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## Research Paper

## Social network participation and coverage by tourism industry sector

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## ABSTRACT

Although identified as an emerging scientific paradigm, social network research has yet to be developed fully in tourism studies. Social network theory focuses on the ties between actors within a particular network. An individual can influence his or her success through the structure, extent and diversity of their network. Within the tourism industry, the study of social networks can be used to enhance understanding of the interactions that take place within, or among businesses, by examining the formal and informal connections linking them together. This study examined involvement or membership in associations (networks) of five key tourism industry segments in a thriving tourism region along participation and coverage dimensions. The results showed that tourism sectors participate differently in social networks. Specifically, the hotel and lodging sector participates in a greater number and covers more types of networks than the retail/shopping sector.

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## 1. Introduction

Government, nonprofit organizations, and commercial enterprises encompass the numerous individuals, corporations, organizations, and agencies that collectively produce the supply-side of tourism (Gunn, 1994). It is generally agreed the supply side of tourism includes five major components, attractions, services, promotion, transportation, and information (Blank, 1989; Gunn, 1994; Jafari, 1982; Mill & Morrison, 1985; Murphy, 1985) that operate interdependently (Smith, 2006). Often the tourism industry is criticized as 'fragmented' (McKercher, 1993; Pavlovich, 2003; Pearce & Butler, 2001) or viewed as a conglomeration of separate industries (Smith, 2006). The fragmented nature of tourism and the interdependency of the tourism sectors underline the importance that the supply-side organizations work together to provide a high-quality experience to tourists. However, previous research on the supply side of tourism has emphasized community, resident or destination approaches (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Carey, Gountas, & Gilbert, 1997; Smith, 1988), service performance

(Kozak, 2002), or economic development (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001). Very little investigation has been undertaken regarding the level, extent or strength of interaction between the five core industry sectors within the tourism system. However, understanding interactions among industry sectors may offer insights to researchers and practitioners about an organization's beliefs and behaviors, factors contributing to organizational or sector success, and public regard for one tourism sector over another. Additionally, if strong social networks can lead to financial, social or political benefits for a tourism service provider (Morison, Lynch, & Johns, 2004), then understanding the scale and nature of social networks is important. This research aims to identify and analyze the social networks of tourism providers in a thriving tourism area where businesses, governments and nonprofit organizations prioritize involvement and membership in a variety of local, regional, state, and national associations and organizations. Social network theory (SNT) provides the overarching theoretical reasoning of this empirical work.

## 2. Literature review

The literature pertinent to this research is first reviewed according to SNT and two related theories or concepts: social exchange and social capital. This is followed by a review of the tourism literature where these theories have been applied.

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### 3. Social network theory

Social network theory was first proposed in the 1950s by Barnes (1954) who defined social networks as social structures consisting of 'nodes' or 'actors' connected through various social familiarities, or 'ties,' ranging from acquaintances to close family-like connections. The actors (often called 'nodes') can be persons, teams, organizations, or concepts. Ties connect pairs of actors and can be directed (i.e. potentially in one-direction, as in giving advice to someone) or undirected (i.e. as in being physically proximate), and can be dichotomous (i.e. present or absent, as in whether two people are friends or not) or valued (i.e. measured on a scale, as in strength of friendship) (Barnes, 1954).

The theory focuses on the relationships and ties with other actors within the network, not on the attributes of individual actors. An actor influences his/her success through their network structure (Burt, 1997). While much research in the social sciences has focused on individual characteristics, network approaches offer a great advancement by identifying cohesive groups of actors who engage in frequent direct interactions (Collins & Raven, 1968; Frank, 1995) or blocks of actors who engage in structurally similar patterns of interaction (Borgatti & Everett, 1994; Borgatti, Everett, & Shirey, 1990; Merton 1957; Nadel, 1957; White, Boorman, & Breiger, 1976). The underlying premise is that an actor's thoughts and behaviors are related to the thoughts and behaviors of others in their group. These processes play an important role in affecting people's beliefs and behaviors that cannot be explained purely in terms of individual attributes or organizational context. On a much larger scale, social network theory has been developed in the context of the small world problem or six degrees of separation phenomenon (Milgram, 1967), as well as the strength of ties principle (Granovetter, 1973, 1982).

Social network analysis has emerged as both a technique (Barnes 1972; Berkowitz, 1982; Bott, 1971; Frank, 1996; Leinhardt, 1977; Marsden & Lin 1982; Mitchell, 1969; Price, 1981; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981; Rogers, 1987; Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988) and topic of study (Stokowski, 1990). The idea of networks arose out of a number of scientific disciplines. Within the physical sciences, the network metaphor was used to describe chains or webs of cellular and molecular interactions in biology and physics (von Bertalanffy, 1950) and the movement of animal herds in wildlife biology and population ecology (Lewis, 1977). The origins of network research in the social sciences are found in sociology, anthropology, geography, social psychology, information science, and organizational studies (Barnes, 1954; Mitchell, 1969; Moreno, 1951; Rogers, 2005). Although identified as an emerging scientific paradigm (Frank, 1996), social network research has yet to be developed fully in recreation, leisure, and tourism studies (Stokowski, 1990). However, the related concepts of social capital and social exchange theory have been employed in the tourism literature. Before delving into the tourism literature on SNT, summarizing the use of social capital and social exchange theories is merited.

#### 3.1. Social capital and social exchange theory

Social capital, as defined by Cohen and Prusak (2001), consists of the stock of active connections among people: trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible. Through mutual consensus and cooperation, social capital allows people to address and resolve collective problems more easily and effectively (e.g. in a neighborhood, a school, a business or a business sector). Social capital refers to the network position of the individual and the ability to draw on the resources contained by members in the network. To clarify, the

more connections (or ties) a person has in the social network, the more knowledge, influence, and power the person will control. The networks that constitute social capital serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information, thereby facilitating goal achievement. Social networks can be analyzed to measure social capital or the value or utility that one gets from his/her social networks. Consequently, a map of social networks allows for the evaluation of the social capital of that individual.

Social capital has provided a theoretical framework for studying community development (Gittell & Vidal, 1998), organizational development (Cohen & Prusak, 2001), grief intervention (Preece, 2002), economic performance (Baker, 1990), creation of intellectual capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), learning in response to change and sustainability in communities (Falk & Harrison, 2000), community and school achievement (World Bank, 1999), community development (Gittell & Vidal 1998), patterns of social disparity created by lack of technological skills (Resnick, 2002), civic engagement (Putnam, 1993; 2000; Sirianni & Friedland, 2001), and economic gains (Sobel, 2002). Despite growing efforts by scholars to examine, understand, and apply social capital, little has been done to extend this understanding to communities where tourism is a part of the economic mix (McGehee, Lee, O'Bannon, & Perdue, 2009). Social capital can have a substantial influence on a tourism business success, affecting such aspects as collective promotion of tourism services, sharing of employment resources, and collaborating on policies for the benefit of the tourism industry (Macbeth, Carson, & Northcote, 2004; McGehee et al., 2009; Okazaki, 2008).

In communications, one of the many theoretical approaches to the study of relationships is the social exchange theory proposed by Thibault and Kelley (1952). This theory is based on the exchange of rewards and costs to quantify the values of outcomes from different situations for an individual. People strive to minimize costs and maximize rewards and then base the likelihood of developing a relationship with someone on the perceived possible outcomes. When these outcomes are perceived to be greater, individuals disclose more, and develop closer relationships with that person. Communication and relationships are concepts that are inextricably intertwined. It is through communication that relationships are developed and within this context, social networks are built.

Social exchange theory has been applied in a variety of fields and research settings including social exchange in the context of negotiation and exchange (Molm & Peterson, 1999), caregiver burden (Call, Finch, Huck, & Kane, 1999) and group formation (Lawler & Thye, 1999). In addition, social exchange theory has been applied in a number of tourism studies (Ap, 1990; Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002; McGehee & Andereck, 2004). According to social exchange theory, people evaluate an exchange based on the costs and benefits resulting from the exchange. Thus, residents' evaluation and support of tourism will depend on the perceived benefits of an exchange. Those residents who perceive themselves as benefiting from tourism will view it positively, whereas those residents seeing the costs outweighing the benefits in the exchange will view tourism negatively. In large part, social exchange theory within a tourism context has focused primarily on resident and tourist attitudes and perceptions, with no apparent literature exploring social exchange theory related to tourism providers or the supply side of the tourism system.

### 4. Social network theory and tourism supply

Pavlovich (2003) proposed that a relational perspective is particularly relevant in the tourism industry because organizations form groups and cluster together within a destination context.

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