

Chapter One

Introduction

To date, far more effort has been expended on predicting the revolutionary futures of the Internet than has been put into finding out in detail how it is being used and the ways in which it is being incorporated into people's daily lives (Hein, 2000: 2).

1. Introduction

Preparation for travel is part of the journey. For most, organised travel, for purposes of both business and leisure, involves a fair amount of planning, which includes gathering reliable information from trustworthy sources regarding, *inter alia*, the destination and the journey. Travellers, especially those exploring unknown travel destinations, are constantly reliant on appropriate and trustworthy information to make informed consumer choices. Sources of information obviously vary. While word-of-mouth has historically been a preferred way to seek travel information, the provision of travel information and services has become a lucrative business in modern societies. In fact, the consumer value of travel information is considerable.

In a highly competitive market commercial travel information providers such as *Lonely Planet*, *Bradt* and *Rough Guides* use comprehensiveness, accuracy and reliability in an attempt to convince consumers to buy their products, i.e. travel information in various formats such as books, brochures, CD-Roms, videotapes, and so forth. Newspapers and magazines also contain travel sections thereby adding to the popularity of the printed media as a widely accessible medium and cheap source of travel information.

In fact, over the years, the printed media has always provided a steady stream of travel information. By most accounts, the ancient Greek writer Pausanias produced the first travel guidebook already in AD180 (Pretzler, 2004). In contemporary societies, it is not only the printed media that is a major source of travel information. Other mass media such as radio and TV also provide travel information. However, with the large-scale integration of the so-called “New Media” into mainstream society towards the second half of the twentieth century, prospective travellers can also include the Internet as a source of information. Wang and Fesenmaier state that this “new media has evolved from a technological curiosity to a place where millions of people around the world stop every day for various travel-related activities. The past decade “has witnessed significant changes to the tourism industry, owing to the adoption and diffusion of Internet applications” (2004: 1).

Sheldon (1997: 87) too recognises the Internet’s importance when she states that “consumer access to information in general, and particularly to travel information has burgeoned with the use of the Internet”. She states:

[t]he use of the Internet and World Wide Web dominate most of the developments in the area of consumer access to travel databases. There are hundreds of thousands of home pages of suppliers and associations and many electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups and chat rooms designed for the travel and tourism community. In fact, tourism and travel home pages dominate the WWW (Sheldon, 1997: 86).

One of the foremost applications is the World Wide Web (WWW), making information available in very much the same way as the printed media. However, the Internet also facilitates other avenues, such as newsgroups and electronic bulletin boards, allowing anyone connected to the Internet to contribute, discuss and participate actively or merely observe. In particular, these avenues facilitate social

interaction in ways and on a scale hitherto unknown to us. If we consider new ways, examples taken from a tourism marketing organisation called *virtualtourist.com* show that members can build their own travel pages in which they can provide their travel profiles, share their travel tips with others and create their own online travelogues. Members can also access discussion forums and chatrooms for further information sharing and communication. These examples emphasise the extent to which ordinary people have become producers of information and the extent of advocating uncensored participation. Subsequently, the digital media extends the reaches of word-of-mouth by using text-based messages in mostly an asynchronous manner on a world-wide scale that involves anybody with access to the Internet. In the case of travellers it is evident that the social ties people form in digital environments allow them to get help from “a global community of travellers who have ‘been there, done that’” (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004: 1).

The global reach of this development is realised when one understands that the Internet is a vast network of computers without any central control that spans the globe and uses avenues such as newsgroups, electronic bulletin boards (EBB) and chatrooms to weave webs of people into social networks. Sheldon (1997: 93) recognises the importance of these avenues and states that they allow travellers to do trip planning in a less formal medium. Sheldon concludes that “travellers using these services can expect the information gleaned from them to be more subjective and ad hoc, and yet valuable in its own way” (1997: 95).

However, why do people share their travel experiences with others in computer-mediated social networks? Are these shared experiences capable of addressing the information needs of others when making consumer choices? Indeed, what needs do travellers have when connecting to online social networks if the primary aim seems to be that of obtaining travel information? Wang and Fesenmaier note that in online travel communities needs can be categorised as functional, psychological, social and hedonic (2004: 2). Addressing these needs, people are able to use their

connections (social ties) to obtain a range of benefits despite the risks involved in connecting to and engaging with others in a computer-mediated social network. Examples of risks are getting no response to a request, receiving incorrect information or perhaps being the target of criticism or a so-called “flame”. Thompsen (2003: 329-343) explores the intricacies of flames in more detail.

If one considers connecting to an electronic bulletin board as an attempt to address specific needs, what is the nature of social ties in such computer-mediated social networks? Are the social interactions patterned in any way to form predictable arrangements or structures? If so, what influence does network structure exert on actors and their accessibility to information? What can we learn from the study of such computer-mediated exchange networks? What does it for example reveal about power, dependence and trust? In leisure studies, the relation between travel information, consumer choices and leisure experiences has been investigated using a network perspective. The latter provides a theoretical framework to investigate this relationship from a structural point of view (Stokowski, 1988). Detail follows on the positioning of network analysis within a broader context of social theory.

2. Background

Lonely Planet, a company that has since its beginnings in 1973 managed to become one of the largest independent travel information publishers in the world embraced the Internet and launched its website in 1994. In 1995, the *Thorn Tree* was unveiled. Being an asynchronous electronic bulletin board, it offers a computer-mediated platform for people across the globe to form social ties and exchange travel information using text-based messages ordered as threads. Drawing on an existing clientele that is accustomed to its wide range of printed material, *Lonely Planet's* incorporation of the so-called “New Media” technologies offers a good example of a traditional company that has managed to redefine itself in the so-called Information

Age. Moreover, the many-to-many communication capabilities made possible by digital technologies such as electronic bulletin boards, enable loyal *Lonely Planet* customers, travellers and non-travellers the world over to be sources and not merely information consumers or so-called “sinks”, thereby furthering the philosophy held in high esteem at *Lonely Planet* that informed travellers are more responsible.

With popular metaphors such as “surfing the Net” or “riding along an information superhighway”, the notion of travellers using the Internet conjures images of both travel in the physical world and travel in cyberspace. The use of metaphors to describe new phenomena such as the Internet and associated digital environments is not uncommon, as is evident in this study too. The *Thorn Tree* resembles a real thorn tree on which travellers hang messages. Similarly to the physical world, on this electronic forum exchanges go beyond travel information but unlike a real thorn tree or other landmark such as a rock, the *Thorn Tree* is set in cyberspace. While transport networks like roads connect people and allow them to “go” places, the Internet is associated with access to all kinds of information without concerns about geographical limits. Indeed, Internet-based communities coincide with the process of globalisation and the mobility that space- and time altering technologies afford (Holmes, 1997: 27). Similarly, physical travel too is noted for social interactions and its consequences for globalisation (Giddens, 2001:80).

With a logical structure to it and very few constraints on members regarding their contributions, the *Thorn Tree* has become a popular platform for travellers on which to exchange travel information. All travel-related information on this electronic discussion board is not above suspicion, useful or even relevant. In the case of travel information, Stewart and Hull (1996: 9) cite a number of research findings about changes over time in travellers’ accounts of their experiences. Invariably, some accounts might be blatantly false. Yet, not everybody is dishonest (Macy and Skvoretz, 1998: 639).

Above, the use of a network perspective to elucidate on the role of network structure was mentioned. There are indeed a number of theoretical approaches to analyse social systems and exchanges that arise from connections and interactions among individuals in small and large groups. Another area of interest pertains to the role of information and specifically incomplete information in social action. The roots of these theoretical approaches are to be found in the Enlightenment precepts of rational conduct. These ideas, however, also have a strong contemporary resonance, in view of technologically supported social interaction and social networks.

3. Development of theoretical frameworks

Exchange and rational choice stand central to a discussion board like the *Thorn Tree*. A paper by Homans (1958), "Social behaviour as exchange", is in many ways seminal to recent developments in exchange and rational choice theory. He introduced the ideas of the benefits and costs of alternative courses of action and declining marginal effects, along with a conception of balance and equilibrium in exchange. Peter Blau's book *Exchange and Power in Social Life* followed shortly afterwards in 1964 and is regarded as a classic in the field. Blau focussed on the process of exchange, which, according to him, directs much of human behaviour and underlies relationships among individuals as well as among groups.

Since that, exchange theory has attracted adherents and has become one of the few areas in sociological theory which is at the same time broadly cumulative and technically well-founded. In this latter respect, the association, which is ever increasingly engineered with network analysis, is of prime importance. Indeed, there are many who now see the combination of networks and rational choice theory as the most promising avenue ahead for systematic sociological theory (Abell, 2000:

226). Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of exchange and rational choice theories finds its contemporary apotheosis in Coleman's *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990). Although systematic claims for game theory as an important theory of social interaction are relatively recent, the use of a game theoretic framework in theoretical analysis is increasingly common. The idea which is probably having the most profound impact upon sociological theory, though, is the shift from an emphasis upon one-shot games (for example a one-off prisoner's dilemma) to repeatedly iterated games. In this respect, Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation* (1984) is the turning point. Coleman is regarded as the "main moving force behind the rise of rational choice theory in contemporary sociology" (Ritzer, 1996: 427). Field explains that it was within this intellectual framework of rational choice theory that he sought to place his conception of social capital (2003: 21). The concept social capital was for Coleman a means of explaining how people manage to cooperate. Coleman himself portrayed social capital quintessentially as a public good that is created by and may benefit not just those whose efforts are required to realise it, but all who are part of a structure (Coleman, 1988-9: 116).

Given the exchanges that take place across the Internet one of the core assumptions of exchange theory is relevant, namely that the benefits people obtain through social processes are dependent on the benefits that they are able to provide in exchange. This gives exchange theory its focus on the flow of benefits through social interaction.

What importance does exchange hold when related to travel information and travellers' consumer choices? Moreover, what does the network structure reveal about actors' place in a network? What does structure reveal about connectivity and how does this influence the flow of communication? How does communication flow influence the speed, extent and reaches of information exchanges? If traveller A informs traveller B of a special place with spectacular scenery or a reasonably priced

hotel in the next town this information can have benefits¹ for traveller B and potentially any other actor with whom traveller B might share this. However, the nature of the relationship between these two actors changes if traveller A is the only traveller who knows about the special place or the hotel; being the only one with something others want puts traveller A in a power position highlighting the dependence of others. Moreover, the position of traveller A in a network of others would determine who else will come to know about the special place or the hotel. For example, if traveller B is connected to traveller C but no-one else, the latter could form a bridge (or link) if traveller C's connectivity extended to another set of actors or subgroup. In such a case, traveller C will be central. However, if only traveller A and B were connected to each other but to no-one else the information would be limited to travellers A and B respectively, making them isolates.

With the above example as background, network theory, like exchange theory in general, can and indeed does consider similar aspects. Power dependence offers a good example. While exchange theory focuses on the dyadic relation between actors in explaining power dependence, network theory looks at things such as structural centrality. This brings to the fore the importance of structure and attempts to move from the dyadic approach of exchange theory toward a focus on the power of a position within a network (Ritzer, 2000: 428-429).

The basis for network analytic principles is the vision of a network of people connected through social relationships. In essence then, and this is something that also bodes well for Internet studies, the strength of the network approach to analysis is in investigating the social distribution of possibilities. The network perspective suggests that people live in worlds of potentially expansive and diverse social

¹. Here, the benefits for the owner of the hotel are not taken into consideration, or the effects of large numbers of people flocking to the special place with its beautiful scenery.

connections. The aim with network studies is to determine how multiple social relationships are arranged and ordered and what the patterns mean for important sectors in the economy such as the tourism industry. Information exchange and leisure choices are clearly related.

4. Research problem

Rice notes that networks, as a theoretical perspective, analytical construct, methodological approach and pragmatic concern have been important to a wide variety of communication research concerns (1994: 167). Employing network analysis for an investigation into travel information exchanges among people reliant on a computer-mediated environment across the Internet is the result of research for the *National Certificate in Heritage Tourism* (NCHT) that was implemented at Vista University² for a limited period from 1999 to 2001. During the research period for this certificate course (1996-1998) the Internet was an invaluable source of information. A website of note proved to be that of *Lonely Planet*, in particular the *Thorn Tree* which is an electronic discussion board. At the start of the research period for the NCHT-course in 1996, electronic discussion boards such as the *Thorn Tree* were relatively new phenomena.

While research for the NCHT-course mentioned above progressed, frequent interaction with the *Thorn Tree* revealed the following:

- Since the *Thorn Tree*'s inception in 1995, membership increased at a steady rate.

². Vista University ceased to exist in 2004 and its various campuses have been incorporated into other tertiary institutions. For example, the Mamelodi Campus has become part of the University of Pretoria.

- Some members are clearly dedicated to participating regularly in the numerous text-based asynchronous conversations.
- Messages are often varied in nature, despite the fact that the *Thorn Tree* is focused on travel information.
- Discussions are mostly short-lived and answers to most travel-related questions given within a few days.
- Many actors contribute little while a few actors are notably active.
- Threads with remarkably numerous messages that sometimes extend for a considerable time are often not travel-related but frivolous in nature.
- Not all legitimate requests for travel information are answered.
- Members are willing to share information and respond to requests in the absence of any obvious or tangible rewards.
- There is evidence to suggest that computer-mediated communication gives rise to traditional forms of interaction, i.e. face-to-face interactions.

These observations also raised a number of questions:

- Why do people choose an electronic discussion board to exchange travel-related information?
 - Why do people willingly exchange information in a computer-mediated environment where the rewards are obscure and non-material?
 - How can the trustworthiness of information be verified if there are no obvious reasons why people relate detailed accounts of their experiences to others?
 - Moving beyond information exchange, what motivates some members to make physical contact or become (online) friends, while others hardly ever share views or choose to remain onlookers or *lurkers*?
-

Findings of another empirical study (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004) and the researcher's exposure to other computer-mediated social networks revealed certain similarities noticed initially on the *Thorn Tree*. The points below outline these similarities:

- An online discussion board offers a platform for people around the world to be active participants instead of passive information consumers.
- Physical barriers such as time and space are no longer obstacles to human interaction, which means that interest and not proximity determines participation in networks.
- The nature of exchanges in a computer-mediated environment is predominantly text-based, which necessitates adaptations since it differs from other forms of communication.

Initial attempts to gain insight into the functioning of computer-mediated social networks such as the *Thorn Tree* highlighted a broader context, namely virtual reality and cyberspace. Other associated concepts soon transpired during exploratory research, for example knowledge networks, communities of interest or practice and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Although virtual reality and cyberspace captured the imagination of the public, it attracted the attention of academics and the business world too. Towards the end of the twentieth century, connectivity to the Internet became a necessity in real life with a measurable impact on the political, economic and social fronts. Placed within a global context and a rapidly changing world, connectivity and the ability of the Internet to facilitate it on a hitherto unimaginable scale have become much-debated topics.

The research problem focuses on an analysis of the structure of the network in order to investigate and explain the patterns of communication on this asynchronous discussion board in order to comment on the extent and nature of information

exchanges. This also raises questions about social capital. Understanding the extent to which actors in a network form ties can be helpful for elucidating the different ways in which social capital delivers access to resources (Field, 2003: 67).

5. Aim of this study

This study brings together a number of main areas: First, travel information and associated consumer choices. Second, it involves the Internet as another focus point since it acts as a medium through which interaction manifests and information is spread, i.e. an electronic bulletin board. In other words, by means of electronic bulletin boards such as the *Thorn Tree*, the Internet facilitates travel information exchanges in a computer-mediated social network. Thirdly, from a methodological point of view, the notions are held that structure explains how position in a network influences actors or what that structure reveals much about communication flow. In this case, access to travel information plays a role in consumer choices but this aspect has thus far received very little attention in academic circles (Stokowski, 1988). Placed within the realm of cyberculture studies it is necessary to note, however, that network analysts pay attention to computer-mediated communication and the role of the Internet to mediate social ties and (information) exchanges across a wide front (Garton, et. al, 1999).

It is a primary aim of this study to investigate the structure of the *Africa* category of the *Departure Lounge* on the *Thorn Tree* as an example of a computer-mediated social network. Based on the results of this investigation, two secondary aims are: First, describe the characteristics of the network and the social ties. Second, comment on the role of position and the impact structure has on the flow of information through this communication network by investigating certain actors and certain threads.

One objective is to use a one-mode and a two-mode network to measure and visualise interaction among actors based on their participation in threads. Applied to the *Thorn Tree*, this objective forms the core of the main research problem underlying this study. Another objective is to contextualise social ties and determine the nature of exchanges by undertaking a content analysis of certain messages. The selection is based on the results of a network analysis.

6. Research design

The Three World Model (Mouton 2001: 138) places scientific research in perspective. The framework is based on a distinction between three worlds, namely: World 1 that is the world of everyday life and lay knowledge, World 2 that is the world of science and scientific research and World 3 that is the world of meta-science. Part of what Mouton calls World 1, the Internet and associated features such as computer-mediated social networks are recent phenomena that pose particular challenges to researchers. These networks are embedded in cyberspace that in turn is viewed as both place and space but also non-place and non-space. This dichotomous view raises complex philosophical and epistemological questions. Nevertheless, computer-mediated social networks like the *Thorn Tree* are part of World 1 in Mouton's Three World Model and offer a real world problem worthy of scientific research.

The *Thorn Tree* is in essence an open archive of text-based discussions, similar in many ways to recorded verbal conversations. In this empirical study, the electronic text-based discussions and the actors responsible for these messages constitute the primary data. Outlined in more detail in Chapter Four, the *Thorn Tree* discussion board is divided into main themes called branches. In turn, branches are sub-divided into categories. Over time, while the threads are active, text-based asynchronous discussions accumulate for each category. Since these text-based threaded

conversations are openly available on the Internet, it can be scientifically research too. Subsequently, network analysis and content analysis are appropriate to the analysis of asynchronous text-based conversations (Mouton, 2001: 165-166).

By employing network analysis, one of the limitations associated with traditional content analysis is avoided, namely sampling (Mouton, 2001: 166). In this study, the complete population active on the *Africa* category is used. Actors are included if they are posters or repliers, i.e. contributed to the discussion board. This suggests, as discussed in Chapter Three, a participatory approach to the inclusion of actors in this dataset. Information from *Lonely Planet's* website can be collected using software packages such as *wwwget*. With the collected data, network analytical calculations can be performed by using a software application such as *UCINET*. In a one-mode network, actors are placed in columns and rows, thus creating a square matrix. The use of binary code, 1 (one) indicates the presence of a link between actors. This link is indicative of participation in the same thread while 0 (zero) indicates no link, i.e. no participation in the same thread. Only actors who contribute to discussions by posting messages can be included which means that people who only view messages are excluded from the dataset and the associated matrix. The same information is used to reconstitute a matrix that allows for a two-mode network in which actors are affiliated to messages. This shifts the focus to threads.

Subsequently, calculations using standard network analytical techniques as outlined in Chapter Three and employed in Chapter Four give results that reflect on the structure of this network. Structure as mentioned at the outset of this study is used to report on the nature of social ties and to comment on the impact structure has on the nature and extent of travel information exchange in a computer-mediated social network.

7. Research methodology

Network analysis is a noted methodology to investigate networks but also social capital, a concept that has been mentioned earlier. With an emphasis on structure, this study relies on network analysis as a research methodology to explain the influence of structure on the nature of social ties in a computer-mediated social network. Quantitative measures associated with social network research are employed in order to gain insight into the structure of the exchange network on the *Africa* category and to take certain measurements. The latter include degree of connectivity, density, levels of reciprocity, centrality and clique analysis. As explained in more detail in Chapter Three, a one- and two-mode perspective of this network is used. The attribute or reason for inclusion in this dataset is participation in a thread(s), i.e. posting text-based messages. Participation in threads is achieved by posting messages on an electronic bulletin board. Ties form between those actors who participate in the same thread; actors are affiliated to threads via their messages. Direction is determined by the type of action, i.e. posted a message that originated a thread, or posting messages that are replies. Relying on accepted social network practices, a matrix is drawn showing who participated in which discussions, i.e. outlining affiliation. Using the data derived from this matrix, the network can be visualised relying on the graph theoretic principles associated with network analysis. In the case of a one-mode network, actors are related to other actors in a square matrix. In a two-mode network, actors are affiliated to threads.

Statistical findings derived from employing quantitative techniques are used, amongst others, to identify members with the highest participation scores, members who contributed in more than one discussion, messages that received no responses, messages that received the most responses (longest threads) and the survival rate of threads. Limited content analysis is also employed in order to contextualise ties between actors, i.e. consider what is being said. Chapter Three outlines the

methodological aspects in more detail while the results are analysed in Chapter Four.

By relating objectives to the research methodology, it is obvious that in order to determine the nature and extent of connectivity between actors on the *Thorn Tree*, a one-mode network is used. Graphic tools that are bundled with *UCINET* make it possible to visualise the ego-networks of specific actors. By employing a two-mode network on the same dataset, threads are affiliated to those actors who are responsible for the messages that constitute the thread. This gives an alternate view on social ties among actors based on messages in similar threads. Moreover, with a content analysis of some of the messages of notable actors, reflection is possible about travel information as a form of social capital.

Finally, by scrutinising the measurements obtained from a network analysis of the dataset, reflection is possible on the extent to which a focus on structure can provide definitive answers about travel information exchange on a computer-mediated discussion board.

8. This study: outline, limitations and structure

8.1 Outline

With the particular aims and objectives in mind the focus of this study can be summarised as follows:

- The Internet is a medium facilitating the exchange of information using various avenues such as the World Wide Web (WWW), newsgroups, electronic bulletin boards and chatrooms.
-

- Certain avenues such as electronic bulletin boards give rise to computer-mediated social networks and facilitate the exchange of information in an asynchronous manner using text-based messages.
- Networks are characterised by differentiated communication which means that their structure can be used to reveal the nature of social ties among actors.
- Social ties are assets of social capital while travel information and other exchanges are examples of resources.

8.2 Exclusions

This study is limited to the *Thorn Tree*. Moreover, only a particular category of a specific branch is used as a dataset for purposes of analysis. Furthermore, only actors who participated in discussions (threads) can be included and not those people who only view messages. Although this study concerns computer-mediated communication and information exchange among people with a shared interest in travel, other limitations are noted, for example:

- This study is limited to network analysis. With reference to social theory, it does not explain in detail nor incorporate related theories such as rational choice theory or exchange theory.
 - A network perspective reveals aspects related to the structure of the network in which actors participate. In this study, ties are indicative of participation in threads and do not reveal anything about the actors or the content of messages. This study does not comment on the attributes of actors such as age, gender, income levels, or other biographical information.
 - It is accepted practice in network studies to incorporate qualitative measures in order to gain a better understanding for the presence or absence of ties
-

among actors. In this case, a content analysis of messages reveals something about the nature of text-based conversations in this asynchronous discussion board. However, in this study content analysis is limited to those messages that are associated with specific actors identified as examples of receivers, transmitters or sources respectively.

- Only a limited number of actors are identified and discussed and not all actors contained in this dataset. Those actors who are incorporated in this study are actors who are chosen for reasons given in Chapter Four.
 - Similarly, in the case where a two-mode network is used this study limits itself to prominent actors based on reasons for selection outlined in Chapter Four and the common threads among them.
 - Clearly, this study explores a limited number of network analytical measures and features and has no intention to explore theoretical and/or methodological debates about network analysis.
 - Although this study investigates information sharing in an online social network, it does not incorporate or explore philosophical aspects of unlimited information sharing across the world via an open medium such as the Internet.
 - This study focuses on information exchange across the Internet and does not consider any related fields associated with the Internet, such as E-commerce.
 - While this study considers travel information exchange as a resource, this example of social capital is not investigated further in terms of its effects on destination areas or the benefits travellers derive from such shared information.
 - While this study uses the *Thorn Tree* as a case study, it does not consider other similar discussion boards such as those hosted by *Rough Guides* or other avenues, for example travel-related newsgroups or synchronous channels such as chatrooms.
 - No efforts to trace actors in the physical world or attempts to conduct qualitative research through interviews or questionnaires were undertaken.
-

- The extent to which actors who are included in this dataset acted on information gleaned from the *Thorn Tree* is excluded from this study.
- This study refers to travel since members of this online discussion board share an interest in travel. However, it does not explore any theoretical or philosophical aspects of leisure studies. However, travel and tourism is considered a field of particular prominence in leisure studies.

8.3 Structure

Concluding this chapter, the layout of this thesis is outlined. An introduction to this study is given in Chapter One, while background information places the research problem, research design and methodology into perspective.

Chapter Two contains a literature overview. In this regard, emphasis is placed on concepts in the developing meta-field referred to as Internet studies. Reference is also made to scholarly works about travel information, specifically works that follow a network approach. Since information is considered a form of social capital, reference is made to works that reflect on this developing concept. Lastly, travel information exchange in digital domains is contextualised against the background of social capital.

In Chapter Three epistemological concerns and methodological aspects of social network analysis and the study of communities are outlined. Specific methodological aspects relevant to this study are discussed, including a detailed discussion of matters such as population, sampling and data collection, measurement, validity and reliability, errors and data editing.

In Chapter Four the results of a social network analysis of the *Africa* category are discussed. Results are interpreted using general descriptive statistical methods but

more specifically network analysis techniques. Regarding measurable social capital among travellers, the extent of exchanges with reference to ideas expressed by exchange theorists is assessed. Consideration is given to the influence of the network structure of this particular category and what it reveals about information flow and the role of particular actors. The Internet as a source of travel information and its capabilities to fulfil such needs, but also as a means to form social networks among people, are reviewed.

Concluding remarks are outlined in Chapter Five. Under “Summary”, a reflection is given on the lessons learnt from this research. As part of recommendations, under the sub-heading “Policy and Practice”, recommendations are done with regards to the travel and tourism industry. Suggestions for further research are outlined in the sub-section “Further research”. In the section “Discussion”, a reflection of the methodological aspects is outlined. In the sub-section “Scientific reflection” conclusions are reached with regard to the contribution this study has made by employing a network approach to the study of a computer-mediated network with a shared interest in travel.
