exchange. The setting (or 'space' as Cresswell mentions) is where geographical location and travellers' sense of place combine to produce a destination in the tourism context. It is against this backdrop of material and immaterial, mobile and immobile, fixed and fluid intersections where social relations between travellers take place. These points of social meeting, connectivity and interaction are linked by way of networks within the destination and contribute to its production (Mavric & Urry, 2009).

While few researchers have applied the mobilities paradigm, a recent example where this was applied was a study into backpackers and caravanners in Far North Queensland. Moscardo, Murphy, McGehee, and Konovalov (2012) examined types of tourists and their relationships to residents and what this meant for tourism and sustainability. Hardy, Gretzel, and Hanson (2013) argued a post-mobilities paradigm in their conceptualisation of recreational vehicle users as neo-tribes. The following



section explores the paradigmatic considerations of research and the suitability of the mobilities paradigm in the design of this research.

### **3.1.2 Ontology**

The ontology is the nature of the reality being studied (Guba, 1990; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). In other words, does the research aim to determine what is ‘out there’ in a detached, singular and objective fashion or does it aim to view the subjective, multiple realities of the participants? For example, Smallman and Moore (2010) suggested that decision making processes can be viewed with a ‘realism’ ontology where real objects or entities interact in an orderly, and often complicated manner. However, as White and White (2008, p. 43) noted, ‘the role of social interaction in the active construction of self as tourist and the tourist experience draws attention to how tourists self-identify social worlds in which they participate while touring’. Similarly, Holloway et al. (2011) observed of social interaction that it is ‘a process of meaning making where individuals and groups shape understandings and attitudes through shared talk within their own communities of critique’. Both these studies suggest an ontology where multiple realities are socially constructed during travel..

### **3.1.3 Epistemology**

The epistemology recognises that there are multiple and varied perspectives on behaviour (Pearce, 2005). The literature usually reflects this perspective as a dichotomy between the objective and subjective approach of the researcher. Often referred to as etic or emic, these approaches are discussed in other areas of social sciences (such as linguistics, anthropology, sociology) and lend themselves to particular paradigms. The etic or objective role of the researcher detaches them from the subjects permitting the findings to be generalised across populations without researcher bias (Jennings, 2001; Veal, 2005; Walle, 1997). While considered reliable in the statistical sense, Dann (1996b) questions the validity of such research where the questions are generated by the researcher, rather than the subjects of the research. Conversely, the emic researcher is often referred to as having an ‘inside’ perspective (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; Pearce, 2005; Woodside, MacDonald, & Burford, 2004).

Pearce (2005) offered the example of researching the experiences of a young budget traveller or senior tourist. He suggested that an emic approach would reveal how they

see the world including the settings, other people in it and the value of the experience, whereas the etic approach would classify and describe the travellers' behaviour. Given that this research focuses on similar groups (backpackers and caravan) to those in Pearce's study and seeks to better understand the WOM phenomenon in the context of a transactional worldview, an emic approach was considered appropriate.

### **3.1.4 Axiology**

Axiology is 'a way to consider values along with issues of ontology, epistemology and methodology' (Morgan, 2007, p. 58). The research designs often utilised in the positivist paradigm endeavour to minimise bias and draw measurable facts, removing the personal values of those from whom these facts are obtained. Conversely the interpretivist paradigm embraces the personal values which set the context from which participants' reality is revealed. Further there is recognition and acceptance of the bias that reflect the individual values, rather than an attempt to eliminate it. Research based on participants' values, perceptions and opinions in the WOM exchange needs an approach where biases and values contribute to the findings. The concept of researching communication (WOM) in a social context without acknowledging the influence of or relationship between the investigator and subjects may 'end up just as just as objectivist, presumptive or pre-calculative as the most presupposing of positivist, quantitative methods' (Hollinshead, 2004 p.67). Moreover Sheller and Urry (2006, p. 217) suggest that the mobilities paradigm could involve participation via 'mobile ethnography' that allows for 'deep engagement in their worldview'.

## **3.2 Development of Theory**

The literature suggests two main approaches to theory development; firstly a deductive approach. This is one which offers a proposition (or hypothesis) then uses data and analysis to argue support or negation of the premise (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Veal, 2005). Secondly, an inductive approach where the data comes first, then the explanation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Veal, 2005; Weaver & Opperman, 2000) or as Decrop put it, 'theories emerge from particular observations' (1999a p.338). The review of the literature reveals an absence of substantial theory in the area of destination WOM. Pearce (2005) argues that there are few true theories of tourist behaviour, contending that conceptual schemes can be used to develop theory.

The exploration and linking of the conceptual schemes to be explored will use an iterative approach. Like Moore et al. (2012) and Woodside et al. (2004) who used this same approach for their studies on traveller decision making in-destination, this research will cycle through theory and data on WOM. At the same time, this approach moves away from the classical grounded theory approach which says that the researcher should dismiss or be ignorant of relevant theory when embarking on research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While Papathanassis and Knolle (2011, p. 215) cautions that ‘it can limit the theoretical scope, direct the questioning and influence the interpretations of the researcher’. Such an objectivist and detached view of the researcher regarding WOM and travel would be unrealistic. Indeed, attempts to dismiss the vast contributing body of research (as outlined in Chapter 2) or researcher’s experience with either travel of the WOM phenomenon would, most probably, not advance the existing body of knowledge at all.

### ***3.3 Methodology***

The methodology is the how the knowledge is achieved and the process of the research (Veal, 2011). Broadly the positivist paradigm utilises quantitative methods and the interpretivist approach adopts qualitative methods. The discussion below outlines the earlier point that research is rarely designed to exemplify the ‘criteria’ of a particular paradigm and outlines suitable methods drawn from the mobilities paradigm.

Quantitative data collection methods rely on the collection and analysis of statistics which can be generalised across the population with a degree of confidence (Brent, 1997; Jennings, 2001; Weaver & Opperman, 2000). Walle (1997) suggested such an approach was suitable when the issues can be meaningfully analysed using such techniques. The advantages are argued as being reliable, that is that the data or results can be replicated, (Buchanan & Rossetto, 1997; Malhotra, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Veal, 2005) and valid, the extent to which the data collected reflect the phenomenon (Brent, 1997; Veal, 2005). Often data collection methods used (typically questionnaires) frequently contain ‘closed’ questions which make for easier recording and statistical analysis but may be determined from the researcher’s assumptions which may be invalid or flawed (Brent, 1997; Decrop, 1999a; Woodside, 2010). Brent

(1997) discussed such studies as being impersonal with little known about the subjects' life history or experiences.

Conversely, qualitative research is considered to draw on a great deal of 'rich' information from fewer subjects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Jennings, 2005; Leedy, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Veal, 2005). Weaver and Opperman (2000) referred to qualitative research as 'data enhancers', suggesting that such an approach is suitable when little is known about the subject as it suits a research agenda which seeks to gain insight into the phenomenon. Many other researchers have recognised the value of qualitative research in the vein of uncovering meanings, motivations, reasons and perceptions of subjects both in the broader field of social science (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba, 1990; Leedy, 1997) and tourism more specifically (Decrop, 1999a; Goodson & Phillimore, 2004; Hollinshead, 2004; Peterson, 1994; Veal, 2005; Walle, 1997).

Peterson (1994), then Brent (1997) posited that purposes of qualitative inquiry was to: generate hypothesis concerning behaviour or attitudes; suggest methods for quantitative enquiry; understand how a buying decision is made; identify language used to address relevant issues and identify full range of issues views or attitudes to be pursued. Altinay and Paraskevas (1990 p.75) noted that 'qualitative research aims to develop an understanding of the context in which phenomena and behaviours take place'. Additionally, Peterson suggested that, in the marketing context, qualitative research can be used to learn how communication is received, what is understood and how. These points are aligned to the aims of this research.

Qualitative studies do, however, have recognised limitations. Perhaps the most often cited is that of its inability to be generalised and its lack of rigour (Brent, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Jennings, 2001; Jennings, 2005; Peterson, 1994; Ritchie, Burns, & Palmer, 2005; Walle, 1997). This is based on the small sample and the absence of statistical validity and reliability. While qualitative studies cannot usually be replicated with the expectation of the same results (either through data collection or analysis), its purpose is not aimed at this goal. Rather, it seeks to understand that which cannot be measured, where measurement in the statistical sense would provide such a narrow focus of results that they would not adequately address the research aims.

Tourism researchers have used qualitative methodologies to explore the interactions of time, setting and people. In a review of seven tourism and leisure journals published from 1996 – 2003, Phillimore and Goodson (2004) identified the shifts in research paradigms in the body of tourism research using Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) five moments of qualitative research. Their discussion offers an interesting insight into the development of qualitative research. The literature provides examples that reflect where an inductive approach to theory has been taken and qualitative methodologies have been used to effectively draw out and discover the realities and relationships of the phenomena being studied. Examples reviewed in the literature chapter of this thesis include:

- Murphy (2001) who analysed backpackers and the social settings where WOM takes place;
- Sørensen (2003) whose ethnographic study of backpackers investigated the phenomenon of 'road status' and the change factors (including internet and guide books) on this phenomenon;
- Woodside et al. (2004) who applied grounded theory to emic based story telling to determine rich and deep understanding of decision making during travel;
- Adkins and Grant (2007) who investigated the collaboratively constructed category of 'backpacker' through the analysis of electronic noticeboards;
- Guthrie and Anderson (2010) took a phenomenological approach, using in-depth interviews with travellers at the destination to elicit their experiences and destination image they would subsequently convey to others; and
- Reichenberger (2014) who used interviews to investigate social interactions between hosts and international guests.

These studies demonstrate the contribution of the qualitative approach to advance understanding and develop theory. While considerable discussions of research methodology is couched in terms of qualitative or quantitative studies, they are not mutually exclusive (Leedy, 1997; Walle, 1997; Yin, 2009). Peterson (1994) discussed the view that the two approaches can complement each other and that qualitative work can form the basis of subsequent quantitative research, which was later supported by

Brent (1997), Weaver and Opperman (2000) and then Ritchie et al (2005 p.4) who acknowledged that, from a pragmatic approach to tourism research, sometimes a mixture of both is required... 'it all depends what you want to find out'.

### **3.4 Research Design**

The research design is the plan of action that allows for the systematic conduct of the research. The following section outlines the considerations for the most appropriate research design using the mobilities paradigm in the context of time, setting and people.

Ethnography was considered as it explores the nature of the phenomena being studied within a social group. Tourism research offers examples of ethnographic studies (see Sandiford & Ap, 1998 for example) and specifically backpackers (Adkins & Grant, 2007; Sørensen, 2003). However, it is a time consuming approach that often sees the researcher 'living' as a member of the group being studied. The transient nature of travellers would also mean that the phenomenon would most likely be studied during travel but across a number of destinations rather than at the points of intersection and therefore, was not considered suitable. The need to expand classical ethnographic methods have been recognised in the mobilities literature (Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman, & Sheller, 2014; Büscher & Urry, 2009; Mavric & Urry, 2009). As such the concept of mobile ethnography has emerged. This 'draws researchers into a multitude of mobile, material, embodied practices of making distinctions, relations and places' (Büscher & Urry, 2009, p. 105). Fuller discussion of the methods will be incorporated into the following discussion of case study design but scholars put forward; observation, cyberethnography, interviews, diaries, visual and literary sources, digital recording, surveying, historical research, mapping and measuring movement of people and things (Adey et al., 2014; Büscher & Urry, 2009; Mavric & Urry, 2009) as possible methods. This study will use a mixed methods approach of qualitative and quantitative methods.

#### **3.4.1 Case Study Design**

A case study design was selected to examine the tourism WOM phenomenon within the limitations of the research and the researcher (see Chapter 1). It accommodates mobile ethnographic methods consistent with the mobilities paradigm and allows

flexibility of qualitative and quantitative methods. One strength of a case study design according to Yin (2009) and Botterill and Plantenkamp (2012) is the capacity to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within a naturally occurring, social context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. Woodside (2010) suggested that to a certain extent all social research is a case study at some level given that all research is geographically and temporally unique.

The use of a single or small number of ‘cases’ is to understand the phenomenon has been widely used in tourism research (Beeton, 2005). Some examples relevant to this research include:

- Collins et al (2006) for a descriptive case study on Tropical North Queensland;
- Stokes and Lomax (2002) for an explanatory case study of WOM in the case of a hotelier in the UK;
- Prideaux and McClymont (2006) who used Goondawindi in south east Queensland to profile Australian caravanners;
- Chalkiti and Sigala (2008) for a study of peer-to-peer on line network of travellers; and
- McClymont, Thompson, and Prideaux (2011) for a study of caravanners in Australia.

Woodside et al. (2004, p. 8) noted that ‘the dominating logic in travel research of variable-based empirical positivism needs to be complemented by additional theory-research paradigms—such as holistic case-based empirical relativism—that focus on thick descriptions of an individual’s thoughts and actions constituting the stories in her lived experiences’. In the case of this research, the purpose is to explore the phenomenon of WOM as it applies to subjects in a particular destination.

Underlying the aim of the study is to understand the phenomenon within the specific context of time, setting and people rather than generalising WOM communications theory through the identification and empirical testing of variables across the wider travelling population. This approach towards WOM research has already been shown as inadequate, so a case study design was adopted.

### 3.4.2 Triangulation and rigour

While the lack of a specific framework may be a perceived weakness of case studies, it allows the researcher flexibility in the selection of the most appropriate methods. For example, academics have noted the length of studies both in terms of duration (Yin, 2009) and size of the report due to the richness and complexities of analysis (Beeton, 2005). However, researchers across a number of disciplines have identified an advantage of case study research is managing the scope of the research project. Veal (2011) and Botterill and Plantenkamp (2012) noted that limiting the number cases makes the research more manageable. This research adopts a multi case study approach by researching two cases; backpackers and caravanners visiting a destination. While it could be argued that two cases widen the scope of the study, the collective and comparative evidence presented may be more compelling (Yin, 2009).

Another common criticism of case study research is the perceived lack of academic rigour (Yin, 2009) and the limitations for generalisation in a scientific sense (Beeton, 2005). Yet Botterill and Plantenkamp (2012) suggests that such generalisability should be based on validity rather than the statistical representativeness. Woodside (2010, p. 52) suggested that the aim of case study research is to achieve accuracy and that the generality and complexity are ‘add-on objectives’. Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the term ‘credibility’ instead of ‘internal validity’ to view the truthfulness of findings in qualitative research. The scholars also discussed ‘transferability’ rather than ‘external validity’ to describe the extent to which findings are applicable to another group. While lack of generalisability is considered by those from the ‘scientific’ viewpoint as a short coming of both qualitative methods and case study design, Veal (2005 p171) argued that the method ‘does not seek to produce findings which are generally or universally representative’. Veal’s view echoes the earlier work of Yin (2009) suggesting that case studies can be used for explanatory research with the purpose of developing theory where none exists. This research seeks to explain WOM between travellers at a destination.

The goal of reliability (or dependability) is the capacity to replicate the study’s procedures and conduct the research to arrive at the same findings or results (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Yin, 2009). According to Yin (2009 p.48) this goal is tied to minimising errors and biases in the study. In this research, the discussion of bias on



the part of the informants has been outlined. The emic approach undertaken in this research has also been detailed - as has the researcher's involvement in the construction of the realities of the participants along with the subsequent interpretation and analysis of those realities that will contribute to the findings.

Triangulation is a design consideration that ensures that the phenomenon being studied is viewed, analysed, interpreted and assessed in more than one way. It is considered to be a strength of case study research as the use of multiple data collection methods, data sources and analyses to address a research question enhances the validity of the findings (Jennings, 2001; Leedy, 1997; Veal, 2011; Woodside, 2010; Yin, 2009). Patton (2002) identified four types of triangulation that have guided the design: data triangulation, theoretical triangulation, methodological triangulation and investigator triangulation – these are reflected in Figure 3-2 and explained below.

Case study research is generally categorised as a qualitative research approach but it is widely acknowledged as incorporating quantitative methods as well (Beeton, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Decrop, 1999a; Jennings, 2001; Leedy, 1997; Peterson, 1994; Weaver & Opperman, 2000; Yin, 2009). Crotts (1999 p.342) suggested that qualitative research is predominant in combination or case study designs where 'qualitative findings are used as such (conclusive research) in a contextual approach and local theories are developed. Quantitative data only help to get a better understanding of a particular case'. The debate about linking paradigms with methods, resulting in researchers choosing between qualitative and quantitative rather than a combination, was highlighted with the adoption of multiple methods (Guba, 1990; Woodside, 2010). Given the arguments and nature of the research problem, the methodology applied in this research will utilise mixed methods to extrapolate meanings which are relative in terms of setting, time and the people and the phenomenon being studied.

Different methods not only provide the researcher the freedom to select the most appropriate means of collecting the data to address the specific research problem, but also provide a variety of avenues from which a researcher can obtain the perspectives of the subject in the context of the individual case. Veal (2011) further suggested an advantage of triangulation of methods is that the methodological weakness of one method can be compensated by the strength of another method. This research

triangulated qualitative methods (observation, interviews and focus groups) along with a quantitative method (questionnaire).

Yin (2009, p. 102) further outlined six most commonly used forms of evidence used in case studies; documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artefacts. The combination of these and (or) others highlights the multiple strategies employed to support data obtained by any single method. The evidence outlined by Yin in Table 3-1 aligns with the emerging mobile ethnographic methods proposed in the mobilities paradigm. Examples of recent mobilities studies which use these methods using the include interviews (Hardy et al., 2013; Moscardo et al., 2012), cyberethnography (Carson, 2008; Holloway et al., 2011), observation (White & White, 2008). The forms of evidence (or data) for collection in these case studies are listed in Table 3-1 but will be detailed in the next section.

Table 3-1 – Case study evidence in the research

<i>Evidence</i>	<i>Examples in the research</i>
Documentation	Secondary data (government tourism statistics, industry reports, case specific research and survey findings)
Interviews	Industry interviews & segment focus groups
Direct Observation	Researcher observation (as researcher)
Participant Observation	Researcher observation (from social interaction)
Survey	Traveller questionnaires

Yin (2009 p.18) discussed how case study design copes with situations where there are ‘many more variables of interest than data points’, relies on multiple sources of evidence where data is triangulated and benefits from prior development of theory to guide data and analysis. The research was designed to utilise a number of data sources to obtain a variety of perspectives of the WOM dynamic in both of the cases researched. Yin (2009) also discussed how the applicability and analysis of data across a number of theories provided strength to the case study approach.

The review of the literature (see Chapter 2) noted a lack of a single substantive theory in the field of WOM communications, particularly in relation to destinations. As such,

this research will triangulate a combination of theories and concepts identified in the literature as they apply to tourism research. Figure 3-2 below builds on Figure 1-3 (Chapter 1) which provided the structure for the aim and research questions in the study. As Figure 3-2 shows, the research has been designed to incorporate different data collection methods and participant perspectives. It reflects the triangulation of perspectives, methods and data collection employed in the case study research design. Figure 3-2 further shows theoretical triangulation using homophily (Chang, 2011; Gilly et al., 1998; McPherson et al., 2001; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970) and tie strength (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973; Katz et al., 2004) to understand the social interactions of travellers at a destination. This is then contextualised by examining the communication channels used in WOM exchange and the social settings where WOM is exchanged.

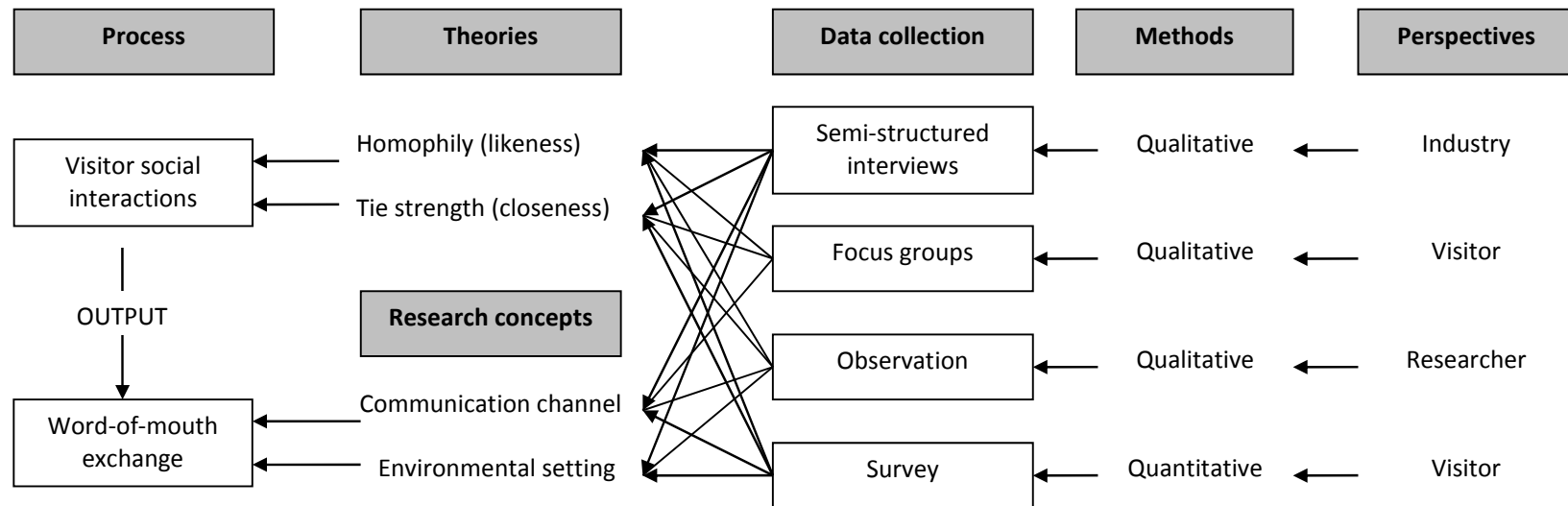


Figure 3-2 – Research design

### 3.4.3 Participants and case selection

The case study design accommodates the transitional worldview of inter-related time, setting and people. The following section discusses the parameters of time and place within which the cases have been bounded. Explanations of the cases selected in context of both the industry and literature is outlined and definitions for the purpose of this research are outlined and a justification for the research site of Cairns is articulated.

A selection of destination based industry participants were identified for inclusion in the study. They were selected on the grounds on their direct involvement with travellers, namely through their operational roles in the accommodation used by those travellers in the study, that is either backpacking or caravanning accommodation. Further, this selective sample of industry respondents included at least one individual who also represented the backpacker and caravanner industry at the association level. In doing so, the sample extended the perspective from that of an individual limited to a single site, to include a wider perspective that incorporated the views of the local industry. These respondents were interviewed on their premises, at an agreed time and were audio recorded, in accordance with ethics approval (Appendix 1).

Further, in keeping with the role of the researcher undertaking research in the natural setting, there were occasions when opportunistic conversations presented. While these were not recorded, notes were taken, de-identified and included in data collection.

A discussion about the selection of subjects is pertinent at this point. From the wider research perspective there is a perceived ‘trade off’ between the heterogeneity of individual tourists and their behaviour with the convenience which comes with clustering tourists into homogenous groups based on attributes, characteristics and/ or demographics (Pearce, 2005; Smith, 1989). Pearce (2005) recognised that meaningful groups make for convenience in both analysis and practice. Smith (1989) earlier discussed that some researchers assume a degree of homogeneity among consumers (in a neo-economist view) or assume averages (in some sociology, psychology and geography research) and argues that denying or masking this diversity can jeopardise the findings. Smith (1989 p.39) further suggested that segmentation is a workable

compromise between denying the great heterogeneity of the world and being overwhelmed by it, as such selection of the cases was based on:

1. Existing industry segmentation;
2. Similarities between groups;
3. Differences between groups;
4. Stability of the selected groups, and
5. Research variables apply to both groups.

The Australian tourism industry has identified both the backpacker and caravanning segments and markets these with a niche focus. Messages, products and distribution for each segment are directed specifically at these pre-determined groups. Furthermore, data is collected on these specific segments and both the backpackers and caravanning markets are significant contributors to FNQ tourism, accounting for 2.9 million backpacker visitor nights (Tourism Research Australia, 2015a) and 775,000 caravanner visitor nights (Tourism Research Australia, 2015b) in the year ending September 2014.

There are similarities and differences between the groups for the purpose of comparison. Both groups are comprised of independent travellers to a destination who have flexibility in their arrangements (Pearce & Schott, 2005) and a propensity to have booked little before their arrival (Hyde & Lawson, 2003; Moore et al., 2012; Pearce & Schott, 2005). They are both drawn to the social interaction, particularly at the point of accommodation. Caravan parks and hostels are, to different degrees, communal. In this context, travel routes and experiences appear to be common topics of conversation (Hardy & Gretzel, 2007; Murphy, 2001; Prideaux & McClymont, 2006). Kain and King (2005 p.198) observed of backpacker accommodation in Australia that it 'can provide a meeting place for like-minded people, who enhance the travel experience by providing advice and stories on current and planned destinations'.

Holloway et al. (2011, p. 237) further suggested that both groups are often going through a transitional stage of their lives; for backpackers they may have completed studies (ending) or about to embark on their professional career (beginnings) and grey nomad caravanners they have often come to the end of their working life (ending) and

use the period of ‘anticipated good health’ as a catalyst to travel. The subjects in each segment are cost conscious but not necessarily constrained by a strict budget. Also, the nature of both groups means that subjects generally have more time to explore options recommended to them and the flexibility to change plans.

These points are important on two fronts; firstly, destination marketers, operators and the travellers themselves clearly identify as belonging to this group. Secondly, industry defined segments allows for replication of this study at alternative sites and the development of theory in the future thereby strengthening the reliability or dependability of the case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith, 1989; Veal, 2005; Yin, 2009).

The groups were also selected by the differences needed for comparison, most notably was the demographic composition of the groups - backpackers tend to be younger (with many visiting from countries where an age bound, working holiday visa arrangement is in place) in contrast many caravanners are older, retired or semi-retired travellers. As such there are a variety of cultural nuances from international backpackers whereas caravanners travelling locally may be more culturally aligned – the characteristics of each group is detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. However, the different demographics, number of holiday experiences and exposure to the Cairns region is likely to result in different expectations of each segment.

#### **3.4.4 Cairns as a research site**

Cairns in Far North Queensland was selected as the research site because it is a major destination for both segments. It is hub for dispersal into the Tropical North Queensland tourism region. The region provides the quantity and diversity of tourism product to satisfy the needs of both segments and this is borne out by statistics indicating longer duration of stay subsequent increased expenditure by both backpackers and caravanners.

Cairns was considered a suitable site to provide the context for these two cases. For the caravanning market Cairns is the access point for the Savannah Way (Cairns to Broome), the Great Tropical Drive and access to Cape York. For the backpacker market Cairns is an international arrival port and is at one end of a favoured well-trodden backpacker path between Cairns and Sydney (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005; Kain &

King, 2004). It is also an access point to the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef and Daintree Rainforest. Furthermore, it is a regional, high profile destination with well developed infrastructure and services for both segments.



Image 3-1 – Cairns and surrounds map

(source: [www.wettropics.gov.au](http://www.wettropics.gov.au))

Finally, the decision to limit data collection in Cairns and the surrounding areas takes into account the mobility of travellers. Hannam and Ateljevic (2007, p. 255) commented of mobility (in the context of backpackers) that,

*Social life seems full of multiple and extended connections, often across long distances, but these are organised through certain nodes. Mobilities thus entail distinct social spaces that orchestrates new forms of social life around such nodes, for example, stations, hotels, motorways, resorts, airports, leisure complexes, cosmopolitan cities, beaches, galleries, roadside parks and so on.*



### 3.5 *Data Collection and Analysis*

The iterative approach to theory along with a mobilities paradigm suggests an approach to data collection and analysis which fulfils the research objective in a way that is meaningful and flexible. There was a need for flexibility in collection of data. As Sørensen (2003, p. 850) mentioned of backpackers (and the same applies to caravanners), they lack a ‘prolonged social interaction within a stable group’ and that they are characterised by ‘impromptu social interaction’ which contributes to an ‘erratic composition’ presenting a challenge to traditional ethnographic fieldwork. Following (Sørensen, 2003), the approach taken for this research fieldwork was directed at the ‘impromptu fieldwork with many’ rather than prolonged field work with a few. This is also consistent with (Büscher & Urry, 2009) ‘multi-sited ethnography’ which allows the researcher to ‘track’ the interdependence of people, information, sites and objects and, additionally, facilitates the researcher’s embeddedness with the social structure they are researching.

While an outline of the methodology and data collection usually precedes the approach to analysis, in this instance, an approach has been adopted where the data is collected and analysed concurrently. A summary of the process of collection and analysing the data is outlined in the table below. Drawing on a selection of valid techniques the analysis will build a framework within which theory can be developed. The process will use sequential process (Woodside, 2010; Yin, 2009), that is a phased approach moving from one stage of collection and analysis to the next.

To explore the context of the cases being examined in a way that facilitates inductive (qualitative) then deductive (quantitative) methods, approaches to network analysis were considered. While there is no single statement of the ‘network perspective’ (Katz et al., 2004), Wellman and Berkowitz (1988) offered five guiding principles which underpin a network analysis approach to researching tourism WOM.

1. Behaviour should be examined by the individual’s relationships within a network, rather than the characteristics of the individual. (cannot draw conclusions about WOM based on a characteristic such as age)

2. The focus of analysis should be on the relations between units rather than the units or characteristics of those units. (cannot fully understand by looking at things in isolation)
3. Interrelationships of those in a network is assumed in the analysis of an individual's behaviour. Analysis cannot rely on independent, discrete interactions at the exclusion of relationships with others.
4. A social network requires more than the aggregations of dyadic ties between individuals. In other words, the structure is a 'network of networks' (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988, p. 20)
5. Groups within networks often have fuzzy boundaries where analysis focuses on the patterned, relational aspects rather than the independent units of analysis required for statistical analysis.

This research aims to explore the nature the relationships and the context in which WOM communication is exchanged. Accepting the size and elasticity of these mobile networks of travellers (caravanners and backpackers) at any point in time at any number of sites in a destination (Cairns), measurement is neither practical nor insightful. However, there is value in measuring characteristics and responses of those in the network in a quantitative manner. This is not for predictive or causal inference, rather this will provide further insights into the cases being examined.

Initial analysis of interviews will provide a language, terminology and the supplier perspective and observations of the WOM phenomenon within the selected cases as summarised in Table 3-2. Emergent patterns and themes identified in this process will then feed into the subsequent focus groups, where issues and trends were highlighted. Table 3-2 summarises the steps and sequence of the research process, Figure 3-3 and the following section looks at these steps separately and in greater detail.

Table 3-2 - Overview of data collection and analysis for case studies

<b>Step 1 Observation</b>		
<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
→ Caravanners → Backpackers	→ Field notes → Memo → Digital images	→ Identify behaviours → Understand interrelationships → Record social dynamics and interactions
<b>Analysis</b>		<b>Outcomes</b>
→ Open coding → Axial coding		→ Confirm and triangulate data → Identify body language and physical proximity → Observe WOM in natural use
<b>Step 2 - Interviews</b>		
<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
→ Caravan park x 3 → Backpacker hostel x 4	→ 7 semi structured interviews with key informants	→ Understand the destination view of how WOM works → Identify current WOM strategies for the destination → Identify emerging WOM trends from supplier perspective
<b>Analysis</b>		<b>Outcomes</b>
→ Identify patterns and themes → Grounded theory analysis (open coding)		→ Reveal language & terminology → Identify examples → Understand WOM from the supplier perspective
<b>Step 3 - Focus Groups</b>		
<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
→ Caravanners → Backpackers	→ 3 backpacker groups → 3 caravanner groups → 2-11 participants → Conducted at respective accommodation in Cairns region	→ Motivation to engage in WOM activity; → Social settings where WOM activity takes place with others in their respective groups; → Identify the group members with whom subjects engage in WOM activity; → Importance of recommendations and most trusted sources; → How communication takes place and in what form (technology).
<b>Analysis</b>		<b>Outcomes</b>
→ Analyse common themes & trends → Analyse participant behaviour → Identify WOM dynamic in group setting		→ Identify potential variables for measurement → Understand WOM in the context of the group
<b>Step 4 – Survey</b>		
<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
→ Caravanners x 338 → Backpackers x 427	→ Self completed questionnaire → Convenience sample	→ Measure occurrences of WOM activity → Determine WOM characteristics → Identify commonality of WOM dynamic within the groups
<b>Analysis</b>		<b>Outcomes</b>
→ SPSS to extract descriptive statistics → SPSS to perform analytical statistics → Voyeur text analysis		→ Determine wider applicability of focus group findings within each case → Compare the results from each case to identify similarities and differences

The role WOM plays in communicating travellers actual and desired tourism experiences both from an industry and tourist perspective and the analysis provided the basis for the survey data collection. Overarching this process was the use of grounded theory which is characterised by the process of continuous collection and analysis to build theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The following section outlines the steps taken to collect, validate, organise and analyse the data from each of the cases, these steps are illustrated in Figure 3-3.

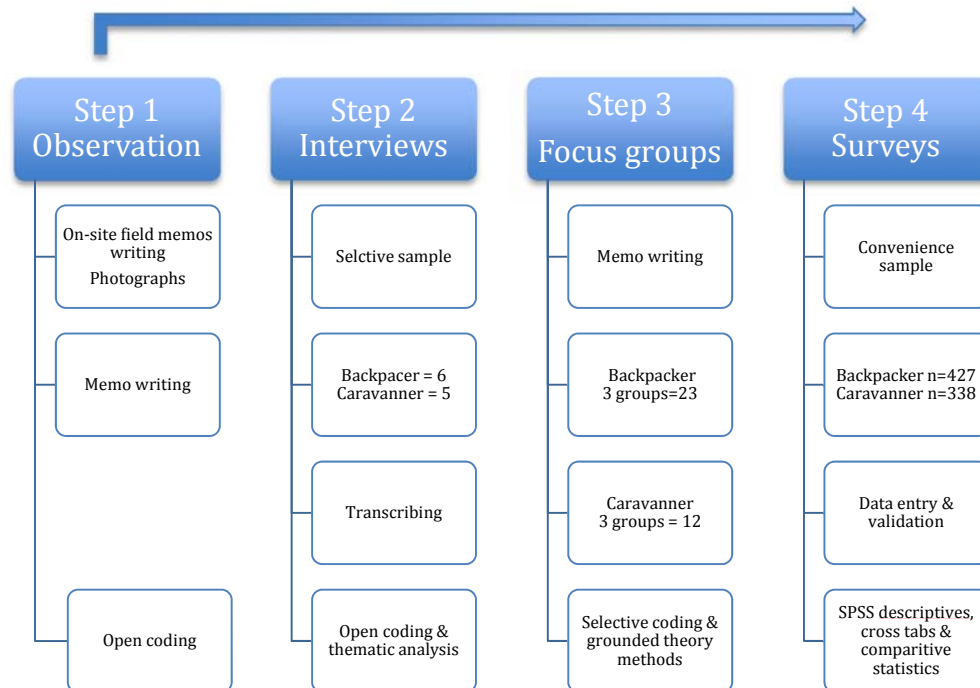


Figure 3-3 – Research process

### Step 1 - Observation

While labelled Step 1 of Figure 3-3, in reality, observation took place as part of the on-going data collection. Unstructured observation was used to develop explanations and understanding of the WOM phenomenon (Veal, 2011). Observation is identified in both the mobilities paradigm and case study design as it can ‘most efficiently deal with micro worlds of peoples’ interaction with other people, their movement or performance, their interaction with the environment, technology and so forth’ (Mavric & Urry, 2009, p. 653). In other words, it overcomes the limitations to how much can be learned from what people say Patton (2002). Observation does have limitations, particularly with respect to accurately recording language and cultural norms but it

was decided these limitations were outweighed by the richness of data collected in conjunction with other sources.

Observation took place in two distinct phases, firstly where the researcher has stayed at caravan parks and backpacker hostels as an actual traveller prior to and during the study. This provided the opportunity to engage in the WOM dynamic as the subjects in the cases do in a naturalistic, insider way (Büscher & Urry, 2009). Initial observations, prior to the formal conduct of the research, in fact contributed to the interest in studying the phenomenon. Secondly, during the fieldwork (in conjunction with focus groups) an overt observation approach has been taken. This has allowed for ‘copresent immersion’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 218) where a range of ‘observation, interviewing and recording techniques’ were utilised concurrently. This approach enriched the data as subjects engaged in discussion of the topic as well as their experiences themselves.

These observations were noted in the form of memos and recorded on research observation sheets that also included details of the site, date and time. Some photographs were also taken as part of the observation, these were date stamped and digitally tagged with the site for analysis purposes. Further to the data collected within the parameters of the research, the study also included ‘self-reflective’ observation (Mavric & Urry, 2009) over the duration of the study. Whilst drawn from sources outside the study those aspects which contribute to the data were not overlooked. Examples include incidental, unplanned discussions between the researcher and others (family, friends, associates and colleagues) which have prompted discussion and revealed anecdotes which have relevance to the themes revealed in the study. These observations were not separately coded and analysed but expressed in the form of first person narrative due to the reflexive nature of the observation. These researcher observations were then written as a separate section at the beginning of Chapter 6.

## **Step 2 - Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews with key informants were conducted. These key informants were selected on the criteria of their involvement with the cases used in the study. While there are no set guidelines for sample size in qualitative research, a sample can be based on ‘theoretical or purposive, and not random, sampling models.

[The researcher seeks] out groups, settings, and individuals where (and for whom) the processes being studied are most likely to occur' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 378). In total 7 interviews took place with key informants from the Cairns tourism industry, four from the backpacking industry and three from the caravan industry. The purpose of these interviews was to;

- Establish some background into caravanners and backpackers;
- Determine industry perception of the mechanics of WOM;
- Understand what involvement industry has in 'managing' WOM;
- Identify if and how industry measures or monitors WOM activity; and
- Understand the future of WOM in tourism marketing from an industry perspective.

Respondents were specifically asked about how backpackers or caravanners communicate with each other, what sources of information they use when visiting the region and how much other travellers influence making. They were also asked about their organisation's use of WOM with respect to strategies they have, monitoring, technology and the future of WOM. As per Figure 3-2, these questions were intended to illicit responses regarding homophily, relationship tie-strength, communication and the settings in which exchanges take place.

Industry respondents were selected from a private Cairns based tourism business with at least one competitive product in the market that can accommodate the backpacker or caravanner markets. The interviews took place in their office or place of business and participants were given access to the research results in return for their support. The reluctance to discuss marketing strategies given the highly competitive environment in which these businesses operate was identified by the researcher and participants were assured that information provided would be treated with integrity.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. These data were then open-coded whereby the researcher replayed the interviews and allocated tentative labels which were then sorted by themes. These themes provided the direction for the focus group guiding questions and, also, the frame for the axial coding from those focus groups.

### Step 3 - Focus Groups

Focus groups effectively act as a group interview, revealing common themes, trends and behaviours with respect to WOM. They aim to draw data and insights which may not otherwise be evident with the interaction found in a group (Malhotra, 1993; Veal, 2005; Weeden, 2005) and informality of the group interview situation is one which encourages subjects to speak freely, but it is the role of the facilitator to ensure that all subjects have the opportunity to do so (Peterson, 1994; Veal, 2005). They are considered to be particularly useful for exploratory research where little is known about the phenomenon being studied (Jennings, 2005) and can aid in the development of a quantitative survey (Weaver & Opperman, 2000). The literature suggests that focus groups usually comprise of six to 12 subjects per group with sessions lasting up to two hours (Kotler et al., 1996; Malhotra, 1993; Peterson, 1994; Veal, 2005; Weeden, 2005). The number of sub-groups used is subject to both practical considerations as well as the complexity of the research.

The research used six focus groups comprising of two to 11 subjects per group. Initially there were two backpacker focus groups (six and seven) participants and two caravanner groups that had seven and three participants. After the analysis of the focus groups, it was decided to run a final focus group from each to ensure that saturation of data had been reached. Saturation is the point at which no new information is achieved (Hardy et al., 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011).

The sessions were recorded using a combination of audio and comprehensive notes (with subject consent) to capture the actions and expressions of the subjects, not just their words. The focus groups built on the interviews and explored homophily, tie strength, communication and settings (Figure 3-2). The points explored included:

- motivation to engage in WOM activity;
- social settings where WOM activity takes place with others in their respective groups;
- identifying the group members with whom subjects engage in WOM activity;
- importance of recommendations and most trusted sources; and
- how communication takes place and in what form (technology).

The facilitator's role is to guide discussion and ensure that all aspects of the topic are covered (Peterson, 1994; Veal, 2005; Weeden, 2005). Peterson (1994) further discussed that subjects should feel comfortable to engage suggesting the discussion of topics 'with their own kind' would foster such openness. Weeden (2005) contends that four to five topics can be covered in a 90 – 120 minute period and that this is best achieved with the use of a framework of questions to be raised. The focus groups were conducted over different time periods from 45 minutes (two caravanners) to 120 minutes (seven backpackers). Focus groups were conducted in 2012 during the peak season of July with the next conducted in November. The subsequent focus groups for each were conducted in July 2013.

Informants needed to be English speakers with no obvious hearing or speech limitations. Subjects were recruited through their respective accommodation types, all respondents were provided with a plain English statement and provided their consent (in accordance with the ethics approval for the study). They were not compensated for their participation.

Focus groups from the caravanners were audio recorded and transcribed. In addition, notes were taken during and immediately after conducting the focus groups. Attempts to record the focus groups with the backpackers were a little more challenging. The backpacker environment tended to be louder with considerable background noise. Like many instances in research, this is a matter of a trade-off where the participants could be removed from their environment to a quieter area to improve audio or, alternatively, conducting the focus group in the naturalistic setting of the busy backpacker hostel common area. The decision was made to conduct the research in the hostel environment where participants would feel at ease and write extensive notes and memos where audio recording was not practicable with this group. The transcribed interviews and memos were then selectively coded for analysis.

#### **Step 4 - Survey**

To develop a broader picture of the WOM phenomenon, backpackers and caravanners were surveyed. The instrument was developed from the literature (gaps and baseline statements in Chapter 2) and the themes drawn from the interviews and focus groups



and tied to the research objectives. The survey instrument was used on a larger sample of caravanners and backpackers in the Cairns region to identify characteristics of the groups and determine if the data revealed from the observations, interviews and focus groups are reflected in the socially bound cases of the study and to determine difference.

This research design includes the surveying respondents as a contributing factor to triangulation. While Yin (2009) discussed mixed methods approach as employing multiple methods so that the weaknesses of any one method is compensated for by the strengths of the others – the use of a survey, in the case of this research design is not geared toward this end of generality. As Woodside et al. (2004, p. 9) noted, ‘theoretical sampling in comparative analysis does not attempt to plan for a representative sample of respondents from a population but rather considers the theoretical possibilities of all unique combinations of case profiles’. Rather, this research utilises data collection methods that will build and generalise theory by reflecting the true complexity of the phenomenon being studied rather than attempt to generalise theory to the population of all travellers to the Cairns region. Furthermore, from a mobilities perspective, surveying of travellers captures information and perspectives at a single point in time and place.

The survey instrument was a 23 item, self administered questionnaire (Appendix 2). A combination of 5 point likert scales to measure preference and frequency and multiple choice questions were used. These questions were designed to collect a variety of ordinal and scaled data suitable for a variety of analysis methods. In addition, two open ended questions to obtain reflective information from respondents regarding their at-destination WOM experiences. They broadly included:

- Demographic data (age, gender, nationality, education, occupation) was collected to measure homophily;
- Travel behaviour and experience (previous visitation to the destination, duration of trip, planning and booking behaviours for the trip, travel party) to determine existing plans and experience;
- Travel party (number of travellers and duration of travelling with other/s) to identify existing relationships with stronger ties;

- Information sources used since arriving in the destination to identify the role of WOM;
- Communication exchange with fellow travellers, both where this has taken place (social and spatial setting) and what WOM attributes they seek (expertise, affiliation, homophily, relationship ties); and
- Communication preferences (face to face and virtual) and technology device ownership to determine which communication channels are used for WOM between travellers.

In addition, a scenario was developed from the comments made by both industry (interviews) and travellers (focus groups and observations) offering a quintessential destination experience – visiting the Great Barrier Reef for a day trip. The scenario was designed to reflect both positive and negative aspects and asked respondents to indicate how they would reflect on the experience (positively, negatively, neutral), whether they would recommend or discuss their experience, who they would exchange their thoughts with (other travellers, family/ friends, ‘everyone’, ‘anyone who asks’) and when (during or after the trip). Finally, respondents were asked how they would communicate (face-to-face or on-line channels). These questions were developed to explore a range of WOM behaviours in the context of relationships and communication channels by providing the same scenario to all respondents and allowing them to project their feelings and views.

An initial pilot test of n=30 was undertaken from two sites, one with backpackers and one with caravanners. The timing, wording and ease of completion were assessed and amendments were made appropriately. Such adjustments included the exclusion of an income related question that caravanners were reluctant to answer and backpackers could not answer with accuracy. Another issue identified with the pilot study was that caravanners (who often travel as couples) tended to offer ‘collective’ responses, that is, one person (usually the female) would answer on behalf of both. A timing issue was also identified with the backpacker group through the pilot study. It was determined that after a day’s activity (late afternoon) but before too greater consumption of alcohol (evening) saw a balance of willingness and accuracy.

A convenience sampling method was used to collect the quantitative data as respondents were approached at their accommodation with the approval of

management. Data were collected at the 15 accommodation sites. These sites were identified due to their size, the capacity of guests who could be accessed at a given time and their willingness to participate. A total of 765 usable questionnaires were collected from each of the segments in Cairns and surrounds: Caravanners (n=338) and Backpackers (n=427).

The results of the survey collection was deemed be sufficient to meet the aims of reflecting the views of the cases in the study, adding depth to the themes and 'examine all theoretically identified customer samples that occur in real-life and provide thick descriptions for each multiple-attribute based conjunctive segment' (Woodside et al., 2004, p. 9).

### **3.5.1 Validation of data**

The research design has acknowledged the role of the researcher and the perceptions and biases this bears on the analysis of the data. The process of triangulation was also outlined (Patton, 2002). The following section outlines how the subjective role of the researcher and the objective aims of the research design have been reconciled to ensure that data is robust at the points of data collection, data entry, coding and analysis.

The qualitative data was collected through observation, interviews and focus groups by the researcher alone. Two recorded interviews were transcribed by a commercial data service with the remaining interviews transcribed by the researcher. The data was manually analysed. The decision was made not to use a computer program such as NVivo as the researcher revisited data from each stage and made coding additions as themes emerged from later stages. This not only applied to transcribed notes but also recordings were replayed. Given the iterative approach, the use of a computer program for the analysis was not considered appropriate.

Observations were recorded by the researcher then open coded. A sample of observation sheets was provided to a more senior researcher who had not been involved in the observation or coding process for checking. This process was repeated with the transcriptions and coding of interviews and focus groups. A process of researcher interpretation was applied to coded qualitative data. To ensure the credibility, preliminary data were checked using Leximancer analytical software. Two

industry interviews and one focus group from each case were run through Leximancer. Clusters representing themes (selective coding) and the relationships between them (axial coding) were consistent with the researcher's coding. These themes are illustrated in Leximancer output in Figure 3-4.

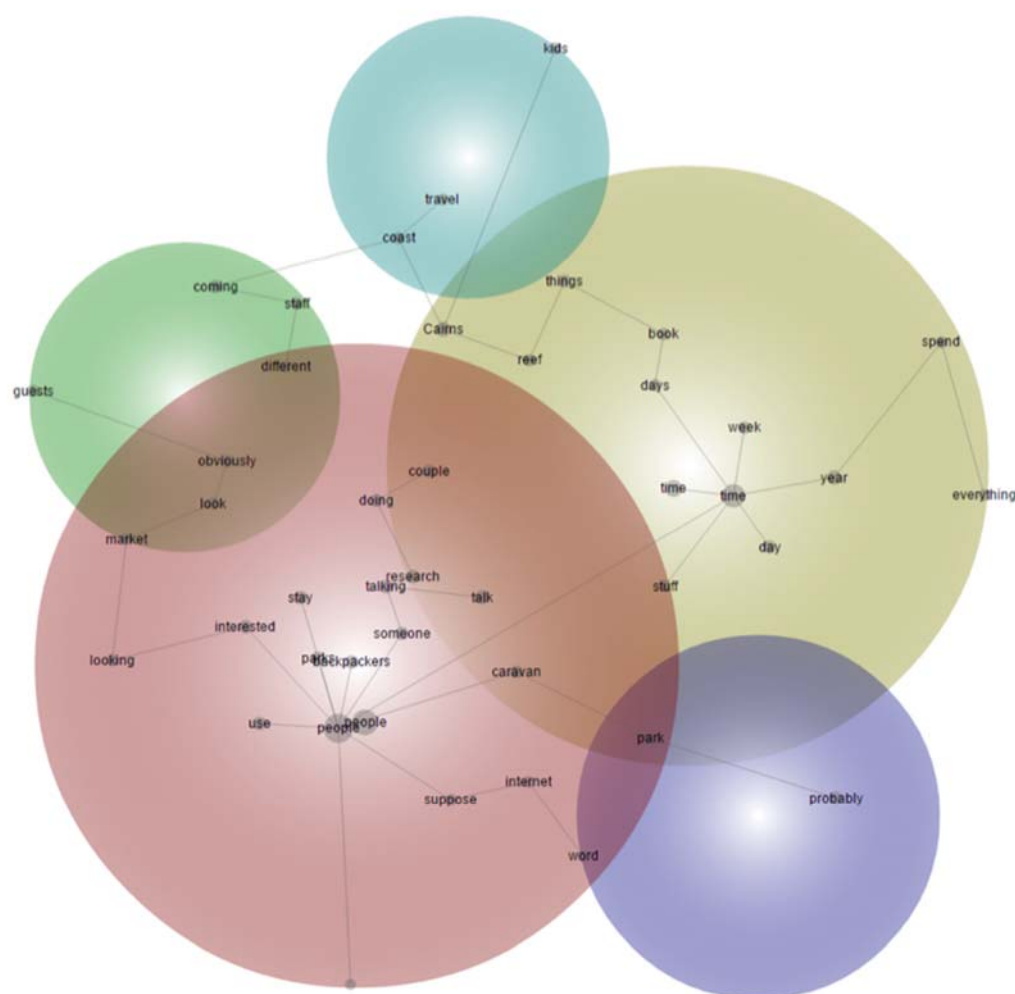


Figure 3-4 – Leximancer theme validation output

The researcher and two research assistants collected the surveys. The research assistants had previous experience with similar data collection of surveys and were provided written instructions on the process. Surveys were checked during the data entry process to ensure that they were completed either substantially or in entirety. Seven surveys were excluded at this stage due to insufficient responses. Those

surveys where respondents did not complete any of the scaled questions of the survey instrument were deemed to be an inadequate response. A data codebook was developed from the survey in SPSS by a commercial data service and then checked by the researcher to ensure validity. Data from the surveys was then entered into SPSS by the researcher and three research assistants. The involvement of others for the purpose of collection and data entry is consistent with investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009).

After entering the surveys for analysis, the data was validated via SPSS using the ‘identify unusual cases’ function across all variables in the surveys. Any inconsistencies were cross-checked with the hard copy and addressed.

Table 3-3 – SPSS identified outliers

Anomaly Case Reason List				
Reason:1				
Case	Reason Variable	Variable Impact	Variable Value	Variable Norm
672	Q8cTravel_time	.854	18000	415.32
202	Q6aNights_away	.906	1440	391.59
665	Q6aNights_away	.918	5400	350.37
666	Q6aNights_away	.918	5400	350.37
201	Q6aNights_away	.947	2400	287.16
199	Q6aNights_away	.938	2160	287.16
200	Q6aNights_away	.938	2160	287.16

During this process outlying data were also identified. These data related specifically to the responses:

- expected nights away on this trip
- duration of travel with existing travel party

These cases tended to be responses from the caravanners where their answers might be in years. Fifteen respondents stated that they would be away for more than one year and less than three years, so this was determined as being substantive enough as an arbitrary cut off point. As such, six responses were recoded as ‘outliers’ and excluded from analysis, these responses ranged from 3 to 15 years (see Variable Value column in Table 3-3). A further case was identified, similarly recoded and excluded as an outlier regarding duration of travel with current travel party. One caravanner reported

travelling with his partner for 50 years. All other answers were regarding duration of travel were two years or less, so were included in the analysis.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

#### **3.6.1 Grounded Theory methods**

Grounded theory is a means of constructing theory through the analysis of inductive qualitative data where the data collection and analysed. It is 'grounded' in the data, meaning that ideas emerge via this ongoing process of collection and analysis (Botterill & Plantenkamp, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory offers a means of developing theory from the data (themes, categories and relationships between them). In effect grounded theory allows the researcher to collect pieces of information and put them together to form a picture, a picture which is unknown at the beginning of the process. Conversely other techniques use the data more like pieces of a puzzle where part of the picture is known before commencement.

This research adopted the latter approach where an iterative process was applied to oscillate between data and analysis, drawing on the foundation theories and concepts identified in the literature review (Chapter 2); homophily, tie-strength, settings and communication. The data collected at each stage and analysed then contextualised in the theoretical underpinnings. As noted by Moore et al. (2012, p. 637), 'it is a common misconception that grounded theorists should enter the field in ignorance of relevant theory'.

Examples of such an approach to develop new theory or approaches include: (Hardy et al., 2013) who used open coding and comparative analysis of focus groups in their conceptualisation of recreational vehicle users from different locations in a popular RV destination in Canada. Papathanassis and Knolle (2011) used axial coding to identify and organise codes (observed phenomena) and then selective coding (which presumes the existence of a core concept or phenomenon) to build theory on adopting and processing on-line holiday reviews. Hyde (2000) adopted an inductive model building stage based on data and research literature, then a deductive phase for testing the model of independent traveller decision-making processes among visitors to New Zealand. Woodside et al. (2004, p. 8) used grounded theory construction of tourist

behaviour in the case context of Prince Edward Island (Canada) noting of grounded theory, that it 'needs to be complemented by additional theory-research paradigms-such as holistic case-based empirical relativism-that focus on this descriptions of an individual's thoughts and actions constituting the stories in their lived experiences'. Moore et al. (2012) also used this process to identify decision making themes of visitors who were travelling to New Zealand.

The approach for data analysis of the qualitative data is one that draws on grounded theory methods. Whilst accepting that it is more of a paradigm than a theory (Moore et al., 2012) in this study grounded theory methods are used for initial open-coding of data, then axial coding where it is categorised, then selective coding where it is ordered (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). All the while, every analytical step will include reflection on existing theory and data.

Alternative means of analysis were also considered but dismissed. Chaos theory, or the butterfly effect, analyses a small change in a complex system that results in wide ranging and divergent outcomes. This study does not look to understand the changes resulting from WOM on the bigger picture in a predictive way. The use of a social network framework (outlined in Chapter 2) provides the parameters for effect. Complexity theory was also considered, that is the study of decision problems by resources. This study has identified the resource of 'other travellers' and endeavours to explore the dynamic between the traveller and that particular source. This approach was also dismissed, as it is not well established in the tourism literature (McKercher, 1999) and was beyond the capacity of the researcher. Moreover it can be argued that such alternative approaches to analysis have not been widely used and consequently haven't contributed to a significant shift away from the 'linear' modelling often seen in the tourism literature.

### **3.6.2 Statistical analysis**

Survey findings will be analysed using SPSS V22 (Statistical Program for Social Sciences) to generate descriptive statistics and frequencies. This data will be used support findings from the qualitative results and provide comparable measures that can be used for comparison between the two cases. Chi square analysis was utilised to compare categorical data determine relationships between variable. Independent t-tests were used to compare interval data means between backpackers and caravanners.

Other statistical methods such as ANOVA were considered but the absence of hypothesis testing and the inductive approach meant that the application of such analytical techniques were not appropriate to meet the aims of the research. Statistical analysis uses  $\alpha$  level of .05 and statistically significant results are highlighted using a bold type font.

The responses to the open-ended survey questions were processed using Voyeur, a web-based text analysis set of tools (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2012). Voyeur counts the frequency of words and terms then generates two outputs. Firstly, a word count list showing how frequently words appeared in the responses. Secondly, it generates network-type diagrams where larger words represent increased frequency in the responses and lines between words reflect the relationships between those words in the responses. To show themes drawn from the qualitative findings, the researcher then manually grouped these words. The use of such tools to count terms and depict their interrelated nature (either automatically or by the researcher) is an emerging method of analysis (Lagos, Harris, & Sigala, 2015) and provides an additional means of triangulating data from the survey. In keeping with the grounded theory methods employed for the qualitative analysis, the data will then contribute to the emerging picture of at-destination WOM through the development of a model.

### **3.6.3 Model development**

The oscillating process of data and analysis along with theoretical underpinnings relating to homophily, tie-strength, communications and settings are staged in order to address the research objectives. In turn, this will lead to the development of a model to explain at-destination WOM. According to McKercher (1999, p. 425), ‘most tourism models recognise the complex nature of tourism and the inter-relatedness of different components’. The role, function and design of models varies, but the analysis of the data in this thesis will contribute to the development of an explanatory model as per Getz (1986) in Figure 3-5.



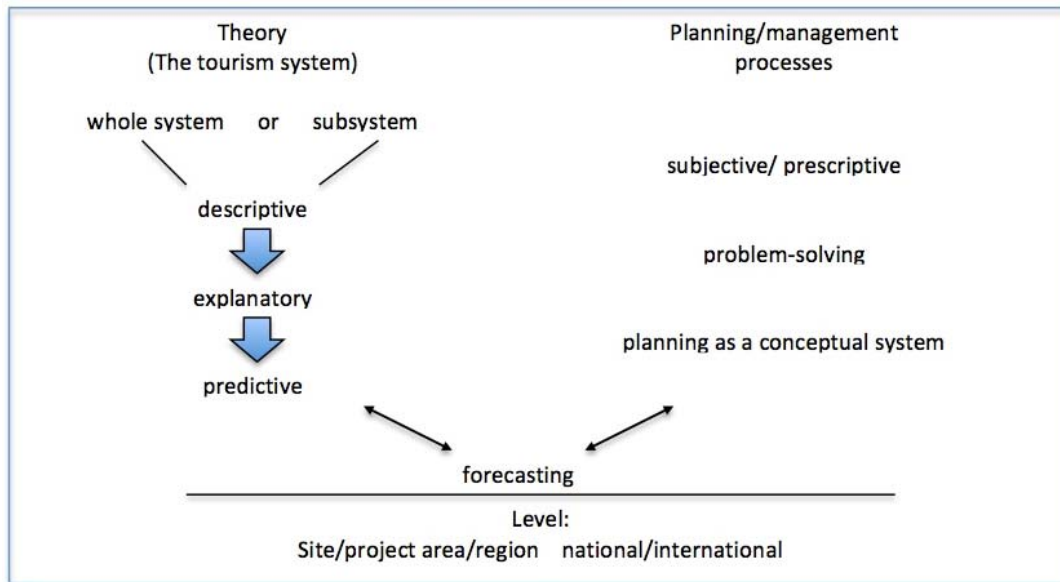


Figure 3-5 – Classification of tourism models (Getz 1986)

McKercher (1999, p. 427) argued that ‘models do not appreciate that tourism operates in a non-linear manner. It is the non-linearity of tourism that makes it extremely difficult to show a direct cause and effect between actions’. This view supports the methodological research gaps identified in Chapter 2. The assumptions of cause and effect based on linearity have largely been inadequate to provide the basis of an effective predictive model. At the same time the model will do more than simply identify the component as per a descriptive model. Instead an explanatory model will be proposed to ‘show how a system or sub-system works (such as by demonstrating interactions among components) with or without specifying causal relationships’ Getz (1986, p. 22). This also reflects the explanatory case study design.

### 3.7 Limitations

The study was limited and constrained by the design, selection of subjects and research site and the nature of WOM itself. These limitations have been recognised in previous research and are outlined below.

#### 3.7.1 Extraneous factors in the decision making process

Broader marketing activity by a destination and competing destinations including advertising and sponsorship will influence perception of travellers. Also cost and time will always have a bearing on travellers’ choices regardless of desire to travel. Within

this; airfares, petrol prices, taxes and exchange rates will have particular influence on touristic decisions. Attempts were made within the context of the two cases to identify factors specific to those cases but it is acknowledged that this was not the focus of the data collection and, as such, there may be additional factors not detailed in the findings.

### **3.7.2 Nature of word-of-mouth activity**

There is an acknowledgement that WOM has no expiry date., as such, travellers to a destination may have heard something about based on an old experience. Memories and recollections can change over time, they may become stronger or weaker. This chapter discussed cognitive dissonance but that discussion doesn't take into account a situation where an out-dated opinion (from someone else is woven into a WOM interaction. This exchange of outdated information or opinion occurs because destinations also change over time so WOM may be used in relation to a touristic experience or opinion which is no longer relevant.

### **3.7.3 Parameters of the study**

The study was limited to Cairns and to the backpacking and caravan segments visiting Cairns for the purpose of comparison. To attempt this research across all market segments to Cairns is outside the resources of the research both in time and cost. There are different means of segmenting markets and the selected cases for this research are limited to the definitions detailed in Section 3.7.3.

The language and cultural frameworks of the subjects may restrict the data obtained. The research was conducted with those who spoke (or were prepared to speak) in English for the purposes of data collection. The interpretation of the qualitative data is dependent of the views of the researcher. It should be acknowledged that, even with design considerations, the interpretation could differ in the hands of another researcher.

Finally, the research is limited within the timeframe of the 2009-2012. Given the number of factors that can impact Cairns (or any destination) including political, social and natural shocks which have a direct bearing on travellers' views it is necessary to restrict the context to Cairns as a destination (including its tourism product offering at the time) to this timeframe.

### **3.7.4 The human condition**

The research seeks to explain the dynamics of WOM within the two groups in the study. It will not, however, delve into the human psychological condition in an attempt to explain the inclination of certain individuals to always view experiences in a positive or negative light.

## ***3.8 Summary and presentation of findings***

The research decisions were bound by an interactional view that the tourism experience comprises of time, setting and people which are unequivocally entwined. The ontology of the selected research paradigm is one which accepts socially constructed, multiple realities and that aims to understand the phenomenon rather than predict it. Any ontological view needs to be taken to adequately deal with the complexities of many tourism research aims (Beeton, 2005). The epistemological basis of this research is subjective, with the researcher playing a role that is interactive, cooperative and participative in the process of the construction of participants' realities. The axiology recognises the values and biases of the subjects and that these contribute to their realities being revealed. The selection of a case study accommodates 'breaking' a piece from this complex web and methodological decisions allow for the examination of this piece as a whole. In taking a multi-faceted approach to collecting data, the research design is aimed at inductively developing theory through a process of continuous collection and analysis using the principles of grounded theory.

The following chapters present the two cases. Following Yin (2009), the cases will first outline secondary data sources along with an overview of the data collected for the case. This will be followed by findings from the qualitative (interviews, observation and focus groups) and quantitative (survey) data. A discussion of findings in relation to the categories of relationship constructs (homophily and tie strength), settings and communication.

## 4 Findings – Backpacker Case

The following chapter will outline how backpackers use WOM during their travels in the Cairns region. Firstly, an outline of the backpacker literature will profile the backpackers with respect to demographics, perceptions, communication and motivations to engage in WOM. This provides the framework within which data from interviews with tourism industry, backpacker focus group participants and participant observation will be analysed to identify concepts and themes. The analysis of 427 useable self-completed questionnaires from backpackers will then further explore the relationship between different concepts. The data in this chapter will be presented in the context of the research objectives (Chapter One) and gaps in the existing literature (Chapter Two). Finally, a reflection of the findings in relation to the broader context of backpacker research will address the research question (Chapter One) of how interaction with other backpackers impacts the WOM dynamic.

### 4.1 Case Profile

Wilson, Richards, and MacDonnell (2008) contended that backpacker tourism is better researched in an Australian context than in any other destination due to the economic significance of the market. Slaughter (2004) concurred, noting that the arrivals of backpackers since the early '90s have generated government and academic research in the backpacker market. If this is true of Australia in broad terms then it is especially true of the Tropical North Queensland region both in terms of research specific to the area and economic importance of the market (Harris & Prideaux, 2011b). Pearce's (1990) discussion of the backpackers was beginning of a flow of literature on the topic generated from Far North Queensland; Ross' studies on backpacker images in FNQ (1992, 1993), Loker's development of Pearce's earlier work (1993), Blomfield's (1998) study on the relationships between backpackers and the industry and, more recently, Prideaux's research on travel patterns (Prideaux, Falco-Mammone, & Thompson, 2006) and shopping patterns (Prideaux & Coghlin, 2006) of backpackers in Cairns.

One of the challenges in any discussion of the backpacker market is definition. Pearce (1990 p.1) argued that 'backpacking is best defined socially rather than in economic or demographic terms'. To that end he identified 5 criteria for distinguishing backpackers from other travellers, noting that the first of these was a 'basic and

necessary' criterion and subsequent criteria, not necessarily all, needed also to be present;

- a preference for budget accommodation
- an emphasis on meeting other travellers
- an independently organised and flexible travel schedule
- longer rather than very brief holidays
- an emphasis on informal and participatory holiday activities.

The strength of this approach to definition is that it captures what Pearce refers to as the 'social flavour' of backpacking. It does, however, pose difficulties when trying to extrapolate quantifiable existing data on this market segment. Consequently many Australian government agencies involved in backpacker marketing and research have used an accommodation based definition such as used in Buchanan and Rossetto (1997) or Ipalawatte (2003);

*a traveller aged 15 years or above who spent one or more nights in backpacker/hostel accommodation during travel in Australia.*

The latter definition is based on the key criteria of Pearce's social definition, but there are other similarities which aid in the definition of backpackers. Ross (1992) selected backpackers as subjects for research based on their appearance as backpackers (younger, dressed informally and wearing a backpack), then further qualified their participation by asking if he/she was staying at a budget accommodation establishment. Importantly this suggests that backpackers may consider themselves (and be considered by others) as 'backpackers'. Of course self identification is not without its problems either but Wilson, Richards and McDonnell (2008) highlighted, less than a third of those visiting other countries considered themselves as backpackers, whereas almost 50% of those visiting Australia considered themselves as such. They attribute this to the highly developed industry and infrastructure which connects travellers with the concept of being a backpacker.

The literature does identify other commonalities within the broad spectrum of the term backpacker. Slaughter's (2004) analysis of seven different research pieces on Australian backpacking over a 10 year period found;

- predominantly British and other European markets
- all studies showed at least 70% of respondents were under 30

- gender was close to even distribution
- well educated
- travel for extended periods of time
- make their own travel arrangements

As the age of this group is 30 years old (and younger), members of this population qualify (depending on nationality) for working holiday visas. Those on such a visa are able to stay longer in Australia and, as they are able to work, budgetary constraints are not a big an issue as with their non-working counterparts.

Furthermore, backpackers are considered to be very social and meeting other backpackers is a strong motivator to travel. For example, Pearce and Foster (2007) found the “high involvement socialites” who rated highest on the individual item ‘to socialize with other travellers’ the largest cluster in their study of backpackers. Hajkowicz et al. (2013, p. 24) also noted of Queensland that ‘for many backpackers the opportunities for social interaction are more important than the destination itself’.

The literature also supports the contention that they use these social networks as a valuable source of information. Murphy et al. (2007) found that those who were staying in backpacker accommodation in far north Queensland were most likely to use other travellers as a source of WOM during travel to the region. Then Pearce, Murphy, and Brymer (2009) found that ‘other travellers’ were the most used information source for backpackers during their trip.

#### **4.1.1 Research site**

Cairns was considered as an appropriate research site as it is a major destination for backpacking travellers to Australia and acts as a hub for dispersal into the surrounding Tropical North Queensland tourism region (Harris & Prideaux, 2011b). The destination provides both quantity and diversity of tourism product and this is reflected in the statistics showing longer duration of stay and expenditure by backpackers than other segments (Tourism Research Australia, 2006). According to Tourism Research Australia, backpackers spent 192,827 nights in TNQ in the year ending September 2014 (Tourism Research Australia, 2015a). Furthermore, there is a significant body of research on the backpacking market to Cairns (Ipalawatte, 2003; Prideaux & Coghlin, 2006; Ross, 1992, 1993) and the social nature of backpackers (Murphy, 2001; Pearce, 1990; Sørensen, 2003) is also well established.

The following section identifies themes from the qualitative data and these will be presented under the headings of homophily, tie-strength, communications and settings. Interviews with industry, focus groups with backpackers and researcher observations are presented below offering different perspectives into these themes with insight and detail.

#### ***4.2 Industry interviews – themes and concepts***

The aims of the industry interviews were to:

- Establish some background into caravanners and backpackers;
- Determine industry perception of the mechanics of WOM;
- Understand what involvement industry has in ‘managing’ WOM;
- Identify if and how industry measures or monitors WOM activity; and
- Understand the future of WOM in tourism marketing from an industry perspective.

Table 4-1 outlines interview respondents from the backpacking industry. Interviews and opportunistic conversations with those working in the backpacking industry are listed below. The formally arranged interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The opportunistic conversations were less formal, had not been pre-arranged and hence, it was decided that brief note taking during the encounter would be more appropriate, with more detailed notes taken immediately after.

Table 4-1 – Industry participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Industry role</b>	<b>Interview type</b>
Ben	President local backpacker industry association Backpacker hostel owner/operator	Interview
Verity	Backpacker hostel manager	Interview
Adam	Backpacker hostel duty manager Former backpacker	Interview
Darren	Backpacker duty manager	Conversation
Jim	Local backpacker industry association member Backpacker hostel owner/operator	Conversation
Monique	Backpacker hostel operator	Interview

Industry participants were selected purposefully (Veal, 2011) over several time points and from different establishments (large and small) to provide variance in perspectives and data.

#### 4.2.1 Backpacker trends and demographics

There were three clear trends that emerged with respect to the backpacker market; a shift in demands of backpackers, lack of competitiveness of Cairns as a destination and work as a priority to backpackers. As Adam (duty manager) noted,

*there has been a move from backpackers to flashpackers. They've stopped carrying backpacks and started carrying suitcases with wheels. Their needs are changing. They all want ensuites to their rooms and the focus has shifted from the destination to the environment...their accommodation.*

Ben also made this same observation stating,

*So many ways its changed, they stopped carrying their backpacks in 1995/1996, they stopped carrying back packs and wheels on backpacks started to come in at the end of the last century... They are a little bit more demanding, we have seen in the time, because it's [Cairns] not so off the beaten track. You know the advent of this terrible word, flashpack, which I hate.*

The demands and style of the backpackers have transitioned to the 'flashpacker'. An example cited by Ben (industry respondent), Verity (industry respondent) and Monique (industry respondent) was the demand for an ensuite bathroom attached to each dorm. The shared bathroom presented a logistics challenge for Ben, Verity saw the shared bathrooms in her property as a means of competitive advantage and Monique explained that her property was recently renovated to ensure that all dorms and rooms had bathrooms.

Monique also discussed the significant refurbishment of her backpacker operation to accommodate these growing demands and the redesign of rooms so that they are more like a budget hotel room than the traditional dormitory style backpacker accommodation. Aside from ensuites, she explained that rooms will have fewer beds and more power points to better meet the needs of the phones, tablets and the like carried by the contemporary backpacker. Such structural changes are significant to operators (building, electricity and plumbing) for a market that is demanding better value, in a destination that is becoming less competitive.

When asked about the Great Barrier Reef as a drawcard for backpackers to Cairns as a destination, Ben commented that, 'it's just a tick off the box these days'. These



sentiments were echoed by backpacker comments who had used Airlie Beach (south of Cairns) to access the Whitsunday Islands as their ‘reef experience’ and Adam (duty manager) also commented that,

*The GBR isn’t drawing backpackers as it has in the past. Part of it is awareness of Cairns being an access point for the GBR. Travel agents in Sydney (which is the arrival point for many of the backpackers) advise backpackers that Airlie Beach or the Whitsunday Islands can be an access point and that there is no need or benefit in the additional cost to Cairns.*

Ben (owner) reflected on the impact of this, ‘Yeah, it’s hard. Cairns has been suffering for a little bit, through physical numbers and what not in the industry’. When asked what still draws backpackers to Cairns, all industry respondents commented about ‘value add’ by way of amenities, inclusions, free meals, tours or activities and transfers. Verity (manager) noted,

*Another thing that appeals to them is a the added extras, the freebies and stuff. You know, the free drink somewhere, the free breakfast. Internet and stuff, they love that.. Other operators who market to backpackers also recognise this ‘value add’ aspect. For example, The Woolshed promotes a \$10 meal and beer deal to backpackers via the hostels and this deal is widely propagated via WOM.*

Several respondents also commented on the price competitiveness of South East Asian destinations and how different laws in Australia, particularly regarding safety and alcohol service, meant that they couldn’t compete with the ‘party atmosphere’ and value ‘on the ground’. As Ben (owner) put it, ‘They only have a certain amount of money they spend and that is about it’.

Certainly, earning money through work was revealed as a driver in backpackers’ behaviours and decision making processes. This will be discussed in more detail below but it is worthy of noting that a strong Australian dollar (post global financial crisis) coupled with the high costs encountered in Sydney (a frequent starting point for backpackers doing ‘the East Coast’) means that securing paid work in Cairns is often the priority. As Adam (duty manager) commented,

*Where once a backpacker would have come to Cairns for 2 weeks, seen all the sights then moved on for work. Now they arrive in Cairns with less Aussie*

*dollars, paying more than they were expecting and so they look for work immediately.*

A final but significant trend among backpackers is the use of technology in their communication. This is discussed in a section below but any discussion of trends that have influenced the backpacker market must acknowledge the integration of technology in their experience up front.

The observations made of the demographics of the backpackers in Cairns were consistent with the literature. The majority were 'young', with many appearing to be in their mid-twenties. Overwhelmingly the backpackers observed were international, although a few Australians were encountered. Their country of origin was categorised in colloquial terms by the Ben (industry respondent) who made reference to 'lager louts' (young British and Irish males), 'the young German girls', 'Scandis' (Scandinavians) and 'Kiwis' (New Zealanders).

Observations suggest that visitor demographics were more heavily weighted to UK and Ireland, Germany, Canada, New Zealand, Europe and United States. This is not surprising and reflects the academic and grey literature about the market to this region. There were, however, noticeable numbers of backpackers from East Asia including Korean backpackers. This may be the edge of the next wave of travellers from this region (Hajkowicz et al., 2013) however, the majority of backpackers encountered over the duration of this research were consistent with the literature and aligned with those countries who have working holiday visa arrangements with Australia.

Many backpackers use the working holiday visa arrangements and work at the hostels where they are staying. This means that the backpackers who visit are drawing on other backpackers as a source of information. In the context of WOM, however, these would be considered interactions with staff regardless of their origin as the staff are paid to work at the hostel and that may involve selling or advising on tours with a view to sell. It is worth noting that one implication of having backpacking travellers as staff creates one less touch point with locals and the expertise that entails. This was observed in the research in an exchange with two German backpackers at a hostel. After introductions and the 'usual questions' (see following) they asked where I was from, when I explained that I was Australian and my research and the purpose of my stay in the hostel, one responded, 'you're a real Australian?'. This also occurred with

a couple (partners) from the UK who were also keen to ask questions of a ‘real Australian’.

#### **4.2.2 Information needs and flexible arrangements**

The data did not reveal a distinct or consistent trend regarding whether backpackers had pre-determined ideas or plans for their time in Cairns when they arrived. Verity (manager) commented, ‘If they have been around Australia already, yes, if they have just got into the country, no.’, adding, ‘A lot of people will just come in and say ‘what can I do’? They don’t really have the idea’. Monique (manager) agreed, ‘some know what they want to see and do while they are here, but they often won’t book until they arrive, you’ve seen how busy our travel desk is’. All the hostels visited as part of the research had travel desks (either dedicated or part of reception) with staff and brochures and information for those backpackers wanting to book. Verity (manager) commented,

*Anna [on-site booking agent] has been on many trips she has a book there that has reviews, of every trip that she has been on and that is very popular. Because they really want to know what these things are really like.*

This suggests that the operators recognise the correlation between at-destination information access and propensity to purchase opportunistically (Decrop, 1999b; Moore et al., 2012).

Given the competitive nature of the backpacker accommodation sector it is little surprise that there is a recognised commercial gain in providing the information to leverage the flexible arrangements.

*Doesn’t matter, your job as a receptionist and what not is to extract whatever money you can out of them because they are only going to spend it at another business. And to make us maintain the property and buy food and everything, its best for them spend it here. Internet, whatever it might be, food, drink, whatever. A tour or what not. – Ben (owner)*

This may take the form of additional spending but also takes place by extending the time at the hostel. Monique (manager) noted that, ‘once they know what is available and they are having a good time, they usually extend’. Verity (manager) concurred, ‘usually we have a few people that extend each day. Umm probably what would

influence them more is the atmosphere around the hostel at that time. If we have got people in that want to get out and meet people - and they would almost probably get involved with that group'. Jim (manager) also observed that a good social atmosphere was related to backpackers extending their stay.

#### **4.2.3 Relationships with other travellers**

The literature suggests that the backpacker market is a social one where travellers are drawn to the style of travel due, in part, to the social interaction with other backpackers. This was reflected by the interviews; 'Generally they speak with any backpacker' (Verity, industry respondent) and 'So it's just the environment at the time and their time frame... they start to loosen up, they'll talk to bloody anyone' (Ben, owner). It was also observed in the field with easy engagement between backpackers and also between the researcher and backpackers.

Specific motivations for engaging particular backpackers also emerged. Firstly, the comfort of similarity was one motivation. That is to say that backpackers are drawn to observable similarities with other backpackers. This may be the language spoken, demographics or other areas of apparent likeness. Ben (owner) stated, 'Demographics matter' and Verity (manager) also commented that,

*I think it depends on the nationality, some do prefer, are just more comfortable with people who do speak their language... But others have travelled to get away from that. So yeah there is not really a majority, in either category, there is probably half and half.*

So some backpackers seek out similarity in terms of language and the commonality of language facilitates communication and cultural similarities can create natural groups. Observations in the field supported this, particularly for those visiting Australia from a non-English speaking background. The willingness to speak to others (in a shared language) was also observed with Korean, French and Spanish speakers. One example from the observation field notes was at a communal table one evening where a German backpacker was reading a guidebook (in German) eating a barbeque dinner (put on by the hostel), a female backpacker sat next to him with her meal, saw the book and engaged conversation in German. After a brief discussion, she turned to the researcher and engaged in conversation in English (having heard me speak in the

queue waiting for the barbeque to be served). It appeared that the other backpacker was unknown to her but she used the evaluative cues to determine the starting point.

It appears that there is an additional motivation for interaction, attraction. As Ben (owner) noted, 'Often will use travel experiences to strike up conversations, particularly if they like each other or have the hots for someone'. Again, this was supported by several observations at different hostels where young, male backpackers were observed approaching female backpackers where their nationality was not obvious. This may have also occurred between same gender backpackers but this was not observed.

#### **4.2.4 Settings – Physical and Social spaces**

The respondents highlighted the physical spaces where socialising took place; namely kitchen, laundry, internet access area and the bar along with other communal spaces. The researcher's observations supported this and Ben (owner) noted,

*they usually interact in the common spaces I guess when they check into hostels, the first thing they do, they scope it out, and see if it is rewarding or not for their relaxation. So relaxation can be in their common spaces, kitchens where there is cooking for each other, in this case a bar and a restaurant or the internet, or what not. And that's usually when they interact unless, at the hostels that's usually where they interact and they'll, you know, that's where they will start off.*

These were supported by the observations of the researcher. However, it is not just in the common space where WOM occurs. Observations of exchanges were also observed in dormitories or shared rooms and in bathrooms suggesting that the flow of discussion and the WOM embedded in it is ongoing upon the establishment of relationships.

Hostel operators also facilitate interaction among backpackers. This is due, largely to a recognition that strengthening relationships with other backpackers can result in backpackers extending their stay. One hostel operator noted that, 'social atmosphere encourages people to stay'.

Observations made of activities that the different backpacker hostels offer to encourage social interaction among their guests include; trivia night (with bar prize), pool competitions, barbeques, a backpacker night at the local cable water-ski park,

parties for long-stay guests and free mini-bus transfers to nightclubs when the on-site bar closes. Both operators noted the success of such activities particularly when there was free food for the backpackers. Verity (manager) commented,

*We have been running these BBQ practically since we opened, about 2 years now, and the pancakes have probably been going for about 12 months. They are very popular because they are free, and yeah we do put on those activities to encourage guests to interact.*

#### **4.2.5 Communications and technology**

Regardless of motivation, there was an observed commonality in the process of establishing a relationship. From a communication perspective, this almost always commences with the exchange of the 'usual questions'. Ben commented,

*So, they usually interact in the common spaces. Then people might ask the usual questions, where you from, how long have you been travelling for, the boring old questions.*

This was observed by the researcher and the researcher engaged in this exchange many times (including the example above with the German speaking backpacker) during the field work but, also, in previous experience outside the study. Even before this engagement there is an assessment of individuals and their 'things'. These things (such as a guidebook in German) provide evaluative cues which are used as points of similarity from which a conversation can take place. Examples observed in the field work included printed material (books, brochures or handwriting of postcards), flags or badges attached to backpacks and even brands. These are all on-site communication mechanisms by which interaction between backpackers can commence.

When asked about WOM, the respondents were unanimous that the face-to-face interaction is the most influential. Verity (manager) said, 'I reckon it's the number one, umm they want to hear from people's personal experiences', Jim (owner/operator) agreed stating,

*word-of-mouth is the most used, they come in here [shared communal space] and start chatting and comparing notes when they are kicking back at the end of the day.*

Ben (owner) was more specific and commented that;

*I mean plans can change sometimes depending on the influence of the person and the experience that the storyteller has actually had. So it depends on if the storyteller like, you know, has just come off... And when they come back, they have great pleasure and enthusiasm, it was brilliant or it was f'en wonderful or whatever. So with more conviction that the story is told with, it has more of a spark on the travellers.*

Furthermore, Ben (owner) noted that these exchanges also occur during daily activities outside the hostel,

*that's usually where [hostel] they interact and they'll, you know, that's where they will start off. Unless they're on tour buses or reef trips or something like that, or on top of the bungee tower, and they usually don't feel like doing because they too scared.*

An example observed in the study is the '\$10 beer and meal deal' at the Woolshed (nightclub & bar in Cairns), it was mentioned frequently, was widely known among backpackers regardless of how long they had been in Cairns and, as researcher, I was invited by other backpackers at the hostel to join them in taking up the offer on several occasions.

A final point raised about communication on-site was the use of message boards. Adam (duty manager) noted that 'a lot' of backpackers still use the physical noticeboard, Verity (manager) confirmed this noting that many backpacking guests 'still use the written message board at the front desk for communication with other guests' and that 'we have heaps of people coming through with notes or cars for sale or that sort of thing'. However Ben (owner) commented, that the message board contributes to a 'broader' mix of communication. Indeed, this was also observed by the researcher at a number of sites, although it seemed to be a means of 'looking busy' for the newly arrived to alleviate social awkwardness with the information being secondary.

The rapid evolution of technology in recent decades has had a significant influence on the requirements for and use of devices, networks and electronic infrastructure on the part of the backpackers. All sites visited in the study had 'desktop' computers, some

owned by the hostel and, in one case, a bank of desktops that are owned by Global Gossip – an external business. All respondents observed that there has been an increase in the use of personal devices, the variety of devices and the number of devices.

According to respondents, the demand outstrips supply. Verity commented, ‘They get 30 minutes of free internet a day. It’s definitely not enough though...Internet is a major, major thing’, Darren said, ‘it doesn’t matter how much wi-fi we give them, it’s not enough...they always want more’ and Jim commented, ‘the computers are always full, especially in the evening when they can talk to their families back home’. The use of technology to keep in touch with home was supported by Verity (manager) who noted,

*Skype... Probably more so communicating with people back home. Yeah that is a guess though, but they probably communicate with people they have met on the way via email or Facebook...email, Facebook all the social networking sites are all major.*

The suggestion that backpackers connect with others and use social media to keep in touch was also supported by Ben (owner) who observed that,

*the advent of social media and trip advisor, for example, even Facebook, even on hostel world, hostel bookers, trip advisor, all those forums, that is why you have to be on the ball... So that the communication these days is a lot more broader, a lot more easier than what it ever has been.*

A challenge for these hostels has also been in the use of social media for marketing. Jim (manager) noted that ‘you have no control over ratings’ but added, ‘we encourage our guests to get online and give us a positive review if they have had a good stay’. Verity (manager) commented that ‘We have had guests make a Facebook group for us’, similarly Ben confirmed that a Facebook page had been set up for his hostel by guests. The management of these social networking sites can present some challenges but, interestingly, Ben recognised the importance of credibility in the message,

*you can tell them that the sky is blue and then they go there and 3 out of 5 people say it’s actually grey... and then your credibility loses.*

In terms of personal use, the increasing use of the technology was evident. For example whilst sitting with a UK backpacker, he was observed writing in a journal



but also mentioned to the researcher uploading photos on Facebook. This integration of new technologies into existing communication channels was frequently encountered.

### 4.3 Focus groups – themes and concepts

Backpackers were interviewed at their accommodation site with key points, anecdotes and examples noted. The details of focus group participants are outlined in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2 – Backpacker participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Interview type	Interview site
Mike	Male	British	Focus group 1	GH hostel
Steve	Male	British	Focus group 1	GH hostel
Annie	Female	British	Focus group 1	GH hostel
Kate	Female	British	Focus group 1	GH hostel
Jo	Female	Irish	Focus group 1	GH hostel
Kerry	Female	Irish	Focus group 1	GH hostel
James	Male	Irish	Focus group 1	GH hostel
Jana	Female	Dutch	Focus group 2	GH hostel bar
Miff	Female	Dutch	Focus group 2	GH hostel bar
Kelly	Female	American	Focus group 2	GH hostel bar
Sven	Male	Norwegian	Focus group 2	GH hostel bar
Helen	Female	Norwegian	Focus group 2	GH hostel bar
Anna	Female	Norwegian	Focus group 2	GH hostel bar
Laura	Female	Irish	Focus group 3	CAL bar
Julie	Female	Irish	Focus group 3	CAL bar
Ian	Male	Irish	Focus group 3	CAL bar
Sarah	Female	Israeli	Focus group 3	CAL bar
Jess	Female	Australian	Focus group 3	CAL bar
Belinda	Female	Australian	Focus group 3	CAL bar
Brian	Male	British	Focus group 3	CAL bar
David	Male	British	Focus group 3	CAL bar
Natasha	Female	British	Focus group 3	CAL bar
Joelle	Female	France	Focus group 3	CAL bar

The option to record was considered but decided against for two main reasons; firstly noise and atmosphere of the sites meant that recording for the purpose of transcribing was not practical and, secondly, it formalises the roles of the researcher and participant taking away from the naturalistic ‘flow’ which contributes to the WOM phenomenon.

Additionally observations of backpackers, both within and outside the parameters of the study, have entwined into the findings. Having stayed in backpackers in Australia in circumstances not related to the study it would be naïve to suggest that these experiences were not drawn upon in framing my observations during the study. Methodological acknowledgment of the contribution this makes to the observational

data has already been outlined. Beyond this, observations within the study were ad-hoc over the entire data collection period and usually included an overnight stay at a hostel and social interaction with other backpackers.

#### **4.3.1 Characteristics of the backpacker network**

Observation and focus groups reflect a group or network that is very open and accommodating of newcomers. Not all those staying in the hostels considered themselves a backpacker. For example, when Kelly (United States, F) was asked if she considered herself to be a backpacker she responded,

*No, not really. I mean I am staying in a backpackers but I consider myself more of a student staying at a backpackers than an actual backpacker.*

Indeed she saw herself as separate from the backpacking network, as a student who elected to stay at a backpackers because,

*I came with a group for college but they have all left and I am staying on for a bit to do some more study in the rainforest. I'm staying here because the rooms are good and I can come to the bar and just meet people...this is my first trip out of the States but it's really easy to chat to backpackers.*

This supports the open social structure of the network where travellers can connect easily and freely. Conversely, there were two Australians (Jess and Belinda) who identified themselves as being backpackers despite being domestic, short term travellers to Cairns, this may have stemmed from a desire to identify with other backpackers during their travels.

#### **4.3.2 Information needs and flexible itineraries**

Backpackers communicate with each other for reasons beyond fulfilling social needs. Predominant themes revealed in the purpose of communication also included; general information acquisition and seeking specific expertise. The findings suggest that there is a transition from the general to the specific.

The findings suggest that backpackers draw on a number of sources of information to choose their destination. The array of brochures available at booking desks, at hostels, information centres and operator booking offices contribute to the information acquisition process. The data further suggests that this information provides general information with specific details provided via interaction with other backpackers. Jana

(Netherlands, F) noted that she sought out backpackers socially because ‘you get the opportunity to talk to other backpackers who can give you information’ [sic]. She went on to specify ‘work’ as the information she referred to. Miff (Netherlands, F) made the same observation, ‘You get the idea from the brochure, but the details from the backpacker’.

Like the industry respondents, the priority to work was evident in backpacker responses.

*We just arrived, we’ll probably go and see the rainforest but we want to find some work pretty much straightaway – Jo (Ireland, F)*

*It depends on work. I asked around here (the hostel) and they mentioned that there was some work at another hostel that is under the same management. So I spoke with them yesterday and am going to see them tomorrow. – Mike (UK, M)*

*We’ll see if we can get some work here in Cairns, but if we can’t we might have to leave Cairns for fruit picking work – Jana (Netherlands, F)*

The need and desire to work appears to be the prioritising force behind the decision making of the backpackers in the study. This was consistent with the industry findings and supports the idea that backpackers who arrive in Cairns need the funds in order to engage in touristic activity and extend their stay.

#### **4.3.3 Homophily - People like us**

The concept of similarity as a foundation for WOM emerged from respondents in the focus groups. When asked ‘whose opinion do you trust?’ Julie (Ireland, F) responded,

*Friends, family and people like me.*

Sarah (Israel, F) said that she also takes culture into account,

*For example; the Germans like to be busy all the time on holiday. So if a German backpacker tells me there is nothing to do at a place, I might go anyway. There is always something to do. People don’t like or visit a place where they “do nothing”. I think us Israelis are opposite to the Germans when we travel. They want to be busy doing things and we prefer to just chill out. But if an Israeli recommends something I would probably think, are they relaxed like me?*

This demonstrates that cultural similarities are drawn upon to contextualise communication. Further, this shows that assumptions about other cultures are also made and that there are subsequent impacts on the WOM dynamic as a result. Observations by the researcher at the different hostels suggest there are a number of cues used to determine culture which include; language spoken, foreign language text (books, brochures, travel guides), flags, badges and other physical adornments on backpacks and, sometimes, food 'from home'. All of which provide an opportunity to strike up conversation with another backpacker with whom a backpacker has something in common.

Backpackers also appear to search for common ground in order to advance the conversation beyond the 'usual questions'. One example was observed [site 1] between England (M), Ireland (F) & Ireland (M) who compared a volcano experience in Indonesia prior to arrival in Cairns. The English backpacker said it was 'fabulous, hard work but rewarding at the rim'. The Irish backpacker said that she 'didn't enjoy it', recounting that she felt unwell, so didn't get to the rim. They then compared another shared Indonesian experience (rainforest) and again, had different views. Eventually, they attributed this disparity to weather. The backpacker from England explained that he was there when it was warm and dry whereas the Irish backpacker visited during the monsoon. She discussed being physically ill prepared and inadequately equipped in terms of clothing and equipment. This exchange allowed the backpackers to have something to attribute the mismatch of experience and reflection. Soon the conversation lulled and each launched a new conversation with the usual questions with other backpackers at the communal table. At the end of the evening the English backpacker was observed sitting with yet another backpacker (at the end of the communal table) repeating this process of experience comparison..

Likeability is also important as backpackers make an effort to seek out others that they like and whose company they enjoy.

*It's a shame that you meet all these cool people and then you all go your separate ways. - Jess (Australia, F).*

This comment suggests a progression from speaking to anyone to targeting specific backpackers for a purpose or, put another way, moving from belonging to the group to forming relationships within the group.

#### **4.3.4 Relationship tie strength - Credibility and trust**

There was, however, a difference between liking another individual and trusting the views of that individual. A combination of experience and personal judgement appeared to determine trust of others' views. When asked 'who do you listen to?', James (Ireland, M) noted, 'You chat to lots of people, and you just know'. This suggests that opinions are considered and judged within the context of experience. Despite this, the views of all are considered. As David (UK, M) reflected,

*You listen to everyone, even idiots. If enough idiots say the same thing, you start thinking about it.*

This is an interesting observation as it suggests that opinions that are not deemed credible can contribute to knowledge acquired.

#### **4.3.5 Relationships with other travellers**

The openness of the network along with the social motivation of the backpackers saw relationships develop quickly. These relationships are usually determined by firstly assessing the surrounds and the non-verbal communication within then engaging in the 'usual questions'. These questions were identified in the industry interviews and the literature (Murphy, 2001). As a participant observer, I was engaged in these exchanges of non-personal details which allow for a brief overview of another backpacker without personal detail; questions include, 'how long have you been in Cairns, when did you arrive in Cairns, where were you before, where are you planning to go next, how long to do you plan to stay?', as one backpacker pointed out, these questions are asked 'to just find out'

Moreover, it appears to be completely acceptable to strike up conversation with another person on the basis of physical proximity. I engaged in such conversations at communal tables, in dorm rooms and in kitchen spaces. However, there are rules of social engagement which must be adhered to as observed by Brian (UK, M) who noted, '*you can't call me by a nickname unless you know me well*'.

#### **4.3.6 Settings – Physical & social spaces**

The observations reflected that exchanges between backpackers took place largely at reception, in dorm rooms or in social settings devised by the hostel operator as seen in Image 4-1. These areas have a degree of familiarity to the backpackers. While they

might look and ‘feel’ different from place to place, the information, services, facilities and people in these areas of the hostels are familiar territory (O'Regan, 2010).



Image 4-1 – Shared space at research site 6, Northern Greenhouse

(source: [www.greenhouse.cairns-hostels.com.au](http://www.greenhouse.cairns-hostels.com.au))

As one hostel operator commented,

*word-of-mouth from someone who is perceived to be expert can be outstripped or countered from a large volume of opposite opinion.*

By better understanding the dynamics of the relationship it may be possible to determine the tipping point whereby one opinion is discounted for another's (or others').

#### **4.3.7 Communication - on site and technology**

Given that the data collection took place in the hostel environment during backpackers' 'down time' when respondents were in shared spaces and engaging in social activities, it is not surprising that much of the observed communication was face-to-face. Much of this communication took place in English, which appeared to be the unifying language of the collective group. This might be because English is the language spoken at the destination or the demographic composition of the backpackers in Cairns or this may be a global occurrence or a combination of each of

these factors. As Svien (Norway, M) commented, ‘when you travel everybody speaks English’. However observations were made of smaller groups (two or three people) speaking a language other than English among themselves where, presumably, it was a first language for all of the speakers. Examples observed included Swedish, Norwegian, German, French, Dutch, Japanese and Korean. There were other languages that were not identified due to limitations of the researcher’s knowledge and an unwillingness to interrupt the flow of conversation to find out. In terms of language, two factors were identified. Firstly, the pace of conversation was much faster in the native language – this is not surprising given the familiarity, extensive vocabulary and ease of comprehension between backpackers. Secondly, a native language was often used to clarify the meaning of something in English. Observations in focus groups were made where a question was posed in English and one member of the group sought clarification of meaning in their own language from another member of the group (for example, Anna in Norwegian).

Technology plays an important role in the communication between backpackers with many backpackers carry a device and using the device as part of or during their face-to-face conversations. When asked if she uses social media to communicate with other backpackers, Miff (Dutch, F) commented,

*You tend to talk face to face first then you might connect through social media.*

This was highlighted by Jess (Australia, F) who commented that ‘It’s a shame that you meet all these cool people and then you all go your separate ways.’ Yet she obviously used this same approach to stay in touch. There was a large group sitting at the long table by the pool, near the bar. They were making arrangements to out for the evening but a few decided not to go because they had an early start the next morning. Jess (Australia, F) said to one of the girls (details unknown) who decided to stay, ‘are you on Facebook?’, to which she responded, ‘yes, just look me up’. Jess (Australia, F) then said, ‘what did backpackers do before Facebook.....they just used emails I guess....’ [observation note]. This suggests an assumption of ongoing connectivity but, interestingly, does not overcome the language issue.

Another example of connectivity via Facebook as a means of maintaining connection was when Helen (Norway, F) sent a Facebook ‘friend request’ to me as the researcher. This was accepted and while the content of this respondent’s ‘News Feed’ has not



been included in the findings there was an interesting observation regarding language. Most of Helen's subsequent posts have been in Norwegian (a language not spoken by the researcher). As such images and tagged locations are critical to understanding where she is and what she is doing. This raises an interesting question regarding the role of imagery in communication and the 'collection' of 'friends' much like souvenirs on a trip.

#### 4.4 Survey findings

The key aspects of demographics, travel experience, identification with the backpacker segment, social spaces of backpackers, communication channels used and views on relationships with other backpackers identified in the qualitative results provided the foundation for the survey.

##### 4.4.1 Demographics

A total of 427 useable surveys were collected from backpacker travellers, of which 204 (48.3%) were female and 218 (51.7%) were male (5 respondents did not answer the gender question). The mean age of the respondents was 25 ( $\bar{x}$  = 25.23) years old (female  $\bar{x}$  = 24.77 years, male  $\bar{x}$  = 25.6 years). There was demographic similarity within the sample, with 66.05% (144) of males and 67.15% (137) of females being 25 years old or younger. The nationalities of the backpackers (Table 4-3) were largely reflective of those seen in the literature; 85 from UK (including Northern Ireland), 59 from Germany, 34 from Ireland, 14 from Scotland, 43 from USA and 24 from Canada. The profile by country of origin is reflective of that found in the literature suggesting that the sample is a close fit.

Table 4-3 – Nationality of international backpackers

			Respondents (n=427)	
			n	%
<b>Britain &amp; Ireland</b>	n =133 41.17%	England	43	10.1%
		United Kingdom	39	9.1%
		Ireland	34	8.0%
		Scotland	14	3.3%
		Northern Ireland	3	0.7%
<b>Europe</b>	n =151 46.74%	Germany	59	13.8%
		France	19	4.4%
		Netherlands	11	2.6%
		Spain	10	2.3%
		Sweden	9	2.1%
		Belgium	8	1.9%



		Poland	8	1.9%
		Italy	7	1.6%
		Portugal	7	1.6%
		Hungary	5	1.2%
		Austria	3	0.7%
		Switzerland	3	0.7%
		Denmark	2	0.5%
<b>Americas</b>	n =73 22.6%	USA	43	10.1%
		Canada	24	5.6%
		Brazil	3	0.7%
		Mexico	2	0.5%
		Chile	1	0.2%
<b>Asia/ Pacific</b>	n =16 4.95%	Korea	4	0.9%
		Singapore	4	0.9%
		Taiwan	3	0.7%
		New Zealand	2	0.5%
		Hong Kong	1	0.2%
		India	1	0.2%
		Japan	1	0.2%
<b>Middle East</b>	n =2 0.61%	Israel	1	0.2%
		Saudi Arabia	1	0.2%
		Missing values	52	12.2%

In addition, 50 respondents provided an Australian postcode instead of or as well as a country of usual residence. This could mean one of two things: firstly, that the respondents are local or, secondly, that they may be longer staying international travellers who have a 'base' elsewhere in Australia. In any case, all respondents were included for analysis in the findings regardless of where they usually reside. Table 4-4 shows that a similar proportion had acquired degree qualifications (32.1% for males and 35.4% for females) and diploma level was also very similar (18.9% for males and 17.9% for females), the only difference was that there was a higher proportion of females who had completed secondary education as their reported highest level of education (23.7%) where a greater number of males had completed a trade qualification (12.6%). This result is not surprising and probably reflects wider social patterns of education.

Table 4-4 – Backpacker demographic characteristics

		<b>Gender</b>			
		Male (n=218)		Female (n=204)	
		n	%	n	%
<b>Age</b>	Less than 21	33	17.3%	37	20.1%
	21-30	136	71.2%	131	71.2%
	31-40	17	8.9%	12	6.5%
	41-50	2	1.0%	1	0.5%
	Over 50	3	1.5%	3	1.5%
<b>Education level</b>	Secondary	32	14.9%	47	23.7%
	Trade/TAFE	27	12.6%	8	4.0%
	Diploma	60	27.9%	49	24.7%
	Degree	69	32.1%	70	35.4%
	Other	24	11.2%	23	11.6%
	Multiple response	3	1.4%	1	0.5%
<b>Occupation</b>	Management	14	6.4%	12	5.9%
	Professional	31	14.2%	22	10.8%
	Retail	9	4.1%	11	5.4%
	Manual/factory worker	10	4.6%	1	0.5%
	Service industry	12	5.5%	11	5.4%
	Office/clerical	6	2.8%	12	5.9%
	Public servant	28	12.8%	26	12.7%
	Student	44	20.2%	77	37.7%
	Tradesperson	27	12.4%	8	3.9%
	Self-employed	17	7.8%	9	4.4%
	Other	14	6.4%	12	5.9%
	Multiple response	6	2.8%	0	0.0%
	No response provided	0	0.0%	3	1.5%

#### 4.4.2 Trip context

For 358 of the respondents, this was their first visit to Tropical North Queensland. The average anticipated duration of their overall trip was 82.39 nights with the average number of nights in FNQ averaging 19.56 of those nights. This suggests that that this group of travellers expected to spend one quarter of their backpacking trip in the region, regardless of whether they had travelled to the region previously ( $n = 39$ ,  $\bar{x} = 18.90$ ) or not ( $n=330$ ,  $\bar{x} = 20.07$ ). While those who have already visited plan to stay longer, repeat backpacker travellers are proportionately small in this sample.

Table 4-5 – Sites visited by backpackers

<i>Locations in FNQ visited on this trip</i>	<b>Backpackers</b>	
	n	%
Cairns	394	92.3
Port Douglas	140	32.8
Kuranda	57	13.3
Mosman Gorge	60	14.1
Barrier Reef	266	62.3
The Rainforest	151	35.4
Mareeba	31	7.3
Atherton Tablelands	51	11.9
Cape Tribulation	116	27.2
Mission Beach	101	23.7
Daintree	93	21.8
Other	38	8.9

Given that the surveys were collected in Cairns it is not surprising that Cairns generated the highest number of responses. The Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics Rainforests are both iconic sites and significant drawcards to the region (Hajkowicz et al., 2013). On average, backpackers surveyed in the study had visited an average of three to four ( $\bar{x}=3.42$ ) of the 12 sites listed, with 8.9% stating that they'd visited an 'other' unspecified site in the region. This suggests, at least on some level, a degree of familiarity with the destination and sufficient destination experience 'stock' from which to draw in WOM exchanges with others at the destination.

Table 4-6 – Frequency of information sources used by backpackers upon arrival

<i>Information sources used since arriving in FNQ</i>	<b>Backpackers</b>	
	n	%
Internet	307	71.9
Friends/ family	181	42.4
Other travellers	171	40.0
Travel Agent	161	37.7
Tourist guide books	160	37.5
Visitor centres	78	18.3
Trip Advisor (or similar)	64	15.0
Advertisements (print)	39	9.1
Previous experience	21	4.9
Other	20	4.7
Advertisements (TV/radio)	5	1.2

Backpackers were asked what sources of information they had used since arrival in the Cairns region (Table 4-6). Clearly the internet plays an important role in accessing destination information during stay and this is consistent with the qualitative findings. However, the next three sources; “other travellers”, “family & Friends” and “travel agent” are all interpersonal sources of information sought during stay. This suggests that interpersonal sources of information (either through electronic or corporeal channels) have a very important role to play. On average, backpackers reported using a little under three sources of information ( $\bar{x}=2.83$ ) since arriving at the destination.

Respondents were also asked whether they identified themselves as backpackers for the purpose of this trip and to rate their own backpacking experience. Table 4-7 shows only 72.2% identified themselves as being a backpacker despite staying in a backpacker hostel.

Table 4-7 – Backpacker self-identification

		<b>Backpackers</b>		
<i>Consider yourself a Backpacker on this particular trip</i>		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Yes	313	73.3%	74.2%
	No	109	25.5%	25.8%
	Total	422	98.8%	100.0%
Missing	Blank / No response provided	5	1.2%	
<b>Total</b>		<b>427</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

The survey did not explore the reasons behind this but it may be that travellers did not associate with being belonging to a backpacker social network and, hence, did not feel it appropriate to identify themselves as backpackers. Alternatively, it could be that there is a demographic fit with the backpacker ‘profile’ but their view of self does not reconcile with their view of ‘backpackers’. In any case, all valid responses were used in the sample of backpackers in accordance with the definition of ‘backpacker’ detailed in “Case Profile” section. Like Larsen, Øgaard, and Brun (2011, p. 696) staying at a hostel was ‘used as an operational criterion for allocating people to a group of backpackers’.

Table 4-8 – Backpacking experience

<i>Which best describes your backpacking experience?</i>	Frequency	<b>Backpackers</b>	
		Percent	Valid Percent
First time	191	44.7%	50.9%
Done some	143	33.5%	38.1%
Done a lot	41	9.6%	10.9%
Total	375	87.8%	100.0%
Blank / No response	52	12.2%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

Table 4-8 shows that respondents appeared to have an even distribution of backpacking experience, with a slight skew towards first time backpackers. Given the nature of the destination this is not surprising as many backpackers travel the route from Sydney to Cairns as part of their journey. The other 49% reported having done ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of backpacking prior to this trip, this suggests that they have already had exposure to the backpacking social network and some travellers might have existing or previous relationships with others in the network.

#### 4.4.3 Backpacking relationships and WOM

Respondents were asked how frequently they would listen to an opinion from a traveller who is a fellow backpacker, shown in Table 4-9. The literature points to information exchange (or word-of-mouth) as a result of engagement in a backpacking network (Murphy, 2001; Murphy et al., 2007), furthermore, it reflects connection to the network.

Table 4-9 – Likelihood of listening to a fellow backpacker

<b>Fellow backpacker BY Travel experience</b>							
		Travel experience					
		First time		Done some		Done a lot	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Likely to listen to opinions of a fellow backpacker	Always	78	50.3%	53	43.8%	12	34.3%
	Often	35	22.6%	32	26.4%	6	17.1%
	Sometimes	39	25.2%	35	28.9%	17	48.6%
	Rarely	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Never	3	1.9%	1	.8%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>155</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The results suggest that experience with backpacking and, by extension, some degree of previous connection to the social networks of backpackers have little impact on how travellers connect (or reconnect). The findings indicate that those who have no previous backpacking experience will listen to the views of a ‘fellow backpacker’ more readily than those with backpacking experience. Of those respondents with no backpacking experience, 48.6% (or 69) stated they ‘always’ listened to other backpacker opinions. Those who considered themselves as having ‘done some’ or ‘done a lot’ of backpacking also reported to be likely to listen to other backpackers ‘always’ (44% and 34.3% respectively) or ‘often’ (22.9% and 17.1% respectively). This suggests a willingness to engage with other travellers simply because they are backpackers, but not the same eagerness as those travellers who had not experienced the social network previously.

Table 4-10 – Likelihood of listening to a traveller with similar opinions

<b>Perceptual homophily BY Travel experience</b>							
		Travel experience					
		First time		Done some		Done a lot	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Likely to listen to opinions of someone who has similar opinions to me	Always	73	45.6%	43	34.7%	15	41.7%
	Often	42	26.3%	33	26.6%	3	8.3%
	Sometimes	43	26.9%	45	36.3%	17	47.2%
	Rarely	0	0%	3	2.4%	0	0%
	Never	2	1.3%	0	0%	1	2.8%
<b>Total</b>		<b>160</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 4-11 – Likelihood of listening to a traveller with similar background

<b>Demographic homophily BY Travel experience</b>							
		Travel experience					
		First time		Done some		Done a lot	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Listen to opinions of someone who is similar to me (age, background, culture)	Always	60	37.3%	53	42.7%	13	36.1%
	Often	47	29.2%	41	33.1%	4	11.1%
	Sometimes	53	32.9%	28	23.6%	19	52.8%
	Rarely	1	0.6%	1	0.8%	0	0%
	Never	0	0%	1	0.8%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>161</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Tables 4-10 and 4-11 reflect a high value placed on WOM based on perceptual and demographic homophily. This appeared to be irrespective of experience backpacking with 36.1% of experienced backpackers reporting that they *Always* listened to someone with demographic similarity and 41.7% reporting they *Always* listened to the opinions of those they perceived to be similar to themselves. A more interesting finding is the almost identical breakdown of responses by travel experience and the frequency of reliance listening to the views of others; only 6.3% reported *Rarely* or *Never* to those with perceived homophily and fewer, 2.2% reported *Rarely* or *Never* to demographic homophily. These findings suggest two things; firstly that backpackers in the study used both dimensions of homophily in the context of WOM and, secondly, that backpackers were drawn to those they perceived to be similar to themselves regardless of their backpacking experience and previous connection to the network.

Table 4-12 – Likelihood of listening to a traveller who is liked

<b>‘Liked’ backpackers BY Travel experience</b>							
		Travel experience					
		First time		Done some		Done a lot	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Listen to opinions of someone I like	Always	60	40.8%	37	33.6%	15	41.7%
	Often	38	25.9%	34	30.9%	7	19.4%
	Sometimes	47	32.0%	36	32.7%	14	38.9%
	Rarely	2	1.4%	3	2.7%	0	0%
	Never	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>147</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

‘Likeability’ is related to homophily and is there is some evidence suggesting that similarity increases ‘likeability’ (Yoo et al., 2013) however studies specifically exploring this aspect in the tourism context are scant. In the case of this study, ‘likeability’ doesn’t appear to be statistically influenced by experience of the backpacker either. Table 4-12 shows that first time (40.8%) and experienced (41.7%) backpackers reported they *Always* listened to the views of those that they liked. This supports the notion that ‘likeability’ or compatibility is heavily relied upon in terms of engaging in social networks. This stands to reason but the extent to which this has been tied to the social network literature in tourism has not previously been made explicit.

#### 4.4.4 Settings and communication

Backpackers were asked where they had discussed their current trip during their stay and, if so, where these exchange had taken place. Table 4-13 shows that backpackers reported destination experience discussions at an average of 3 different settings ( $\bar{x}$  =3.27) from the seven options drawn from the observation and interviews.

Table 4-13 - Social settings where destination discussions took place

<i>Where discussions with other travellers have taken place since arriving in FNQ</i>	<b>Backpacker</b>	
	n	%
At accommodation	297	69.6
During day trips	202	52.7
In social settings	211	49.4
While making a booking and/or enquiry	68	15.9
At visitor centres	37	8.7
While shopping	35	8.2
Elsewhere	20	4.7

Of the 20 “elsewhere” responses, four made reference to Facebook and three mentioned whilst ‘on buses’. These findings are consistent with (Sørensen, 2003) who characterised backpackers by their ‘impromptu social interaction’ and social nature of backpackers revealed in the qualitative findings.

The recent experiences of Cairns and the surrounding region (backpackers reported having visited  $\bar{x}$  =3.5 of the 10 sites listed), then becomes the conversational content which becomes the common foundation for which the talk, information-gathering and connection (Hannam & Ateljevic, 2007) with others is based. The sites where these exchanges take place are, in all likelihood, resultant from proximity. As highlighted in the literature review; proximity, whether physical or virtual, facilitates concepts of convenience and relationship built on frequency of contact.

Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of communication channel used to ‘discuss your experiences with other travellers’ during your visit to Cairns’. Ten sources were identified from previous studies and the qualitative data collected in the first two stages of this study.



Table 4-14 – Backpacker use of communication channels

Backpackers								
How frequently have you used the following to discuss your experiences with other travellers during your visit			Daily or more		Sometimes		Not at all	
			Synchronous					
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Face-to-face communication			336	80.8	65	15.6	15	3.6
Mobile phone - calls			61	14.8	162	39.4	188	45.7
			Asynchronous					
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Social networking – Facebook			178	43.7	123	28.8	106	24.8
Mobile phone – text/SMS			78	19.2	153	37.6	176	43.2
Email			51	12.6	117	28.8	238	58.6
Internet – personal blog/Twitter			60	14.9	102	25.2	242	59.9
Social networking – Other			52	12.9	95	23.5	257	63.6
Internet – other blog			45	11.4	65	16.4	286	72.2
Notice boards			26	6.4	59	14.5	321	79.1
Trip Advisor/ recommendation sites			21	5.1	77	18.0	311	76.0

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 = ‘More than once a day’ and 5 = ‘Do not use at all’, the most frequently used channel of communications reported was *Face-to-face communication*, where 80.9% of respondents reported using this channel with ‘Daily’ or ‘More than once daily’. Given the social nature of backpacker travel and the spatial proximity this result is unsurprising. The use of Facebook (43.7%) and text messaging (19.2%) as the second and third most frequently used channels is consistent with the qualitative findings of the study. Facebook was explicitly mentioned due to its domination in the social media space at the time of the questionnaire design. Other sites could have been listed but this ran the risk of shifting the focus from offline to online channels. The communication channels are important (Grønflaten, 2009), not just the WOM message transmitted. The findings in Table 4-14 have been further categorised following Litvin et al’s (2008) typology of eWOM using synchronous and asynchronous categorisations. Arguably both Facebook and SMS have ‘crept’ closer to being synchronous given the observed physical connectivity of backpackers with the devices that access those channels.

There were some findings that did not align with the qualitative data. For example, the use of traditional *notice boards* was reported as being the least frequently used among backpackers in the study (79.1% - *Not at all*), despite being identified by

operators and via researcher observation. Also of interest is the lack of use of recommendation sites. The interviews with operators suggested a heavy usage of recommendation sites but this was contradicted by the quantitative results which showed that 76% reported did not use at all. This may be because the operators were referring to accommodation booking sites which included recommendations from other backpackers. This contradiction and the results more broadly suggest that travellers may ‘shop around’ for opinions before travelling but rely on the convenience of synchronous (or near-synchronous) communication upon arrival at the destination. .

The findings in relation to Table 4-14 highlight the need to explore the devices used by backpackers during travel. Device facilitated communication is very important to the connectivity and exchange of information within the mobile social network of backpackers.

Table 4-15– Backpacker use of electronic devices

<i>Indicate the device you have used <u>most</u> for your communication with <u>other travellers</u> during your visit</i>	<b>Backpackers</b>	
	n	%
‘smart phone’ or iPhone	166	38.9
Mobile phone	103	24.1
Laptop	59	13.8
Tablet or iPad	57	13.3
Notebook	37	8.7
Other	18	4.2
Blank/ no response	19	4.4

The results suggest multiple devices being used by backpackers in the study and the majority of devices facilitate online information sharing and seeking, consistent with the channels discussed in the previous section. Respondents were instructed to ‘select only one’ option but, as seen in Table 4-15, many selected more than one. In such instances these were included in ‘Other’ category. Consequently those who selected ‘Other’, included four responses of ‘laptop’, two of ‘mobile’ and a further two that were ‘laptop’ and ‘mobile’. Some additional ‘Other’ responses included nine responses ‘verbal’ or ‘face-to-face’ and three stated that they used the computer at the accommodation.

This question did not achieve what it was intended to achieve. Single responses were desired for analysis by use of device. However the findings are nonetheless interesting as the results suggest that the majority of backpackers use their own device or devices for the exchange and sharing of information. There appears to be a trend towards using smaller, lighter devices that facilitate synchronous communication, consistent with the results in Table 4-14. More interesting still is that nine respondents value ‘face-to-face’ to the degree that they felt it warranted inclusion in their response to a question of electronic devices.

#### **4.4.5 Backpacker views on WOM**

Respondents were also asked to complete the following sentence, “During my trip to Cairns I have listened to word-of-mouth from people who.....”. There were 306 usable answers to this open-ended question. The figure below is a diagrammatic representation generated by Voyeur. Themes identified in the qualitative findings were reflected in the diagram and these were then been manually circled and labelled for the purpose of explanation. The frequency and association of words in these open-ended responses closely mirrored the concepts outlined in the literature regarding: perceptual homophily, similarity, likeability, tie strength, closeness, expertise, familiarity, physical proximity and settings.

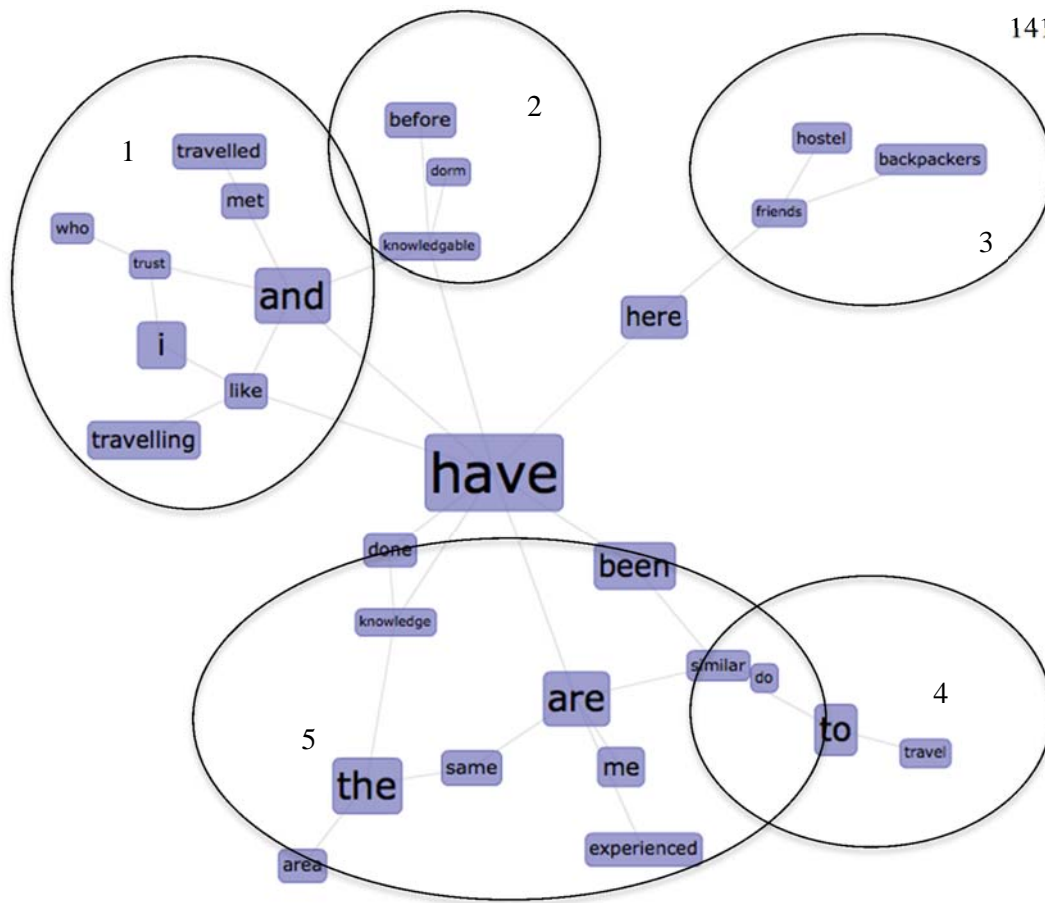


Figure 4-1 – Voyant textual analysis of “During my trip to Cairns I have listened to word-of-mouth from people who...”

Theme 1 – identifies the issues of meeting, developing trust and the degree to which another travelling backpacker was ‘liked’ by the respondent. A selection of the comments below, drawn from the surveys, indicate a basis of knowledge and compatibility as key factors

*Word of mouth is the way travellers communicate and find much of their information. The experience and knowing they have done it (eg. A trip) makes it feel ‘trustworthy’*

*I really trust*

*Travel a lot and trust*

*Are nice friendly*

*Friendly, informative, well travelled*

*I trust and like*

*I have met for a few days and liked*

*Interest me*

*Are nice*  
*I have been talking too*  
*I liked and seemed to have the same interests like us.*  
*Are friendly and willing to shoot the breeze*  
*Are easy to talk to and welcome to questions*  
*Drip confidence, excitement and are passionate for sharing their experiences*  
*for the purpose of enhancing mine, instead of monetary gain.*  
*I like to speak to*  
*Were friendly and seemed to have experience*

Theme 2 – suggests acquired knowledge and associates this with private space, being the ‘dorm’. This supports the observations in the study of proximity and communication exchange. The dorm room has more intimate space, fewer people and more time within which relationships can develop and more communication can take place.

*Have stayed with me and are currently travelling*  
*Have stayed with me*  
*I met in our hotel room*  
*I met in my room*  
*Are staying in the same room as me*  
*I have met in my dorm and who have partaken in trips I am interested in*  
*I met in my room who I spoke to at length about where to go in Cairns.*

Theme 3 – indicates the social interaction between friends and other backpackers in the social space, ‘the hostel’. Responses from the surveys below see the aspects of social groups and the hostel.

*Talk to me and my group gently*  
*Are staying at my hostel*  
*I come across, the people I meet while socialising*  
*Are living in the same hostel and socialising in the same bars as me*  
*I have met at the hostel.*  
*Have been part of my group and other backpackers I’ve met at hostels and bars*  
*Are in my hostel. Also friends/ backpackers from previous location*

*Reside in the same hostels as myself*

Theme 4 – may indicate similarity of trip. Many respondents commented about drawing on others who had already done the trips the respondents planned to do.

*Have done the trip/ places before and shared their experiences*

*Have already been to the trips we plan to go on*

*Have done the same trip*

*Are in the same boat as me and have the same interest in places to travel*

*Have experienced the activities i am interested to do*

*Are looking to do similar things of me*

*Have travelling far north Queensland before or are travelling in the same direction*

Theme 5 – relates the experience of others in context with self.

*Have had and want similar things, want and experiences as me and my friends*

*Has similar interests like me*

*Has similar opinions to me*

*Have been on the trips and are like me*

*Are from my region and have been here*

*Have been to similar places and can speak English.*

*People who are of a similar age and want to take home the same experience*

*Are similar to me in terms of their interests and know the place because they have spent more time here.*

*Like similar things that I do and have been here before*

*Are locals, have been to the place they are advising on, and usually have the same mind frame/age group as me.*

*Seem to have the same travel goals as me.*

The diagram and identified clusters along with the direct quotes from respondents reflect that these concepts are entwined and often linked within the same concept. However, it is not only those comments that have been made that provide points of interest, there was an interesting finding based on comments that had NOT been made. Not one of the respondents made any reference to electronic channels or electronic devices in their answers.

#### 4.4.6 A scenario in context

Survey respondents were provided with the following scenario then asked how they think they would respond to the experience, who they would tell and how they would communicate.

*You have booked and paid for a trip to the Great Barrier Reef. When you get there, the fish and coral you see are incredible and the water is very clear. The staff on the boat are really helpful and friendly, but the trip back is long, you are tired and a little sunburnt. Also, on the boat trip back, you find out that other travellers had paid \$50 less for the same trip.*

Table 4-16 – Backpacker reflections on a travel scenario

	Respondents (n=427)	
	n	Valid %
Positively and would recommend the trip	118	27.6%
Positively but would just discuss, not necessarily recommend	105	24.6%
Positively and negatively	109	25.5%
Negatively, but would not advise against the trip	27	6.5%
Negatively and would recommend against the trip	25	6.0%
Neutral, just discuss the trip as part of the Cairns experience	23	5.4%
Other	10	2.3%
Multiple response provided	1	0.2%
No response provided	9	

Table 4-16 shows that the majority of backpackers reflected on this scenario positively, but there was little difference between whether they would then go on to recommend. For those who viewed the scenario positively 27.6% stated they would recommend and 24.6% who said they would not necessarily recommend. Similarly, 6.5% who reflected on the experience negatively reported that they would not advise against the trip compared with 6% who stated that they would. Respondents were then asked who they would share the experience with and the results are outlined below in Table 4-17. Respondents were asked to ‘select all that apply’ so the percentages reflect the proportion of respondents.

Table 4-17 – Who this experience would be shared with

	Backpackers	
	n	%
<i>Who are you likely to share this experience with?</i>		
Anyone who asks	178	41.7
Family and/or friends after my trip	173	40.5
Everyone I can	175	41.0
Anyone who is looking to do a similar trip	148	34.7
Other backpackers during the trip	134	31.4
No one	8	1.9

The large number of respondents who reported that they would share the experience with ‘anyone who asks’ (41.7%) and ‘everyone I can’ (41%) suggests that the experience will become part of the collective experiences that are so freely exchanged between backpackers. The drop between the top three responses and the following two, ‘anyone doing a similar trip’ (34.7%) and ‘other backpackers’ (31.4%) indicates a lack of discernment when it comes to audience or recipients of travel tales. Very few respondents who stated that they would share the experience with ‘no one’ (1.9%).

Backpackers were then asked how likely they were to use a certain channel to communicate their experience (*1=Definitely not, 2 = Unlikely, 3=Possibly, 4= Likely, 5=Definitely*), the results are outlined in Table 4-18.

Table 4-18 – Likely communication channel for sharing an experience

How would you communicate this experience to others?	n	Mean	Std. Dev.
Face-to-face	404	4.13	.892
Facebook	401	3.66	1.171
Mobile - calls	401	3.34	1.126
SMS/text	403	3.28	1.190
Email	398	3.09	1.149
Internet - personal blog	394	2.63	1.324
Other social network	396	2.48	1.264
Internet - other blog	392	2.30	1.229
Trip Advisor or similar	400	2.21	1.217
Valid N (listwise)	368		

The high mean ( $\bar{x}=4.13$ ) and low standard deviation (.892) suggests that the likelihood of using ‘face-to-face’ to communicate is very strong. ‘Facebook’ was also a likely choice of communication channel, which is consistent with the observed qualitative data and the results in Table 4-14 regarding Facebook use. It could be expected that backpackers could post their day’s events with pictures and comments upon return from their day trip and, in doing so, it is shared with family, friends and other travellers who they have ‘friended’ along the way. These results show that anticipated WOM behaviours are consistent with other quantitative findings regarding use of devices both in type and frequency.

#### 4.5 Summary of findings

The backpackers reflected similarities with regard to demographic homophily. The majority were young and came from the key markets of UK, Ireland and Europe.



Over half those surveyed were educated beyond secondary level and 121 of the respondents reported being students at the time of travel. Not surprisingly many were new to backpacking and very few had visited the region previously. Given that 74.2% of backpackers surveyed considered themselves to be a backpacker for the purpose of the trip suggests that identity with the group was a source of similarity that the majority shared. They also demonstrated perceptual homophily with respondents commenting that they take culture into account when engaging with other backpackers. This was also evidenced by the use of cues which represent culture (foreign language books, food, flags and other symbols). The use of these cues acted like a foundation of similarity which facilitated communication. Communication tended to take place when backpackers liked each other and when similarity could be established.

A regularly observed interaction between the backpackers was the use of the initial 'usual questions'. These were both a socially accepted means of connection and, at the same time, allowed a determination of expertise – which was considered important to the respondents. Interestingly, the responses tend to indicate that even the views of those who are not considered experts are also taken into consideration but it was commented upon that expertise can 'outstrip' the collective opinions of those who are not perceived in such a way.

Another element of the relationship ties between backpackers was the degree of familiarity between individuals. With one comment about not being able to use a nickname 'unless you know me well' suggesting a need for relationship establishment before signs of familiarity. Trustworthiness was also revealed as important in the open-ended question of the survey and was related to the concept of time. This was both commented on and observed in the study however, the establishment and development of relationships between backpackers appeared to move at a rapid rate where relationships that are deemed as worthwhile in pursuing are quickly abandoned.

A significant contributing factor to the establishment and development of relationships was the setting and physical proximity. Settings within the backpacker hostels included both public and private spaces which allowed for interaction between backpackers. The familiarity of the layout of the hostel appeared to align closely with the socially acceptable norms that allow an individual to 'fit in' with the group. Beyond this, backpackers also used unspecified 'social settings' and 'day trips' as

common settings to engage with each other and discuss the details of their trip. This further entwines the development of relationships with setting and the exchange that takes place.

Much like the physical and social settings which act as both facilitators and a prompts for exchange, communication is both an outcome and input regarding these relationships. The most frequently used channel to discuss their trip was face-to-face and this was reflected in both the qualitative and quantitative findings. Smartphones and mobile phones were the most common devices used by the backpackers. The channel and device preference suggests a leaning toward synchronous communication when communicating with each other at the destination.

## 5 Findings – Caravanners

This chapter will outline the findings of the research in relation to caravanners in Cairns the surrounding region. An overview of the related literature will profile the caravanners and highlight some of the challenges in identifying this segment. Nevertheless, some assumptions can be drawn regarding demographics, social engagement, motivation, communication and perceptions. Consistent with the inductive approach, the next step is participatory observation on the part of the researcher. These observations, grounded in literature provided the basis for the development of a schedule of questions to direct the semi-structured interviews with the industry participants. These revealed themes, language and terminology within which to frame the questions asked of the focus groups (see appendix 2 for interview and focus group schedules). The analysis of 338 useable self-completed questionnaires from caravanners will then further explore the relationship between different concepts.

### 5.1 Case Profile – Caravanners

Caravanning has not received the same level of attention as the backpacker segment. While there is research in the Australian context (see Prideaux & McClymont, 2006 for example) much of the academic focus has come from the ‘RVing’ (recreational vehicle) literature (Hardy & Gretzel, 2007). Defining a ‘caravanner’ can be challenging insofar as the literature tends to define this group by where they stay (Tourism Research Australia, 2007a) or by their characteristics. In Australia, such travellers are usually travelling away from home for over a month and tend to be domestic travellers (Holloway et al., 2011; Onyx & Leonard, 2005, 2006; Patterson, 2007a). Mikkleson and Cohen (2015, p.8) noted that ‘caravanning is difficult to define and delimit as it takes on a range of different meanings depending on context’. For the purpose of this research, caravanners are considered to be travellers whose trip ‘was experienced at the caravan sites, as people travelling in camper trailers, pop-tops, caravans, tents or RV’s’ (Mikkleson and Cohen, 2015, p.8).

It is important to acknowledge that while terms such as ‘RVers’ and ‘motorhomers’ are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, there are differences in the attitudes, behaviours and characteristics of these travellers. The term ‘caravanner’ has

been used for consistency but other terms, including motorhomers, RVers, free-campers are referenced from the literature and from the respondents themselves. A full discussion of differences has not been included here but a synthesis of similarities has been provided to justify caravanners as a case in this research.

In the Australian context, caravanners are often motivated to travel for the warmer weather, particularly those from southern Australia who travel to the warmer states in northern Australia from May to September, is a feature of this market. Such travel patterns allow them to travel for extended periods. Often these are older Australians who are retired or semi-retired, giving them the time to tour. The collective, colloquial term for these travellers is 'grey nomads' although this term has now gained acceptance and academic and industry support the existence of a discrete segment within this wider caravanner market (Brayley & Obst, 2010; Holloway et al., 2011; Patterson, 2007a).

A number of studies identify these caravanners as being over 55 years old, travelling as a couple, towing a caravan or using a motorhome, utilizing caravan parks and travelling to northern Australia for more than two weeks and less than three months (Cridland, 2008; Gountas and Gountas, 2008; McClymont, Thompson, and Prideaux, 2011; Onyx and Leonard, 2005; Pearce et al., 1996). Tourism Tropical North Queensland (TTNQ), the DMO responsible for marketing the Cairns region, implemented a marketing campaign in 2008 that encompassed the domestic caravanning market segment. The campaign defined this segment as:

*Couples aged 45-64 years from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane with a household income of \$80,000+ pa. This market is however defined more by attitude than by age. They prefer holidays either as a short break to escape the grind or longer trips that allow them to discover new and interesting things. Although rest and relaxation is important, they also want variety with social activities, restaurants, sightseeing and shopping.*

A report into the caravan market in Western Australia (Tourism Western Australia & Tourism Research Australia, 2007) suggested that 'visitors were typically independent and stayed in caravan parks to provide a flexible holiday', it also noted that selecting caravan accommodation allowed longer holidays due to the affordability and that caravanners were 'time rich and income poor'.

Industry reports also suggest similarities of caravanners' travel patterns, their social interactions and their use of WOM. Gountas and Gountas (2008) found that 44% of travellers in their study were travelling 8-21 days with a further 17% travelling for over 22 days. Of these they found that 47% utilised caravan parks. They further noted that caravan parks were good for travellers with a base of interest to then travel short distances to visit local attractions and that the subjects opted for 'touring' because it provides them with freedom to chose. Hardy et al (2006) suggested that those road travellers who visited Queensland were more price sensitive due to the length of their trip. Importantly, the literature suggests that caravanners are drawn to the social element of caravanning (Gountas & Gountas, 2008; Hardy & Gretzel, 2007; Hardy et al., 2013; Prideaux & McClymont, 2006). Cridland (2008) found that social interaction within their group or cluster was high and with other caravanners was medium in his study of caravanners in northern Australia. Gountas and Gountas (2008) concluded that those motivated by social experience had a strong correlation with 'need for affiliation' and Onyx and Leonard (2005) noted that the closest people in social networks are travelling companions where 'almost all' ranked 'meeting new people' as the most positive aspect of their trip.

Regardless of whether socialising was a motivating factor, the research suggests that the caravanners do socialise when they travel and engage in WOM activity. Studies have found that many caravanners utilise WOM from fellow caravanners both en-route and at-destination. A Western Australian study (Tourism Western Australia & Tourism Research Australia, 2007) found that discussion with other travellers en-route was more influential than family and friends in decision making about caravan parks. Hardy et al (2006) also found WOM as an information source en-route (25.6%) came only second to the tourism information network (48.1%), this was supported by Gountas and Gountas' (2008) who found that 42.1% used WOM during the trip from 'known/unknown' sources. Hardy et al (2006) also noted that information sources were more important than formal information sources to get the 'experience' travellers were seeking.

Caravanners, and grey nomads in particular, are generally defined by age as seen the definitions here. However, for the purpose of this research a caravanner is defined as: travellers whose trip was experienced, in part or full, at the caravan sites (commercial or not commercial) in camper trailers, pop-tops, caravans, tents or RV's'. Older

caravanners, ‘grey nomads’ will be of particular focus because they are a significant proportion of the market (Ipilawatte et al, 2005), they are specifically targeted by the DMO (TTNQ) and they provide a demographic contrast to the backpacker case study.

### **5.1.1 Research site**

Cairns and the Tropical North Queensland is a popular destination for this market and has been selected as the site for numerous studies (Mings, 1997; Murphy et al., 2007; Onyx & Leonard, 2005). Industry research also shows the significance of this market (Hajkowicz et al., 2013; Pearce, 2013; Tourism Queensland, 2011; Tourism Research Australia, 2007c). According to Tourism Research Australia, the over 55 market spent 455,000 nights in a caravan park or camping site in TNQ in the year ending September 2014 (Tourism Research Australia, 2015b).

The research site was not just limited to Cairns in the case of the caravanning market. It became evident early in the research that there was a divide in the market between the ‘caravanner’ grey nomads that are often associated with the literature and industry data and the ‘free campers’ or ‘motorhome’ markets who do not always use commercial caravan sites. These are discussed in greater detail in the findings but the geographical area was expanded slightly to better capture the diversity of views and different styles of travel using different types of vehicles.

The focus groups and observation took place in two commercial caravan parks in Cairns and a non-commercial site in Mareeba. Survey data was collected in three sites in Cairns along with five sites in the region: Rocky Creek, Walkamin, Mareeba, Atherton and Mt Molloy. These sites are highlighted on the map in Figure 5-1.

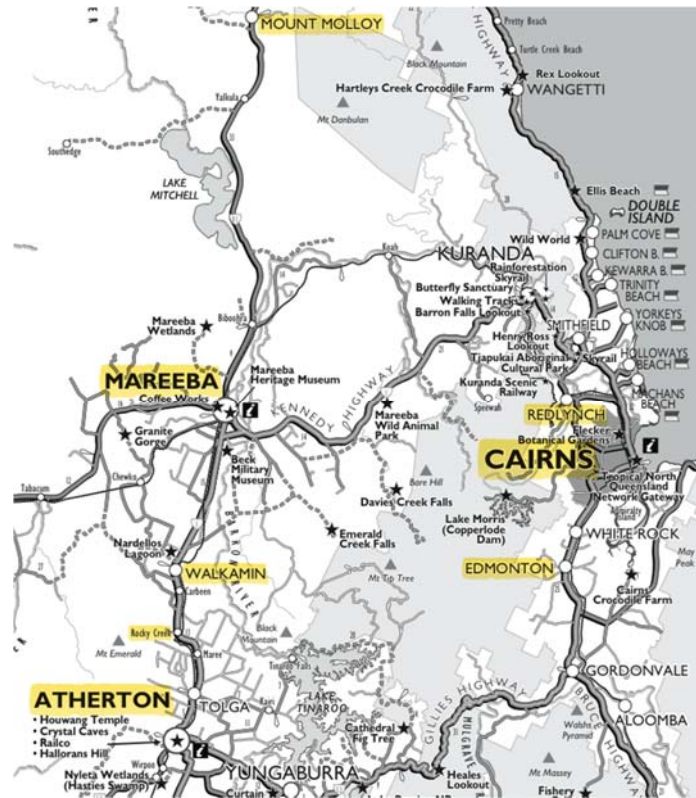


Figure 5-1 – Map of data collection - caravan case study

(source: www.cairnsinfo.com)

## 5.2 Industry interviews – themes and concepts

The participants for interviews were selected as a purposive sample to capture the views of industry from different perspectives. Like the backpacker case study, the nature of the research presented opportunities to engage in casual conversations that were not structured or planned but yielded interesting and noteworthy data. These have also been included. The questions specifically explored the context of the caravanners, shifts in the market, social interaction and WOM communication.

Table 5-1 – Industry participants

Pseudonym	Industry role	Interview type
Roger	Caravan park owner President local caravanning association	Interview
Joanne	Caravan park owner/ manager	Interview
Janette	Local caravan industry association Caravan park manager	Interview
Kevin	Caravan park manager	Conversation
Kate	Researcher who conducted field work	Conversation
Penny	Caravan park owner/ operator Board member local tourism association	Conversation



### 5.2.1 Caravanner trends and demographics

As noted in the previous section, there was a definite demarcation between those travellers in caravans, the free campers and the motorhomers. This is a significant and very political issue and one where commercial operators and travellers hold strong views. While the term ‘caravanners’ is used in this chapter they generally identify with one of two sub-groups:

- Paid campers – these travellers use commercial caravan parks but may supplement it with free or council subsidised sites during their travels in the region.
- Free campers – may be in a camper, caravan or motorhome these travellers are often happy to stay in a council owned area with very few amenities because their vehicles are self contained.

Those who use commercial or council sites utilise a variety of vehicles for their travel ranging from campers, to caravans to completely self-contained motorhomes. These vehicles vary in size and the degree to which they are self-contained. This is particularly evident in the Atherton Tablelands area of Atherton, Mareeba and the surrounds (see Figure 5.1 – Map of data collection area). These areas receive significant visitation from this ‘grey nomad’ market particularly between June and September when the Mareeba Rodeo and ‘Christmas in July’ events are held here. This places significant demand on the existing commercial caravan park capacity so the local councils permit short stays for these travellers in dedicated sites around the region including Rocky Creek as seen in Image 5-1.



Image 5-1 – Free Camping at Rocky Creek rest area



While the politics of the issue is complex and not limited to this region in Australia, it is worth noting a couple of the issues identified by the stakeholders involved. Penny (park operator) commented,

*now the local council has put in toilets and BBQs at the site that puts them in direct competition with us but our rates subsidise those sites.*

The views on these ‘free campers’ was clear, as Joanne (park owner) noted

*...and the truth be known, they're freeloaders. They're not going to bring anything, they want things for nothing, it's a proven fact that people who are travelling around paying for things, they're the ones that spend the money and buy the tours and go out for a meal. Those freeloader ones, they probably have a bag of potatoes under their bed they brought from home sort of thing.*

Kate (researcher) offered an alternative view, suggesting that ‘motorhome travellers feel excluded because they can't be easily identified, quantified or are connected directly with an identifiable sector of the tourism industry’.

Regardless of self-perception, the flexibility and freedom of itineraries appeared to be common ground. Roger (park owner) observed,

*The caravanners have got sort of, I suppose they talk about freedom, part of their thing is the freedom of travelling around the country side.*

Kate (researcher) also commented that ‘there are those who don't like staying in commercial sites, they would rather stay in free camping because of their lifestyle’ and Janette (park manager), ‘it's the lifestyle, it's what you get’.

This idea of freedom and choice appeared to be tied to lifestyle and planning. Kate (researcher) noted, ‘if they arrive in a town and there is no free camping they just move on to the next town’ and that ‘some caravanners only free camp so that they can spend more time on the road’. Roger (park owner) also observed this, ‘it's easier to free rest and they subsidise their holiday by saying ‘I'm only going to pay X amount per power sites for the week’.

The presence of the ‘grey nomads’ at all the research sites was observed and noted by the researcher at each visit to a caravan or camping site over the duration of the research and in previous personal travel experience prior to commencing the study. Roger (park owner) was unequivocal, ‘I would say that the caravan market, certainly

the Baby Boomers' when asked about the shifts in demographics. Image 5-2 is indicative of the travellers observed during the study.

Image 5-2 – Shared space at research site 7, Crystal Cascades



(source: [www.crystalcascades.com.au](http://www.crystalcascades.com.au))

The industry interviews suggest that they have a mix of travellers from around Australia. Roger (park owner) stated,

*The biggest market is Queensland, but all over the country though...I suppose the next biggest one would be NSW, the population, then Victoria, South Australia and WA, a steady mix across there. And a third of our market would be international.*

Janette (park manager) also reported travellers from 'Victoria, Tasmania, that sort...further down that way', but also acknowledged a significant number of international travellers. Certainly the variety of car and vehicle registrations observed during the study would support this.

Respondents also noted this market's capacity to spend in a destination. Janette (park manager) commented that,

*Caravanners [have] got the capacity to actually spend and, I don't know, I've sort think that they might be a little overlooked...they'll book four or five trips, so they are good for us.*

Roger (park owner) supported this, commenting that, 'last year we turned over \$400,000 in tours'.

### **5.2.2 Information needs and flexible arrangements**

The data suggested that caravanners source specific information upon arrival at the caravan park, although they arrive with a clear, general idea. Janette (park manager) observed,

*At least 90% know what they want to do...they'll come to the desk and say "we want to go to the reef, we want to go the rainforest, love to go up to the Tablelands". They got it in their head but they just can't work it all out.*

Roger (park owner) echoed this observation,

*some will have done a lot of research, some will have talked to people on the road and some come in and use us, you can't be that local knowledge and they may have some idea but we will certainly refine it all or, I suppose, touch it up and suppose show them what they can do.*

From the respondents' perspectives, this information serves a commercial purpose. Roger (park owner) commented that,

*Lots of people extend, especially the caravanners. They generally book, some of them know what they are doing. They will come in and book a week and that might do them, some will say can they have another week.*

Janette (park manager) made a similar comment,

*you know often they'll book in for a couple of days and book on for four or five days, no problem at all.*

### **5.2.3 Relationships with other travellers**

Acknowledging that information (staff, brochures, internet kiosks) provided on-site offers some detail to assist in decision making, respondents were asked about how grey nomads interact with each other and whether they were particularly drawn to those they perceived to be similar to themselves, the operators didn't think so. Janette (park manager) commented 'yeah, no, yeah...yes and no' and went on to say that the guests interact and will talk with anybody, 'then all of a sudden there is someone from

Melbourne, someone from The Netherlands, some from here, some from there...all over the place'. Roger (park owner) responded,

*No, I think it's just that sort of thing of: you are cooking there, you start to talk to someone....we normally a couple come in in a caravan, so there are different lots that get together.*

Research observation notes also reflect this. As a researcher walking around numerous sites I had people wave, nod, smile, shout out 'g'day' and attempt to engage me despite not being of the same demographic.

When asked about the nature of the relationships which develop between grey nomads, Roger (park owner) commented, 'actually some of the stories you hear at the caravan parks have made friends for life and met having a BBQ and stay friends for ever'. Janette (park manager) made a similar reflection,

*they just like to come up here for the weather and they go out and have dinner or lunch and catch up with friends and things like that... [they are] regulars who come every year.*

When asked if they meet with others who return year after year she answered, 'that's what they do'. Conversely, Kate (researcher) noted of the free campers that, 'they hope to meet new people in their travels rather than the 'same time next year' arrangement' but also acknowledged that some return every year fully expecting to see the same people.

James and Shirleen manage a temporary, seasonal site adjacent to the Mareeba showgrounds where the annual Mareeba Rodeo draws hundreds of grey nomads. They explained that the site office which books the van sites and takes the fees has been staffed by the same returning grey nomads (women travelling with husbands) from Victoria for the past 5 years. Shirleen observed that 'the ladies', know a lot of the regulars and that they know to allocate sites depending on type of travellers: campers are all together, the motorhomes are all together, the caravans are all together and so on. The implication being that travellers are clustered by vehicle but, as Shirleen pointed out, 'and all the young people in tents go right up the back' so that the noise and 'carry on that can go on all night' does not impact others.

Janette (park manager) also observed the recognition of familiar vehicles with her guests. She explained that all arriving guests are given a brief buggy tour around the site to familiarise guests with the layout and location of facilities. She remarked,

*Good chance to talk to people and you'll hear often [when] people drive past someone '...and, oh, we've just seen the other caravans over there. Oh, we'd like to be...can you put us around that area, where they?' sort of thing. People recognise, and they do sort of follow, especially when staying in parks like X [group of caravan and holiday parks].*

#### **5.2.4 Settings - Physical & social spaces**

The composition of commercial caravan parks also contributes to the issue of location and proximity. Their site offerings and layout relate directly to costs and shifting demand. When Joanne (park owner) reviewed some statistics, 'couples on-site caravans 70%...that'd be right'. There were obvious shifts in the composition of accommodation in caravan parks and sites.

*just to have a caravan park as such in Cairns, you would probably struggle a bit you know with the rates and land tax, thing like that would probably kill you. I don't think you could survive with just a caravan park....So the cabins probably make a difference to, well I know they do make the difference to being a good business. (Roger)*

Kate (researcher) suggested that 'those in motorhomes see themselves as self-contained and, therefore, the cost of staying in a caravan park is wasted money. Also, the size of their vehicles means that they don't 'fit' easily into caravan park'. This is likely to continue in the future where commercial properties seek to obtain higher yield per square metre of land and meet the growing demand for cabins within parks.

*We've still got plenty of sites, but we have put more cabins in, that's for sure, and over the next few years I know [owners] are thinking about taking a lot of the cheaper cabins out...and you know the top accommodation is always way busier than the lower accommodation (Janette)*

The issue of rates and costs associated with running a commercial caravan park has changed the landscape of sites and access to the destination.

The importance of communal spaces where caravanners are in close proximity was noted as being critical to communication. Janette (park manager) commented of her property that,

*They will communicate, you see them. I go and do all the washers and dryers every Wednesday and you see them sitting up at the laundries, you see them at the recreation room, they get together down at 'pancakes' (pancakes is reference to a social pancake breakfast held every Thursday for guests).*

Roger's comments (park owner) reflected this notion:

*Certainly in the amenity block is a big spot to be chatting, but the we have a large undercover eating area, if you can call it that, or a camp kitchen and any night of the week you can go down there and there'd be 50 or 60 in there barbequing, sitting at tables and talking. We seat that many in there, every night it is just full up in there with people and all chatting to each other. It's a big area, it's 10m x 10m.*

These social spaces were noted in the research observation notes with the most recent observation of the 'camp kitchen' where there were just less than 30 grey nomads sharing a drink and chatting in two separate groups. There was one group of 8 guests, who appeared to be 4 couples, who were seated, having drinks and chatting amongst each other. On the other side of the large camp kitchen area was a group of approximately 20 guests but this number was growing with more joining the group and bringing their own chairs. This larger group was also chatting, having drinks and organising food for the barbeque.

The management of one of the caravan parks holds weekly 'pancake breakfasts' for their guests without cost. These are conducted every week throughout the year, as Janette (park manager) mentioned, 'So, you know, they all got their names on and where they are from on little name tags....and that often gets conversation going.' She also mentioned that other social activities are run during the peak season including bingo evenings, outdoor movie nights (3 times a week) and water aerobics. This is an example of a highly organised operation.

In contrast, Roger (park owner), commented that

*I suppose everything costs so we're, although you try to give them a nice time, we used to do a BBQ every Friday night whereas now we will do it a bit more*

*spasmodically because, and it depends, I think the other thing was to when we first came here we had a park that was sort of, we had a big turnover.*

He went on to mention that the park had engaged singers, bush poets and occasional talks from a police liaison officer about protecting your property when you are on the road.

*And you know they come in here [reception] and the girls see them come in a couple of hours later and they still have their tags on and the girls say their first name or 'are you from there?' and that starts more conversation*

These facilitated social activities have the dual purpose of creating atmosphere and positive experience on-site but also provide guests with increased opportunities to interact. Previous sections suggest that, from a commercial operator's perspective, this is good for business. Arguably, in the free camping realm it creates a sense of engagement with the destination.

### **5.2.5 Communications and technology**

The examples cited above demonstrate non-verbal communication used between the caravanners on-site. Similar examples can be drawn from the research notes where number plates, stickers indicating association with a group (caravan park membership, past time, political affiliation, sporting club etc), equipment carried or type of vehicle all acted as non-verbal communication upon which assumptions about the traveller could be drawn.

Overwhelmingly, face-to-face conversations are the means of grey nomads communicating on-site. As Roger pointed out,

*Your word of mouth, in the older age group, [they] still talk like crazy within the park, everyone talks within the park!.*

Aside from the general discussion, WOM is also used for obtaining detail to assist in making decisions about what to do and what decisions to make (as per previous sections). Janette offered the example of WOM on the courtesy bus into the city.

*You know it's only a 20 minute drive into the city but I've driven that bus many times and people are chatting about what have you done for the day, how long have you been in Cairns, where they are going next, what they want to do...and then those questions can jolt them into coming in to us and asking*



*us about the tours that, you know, 'oh look, I spoke to these people on the courtesy bus and they said they did this...is it a good trip?'*

Roger (park owner) gave the example of 'where you get a 2 for 1 meal' as the kind of detail sought in these conversations.

The changing role of technology has been noted in caravanners' adoption, use and demand of technology. This was seen in bookings, personal use and channels of exchanging information and opinion. With respect to bookings, in the commercial context at least, operators observed an increase in online bookings over recent years but, as earlier indicated, these are often extended upon arrival. Obviously this is not the case with the free camping sites which do not have a pre-booking facility.

In terms of personal use, Roger (park owner) noted, 'I.T. is a huge, huge change. It's one of the biggest changes I've seen'. Both Roger and Janette commented that it was firstly a change from landline phones to mobile phones: 'mobile phones, definitely!' (Janette) and 'we used to have 2 public phones inside reception, and now there is one there and it hardly every gets used' (Roger). This same trend has been mirrored with laptops: 'a lot of them have laptops. It's just quite a normal thing' (Janette) and a 'large percentage of them' carry laptops. Not surprisingly, this extends to wireless connectivity on-site which is provided free to guests at the commercial sites in the study. Roger commented,

*I can see now that there is a growing trend for people having their own...where you plug the little stick in wherever you have mobile reception.*

This connectivity was observed across all sites where grey nomads used a combination of portable data or, often, used satellite dishes attached to their vehicles.

When asked if how technology was used for communications with the grey nomads, Janette (park manager) commented that 'majority talk to family'. Roger (park owner) observed that 'you see the internationals on Skype of the night, you see them using it on Skype'. There were no comments that provided any particular insight into the use of technology for traveller-to-traveller WOM, although Roger noted,

*The interesting thing is there's a growing trend, with your Facebook, probably is a growing word of mouth, there is no doubt about that.*



When probed he was unable to provide any further detail but raised the issue of Trip Advisor. Both commercial operators commented that they monitor word of mouth about their sites. This is seen as an important way of keeping the finger on the traveller opinion pulse.

*It can be very dangerous that social network and stuff. Actually I look at a park, there was a park in Cairns and I couldn't believe the bad mouthing it had on the internet. Just one after the other, I was wondering if anyone stays there at all. That surprised me, they obviously can't be monitoring it or they would be trying to do something about it (Roger, park owner)*

Janette (manager) also commented that 'it is a little difficult [so] no we don't measure anything like that' regarding monitoring caravanner forums but when asked about recommendation websites (such as Trip Advisor) she said, 'yes, yes, [property owner] is really good at checking statistics and all that sort of stuff'. Online caravan forums were out of the scope of this study but their existence as an electronic communication channel was raised and considered.

### **5.3 Focus group – themes and concepts**

Table 5-2 outlines the participants of the focus groups including which state they originated from. These were all conducted in the afternoon at caravan parks when the respondents had returned from their day's activities.

Table 5-2 – Caravanner participants

Pseudonym	Gender	State	Interview type	Interview site
Rick	Male	NSW	Focus group 1	Site 1
June	Female	NSW	Focus group 1	Site 1
Steve	Male	NSW	Focus group 1	Site 1
Janine	Female	NSW	Focus group 1	Site 1
Mike	Male	SA	Focus group 1	Site 1
Jan	Female	SA	Focus group 1	Site 1
Bruce	Male	VIC	Focus group 1	Site 1
Ron	Male	SA	Focus group 2	Site 2
Joan	Female	SA	Focus group 2	Site 2
Frank	Male	QLD	Focus group 2	Site 2
Carol	Female	VIC	Focus group 3	Site 1
Stuart	Male	VIC	Focus group 3	Site 1

Observations combined with focus groups confirmed the social nature of this market. Primarily these travellers appear to be motivated to engage with fellow travellers for social and information needs but the data also revealed practical reasons.

### 5.3.1 The travellers & the network

The divide that was noted by the industry key informants between the caravanners and free camper was also reflected in the way they saw themselves. Joan commented, ‘we always stay in caravan parks because of security...us two don’t free park’, Frank observed ‘more and more people are doing it these days’. When they were asked why this is Ron said, ‘tight-arses’ and Frank said ‘costs’. Yet others include at least some element of free camping in their trip, Stuart said that ‘sometimes we free camp, it all depends’, Carol interjected with ‘we always stay in caravan parks when we are in town, it’s safer’. Steve commented, ‘it’s not like travelling years ago with young kids, we can be flexible’. They want the option to choose where they go and when and determine how long they stay. (Kate)

The caravanners use time as significant markers in their conversations. These time markers reflect context and their experience travelling in this way.

*Well, we’ve been coming here 25, we’ve been up to the tip [Cape York] and it’s an adventure – Rick*

*We’re relative newcomers. We’ve only spent 18 months here – Bruce*

*18 months? In this park? – Alana (researcher)*

*No, 18 months in this park over 7 or 8 years! – Bruce*

This suggests an underpinning of longevity attached with a sense of ‘belonging’ to the network.

There are also self-regulating aspects of the network and these were observed in the commercial and free camping sites. This anecdote was offered by Ron

*We had a couple come into Yeppoon [Queensland] didn't we [to Joan]? She put on a show on where she wanted to park and she wanted someone to move, she wanted me to move so she could get our spot. I thought, ‘stuff em’. And she used to come up to the camp kitchen for drinks in the afternoon and she'd talk about how she talked to the Prime Minister and how she talked to someone else. By the end of the second day, she was sitting at the end of the table talking to herself, everybody else got another conversation going [laughter]*

This reflects the clustered nature and self governance of a group within a network at one location. Not dissimilarly, Image 5-3 also demonstrates group enforcement of rules and acceptable norms of groups staying at a site where someone has written “read this” where it says “generators are not permitted”.



Image 5-3 – Rocky Creek entrance sign

### 5.3.2 Information needs and flexible itineraries

Cost consciousness was another theme that emerged from the caravanner focus groups. When asked about alternatives to using the van during travel, Janine

commented, ‘cabins? You can’t afford that!’. Ron and Joan made several references to tours and destinations they’d visited ‘on the road’ with Ron describing one destination as ‘over-rated and over-priced’ and Joan remarking of another, ‘you’ve got hire a 4WD...Being pensioners, we can’t afford things like that’. Ron later commented that their travels are ‘costing us \$35 a day’, confirming the earlier observation made in the interviews that these travellers have money allocated for their daily activity.

### 5.3.3 Relationships with other travellers

Grey Nomads were found to be very social and prepared to engage in conversation or as Stuart put it, ‘Grab a seat, we’ll talk to anyone’. As previously noted as a researcher walking around numerous sites I had people wave, nod, smile, shout out ‘g’day’ and attempt to engage me simply for the purpose of engaging in conversation. This is reflective of the findings in the literature and the reasons appear to be centred around the social interactivity being part of the caravanning experience.

A willingness to engage with others may be a reflection of their travel style. In many instances, caravanners travel for long periods, often in couples so the opportunity to engage in conversation outside the immediate travel party may be viewed as a welcome break from their travelling ‘norm’. As Carol quipped,

*After spending all day in the car with someone else, you are keen to get out and talk to anyone!.*

This suggests that the confined space in a car, coupled with the long duration of travel acts as a motivator to socialise.

This willingness to engage often started with ‘the usual questions’. This was observed and experienced by the researcher on several occasions. One research observation note captured this process where I observed two women (unknown to each other) who had come to check on their laundry; “I observed the process of the usual questions as the starting point. Having established general information, they began asking questions of each other for more detail (about places or vaning or park facilities). This soon moved on to exchange of stories” [observation note].

### 5.3.4 Homophily - People like us

A key element that emerged from the focus groups in the development of relationships with fellow Grey Nomads (beyond the 'usual questions') was one of similarity. This was cited by a number of informants.

*They are doing the same as you – Rick*

*People who are similar to us - Rick*

*They are the same type of people – Steve*

*Similar interests.... – June*

*People like us – Jan*

Likeability is also important. The perception is that those drawn to the 'lifestyle' of being a Grey Nomad are, inherently, friendly.

*People at campgrounds are just so friendly, they'll move their van for you, they'll create a space, help you back up...all that kind of stuff – Steve*

*People are friendly - Janine*

Carol and Stuart made a similar observation of the assistance provided by the grey nomad in the neighbouring spot who assisted them when they arrived. It appears that Stuart had some physical limitations which may or may not have been the prompt. Despite Ron's earlier example of a demanding Grey Nomad who was ostracised by the group, he conceded that 'they sort themselves out'. Rick was a little more direct, stating 'you don't get many arseholes'. This straight-forward attitude was reflected by the informants regarding the elements of credibility and trust.

### 5.3.5 Relationship tie strength - Credibility and trust

Participants saw matters of credibility and trust as very important which is consistent with the literature. When asked about how they make judgements of the WOM they are receiving or the people they are receiving it from, there appeared to be reliance on their own judgement.

*'you soon sus people out. Whether they are fair dinkum ... and they sus you out to see whether they want to be friends with you or not. – Joan.*

*'not bullshitters' - Ron*

*You just know. You can tell by talking to them, by the way they talk and what they say – Mike*

The comments above suggest that there is a combination of content and delivery that is interpreted by individuals that determines credibility of others. Moreover, Joan's comment takes this one step further by linking this credibility with likability or potential friendship. This is an important first step in forming a relationship and the foundation for that relationship.

As mentioned previously, the data revealed that conversation moves from 'the usual questions' towards story exchange which serves the purpose of establishing common ground and determining credibility. As Rick commented,

*Everybody's got a story to tell and you should be prepared to listen.*

### **5.3.6 Settings – Physical & social spaces**

Physical proximity was both noted and commented on. The layout of the commercial sites have allocated 'spaces' for vehicles. From a spatial perspective these are laid out in a similar fashion to a suburban setting. As a researcher I observed no difficulty in orientating myself at a new site despite lack of familiarity. Generally, the sites had different areas (some more diversified than others) that comprised of camping, vehicle sites (powered and unpowered) and cabins with central laundry and ablution areas and easily accessible camp kitchen. While some have additional amenities, these are the core 'shared spaces' common to commercial caravan parks, along with the reception which, logically, is located at the entrance.

These shared spaces are used for social and practical purposes. Observations made in the previous section (industry interviews) show the social role of the camp kitchen. Ron's comment, 'she used to come up to the camp kitchen for drinks in the afternoon.' is indicative of the assumption that such places are general meeting places. I observed communal eating and drinking at almost all sites, particularly in the late afternoon.

Observation notes taken during the field work also reflected the social mingling of travellers in the communal areas of the camp kitchen, laundry, ablution block and reception.

Another practical element was revealed when discussing the communal spaces. Frank observed [at site 2] that,

*they'll be walking around to get reception because there are a lot of black spots around here. You'll see 3 or 4 lining up for the laundry [laughing],*

in relation to use of wireless technology availability at that site. This suggests that some travellers using wireless may also find functional commonality in these shared social spaces. These issues were not seen to the same degree at those non-commercial or free camping sites as they have not been designed to facilitate travellers in that way.

Social spaces extend beyond the physical layout and facilities of the sites. Most of the vehicles observed in the study had an annex attached to the side of the vehicle which allows for chairs, tables and cooking to take place outside but in the immediate vicinity of the vehicle. Social drinks among known travellers (or cliques) take place within these annexes. Those who may be parked at the site often join with others to share drinks and food, play cards or games or simply chat within someone's annex.

*We come here every year, we stay in the same spot and we meet up with people. You know they are going to be here, you know we don't really keep up during the year but we see each other when we get here...and we know the people over there [pointing] and there [pointing] and we've got more friends who are coming. There are quite a number of us who come up from South Australia, and from other places as well. - Jan*

This suggests a link between space, time and on-going connectedness between return travellers. Booking their 'spot' from season to season provides a certain level of predictability to the immediate spatial and, consequently, social proximity.

Other research observation notes reflect a link between spatial proximity and social interaction. 'observed a courtesy coach arriving from 'town' returning guests to the park after a day's outing. It wasn't clear if they had all participated in the same activity during the day but the interaction suggested a degree of friendliness and congeniality among the group. The group was alighting from the bus with males offering a hand to females, light banter between guests and tentative arrangements to catch up to discuss the day with a drink after they had 'freshened up' [observation note, 5.20pm – site 1]. This observation shows a process of familiarity, the role of proximity in supporting closer ties and the use of communal space (ie camp kitchen) and possibly personal space (caravan annex) to further develop these relationships. There were other similar observations made during the study when caravanners would



mingle at a facilitated activity (transfer into town, breakfast) and make arrangements to meet again after returning to their personal space (vehicle) to attend to individual matters (washing up dishes, organising affairs, ‘freshening up’).

### 5.3.7 Communication - on site and technology

Overwhelmingly and, not surprisingly given the nature of the study, much of the observed communication was verbal, face-to-face exchanges. However, before a word of spoken communication takes place, there is a range of evaluative cues used by caravanners. The image below reveals a rich variety of cues which are used by other travellers to make assumptions or to trigger conversation.

Image 5-4 is an example which tells other travellers the names of the couple, the state they are from, the radio frequency upon which they can be contacted, their dedication to the make (Roadstar) and model (Daintree) of caravan (evidenced by signwriting on their rig, their spare type cover and the website is also written across their van). The visibility of a jerry can would suggest to onlookers that this van travels to remote areas where it may be necessary to carry fuel. Furthermore an air conditioning unit on the top of the van indicates a level of comfort and/or luxury.



Image 5-4 – Caravan and visual cues

All this information provides potential starting points of conversation. How this plays out can be highlighted with the following exchange:



*'well we're going to the Cape [York] right? We're heading up and we wanted to know what the road was like and we ran into a bloke this morning..... – Steve.*

*'every time we saw somebody with a dirty, muddy car we would go up and see them' - Jenine*

Evaluative cues are one precursor to conversation; another conversation starter observed was environmental factors, such as weather (humidity, heat, rain, clouds) and other observations about the site (for example crowding and presence of insects). This is not surprising as these are innocuous topics that require little personal exposure and are fact based observations rather than opinion-laden observations. In the general polite acknowledgement and exchange observed whilst walking around the sites, as the researcher, I was often greeted with a nod or a wave followed by, 'lovely afternoon for it' or 'great weather we're having' or 'how are you enjoying this glorious weather?'.

In terms of technology, there was a noticeable visual absence of its use. There was evidence of technology related to vehicles (CB radio antennas, satellite dishes) which suggested that caravanners have the technology but it was rarely openly displayed. Carol explained that she blogs during their trips, explaining that

*I don't update it everyday, sometimes I'm too busy, other times I don't have much to say and sometimes we can go quite a while without internet access.*

When asked who follows her blog she said, 'it's mainly for the family and friends back home'. This seemed to be the exception, rather than the rule.

Several participants explained that they use email to communicate with family members back home. When I suggested to one focus group, 'a lot of them [caravanners] use email to send a message back home saying, 'can you pay my Foxtel so no one disconnects it while I am away' this was met with group laughter and the response by June, 'we did that two weeks ago!'. There was nothing in the data that suggested that email was commonly used for communication between travellers. Although Joan noted, 'our Christmas card list is growing and growing and growing every year', while this was not probed further, given the age of Joan it could be expected that this statement could be taken literally.

One area where technology had been adopted was the use of mobile phones. Jenine recounted a story of travel to Tasmania and noted,

*It was 40 degrees at Goulburn [home town], which was very unusual. I'd text people, "it's sleeting here" and they're saying "it's 40 degrees!"*

This is indicative of comments and observations where the use of mobile phones (for texting or calling) is used to stay connected with established relationships. For example, when asked who they keep in touch with via mobile phone, Joan answered, 'family and friends'. Ron added, 'we have a free hour with Telstra' and then Frank added,

*Everyone on the road has a free hour with Telstra, and they all have it so that no one's hour overlaps with each other.*

This indicates both a 'standard' practice of those 'on the road' and a structured, coordinated approach to mobile communication and the costs associated with it.

## **5.4 Survey Findings**

### **5.4.1 Demographics**

There were 338 valid surveys returned for the caravanning case study. Of those, 53.3% were male respondents, 46.2% were female and 4 did not report gender. The mean age of the respondents was 63.8 years old (female  $\bar{x}$  = 62 years, male  $\bar{x}$  = 68.48 years). The findings outlined in Table 5-3 revealed that male respondents were generally older than female with 82.2% males aged 61 years or older compared with 63.8% females in the same age category.

Table 5-3 – Caravanner demographics

		<b>Gender</b>			
		Male (n=178)		Female (n=156)	
		n	%	n	%
<b>Age</b>	Less than 41	2	1.2%	6	4.0%
	41-50	9	5.6%	11	7.2%
	51-60	18	11.1%	38	25.0%
	61-70	96	59.3%	71	46.7%
	71-80	34	21.0%	24	15.8%
	Over 80	3	1.9%	2	1.3%
<b>Education level</b>	Secondary	68	38.9%	77	49.7%
	Trade/TAFE	50	28.6%	23	14.8%
	Diploma	24	13.7%	30	19.4%
	Degree	23	13.1%	17	11.0%
	Other	8	4.6%	7	4.5%
	Multiple response	2	1.1%	1	0.6%
<b>Occupation</b>	Management	7	3.9%	2	1.3%
	Professional	5	2.8%	12	7.7%
	Retail	0	0%	5	3.2%
	Manual/factory worker	0	0%	1	0.6%
	Service industry	5	2.8%	2	1.3%
	Office/clerical	1	0.6%	7	4.5%
	Public servant	3	1.7%	7	4.5%
	Retired/ semi retired	130	73.0%	102	65.4%
	Student	1	0.6%	1	0.6%
	Tradesperson	8	4.5%	1	0.6%
	Self-employed	14	7.9%	7	4.5%
	Other	2	1.1%	8	5.1%
	Multiple response provided	1	0.6%	1	0.6%
	No response provided	1	0.6%	0	0.0%

Table 5-3 shows a large proportion of this sample completed secondary schooling as their highest level of education, for females this was just under 50%. Beyond this level there were more males with trade qualifications (28.7% compared with 14.8% of females) but more females were diploma qualified (19.4% compared with 13.7%). Not surprisingly, a significant number from each group identified themselves as being retired or semi-retired again, this is consistent with the literature.

Table 5-4 – Caravanner state of origin

Where do you usually live?		Respondents (n=316)		
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	NSW	91	26.9%	28.8%
	Victoria	87	25.7%	27.5%
	Queensland	74	21.9%	23.4%
	SA	24	7.1%	7.6%
	WA	20	5.9%	6.3%
	Tasmania	20	5.9%	6.3%
	Total	316	93.5%	100%
Missing	System	22	6.5%	
Total		338	100.0	

The literature identifies that the majority of caravanners are older, domestic travellers. Of the 22 responses considered ‘missing’ in Table 5-4, seven of those reported being international travellers who were staying at sites. In total 79.7% of respondents came from the east coast of Australia, this is consistent with visitor arrival data to the area (Tourism Research Australia, 2015b).

#### 5.4.2 Trip context

Of the 338 respondents, 79.1% (265) had visited Far North Queensland before, 20.9% (70) said they had not and 3 did not respond. This means that almost 80% are return travellers to the destination and can draw on their previous experiences and potentially reconnect with others they have previously met.

The average anticipated duration of their overall trip was 120 nights ( $\bar{x}=119.9$ ) with the average number of 46 nights ( $\bar{x}=46.35$ ) in visiting far north Queensland. This indicates that caravanners expect to spend over a third of their trip on average in the region irrespective of whether they had travelled to the region previously (n= 242,  $\bar{x}$  = 48.86 nights) or not (n=68,  $\bar{x}$  = 36.97 nights). In either case, these are significant periods of time to be spent in a destination. Travellers were asked to indicate all the locations they had visited during this trip and their responses are outlined in Table 5-5.

Table 5-5 – Sites visited by caravanners

<i>Locations in FNQ visited on this trip</i>	<b>Caravanners</b>	
	n	%
Atherton Tablelands	272	80.5
Cairns	262	77.5
Mareeba	255	75.4
Port Douglas	198	58.6
The Rainforest	167	49.4
Daintree	159	47.0
Mission Beach	148	43.8
Cape Tribulation	135	39.9
Kuranda	115	34.0
Mosman Gorge	117	34.6
Barrier Reef	83	24.6
Other	89	26.3

Given the amount of time respondents reported spending in FNQ it is not entirely surprising to see high levels of visitation across the region. This finding is also consistent with the qualitative data which indicated, many of these travellers choose to find remote destinations or places that are ‘off the beaten track’, this may explain the high number of respondents (26.3%) who specified ‘other’. On average, the caravanners surveyed in the study had visited an average of six ( $\bar{x}$  = 5.97) of the 12 sites listed.

Table 5-6 – Frequency of information sources used by caravanners upon arrival

<i>Information sources used since arriving in FNQ</i>	<b>Caravanners</b>	
	n	%
Visitor centres	195	57.7
Other travellers	185	54.7
Internet	183	54.1
Previous experience	159	47.0
Tourist guide books	139	41.1
Friends/ family	83	24.6
Advertisements (print)	46	13.6
Other	35	10.4
Trip Advisor (or similar)	22	6.5
Advertisements (TV/radio)	13	3.8
Travel Agent	9	2.7

Caravanners reported using an average of three information sources ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.33) since arriving in the region. Despite their experience in the destination (79.1% were repeat

travellers), Table 5-6 shows that ‘Previous experience’ only ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in frequency of use. Moreover there is a substantial difference between ‘Previous experience’ (47%) and the use of ‘Family & Friends’ (24.6%) as a source of information upon arrival at the destination. Interestingly, 54% used the ‘internet’ as a source of information since arriving, this was ranked higher than previous experience. The greater use of ‘visitors centres’, ‘other travellers’ and ‘internet’ lend support to the literature which suggests that WOM can be given greater weight than previous personal experience.

Over three quarters of respondents identified themselves as a ‘caravanner’ for the purpose of this particular trip (76%) however, 23.1% (78 respondents) did not as shown in Table 5-7.

Table 5-7 – Caravanner self-identification

<i>Consider yourself a Caravanner on this particular trip</i>	<b>Caravanners</b>		
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	257	76.0%	76.0%
No	78	23.1%	23.3%
Total	335	98.1%	100.0%
Blank / No response provided	3	0.9%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

Given the comments made by both the industry and travellers regarding ‘free campers’ and ‘motorhomers’ then this may be attributed to terminology used in the survey which was not detected during the pilot study. Despite these perceived differences, all those who completed the survey were included in the sample but it is worthy of noting as some respondents may not have the same view of group cohesion, identification or belonging as others.

Table 5-8 – Caravanning experience of respondents

<i>Which best describes your caravanning experience?</i>	<b>Caravanners</b>		
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
First time	20	5.9%	7.4%
Done some	56	16.6%	20.8%
Done a lot	193	57.1%	71.7%
Total	269	79.6%	100.0%
Blank / No response	69	20.4%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

Consistent with the high return visitation to the area was also a high level of caravanning experience as outlined in Table 5-8. Those who did not identify themselves as a caravanner for the purpose of this trip were not required to answer this question yet the results suggest that many did anyway. Only 5.9% (20 respondents) reported that this was their first caravanning experience. Given the costs involved with the purchase and the time commitment attached to caravanning coupled with the average age of the group, it could be expected that many have experienced caravanning as a form of travel before. Indeed, almost 60% stated that they had ‘done a lot’ of caravanning in the past.

Table 5-9 – Likelihood of listening to a fellow caravanner

		<b>Fellow Caravanner BY Travel experience</b>					
		Travel experience					
		First time		Done some		Done a lot	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Likely to listen to opinions of a fellow caravanner	Always	8	40.0%	8	14.5%	32	17.8%
	Often	8	40.0%	29	52.7%	93	51.7%
	Sometimes	4	20.0%	18	32.7%	52	28.9%
	Rarely	0	0%	0	0%	3	1.7%
	Never	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>20</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Regardless of experience, Table 5-9 shows that over 65% of caravanners stated that they ‘always’ or ‘often’ listened to the opinion of fellow caravanners. This is an interesting finding as it shows that caravanners are willing to listen to others regardless of the experience they have themselves. This supports the view expressed in the qualitative findings that ‘you listen to everyone’.

### 5.4.3 Caravanning relationships and WOM

Table 5-10 – Likelihood of listening to a traveller with similar opinions

<b>Perceptual homophily BY Travel experience</b>							
		Travel experience					
		First time		Done some		Done a lot	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Likely to listen to opinions of someone who has similar opinions to me	Always	2	14.3%	4	8.0%	19	11.7%
	Often	7	50.0%	23	46.6%	64	39.5%
	Sometimes	5	35.7%	20	40.0%	71	43.8%
	Rarely	0	0%	3	6.0%	6	3.7%
	Never	0	0%	0	0%	2	1.2%
<b>Total</b>		<b>14</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 5-10 shows that less than 10% stated that they ‘rarely’ listen to other caravanners’ views and only 1.2% of the respondents reported to disregard the views entirely (reporting they are ‘never’ likely to listen to . Although this may be for information acquisition reasons or group acceptance reasons, but such a conclusion cannot be drawn from this data.

Table 5-11 – Likelihood of listening to a traveller with similar background

<b>Demographic homophily BY Travel experience</b>							
		Travel experience					
		First time		Done some		Done a lot	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Listen to opinions of someone who is similar to me (age, background, culture)	Always	5	27.8%	4	7.5%	15	8.9%
	Often	9	50.0%	23	43.4%	63	37.5%
	Sometimes	3	16.7%	25	47.2%	80	47.6%
	Rarely	0	0%	1	1.9%	7	4.2%
	Never	1	5.6%	0	0%	3	1.8%
<b>Total</b>		<b>18</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 5-11 shows responses to demographic homophily are very similar to the perceptual homophily, although 12 respondents reported that the ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ listen to the opinions from other travellers based on demographics.



#### 5.4.4 Settings and communication

Table 5-12 - Social settings where destinations discussion took place

	Caravanners	
	n	%
<i>Where discussions with other travellers have taken place since arriving in FNQ</i>		
At accommodation	263	77.8
During day trips	158	46.7
In social settings	175	51.8
While shopping	61	18.0
At visitor centres	101	29.9
While making a booking and/or enquiry	57	16.9
Elsewhere	35	10

Of the 316 respondents who answered the question asking whether they had discussed their trip with other travellers since arrival, 295 (93.4%) said they had. The majority had done so in a social setting (eg. out for a drink or a coffee), at their accommodation and/or during day trips. This is consistent with the qualitative data from the observations and the focus groups. On average caravanners reported using 2 locations ( $\bar{x}=2.41$ ) for their discussions with other travellers during their trip.

Table 5-13 – Categorisation of communication channel used by caravanners

Caravanners							
<i>How frequently have you used the following to discuss your experiences with other travellers during your visit</i>	Daily or more		Sometimes		Not at all		
	<i>Synchronous</i>						
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
	Face-to-face communication	154	<b>47.1</b>	169	51.7	4	1.2
	Mobile phone - calls	31	11.1	101	36.2	147	43.5
<i>Asynchronous</i>							
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Social networking – Facebook	21	8.0	50	19.2	190	72.8	
Mobile phone – text/SMS	28	10.5	74	27.7	165	61.8	
Email	19	7.2	87	33.1	157	59.7	
Internet – personal blog/Twitter	11	4.4	30	11.9	211	83.7	
Social networking – Other	5	2.0	31	12.4	214	85.6	
Internet – other blog	10	4.0	22	8.7	221	87.4	
Notice boards	17	6.6	73	28.5	166	64.8	
Trip Advisor/ recommendation sites	11	4.3	42	16.3	205	79.5	

Caravanners were asked about how frequently they used different channels of communication to discuss their experiences with other travellers. Overwhelmingly, ‘face-to-face communication’ was used most frequently with 47.1% reporting that they used it daily or more than once a day and a further 51.7% reporting that they used it sometimes. The lack of engagement with social networking sites and blogs is not entirely surprising. The qualitative data revealed that caravanners use wireless at caravan sites to send emails home to keep in contact with family but nothing indicated extensive use to stay in contact with other travellers. On the other hand, phone calls and text messaging were both identified in the focus groups and observations and the data in Table 5-13 supports these results.

An interesting finding was the reported lack of use of park notice boards, despite their reported use by operators. This may be attributed to caravanners using the notice boards for general information but not for communication with other travellers. This would make sense as the devices carried and used by caravanners make alternative, synchronous communication easier and more convenient.

Table 5-14– Caravanner use of electronic devices

<i>Indicate the device you have used <u>most</u> for your communication with <u>other travellers</u> during your visit</i>	<b>Caravanner</b>	
	n	%
Mobile phone	157	46.4
‘smart phone’ or iPhone	48	14.2
Laptop	27	8.0
Tablet or iPad	11	3.3
Notebook	3	0.9
Other	36	10.7
Blank/ no response	56	16.3

The high use of mobile phones and smart phones supports the previous finding that phone calls, texts and emails are most frequently used after face-to-face. A number of respondents also stated ‘face-to-face’ or ‘conversations’ as ‘other’ and a further 5 respondents also reported using a UHF radio to communicate with other travellers.

#### **5.4.5 Caravanner views on WOM**

The survey asked respondents to complete the following sentence, “During my trip to Cairns I have listened to word-of-mouth from people who.....”. There were 289

usable answers to this open-ended question and the key words and their relationships are represented in the diagram below (Figure 5.2). Voyant (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2012) was used to automatically collate the key words based on frequency of occurrence (size of the word) and association within a response (links between words). These have then been grouped manually using circles to identify themes and these groups are then discussed in terms of the themes from the literature regarding: perceived homophily, likeability, relationship tie strength, expertise, familiarity and physical and social proximity. A selection of direct quotes taken from the surveys to provide specific detail.

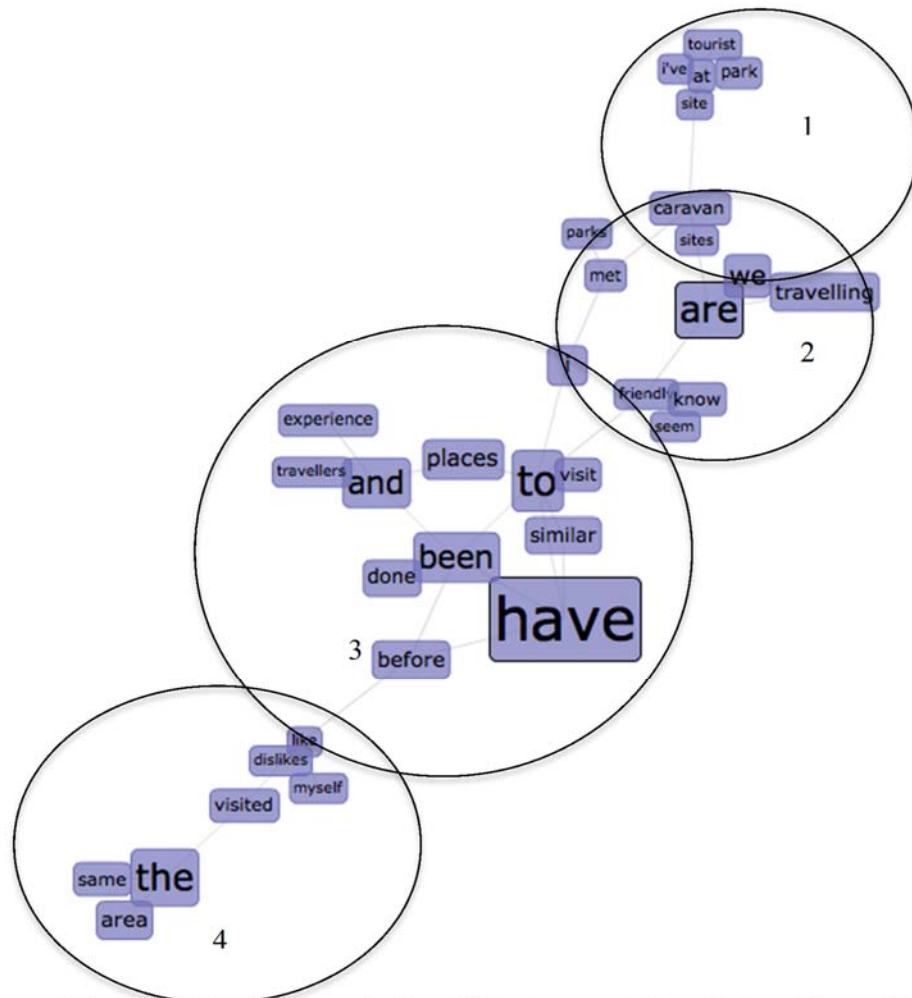


Figure 5-2 – Voyant textual analysis of "During my trip to Cairns I have listened to word-of-mouth from people who..."

Theme 1 – is site related with references being made to caravan and tourist parks and sites. This is consistent with the previous qualitative findings where the shared social and physical spaces of a caravan park provide a setting that facilitates WOM

exchange. There were also comments regarding those who work at these sites, which is consistent with the qualitative findings.

*Travel by caravan.*

*I've met at my caravan park or at a tourist site.*

*Are also travelling in caravans or RV*

*Are also caravanners*

*Are travelling in caravan parks*

*Are in the same van park*

*I have met in caravan parks*

*We meet at camping spots*

*Are staying at the same location*

*Are in tourist info centres. Caravan park reception and other travellers*

*I have conversed with in a caravan park or on a tour.*

*I come into contact with at other tourist attractions and in the caravan parks.*

*I meet in caravan parks or visiting same venues as myself.*

*other caravaners are the best socially when discussing where to stay*

*I meet at happy hour (sometimes)*

*Are on the road, other campers, people pass on fuel prices, road conditions, roadhouse accommodation experiences, free camps.*

*I have met in the caravan park, who pull up beside us, or who are using the laundry facilities.*

*Work at the park we are staying at, who have given us recommendations of where to go & what to do*

*I have met in caravan parks and other times; also from park owners and managers who recommend attractions in the area.*

Theme 2 – identifies the issue of meeting and friendliness of other like travellers during travel. Like the data drawn from the focus groups, there is an emphasis on ‘friendliness’ but the comments below also suggest a degree of compatibility.

*Are quiet, are not in your face, say what they have to say without becoming a pain, don't fit into the category of knowing everything about everything!!!*

*Have an open mind - positive attitude - honestly constructive - who enjoy travelling - happy disposition*

*Are friendly and seem eager to want to share their experiences*

*Have done travelling before. Interest me*

*I can relate to, young and retired*

*Are friendly*

*Are friendly and pleasant and seem to know what they are talking about.*

*Friendly & compatible*

Theme 3 – ties the experience of other travellers with the respondents' context, specifically the idea that someone has been to the same places or the places that the respondent plans to visit. Another interesting point is revealed in these comments, with several respondents discussing the importance of recency in relation to this expertise.

*Have travelled where we are going.*

*Have travelled to similar destinations*

*Have been to places that I intend to go to.*

*Have been here before and have experienced different places not in tourist books.*

*Have visited different areas and taken trips to these areas.*

*Are going or have been over the roads I am going to take 'recently'.*

*Have already been to the place we are headed and have given their opinion*

*Have been there and done it.*

*Who have been to FNQ & experienced similar trips to what we would do.*

*Who have travelled here before (some many times)*

*Enjoy telling us of their experiences in different places & tell us some of the best sites to visit.*

*Have had recent experience in the area.*

*Visited places we intend travelling to*

*Have experienced where I am going.*

*Are fellow travellers who have recently been here.*

*Are doing or have done a similar trip to us*

*Have done similar trip*

*Have experience. Been there, done that particularly having come from where we are about to go*

Theme 4 – despite the limited number of terms, this cluster appears to be a whole of two halves. Firstly, a filter whereby opinion is cast on the basis of likeness (in terms of like or dislike and similarity). Then, like the qualitative findings, this provides a reference point from which the respondent can determine a basis of comparison with their own personal experience. Interestingly, there were only two comments that made

reference to demographic homophily with the large majority referring to perceptual homophily.

*Have similar outlook*

*Have travelled here in the past or recently but take it all with a grain of salt as everyone has different like and dislikes. You have to judge for yourself.*

*Are interested in the same things as we are and are travelling or have been where we are going next*

*Have indicated similar likes/dislikes to myself*

*Like similar experiences: sight seeing, walking, bike riding*

*Have similar likes to us*

*Have been in the area with similar interests to me*

*Whose judgement I value*

*Have similar interests to me.*

*Seem to enjoy similar activities or environments to myself.*

*Have been there and I consider knows what they are talking about*

*Are travelling in caravan or motor homes who are interested in the same things we are interested in*

*Is similar in age and demographics to me*

*Are similar age and are retired. Value their opinion*

These comments reflect the concepts raised in the qualitative data and show the interrelated nature of social and physical settings, similarity, compatibility and expertise. The concept of recent experience was also raised in these comments which shows an understanding by the caravanners that a destination changes over time, this was further evidenced by comments relating to roads and access to ‘out of the way’ places. Interestingly, there was not a single comment which made reference to technology.

#### **5.4.6 A scenario in context**

Having determined who caravanners would listen to a further three questions were asked to determine who they would talk to about an FNQ experience. To measure their responses, the following scenario was provided and respondents were asked to report on how they would react, who they would likely share the experience with and how they would share this experience.

*You have booked and paid for a trip to the Great Barrier Reef. When you get there, the fish and coral you see are incredible and the water is very clear. The staff on the boat are really helpful and friendly, but the trip back is long, you are tired and a little sunburnt. Also, on the boat trip back, you find out that other travellers had paid \$50 less for the same trip.*

Table 5-15 – Caravanner reflections on a travel scenario

	<b>Respondents (n=318)</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>Valid %</b>
<i>How do you think you would reflect on this experience?</i>		
Positively and would recommend the trip	65	20.4%
Positively but would just discuss, not necessarily recommend	56	17.6%
Positively and negatively	73	23.0%
Negatively, but would not advise against the trip	23	7.2%
Negatively and would recommend against the trip	23	7.2%
Neutral, just discuss the trip as part of the Cairns experience	52	16.4%
Other	24	7.5%
Multiple response provided	2	0.6%
No response provided	20	

Table 5-15 shows 46 (14.4%) respondents who reflected on this scenario in a negative light, there was an exact split of who would advise others against taking the trip and those that would not. Similarly, of those 121 who viewed the trip in the scenario positively there was very little difference between the number who would recommend (20.4%) and those who would not (17.6%).

Table 5-16 – Who this experience would be shared with

	<b>Caravanner</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Who are you likely to share this experience with?</i>		
Family and/or friends after my trip	203	60.1
Anyone who asks	198	58.6
Other caravanners during the trip	194	57.4
Anyone who is looking to do a similar trip	193	57.1
Everyone I can	52	15.4
No one	4	1.2

Table 5-16 the data suggests that communication is most likely to take place after the trip when recounting the details of the trip to family and friends (60%). This is closely followed by ‘anyone who asks’ (58%), ‘Other caravanners’ (57.4%) and ‘anyone doing a similar trip’ (57.1%). Given the context of WOM exchange ‘on the road’ and part of the social interaction between caravanners, these responses stand to reason. It has been observed in the qualitative findings that such scenarios simply ‘come up’ in

the cut and thrust of conversation. Indeed such experiences are used as part of the process which allows the points of reference in travel tale exchanges to emerge. Interestingly, very few expected to keep this experience to themselves.

Table 5-17 – Likely communication channel for sharing an experience

	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev</b>
<i>How would you communicate this experience to others?</i>			
Face-to-face	294	4.04	.912
Mobile - calls	242	3.32	1.153
Email	224	2.82	1.273
SMS/text	215	2.73	1.304
Facebook	216	2.18	1.359
Trip Advisor or similar	201	1.90	1.235
Internet - personal blog	197	1.76	1.142
Other social network	200	1.74	1.117
Internet - other blog	200	1.63	1.034
Valid N (listwise)	180		

Finally, respondents were asked how likely they were to use a certain channel to communicate their experience (*1=Definitely not, 2 = Unlikely, 3=Possibly, 4= Likely, 5=Definitely*). Overwhelmingly, caravanners anticipated using ‘Face-to-face’ ( $\bar{x}$  =4.04) to communicate, followed by ‘Mobile phone calls’ ( $\bar{x}$  =3.32), ‘Email’ ( $\bar{x}$  =2.82) then ‘SMS/text message’ ( $\bar{x}$  =2.73). Interestingly the low standard deviation of ‘Face-to-face’ suggests closeness to the mean where as subsequent channels generated a larger standard deviation, suggesting greater variance in these answers. These results are consistent with other quantitative findings regarding use of devices both in type and frequency.

### 5.5 Summary of findings

The caravanners examined in this case were demographically similar. The mean age was 64 years old with most being qualified to the secondary or TAFE/ trade level. Not surprisingly the majority of the individuals considered themselves retired or semi-retired. The majority were domestic travellers, largely from the states along the east coast and almost 80% of those surveyed had visited the destination previously. Beyond destination experience, they were also very experienced with 67% of those surveyed reporting that they had ‘a lot’ of caravanning experience. Furthermore, 76% considered themselves to be caravanners for the purpose of this trip. That said, it was noted that there are terminology issues and identity aspects relating to the divide between commercial and non-commercial sites users.



Nevertheless, those respondents reflected similar core values of freedom, flexibility and being part of something bigger, part of a community of like minded travellers. So beyond the demographic similarity, perceptual homophily was evident particularly regarding the cultural norms and mores expected on the road. While seemingly homogenous, caravanners use a number of cues including vehicle type, stickers, badges, equipment and other vehicle appendages to identify similarity of style. While this may ‘kick start’ the conversation the data revealed an inclination to connect with those who have similar likes and interests. The qualitative data, quantitative data and open ended questions all reflected the concept that caravanners engage with ‘people like us’ – those of similar interests, likes and dislikes. In other words, communication tended to take place when caravanners liked each other and when similarity could be established.

The caravanners undertook the process of asking a series of questions upon meeting each other. These ‘usual questions’. is part of the social norms of caravanning (particularly upon arrival at a site) and allows for connection with those in close proximity along with establishing a relationship built of similarity, of views, of experiences of plans. The qualitative data suggests that this process allows individuals to develop relationships and weed out the “bullshitters”. In the case of caravanners, friendliness, sincerity and willingness to share appeared to be more important than gaining the expertise of others. This is not surprising given the age, destination experience and caravanning experience of these travellers.

Another element of the relationship ties between caravanners was the degree of familiarity between individuals with some caravanners reporting repeat visitation to the same spot each year and reconnecting with the same people in the same place. Trustworthiness was also revealed as important in the open-ended question of the survey and was related to the concept of time. This was both commented on and observed in the study with comments from the focus groups making reference to credibility.

A significant contributing factor to the establishment and development of relationships was the setting and physical proximity. Settings within caravan site (commercial and non commercial) included both public and private spaces. Caravanners can (and do) extend hospitality to others with whom they affiliate for drinks at ‘happy hour’ in the afternoon after the activities and usually conducted in

the annex of the van. This allows for the development of intimate relationships along with direct, interpersonal exchange. They also share common spaces and this is seen particularly in the commercial context with shared laundry, camp kitchen and leisure spaces. Moreover, interaction in these shared spaces is fostered by the operators.

Caravanners generally used face-to-face interactions as their preferred channel of discussing their experiences with other caravanners. Much of the discussion is exchanged verbally and this was reflected by their preferred communication device, the mobile phone.

Caravanners were generally open and willing to engage with each other and outsiders or, as one respondent said, 'we'll talk to anyone'. The data from the open-ended question of the survey along with the scenario suggest that they are tempered in their approach to disseminating WOM information and have the capacity to filter the information they receive in the context of credibility, trust and likeability of the person delivering the information.

## 6 Comparative analysis of case studies

This chapter will analyse the case study findings and compare the cases with a focus on relationships, particularly homophily and tie strength, physical and social settings and communications in order to address the research aims. As previously noted the complexity of the WOM phenomenon is difficult to unpick in terms of people, place and time; this was a key consideration in the data collection methods which were designed to capture the elements of this phenomenon. However, as outlined in the methodology, a process was followed to provide clarity and order to this holistic phenomenon. Firstly themes that emerged from the findings of each of the case studies have been identified and categorised. These categories were then ordered in a logical sequence reflective of the WOM process. Adding to the quantitative data and themes outlined in the case studies, a reflective narrative from the researcher's perspective has been included in the discussion. The decision to do so comes from the researcher's involvement in the constructed realities of those both inside and outside the study and is in keeping with the methods of the mobilities paradigm.

Drawing on the findings in the case studies (Chapters 4 and 5), this chapter will detail how the themes drawn from the research have emerged and been categorised in the context of at-destination WOM among mobile networks of travellers. Firstly, a brief reflection of the researcher's perspective (written in first person) provides the context of the researcher's experience. Then an analytical comparison of thematic findings from the case studies will identify similarities and differences between the cases. The chapter will then detail categories within these themes that will contribute to the development of a model to explain the WOM phenomenon.

### *Reflections of the researcher*

Over the duration of the study I have stayed at backpacker hostels and caravan parks and both observed and participated in the WOM process. I have exchanged in the 'usual questions', swapped stories, provided and received practical help, borrowed and lent equipment (from food to clothes pegs). I have developed relationships with fellow travellers based on compatibility and likeness. These relationships have been useful in framing the context within which information is exchanged. I have found that similarity offers an effective filter for information and allows pointed, specific

questions (based on those similarities) to be asked. This appears to be a process which works both ways. Once a degree of similarity has been established, the information sought has been more likely to influence on the grounds that it “feels” like the information provided has been done so on the basis of my personal context.

This has extended beyond the experience as the researcher. Over the duration of the study, I have shared the topic of the research with many others; family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues. The topic and the direct experience of individuals’ realities have been such that it has always elicited a response. In most cases, individuals immediately respond by confirming the importance of WOM and relating it to their own personal experiences. In one case, a family member recalled his experience backpacking and said how he would arrive in a hostel and spend the first night there discussing what to do with others who had been there for a while. In another case, a different family member said that they had done the same thing in a caravan situation.

It is interesting to observe how strongly individuals (outside those respondents from the study) exhibit the same passion to espouse the virtues of WOM as a means of obtaining information, details and recently acquired expertise from those whose travel mode is similar to their own. Moreover, there has been a need for those people to highlight this with an example. These examples often centred on a place stayed or an experience undertaken that would not have been the case in the absence of WOM. From a traveller’s perspective (both respondents and those casual remarks from outside the study), it appears that WOM is a key element that enriches the travel experience.

When outlining in further detail the premise of this research (theoretical underpinning and concepts such homophily, tie-strength), the role, need and function of WOM seems obvious to these individuals. In discussions (both within the parameters of the study and outside those parameters) there is a sense that a great volume of WOM is exchanged, the credence given to an opinion is dependent on the connectivity with the provider of that advice. Where time and continuity come into play or when the parties share common ground, the result is that information may be acquired and assessed in the context of other WOM or it may be acted upon solely on its merit.

## 6.1 Overall analysis

Table 6-1 outlines a summary of the qualitative findings (observations, interviews and focus groups). These have been categorised and those categories have been collected and presented as themes. While presented as discrete categories, it is important to note that these categories often overlap from one theme to another, and these interrelationships will be presented diagrammatically at the end of the table.

Table 6-1 – Summary of qualitative findings

	THEMES	BACKPACKERS	CARVANNERS	DIFFERENCES	SIMILARITIES
Characteristics of the traveller	DEMOGRAPHICS	Younger International	Generally older Domestic	Age difference and BP case has more diversity, the CV case appeared more homogenous	Little crossover in demographics, there were a few BP types staying in CV sites and vice versa
	TRAVEL TYPE	Not all identify as BP Variety of luggage, equipment & other identifiers Motivated to engage in activities at the destination	Not all identify as CV Variety of vehicles & equipment Motivated to sightsee in the destination	CV travel with their equipment (self sufficient) allowing wider selection of sites for accommodation, they can segregate from others BP use their equipment to stay with others who identify as BPs.	Staying at sites with other 'like' travellers whether they identify as being part of that group or not Neither group is homogenous
	INFORMATION NEEDS	Seek detail Find expertise Use internet & guidebooks	Exchange expertise High use of visitor centres Use reception info	CV can draw on previous destination experience CV have richer general destination knowledge through acquisition over time	Actively seek details which are current Compare information from a number of sources to form an opinion

	THEMES	BACKPACKERS	CARVANNERS	DIFFERENCES	SIMILARITIES
Physical & social spaces	ACCOMMODATION SITE SPACES	Shared dorms Enclosed spaces	Private dwellings Social spaces are attached to vehicle	CV chose can invite others to their private space to develop relationships. BP almost always need to accommodate others	shared social spaces to interact (laundry, kitchen etc)
	OTHER SHARED SPACES	Airport and city transfers provided by hostel Public spaces for relaxing (parks, esplanade) Booking centres On trips and tours	City transfers provided by the park Public spaces for relaxing (parks, esplanade) Visitor centres Road side stops Other visitors sites	BP share more spaces because they tend to use vehicles more for transport than accommodation space. BP have higher engagement in 'fun' activities (reef trips, pub crawls). CV participate in 'passive' activities (sightseeing by car, remote locations)	Interact away from the accommodation site Both use transfer services provided by the accommodation site where they mix with other similar travellers
Relationships with others	SOCIAL INTERACTION	Highly social Seek opportunity to meet fellow BP High involvement in social events New & quickly evolving relationships	Highly social Talk to anyone Congregate with others On-going 'road' relationships Often repeat visits	BP will seek out those who they "like", c/v appear to only seek out social interaction CV are often mixing with similar demographic BP are more likely to engage with mixed cultures.	High level of interaction at the place of accommodation Interaction is facilitated by operators Social interaction usually occurs in the evening after returning from day's activities
	NATURE OF RELATIONSHIP	Intense Usually short lived Extended by on-line means (phone, FB, email)	Casual On-going Extended with the luxury of time	CV may plan to re-connect on subsequent trips BP tend to focus on here-and-now or later in the same trip	Social reciprocity benefits

	THEMES	BACKPACKERS	CARVANNERS	DIFFERENCES	SIMILARITIES
Communication mechanisms	CUES	Language Clothes Flags & badges Foreign items (inc food)	Number plates Bumper stickers 'Like' equipment or brands (eg car, trailers)	Open spaces in a van park make cues highly visible	Both actively seek cues as a means of striking up conversation
	LANGUAGE	Multiple languages spoken English, as a second language, the common link for non-compatible first languages	English predominately used as primary language	Sometimes a first language is used to explain terms between individuals before reverting to English to engage with a group	Use of jargon specific to the group
	TECHNOLOGY	Mobile phones Phone cards Social media (Facebook)	Mobile phones Satellites Laptops	Different electronic channels of communication BP have a more natural affinity to technological channels CV reflected inconsistent adoption of technology	Use of technology primarily to keep in contact with home (family/friends) Used for broad information needs and planning Used to maintain connections during travel

	THEMES	BACKPACKERS	CARVANNERS	DIFFERENCES	SIMILARITIES
WOM content	STANDARD QUESTIONS	Where are you from? How long have you been here? Where are you going next?	Where are you from? What other parks have you stayed in? Is this your first time here?	Brand loyalty to accommodation shown by caravanners and high levels of repeat visitation	'Standard questions' were used as part of the ritual of meeting others
	DISCUSSION OF SELF	Home country Family Study Travel (general)	Work Family Previous travel Domestic current affairs	Discussion of self in terms of trip Discussion of self informs traits and characteristics	BP contextualise in terms of their home country or city CV discuss self in the Australian cultural context
	DISCUSSION OF TRIP	Road status Travel plans Work opportunities	Degrees of experience Others they have encountered	CV reflect on previous trips, BP focused on the current trip	Offering and receiving practical information
	IMAGES	'selfies' Take and share many images 'evidence' of travel	Group photos or photos with travelling partner Images of the trip	BP use images to place themselves in social context CV place themselves in the 'scene' of what they are visiting	Images provided to other networks to 'show' the travel experience 'Evidence' of having fun
WOM exchange	VOLUME OF WOM	High volume communication 'just know'	same	Difficult to objectively measure but constant exchange was observed in both cases	A tidal wave of opinion can influence decision making
	WOM ATTRIBUTES	Detail Work and earning opportunities Likability Cultural similarity Expertise & experience	Detail Recent experience Longer caravanning experience Travellers they can relate to	CV seek recent experience, BP assume recent experience CV have more destination experience to provide context for the WOM & its credibility	The details from the experience of others is used to make fine grain decisions Filter information through individual lens and attributes WOM contributes to bank of knowledge & decisions are made drawing on that and other aspects



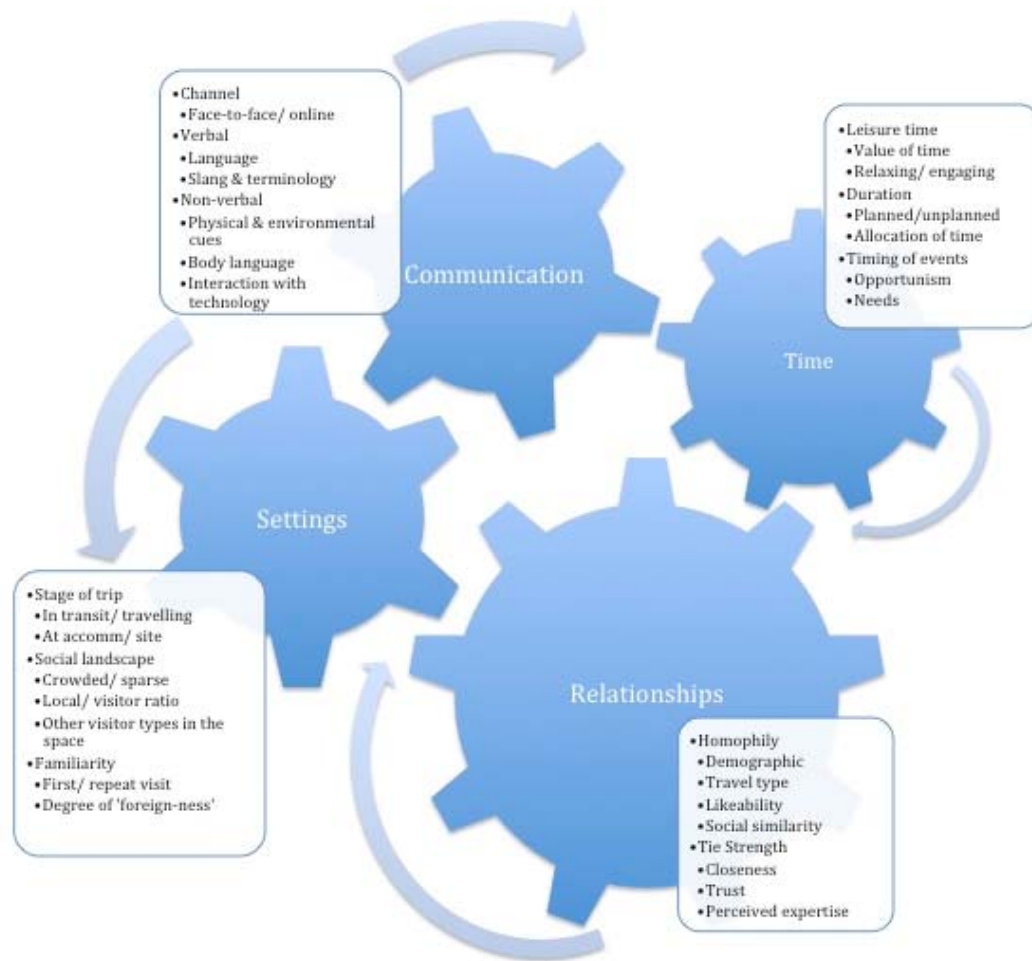


Figure 6-1 – Interrelated themes and categories identified in qualitative findings

The diagram above summarises these categories into the themes outlined in the research framework for the study (see Figure 1-3, Chapter 1) and explored in the literature review (Chapter 2). This diagram depicts the interconnectedness of the key themes of relationships, setting and communication that are central to addressing the research aims. This will provide a guiding structure for the comparative analysis of the cases where each theme draws on the qualitative and quantitative findings to answer the primary research question: How does interaction with other like travellers at a destination impact the WOM dynamic?

### 6.3 Traveller characteristics

The characteristics of the cases were different. Demographically the cases differed on the basis of age, origin, cultural diversity, education level and profession. Both cases closely mirrored the secondary data available in the literature about each segment. The two cases also differed with respect to the travel experience and their experience at the destination. Table 6-2 offers a demographic comparison of the samples used in the case studies.

Table 6-2 – Demographic case comparison

	<i>Case</i>		<i>Test Statistic</i>	
	Caravanner	Backpacker	Chi Square	Sig
Gender %				
Male	53.3	51.7	.200	.655
Female	46.7	48.3		
Age %				
<21	0.3	18.5	629.683	.000
21-30	0.6	70.9		
31-40	1.6	8.2		
41-50	6.4	0.8		
51-60	17.8	1.1		
61-70	53.2	0.3		
71-80	18.5	0		
>80	1.6	0.3		
Education %				
Secondary	44.3	18.9	118.041	.000
Trade/ TAFE	21.9	8.6		
Diploma	16.2	26.1		
Degree	12.0	34.1		
Other	4.5	11.3		
Multiple response	1.2	1.0		
Occupation %				
Management	2.7	6.1	118.041	.000
Professional	5.0	12.6		
Retail	1.5	4.7		
Manual/ factory worker	0.3	2.6		
Service industry	2.1	5.4		
Office/ clerical	2.4	4.2		
Public servant	3.0	12.6		
Retired/ semi retired	69.8	0		
Student	0.6	28.6		
Tradesperson	2.7	8.4		
Self employed	6.2	6.1		
Other	3.0	6.3		
Multiple response	0.6	1.4		

There was no significant difference between males and females in the study,  $\chi^2 = .200$  ( $p = .655$ ).

The age distribution is what would be expected from the respective groups with the

caravanners being significantly older than the backpackers,  $\chi^2=629.683$  ( $p=.000$ ). Most caravanners were over 50 years old and the majority of backpackers being under 30 years old. The respective professions were also as expected based on the literature. The bulk of caravanners (69.8%) were 'retired/ semi retired' and a substantial number of backpackers (28.6%) reported themselves as being 'students'. Additionally, the backpackers were largely international (41.17% from UK or Ireland and 46.74% from Europe) and the majority (79.7%) of caravanners coming from the east coast states of NSW, Victoria and Queensland. There was also a strong association between education and the cases,  $\chi^2=118.041$  ( $p=.000$ ) where the majority of caravanners were educated to 'secondary' or 'trade/TAFE' level, whereas 60% of backpackers were educated to 'diploma' or 'degree' level.

As expected, the backpackers were generally younger ( $\bar{x}=25.23$  years), had a higher level of education and were comprised largely of students, whereas the caravanners were older ( $\bar{x}=63.8$  years) and reported to be retired or semi-retired (Tourism Queensland, 2011). The quantitative findings supported the qualitative observations and the cultural diversity and difference in source markets made the cases different enough for useful comparison.

### **6.3.1 The individual and the group**

The qualitative findings suggested that there were different perceptions to association with the group. In both cases of caravanners and backpackers, there were respondents who acknowledged that they were staying with the respective groups but saw did not perceive themselves to be a member of that group, rather an outsider. Such as Kelly (Backpacker, United States, F) who stated, 'No, not really. I mean I am staying in a backpackers but I consider myself more of a student staying at a backpackers than an actual backpacker' or Bruce (Caravanner, M) who considered that, 'We're relative newcomers' because the and his wife had only spent 18 months at the same van park over a 7 year period. The quantitative results showed a large majority in both cases surveyed actually identified with the traveller type of 'caravanner' or 'backpacker'.

Table 6-3 – Identification with traveller type

	<i>Case</i>		<i>Test Statistic</i>	
	Caravanner	Backpacker	Chi Square	Sig
Consider yourself a caravanner/ backpacker for this particular trip %				
Yes	76.7	74.2	.651	.235
No	23.3	25.8		

Statistically, there was no relationship between the survey-determined ‘traveller type’, that is the two cases of the study, and whether respondents associated with that traveller type,  $\chi^2 = .651$  ( $p = .235$ ). About a quarter of those did not consider themselves to be a backpacker or caravanner for the purpose of this trip, but the likelihood of that response was not dependent on whether they were a caravanner or backpacker.

### 6.3.2 Information needs and flexible itineraries

The two cases were statistically compared in terms of their previous travel experience, their destination experience and their planning and booking behaviours. The analysis is presented in Table 6-4.

Table 6-4 – Experience and trip planning

	<i>Case</i>		<i>Test statistic</i>	
	Caravanner	Backpacker	Chi Square	Sig
Travel style experience %				
First time	7.4	50.9	265.088	<b>.000</b>
Done some	20.8	38.1		
Done a lot	71.7	10.9		
First visit to FNQ %				
Yes	20.9	88.4	342.559	<b>.000</b>
No	79.1	11.6		
Pre planned %				
Planned all	9.7	10.0	3.021	.554
Planned most	20.7	16.0		
Planned some	32.5	36.5		
Planned little	21.9	22.0		
Planned nothing	15.2	15.5		
Pre booked %				
Booked all	4.6	10.8	30.339	<b>.000</b>
Booked most	9.2	13.3		
Booked some	25.1	27.5		
Booked little	24.7	30.4		
Booked nothing	36.4	18.0		

Chi Square tests between the cases and ‘travel planning’ did not show a statistically significant relationship  $\chi^2=3.02$  ( $p=.554$ ), but travellers from both cases did some planning before arriving in the destination (see tables in Appendix 3). In both cases a very small number (9.7% and 10%) reported pre-planning all aspects of their trip, leaving destination arrangements such as tours, activities (Ortega & Rodríguez, 2007; Ortega et al., 2014). The literature also supports this view of flexibility of itineraries as a motivation for both backpackers (Richards & Wilson, 2004) and caravanners (Gountas & Gountas, 2008; Hardy & Gretzel, 2011).

However there was a significant relationship difference between backpacker and caravanner’s prior booking behaviour  $\chi^2=30.339$   $p=.000$ . Table 6-6 shows that twice the number of caravanners (36.4%) ‘booked nothing’ compared to backpackers (18%). Given the distance travelled, time constraints, lack of familiarity with the destination and lack of overall travel experience it is not surprising to see this result. Moreover, comments from the focus groups reflect that caravanners like to decide they’re arrangements ‘on the road’ whereas a number of backpackers commented about making bookings in Sydney before departing for FNQ.

Themes emerged from the qualitative findings regarding the information sources by travellers upon arrival to Cairns. The qualitative data indicated that backpackers used ‘internet’ and ‘guidebooks’ as key sources of information, whereas the caravanners used ‘visitor centres’. These themes, along with information sources from the literature, provided a selection of information sources for respondents to identify in the survey.

The familiarity of a destination and subsequent expertise has been associated with information search (Fodness & Murray, 1998; Gursoy, 2001; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). A chi square test in Table 6-4 showed a significant difference in the destination experience of caravanners and backpackers in the sample,  $\chi^2=342.559$  ( $p=.000$ ). Almost 80% of caravanners had travelled to FNQ previously, compared with 11.6% of backpackers. It would be expected, then, that the backpackers required more information sources. Table 6-5 shows that caravanners reported using a significantly higher number of information sources ( $\bar{x}=3.33$ ) upon arrival than backpackers ( $\bar{x}=2.83$ ). The table lists the reported frequency of use which have been placed in

descending order based on overall total use (see appendix 2 for the original order) and the top three sources for each group have been highlighted in bold.

Table 6-5 – Comparison of information sources used

		<i>Case</i>		<i>Test statistic</i>	
<i>Information sources used since arriving in FNQ</i>		Caravanner	Backpacker	t-test	Sig (2-tailed)
Overall number of sources		3.33	2.83	4.674	<b>.000</b>
<i>Information sources used</i>		Caravanner		Backpacker	
n	Source	n	%	n	%
490	Internet	183	54.1	<b>307</b>	<b>71.9</b>
<b>356</b>	<b>Other travellers</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>54.7</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>40.0</b>
273	Visitor centres	<b>195</b>	<b>57.7</b>	78	18.3
264	Friends/ family	83	24.6	<b>181</b>	<b>42.4</b>
215	Tourist guide books	<b>199</b>	<b>58.9</b>	160	37.5
180	Previous experience	159	47.0	21	4.9
170	Travel Agent	9	2.7	161	37.7
86	Trip Advisor (or similar)	22	6.5	64	15.0
85	Advertisements (print)	46	13.6	39	9.1
55	Other	35	10.4	20	4.7
18	Advertisements (TV/radio)	13	3.8	5	1.2

The ‘internet’ and ‘friends/family’ were both heavily utilised by backpackers (71.9% and 42.4% respectively) and ‘guide books’ and ‘visitor centres’ were the most used source by caravanners (58.9% and 57.7% respectively). The use of the ‘internet’ by caravanners was also widespread (54.1%) and this is consistent with the qualitative findings in the study and supported by the literature (see Chapter 2) which has identified the rapid adoption of technology for information sourcing. Similarly, the high use of ‘travel agents’ by backpackers is consistent with the qualitative findings are previous research (Richards & Wilson, 2004).

Importantly, the third highest-ranking information source upon arrival at a destination for both groups was ‘other travellers’ (caravanners=54.7% and backpackers=40%). This supports the notion that drawing on ‘other travellers’ as a source of information was also relied on by both cases. However there was a significant difference between backpackers and caravanners regarding the use of ‘other travellers’ as an information source,  $\chi^2=16.357$   $p=.000$ . This same result was found by Murphy et al. (2007)

when investigating the use of ‘other travellers WOM’ by those staying in a ‘motorhome/campervan’ or ‘backpacker hostel’.

‘Previous experience’ is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the overall frequency of use as an information source (Table 6-2). Not surprisingly the backpackers relied less on ‘previous experience’ than the caravanners, probably due to the lack of experience upon which to draw. This is consistent with the finding that they were more likely to be first time travellers to the region. This also lends support for the notion that there is sometimes greater trust in the views of others than of the individual’s personal experience. (Dann, 1996b; Dickinger, 2011; Yoo et al., 2013). This was particularly relevant from the caravanners who indicated that recent experience was important when sourcing information from others.

The level of detail and expertise exchanged in a synchronous manner at the destination also supports findings from previous studies (Moore et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2014). Given the engagement with these specific information sources it makes sense that there are a large number of discussions that take place in the spaces where the information is sourced. The sources ranked in Table 6.2 shows the internet, other travellers and visitors centres were the most used sources overall across both cases indicating that ease of access, volume, detail and expertise were important considerations in selecting information sources.

#### **6.4 Theme – Relationships**

The data reflected a strong desire to connect socially with others. This social motivation has long been established in the backpacker literature (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Murphy, 2001; Richards & Wilson, 2004; Sixaba, 2013; Sørensen, 2003). This is a commonality shared with the caravanning literature (Hardy & Gretzel, 2011; Hardy et al., 2013; Southerton, Shove, Warde, & Deem, 2001; White & White, 2008). Other studies have drawn parallels between backpackers and caravanners with respect to the strong desire to interact socially with the group (Holloway et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2007). This might be attributed to helpful strangers, which has been raised in the literature. For example, White and White (2008) suggested that use of ‘temporary strangers’ in the form of other travellers might be a strategy to cope with the unfamiliar and Sørensen (2003, p. 854) proposed that ‘backpackers are the most familiar strangers’.

This sense of conforming to the group norms (Festinger, 1950, 1954; Merton, 1949; Stokowski, 1992; Turner, 1991) was deemed important to connect with other NITs in the context of each case. Beyond the motivations of the travellers, the commercial operators of both backpacking and caravanning sites facilitated social engagement (such as trivia nights for backpackers or pancake breakfasts for caravanners).

There was also a sense of ‘friendliness’ and community at these sites. This perception of ‘friendliness’ was revealed in the open-ended question of the survey where 4 quotes citing ‘friendliness’ were provided from each case and both cases saw a cluster of answers that related to this theme (Backpackers, Theme 1 – Likability. Caravanners, Theme 2 – Friendliness). This friendliness, however, may not be as altruistic as it appears.

In the cases investigated in this study, travellers tended to share accommodation sites and evidence of group cohesion and physical proximity played out here. All travellers (backpackers and caravanners alike) demand certain mores and rules be adhered to (Holloway et al., 2011; O'Regan, 2010) and this reflects earlier theories of group membership (Merton, 1949; Simmel, [1908] 1950; Turner, 1991). The unwritten rules and social network etiquette and adherence thereof were revealed in the data such as ‘pool table’ rules, camp kitchen and BBQ ‘turn taking’. These rules are specific to the networks and appear to be learnt through combinations of watching and experience. Such self-organising principles were also seen at the non-commercial van sites (for example where a free camper had written ‘read this’ next to the ‘no generator’ sign – see Image 5.3). This supports Holloway et al’s (2011, p. 236) idea that, ‘As with the tourist gaze, the intratourist gaze has the potential to be an authoritative gaze that can discipline and regulate the behaviour of others, in this case other tourists. It is also a self-governing gaze, however, in which the self-reflexive tourist may monitor and adapt their own behaviours in light of newer, emerging norms and discourses’.

#### **6.4.1 Homophily – People like us**

The literature provides mixed results regarding demographic homophily, that is, similarity based traits such as age, gender, occupation and education (McPherson et al., 2001; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). The qualitative findings from this study also reflect the inconsistent results from the research regarding demographic homophily. For example, in the backpacker case Ben and Verity (industry interviews) both



contradicted themselves. Verity said, ‘generally, they speak with any backpacker’ then went on to say, that some prefer ‘people who speak their language’. Similarly, Ben noted that, ‘they’ll talk to bloody anyone’ but that ‘demographics matter’.

There was more consistency from the focus group findings and observations. The exact phrase ‘people like me’ was cited in both the backpacker (Julie, F) and caravanner (Jan, F) focus groups. In the case of the backpackers this was particularly noticeable in observations where the language (spoken and written) was not English. Commonality of language was observed as drawing travellers together. This was not limited to situations where the language used was not English.

Across English speakers in both cases, slang and colloquialisms were another means of connecting on common ground. In addition to this there was another language layer which related to the ‘lingo’ of the travel style. Particularly with caravanners, the use of group language demonstrates a degree of familiarity with the travel style and indicates credibility. For example, Mike (M, CV), ‘You can tell by talking to them, by the way they talk and what they say’. This language element relates not only similarity but is linked to the earlier point regarding acceptable group norms.

Homophily traits were further explored in the quantitative findings, where *I=Always* and *5=Never*. Table 6-6 shows that backpackers ( $\bar{x}=1.95$ ) more frequently valued the opinions of those travellers who they perceived to be demographically similar than caravanners ( $\bar{x}=2.45$ ).

Table 6-6 – Demographic and perceptual homophily

<i>I value opinions from a traveller who.....</i>	<i>Case</i>		<i>Test statistic</i>	
	Caravanner	Backpacker	t-test	Sig (2-tailed)
Group association				
Is a fellow caravanner/ backpacker	2.23	1.91	4.537	<b>.000</b>
Homophily				
Similar to me (age, background, culture)	2.45	1.95	7.572	<b>.000</b>
I like	2.40	1.98	5.977	<b>.000</b>
Has similar opinions to me	2.34	1.99	5.152	<b>.000</b>

Table 6-6 further shows statistically significant differences between the groups on the value placed on other travellers’ opinions based on perceptual homophily measures using a 2-tailed t-test. Overall, the findings illustrate that backpackers were more

inclined than caravanners to value the opinions of across all measures of homophily, both demographic and perceptual.

Table 6-7 reports the frequency of the top four homophily terms mentioned in the open-ended responses of the survey question. These include the term ‘like’ which relates in some context to similarity and in others to compatibility, in either instance both ideas are tied to homophily. The open-ended questions from the survey also highlighted the importance of perceptual similarity, yet demographics received little mention. Only two of the caravanners’ open-ended question made specific reference to demographics, likewise only one backpacker made reference to being able to speak English and another stating that they ‘are from my region’. These comments further suggest that perceived similarity rather than demographic similarity compelled one person to value the WOM from another.

Table 6-7 – Frequency of homophily terms in open-ended survey question

<i>I have listened to word-of-mouth from people who...</i>	<i>Backpackers</i>	<i>Caravanners</i>
Similar	16	28
Same	25	20
Like	27	9
Experience	39	30

Overall these findings support the research on homophily, that individuals who are similar receive messages that are congruent with their own ‘norms’ (beliefs, values) making them feel at ease. This homophily lends itself to trust and a willingness to invest in developing the relationship ties with others (Blazevic et al., 2013; McPherson et al., 2001).

#### **6.4.2 Tie strength – closeness to others**

The attributes of trust and perceived expertise are critical to the development of relationship ties upon which WOM is based (de Matos & Rossi, 2008; Ozcan, 2004; Rosen & Olshavsky, 1987; Urry, 2003). The affective ties based on likability and trust (Katz et al., 2004; Yang & Mattila, 2012) in this study can be categorised one of two ways. Firstly, the existing relationships with a travelling companion and, secondly, newly formed relationships during travel. Travellers at the destination use both types

of relationships for the purposes of WOM. Table 6.9 shows the quantitative results regarding existing relationships of respondents at the time of data collection.

Table 6-8 – Travel party case comparison

	<i>Case</i>			
	Caravanner	Backpacker		
Travel party type %				
Alone	6.8	21.8		
Couple (partner/spouse)	79.5	10.6		
Tour group	0	3.5		
With a friend	1.5	31.7		
Group of friends	4.7	30.3		
Relatives	5.9	1.2		
Club	0.3	0		
Multiple response	1.2	0.9		
	<i>Case</i>		<i>Test statistic</i>	
	Caravanner	Backpacker	Chi Square	Sig
Travel group %				
Alone	6.8	21.8		
Couple or pair	81.0	42.3	117.207	<b>.000</b>
More than 2 people	12.2	35.9		
			t-test	Sig
Travel party				(2-tailed)
Size (exclude respondent) $\bar{x}$	1.92	3.64	-5.496	<b>.000</b>
Days travel with this party $\bar{x}$	58.37	49.51	1.604	.109

A Chi Square could not be conducted on the ‘travel party type’ due to the large number of cells having less than the expected count. This variable was recoded to represent three categories; travelling alone, travelling as a dyad or couple (including responses for ‘Couple’ and ‘With a friend’) and those travelling in groups larger than three people. There was a significant relationship between the case the travellers belonged to and whether they were travelling alone, as a pair or in a group of 3 or more, (  $\chi^2 = 117.207$ , (p=.000)) with caravanners significantly more likely to be travelling as a couple.

A two-tailed t-test revealed that the size of the travel party for caravanners was significantly smaller on average (  $\bar{x} = 1.92$ ) than the backpacker travel party (  $\bar{x} = 3.64$ ). This could probably be attributed to the 81% of caravanners who travelled as a couple or with a friend whereas a larger proportion of backpackers were travelling with a ‘group of friends’ (30.3%). An additional two-tailed t-test yielded no significant

difference between the number of nights that backpackers ( $\bar{x}$  =49.51) and caravanners ( $\bar{x}$  =58.37) had been travelling with that party during this trip,  $t(592)=1.511$ , ( $p=.131$ ).

These findings indicate that while the travel party composition (size and type) differed significantly between the two groups of travellers, there was no statistical difference regarding how long they had travelled with that party on this trip. Using duration of relationship as a measure of its strength (Granovetter 1973), the data was further analysed to explore whether the respondents valued opinions based on tie-strength and expertise similarly.

Table 6-9 – Tie strength and value placed on other travellers' WOM

<i>I value opinions from a traveller who.....</i>	<i>Case</i>		<i>Test statistic</i>	
	Caravanner	Backpacker	t-test	Sig (2-tailed)
<b>Tie Strength</b>				
I am travelling with	2.35	2.05	3.540	<b>.000</b>
<b>Expertise</b>				
Seems to know a lot about the location	2.16	1.89	4.025	<b>.000</b>
Has travelled a lot	2.22	1.90	4.707	<b>.000</b>
Has been in this location for a while	2.21	1.83	5.689	<b>.000</b>

The t-test results in Table 6-9 shows there is significant difference to the value placed on other travellers' opinions between the two cases. Where *1=Always* and *5=Never*, the table suggests that backpackers were more inclined than caravanners to value the opinions of across all elements measured. This was further explored through the open-ended question of the survey. Table 6-10 reports how frequently terms which related to relationship ties appeared in the response. These include the ideas of meeting (connection) and expertise through 'knowledge' and 'experience'.

Table 6-10 - Frequency of tie-strength terms in open-ended survey question

<i>I have listened to word-of-mouth from people who...</i>	<i>Backpackers</i>	<i>Caravanners</i>
Met/ meet	23	17
Trust	6	0
Know(ledge)	31	29
Experience	39	30

The four most frequently used terms in open-ended questions are listed in Table 6-3. Interestingly, 'experience' and 'knowledge' were the most popular with both groups and this mirrored the results in Table 6-9 where 'Seems to know a lot about the location' and 'Has been in this location for a while' were valued the most by both

groups. Again, this suggests that the travellers (regardless of case) value the expertise of others that comes from experience at the destination.

While ‘trust’ was rarely mentioned explicitly in the open-ended question, it was implied contextually particularly in relation to meeting others and expertise. Overall, the frequency of these words appeared more often among backpackers than caravanners. This could possibly relate to the higher number of dyads (couples) seen among caravanners along with their greater depth of destination experience upon which they can draw. It is consistent with the statistical analysis that suggests that backpackers develop relationships during travel and that they value the opinions borne from those relationships to a greater extent than caravanners in the study.

### **6.5 Theme – Settings**

The idea of co-presence (Sheller & Urry, 2006) as a basis for group association within the backpacking and caravanning literature is tied closely to the concept of place. Both the literature in caravanning (Southerton et al., 2001) and backpacking (O'Regan, 2010) literature refers to the physical layout of the respective sites and the familiarity they offer the traveller. (O'Regan, 2010, p. 95) states that ‘hostels contain the comfort of a spatially coherent identity, connect places together in an architectural styles, containing familiar comforts such as wi-fi internet, English-speaking staff, security, live music, sociality, privacy – features that have become so common place and familiar within hostels, that they are now only noticeable when missing’. Similarly, (Southerton et al., 2001) talks of ‘highly-managed environments included bars, swimming pools, shops, showers, toilets, laundries, mains electricity, piped water and sewerage services, street lighting and more’. This provides the travellers a sense of the familiar and predictable in an unfamiliar destination. This was observed and experienced by the researcher. When approaching each site for the first time there was an overwhelming sense of familiarity or ‘you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all’, this was also observed of newcomers site from both cases from observations in reception and other shared spaces and also noted by those outside the study.

The layout and immediate familiarity offers solace to the traveller, regardless of whether they perceive themselves to ‘belong’ to group or not. Moreover, there is a close association with the physical and social spaces found at the accommodation site.

The physical proximity lends itself to social engagement with other networks independent travellers (NITs) on site (Festinger, 1950, 1954; Festinger et al., 1950).

The relationship between physical closeness and increased communication both stands to reason and has been well established in the literature (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Monge & Contractor, 2001; White & White, 2008). The findings from both cases supported this idea of social connection with physical proximity. Each case revealed a cluster related to this theme in the open-ended question of the survey. For backpackers, Theme 2 – Dorm room and Theme 3 – Hostel highlight specific quotes that tie the location and proximity to the respondents' willingness to listen to WOM from other travellers. In the case of caravanners Theme 1 – Sites also reflects the association made by respondents between physical proximity and propensity to listen to others' WOM.

Accommodation is also representative of 'personal time', that is, time for oneself rather than for touristic activity. Observations and researcher experience suggested that this time is used for relaxing, socialising or time spent with a close 'other' (dyad). Both backpackers and caravanners were observed at their respective sites of accommodation, some enjoying time by themselves (reading) or sitting with a close 'other', be it spouse, partner or travelling companion, in close conversation. O'Regan (2010, p. 92) notes of hostels, but equally applies to caravan sites, 'it is also an environmental setting in which an individual can establish his or her own place, how to organise his or her time and his or her next move'.

The settings were reported to be in personal spaces or communal spaces. Personal spaces of the two cases were represented differently. For caravanners it was the traveller's actual vehicle and, more often, the annex of their vehicle. Observations were made at a number of sites and from researcher experience of spending time in exclusive, private space with the option of complete privacy within the vehicle. In the case of backpackers, who generally share rooms or dorms, the same level of privacy cannot be afforded. Instead, these travellers use their bed or bunk, their pack or bag alone with a number of their associated 'things' (such towels, clothes) to demarcate private space within these shared spaces. Sharing of communal space is a commonality for both backpackers and caravanners and the observations, interviews and focus groups all revealed the use of a variety of spaces at accommodation sites where social interaction took place. These included kitchen or camp kitchen, laundry,

communal bathrooms and reception areas. The hostels in the study also had pool tables, bars, swimming pools and communal dining spaces, all of which were used, see Image 4-1 as an example.

The qualitative findings also reflected that social engagement takes place outside the accommodation site. This is consistent with Hannam and Ateljevic (2007, p. 255) who proposed the idea of ‘social and material dwelling-in-motion; places of and for various activities’ and that these activities ‘can involve specific forms of talk, work or information-gathering, but may involved simply being connected, maintaining a moving presence with others that holds the potential for many different convergences or divergences of physical presence’. Examples from the data included on accommodation provided transfers, either to and from the ‘city’ or, in the case of backpackers, from the airport. While the data suggested that they engage with others ‘during trips’, their descriptions of ‘trips’ differs. For the backpacker it is more likely to be an organised, external operator which allows them to do the ‘must see’ attractions, particularly the Great Barrier Reef. In contrast, the caravanners expressed their idea of a ‘trip’ as getting in the car and exploring sites beyond the immediate geography where they are staying. Both cases reported engaging with others at visitor centres, whilst making bookings and when they were ‘out and about’. Further to this, both cases were observed engaging with other travellers in public spaces including parks and shopping centres. The qualitative findings suggested that backpackers share more spaces, which is logical given that many don’t have a vehicle either from the purpose of driving or private dwelling.

To further explore this, respondents were asked ‘*Have you discussed your trip to Far North Queensland with other travellers during your stay?*’ and, for those who answered ‘yes’, where these discussions had taken place. Table 6-11 show that the majority of both cases engaged in discussions with other travellers during their stay but caravanners were significantly more likely to have shared their experiences than backpackers,  $\chi^2 = 22.043$  ( $p = .000$ ).

Table 6-11 – Discussed trip with other travellers

	<i>Case</i>		<i>n</i>	<i>Test statistic</i>	
	Caravanner	Backpacker		Chi Square	Sig
Discussed trip %	93.4	81.3	706	22.043	<b>.000</b>
Yes	6.6	18.7			
No					

Table 6-12 – Places where trip discussions have taken place

	<i>Case</i>		<i>n</i>	<i>Test statistic</i>	
	Caravanner	Backpacker		Chi Square	Sig
Where discussion took place %					
At accommodation	80.4	69.6	753	11.301	<b>.001</b>
In social settings	55.2	49.4	744	2.444	.118
(out for coffee or drink)					
During day trips	49.5	47.3	746	.361	.548
At visitors centres	32.5	8.7	738	67.106	<b>.000</b>
While shopping	19.7	8.2	737	20.896	<b>.000</b>
(for food, clothes, supplies)					
While making a booking	18.8	15.9	736	1.023	.312
and/or enquiry					
Elsewhere*	1.6	1.8	182		

\* Open-ended response could not be statistically analysed.

Table 6-12 illustrates that most discussions took place at the respondents' accommodation for both caravanners (80.4%) and backpackers (69.6%), followed by 'social settings' and 'during day trips'. This was followed by 'at visitors centres' for caravanners (32.5%) and 'while making a booking and/or enquiry' for backpackers (15.9%). There was a significant relationship between the cases and the location where discussions took place in the case of 'at accommodation',  $\chi^2 = 11.301$ , ( $p=0.01$ ), 'at visitors centres',  $\chi^2 = 67.106$ , ( $p=0.000$ ), and 'while shopping',  $\chi^2 = 20.896$ , ( $p=.000$ ).

These quantitative findings were largely consistent with the qualitative findings. The significant difference and lower percentage of backpackers discussing their trip was a little surprising but this may be attributed to the amount of time that they had spent at the destination when completing the survey, this question was not asked.



## **6.6 Theme – Communications**

Communication lies at the heart of the WOM phenomenon. The literature (Chapter 2) demonstrates a long held interest in the studies of the channels of communication used as part of the WOM process. Two main areas emerged relating to communication, the first was a process that facilitates travellers to connect in a new place and the second is the mechanisms by which they communicate.

### **6.6.1 Process**

Visual cues are the first indicator of the traveller network. These can be manifestations of the travel style (such as backpacks or caravans) that suggest a general ‘belonging’. Beyond this, there were more cues such as flags, badges, number plates, bumper stickers, specific to the different cases. These cues can also indicate sources of similarity such as places of origin (number plates for caravanners, national flag for backpackers), previous travel experience or even political persuasion through clothing, badges and other symbols. The observations, focus groups and interviews all revealed the use of cues.

Cues are used as a precursor (Duhan et al., 1997; Katz et al., 2004; Ozcan, 2004) and can provide an assessment of homophily before engagement. A sign indicating similar hometown, political affiliation or similar likes can provide common ground before engagement between individuals. For new entrants (either at a network level or to a destination) this information can be used to determine if an individual offers an “in” to the network of independent travellers.

The ‘usual questions’ came up repeatedly in the qualitative data from respondents and industry in both case studies and also the observations both within the context of the study and outside the study. Typically these include; Where are you from? How long have you been travelling? Where have you been?. When probed, the backpackers suggested that these questions serve a couple of purposes. Firstly, it appears to be part of the culture and routine of backpacking (Murphy, 2001; Sørensen, 2003). Secondly, these introductory questions provide some base information from which the traveller can determine a degree of similarity with others in the group. Operators from both cases in the study also supported the observations of the ‘usual’ questions as a foray into general conversation. The process of providing basic information about ‘self’ allows for determination of demographic homophily.

### **6.6.2 Exchanging travel stories**

This stage occurs when the conversation extends from the ‘usual questions’ and allows closer relationships to form. By moving from preliminary information about ‘self’, individuals divulge more information in the context of travel situations with whom the other individual(s) may relate. Effectively, it allows the development of closer relationships where tales of previous experiences with the network demonstrate how an individual ‘fits in’ to the localised network. It also sees a shift from simple travel experiences to injecting individual and personal information about self. This allows identification of convergent and divergent beliefs, opinions and views. By identifying ‘shared’ experiences, travellers find perceived similarity (perceptual homophily). Some WOM in passive form via storytelling begins to emerge from these exchanges.

### **6.6.3 Shared experiences**

Where a foundation of similarity (homophily) is determined, relationships begin to form. These might be neighbours (in the case of caravan ‘spots’ or dorm mates in the case of backpackers), friendships (when people just ‘click’) or romantic encounters (more often seen in backpackers than caravanners). In any case they are considered by both parties to be temporary at this stage but offer potential to develop.

These shared experiences can vary greatly. Examples from the observations, interviews and focus groups include meeting for a drink, sharing a transfer to a day trip, participating in a day trip together and more. These seemingly discrete shared experiences have the potential to scaffold into more substantive shared experiences such as making arrangements to meet at the next location ‘en-route’, travelling together or, even, one party changing plans in order to travel with another.

### **6.6.4 Technology**

All the operators in the study commented on the rapid increase in use and demand for access to technology, particularly Wi-Fi. This mirrored the researcher’s personal experience when travelling with caravanners in remote areas of northern Australia, both in terms of frustration with network connectivity and/ or availability of ‘on-line’ desktops available for use. While all operators reported the increase in use and demand, there was widespread acknowledgement of the maintained importance of face-to-face communication ‘on-site’. The integration of communication in the on-

line and face-to-face forms was evident, particularly with the backpackers as outlined in Tables 6-13 and 6-14.

Table 6-13 – Communication devices used during travel

	Case		n	Test Statistic	
	Caravanner	Backpacker		Chi Square	Sig
<i>Device use for communicating with other travellers</i>	%	%			
Mobile phone	46.4	25.2	260	106.343	<b>.000</b>
Smart phone or iPhone	14.2	40.7	214		
Laptop	8.0	14.5	86		
Tablet or iPad	3.3	14.0	68		
Notebook	0.9	1.2	8		
Other	10.7	4.4	54		

There was a significant association between the cases and the type of device they had most used to communicate with other travellers during their visit,  $\chi^2=106.343$ , ( $p=.000$ ). The most popular device used for communications in both cases was the ‘mobile phone’ or ‘smart phone’, however caravanners were more likely to use mobile phones and backpackers to use smartphones. These devices allow for synchronous communication and, in the case of ‘smart phones’ all of the asynchronous options (aside from ‘noticeboards’) as well. The qualitative data suggested that the integration of the device with the traveller and observed frequency of use during conversations suggested that the technology used is considered an extension of self among backpackers.

Table 6-14 – Communication channels used during travel

Channels used to communicate with other travellers	Respondents (%)						Test statistic	
	Daily or more		Sometimes		Not at all		Chi Square	Sig
	Synchronous							
	B/P	C/V	B/P	C/V	B/P	C/V		
	Face-to-face communication	80.8	47.1	15.6	51.7	3.6	1.2	111.124
Mobile phone - calls	14.8	11.1	39.4	36.2	45.7	52.7	3.837	.147
	Asynchronous							
	B/P	C/V	B/P	C/V	B/P	C/V		
Facebook	43.7	8.0	30.2	19.2	26.0	72.8	153.950	.000
Mobile phone – text/SMS	19.2	10.5	37.6	27.7	43.2	61.8	23.361	.000
Email	12.6	7.2	28.8	33.1	58.6	59.7	5.327	.070
Personal blog/Twitter	14.7	4.4	25.2	11.9	59.9	83.7	42.260	.000
Social networking – Other	12.9	2.0	23.5	12.4	63.6	85.6	41.210	.000
Internet – other blog	11.4	4.0	16.4	8.7	72.2	87.4	21.389	.000
Notice boards	6.4	6.6	14.5	28.5	79.1	64.8	19.726	.000
Trip Advisor/ similar sites	5.1	4.3	18.8	16.3	76.0	79.5	1.064	.587

Table 6-14 shows that the backpackers in the study used face-to-face communications significantly more than the caravanners, even though the highest percentage from each case reported using this at least once a day as a means of communicating with other travellers. The other synchronous communication was 'mobile phone calls' where there was no significant difference between frequency of usage reported. Table 6-14 shows no significant difference between groups' frequency of email use, most reported using it less than daily (backpackers 28.8% and caravanners 33.1%). Likewise, neither group use Trip Advisor frequently with 76% of backpackers and 79.5% of caravanners reporting that they did not use it at all.

With the exception of email, and Trip Advisor, there was significant difference in the frequency of use of communication channels between the groups. This lends support to the notion that the increased use of 'smart' phones by backpackers facilitates the synchronous and asynchronous communication with other travellers at the destination. In the case of caravanners, more than 50% reported that they did not use 'at all' any of the items other than face-to-face communications. These findings suggest that backpackers are likely to use a wider variety of communication channels for communicating with other travellers than their caravanning counterparts.

### **6.7**     *Summary of cases*

This chapter analysed the cases collectively and then used the themes from the literature to compare the two cases. In terms of traveller characteristics, the data revealed that the two cases reflected the existing literature with the backpackers being younger, international travellers who do not have much travel experience and have had little exposure to the destination. The caravanners, on the other hand, tend to be older, domestic travellers who have had experience at the destination and in the art of caravanning and many of these were travelling as couples.

In terms of their connection to other like travellers in the network, both cases were socially motivated, sought a sense of connection to those in close proximity and were prepared to conform to the rituals and rules of the group. The physical and social settings in which they engaged with others was also similar, although caravanners had both private space and transport due to their vehicle. Both groups actively engaged with other travellers at a number of sites in order to achieve both social benefits and destination information. This information was sought in detail and both groups were

prepared to listen to ‘anyone’, but different views carried different weight. In both cases travellers effectively filtered the information they received from others using recency of experience (expertise) and personal context (similarity to self) as means of determining relevance. Language and cultures within each group was evident and while this differed to each other, the need for personal face-to-face contact prevailed in both cases. For the backpackers this was augmented by electronic channels, this was not seen with the caravanners to the same degree.

## 7 Discussion

The analysis revealed differences in the characteristics, experiences and social norms of backpackers and caravanners in the study. It also found that the motivation to connect, obtain information and contribute to the network of fellow travellers by establishing relationships were commonalities shared by both groups. This chapter will synthesise the findings and discuss how the interrelated themes drawn from the analysis can be built upon to develop a model of at-destination WOM. The chapter will explain the elements of the model and discuss the outcomes from these findings.

### 7.1 *Modelling emergent themes*

As previously noted the complexity of the WOM phenomenon is difficult to unpick in terms of people, place and time; this was a key consideration in the data collection and analysis. The inductive approach that iteratively cycled between the qualitative and quantitative data was designed to capture the elements of this phenomenon, its intricacies and complexities. Firstly themes that emerged from the findings of each of the case studies have been identified and categorised. These themes generally fit into the theories and concepts of relationships (homophily and tie strength), the setting (physical space or location or proximity) and communication channels (verbal, non-verbal and technological) relating back to the research objectives.

The interdependence of these themes presented challenges in the simple approach to their discussion. The need to categorise in order to provide sufficient detail risks presenting these themes and their categories as discrete when they are not. The categories within these themes were then ordered in a logical sequence reflective of the WOM process. Then the baseline statements and literature gaps (Chapter 2) were used to frame the development of the model.

To present this holistically, the findings have been modelled to show the process and the interrelated nature of the phenomenon. Following Getz (1986); McKercher (1999), an explanatory model is proposed. While extending beyond description, this model does not attempt to imply cause and effect to the extent that it can be considered a predictive model rather illustrate the interrelated themes and categories. The model outlined in Figure 7-1 shows a number of related and sequential components or parts, and the flows (and their directions) between parts. The individual stages within the models are then discussed in detail.

## **7.2 *At-destination WOM in tourism model***

This section will provide an overview of the model, including the directional aspects, then the components of the model will be explained. In essence, the model is a two directional model, with five main parts, where each part is connected to one or more other parts to reflect the dynamism of WOM phenomenon between people, place and time.

The model builds from the 'Contributors' which feeds into the 'Context' of the trip. In the case of NITs, the 'Context' takes the form of a mobile, fluid network. It is within the 'Context' that 'The Arena of Exchange' facilitates interaction and word-of-mouth. The 'Outcomes' result from the exchange and there are 'Implications' from these 'Outcomes'. Flowing in the opposite direction, these 'Implications' feedback into the 'Arena of Exchange', the 'Context' and the 'Contributors'. The 'Arena of Exchange', regardless of 'Outcomes' also alters the 'Context' and 'Contributors'. Finally, any shift within the 'Context' has a bearing on the 'Contributors'.

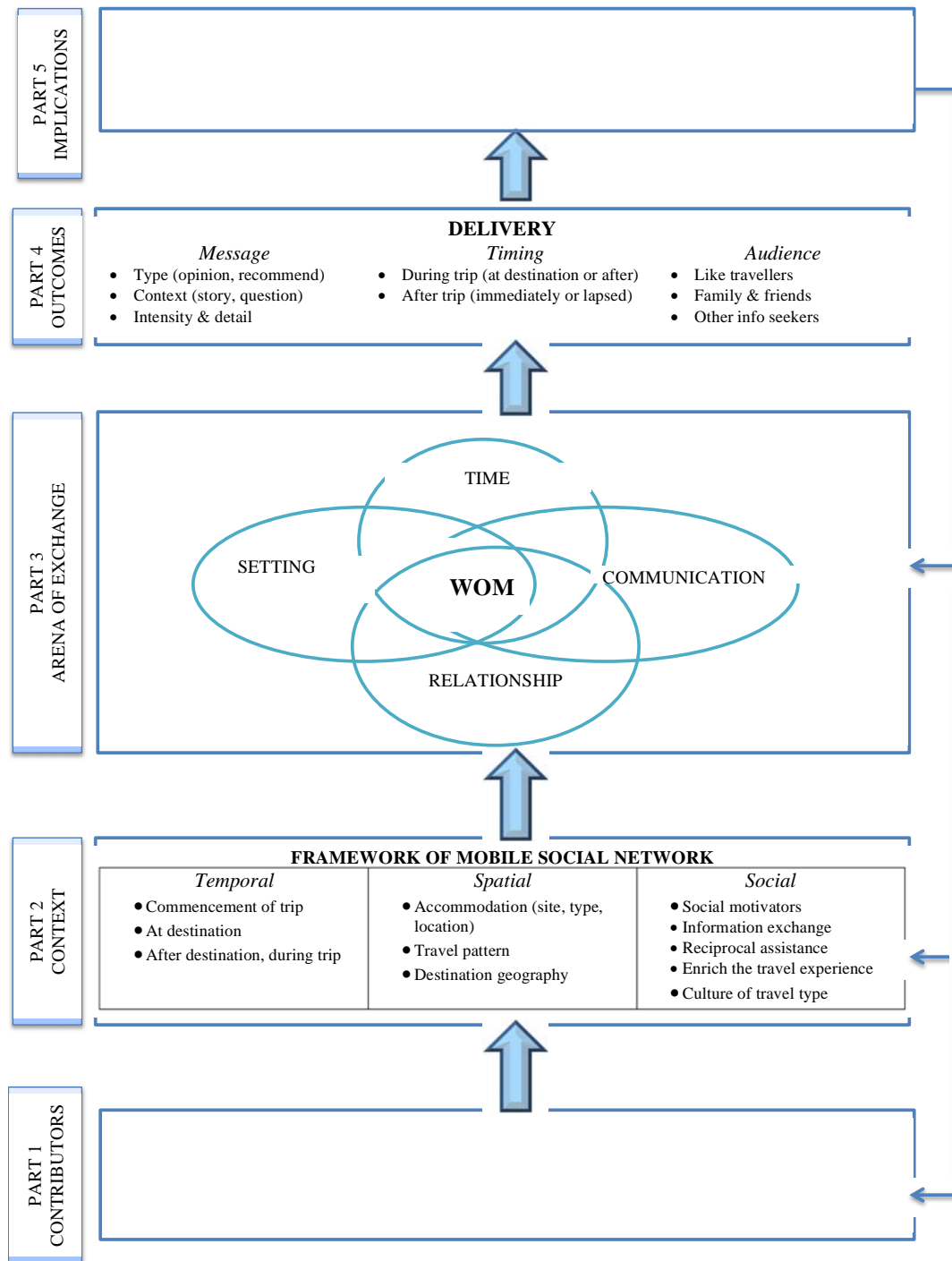


Figure 7-1 – Model of at-destination WOM



### Part 1 – Contributors

‘*Contributors*’ are the aspects that an individual brings to the travel experience. These take the form of ‘*Characteristics*’, ‘*Attributes*’ and ‘*Behaviours*’ (see Figure 7-2), many of which are formed before travel. However, as the model shows, some aspects are also influenced by the experience, interactions with others and the implications of those interactions.

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Behaviours</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographics</li> <li>• Culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal experience</li> <li>• Expectations</li> <li>• Preference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trip planning</li> <li>• Trip booking</li> <li>• Information sourcing</li> </ul>

Figure 7-2 – Contributors to the Individual Traveller Profile

In this study, demographic difference was easily identified through age, origin, education and occupation. Gender was also measured but the observed ratio from both qualitative and quantitative data was proportionate and had no statistical relationship on other tested variables. Other variables that could be measured include income, ethnicity, sexual preference or relationship status. Of the ‘*Contributors*’, this is the factor that is least likely to change as a result of the experience. Culture was also identified in the findings. There was recognition of cultural differences between the backpackers and caravanners and, to a greater degree, within the backpacker case.

The *Attributes* of travellers was explored with Personal Experience measured through respondents reporting of their travel experience and their destination experience. This study used respondents’ overall rating of their trip to the region as a measure of how their Expectations were met. The Personal Experience is linked to the Expectations of a destination, this was also revealed in qualitative data where the backpackers had an expectation of sunny, warm and stable weather whereas the caravanners, many of whom had previous experience in the destination anticipated some cloud, wet weather and insects. In both cases respondents showed flexibility of arrangements and value as Preferences in the focus groups.

Lastly, the *Behaviours* have been identified as a ‘*Contributor*’ factor in Figure 7-2. Trip planning, trip booking and information sourcing have been offered here as they were explored in the literature and examined in the case studies. Trip planning behaviour that is flexible and accommodating of change is a feature of the NIT. Interestingly, the analysis found that there was no significant difference between the

‘trip planning’ of the two cases but there was a significant difference in ‘trip booking’ behaviours. While backpackers had a propensity to book more arrangements, the literature suggests that it is accommodation and transport that make the majority of pre-booked arrangements (Moore et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2014). This finding is not surprising as backpackers need to book flights and accommodation, particularly in peak season. Whereas, the vehicle used by caravanners circumvents both these issues, by providing transport and accommodation. Recognising that some caravanners need to book sites, there were also a number included in this study who don’t always use commercial sites in which case, there is nothing to book.

The research also found some interesting information sourcing results. As highlighted in the literature, a traveller’s personal experience is not necessarily the most drawn upon source (Andereck & Caldwell, 1993; Bruwer & Lesschaeve, 2012; Bruwer & Thach, 2013; Hsu et al., 2006; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Tan & Tang, 2013). The study found that respondents valued information from ‘other travellers’ ahead of ‘personal experience’. Overall the ‘internet’ was the highest used source of information.

The *Characteristics*, *Attributes* and *Behaviours* make up the “Individual Traveller Profile”. While some variables have been identified and provided in the model, this not an exhaustive list. Extensive research on traveller traits is available in the literature and is often a basis of quantitative analysis, not only in the area of WOM in tourism but in many empirical tourism studies focusing on the traveller behaviour. A cursory review of literature would reveal many additional variables to this list. Nevertheless, the premise of the “Individual Traveller Profile” is that individual *Characteristics*, *Attributes* and *Behaviours* are contributing factors that both bring influence to and are influenced by the travel experience.

## **Part 2 – Context**

The individual travellers in the cases explored in this research were part of a mobile social network of travellers. According to Harris (2012) these findings demonstrate how the *Contributors* are contextualised in the framework of a mobile social network of NITs. The model reflects that these are preceding factors to WOM exchange. At the same time, WOM exchange and the implications of its outcomes contribute to the evolution of the network. *Temporal*, *spatial* and *Individual/social* factors were

identified. Like many aspects within the model, they are presented here as discrete and the researcher allocated certain *Characteristics* to particular *Aspects*, but there is an acknowledgement that these *Characteristics* can overlap.

The framework shown in Figure 7-3, Figure 7-4 and Figure 7-5, based on Harris (2012), uses the data from the caravanning case study as examples. This shows the different ‘aspects’, ‘characteristics’ of those aspects and what the ‘network implications’ are for this particular case, but most of this could also apply to the backpackers as well.

<b>TEMPORAL</b>		
<b>ASPECTS</b>	<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>NETWORK IMPLICATIONS</b>
Pre-trip - decision	Information gathering Discussions with others	Establishing external ties to networks
Pre-trip - commitment	Equipment purchase Vehicle and van purchase Preparation of travel ‘equipment’ Arranging time to travel	Determining tentative ties to networks away from home
Commencement of travel	Learning the style of travel Acquiring language Familiarising with group ‘norms’	Establishing ties within the network
Post-trip - returning	Reflecting and sharing experiences	Further strengthening existing ties
Post-trip – next trip	Arranging time to travel Contact fellow travellers to make future plans	Developing clusters within the network and reconnecting ties

Figure 7-3 – Temporal aspects of a mobile network, a cavananning example

This research focused on WOM at the destination but the literature outlines the pre tour and post tour activities which relate to WOM, destination selection and information seeking (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Grønflaten, 2009; Rompf et al., 2005). These have been stepped out in Figure 7-3 because the *Temporal* factors emerged in the findings and are relevant to the context. Both backpackers and caravanners recounted stories and reflected on stages of their planning during the focus group interviews. The operators also made reference to temporal aspects. *Temporal* factors have long been a challenge for WOM research because the view has been held that the WOM exchange looks the same at all points in time (that is, a giver and receiver of WOM message).

While this model would be incomplete without the inclusion of these *Aspects*, the temporal focus of this research focused particularly on *Commencement of travel* and

*Post trip – next trip*, that is, investigating those NITs who are in the destination either for the first time or repeat travellers.

<b>SPATIAL</b>		
<b>ASPECTS</b>	<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>NETWORK IMPLICATIONS</b>
Caravan/dwelling	Adjust to smaller space Confined living & travelling quarters	Strong establishment of a dyad
Accommodation – caravan sites	Small allocations for caravans Close neighbours	Physical proximity lends itself to interaction
Accommodation – caravan parks	Layout is ‘mapped’ out, similar to a small suburb	Close temporary living requires social ‘good will’
Accommodation - location	Proximity to town Centrality as an amenity point Degree of security/safety	Gathering point which geographically draws travellers together by need or necessity
Travel patterns	Regular patterns of travel over particular periods	Likelihood of encountering the same ‘actors’ in the network at multiple points
‘Remote’ geography	Limited infrastructure in remote locations Large, wide open spaces during travel Geographically isolated	Social, physical and practical needs for expertise and assistance available from within the network

Figure 7-4 – Spatial aspects of a mobile network, a cavananning example

The spatial proximity is important and examples of this can be seen in Figure 7-4. Firstly, the shared space is an important conduit for the exchange process including ideas, knowledge, friendship and material goods. As O'Regan (2010, p. 91) ‘The decision to stay within these places of co-presence and communal proximity isn’t ‘incidental’, but a conscious and habitual way of encountering and experiencing places and people’. Secondly, Figure 7-4 illustrates that the *Spatial* aspects are not limited to the site but also consider wider geographical issues such as travel patterns and touring. Büscher and Urry (2009) conceptually link the two with the concept that the sites act as ‘transfer points’ or places of ‘in-between-ness’ of mobility. The needs, necessities and desire for connection (or reconnection) are evident in the *network implications*.

INDIVIDUAL / SOCIAL		
ASPECTS	CHARACTERISTICS	NETWORK IMPLICATIONS
Social motivators	Desire to meet other 'like' travellers	Desire to enter the network Ease of entry into the network
Reciprocal assistance	At-site and on-road 'helping' behaviours	Appreciation of the reciprocity of the network
Information exchange	Access to 'inside' information Share expertise	Demonstration of network 'usefulness'
Enriching the experience	Socialising is part of the actual experience Other travellers' experience contribute	Motivated to connect with the network Motivated to select ties to develop
Culture of "sunbirds"	Following cultural norms such as 'Happy Hour'	Learned expectations to connect to a network

Figure 7-5 – Social aspects of a mobile network, a cavananning example

The *Aspects* and *Characteristics* of the *Individual/ Social* factor shows 'the role of social interaction in the active construction of self as tourist and the tourist experience draws attention to how tourists self-identify social worlds in which they participate while touring' (White & White, 2008, p. 43). The *Network Implications* suggest a desire to connect with the group, a need to learn the norms and expectations of the group and contribute to the group. This, in turn, provides benefits to the individual traveller and the mobile social network as a whole. The constant spatial and temporal movement means that these fluid relationships impact the elasticity of the network as a whole, supporting Urry's (2003) concept of 'meetingness'.

### Part 3 – Arena of Exchange

The *Arena of Exchange* is central aspect in Figure 7.1 and is outlined in more specific detail in Figure 7.6. Developed from Harris and Prideaux (2011a) this part of the model draws together the elements of time, relationships, setting and communication.

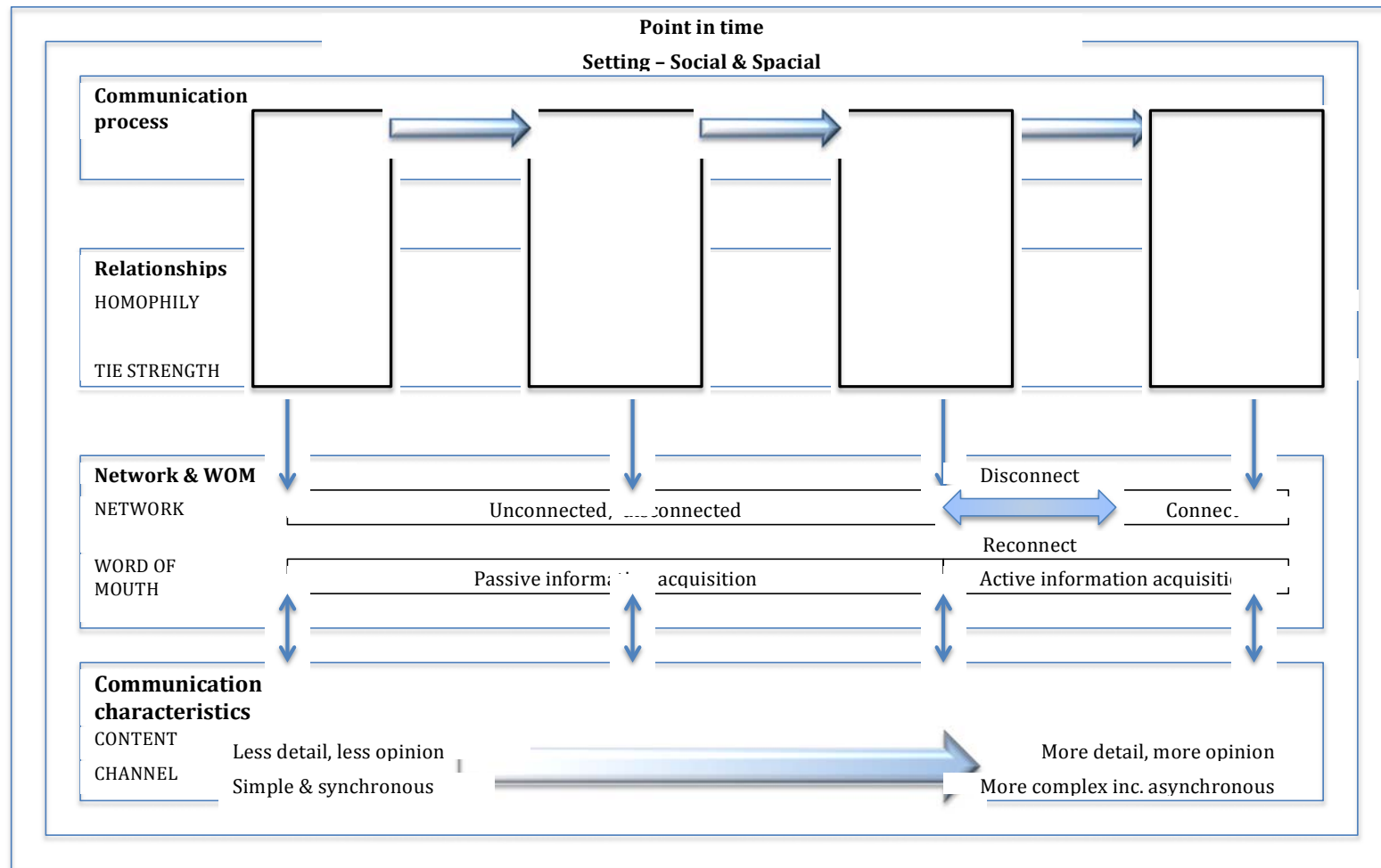


Figure 7-6 – Arena of WOM exchange

The *Arena of Exchange* in Figure 7-6 illustrates how connections between travellers occur through the ‘Communications Process’ observed in the cases and ties this to the relationship constructs of ‘homophily’ and ‘tie strength’. How these fledgling and tentative relationships relate to the network and type of WOM is then stepped out and aligned with the ‘characteristics of communication’. The starting point for this explanation is a delimited point in time in the context of a setting that is both physical and social at a certain point in time.

The ‘communication process’ can take varying amounts of time but it appears to start in a ‘rapid fire’ fashion to see if it worth investing further time. Firstly, upon meeting, there is identification of similarities, generally this takes place in space which is familiar, comfortable and laden with visual cues and conversation prompts (vehicle types, clothing, badges, bags, luggage). These cues are a precursor to connecting with the localised NIT on a face-to-face level and are used by NITs to determine points of similarity.

Conversation can be prompted by these cues, by physical proximity, by conforming to the social norms of engagement or any combination thereof. These ‘usual questions’ provide the first unique exchange between individual travellers. This exchange has been noted in previous research (Murphy, 2001; White & White, 2008) which notes the ritualistic form and content of these exchanges. This ritual serves a number of purposes. Firstly, this ritual offers a non-committal form of communication with individual members of the localised network. At the same time it demonstrates knowledge (even at a basic level) of standard practice within the network and, consequently, sends the message of ‘belonging’. Finally it provides a starting point for determining homophily and build on the visual cues already observed before engagement. This then becomes a reference point for future dealings and communications and allows two or more travellers to establish rapport.

Any information exchanged at this point is done so without context and is ‘passively’ acquired. This stage may be used to seek information, expertise or recent detail as part of the on-going information acquisition process contributing to a ‘bank’ of information which can be drawn upon for use when needed (Fodness & Murray, 1998, 1999; Gursay, 2001).

Where rapport is established, the travellers may then begin to detail their travel experiences or destination experiences which provides further details and information. These exchange of 'travel stories' effectively act as an anchor point by which the two parties can find common ground to continue the discussion. Without establishing this common ground, travellers may move on at this point and seeking a connection elsewhere. Alternatively, they may continue by providing more detail and injecting their personal views of their experiences. Effectively, travellers used the 'usual questions' along with their own 'judgement' to discuss their experiences, and then, themselves. This seemed to achieve the dual purposes of identifying points of similarity (homophily) and establishing a relationship (tie-strength).

Where travellers find that the views, experiences or opinions of the other is incongruent with their own, again, they may choose to politely opt out and pursue a conversation with another traveller. An example of this was seen in the backpacker case where an English (M) backpacker shared a previous Indonesian volcano trip experience with two other backpackers, despite having done the same trip, their reflections and opinions differed vastly and, it was at this point of opinion divergence that the backpacker moved on to other individuals sitting nearby.

At this point, synchronous face-to-face communication allows for this rapid exchange, however, as 'stories of travel' evolve into 'stories of self' points of similarity can then be aligned and a connection with the other traveller is made. When there is established similarity, compatibility is sought between travellers and this saw behaviours that contributed to the development of the relationship between travellers. Examples provided by operators and backpackers and noted in observations include; exchanging mobile phone numbers, becoming 'friends' on social networking websites (including Facebook and other country specific sites), the exchange of communication via communal notice boards and casual joint participation in hostel based activities (such as a game of pool/snooker, joining a trivia team or sharing a communal table for a drink). Such arrangements facilitate more exchange, allows the maintenance of the connection to the network and development of relationships between individuals over time. With on-going exchange, more detail may be sought that is opinion laden and some of these opinions may start to be taken on board.



#### **Part 4 – Outcomes**

Regardless of the connectivity, information is exchanged as part of this process. The *Outcomes* of the *Arena of Exchange* is the delivery, timing and audience of the information as shown in Figure 7-1. The ‘delivery’ may offer an interesting and detailed story, as one caravanner said, ‘everybody’s got a story to tell, and you should listen’. The ‘timing’ ties the idea of opportunism into the model. The literature review highlighted that existing research did not accommodate the opportunistic nature of WOM rather that previous studies had focused on ‘intent’ to engage of WOM despite the difference between intentions and actual behaviours (de Matos & Rossi, 2008). Finally, the ‘audience’ for the communication is included in the outcomes. One aspect that is rarely considered in the research of WOM is the presence of other and the bearing that may have on the exchange. There is a difference in how a story will be recounted when the audience for that story differs. For example, with the caravanner case there were many respondents who were travelling as a couple. If this couple then engage with another individual and recount a story it will be done so with consideration that the audience also had the experience. This was often seen with the focus groups where one member of the couple would seek assurance or clarification from the other. The dynamic of the audience, again related to physical proximity, is an important and overlooked aspect of the exchange.

#### **Part 5 – Implications**

This leads to a subsequent stage of relationships between backpackers that draws on similarity, compatibility and trust via a range of sharing behaviours. These sharing behaviours go beyond the simple verbal exchange of experiences and include sharing resources (such as books, music and other possessions). As the trust and compatibility build the relationship develops and this was reflected in the mutual arrangements of the backpackers and caravanners. Examples in the study include sharing photos (usually virtually), making travel or social arrangements together (day trips, night clubs, shared meals, hostel activities, accommodation arrangements) and developed, in some cases, to becoming travelling partners.

The *implications* stage is significant because sharing experiences forges stronger relationships built on desirable traits such as similarity, likeability and trust. Moreover, shared experiences in a dyad allow the contextual exchange of WOM with increased communication. Effectively feeding back into the process of building relationships

and, at the same time, contributing to the social interaction and experience of the traveller.

### **7.3 *Application of the model***

The model shows the interrelated nature of the themes identified in the findings. These findings also indicate a shift from the traditional thinking of independent travellers influenced by external forces, such as the destination marketing organisation, to a new ‘networked independent traveller’, or NIT, who is constantly connected both in a corporeal and virtual sense to others. Finally, the research dismisses the widely held view in the academic literature that WOM is solely an output of social interaction between travellers at a destination. Instead, the findings support the notion that WOM is both a contributor to and a consequence of travellers’ social interactions at a destination. The following section extends two sections of the model with consideration of these research findings.

#### **7.3.1 Applying the network theory to findings**

Annie (British, F) recounted the scenario below to the researcher. It is included as it demonstrates the concepts of time, space, settings, use of communication channels and the shift relationship dynamic of backpackers in the study and how this is entwines social interactions of NITs with WOM. Moreover, it demonstrates a living example from the study that highlights the WOM phenomenon in a naturalistic setting using network diagrams to represent the phenomena. In doing so, this addresses a (Baggio et al., 2010, p. 2) criticism that previous network science studies tended to view the social system as static, ignoring the dynamic nature of groups.

Figures 7-7A, 7-7B and 7-7C are detailed below to demonstrate NITs and dynamism of social networks, other points labelled in the figures to reflect the presence of other, unidentified members of the network in the example.

Figure A demonstrates the relationships in the study. Some of the relationships within each hostel are assumed, however the data revealed that Backpacker B (Annie, UK, F) and Backpacker F (Kate, UK, F) were friends (medium tie) and had met Backpackers A and E (medium tie) along their travels.

Backpacker B (Annie) reported that she exchanged phone numbers with Backpacker A and had compared hostels, discussed their destination experiences thus far and she had sent a text message to Backpacker A asking her and Backpacker E to join them at Hostel 2.

Figure C shows Backpacker A and Backpacker E change hostel (as a result of the influence from the stronger tie relationship). Yet these backpackers still maintain a combination of weak tie relationships and medium tie relationships with backpackers they had met at Hostel 1.

It is likely that during this process, Backpacker A (Annie, UK, F) and Backpacker E (Kate, UK, F) are at varying stages of the relationship development with other backpackers they have previously met at Hostel 1 and elsewhere.

When backpackers are at the familiarisation stage it appears that there is a degree of personal investment on the basis of similarity or likeness (homophily). This example shows a number of behaviours which reflect this increasing level of trust and development of the relationship. It follows, based on the literature and findings, that the opinion of a fellow backpacker increases in importance and, hence, the degree of

-- Weak tie relationship  
-- Medium tie relationship

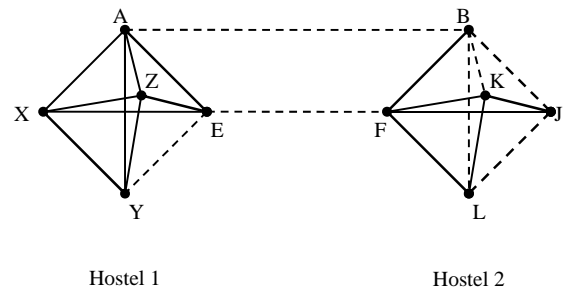


Figure A – Meeting Stage

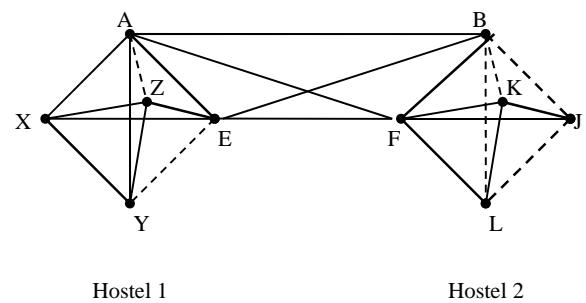


Figure B – Familiarising Stage

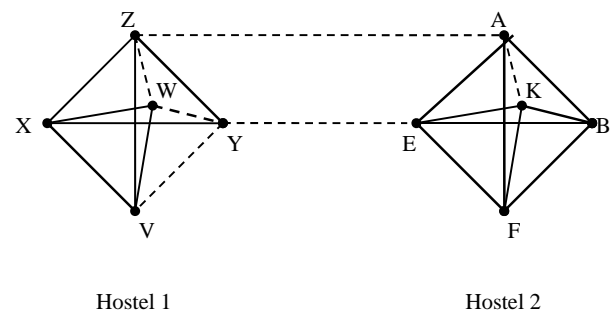


Figure C – Sharing Stage

Figure 7-7 – Network diagram of at-destination WOM

influence also increases. This is extended to the final stage of sharing where backpackers appear to form a travel party, be it explicit or tacit to achieve mutual goals.

### **7.3.2 Operationalising the ‘Arena of Exchange’**

Observations made at a caravan park recorded during the study were also modelled. The management of the caravan park used in the study holds a weekly ‘pancake breakfast’ for their guests. The event is without cost to the guest and offers an opportunity to socially interact with fellow guests. The breakfast facilitates a large volume of information and WOM exchange by stimulating social interaction with careful consideration to context.

Researcher observations from attending one such breakfast were categorised using the themes and categories from Figure 6-1. While this was retrospectively applied to a social event in this example, it demonstrates that the facilitators of WOM activity within a network context may be identified. The table below outlines the observed facilitating elements that facilitate the social construction of WOM activity.

<b>WOM Facilitating factors</b>	<b>Concept - TIME</b>	
	→ Leisure time	→ Before day's activities commence – relaxed
	→ Allocation of time	→ Set start & end time for the breakfast
	→ During stay	→ Open to vacationing guests
	→ Duration of stay	→ Caravan park guests tend to stay longer
	→ Point of vacation	→ Guests may be at the beginning or end of stay
	→ Information need	→ Opportunistic and planned
	<b>Concept – SETTING</b>	
	→ At-destination	→ Amenable weather
	→ Location	→ Held outside in open space, not crowded
	→ Proximity	→ Communal tables where guest sit with each other
	→ Comfort of setting	→ Held in common space
	→ Players in the setting	→ Only other guests
	<b>Concept - RELATIONSHIPS</b>	
	→ Degree of similarity	→ Varied, but caravanning in common
	→ Likeness	→ Value for money, seeking social interaction
	→ Closeness	→ Mix of travel party, newly made friends & strangers
	→ Expertise	→ Guest used each others' expertise and staff and some industry on hand for questions
	<b>Concept - COMMUNICATIONS</b>	
	→ Cues	→ Guests provided with name tags with hometown written on it
	→ Language	→ Largely English speaking Australian guests
	→ Channels	→ Largely face-to-face conversation
	→ Technological channels	→ Wi-Fi access so wireless technology can be used
	→ Lingo	→ Caravanners often familiar with same terminology
	→ Topics	→ Conversation starts with travel stories

Figure 7-8 – Operationalising the 'Arena of Exchange'

Both examples, Figure 7-7 Network diagram of at-destination WOM and 7-8 Operationalising the 'Arena of Exchange' are drawn from the model, demonstrate the integration of the themes and categories found in the research in the context of the NIT. Moreover they simply demonstrate how WOM contributes to (Figure 7-5) and is a result of (Figure 7-4) social interaction at the destination.

#### 7.4 NIT – Networked Independent Traveller

This section will outline the concept of the Networked Independent Traveller (NIT), independent travellers who belong, or perceive themselves as belonging, to a mobile social network of travellers. The concept has emerged from this study and the draws on the idea that the travellers in the cases presented are independent travellers who are mobile and operate, in varying degrees, within a network during their travels.

The case studies show that these travellers enjoy the flexibility of their travels consistent with Hyde & Lawson (2003, p.19) who found that ‘The independent vacation is like experiencing the “fun of the fairground,” a freewheeling experience of going from place to place, relatively unaware of what each subdestination offers, extracting as much as possible from each place (given the constraints of time and expense) and taking advantage of serendipitous opportunities’. White & White (2008, p. 43) were more specific in their definition for their study of independent outback, Australian tourers, ‘not mediated by the tourist industry: that is, hotel staff, tour guides, restaurants’.

It can be noted that the concept of NITs (Networked Independent Travellers) aligns with the following baseline statements that were offered in Chapter Two (Literature Review):

- All travellers will research and explore their destination upon arrival
- A proportion of touristic elements will be selected upon arrival to a destination
- Travellers will socially interact with other travellers during their visit to a destination

The Networked Independent Traveller (NIT) steps away from the tradition of the FIT (free and independent traveller see (Weaver & Lawton, 2011). The central tenant of this thinking is one that accepts that all travellers are networked when they travel. This rejects previous thinking of the FIT (free and independent traveller) which assumes that the individual is free from the frequent communication and influence of family and friends (strong tie and highly homophilous relationships) during their travel and, by extension, making individual decisions where marketers are the most influential factor, they are not. While some may argue that travellers have always been networked with others during their travel, this has not been widely explored in the research (Ortega et al., 2014). A semantic shift is important as it acknowledges the corporeal and electronic networks and directs the focus to on-going connectivity to others rather than reliance on DMO generated communication.

The analysis from this study supports the literature that shows that the on-going process of information acquisition takes place when travellers are at their destination. This comes in the form of other personal sources of information as well as non-personal sources of information (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2014;

Ortega et al., 2014; Tan & Tang, 2013). The value of personal sources of information is determined by the NIT's perception of other (likeability, credibility, expertise) and the relationship with that other (trust). At the same time, a continuous process of electronic connectivity with 'back home' or with others they have met during their travels, means NITs are almost always continuously networked.

While these travellers remain 'independent' (Hyde, 2000; Hyde & Lawson, 2003) in their capacity to make decisions, they are communicatively networked either in physical periods of co-presence (Axhausen, 2006; Büscher & Urry, 2009; Urry, 2003) or entwined in electronic networks such as social media (Confente, 2014; Libai et al., 2010; Tham et al., 2013). As such, these networks are comprised of a series of relationships that are constantly changing in nature and, therefore, influence is fluid.

This research found both groups of travellers (regardless of individual characteristics) have constant exposure to new, specific, detailed information that is either passively acquired or actively sought. Regardless of experience with either the destination or the travel style, they did not book much in advance, leaving the door open for at-destination decision making and purchase (Pearce & Schott, 2005; Smallman & Moore, 2010).

### **7.5 Social networks and WOM**

In terms of social networks and WOM, there are two sides to the coin. On one side, mobile social networks of travellers provide important, timely, useful and contextualised information. They represent relatively low-cost choice heuristic solutions or, as (Ryley & Zanni, 2013, p. 249) put it,

*Social networks are therefore an important source of information and decision support for individuals in the planning of activities and related trips....Neglecting the consideration of social interactions in the analysis of the way travellers generally behave, and perceive and react to uncertainty can therefore leave aside important aspects that need to be considered.*

On the other side, WOM also contributes to social interaction between NITs. In other words, WOM forges relationship links in mobile networks of travellers as established in the findings and model with the use of the 'usual questions', 'exchange of travel stories' and 'exchange stories of self'. Put simply, these are socially accepted

questions that allow for localised connection to the network and provide effortless conversation fodder.

Given the two-way flow of WOM and NIT social interactions, the ‘Factors contributing to the word-of-mouth exchange’ (Figure 1-1) has been revisited below as Figure 7-6. Instead of having a one way flow that represents ‘traveller-to-traveller interactions’ as an output of WOM exchange, this research suggests that it is better represented with a two directional flow as ‘NIT interactions’ which is both an input and output of the WOM exchange.

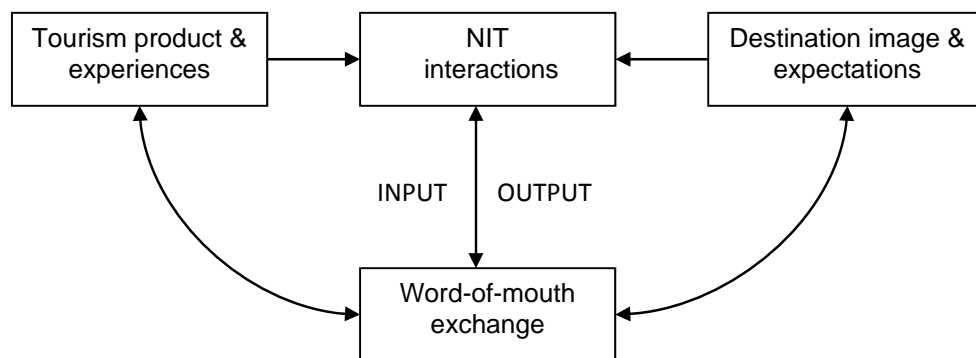


Figure 7-9 – Revised factors contributing to word-of-mouth exchange

This re-examination based on the research tells the story of the three academic contributions of this thesis. Firstly, WOM can be conceptualised and modelled. Secondly, independent travellers could and should be viewed as networked. Finally, it suggests that WOM is both a contributor to and a consequence of travellers’ social interactions at a destination.



## 8 Conclusion

The research undertaken in this thesis aimed to address the research aim and objectives including the development of a model to explain at-destination WOM. This chapter will relate the findings to these questions along with the gaps in the literature in order to satisfy the aim of the thesis. The theoretical and practical contributions of the model will be discussed, in doing so, the opportunities to expand the model will be outlined. Finally, areas for further research stemming from this thesis will be outlined.

### 8.1 *Addressing the theoretical gaps*

The theoretical gaps identified in the literature review related to the relationship constructs of homophily (similarity) and tie strength (closeness), the roles of relationships in WOM at the destination, the settings within which WOM transpires and the means of communication. These informed the research aims that are addressed in this section.

#### *1. Investigate how similarity (homophily) between travellers in a network contributes to WOM engagement in a destination setting*

The first objective was to investigate how similarity (homophily) between travellers in a network contributes to WOM engagement in a destination setting. The research found that perceptual homophily was critical and demographic homophily was not as important and gender had no bearing in either the backpacker or caravanner case. The qualitative and quantitative data reflected that perceived similarity was a critical aspect of the social engagement in the destination setting (see section 6.41). These findings would support the research on homophily, that being that individuals who are similar receive messages that are congruent with their own 'norms' (beliefs, values) making them feel at ease.

As mentioned by Bartle (2011), perceived trustworthiness can increase with social proximity, social identification, accepted norms of behaviour and the degree of similarity between individuals and this was reflected in both cases. The findings also supported McPherson et al. (2001) view that similarity breeds connection and it is the connection, or relationship strength that was the focus of the second objective.

*2. Investigate the role strong and weak ties have in the WOM phenomenon between a network of travellers at a destination*

Consistent with the literature, the strength of relationships has a significant role in an individual's position in the network and the extent to which they will rely on and trust other travellers (Gartner, 1994; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970; Tham et al., 2013). This differed between the cases but might be explained by the fact that there was a significant difference in the travel party composition between backpackers and caravanners, with the majority of caravanners travelling in pairs where the average size of a the backpacker travel party was over three people. Interestingly, there was no significant difference to travellers' preparedness to listen to those travellers who 'seem to know a lot about the location', suggesting the expertise that the literature associates with weak ties may have a more important role to play. The ideas of 'knowledge' and 'trust' were also mirrored in the qualitative results with both cases relying on these aspects.

The concepts of tie-strength and homophily are inextricably linked and entwined over time. A relationship can develop but it needs a foundation, this is particularly important when it comes to the transients ties developed between travellers at the destination. The research found that many of the relationships formed at the destination were fast moving, indeed the 'arena of exchange' (Figure 7-6) can transpire in minutes.

The model also accommodates the 'connection', 'disconnection' and 'reconnection' of relationships between travellers. Both the interviews and focus groups identified that some travellers were looking at reconnecting (such as caravanners returning to the same destination or backpackers using Facebook to stay in touch with the possibility of meeting again at another destination) and some were looking for new connections. This leant support to Urry (2003, p. 156) concept of 'meetingness', 'the strange combination of increasing distance and intermittent co-presence'. The concept of co-presence lead to the next research objective that was to identify different settings (social and spatial) that contributes to WOM exchange.

*3. Identify different settings (social and spatial) that contribute to WOM exchange*

In the broader sense, this co-presence was reflected in both cases where most identified as being a backpacker (74.2%) or caravanner (76%) suggesting social

connection with others. This is consistent with the early sociology and social psychology theory regarding reference groups (Merton, 1949), social distance (Simmel, [1908] 1950), social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and self categorisation theory (Turner, 1991) but in the context of a destination setting. Individuals connect with the network via relationships developed with individuals (tie strength) and the group as a whole (identification) and it is within this setting the parameters within which the network 'rules' are learnt and practiced, what Holloway et al. (2011, p. 243) refer to as 'their disciplinary intratourist gaze'.

Also consistent with previous literature, the research found the social landscape sat very closely with the spatial landscape (Katz et al., 2004; McPherson et al., 2001; Monge & Contractor, 2001; Ozcan, 2004). Respondents showed a strong tendency to seek out personal advice from whomever was immediately available and physically close in proximity. In both cases there were shared social spaces and these facilitated spontaneous and opportunistic meetings of an individual's information and social needs reflecting the early sociological literature (Festinger et al., 1950) but also previous tourism studies (Hardy et al., 2013; O'Regan, 2010). The physical setting with shared social spaces and shared personal spaces (such as use of bathrooms or in the case of backpackers, dorm rooms) provides a bounded physical area within which many micro encounters took place – each of these encounters contributed to the dynamism of the respective networks in their entirety.

In addition to the social and physical spaces, both cases reflected that networks also have a presence in the electronic landscape. This is different from electronic communication as a channel – the electronic space co-exists with the physical space. This electronic network is open to all, but does not adhere to the behavioural or procedural aspects of the physical one (due to temporal and spatial issues). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the existence of this space as a form of co-presence. The use of technology allowed respondents to maintain relationships established in the network in the absence of physical proximity.

The relationships (similarity and closeness) and settings (social, corporeal or virtual) fed into the next research objective, which was to determine which communication channels are used for WOM by a network of travellers at a destination.

*4. Determine which communication channels are used for WOM by a network of travellers at a destination*

The answer is non-verbal, verbal and technological and the findings suggest that order. Firstly, respondents appeared to use a number of visual cues as a precursor to engagement. While the cues were different (for example number plates for caravanners or flags representing country of origin for backpackers), these cues acted as ‘symbols’ of the network with which they affiliate and offered travellers an ‘anchor’ upon which they could engage in the next step of communication. The findings suggested that many of the travellers used these cues to find common ground (homophily) to engage (form relationship ties), regardless of whether they were backpackers or caravanners.

Face-to-face verbal communication was the most widely and frequently used form of communication in both cases (Table 6.14). This is not surprising given the social motivation of the groups along with physical proximity and convenience of tapping into a network of those with whom they can affiliate. A slight difference between the cases was that there were more language groups among the backpackers. Even so, many spoke English to other backpackers as a common language. Included in the verbal communication is the body language concurrent with verbal exchange. In some respects body language assists verbal exchange as it allows gauging of responses and assists the flow of conversation.

Technology seemed to be used for research before arrival (refer to ‘technology’ theme in Table 6.1) and, to some extent, allows travellers to ‘dip their toe’ into the networked world upon which they plan to embark. During the trip, there was also evidence of technology being used for investigating the next stop but when it comes to the ‘here and now’, travellers from both cases drew on face-to-face communication underpinned by trust, similarity and expertise. Technology was also used to maintain existing relationships outside the network during travel, such as with family members or close friends ‘back home’ via emails (caravanners) and Facebook (backpackers). While the channels altered between the two cases examined, in reality, these lines are blurring over time as the adoption of technologies increases.

Finally, technology was used to augment the off-line communications. In the case of backpackers, they ‘collected’ Facebook friends during their travels supported by the

surveys. In doing so, they immediately connected electronically to the global network of backpackers, establishing a position in that network regardless of time (or until a later point whereupon an individual intentionally disconnects from the network via the ‘de-friending’ process). Caravanners, on the other hand, appeared to use asynchronous electronic forms (such as text messaging and emails) to keep in touch.

In short, electronic channels and devices appeared to be used for WOM outside the network of travellers during their destination visit (eg. Facebook for the wider audience or emails back home). Electronic was also used for the purpose of facilitating communication among already established relationships such as the use of mobile phones and text messaging among those who have already struck ‘friendships’ and were used to make arrangements.

#### *5. Develop a model of at-destination word-of-mouth*

In almost every way, each of objectives (homophily, tie-strength, settings and communication) are interrelated but the findings also revealed another important consideration relating to temporal factors and the social network. (Hannam & Ateljevic, 2007) suggested that a mobilities perspective can ‘lead us to discard our usual notions of spatiality and scale, but it also undermines existing linear assumptions about temporality and timing, which often assume that actors are able to do only one thing at a time, and that event follow each other in a linear order’. Temporal factors have been a challenge for WOM research because the view has been held that the WOM exchange looks the same at all points in time (that is, a giver and receiver of WOM message). This PhD research recognised temporality as a research gap (section 2.7) and accommodated the temporal aspect as an important factor (Figure 6-1) in developing the model of at-destination word-of-mouth.

### **8.2 Addressing the empirical gaps**

The empirical gaps related to building the body of knowledge regarding the use of WOM as a means of marketing a destination to particular segments. The literature review identified that there has been little research specific to managing WOM at the destination level and there are no evident studies linking the WOM activity at the traveller level to the management of WOM at the destination level.

In the first instance, the research found that at-destination WOM contributes to and, consequently directs, the visitor experience. It is the fluid exchange between travellers

and others at the destination that influences a number of decisions, which, in turn, contributes to the overall visitor experience. This is fundamentally different from pre-trip WOM (information seeking) or post-trip WOM (recollection) as neither of these have direct bearing on all the day-to-day decisions which have small but significant impacts on the destination experience. However, at-destination WOM does share some similarity with pre-trip and post trip WOM in that it has the capacity to influence and inform, it can take the active or passive form and it is both sent and received.

Section 1.2.2 raised the question of whether WOM can be managed at a destination level through targeted activities directed at specific market segments. Due to the complexities of services that make up the destination experience, the findings of this research suggest that this question should be answered at the episodic level. It is the totality of these micro episodic exchanges which lead to the overall experience recalled in the post trip WOM. This is consistent with Granovetter's theory (1973) of networks which related micro-level interactions with macro-level patterns. Given the nature of the WOM phenomenon, it cannot be 'managed' at this level.

Substantive research (as detailed in section 2.2) points to credibility, trustworthiness, likability and lack of commercial influence as critical factors to the success of WOM. Previous attempts to manage such episodes (both in the tourism context and other service experiences) have not been successful (refer section 2.6). This thesis did not support the contentions of those scholars who argue that WOM phenomenon can be managed (even in part) at the destination level. However, given the social events highlighted in the research (eg. Pancake breakfast or happy hour drinks) there are opportunities for DMOs. The literature indicates that satisfaction is necessary for positive WOM, but 'satisfaction' does not guarantee dissemination in of itself (Wirtz & Chew, 2002), it requires a platform. Irrespective, the individual service delivery elements of a destination experience are outside the control of the DMO. However, the network context within which these many and frequent exchanges take place does present an opportunity for DMOs to manage the networks of travellers. The findings of this research suggests DMOs can foster these networks by:

- 1) Considering proximity - The case studies supported previous research that close physical proximity fosters more communication exchange

2) Propensity for social interaction - By targeting segments who are motivated by the social interaction, particular with similar travellers, destinations can foster complex networks that support WOM.

### **8.3     *Addressing the methodological gaps***

The literature review revealed methodological gaps in the development of at-destination WOM research. The research in this PhD has demonstrated that there are shortcomings in taking an approach whereby WOM can only be considered by the research if there is an identifiable outcome which can be predicted or observed. In terms of destination marketing this has limited both research and application of WOM, particularly in the traveller-to-traveller context.

By moving away from the “process” ontology (Smallman & Moore, 2010) and adopting the mobilities paradigm, the fluid and dynamic nature of the networks of travellers to a destination has presented WOM as a holistic phenomenon. There has been no attempt to measure these networks in a quantifiable manner. Arguably, measurement without consideration to temporal factors or parameters as a basis for prediction of WOM exchange or activity, would be unreliable. Instead, this thesis has argued that insights from various perspectives, obtained in-situ has resulted in a holistic view of the phenomenon, rather than removing it from context (individual, social, physical and temporal).

Data was collected at the crossroads of mobility for the travellers within the study. So rather than seek an ‘absolute truth’ in a positivist tradition, this study sought a ‘constructed truth in moment’ with insights from those individual travellers whose WOM ‘truth’ is constantly changing. The findings and resultant model have reflected the process behind the construction of that ‘truth’. WOM may not ever be managed in the same way as other marketing communication methods employed by a DMO but an understanding of how WOM is formed at an individual level is critical in understanding its implications.

From a research perspective this study extended the line of research from Decrop (1999b); Woodside et al. (2004) and more recently Smallman and Moore (2010) from decision making to WOM. These scholars have stepped away from the post-positivist tradition of measurement and prediction in their studies of decision making in tourism. While a holistic approach may not provide a single, clear cut answer or formula to

answer problems, such an approach acknowledges that the context (or external variables) is too complex for universality. Instead recognising that the knowledge acquired contributes to the existing body of knowledge and adds to it by embracing the complexity.

## **8.4     *Key contributions***

This research generated three significant contributions to the development of theory:

1. An explanatory model of at-destination word-of-mouth
2. The concept of the NIT (networked independent traveller)
3. Understanding that at-destination WOM is both an outcome and contributor to the destination experience.

The following section outlines the theoretical implications of each.

### **8.4.1   Overview of the model**

The idea of this model is to demonstrate the relationships between the concepts and theories to address the overall research question: How does interaction with other like travellers at a destination impact the WOM dynamic?

The model identified the traits that the individual traveller brings to the network during travel. It then steps out the characteristics of the network itself, acknowledging the dynamism of temporal, spatial and social aspects. The “Arena WOM exchange” identified many variables that contribute to a WOM exchange between travellers. On one hand, it highlights the shortcomings of quantitative, causal studies reliant on anticipatory or post-hoc behaviours which has resulted in ad-hoc development of WOM understanding (Harrison-Walker, 2001). The model recognises that ‘traditional WOM is a rich media since it often takes place in casual settings such as social gatherings’ (Tan & Tang, 2013, p. 400). By drawing on data from subjects in-situ, this model shows multiple contributing variables and the conceptual relationships between the main themes of time, setting, communications and relationships. Moreover, lesser explored areas of the theory were more closely examined: including the conceptual links between tie-strength and homophily (Iles-Harris, 2010) and the roles similarity and likability (Harris, 2013) in the destination context.

The “at-destination WOM in tourism” model has both a theoretical and applied contribution. From the theoretical standpoint, it reflects a theoretical framework



which takes individual travellers into mobile networks during travel and then explains how these network encounters manifest in WOM exchanges and the outcomes of those exchanges. It further demonstrates that at-destination relationships can develop from weak-tie, (where information, detail and expertise are sought) into medium-tie (where a degree of influence comes into play).

#### **8.4.2 NIT – Networked Independent Traveller**

The findings of the research also identified a new category of traveller. Where there has been the FIT (Fully Independent Traveller), this research suggests an evolution to the NIT (Networked Independent Traveller). The outcomes of this research found that travellers in the study were networked during their travel and the utilisation of these networks facilitated decision making and influenced their trip. These networks may be in line with (Urry, 2003) ‘meetingness’ concept where travellers meet, connect, establish ties, separate and maintain ties or lose ties and possibly meet again. Beyond this, the electronic network facilitates the maintenance of virtual ties during travel and these ties connect travellers to a variety of networks concurrently. In both cases, travellers belong to networks which, during travel, accommodate WOM exchange.

The NIT concept has implications for academic research into tourist behaviour as it shifts the view from internal and individual characteristics and external environment to include the continued influence of those within their social network (intimate and extended) during travel. Moreover, it dismisses the view that travellers are disconnected from their network when they travel - travellers can ‘tap in’ to their own network for information, detail or opinion as they need it. At the same time, they will passively acquire information. These networks are comprised of a series of relationships, which are constantly changing in nature, and, therefore, influence and information transfer is fluid. This means that a one-size-fits-all approach to marketing premised on static and sedentary elements in a segment can no longer be supported.

The research also shifts the focus for WOM research from the ‘sender’ – or the individual who espouses opinion, to the ‘receiver’ who seeks out information in the context that suits (time, situational circumstances) using a channel that suits their needs at the time (verbal, non-verbal, electronic) to obtain information that is specific to their needs. Furthermore, the information that is received from the network is filtered (in terms of the relationship context within which it was delivered) and stored

for further use should the need arise. This presents opportunities for researchers to further explore these interactions from a co-creation perspective.

### 8.4.3 WOM as a consequence and contributor

Finally, the research expands the widely held view in the academic literature that WOM is output of social interaction between travellers at a destination (Camprubí, Guia, & Comas, 2012; Gartner, 1994; Govers et al., 2007). Instead, the thesis contends that WOM is both a contributor to and a consequence of travellers' social interactions at a destination. The implications of this is important, as (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010, p. 2) noted:

*More seriously, these studies privilege the destination manager's perspective above that of the visitor; as a result they do not generally deliver much understanding of what brings visitors in the first place, how their experience affects the way they think about the destination or the vitally important transmission of that image through their retelling of their experiences.*

The 'implications' (Part 5) of the model reflect that WOM does not simply result in 'opinion influence' but also 'knowledge acquisition' and 'sharing behaviours'. This supports the view that WOM does not simply influence but contributes to knowledge acquisition, both destination knowledge and skills in the style of travel (Pearce & Foster, 2007).

While scholarly attention has been focused on managing the 'opinion influence' the model presented has an arrow feeding back into 'contributors' (Part 1), 'context' (Part 2) and the 'arena of exchange' (Part 3) suggesting that any one of these outcomes could alter the individual, the network or subsequent interactions. Importantly, this highlights the need to recognise that the at-destination WOM phenomenon is socially constructed and cannot be unpicked and examined in isolation. This may be possible for WOM that takes place in the pre-trip or post-trip context but during the trip it is inexplicably linked to the visitor experience.

This outcome contributes to tourist behaviour research along with services marketing research. The implications of this are significant in terms of how much influence and/or expertise is sought from and provided by other travellers to make at-destination decisions.

### 8.5 *Practical contributions*

Interviews, focus groups, observation and surveys from this research all support the literature that travellers make some decisions before arriving then use information sources on-site to refine their decisions and that more information leads to increased duration of stay and spend (Ortega et al., 2014). Previous empirical studies support that length of stay interacts with on-site decision-making (Smallman & Moore, 2010) and, according to (Pearce & Schott, 2005) visitors to Wellington and Rotorua (NZ) reported that they didn't book or pay in advance for their attractions or activities was because they had flexibility (17.7% and 38% for the respective destinations) and they saw no need (31.1% and 13.5%). Yet, this thesis dismisses the view that WOM can be managed by a DMO at a destination level.

If travellers arrive with perceptions based on pre-trip information sources (including WOM) yet the influence of others has been shown in the research to have a relationship with spending, duration of stay and engagement then this raises the question of the practical implications of the research for destination marketers. This section outlines how the findings contribute to destination marketers (not only in Cairns) by shifting the focus from the WOM process to fostering the networks to more effectively operate in an increasingly competitive environment with shifting markets where travellers are more frequently reliant to their own networked sources of information (Ryley & Zanni, 2013).

Firstly, destination marketers should view travellers as NITs rather than FITs. It could be argued that it is an evolution from FIT to NIT. Regardless, this research moves away from the traditional thinking that market segments are comprised of individuals with shared characteristics to one where markets comprised of individuals who share relationships. It is these relationships that facilitate communication that influences, informs and facilitates sharing behaviours that underpins at-destination WOM.

Secondly, there is value in operationalizing parts of the model to create analytical tools to assess the WOM value of marketing activity. The example provided in the discussion (Section 7.5.2) showed how the 'arena of exchange' was operationalized to assess the facilitators of WOM. Utilising the first two stages of the model ('contributors' and 'context') from existing data may provide an enriched view of the dynamism of the networks rather than discrete market segments.

In the context of TTNQ, Hajkowicz et al. (2013) recently suggested that the next wave of backpackers will be coming from Asia. Understanding how different segments operate as networks within this Asian backpacking market could provide the opportunity foster these networks and provide opportunities for at-destination WOM. For example, if research determined that the South Korean NITs had a propensity to communicate in Korean, a high use of social networking and communicated more in social settings than at accommodation sites then TTNQ could employ a tactic of providing a wi-fi hotspot in a popular social location (such as the lagoon area) supported by signage or an phone app in Korean to foster network connectivity between travellers. In the caravanning context, the DMO would be familiar with many temporal aspects of travellers' trips (particularly on designated tourist drive routes), the timing, information needs of travellers along with an understanding of relationships between road travellers could drive tactics which could foster connectivity, physical proximity and social interaction, such as a rest stop large enough to accommodate the bigger motorhomes with dumping facilities, water access, an information board with 'buy, sell, swap' of goods and services.

These ideas are simple illustrations of how the use of the model could inform practices rather than specific marketing recommendations. As Li and Petrick (2008) noted of the network marketing paradigm, the role of the DMO has shifted from 'selling' the destination to becoming the 'integrator and coordinator' of this network. This model offers a means by which the DMO can better understand these networks.

Related to the previous point, DMOs should continue maintaining the brand of the destination and working with operators in the destination. While visitor satisfaction is not a guarantee of positive WOM, it is a necessary criterion. So functions relating to managing brand and destination image are important. This is particularly critical to a destination such as the Cairns region, which is prone to highly destructive cyclones. The encouragement of return travellers is not only cost effective in terms of marketing ROI but there is also a 'WOM multiplier effect'. From a network perspective, this research showed that return travellers are perceived as having expertise and the benefit is two fold. Firstly, the majority of respondents in the study were most likely to listen to WOM from someone they perceived as having destination expertise and there was no significant difference between the two cases in this respect. This makes such travellers critical, 'go to' individuals among the NITs. Secondly, these travellers

have detailed knowledge along with strong enough desire to return, this suggests that they are more likely to view the destination positively and it could be expected that such a view would be reflected in their conversations with other NITs at-destination.

Finally, the degree to which NITs seek information and from whom, along with understanding the strength of relationships between NITs, will provide insight into at-destination WOM source selection. Market research conducted by DMOs should incorporate surveys of travellers during their stay. Additionally, these surveys should be expanded to determine whether sources of information are from ‘family’, ‘friends’, ‘other travellers’, ‘on-line sources’, ‘local service providers’ or ‘local residents’ (as per Table 2-3). This information can provide DMOs with insights into the relationships, value and volume of at-destination WOM.

## **8.6 Further research**

This thesis has demonstrated that ‘familiar strangers can provide guidance’ (Pearce, 2005, p. 21), in the context of backpackers and caravanners during their visit to the Cairns region. While some valuable insights have been gleaned from the research, good theory emphasizes the rich nature of causation, identifying the order and timing of experiences (Smallman & Moore, 2010). As such, directions for research that further explore causation through different methodologies and settings have been outlined below.

### **8.6.1 Theoretical development of the model**

An explanatory model was proposed that is flexible enough to address the gaps in the literature, offer methodological flexibility and explore potential, rich areas of traveller WOM. In order to progress research as intricate and complex as the micro WOM episodes and the macro WOM phenomenon, the model captures the nuance, reveals the episodic meaning, addresses research gaps and builds on existing tourism WOM theory. An adoption by scholars of this framework in tourism behaviour, communication and marketing research opens the door to alternative methodologies which builds on existing theories and thus creating new opportunities to better understand the complex phenomena of WOM in tourism.

This model could also be further developed and applied through the lens of diverse disciplines. Some suggested disciplines and directions for further research are outlined below. It is acknowledged that this is not an exhaustive list as these are

discipline areas outside the expertise of the researcher, however the ideas offered would take the model in the direction that would address some of the remaining gaps not addressed in this thesis.

- *Psychology* – exploring tourist behaviour within a network. Determine if some individuals have a propensity towards being positive or negative in their views.
- *Economics* – what is the cost effectiveness of sourcing WOM from a network than alternative sources? What are the economic implications of using networks as an alternative means of providing information? Can a value be placed on a WOM message
- *Geography* – mapping NIT over time and across multi-destinations. Use of GPS and other devices to view connectivity, reconnectivity with other travellers at different points
- *Anthropology* – does this model work in other destinations or with NIT from other cultures, particularly non-English speaking?
- *Technology* – what is the usage ratio of face-to-face with technology? In what ways will technological advancement impact this ratio and the channels by which travellers communicate?
- *Network Science* – can these networks be delimited and measured, despite their dynamic nature? Can relationships of a small number of travellers be mapped temporally and spatially to provide relationship and network outputs?  
Investigating smaller networks and WOM can shed light on how WOM play out in the global (corporeal and virtual) network

The model presented is an explanatory model, where empirical data from the study has been applied to two parts of the model (see section 7.3). Further work could be done to expand on the application of the model and to operationalize other parts of the model.

### 8.6.2 Empirical directions

From a geographical perspective it is also possible that the model can be applied by small or isolated destinations where mobile markets may be clearly identified, such as the self drive market to other regional Australian destinations or cruise market in the Pacific. This could also be applied on smaller scale touring routes, such as hiking, cycling or horse riding trails where travellers share a common interest, have

designated stops where they are in close proximity and may be socially motivated to engage in this form of travel.

It would not be necessary to limit studies to those destinations or stops that are part of a touring route. On the smaller geographical scale, the model could be applied to travellers to particular stops such as wineries where physical proximity is close and social engagement is key. There would be value in researching multiple sites, such as wineries, within a destination region to gather a broader picture of the extent to which NITs are connected and the implications for communication and decision making. While winery visitors are mentioned here, other niche segments could also be investigated such as pilgrimage travellers, event attendees, schoolies, festival-goers, adrenalin junkies, divers, volunteer tourists. By viewing these niche market segments as NITs who have some shared characteristics and who may be drawn to particular destinations with other 'like' travellers further studies could explore whether relationship constructs of homophily and tie-strength play out as they have in this research and, also, whether the settings and communications of WOM unfolded in the same way. In doing so, this would both develop the model and provide different insights from the DMO's perspective.

### **8.6.3 Alternative research approaches**

This thesis used the mobilities paradigm which accepts the movement of individuals and the dynamism of social groups resulting from this movement and assumes actual, virtual and imagined mobility. Premised on 'liquid modernity', it assumes that people, objects, images and information are all moving and that there is an interdependence of these movements. The paradigm assumes a network approach of the mobile (travellers, stories, experiences) and the fixed (infrastructure, accommodation). Yet advancement of at-destination WOM theory is likely to come from further testing and development of the model from a multidisciplinary perspective in different contexts utilising different research paradigms.

While this thesis argues that the positivist and post-positivist approaches have been inadequate to accurately explain a cause-and-effect of identifiable variables in the WOM exchange from a sociological perspective, these might be appropriate paradigms for economic, technology or network science development of the model. Similarly, interpretivist, social constructionist or feminist paradigms could be adopted

to explore the model from a psychological or anthropological perspective. The nature of NITs, the many contributing variables within the context of dynamic networks and the nuance of conversation with the social context may also be explored via lesser used paradigms in tourism research such as chaos theory, complexity theory and fuzzy logic which may yield further insights and creative contributions.

### **8.7     *Limitations***

There were limitations of the research. From a case study design perspective, the research was limited to the two cases, backpackers and caravanners, as outlined and justified in the methodology. While two cases allowed for comparison beyond that of a single case, the findings stem from characteristics found in each of the cases used which include language, culture, demographics and travel experience.

Related to this an acknowledgement that both these cases will be influenced by factors not captured in the research design, specifically cost and time. The cases were bounded by the selection of the Cairns region as the destination, but each destination is unique and will in all probability, shape the views and experiences of the travellers in a unique way. Destinations are also dynamic; shifting, evolving and changing over time. Despite the timeframe within which the research took place, political, environmental and other changes impacting the destination were not considered. While the study employed the triangulation of mixed methods in accordance with (Yin, 2009), the surveys were drawn from a convenience sample so cannot be extracted from the other data found generalised to draw broader inferences.

Finally, the limitations that relate to the rapid change in technology must be acknowledged. Over the duration of the study there have been rapid and unexpected developments in technology which have impacted almost every facet of tourism. Focusing on communications alone, wider availability of internet access, increased demand for that access, more diverse and affordable range of devices which have greater capacity than ever before. It is reasonable to expect that further advances will have significant bearing on tourism and greater integration into the lives of those who travel. The model proposed in this thesis acknowledges technology and integrates existing technology of communication, social relations, WOM and mobility but may not be able to pre-empt unknown, future seismic shifts.



## 8.8 *Conclusion*

While tourism literature has used the ideas of WOM as a component of destination management, there has been little effort given to exploring the theoretical application in a systematic way. The study broadens the current view of WOM, the travellers who use it and how it fits in the social interaction of travellers at a destination. It builds on what is already known and offers researchers and marketers valuable insights into the human side of WOM but one that also incorporates technology as a key communication media.

Botterill and Plantenkamp (2012, p. 22) noted that that case study research ‘becomes naturalistically generalisable when results are used by others in their research or practice’. This chapter has offered a multi disciplinary means of developing the model and proposed a number of empirical directions for further research. This should be approached by researchers with consideration of the existing baseline statements outlined in the literature. In addition, this thesis argues that the two other significant outcomes of the research should be included in the baseline assumptions for the progression of at-destination WOM research – that is:

1. WOM takes place by a Networked Independent Traveller (NIT) who is connected in a corporeal and/or virtual way to others and the information stemming from such connections will have some influence.
2. WOM is both a contributor to and a consequence of travellers’ social interactions at a destination

Finally, to return to the starting point of this thesis, the overarching research question was to determine how interaction with other like travellers at a destination impacts the WOM dynamic. The backpacker and caravanner cases used in this research, based in the Cairns region of Far North Queensland in Australia, reflect that every aspect of interaction impacts the WOM dynamic in the ‘at-destination’ context. The transactional worldview outlined in the methodology posited that time, setting and persons are inter-related factors which contribute jointly to the experience and cannot be viewed individually as no one factor can be extracted from the touristic experience being researched. This research supported this view finding that the individual, the destination experience, connection with others and the communication are all inextricably linked so that a change in any one aspect will alter the course of

encounters, discussions, decisions because WOM is part of the destination experience, not simply a result of it.

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## **10 Appendix 1 – Ethics Declaration**

This administrative form  
has been removed

## 11 Appendix 2 – Data Collection Instruments

### Caravanner Questionnaire

The following survey is part of a post-graduate PhD study which aims to understand how travellers use word-of-mouth to help make decisions during their trip to Far North Queensland (FNQ). The survey should take less than 10 minutes and your assistance is greatly appreciated.

**Q1. Are you:**

☐ Male ☐ Female **Please tell us the year of your birth** 19\_\_\_\_\_

**Q2. Where do you usually live?**

Australia (*postcode*) \_\_\_\_\_ Overseas (*country*) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q3. Please indicate the highest level of formal education that you have received so far:**

☐ Secondary ☐ Trade/TAFE ☐ Diploma ☐ Degree ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q4. How would you best describe your usual occupation: (*Please choose only one*)**

☐ Management ☐ Professional ☐ Retail ☐ Manual/Factory worker  
☐ Service Industry ☐ Office/Clerical ☐ Public Service ☐ Retired / Semi-retired  
☐ Student ☐ Tradesperson ☐ Self-employed ☐ Other

**Q5. Is this your first visit to Far North Queensland?**

☐ Yes ☐ No *If No, how many times have you visited FNQ?* \_\_\_\_\_

**Q6. a) How many nights will you be away on this trip?** \_\_\_\_\_ nights **OR** \_\_\_\_\_ months

**b) How many nights (in total) do you plan spending in Far North Queensland?** \_\_\_\_\_ nights

**Q7. a) Where was your last overnight stop before this location?** \_\_\_\_\_

**b) Where is your next planned overnight stop after this location?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Q8. a) Which of these best describes your immediate travel party?**

☐ Alone ☐ Couple (partner/spouse) ☐ Tour group ☐ Club  
☐ With a friend ☐ Group of friends ☐ Relatives

**b) How many other people are you travelling with at the moment (excluding yourself)?**

**c) Approximately how long have you been travelling with this travel party?**

\_\_\_\_\_ nights **OR** \_\_\_\_\_ weeks **OR** \_\_\_\_\_ months

**Q9. Do you consider yourself to be a Caravanner on this particular trip?**

☐ Yes ☐ No (go to Q11)

**Q10. Which of the following best describes your caravanning experience?**

- ☐ I'm a first time caravanner
 ☐ I have done some caravanning before
 ☐ I have done a lot of caravanning

**Q11. How much did you organise BEFORE arriving in Far North Queensland?**

- ☐ Planned all
 ☐ Planned most
 ☐ Planned some
 ☐ Planned little
 ☐ Planned nothing
- ☐ Booked all
 ☐ Booked most
 ☐ Booked some
 ☐ Booked little
 ☐ Booked nothing

**Q12. What sources of information have you used SINCE arriving in Far North Queensland? (Select all that apply)**

- ☐ Internet
 ☐ Tourist guide books
 ☐ Friends/family
 ☐ Advertisements in print
- ☐ Travel Agent
 ☐ Other travellers
 ☐ Visitor centres
 ☐ Advertisements on TV/radio
- ☐ Trip Advisor (or similar on-line site)
 ☐ Previous experience
- ☐ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Q13. Have you discussed your trip to Far North Queensland (where you have been, what you have done, what you intend to do) with other travellers during your stay?**

- ☐ Yes
 ☐ No (go to Q15)

**Where? (select all that apply)**

- ☐ At your accommodation
 ☐ During day trips (either on the way or on site)
 ☐ In social settings (eg. out for a drink or coffee)
 ☐ While shopping (eg. for food, clothes, supplies)
 ☐ At visitor centres
 ☐ While making a booking and/or enquiry
 ☐ Elsewhere (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q14. Please indicate your response to the following statements about other travellers' opinions of the region**

I value opinions from a traveller who ....	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Is a fellow caravanner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is similar to me (age, background, culture)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has been in this location for a while	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seems to know a lot about the location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am travelling with	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has travelled a lot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has similar opinions to me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q15. Please indicate how frequently you have used each of the following to discuss your experiences with other travellers during your visit to Far North Queensland:**

	More than once a day	Daily	Sometimes	Rarely	Do not use at all
Face-to-face conversation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mobile phone – calls	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mobile phone – sms/txt message	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Van park notice boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Internet – personal blog/Twitter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Internet – other blog	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social networking – Facebook	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social networking – Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Trip Advisor or similar on-line site	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q16. Please indicate which device you have used most for your communication with other travellers during your visit to Far North Queensland (select only one)**

- ☐ Mobile phone   
 ☐ 'Smart' phone or iPhone   
 ☐ Laptop   
 ☐ Tablet or iPad   
 ☐ Notebook   
 ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q17. Please complete the following sentence** *During my trip to Far North Queensland, I have listened to word-of-mouth from people who .....*

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**Please consider the following scenario then indicate how you would respond.**

*You have booked and paid for a trip to the Great Barrier Reef. When you get there, the fish and coral you see are incredible and the water is very clear. The staff on the boat are really helpful and friendly, but the trip back is long, you are tired and a little sunburnt. Also, on the boat trip back, you find out that other travellers had paid \$50 less for the same trip.*

**Q18. How do you think you would reflect on this experience?**

- ☐ Positively and would recommend the trip  
☐ Positively but would just discuss, not necessarily recommend  
☐ Positively and negatively  
☐ Negatively, but would not advise against the trip  
☐ Negatively and would recommend against the trip  
☐ Neutral, just discuss the trip as part of the Cairns experience  
☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_





## Interview Guide

Aims of semi-structured interviews:

- Determine industry perception of the mechanics of WOM;
- Understand what involvement industry has in ‘managing’ WOM;
- Identify if and how industry measures or monitors WOM activity;
- Understand the future of WOM in tourism marketing from an industry perspective.

Primary questions for semi-structured interviews:

1. What does your organisation know about the way backpackers/caravanners communicate with each other?
2. What sources of information do backpackers/caravanners use when they are visiting Cairns?
3. To what degree do you believe backpackers/caravanners are influenced in their decisions by others they encounter during their visit?
4. Does your organisation implement any WOM (word of mouth) strategies directed at attracting these two segments?
5. Does your organisation monitor what backpackers/caravanners are saying about Cairns?
  - a. If so, how?
  - b. Do you believe this to be effective?
6. How do you see WOM fitting in with marketing activity in the future?

### Focus Group Guide

Points to be explored using the focus groups include;

- motivation to engage in WOM activity;
- social settings where WOM activity takes place with others in their respective groups;
- identifying the group members with whom subjects engage in WOM activity;
- importance of recommendations and most trusted sources;
- how communication takes place and in what form (technology).

Primary questions for semi-structured interviews:

1. Who do you discuss your experiences with during your trip? (travel party, other travellers)
2. Where do discussions of your experiences take place (where you are staying, while cooking a meal, when out for a drink, when making arrangements)
3. How do you treat the views of other travellers?
  - a. What makes their opinion worth listening to?
  - b. Do you listen to all, or only to some
4. Do you usually undertake a 'preamble' of generic questions when you meet a fellow traveller or are questions about their experiences the 'preamble'?
5. Do you rely solely on conversation for WOM or do you use other forms?
6. How important is the internet (blogs, forums, social networking) in WOM?
7. Can you give an recently example of a WOM experience in Cairns, about Cairns (either your own or someone else's experience)

## 12 Appendix 3 – SPSS output tables

**Survey\_Type \* Travel\_experience Crosstabulation**

Survey_Type		Travel_experience			Total
		First time	Done some	Done a lot	
Caravanner Survey	Count	20	56	193	269
	Expected Count	88.1	83.1	97.7	269.0
Backpacker Survey	Count	191	143	41	375
	Expected Count	122.9	115.9	136.3	375.0
Total	Count	211	199	234	644
	Expected Count	211.0	199.0	234.0	644.0

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	265.088 <sup>a</sup>	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	289.259	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	246.730	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	644		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 83.12.

**Survey\_Type \* First\_trip Crosstabulation**

Survey_Type			First_trip		Total
			Yes	No	
	Caravanner	Count	70	265	335
	Survey	Expected Count	193.8	141.2	335.0
	Backpacker	Count	358	47	405
	Survey	Expected Count	234.2	170.8	405.0
Total		Count	428	312	740
		Expected Count	428.0	312.0	740.0

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	342.559 <sup>a</sup>	1	.000
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	339.796	1	.000
Likelihood Ratio	373.404	1	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	342.096	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	740		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 141.24.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Crosstab**

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Survey_Type	Caravanner Survey	Count	178	156	334
		Expected Count	175.0	159.0	334.0
		% within Survey_Type	53.3%	46.7%	100.0%
	Backpacker Survey	Count	218	204	422
		Expected Count	221.0	201.0	422.0
		% within Survey_Type	51.7%	48.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	396	360	756
		Expected Count	396.0	360.0	756.0
		% within Survey_Type	52.4%	47.6%	100.0%

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.200 <sup>a</sup>	1	.655		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	.140	1	.709		
Likelihood Ratio	.200	1	.655		
Linear-by-Linear Association	.199	1	.655		
N of Valid Cases	756				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 159.05.

**Crosstab**

Survey_Type		AGE								Total
		< 21	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-80	> 80	
Caravanner Survey	Count	1	2	5	20	56	167	58	5	314
	Expected Count	32.2	122.5	16.3	10.4	27.2	76.2	26.3	2.7	314.0
	% within Survey_Type	0.3%	0.6%	1.6%	6.4%	17.8%	53.2%	18.5%	1.6%	100.0%
Backpacker Survey	Count	70	268	31	3	4	1	0	1	378
	Expected Count	38.8	147.5	19.7	12.6	32.8	91.8	31.7	3.3	378.0
	% within Survey_Type	18.5%	70.9%	8.2%	0.8%	1.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	71	270	36	23	60	168	58	6	692
	Expected Count	71.0	270.0	36.0	23.0	60.0	168.0	58.0	6.0	692.0
	% within Survey_Type	10.3%	39.0%	5.2%	3.3%	8.7%	24.3%	8.4%	0.9%	100.0%

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	629.683 <sup>a</sup>	7	.000
Likelihood Ratio	825.407	7	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	576.207	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	692		

a. 2 cells (12.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.72.

**Group Statistics**

	Survey_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Age_in_years	Caravanner Survey	314	63.80	9.596	.542
	Backpacker Survey	395	25.24	6.681	.336

**Independent Samples Test**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Age_in_years									
Equal variances assumed	38.980	.000	62.960	707	.000	38.567	.613	37.364	39.770
Equal variances not assumed			60.508	537.288	.000	38.567	.637	37.315	39.819



**Crosstab**

			Education_level						
									Multiple response provided
Survey_Type			Secondary	Trade/TAFE	Diploma	Degree	Other	Total	
Caravanner Survey	Count		148	73	54	40	15	4	334
	Expected Count		101.0	48.5	72.5	80.9	27.6	3.6	334.0
	% within Survey_Type		44.3%	21.9%	16.2%	12.0%	4.5%	1.2%	100.0%
Backpacker Survey	Count		79	36	109	142	47	4	417
	Expected Count		126.0	60.5	90.5	101.1	34.4	4.4	417.0
	% within Survey_Type		18.9%	8.6%	26.1%	34.1%	11.3%	1.0%	100.0%
Total	Count		227	109	163	182	62	8	751
	Expected Count		227.0	109.0	163.0	182.0	62.0	8.0	751.0
	% within Survey_Type		30.2%	14.5%	21.7%	24.2%	8.3%	1.1%	100.0%

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	118.041 <sup>a</sup>	5	.000
Likelihood Ratio	121.811	5	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.123	1	.289
N of Valid Cases	751		

**Survey\_Type \* Consider\_travel\_style Crosstabulation**

Survey_Type		Consider_travel_style		Total
		Yes	No	
Caravanner Survey	Count	257	78	335
	Expected Count	252.2	82.8	335.0
	% within Survey_Type	76.7%	23.3%	100.0%
Backpacker Survey	Count	313	109	422
	Expected Count	317.8	104.2	422.0
	% within Survey_Type	74.2%	25.8%	100.0%
Total	Count	570	187	757
	Expected Count	570.0	187.0	757.0
	% within Survey_Type	75.3%	24.7%	100.0%

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.651 <sup>a</sup>	1	.420		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	.521	1	.470		
Likelihood Ratio	.653	1	.419		
Linear-by-Linear Association	.650	1	.420		
N of Valid Cases	757				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 82.75

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Group Statistics**

	Survey_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
No_of_trips	Caravanner Survey	191	5.51	4.641	.336
	Backpacker Survey	32	3.09	2.977	.526
Nights_on_trip	Caravanner Survey	305	119.90	115.913	6.637
	Backpacker Survey	413	82.39	125.538	6.177
Nights_in_FNQ	Caravanner Survey	313	46.35	43.971	2.485
	Backpacker Survey	390	19.56	43.162	2.186

## Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
No_of_trips	Equal variances assumed	7.169	.008	2.849	221	.005	2.419	.849	.746	4.093
	Equal variances not assumed			3.876	59.765	.000	2.419	.624	1.171	3.668
Nights_on_trip	Equal variances assumed	7.882	.005	4.087	716	.000	37.507	9.176	19.491	55.523
	Equal variances not assumed			4.137	681.472	.000	37.507	9.067	19.704	55.310
Nights_in_FNQ	Equal variances assumed	31.371	.000	8.110	701	.000	26.787	3.303	20.302	33.272
	Equal variances not assumed			8.093	663.085	.000	26.787	3.310	20.288	33.285

**Survey\_Type \* Planned\_before Crosstabulation**

Survey_Type		Planned_before					Total
		Planned all	Planned most	Planned some	Planned little	Planned nothing	
Caravanner	Count	32	68	107	72	50	329
Survey	Expected Count	32.5	59.6	114.2	72.2	50.5	329.0
Backpacker	Count	40	64	146	88	62	400
Survey	Expected Count	39.5	72.4	138.8	87.8	61.5	400.0
Total	Count	72	132	253	160	112	729
	Expected Count	72.0	132.0	253.0	160.0	112.0	729.0

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.021 <sup>a</sup>	4	.554
Likelihood Ratio	3.013	4	.556
Linear-by-Linear Association	.304	1	.581
N of Valid Cases	729		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 32.49.

**Survey\_Type \* Booked\_before Crosstabulation**

Survey_Type		Booked_before					Total
		Booked all	Booked most	Booked some	Booked little	Booked nothing	
Caravanner Survey	Count	13	26	71	70	103	283
	Expected Count	22.2	32.1	74.6	78.4	75.6	283.0
Backpacker Survey	Count	34	42	87	96	57	316
	Expected Count	24.8	35.9	83.4	87.6	84.4	316.0
Total	Count	47	68	158	166	160	599
	Expected Count	47.0	68.0	158.0	166.0	160.0	599.0

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	30.339 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	30.830	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	22.722	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	599		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 22.21.

**Group Statistics**

	Survey_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
No_info_sources	Caravanner Survey	338	3.33	1.595	.087
	Backpacker Survey	427	2.83	1.388	.067

**Independent Samples Test**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
No_info_sources									
Equal variances assumed	11.921	.001	4.674	763	.000	.505	.108	.293	.717
Equal variances not assumed			4.600	671.521	.000	.505	.110	.289	.720

**Group Statistics**

	Survey_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Fellow_traveller	Caravanner Survey	292	2.23	.841	.049
	Backpacker Survey	342	1.91	.952	.051
Similar_to_me	Caravanner Survey	287	2.45	.782	.046
	Backpacker Survey	356	1.95	.853	.045
I_like	Caravanner Survey	253	2.40	.823	.052
	Backpacker Survey	352	1.98	.874	.047
Similar_opinions	Caravanner Survey	271	2.34	.795	.048
	Backpacker Survey	354	1.99	.917	.049

## Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Fellow_ traveller	Equal variances assumed	15.688	.000	4.493	632	.000	.323	.072	.182	.464
	Equal variances not assumed			4.537	631.274	.000	.323	.071	.183	.463
Similar_ to_me	Equal variances assumed	1.633	.202	7.572	641	.000	.494	.065	.366	.622
	Equal variances not assumed			7.642	630.431	.000	.494	.065	.367	.621
I_like	Equal variances assumed	.495	.482	5.977	603	.000	.420	.070	.282	.558
	Equal variances not assumed			6.035	561.043	.000	.420	.070	.283	.557
Similar_ opinions	Equal variances assumed	6.365	.012	5.056	623	.000	.354	.070	.216	.491
	Equal variances not assumed			5.152	613.361	.000	.354	.069	.219	.488



**Survey\_Type \* Dyads Crosstabulation**

Survey_Type		Dyads			Total
		Alone	Couple	More than 2	
Caravanner Survey	Count	23	273	41	337
	% within Survey_Type	6.8%	81.0%	12.2%	100.0%
Backpacker Survey	Count	93	180	153	426
	% within Survey_Type	21.8%	42.3%	35.9%	100.0%
Total	Count	116	453	194	763
	% within Survey_Type	15.2%	59.4%	25.4%	100.0%

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	117.207 <sup>a</sup>	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	122.937	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.629	1	.057
N of Valid Cases	763		

**Group Statistics**

	Survey_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
No_of_travellers	Caravanner Survey	323	1.92	2.163	.120
	Backpacker Survey	420	3.64	5.937	.290
Duration_of_travel	Caravanner Survey	230	58.37	57.988	3.824
	Backpacker Survey	364	49.51	76.046	3.986

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
No_of_ travellers	Equal variances assumed	67.771	.000	-4.971	741	.000	-1.724	.347	-2.405	-1.043
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.496	554.638	.000	-1.724	.314	-2.340	-1.108
Duration_ of_travel	Equal variances assumed	9.941	.002	1.511	592	.131	8.859	5.864	-2.658	20.376
	Equal variances not assumed			1.604	571.429	.109	8.859	5.523	-1.990	19.707

**Group Statistics**

	Survey_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
In_FNQ_a_while	Caravanner Survey	286	2.21	.751	.044
	Backpacker Survey	356	1.83	.877	.046
Travelling_with	Caravanner Survey	240	2.35	1.091	.070
	Backpacker Survey	350	2.05	.937	.050
Knows_a_lot	Caravanner Survey	282	2.16	.801	.048
	Backpacker Survey	351	1.89	.874	.047
Travelled_a_lot	Caravanner Survey	271	2.22	.821	.050
	Backpacker Survey	354	1.90	.865	.046

## Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
In_FNQ_a _while	Equal variances assumed	19.004	.000	5.689	640	.000	.372	.065	.244	.500
	Equal variances not assumed			5.785	637.381	.000	.372	.064	.246	.498
Travelling_ with	Equal variances assumed	3.324	.069	3.540	588	.000	.297	.084	.132	.462
	Equal variances not assumed			3.441	461.102	.001	.297	.086	.127	.467
Knows_ a_lot	Equal variances assumed	13.445	.000	3.987	631	.000	.269	.067	.136	.401
	Equal variances not assumed			4.025	619.964	.000	.269	.067	.138	.400
Travelled_ a_lot	Equal variances assumed	3.426	.065	4.674	623	.000	.319	.068	.185	.454
	Equal variances not assumed			4.707	595.130	.000	.319	.068	.186	.453

**Survey\_Type \* Device Crosstabulation**

Survey_Type		Device						Total
		Mobile phone	Smart phone	Laptop	Tablet or iPad	Notebook	Other	
Caravanner Survey	Count	157	48	27	11	3	36	282
	Expected Count	106.3	87.5	35.1	27.8	3.3	22.1	282.0
Backpacker Survey	Count	103	166	59	57	5	18	408
	Expected Count	153.7	126.5	50.9	40.2	4.7	31.9	408.0
Total	Count	260	214	86	68	8	54	690
	Expected Count	260.0	214.0	86.0	68.0	8.0	54.0	690.0

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	106.343 <sup>a</sup>	5	.000
Likelihood Ratio	109.900	5	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.899	1	.048
N of Valid Cases	690		

a. 2 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.27.