

# **An Exploratory Study on the Use of Information Sources by Consumers to Select Australian Regional Travel Agencies**

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Eric Ng

**ABSTRACT.** This research investigates the information sources consumers used to select regional travel agencies to make their travel arrangements. The research design involves two stages, in-depth interviews with 13 participants and a mail-out survey of 400. The in-depth interviews highlighted the need to remove three particular information sources (travel guidebooks, travel or automotive clubs and local tourist offices) for inclusion in the mail-out survey and replaced with two other information sources (television lifestyle programs and travel consultants) worthy of investigation. The mail-out survey revealed that *personal experience* was the most important information source used in the selection of a regional travel agency whilst *yellow pages* were identified as the least influential. The findings highlighted the relative importance of the 11 information sources investigated and also suggested that informal sources were more important than formal sources when consumers search for information sources to assist them with their selection of the travel agencies to patronise.

**KEYWORDS.** Regional Australia, travel agency selection, travel information sources, consumers

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The evolution of the internet has signified a need to rethink the intermediary role of travel agencies where their future may be eliminated in the electronic environment. Research on the impact of the internet on travel agencies has mainly focused on the future of the travel agencies as a viable business with the key threat of disintermediation from the distribution channel (Law, Leung & Wong, 2004; Lewis, Semeijn & Talalayevsky, 1998). The internet and the use of on-line search facilities for travel information have provided consumers with additional sources of information and opportunities to search for and purchase travel products direct from suppliers such as airlines and accommodation providers without recourse to travel agents (Buhalis, 1998) and in some cases at discounts to prices available through travel agencies by eliminating commissions for such agents (example such as the Flight Centre). In addition, the internet has the capability to promote and provide information very conveniently and quickly, has provided alternatives to physical visits by consumers to travel agencies in order to access such information (Buhalis, 1998). Thus, the need to understand how consumers acquire information for businesses to make marketing related decisions is now more important than before, and this is particularly evident in the travel and tourism industry (Srinivasan, 1990; Wilkie & Dickson, 1985).

The travel and tourism industry is service oriented in nature and the travel products are generally associated with intangible personal service, involving personal interactions between consumers and service providers such as travel consultants or agencies (Lovelock & Wright, 1999; Normann, 1996). Furthermore, travel products usually induce high personal involvement and investment into time, effort and financial resources (Lambert, 1998).

The travel and tourism industry has historically played an important role in Australia's economy and in the year 2004-2005, the inbound tourism had accounted for approximately \$8.1 billion of the total gross domestic product (GDP), which saw an increase of 5.5 per cent from the previous year (Tourism Australia, 2007). Furthermore, tourism's gross value added (GVA) in Australia was up by 19 per cent while tourism exports were up by 35 per cent in six years from the year 1998 to 2004 (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, 2006a). Tourism is also regarded as an important economic contributor to many regions of Australia that had brought in approximately \$30 billion to regional Australia in the year 2004, and of which domestic visitors contributed around \$28 billion (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, 2006b). The travel agency sector in Australia can be classified into three main categories; namely retailers, wholesalers/ticket consolidators, and inbound tour operators. In June 2004, there were 2640 businesses whose core activity was the provision of travel agency services and of which, 90.8 per cent (2396) of the businesses were engaged in the retailing of travel products (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The total income generated by travel agencies in the year 2003-2004 was \$2108.9m, and of which 91.8 per cent (\$1935.1m) was earned directly from the sale of travel products (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Retail travel agency businesses accounted for 72.8 per cent (\$1534.9m) of the income generated by all travel agencies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The major source of income for retail travel agencies was ticket sales of \$1334.4m, which represents 86.9 per cent of their total income of \$1534.9m (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). On the whole, businesses providing travel agency services had recorded an operating profit before tax of \$333.1m for the 2003-2004 financial year, this represented an operating profit margin of 17 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). However, this profit margin varied by type of travel agency and the retail travel agencies had an operating profit margin of 14.1 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

In June 2004, the travel agency sector employed a total of 22 609 people and of which 17 534 (77.6 per cent) of the total employment served in retail travel agencies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Approximately 95 per cent (2518) of travel agency businesses employed fewer than 20 persons and these businesses accounted for 45.1 per cent of employment and 32.4 per cent of income for all travel agency businesses (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). In contrast, large businesses employing 100 or more persons accounted for only 0.6 per cent of all businesses but contributed 37.5 per cent to total employment and 48.2 per cent to total income (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

There is an apparent lack of research into the effects of these changes in the industry, particularly in the Australian regional context, and about the information sources which consumers used to select travel agencies. The research findings should assist conventional travel agencies in identifying the key information sources that consumers used to select regional travel agencies.

The research in this paper seeks to identify *the information sources consumers used to select Australian regional travel agencies* and the results will determine their relative importance.

This will enable regional travel agencies to make marketing related decisions on how to counter threats from on-line specialist providers and improve their presence and awareness to consumers by better positioning themselves in the marketplace.

This paper begins by reviewing the literature relevant to the research issue and then discusses the methodology including the data collection techniques used in researching this issue. Next the analysis of data is described and then the findings presented. These are followed by the conclusions drawn from the research, the implications from these and finally suggestions for further research are drawn.

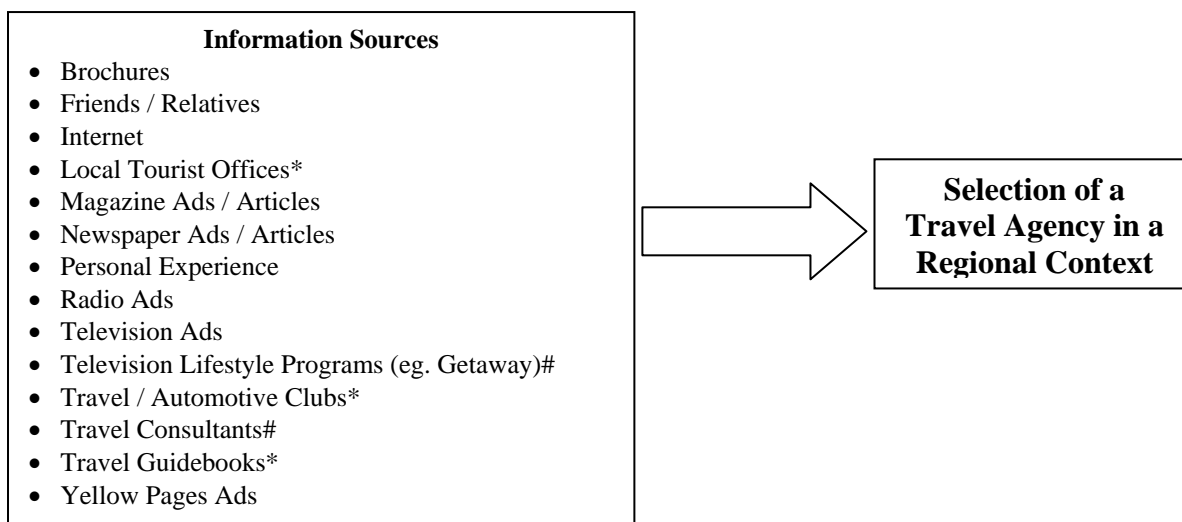
## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A travel agency is regarded as a firm qualified to arrange for travel related retail services (such as hotel rooms, meals, transportation, cruises, tours, and other travel requirements) on behalf of various tourism industry principals (Goldblatt & Nelson, 2001). Traditionally, the role of the travel agencies includes three main tasks. Firstly, to perform the function of information broker (Lewis et al., 1998) passing information between buyers and suppliers, that includes specialised information on destinations and other travel related information. Secondly, as tour planners to provide travel advice and organise tour plans for consumers, including transportation, accommodation and tour packages (Dickman, 1989). Lastly, as intermediaries to act as sales agents for their products, where suppliers had become heavily reliant on them for distribution to process transactions, airline reservations, ticketing, market coverage and presence, and packaging.

Current literature shows that there are limited studies on travel agencies in a regional context, which is the key focus of this paper. Nevertheless, travel agencies have been regarded as critical information and planning or booking providers for a large number of travellers (Buhalis, 1998; Buhalis & Deimezi, 2003; Duke & Persia, 1993; Mihalik, Uysal & Pan, 1995). Other studies have also investigated several different aspects of travel agencies, such as information technology needs (Bennett, 1993; Buhalis, 1998; Buhalis & Deimezi, 2003), travel agent's role in family decision-making (Wang, Hsieh, Yeh & Tsai, 2004), advertising strategies (Laskey, Seaton & Nicholls, 1994), the more effective use of relationship marketing (Bennett, 1993; Richter, 1996) and the selection attributes of travel agencies (Buhalis, 1998; Meidan, 1979; Ng, Cassidy & Brown, 2006; Oppermann, 1998; Persia & Gitelson, 1993).

Although studies (for example Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1999; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Mathur, Sherman & Schiffman, 1998; Pearce & Schott, 2005; Perdue, 1993; Snepenger, Meged, Snelling & Worrall, 1990; Van Raaij & Francken, 1984) had been conducted on travel information search in general, however, very few studies have been carried out in Australia (particularly in the South-East Queensland region), specifically to investigate into the information sources used for selecting travel agencies. Based on the literature, a preliminary framework (Figure 1) was developed and derived from these previous travel information search studies which had investigated into different types of information sources.

FIGURE 1: Preliminary Framework of Information Sources Used in the Selection of an Australian Regional Travel Agency



Note: Based on the in-depth interview findings, information sources with a (\*) were not regarded as important to the selection of a travel agency in the Australian regional context whilst information sources with a (#) were added to the framework as important to the selection of a travel agency.

Information sources that consumers might use to assist in their selecting of travel agencies could vary and might differ in accordance to decision making situations. Studies have investigated models of information search behaviour and information source usage in different situations (for example Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Dodd, Laverie, Wilcox & Duhan, 2005; Fodness & Murray, 1999; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Whilst there is no single unique classification system for information sources, they can generally be classified as: (a) internal and external sources, (b) personal and impersonal sources, (c) informal and formal sources, and (d) commercial and non-commercial sources (for example Crotts, 1999; Dodd et al., 2005; Fodness & Murray, 1997; Raitz & Dakhil, 1989). The literature also highlighted that information sources might be more important in consumer's decision process when the product or service is regarded as expensive and complex in nature (Ozanne, Brucks & Grewal, 1992; Urbany, Dickson & Wilkie, 1989).

The literature suggested that *personal experience* is one of the most common strategies for consumers to use as a passive or internal information search in their decision making process and is often regarded as the consumer's first choice of information source (Andereck, 2005; Crompton, 1992; Fodness & Murray, 1999; Um & Crompton, 1990). This internal information derived from past experience and knowledge, depending on the nature and the extent of these previous travel experiences could potentially influence consumer's future travel behaviour, including the choice of travel agency (Mazursky, 1989).

Word-of-mouth from *friends and relatives* was often perceived as a trustworthy and credible source of information (Andereck, Vogt & LeClerc, 2003; Noor, Hashim, Haron & Ariffin, 2005; Rao, Thomas & Javalgi, 1992). Individuals were likely to seek information, opinions

and suggestions from their friends and relatives, to assist them in making a decision as to which travel agency to patronise. Findings from previous studies (such as Fodness & Murray, 1998; Pocock, 1992) had suggested that consumers have traditionally used non-directed public information sources such as *newspapers*, *magazines*, *television*, *radio* and *yellow pages*, to obtain travel related information. This was further supported by a recent study that revealed television, newspapers, magazines and radio as the top media ad spending in Australia (Veldre, 2005).

The development of the *internet* had also prompted an increasing number of studies (for example Hanna & Millar, 1997; Law, 2005; Tjostheim & Tronvoll, 2002) that consider its role in the information search process for travel agencies. Findings in several studies (for example Bonn, Furr & Susskind, 1998; Marcussen, 1997) suggested that it was critical that tourism organisations exploit the internet in their marketing mixes as a result of its many advantages (such as global accessibility, convenience in updating, real-time information). Despite the rapid emergence of travel information technology, the *brochure* remains as a popular and frequently used information source (Andereck et al., 2003; Fodness & Murray, 1999; Zhou, 1997). Brochures were not only used to assist consumers in planning their trips and as a reference during the trip (Wicks & Schuett, 1991) but they also served as an information source in their selection of a travel agency.

Finally, *travel guidebooks*, *travel or automotive clubs* and *local tourist offices* (Andereck et al., 2003; Fesenmaier & Vogt, 1993; Tierney, 1993) were also perceived as valuable information sources to consumers when they sought for travel related information. However, the effectiveness of these three sources was still uncertain, particularly when used to select a travel agency.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research was designed primarily to overcome a lack of prior research directly related to the research problem. Due to the apparent lack of research literature about travel agencies operating in regional settings and the consequent absence of empirically tested models, it was deemed necessary to develop propositions about the research issue. Therefore a two-stage process was adopted, firstly interviews were conducted with key stakeholders amongst travel agencies in the regional Australia in order to determine the relevance of the current literature about the information sources consumers used in the selection of travel agencies in regional settings and also to identify other issues which might be specific to travel agencies in such settings. In the second stage, a mail-out survey using information gathered from the first stage was conducted.

### In-Depth Interviews

The adoption of in-depth interviews in this stage of the research was based on two grounds: collecting interview data and the need for flexibility. Firstly, in-depth interviews are regarded as one of the more appropriate techniques in exploratory research for *collecting inductive data* and since knowledge and understanding in this research area is limited, this is an appropriate technique (Connell & Lowe, 1997; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995). This technique not only allows the interviewer to gather preliminary information about the research topic but more specifically to gain insights and understanding regarding the research objectives (Jones, 1985; Kumar, 2005). Secondly, in-depth interviews also provide the *flexibility* to allow the interviewer to modify, drop or add propositions in response to evidence from the interviewees, particularly in relation to information sources

that influence the selection of a travel agency (Jones, 1985; Minichiello et al., 1995). Thus, the interviewer is able to acquire a more valuable outcome through the use of this technique.

This stage of the research process comprised 13 in-depth interviews with five frequent travellers, five occasional travellers and three experienced travel agency consultants, where questions were asked to investigate the appropriateness of those information sources identified in the preliminary framework and from the literature reviewed. The selection of these 13 interviewees was based on judgemental sampling, where they were chosen through personal contacts or references from peers or colleagues (Malhotra, 1996; Patton, 1990). These interviews were semi-structured in nature where the discussion was flexible and informal, thus allowing the interviewer to gain an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' experiences, opinions and attitudes towards those information sources used in the selection of a travel agency in a regional context. Additional insights from interviewees were sought and the following objectives were also addressed.

- To determine the relevance of the current literature about the research issue in the Australian regional context;
- identify and evaluate information sources which existing travel agencies need to concentrate on in order to retain existing customers and attract new customers; and
- assist in the questionnaire design and hypotheses to be developed for the second stage of this research.

### **Mail-Out Survey**

Stage two of the research was conducted in the form of a mail-out questionnaire survey and was justified on two bases: geographical stratification and anonymity. Firstly, this research has a target sample population that is widely dispersed in the metropolitan area and surrounding region of the Darling Downs (Fowler, 2002). Thus, it was more cost effective and efficient to administer the questionnaire by mail. Secondly, for reasons of confidentiality and privacy, respondents could remain anonymous through this mail administration process since they could not be matched to those questionnaires they had completed (Fowler, 2002). Although a lower response rate is a major disadvantage of using the mail-out questionnaire survey, this issue was addressed by prior telephone screening for appropriate and interested participants for the mail-out survey. Furthermore, the use of a well-designed questionnaire and incentives were offered, to ensure a higher response rate could be achieved.

The mail-out questionnaire survey was distributed to 400 travel agency users to further investigate those information sources identified in the in-depth interviews and the literature. Respondents were randomly selected from a local travel agency's database as well as the local telephone book. The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire distributed by the researcher after it was pre-tested with 10 respondents. Prior to the mail-out and to ensure the adequate well design of the questionnaire, some minor changes were made to the questionnaire based on the feedbacks received from the 10 respondents who had pre-tested it. The questionnaires were returned via a reply paid envelope. The questionnaire was structured into three sections that consisted of 20 questions, aimed at addressing relevant issues and providing data to the following research objectives:

- to identify the information sources by which travel agency users used to select regional travel agencies,
- to determine the relative importance of those information sources used in the selection of a regional travel agency.

## Data Analysis

This research utilised the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program, in particular the use of non-parametric techniques (such as the chi-square test and Wilcoxon Signed-Ranked test) to conduct the analysis. The justification for the use of non-parametric relates to the small sample size and the fact that normality was not established in the population distribution (Krebs, 1989). Each of these data analysis techniques is now described.

Chi-square test was used to determine if differences in frequency exist across response categories (Coakes & Steed, 2007). In this research, this test was used to analyse the respondent's demographic profiles and determine if there were any significant differences between these demographic variables (such as gender, age group and household income) in response to the information sources. On the other hand, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranked test was used to test the magnitude of difference between a pair of information sources where an alpha value indicating less than 0.05 denotes significant difference between the information sources (Coakes & Steed, 2007). In addition, frequency distribution was used to analyse the demographic and information sources data. Cross tabulation reveals a more concise portrayal of the data captured.

## FINDINGS

Findings from the in-depth interviews revealed some changes to the preliminary framework. Three information sources (travel guidebooks, travel or automotive clubs and local tourist offices) could possibly be excluded from the preliminary framework since they were not mentioned by any of the in-depth interviewees. In contrast, two additional information sources (television lifestyle programs and travel consultants) could be included in the framework for further investigation in the second stage of the research as they were mentioned by more than 50 per cent of the interviewees. The information sources from the in-depth interviews were then used in stage two of this research to determine their relative importance in the selection of a travel agency in a regional context.

The second stage of the research achieved a response rate of approximately 54 per cent with 217 responses received from a total of 400 surveys that were sent out. The respondents were predominantly more female (63.6 per cent) than male (36.4 per cent) with the majority of them married (64 per cent) and reported as having no dependents (approximately 60 per cent) in their household. The age groups and qualifications obtained in the responses were evenly spread across their respective categories, except for the under 24 years age group, where it registered only 10 per cent of the responses. The annual household income groups were also relatively wide and evenly spread in the responses with only three per cent of the sample indicated their earnings of above AUD\$100 000. Table 1 provides a brief summary of the demographic profiles of the respondents.

**TABLE 1:** Summary of the Demographic Profiles

Demographic Profiles	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender:</b>		
Male	79	36.4%
Female	138	63.6%
<b>Marital Status:</b>		
Single	29	13.35%



Defacto	12	5.55%
Married	139	64.05%
Divorced	14	6.45%
Widowed	23	10.65%
<b>Dependents Living Together:</b>		
No	130	59.85%
Yes – One Child	36	16.65%
Yes – Two Children	32	15.25%
Yes – Three or More Children	18	8.25%
<b>Age:</b>		
Under 18	4	1.85%
18-24	17	7.9%
25-34	26	21.15%
35-44	40	18.45%
45-54	44	20.2%
55-64	34	15.7%
65 and Over	31	14.3%
<b>Qualification:</b>		
Junior Certificate	63	29%
Senior Certificate	47	21.7%
Diploma	32	14.75%
Degree / Post Graduate	61	28.1%
Others	9	4.1%
<b>Household Income:</b>		
Under \$25,000	30	13.85%
\$25,000 - \$34,999	52	23.95%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	50	23.1%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	45	20.7%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	25	11.5%
\$100,000 or More	7	3.2%

Source: developed for this research

The survey investigated the 11 information sources; namely brochures, friends and relatives, internet, magazine ads and articles, newspaper ads and articles, personal experience, radio ads, television ads, television lifestyle programs, travel consultants and yellow pages ads, identified in the in-depth interview stage. The findings suggested that *personal experience* was the most important information source whilst *yellow pages* were the least important. Table 2 briefly illustrates the frequency distribution of the information sources used to select a travel agency in a regional context.

**TABLE 2:** Frequency Distribution of the Information Sources

Information Sources	NI	SI	I	VI	EI
Personal Experiences	2 (0.9%)	6 (2.8%)	44 (20.3%)	67 (30.9%)	98 (45.2%)

Travel Consultants	13 (6.0%)	20 (9.2%)	59 (27.2%)	58 (26.7%)	67 (30.9%)
Friends / Relatives	31 (14.3%)	33 (15.2%)	62 (28.6%)	57 (26.3%)	34 (15.7%)
Television Lifestyle Programs	48 (22.1%)	40 (18.4%)	68 (31.3%)	47 (21.7%)	14 (6.5%)
Internet	36 (16.6%)	52 (24.0%)	77 (35.5%)	34 (15.7%)	18 (8.3%)
Newspaper Ads / Articles	54 (24.9%)	57 (26.3%)	72 (33.2%)	22 (10.1%)	12 (5.5%)
Magazine Ads / Articles	61 (28.1%)	61 (28.1%)	72 (33.2%)	18 (8.3%)	5 (2.3%)
Television Ads	72 (33.2%)	64 (29.5%)	57 (26.3%)	19 (8.8%)	5 (2.3%)
Radio Ads	87 (40.1%)	51 (23.5%)	59 (27.2%)	15 (6.9%)	5 (2.3%)
Brochures	103 (47.5%)	61 (28.1%)	35 (16.1%)	13 (6.0%)	5 (2.3%)
Yellow Pages Ads	135 (62.2%)	36 (16.6%)	31 (14.3%)	13 (6.0%)	2 (0.9%)

Source: developed for this research

Note: NI – Not important, SI – Slightly important, I – Important, VI – Very important, EI – Extremely important

The most important information source used in the selection of a travel agency was *personal experience* where approximately 96 per cent of the respondents (ie 208 respondents out of a possible of 217) supported it. This information source was regarded as critical by these respondents (with a mean score of 4.17 out of a possible 5) as they believed that this internal information which derived from their past experience and knowledge could impact either positively or negatively on their choice of travel agency to patronise in the future. Furthermore it was argued that where things are more convenient, they are more likely to be used (Dodd et al., 2005) and in this study, the convenience of accessing this information source together with its highly reliable first-hand experience would have contributed to its importance.

*Yellow pages* were identified as the least important information source by the respondents (approximately 21 per cent, with a mean score of 1.67 out of a possible 5) when selecting a travel agency in a regional context since these respondents suggested that this information source was not a key source for them to consider when selecting their choice of a travel agency. Table 3 briefly illustrates the relative importance of the various information sources used to select a travel agency in a regional context and also indicates if significant difference exists between a pair of information sources.

**TABLE 3:** Relative Importance of the Information Sources and the Magnitude of Difference Between a Pair of Information Source Variables

Information Sources	Mean (1= Not Important, 5= Extremely Important)	Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test	
Personal Experiences	4.17	0.000*	0.000*
Travel Consultants	3.67		
Friends / Relatives	3.14	0.000*	NS
Television Lifestyle Programs	2.70		
Internet	2.68	0.000*	NS
Newspaper Ads / Articles	2.44		

Magazine Ads / Articles	2.28	NS	NS
Television Ads	2.17		
Radio Ads	2.08	0.003*	0.014*
Brochures	1.88		
Yellow Pages Ads	1.67		

Source: developed for this research

Note: NS refers to no significant difference between information sources. Whilst (\*) denotes a significant difference between information sources.

Overall, respondents were consistent in their responses to the importance of the different information sources used when selecting their travel agency. Although findings (as indicated in Table 3 column 3) showed no significant differences between (1) television lifestyle programs and the internet, (2) newspaper ads and articles and magazine ads and articles, (3) magazine ads and articles and television ads, and (4) television ads and radio ads, but did reveal notable significant differences between some information sources, namely (1) personal experiences and travel consultants, (2) travel consultants and friends and relatives, (3) friends and relatives and television lifestyle programs, (4) internet and newspaper ads and articles, (5) radio ads and brochures, and (6) brochures and yellow pages ads.

In addition, there were also notable differences between gender, age and household income groups. In the gender group, it was noted that male respondents favour the use of the *internet* as an information source whilst female respondents were more likely to be using *newspaper ads* and *articles*. On the other hand, respondents in the age group between 25 to 34 would regard the *internet* as a more important information source while respondents in the age group between 35 to 44 and 55 to 64 would prefer *television lifestyle programs* and *television ads* respectively. In the household income group, respondents with a household income of \$35,000 to \$49,999 would seek information from *friends and relatives* when selecting a travel agency whereas respondents with a household income of \$50,000 to \$74,999 would prefer information source such as the *internet* and *television lifestyle programs*. *Magazine ads* and *articles* were the desired information source for respondents with a household income of \$75,000 to \$99,999. The differences in these respective groups were briefly illustrated in tables 4, 5 and 6. The variation could be explained by respondents' overall level of travel experiences and also their attitudes and perceptions towards travel information search and sources.

**TABLE 4:** Relative Importance of Information Sources Used in the Selection of a Travel Agency: Mann-Whitney Test of Difference Between Male and Female

Information Sources	Mann-Whitney Test of Difference
Personal Experiences	NS
Travel Consultants	NS
Friends / Relatives	NS
Television Lifestyle Programs	NS
Internet	0.022*
Newspaper Ads / Articles	0.038*
Magazine Ads / Articles	NS
Television Ads	NS

Radio Ads	NS
Brochures	NS
Yellow Pages Ads	NS

Source: developed for this research

Note: NS refers to no significant difference between male and female. Whilst (\*) denotes a significant difference between male and female.

**TABLE 5:** Relative Importance of Information Sources Used in the Selection of a Travel Agency: Kruskal-Wallis Test of Difference Between Age Groups

Information Sources	Kruskal-Wallis Test
Personal Experiences	NS
Travel Consultants	NS
Friends / Relatives	NS
Television Lifestyle Programs	0.028*
Internet	0.000*
Newspaper Ads / Articles	NS
Magazine Ads / Articles	NS
Television Ads	0.001*
Radio Ads	NS
Brochures	NS
Yellow Pages Ads	NS

Source: developed for this research

Note: NS refers to no significant difference between age groups. Whilst (\*) denotes a significant difference between age groups.

**TABLE 6:** Relative Importance of Information Sources Used in the Selection of a Travel Agency: Kruskal-Wallis Test of Difference Between Household Income Group

Information Sources	Kruskal-Wallis Test
Personal Experiences	NS
Travel Consultants	NS
Friends / Relatives	0.040*
Television Lifestyle Programs	0.000*
Internet	0.028*
Newspaper Ads / Articles	NS
Magazine Ads / Articles	0.006*
Television Ads	NS
Radio Ads	NS
Brochures	NS
Yellow Pages Ads	NS

Source: developed for this research

Note: NS refers to no significant difference between household income groups. Whilst (\*) denotes a significant difference between household income groups.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

In conclusion, this paper investigated 11 information sources that consumers used to assist in their choice of travel agencies in an Australian regional setting. The survey results showed that personal experience was the most important information source used to select a regional travel agency whilst yellow pages were regarded as the least influential in the selection process.

The findings (as shown in Table 3) highlighted the relative importance of those information sources and provided consumers with a list of sources for which they could use to assist in their selection of a travel agency. From this study, consumers are able to consider the relevance of these information sources (in accordance to their differing situations) and determine the essential sources that require further consideration during their selection process.

On the other hand, the findings could also assist travel agency managers to evaluate and determine the most appropriate information sources for which they believed their advertising money would be most adequately spent and justified upon. For example, it appeared that informal sources (such as personal experience, travel consultants, and friends and relatives) were more important than formal sources (such as television lifestyle programs, newspaper and magazine ads and articles) when consumers search for information sources to decide on the travel agencies to patronise. Knowing this, managers could possibly focus their marketing efforts on the informal sources so as to more effectively target their markets and consumers, thus increasing their patronage traffic. In addition, through market segmentation (via gender, age and household income groups) managers could focus and utilise the most appropriate and effective information sources to deliver their marketing messages to their targeted market segments. For instance in gender segmentation, it would be more effective for managers to use the internet as an information source on males while the use of newspapers ads and articles would be considered as more appropriate information sources for females. When targeting different age groups, managers should consider the internet as a more useful information source for age group between 25 to 34 and should concentrate their marketing efforts on television lifestyle programs and television ads for age groups between 35 to 44 and 55 to 64 respectively. Managers segmenting their markets by household income should place greater marketing emphasis on friends and relatives as information sources for income group of \$35,000 to \$49,999 whereas the use of the internet and television lifestyle programs would be more effective on income group of \$50,000 to \$74,999. Conversely, the use of magazine ads and articles as information sources would potentially achieve greater success in the higher income group of \$75,000 to \$99,999.

The findings of this research has also added new insights to the existing literature of travel information search with the identification of two additional information sources (television lifestyle programs and travel consultants) that travel agency users used in their selection of a travel agency.

## **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study investigated only the Darling Downs region in Queensland, Australia and therefore the findings could not be generalised to the population at large. A more representative sampling population should be sought to generalise the findings and be tested in another Australian regional setting. The findings from this study could be further investigated in a business organisation context where comparisons to the findings could be

made to determine if any significance existed between individual consumers and business organisations on the information sources that impact on the selection of travel agencies in regional settings.

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