



Residents' place attachment and word-of-mouth behaviours: A tale of two cities



Ning (Chris) Chen^{a,*}, Larry Dwyer^{b,c}, Tracey Firth^d

^a Department of Management, Marketing & Entrepreneurship, University of Canterbury, New Zealand

^b Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

^c Griffith Institute for Tourism, (GIFT) Griffith University, Australia

^d Southern Cross University, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Factors that motivate residents to communicate with potential tourists have not received adequate attention from researchers. Based on the environmental psychology and tourism literature, this study focuses on local residents' positive word-of-mouth behaviour about their destination region through two communication channels. Dimensions of place attachment are proposed as determinants of two types (one-to-many and many-to-many) of online word-of-mouth behaviours. A theoretical structural model is tested based on an empirical study in Shanghai, China and Sydney, Australia. The research has implications for destination marketing managers in understanding how to involve local residents in the promotion of their tourism destinations.

1. Introduction

The development of information and communication technology has enabled all-around customer-to-customer (C2C) communication, and thus enables residents to play a key role in tourism destination marketing by attracting potential tourists through personal communication channels. Due to physical and cultural distance, residents of a destination become a greater and easier information source to promote destination brands, attract potential tourists, and improve the tourist experience, compared to the official information providers from the destinations themselves (Chen, Dwyer, & Firth, 2014b). The reasons are as follows: (1) residents are experienced consumers of the places and thus their word-of-mouth is informative (Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, & Backman, 2010); (2) information (or word-of-mouth) is more useful for tourists from residents compared to that from agents since the information is perceived to be more credible (Bickart & Schindler, 2001); (3) information from residents is more relevant to tourists compared to public available information from the destinations themselves (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). In consequence, sites such as *TripAdvisor.com*, *Qiongyou.com* (Chinese versions of TripAdvisor) become popular since they are great platforms for reviews, pictures, and blogs of experienced tourists and residents' traveling and living experiences in different tourism destinations (Chen, Dwyer, & Firth, 2015). Previous research on residents has largely focused on their attitude toward tourism and its impact on destination tourism planning, indicating residents' indirect

roles in tourism marketing and destination branding (e.g. Dyer, Gursoy, Sharma, & Carter, 2007; Gursoy & Kendall, 2006; Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002; Jurowski & Gursoy, 2004). However, little research explores the potential of residents' direct involvement in destination marketing. At present, there is a gap between the perceived importance of residents in destination studies and the lack of research on residents' psychology and behaviour. Primarily, potential travellers engage in online travel communities and travel themed social media platforms for information from experienced travellers, which may largely influence the travel decision making (Crotts, 1999). The role of local residents of a tourism destination in providing information in online communities is yet to be explored. In fact, residents of a tourism destination and travellers can interact with each other in online communities, and "the interaction occurs before the traveller arrives at the destination and may influence where travellers visit and their choice of accommodation and restaurants" (Arsal et al., 2010, p. 401). Although the examination of residents as a source of information to potential tourists prior to visiting is largely missing, there are studies implying residents' role in tourism marketing and promotion via information exchange on internet. For instance, Bieger and Laesser (2004) suggest that residents are important source of information for travellers via internet. Other studies imply residents' importance in influencing potential tourists' decision making by emphasising their experiences with the place, e.g., Wearing and Wearing (2001); Yoo and Gretzel (2008). Specifically, Arsal et al. (2010) emphasise the direct influences residents have on

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: chris.chen@canterbury.ac.nz (N.C. Chen), l.dwyer@unsw.edu.au (L. Dwyer), tracey.firth@scu.edu.au (T. Firth).

travel decisions, in a study of Thorn Tree Forum, a part of Lonely Planet's Website, and further that residents are more influential in accommodations and food and beverage recommendations.

The relationship between residents and a place may drive their actual behaviours or intentions, and thus might influence promotion of a destination. Literature from multiple disciplines supports a causal relationship from the connection of individuals and entities, such as a brand/organization/place, to behaviours such as WOM. Thus we find associations between organizational identification and organizational citizenship behaviour in organizational studies (Van Dick, Grojean, Christ, & Wieseke, 2006); between relatedness to brand community and positive word-of-mouth in internal branding literature (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009); between loyalty and recommendation intention in consumer behaviour realm (Bloemer, De Ruyter, & Wetzels, 1999); and between place attachment and environmentally responsible behaviour in environmental psychology literature (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). Based on this assumption, this study proposes that place attachment, the construct to indicate the relationship between people and places or spatial settings, is a key driver in understanding residents' intention and actual behaviours including both word-of-mouth (WOM)/e-word-of-mouth (eWOM). It aims to understand how residents are attached to their resident place, to explore their attitude toward destination planning and development (Choo, Park, & Petrick, 2011) and further, how their voluntary WOM/eWOM behaviour to promote the place as a destination is motivated and generated. Specifically, WOM can be categorized by the circumstances where the information is generated and shared, and this study explores the variations in the effects of different dimensions of place attachment on different types of WOM, specifically one-to-many and many-to-many WOM. The findings will advance the theoretical literature with implications for understanding the complex relationships between dimensions of place attachment and diverse types of WOM behaviours.

To set up the study context, we first review the literature on the constructs of place attachment, word-of-mouth, and its motivation. The six-dimension place attachment framework and three-type WOM categorization are applied. Hypotheses are developed based on the conceptualization and discussions on relevant constructs and their relationships. Subsequently, the questionnaire design, sampling, data collection of an empirical study is described, as well as the research methodology. Finally, data analysis is reported, the findings are presented, and theoretical and managerial implications are further discussed, as well as suggestions and recommendations for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Types of WOM

Earlier research from the 1960's studied WOM in the context of marketing (Arndt, 1967; Dichter, 1966; Engel, Kegerreis, & Blackwell, 1969). In the tourism marketing and destination branding research context, Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) after reviewing the relevant literature summarize the key reasons underpinning the critical importance of WOM and propose a typology to enhance our understanding of key concepts. WOM may be classified by the format of information communicated, such as WOM versus eWOM. Specifically, eWOM is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39).

Alternatively, WOM can be categorized as *one-to-one WOM*, *one-to-many WOM*, and *many-to-many WOM*, in terms of how and why WOM is created and communicated (Litvin et al., 2008). The latter typology is more relevant to destination marketers, because it allows researchers and managers to understand the different motivation mechanisms of WOM generated in these scenarios, and thus understand how to

motivate individuals such as residents to be more involved (Litvin et al., 2008). WOM and eWOM, on the other hand, are difficult to distinguish since they are integrated in daily lives and there may be minor difference in the motivations. For instance, WOM from a physical conversation could be the same as that from a Facebook conversation or phone messenger.

The first type of WOM, *one-to-one WOM*, is generated by one person and communicated to another person or a small group of people in private (Chen et al., 2014b; Litvin et al., 2008). Examples are WOM through conversation with family or friends via emails, instant messaging, telephone, etc. The communication occurs in the scenarios when mutual parties know the identity of the other. In the psychology and consumer literature, different intrinsic drivers motivating the generation of WOM are identified, including concern for others (a genuine desire to help a friend or relative make a better purchase decision); message intrigue (entertainment resulting from talking about certain ads or selling appeals) (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998); a desire to help the place (Sundaram et al., 1998).

WOM generated on blogs, social networks websites, and other Web 2.0 media is a different format of WOM compared to *one-to-one WOM*. This type of WOM does not necessarily include face to face interaction between the WOM generator and the audience. Due to this, the WOM is not targeted to a specific audience. Further, the information in the WOM can include multiple formats of contents, such as messages and photos. Fast growth of social networking websites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, enables this type of WOM to be increasingly available and influential. Social media has become the "third place" between home and work, and is used for sociability, spontaneity, community building and emotional expressiveness (Murphy, Gil, & Schegg, 2010). In this study, this type of WOM is defined as *one-to-many WOM*, which is mostly based in social media channels, where people can rebuild the community in their mind (Rheingold, 1993). It also reflects a space for people to share their expressions of feelings, and to establish their social positions. *One-to-many WOM* is more content oriented than audience oriented. In the tourism context, there is a major trend of potential tourists turning to Web 2.0 social media to search for information to assist them in choosing a destination. One credible source of information on various aspects of a product is the experienced consumer group (Engel, Blackwell, & Kegerreis, 1969; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Further, research has shown that WOM from experienced customers may have higher credibility, empathy and relevance to customers than marketer created sources of information on the Web (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). In the tourism context, the experienced consumer group of a tourism destination mainly refers to those who have travelled to the destination in question, as well as its residents. Consequently, WOM generated by residents of a tourism destination in the format of one-to-many WOM becomes vital in affecting a potential tourist's traveling decisions (Litvin et al., 2008). For instance, a study of destination selection methods finds that many Western Australia travel decisions were based upon WOM communications (Shanka, All-Knight, & Pope, 2002). Diaz-Martin, Iglesias, Vázquez, and Ruiz (2000) find that positive WOM increases expectations in their study of Spanish tourists. Therefore, it is important to understand the motives that drive residents to spread positive *one-to-many WOM* on different social media channels, for which tourism officials may focus considerable efforts on the local market to encourage that WOM behaviour (Simpson & Siguan, 2008).

Apart from social media websites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, there are other websites that may influence a tourist's destination choice-tourism themed online communities, for instance *TripAdvisor.com*. On these websites, experienced tourists provide comments and reviews about a tourism destination and relevant product and services within the destination. Increasingly potential tourists are choosing to consult these websites to find information that allows them to make informed choices and to plan their holiday based on the knowledge provided and

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