Centre for
Transport &
Society

SPREADING THE WORD:
A Social-Psychological Exploration of Word-of-Mouth Traveller Information in the Digital Age

Research Aims

The aims of this PhD study, funded by the ESRC and the Department for Transport, were:

- To explore the role of informal information and word-of-mouth in everyday travel behaviour;

- To identify and explore social-psychological factors which may account for word-of-mouth influences on travel behaviour;

- To study the above phenomena in the context of a real-world, interactive system delivering travel information;

- To develop recommendations on the incorporation of word-of-mouth features into a wider range of advanced traveller information systems.

Background and Rationale

The use of 'formal' travel information pertaining to costs, routes, journey times, or real-time transport disruptions, and its role in travel behaviour (for example, choice of mode, route or departure time) has been widely studied, but little is known about the part played by 'informal' information, shared through word-of-mouth amongst friends, family, colleagues and other social networks, in relation to everyday travel. Furthermore, considerable investment has been made over the last decade in the development of increasingly sophisticated 'advanced traveller information systems', delivering formal, top-down travel information, but little attention has been paid to parallel developments in the diffusion of bottom-up, user-generated information through 'electronic word-of-mouth' on the internet (acknowledged in marketing research as a growing source of influence on consumer behaviour). This thesis examined the role of word-of-mouth information diffusion within everyday travel behaviour and its emerging applications in the field of online traveller information, within a framework of social-psychological theories of behaviour and decision theory.

Methodology

The research was undertaken in two empirical phases, both employing a qualitative methodology. In Phase 1 (exploratory), in-depth interviews and focus groups were held with 24 employees and students at a large UK university, to explore their use of word-of-mouth information in planning and carrying out their first trips to the university, as well as in other trip contexts. The study sought to explore participants' perceptions of the influence of word-of-mouth on their own, and others' travel behaviour, and to draw out social psychological factors underlying these processes, informed by theories and constructs such as social learning, social identity and pro-social behaviour. In Phase 2 (applications), the initial findings were explored further through a qualitative case-study of an innovative, web-based traveller information system, entitled *Cycology,* through which 23 participants shared cycle routes and other information with one another over a period of six weeks. Data were generated through: observation of postings on the website; follow-up questionnaires and in-depth participant interviews.

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Findings

The exploratory research revealed that a high value is attributed to informal advice obtained from those with first-hand experience of a particular trip ('local knowledge'), particularly its role in improving awareness of different travel alternatives and/or improving the trip experience. The social transfer of information was found to occur through: general social interactions about travel; passive absorption of information about specific trips; and the active seeking or offering of information during the planning or execution of a trip. General interactions about travel (for example, appraising the experience of using a particular transport mode), whilst not necessarily perceived as travel information, appeared to be influencing beliefs and attitudes, and shaping the psychological context in which travel choices might later be made. When trips were being actively planned or executed, word-of-mouth was thought to play a complementary role to formal information in the decision-making process, and was reported to have had a direct influence on trip details (e.g. route or departure time), but was less likely to affect participants' modal choice.

'Local knowledge' was deemed trustworthy primarily because it was based on the informant's direct experience (an instrumental-reasoned explanation), but perceived trustworthiness could also be improved by social-psychological factors such as social proximity, group-identification and accepted norms of behaviour. When information was provided to others, factors such as empathy and reciprocity, both facets of pro-social behaviour, were common. These themes were explored in relation to all the common forms of everyday transport, but information about cycling emerged as an area of particular interest, and was selected as a focus for the second phase.

Phase 2 (applications) set out both to validate the earlier findings within the context of a real-world traveller information system, and to explore certain findings in greater depth - in particular, the ways in which social norms and social identities around travel are established or reinforced in peer-groups through word-of-mouth interactions, and help to explain interpersonal influences on behaviour. Interactions on the *Cycology* website were found to have influenced participants in a number of ways, ranging from a tangible effect on behaviour in the form of people using routes suggested by others on the website, to the strengthening of pro-cycling attitudes, to more subtle psychological effects on the way in which people experienced their commute. A key finding was the role which the case-study system played in building a sense of 'community' (group identification) amongst its users. This was linked to high levels of trust and pro-social behaviour amongst group members, which both reinforced positive views of cycling as a commuter mode, and increased people's propensity to act on information from others through a process of referent social influence.

Potential Benefits

This research led to an expansion of existing theory through the proposed incorporation of additional 'social factors' into established models of information use. Practical recommendations from the research concerned ways in which developments in 'social media' might be combined more widely with online, map-based traveller information, particularly route-planning tools, potentially enhancing the perceived reliability (and influence) of such systems, and, consequently, their effectiveness as a transport policy tool.

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