

ABSTRACT

IYENGAR, JENNIFER HICE. Knowledge Dissemination in Rural Tourism Networks. (Under the direction of Erin Seekamp).

Rural tourism development is often promoted as an alternative source of economic growth in agriculture dependent areas. Some counties are equipped to support tourism entrepreneurs through existing economic development agencies; however, not all counties have the necessary resources to provide dedicated tourism support. To effectively distribute information in counties throughout North Carolina, support agency staff need to understand how information flows through tourism entrepreneur networks and what the critical factors are when disseminating their services using these networks.

This qualitative study examined perceptions of support networks in and knowledge flows through two rural NC counties, one with (Franklin County, NC) and one without (Hoke County, NC) formal tourism support services. Data generated during 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews (3 support agency staff; 12 tourism entrepreneurs), connections between homogenous entrepreneurs and the role of trust in the dissemination of tacit and explicit knowledge were evaluated. No clear networks were found in either county, likely related to limited resources within county support agencies; data suggest more similarities than differences in terms of knowledge exchange between the entrepreneurs in the two counties. However, more linkages were identified among agritourism entrepreneurs based on shared tacit agricultural knowledge and participation in an annual farm tour. All explicit tourism knowledge shared came from business associations such as the Agritourism Networking Association. To provide improved support with limited resources, tourism support agencies need to identify and utilize existing opinion leaders and emerging tourism

initiatives in their county. These linkages may allow them to develop positive relationships with a broader group of small scale businesses. Developing materials that are both pertinent and trusted will require closer interaction with different business sectors and appropriate responses to their needs. Future research is necessary to identify what network characteristics are found in counties with more established tourism development.

Knowledge Dissemination in Rural Tourism Networks

by
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DEDICATION

To my wonderful parents who provided the support and food necessary to complete this degree. And to my amazing husband for providing all the words my brain couldn't come up with during those late nights of writing.

BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Hice Iyengar was born and raised in Raleigh, NC. Her mother, Teresa, and father, John are also the parents of one younger sibling, Benjamin. She married Ravi Iyengar in 2011 and lives in Raleigh with their two dogs and two cats. She graduated from Raleigh Charter High School in 2003 and obtained a B.A. in Spanish from NC State University in 2007. After three years of experience in the field, she returned to NC State for her B.S. in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management. While there, she completed a five month internship with a winery just outside Salem, Oregon, cementing her love of wine tourism and agritourism. On completion of her B.S in 2012 she elected to pursue her M.S in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management to gain a more in depth understanding of small-scale rural tourism businesses and their needs.

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LIST OF KEY WORDS AND ACRONYMS

Best Practices	A common segment of knowledge shared between organizations that can include both tacit and explicit knowledge.
Bonding Ties	The connections within a homogeneous group of similar individuals.
Bridging Ties	The connections that link heterogeneous groups of individuals who might not otherwise interact due to factors such as geography, education levels, socioeconomic status, or language.
Chamber of Commerce	A business federation representing companies and business associations who pay a fee to become members.
Change Agent	An individual who works to initiate social change and plays a major role in that process.
CES	Cooperative Extension Service; A partnership between county governments and land grant universities designed to provide individuals and communities access to research.
Destination	A place that people will make a special trip to visit.
Diffusion of Innovation	A theoretical framework developed by Rogers (2003) used for understanding knowledge flow and adoption of best practices.
Explicit Knowledge	Knowledge that is easily recorded and shared.
Heterogeneous Groups	Individuals with different sociodemographic backgrounds.

Homogeneous Groups	Individuals with similar sociodemographic backgrounds.
Opinion Leader	An individual who is respected by community members as a decision maker and source of new ideas, and who can connect groups inside and outside the community.
SMEs	Small to Medium Enterprises; Businesses that employ 40 or less individuals.
Social Network Analysis	An analytical framework used to conceptualize, visualize, and analyze networks of rural tourism entrepreneurs developed by Jacob Moreno (1934).
Tacit Knowledge	Knowledge that is necessary to learn through personal experimentation.
TALC	Tourism Area Life Cycle; A conceptual model demonstrating the development of a tourism destination and the effects on the local inhabitants developed by Richard Butler (1980).
Tourism Support Agency	An organization dedicated to providing assistance to businesses for tourism development.
TDA	Tourism Development Agency/Authority; An organization in charge of tourism development generally dependent on funds from accommodation taxes.
Trust	The amount an individual feels an organization or individual will carry out their responsibilities, share or respect their values, and adhere to a moral code.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As agriculture and manufacturing jobs decline in North Carolina (NC), rural tourism development is often promoted as an alternative source of economic growth (Breidenhann & Wickens, 2004; Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000). Some counties are equipped to support tourism entrepreneurs through existing economic development agencies such as Tourism Development Agencies (TDAs) and Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs). However, not all counties have these agencies and tourism entrepreneurs are looking to the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) – an agency with a historic agricultural presence in all NC Counties – to provide these services. To effectively distribute information in counties throughout NC, CES staff needs to understand how information flows through tourism entrepreneur networks.

Although there has been a great deal of research on diffusion of knowledge, network analysis, and rural tourism, there has been much less research looking at knowledge transfer within rural tourism networks (Shaw & Williams, 2009; Fleischer et al., 2000) and the implications of knowledge transfer within these networks for support agencies. Without this information, tourism support agencies may not be making the best decisions about how to codify and distribute their materials and services. Each network and situation is distinctive, which makes it important to identify the core patterns and themes of knowledge transfer without oversimplifying the networks being studied.

Research demonstrates that rural tourism networks are primarily composed of small to medium enterprises (SMEs; Fleischer et al., 2000), and that it is necessary for these businesses to work together to create a successful product to attract visitors (Halme &

Fadeeva, 2000). SMEs are defined as businesses with 40 or fewer employees (Dudensing, Hughes, & Shields, 2011). To develop partnerships between SMEs, a level of trust is necessary (Bodin & Crona, 2009), which is more likely to occur between homogenous individuals than between heterogeneous individuals (Rogers, 2003). However, information shared between homogenous individuals rarely introduces new ideas to the network whereas sharing between heterogeneous individuals allows new ideas and information to reach that individual as well as their primary contacts (Levin & Cross, 2004; Rogers, 2003). To enhance information flow into homogeneous groups, it is often important for organizations to connect with specific individuals in the community who are trusted by a majority of community members and open to new ideas. These opinion leaders filter new ideas into homogeneous groups allowing for growth and innovation (Rogers, 2003). Understanding how to identify the most effective opinion leaders and how to best disseminate information through their networks allows agencies to better meet the needs of the communities they serve.

To develop this understanding, I examined how tacit (e.g., experiential knowledge) and explicit (e.g., codified) knowledge flow between support agencies and entrepreneurs, and within and between groups of entrepreneurs (Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008). My research goal was to examine how rural tourism networks are organized and utilized by tourism entrepreneurs and support agencies. Specifically, I contextualized knowledge transfer using diffusion of innovation and social network analysis to answer the following questions:

- How does tourism knowledge flow through rural tourism networks?

- What are the critical factors for support agencies when disseminating their services using these networks?

Diffusion of innovation is a theoretical framework used for understanding knowledge flow and adoption of best practices (Rogers, 2003). Social network analysis is an analytical framework used to conceptualize, visualize, and analyze networks of rural tourism entrepreneurs (Scott et al., 2008). Both conceptual frameworks have been applied using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Although quantitative studies can enable generalization of findings, the explanations for their findings tend to look at the surface questions of ‘who’ and ‘what’ rather than the deeper questions of ‘why’ and ‘how’ (Tinsley & Lynch, 2001) and require sufficient evidence from previous research to construct valid and reliable instruments (Patton, 2002). Therefore, given the exploratory nature of my study and my goal of gaining a better understanding of how individuals interact within rural tourism networks, I employed qualitative research methods.

Personal Background

Before I introduce the literature and theoretical frameworks of this study, I feel it is important to provide information on my own background, which influenced both my topic of study and my methods and interpretations of this data. I was raised in a rural setting outside an urban center. My mother worked for the Soil and Water Conservation District, raising me around farmers with emphasis on environmentally friendly agriculture practices. We owned and operated a small organic farm for five years, selling our produce at the farmers market in the nearby city.

Once in college my interest in small scale, rural tourism grew during an internship with a small winery in Oregon. Recognizing the challenges faced by many of the small tourism businesses in the area, I entered graduate school with the goal of understanding and developing materials to respond to these challenges. My part-time assistantship with Tourism Extension allowed me to attain those goals, while providing direction for this thesis.

All of these factors had some influence on my research questions, the questions developed for my interview protocol, the interviews themselves, and my interpretation of the findings. It is important as researchers to recognize our own biases in order to address them as we conduct research. I kept regular memos throughout this process, not only about the individuals I interviewed, but also my own thoughts and their effects on my interpretations and reactions. This helped when writing the findings section to ensure I was interpreting their words, not my thoughts.

Thesis Overview

The remainder of my thesis is organized into four chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of previous literature, developing the main ideas and terminology, as well as the theoretical and methodological background of this study. Chapter 3 provides a description of the methods and data analyses used in this study, as well as a description of the study location and participants. Chapter 4 comprises the study's results, introducing the key findings broken down by theme. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings and ties them in with the existing literature as well as a discussion of the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research. This chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and presents implications for both support agencies and tourism entrepreneurs.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge Flow

Previous research has looked at the bonds, or linkages that delineate how society functions. These linkages allow knowledge to travel between and within groups (Shaw et al., 2009). They also provide a chance to study how knowledge (Scott et al., 2008) and innovation (Rogers, 2003) move through a network, as well as the roles of power and trust in information flow and innovation adoption (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Bodin et al., 2009; Halme et al., 2000). These studies have crossed a number of fields including, but not limited to agriculture (Shaw, Lubell, & Ohmart, 2011), medicine (Rogers, 2003), and natural resource management (Bodin et al., 2009).

A number of studies have defined the linkages discussed above as bonding and bridging ties (Bodin et al., 2009). Bonding ties are the connections within a homogeneous group of similar individuals. These ties are generally built on stronger trust and more consistent communication (Bodin et al., 2009; Rogers, 2003; Levin et al., 2004). Bridging ties are those that link heterogeneous groups or individuals; in other words, bridging ties link homogenous groups that may not otherwise interact due to factors such as geography, education levels, socioeconomic status, or language (Bodin et al., 2009). These ties are important for introducing new ideas and information into a more homogeneous group where similarities among individuals can isolate them from new ideas and innovations. Bridging ties also build trust between groups, which in the case of rural tourism networks can foster destination development.

Rogers (2003) demonstrated that knowledge transfer between heterogeneous groups can be complicated by a number of factors. Individuals who work for tourism support agencies (i.e., change agents) are often better educated and of a higher socioeconomic status than the community members with whom they are working. These differences can create a distance between the two individuals that hinders trust and communication. A common technique to improve the flow of communication is for change agents to identify and connect with opinion leaders in the community (Smerecnick & Andersen, 2011). Opinion leaders are individuals who are respected by community members as decision makers and sources of new ideas. They have connections with multiple groups within the community as well as groups and organizations outside the community. A common issue in identifying opinion leaders is selecting individuals that are too innovative and are outside the target network (Rogers, 2003).

Rural Tourism Networks

Although research on knowledge flow in rural tourism networks is limited, several studies documented that these networks are primarily composed of SMEs (Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Tinsley et al., 2001; Halme et al., 2000; Fleischer et al., 2000). These networks enhance the ability of businesses to think at a destination level, which is critical given that visitors and rural economic development funders typically view tourism as a collection of entrepreneurs and not as individual entities (Fleischer et al., 2000; Dudensing et al., 2011). Despite the need for collaboration within the destination to build and present a successful tourism product (Costa, Breda, Costa, & Miguens, 2008; Breidenhann et al., 2004), collaboration is often viewed negatively within the mindset of SMEs who tend to think

primarily of local competition (Plummer, Telfer, & Hashimoto, 2006). This dichotomy is one reason why outside intervention is often necessary (Dudensing et al., 2011; Baggio et al., 2010) and thus, highlights the need to better understand information flow from change agents through opinion leaders into rural tourism networks. Additionally, Baggio et al. (2010) found that knowledge flows faster across structured networks rather than random networks, which supports the need to create and/or strengthen an overarching tourism support system within rural counties. Yet, the tourism industry is complex and made up of several independent industries (Wilkinson & March, 2008; Halme et al., 2000).

The tourism industry's complexity often leads to fragmentation of tourism development efforts, which can make it difficult to market the destination (Dudensing et al., 2011), develop initiatives, and garner political support (McGehee, Meng, & Tepanon, 2005; Halme et al., 2000). Bridging ties between tourism groups facilitate community action and allow tourism businesses to impact tourism development policies (Nunkoo et al., 2012; Bodin et al., 2009), thereby building their competitive advantage (Halme et al., 2000) and fostering social cohesion (Bodin, 2009). This cohesion within communities facilitates destination development. Because of the key role government plays in tourism policies and planning, it is important to develop bridging ties between groups as well as between entrepreneurs and government-funded support agencies (Nunkoo et al., 2012), such as CES.

Support agencies can also help tourism entrepreneurs by facilitating communication among SME's and providing training to enhance skills such as marketing and business plan development (Dudensing et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2008). Dudensing et al. (2011) found that "either adequate local help in developing business plans is often unavailable for many

tourism-based businesses or such businesses are unaware of the support that is available” (p. 1460). In addition, larger initiatives such as tourism management plans and collaboration among support agencies can be important in successful tourism destination development.

One of the frameworks used to demonstrate tourism development is Butler’s (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC).

This framework introduced a curvilinear model (Figure 1) based on the product cycle of a tourism destination. Butler (1980) identified each stage of the cycle and the associated characteristics. For this study, I will be focusing on the initial stages of this development cycle given my assumption that destinations in these stages will likely include newly developed

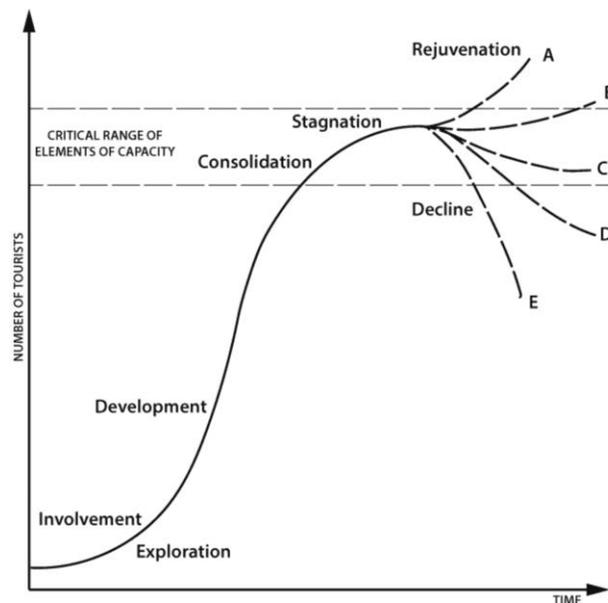


Figure 1: Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle

networks in which the members have a clearer recollection of how these connections were formed.

According to Butler (1980), the “exploration stage” has few tourists who make individual travel arrangements and visit in irregular patterns. At this point of development, there is very limited infrastructure and so visitors are highly dependent on locals to provide tourism services. However, because there are only a few visitors, the community as a whole

will not see the effects of these visitors either socially or economically. As visitation increases and visitors begin to arrive in a more predictable pattern, certain businesses will enter the “involvement stage”. They will begin to cater solely to visitors and marketing to attract new visitors will begin to be developed. At this stage, tourism businesses will begin to identify their initial market segment and a tourism season will begin to affect how these businesses function. With these changes will come a growing demand on local governments and public agencies for improved infrastructure (Butler, 1980). Although a number of studies have looked at TALC and the environmental, social, and economic effects of each stage of tourism development (Lagiewski, 2006), there has been little to no research on SME networks and the role support agencies play within those networks at each stage, particularly in context of rural US communities.

In the case of rural tourism, businesses tend to be located in remote areas (i.e., far enough away from more populated areas that they are less accessible and visible to support organizations and visitors), which can isolate them from other SMEs, impacting their access to support and networking opportunities. Additionally, rural tourism businesses are generally run and staffed by those with less education and less access to professional training (Juvan, 2011; Breidenhann et al., 2004; Fleischer et al., 2000). Other constraints for rural tourism businesses include high staff turnover due to the seasonality of work and lower wages due to limited access to capital (Dudensing et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2008). However, linked tourism SMEs can increase the ability to impact policy, and allow the tourism industry to increase pay and convert some part-time positions to full-time positions (Halme et al., 2000).

Although high staff turnover is often seen as a negative aspect of the industry, it can actually

be an opportunity to introduce new knowledge and skills to the business. This is specifically helpful in the spread of tacit knowledge (Shaw et al., 2008).

Knowledge Dissemination

“Tacit knowledge is the practical knowledge needed to perform a task” (Scott et al., 2008, p. 42) and is thus critical to further destination development. Yet, tacit knowledge is difficult to articulate and share (Levin et al., 2004). Overcoming this challenge of knowledge transfer usually calls for a more trusting relationship between individuals with strong bonds (Saxena, 2005; Levin et al., 2004). Destinations can capitalize on tacit, specialized local knowledge to gain a competitive advantage in attracting niche tourists (Saxena, 2005). Scott et al. (2008) noted that tourism knowledge is primarily tacit and recommended that this knowledge be slowly converted to explicit knowledge to improve the competitiveness of the organization or destination as a whole. Explicit knowledge is easily codified and communicated (Scott et al., 2008); thus, explicit knowledge is more regularly shared and may not require the same level of trust in the individual providing the information as tacit knowledge (Levin et al., 2004). Understanding these distinctions through an exploration of trust within rural tourism networks can enhance support agencies’ ability to develop and disseminate information on best practices.

Best practices are a common segment of knowledge shared between organizations. This information can include both tacit and explicit knowledge and can cross industry boundaries. Best practices adopted from unrelated industries are called external benchmarks and they can be used to improve the performance of organizations (Hawkins, 2000). Best practices can also improve the profitability of organizations (Baggio et al., 2010). Scott et al.

(2008) found that organizations that were able to transfer knowledge effectively were more productive. Further, Halme et al. (2000) identified that organizations that develop knowledge-sharing linkages were able to learn from the successes and failures of other tourism enterprises.

These linkages often need to be initiated by support agencies as discussed above, but research has typically identified poor linkages between tourism support agencies and practitioners. This failure to connect has roots in both groups. Hudson (2013) and Liburd and Hjalager (2010) found that although businesses say they appreciate research, they fail to use it because of a lack of staff, money, time, and ability to implement tourism research into their business practices. Hudson (2013) also found that support agencies feel practitioners want easy tools and answers at little to no cost. Because the tourism industry is made up of a diverse array of SMEs, generalized information may be ineffective due to the variability of needs and expectations (Saxena, 2005); yet, specialized information is generally cost or time prohibitive for support agencies to produce (Scott et al., 2008).

Additionally, Dudensing et al. (2011) found a basic lack of understanding about the needs of rural tourism businesses by policy makers and economic development organizations. This disconnect could be caused by a lack of support due to changing political groups and associated changes in agendas and funding priorities (Breidenhann et al., 2004). Alternatively, this disconnect could be related to the fact that research is often driven by funding rather than the needs of stakeholders (Saxena, 2005). Research has another weakness; Scott et al. (2008) found that organizations that generate knowledge (e.g., academic researchers and industry consultants) share common publications and terminology,

which aren't necessarily shared with practitioners. Therefore, further exploration of the factors that facilitate and inhibit knowledge and innovation sharing within tourism networks is needed.

Diffusion of Innovation

Diffusion of innovation is a framework for understanding the spread of innovation through a population (Rogers, 2003). Information about an innovation is spread through networks by word of mouth and interaction with other adopters (Shaw et al., 2011). Substantial research has been conducted using the diffusion of innovation framework; however, it has been focused on more cohesive fields such as medicine and agriculture (Rogers, 2003), unlike tourism with its wide range of businesses. There are many factors that affect diffusion of innovation as discussed above. Additionally, Smerecnick et al. (2011) found that simplicity of the information presented and the use of opinion leadership were key aspects in successful dissemination among tourism entrepreneurs.

This study focused on knowledge disseminated through bridging and bonding ties, specifically knowledge shared between homogenous and heterogeneous tourism SMEs. The role knowledge plays within networks is the basis of competitive advantage among organizations (Costa et al., 2008). More specifically, it is an organization's ability to learn and quickly implement that new knowledge that gives it the advantage (Shaw et al., 2009). Effective use of knowledge also allows the organization to adapt more effectively to change (Hudson, 2013).

Technology is changing the way information is disseminated. For example, Liburd et al. (2010) found that improving technology provides easier access to research, as well as

methods to easily and cheaply collect feedback from customers and partners. As technologies improve, it is important for support agencies to update their web capabilities to keep up with stakeholder expectations (Dudensing et al., 2011). One technology that is being utilized more by entrepreneurs is online knowledge portals, which allow individuals to interact with other network members to share information in a secure setting (Scott et al., 2008). Even as networks become more dependent on technology, Levin et al. (2004) found that individuals are still more likely to seek out information from a person than from a document or the internet. This personal communication approach is the traditional (and perhaps expected and preferred) dissemination system of CES. Thus, it is important to explore tourism SMEs expectations and preferences related to information dissemination from support agencies into and through tourism networks.

Network Analysis

Network analysis can be used to conceptualize, visualize, and analyze networks of rural tourism entrepreneurs (Scott et al., 2008; Baggio et al., 2010). This study will attempt to employ network analysis and knowledge mapping to identify key bridging ties, bottlenecks, and subgroups (Shaw et al., 2009). Subgroups are groups of entrepreneurs that “have significantly more ties between its group members than between members and non-members” (Bodin et al., 2009, p. 368). Using this information can help facilitate the inclusion of marginalized groups and establish linkages between subgroups (Reed, Graves, Dandy, Posthumus, Hubacek, Morris, Prell, Quinn, & Stringer, 2009). Therefore, I aimed to visualize knowledge flow between entrepreneurs and tourism support agencies, identify opinion leaders identified by entrepreneurs and those identified by change agents, and compare the

lists and how they are used. Ideally, this approach would enable identification of missed linkages and failed opportunities for knowledge dissemination.

Although most network analysis research is conducted using quantitative methods, Scott et al. (2008) compiled a set of examples within the context of tourism that also included qualitative studies. As opposed to the quantitative approach of focusing on the structural properties of the network as a whole, the qualitative techniques provided thick description of the linkages between groups. Thus, I employed qualitative techniques to develop a more in-depth exploration of information flow through two rural tourism networks in North Carolina. Specifically, I selected the county as my unit of analysis to compare how information flows in rural counties with and without a tourism support agency.

Research Questions

Using the framework of diffusion of innovation, I employed network analysis to better understand knowledge flow through complex rural tourism networks. By visualizing the bridging and bonding ties that constitute these destinations, I aimed to identify critical factors for the dissemination of tourism knowledge. Specific research questions include:

1. How does tourism knowledge flow through rural tourism networks?
 - a. How linked are homogeneous groups of rural tourism entrepreneurs?
 - b. How are change agents and opinion leaders integrated into rural tourism networks?
 - c. How does trust influence the flow of knowledge and innovation within rural tourism networks?

- d. How are tacit and explicit knowledge disseminated through rural tourism networks?
2. What are the critical factors for support agencies when disseminating their services using these networks?
- a. What are tourism SMEs' expectations and preferences for information dissemination?
 - b. How can rural tourism networks be utilized by support agencies for information dissemination?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This exploratory study was conducted using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gain a rich understanding of not only what ties exist within rural tourism networks, but also how specific types of information flow within these networks (Yin, 2014; Tinsley et al., 2001). Interviews were conducted with tourism entrepreneurs and support agency staff in two rural NC counties: one with an existing tourism support agency, such as a TDA or CVB, and one that depends primarily on CES or Chamber of Commerce for tourism-related information. I used the NC Rural Center’s (2013) rural county designations (see Figure 1), which defines rural as “a population of fewer than 250 people per square mile” (NC Rural Center, 2013, p. 4). Then, I selected two counties that had similar population, geographic characteristics, and natural resource opportunities to enhance comparability (see counties outlined in black in Figure 1).

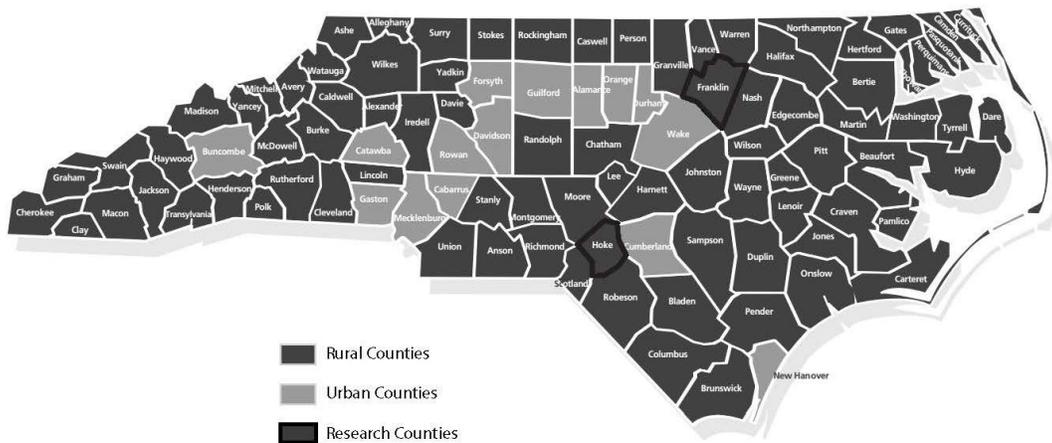


Figure 2: NC Rural & Urban County Designations (NC Rural Center, 2013)

County Selection

This study was conducted in Franklin (Figure 2) and Hoke Counties (Figure 3). These counties are located in the center, or Piedmont, of North Carolina and so share similar geographic characterizes. Neither Franklin County nor Hoke County have large scale tourism attractions, such as state parks or event centers; therefore, it is assumed that both counties are in the early stages of TALC with similar levels of limited tourism development. They are both agrarian-based communities with comparable populations, education levels, and land areas. They also each border one county designated as urban (Rural Center, 2013); Wake County, bordering Franklin County, has around three times the population of Cumberland County that borders Hoke County (“State & county quickfacts: Cumberland County”, 2014; “State & county quickfacts; Wake County”, 2014). Additional differences are found in their race and poverty figures.

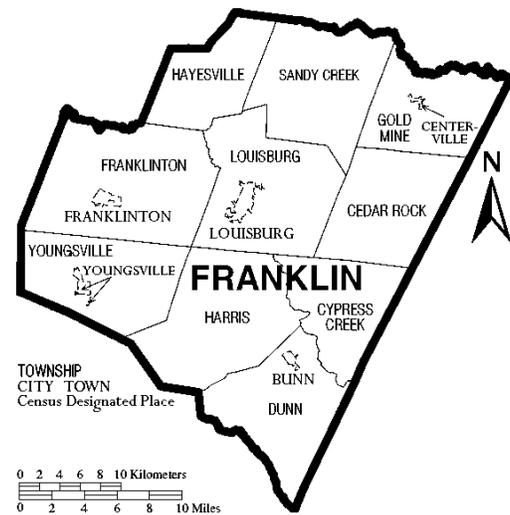


Figure 4: Franklin County w/ Municipal & Township Boundaries (“Appendix f. maps,” 2003)

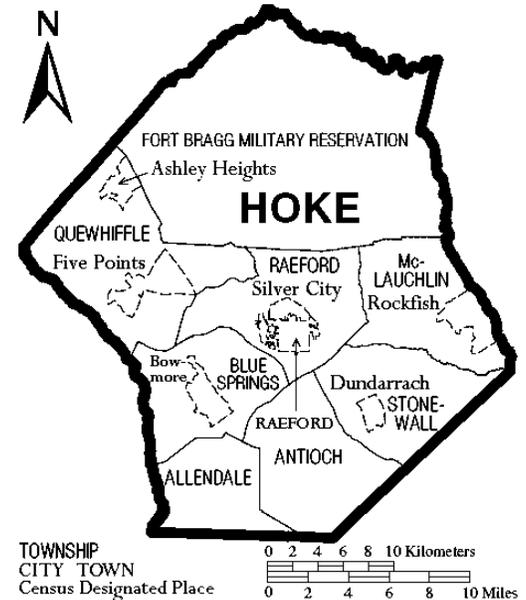


Figure 3: Hoke County w/ Municipal & Township Boundaries (“Appendix f. maps,” 2003)

Franklin County was estimated to have a population of 62,260 in 2013, with 64% of that population classified as Caucasian, 27% as African American, 8% as Hispanic, and 1% as Native American (“State & county quickfacts: Franklin County”, 2014). Of Hoke County’s 51,322 residents, 42% are Caucasian, 34% are African American, 12% are Hispanic, and 9% are Native American (“State & county quickfacts: Hoke County, 2014). Both counties have around an 80% high school graduation rate and around a 16% college graduation rate. Additionally, their land area use differs in ways that could also affect their county income and tourism development. Franklin County is only 100 square miles larger than Hoke County, but nearly a third of Hoke County is controlled by Fort Bragg (“American factfinder: Hoke County”), with the primary development and economic benefits from the base occurring in neighboring Cumberland County.

By selecting counties with a number of similar variables, I was able to look more closely at the effect of each tourism support organization on networking and development. Both Franklin and Hoke counties have a Chamber of Commerce, but Franklin County has the added support of a TDA. The TDA controls the county’s accommodation tax and funnels the money back into tourism development and infrastructure. The differing support structures in these two counties allowed me to look at support provided by similar agencies, as well as the additional services provided by the TDA.

Data Generation

Interviews with entrepreneurs contained questions on knowledge used, sources of knowledge, use of tourism networking opportunities, perceptions of support agencies, trust among SMEs, trust of opinion leaders, trust of change agents, and technology use (see

Appendix A). I also collected basic demographic information to explore the heterogeneity of the networks. Interviews with support agency staff covered methods of information dissemination, key contacts among the entrepreneurs, and perceptions of success with information dissemination and diffusion within the tourism network (see Appendix B). Interviews were conducted from June 3rd to August 4th. Entrepreneur interview times varied greatly, ranging from 20 to 210 minutes based on the level of detail provided by the interviewee. Support agency interviews ranged from 15 to 30 minutes.

This study was confidential, not anonymous, due to the audio recording of interviews and use of chain referral sampling. Therefore, I protected the lists of names collected by storing them on a password protected computer a locked file cabinet and presenting findings in a way that would not enable identification of individuals (i.e., names were not used in connection with quotes). The subject matter of the interviews did not cover subjects that hurt participants, but in-depth interviews are generally about human affairs and they needed to be conducted with sensitivity. To do this, I gained informed consent, avoided the use of deception, and selected participants equitably (Yin, 2014). All interview protocols were approved by the NC State University Internal Review Board (IRB) for research with human subjects (see Appendix C).

Participant Identification

The initial list of entrepreneurs was developed using online resources (e.g., Visit NC, TripAdvisor, Yelp, Homegrown Handmade) and information provided by tourism support agencies. This initial list included 20 businesses in Hoke County and 42 businesses in Franklin County (Table 1). Additional contacts were identified using a chain referral method

(Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), until enough confirmatory evidence (i.e., two or more sources from each subgroup) was collected or the list of potential contacts was exhausted (Yin, 2014). Chain referral sampling was especially important in these rural settings, as many of the smaller rural tourism businesses had not yet developed an online presence and have developed limited marketing materials. Ultimately, I identified five additional contacts in Hoke County and four additional contacts in Franklin County from chain referral sampling.

Table 1: Interview Source, Result, & Sector by County

	Hoke County	Franklin County	Total
Identification Source			
Online Search	8	33	41
Support Agency Website	9	9	18
Chain Referral	5	4	9
Contact Result			
Closed Business	6	15	21
No Response	8	12	20
Declined	4	11	15
Interviewed	4	8	12
Sector			
Recreation	11	16	27
Retail	4	4	8
Lodging	2	5	7
Food Service	5	21	26
Total Tourism Businesses	22	46	68

Of the 68 businesses identified, nearly one-third (31%) were closed and nearly another third (29%) did not answer when calls were placed to the listed number.

Due to the prevalence of agritourism businesses interviewed, saturation was successfully reached for this sector of businesses. I believe saturation was also reached for locally owned accommodations and shops, as there were so few of these business types located in the two counties and no new businesses were identified after the first round of interviews. Restaurants proved to be the most difficult sector to access, as owners were busy when open and unavailable outside normal business hours. One respondent pointed out that in “*Franklin County, getting to the restaurants, that’s going to be tough...I can tell you the turnover among those restaurants is ridiculous*” (FE7).

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (Yin, 2014). Transcribed text was then uploaded into QSR N*Vivo, a qualitative data organization software. Data was coded using open and axial coding (Patton, 2002). Initially, general categories, or themes, were identified using open coding. Once themes were identified across all interviews, axial coding was used to detect relationships between themes and among interviews. Mitchell’s (1969) classification of network linkages as exchange (e.g., commercial) relationships, communication (e.g., non-trading, professional) relationships, and social (e.g., friend, family) relationships helped inform analyses related to the connections between entrepreneurs and between entrepreneurs and support agencies.

Data quality was enhanced by keeping regular memos throughout the interview and coding process to track the flow of ideas and preliminary interpretations to help with

conceptualization (Charmaz, 2006). This was paired with peer debriefing (Spall, 1998) to check the clarity and logic of coding used. Specifically, a codebook with the codes from the first few entrepreneur and support agency interviews was created and two researchers external to the study individually recoded one entrepreneur and support agency interview to establish dialogue about the codes and the application of those codes to portions of my textual data. Once all interviews were open-coded, this process was repeated with a different pair of entrepreneur and support agency interviews.

Data Presentation

The next chapter will present the key themes found among tourism entrepreneurs and support agencies in both Franklin and Hoke Counties. Similarities and differences will be identified between the two counties, as will the major challenges to networking and information exchange needs. Findings will be supported with quotes from participants. The quotes will be identified using a code that signifies the county (“H” or an “F” for Hoke or Franklin County), the informant type (“S” or an “E” for support agency staff or entrepreneur), and an interview number (e.g., HE1, HE2, ... FE1, FE2., ...); however, identifiers for support agency representatives will not include county to enhance confidentiality (i.e., S1, S2, S3).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Participant Profile

Three support agency representatives were interviewed; one in Hoke County and two in Franklin. I also interviewed 12 entrepreneurs in all. Of those entrepreneurs, two were food service providers, two were small-scale accommodation businesses, five were businesses with a retail aspect, and eight were businesses that provide recreation activities. Some of the businesses interviewed fit into multiple categories. The entrepreneurs interviewed in these counties were socioeconomically heterogeneous (Table 2). They ranged in age from 42 to 87; 75% had some form of higher education, with 25% completing a graduate degree; 90% were white, a third were female, and their average annual incomes ranged from \$27,000 to \$150,000.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Entrepreneur Demographics	Hoke	Franklin	Total
Age			
40-50	-	38%	25%
51-60	25%	-	8%
61-70	75%	38%	50%
71-80	-	12%	8%
81-90	-	12%	8%
Education			
High School	25%	24%	25%
Associates Degree	50%	-	17%
Bachelor's Degree	25%	38%	33%

Table 2 Continued

	Hoke	Franklin	Total
Education (cont.)			
Graduate Degree	-	38%	25%
Ethnicity			
Caucasian	100%	87%	92%
African American	-	13%	8%
Sex			
Male	50%	75%	67%
Female	50%	25%	33%
Annual Income (estimated) *includes pensions			
25,000-50,000	25%	50%	43%
50,000-100,000	-	25%	16%
100,000-150,000	25%	13%	16%
Unknown	50%	13%	25%
Years in Community			
0-5	25%	-	8%
6-10	-	38%	25%
11-20	25%	25%	25%
21-30	-	13%	8%
31-60	50%	25%	34%

Emergent Themes

The two counties shared more similarities than differences. The TDA currently has less of an effect on Franklin County’s tourism development than expected due to limited

funds and county prioritization. Other factors, such as location, business sector, and access to resources, seem to have more of an influence on the current development of tourism entrepreneur networks. While analyzing these similarities and differences, three unexpected themes emerged related to the challenges facing tourism development (i.e., remote location, limited tourism support & SME-specific challenges; Table 3). These themes and additional subthemes provide insight into why tourism development is stagnant in these counties and provides necessary context for the limited tourism networks reported by study participants (discussed in the Network Development and Knowledge Exchange sections below).

Remote Location

This section of findings introduce the challenges rural businesses face due to their remote location as it relates to destination development, potential visitors, and other businesses. Fleischer et al. (2000) noted the effects location on the success rate of small businesses and found that those in “remote” areas face similar challenges (e.g., a low capital base, limited access to training, & distance from potential customers). As my findings support many of those challenges, the title of this section stems from the language used in Fleischer et al.’s (2000) research.

Lack Infrastructure. Both Franklin and Hoke Counties lack infrastructure that would aid in supporting tourism development. One entrepreneur pointed out that Hoke County lacks a number of factors that are necessary to support visitors. *“The lack of a major highway, we need a four lane road through the county...The lack of motels and restaurants. The only sit down restaurant in town is closed on Wednesday evenings, Saturday evenings and all day*

Table 3: Emergent Themes

	Hoke County	Franklin County	Recreation	Retail	Lodging	Food Service
Themes & Subthemes						
Remote Location						
• Lack Infrastructure	X	X	X	X	X	
• Building a Destination	X	X	X	X	X	
• Shared Image	X	X	X	X		X
• Staffing Issues		X	X	X	X	
• Development Prioritization	X	X	X	X	X	
Limited Tourism Support						
• Resistance to Change		X	X	X	X	
• Low Government Trust		X	X	X		
• Limited Agency Resources	X	X	X	X	X	
• Lack of Support	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Lack of Equity		X	X	X		
• Slow Growth	X	X	X	X	X	X
SME Challenges						
• Limited Marketing	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Social Media Marketing	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Liability Insurance	X	X	X	X	X	

Sunday” (HE1). In Franklin County, where they have more developed infrastructure, there are still a similar set of needs and challenges.

Most of these hotels, I don't think anybody has more than 25 to 50 rooms...The small counties trying to attract tourism dollars is pretty difficult as compared to a Vance County where you have [Interstate] 85 running through it. You have a lot of big hotels so you get a lot more money so they can have an actual department as a part of the county government and they can do things and actually build more. (FE7)

Building a Destination. Another entrepreneur made the point that without those large roads moving people through the county, *“this has to be the destination. It's not the trail to [somewhere else]”* (FE5). This idea of creating a destination was addressed by most entrepreneurs in Franklin County but very few in Hoke County. Although the Franklin County entrepreneurs recognized the need to become a destination, very few of them addressed it in terms of connecting with other businesses. Instead, they have focused on turning their own businesses into destinations. One entrepreneur noted that they are *“really trying to create a destination place that people come to three or four times a year”* (FE2). However, this method of creating small individual attractions wasn't perceived as advancing tourism development within Franklin County. For example, an entrepreneur noted *“If I were touring, I wouldn't [visit Franklin County]...we go to beaches and stuff like that but there's none of that stuff out here”* (FE6).

Shared Image. When describing destination development strategies, it was common for Franklin County entrepreneurs to discuss creating something unique that individuals couldn't find elsewhere and staying creative. They identified the area as primarily agriculture but that

it is a “*diverse farm economy. It’s not all tobacco or all cotton, or all beef cattle*” (FE1). One entrepreneur tried to articulate these different parts into a representative image that could connect businesses to visitors.

Farming is a dream, the more natural life seems to be the dream and the [realization that] how it’s going right now is not going to work long term. So I would say sustainability of your dream. Small farm, independent dreams, and sustainability.
(FE5)

This informant clarified that small-scale sustainable farming was the “new school” of agriculture and that despite larger mono-crop farmers still being present in the county, large farms are fading away and do not participate in tourism.

In addition, entrepreneurs described an important educational component of small scale rural tourism. Whether it is “*classes that come over, it’s a business class I think, and they’re wanting to find out how we did and what we did*” (FE6), or “*I take the kids into the area where we hatch our birds and I will candle the eggs so that they can see the development inside the egg*” (FE7), there was a sense of giving back and sharing skills with visitors and community members alike. Although most entrepreneurs in Franklin County failed to see what connected them to other tourism businesses, this self-representation was seen across the interviews.

There were differences in how they interpreted the role they play in the community and the product they present, especially among the agritourism businesses. One entrepreneur described the role of agritourism businesses as “*[Visitors] come to see the farm sort of for the same reason that you would go to a museum or go to a movie. It’s neat, it’s interesting, but*

it's a combination of education, entertainment and educating their children" (FE1). These businesses ranged along a scale of education to "agritainment" and there was some judgment of those that chose a different path. *"I tell people it used to be a real farm. He started out as a vegetable guy and he's what we call agritainment now. He has a farm theme, but not much farm left"* (FE7). This judgment of what works, what doesn't, and what you're willing to give up to succeed may be hindering effective networking among these businesses.

Entrepreneurs in Hoke County also had a common image of their community; however, it was not as developed as the one identified in Franklin County, and they were not as clear on how to use that image to attract visitors. One entrepreneur described it as *"I don't know what image that would be other than just...I don't want to say Mayberry, but something along those lines"* (HE4). Another entrepreneur addressed the image and the difficulty with sharing that image with visitors.

You know, if anything, I would say people like the hometown feel and atmosphere of a small town, but I don't know if you can really portray that as an image, it's something people have to talk to you and get to know you to realize where that small town feeling comes from. (HE2)

Yet, this same entrepreneur recognized that this image isn't enough on its own for successful tourism development.

Everybody here goes to Asheboro to the Zoo, they go to Lillington to Raven Rock State Park, they go to Elizabethtown for White Lake...What's Raeford got? We've just got our down home personality and that's about it. (HE2)

The county has even built on this idea to improve the community and draw visitors. *“I mean, we’ve already revitalized downtown Raeford. I don’t know what more you can do”* (HE2).

Although they’ve enhanced one downtown area, the county has not been able to implement initiatives that have successfully facilitated collaboration among businesses and assisted in the development of a destination.

One aspect of this rural setting that was recognized as unique to Hoke County is its connection with the military base, which could enhance tourism development if it could overcome some inherent challenges.

I don’t know about the military. That helps and hinders because they’re here for this amount of time and then they’re gone. You have a whole new bunch that comes in and by the time they start figuring things out they’re gone again. It helps bring people in, but then they leave. (HE4)

Another entrepreneur noted that *“a lot of people visit this area because they’re coming to see relatives that are stationed at Fort Bragg”* (HE2). The growth of Fayetteville and its spread into Hoke County could also add potential sources of revenue. The unanswered question is: how do these businesses harness that potential?

Staffing Issues. Franklin County entrepreneurs discussed one additional challenge they face in their county: the inability to find dependable help. One entrepreneur explained that *“this year we tried to get somebody and some of the young people are not very equipped to work hard, so even riding a lawn mower is too much”* (FE7). Another entrepreneur had to work with his staff a lot to get them ready for customer service, explaining *“I mean we’re still working with some of our teenagers that need to...they don’t come here naturally with an*

outgoing personality” (FE4). The common theme seemed to be the lack of qualified younger, seasonal staff, which is a common aspect of tourism businesses, especially in these rural settings.

Development Prioritization. Entrepreneurs in both counties recognize that tourism development is a complicated process. One entrepreneur brought up the issue of supply and demand, which is key at this tipping point in tourism development.

You don't have those tourism dollars that are feeding those restaurants and as a result they struggle and go out of business and then you don't get a lot of outsiders because they also need a place to eat. Which comes first? (FE7)

One source of how these communities can deal with these questions will be discussed in the next section, as well as the challenges that come from working with support agencies.

Limited Tourism Support

This section of findings introduces the relationships perceived between the tourism entrepreneurs interviewed and the local support agencies. These findings revealed several challenges related to entrepreneurs' openness to new ideas and the limited funding within the Franklin County tourism support agency. Additional concerns related to trust and power imbalances were identified as barriers to tourism development in the study counties.

Resistance to Change. Outside of the lack of infrastructure, the most common reason given for stagnant tourism development in Franklin and Hoke Counties was a resistance to change among certain community groups and those in power. *“One of the things that has hindered the growth is our county government. They tend to be the older kind of county people and they're afraid of growth”* (FE4). Notably, three different entrepreneurs in Franklin County

related the same story of an outsider coming into the county, buying property, and pouring a lot of money into revitalizing those properties while coming up against road block after road block put in place by the town. As described by one entrepreneur, this individual eventually gave up and left the county altogether.

When you go for permits and you're from out of town the cost is the same but you're either told the loopholes to get around the requirements or you're not. So they have ways of doing that that takes all of the little money that people bring in the area, uses it up, and speeds them on their way...The stumbling blocks are wherever the town wants to put them. (FE5)

This example was used to demonstrate how, despite the individuals in power saying they want change and development, their actions demonstrate their true preferences. Another story related by two entrepreneurs was of a zip lining company attempting to buy property in the area and being put off by both those in power and others in the community. The feeling was that it would cause too much noise and traffic.

Hoke County, which is at an earlier stage of development, had no such stories of attempted growth and community reaction. The statements about government support were vague or focused on their individual experience. *"They called it a hobby. This is a hobby but it's a business. I bought a laptop to keep track of my business so I'm going to claim my laptop. They really questioned it, they are a thorn"* (HE3). Further inhibiting entrepreneurship was also a sense of old school elite and their effect on tourism growth.

Most of the money in town is old money and if they can't see how it's going to benefit them in particular, they're not all that interested in supporting it. So I hate to say that the biggest part of the town is not that pumped up on tourism. (HE2)

Low Government Trust. Most Franklin County entrepreneurs interviewed had only moderate trust in local government agencies, citing human bias as the reason. One entrepreneur noted that they “trust [that] the angle that [government entities] have is where they are come from. Because that's all you can bring is your angle, and so I'm always looking at it with somewhat of a critical eye” (FE4). Another entrepreneur commented that their lack of trust was based on the biases that come from small town interactions between political leaders and community members. In reference to a government official, this individual noted that:

If you have to deal with someone who you paid to fix your car and they did a crappy job, you're going to do what you have to; but if someone comes up and they really came through for you in a time of need, you will look to see what is the most you can do for that person. (FE1)

In Hoke County, the entrepreneurs interviewed varied in their levels of trust in local government. As one entrepreneur stated “most of the people that are on the boards and stuff I know them, so that's why I trust them” (HE2). However, others stated that they just don't trust government officials or that they didn't want to answer because they would “answer too personally” (HE4). The difference seemed linked to whether or not the individual was local or not. Individuals who had been in the community a short time seemed to have a lower trust of local government.

Limited Agency Resources. Additional complications were uncovered in the study counties as tourism businesses begin to expect more from support agencies but support agencies continue to work with limited funds and staff. A support agent in Franklin County pointed out that “*money is limited because we only get occupancy taxes from hotel night stays, and we only have about three or four lodging agencies in the county; and most of those are not acceptable to most visitors*” (S2). Although the entrepreneurs understand funds are limited, there was a demand for greater prioritization of developing tourism goals.

I keep telling them they must have one big idea. You may never get there but you have to have a big goal...Here they have no plan, they will not commit to any plans at any level; they want to keep their options open. Another year goes by and nothing happens. (FE2)

Lack of Support. Both the Hoke and Franklin Chambers of Commerce and the Franklin TDA focus on providing marketing services to the businesses they serve. In general, I found that the Chambers provided limited information and training. However, the Franklin Chamber has connected with the Vance County Chamber, which has more resources and trainings, and these opportunities are shared with Franklin County members.

The TDA in Franklin County, which is run by volunteers, is primarily a grant organization for marketing and events. Any outreach is conducted by their board members, who are also volunteers. This limits the amount of outreach and assistance they provide and the mentality seems to be “*anytime people want money from you, they reach [out to] you*” (S2). During interviews with entrepreneurs, their interactions with the TDA demonstrated that they were entirely financial. Many entrepreneurs who applied for grants in Franklin

County noted *“they make it really hard. You have to go to one of their meetings and submit this form, a big long form, and nine copies or something, and they don’t get back to you. So I would say we’re never in touch with them unless we request funding”* (FE8).

The Chambers in both counties provide a number of services to their members, but the primary service is marketing. Both Chambers seem to recognize their limitations and in response have formed networks with surrounding counties to reach more individuals. *“All of the chambers in the region contact each other via email, and any event that’s going on they send to each other. Then each of them have a list of their members and they share that information with them”* (S3). A similar networking approach was described to explain how the Franklin Chamber is able to share Vance County materials and training opportunities. Chamber staff from both Chambers also play large planning roles in a county festival. Although the Chambers appear to be more involved in the community than what was described about the TDA staff in Franklin County, Chambers of Commerce are membership organizations and the associated fee discourages some entrepreneurs from joining. For example, an entrepreneur explained, *“I don’t think it represents small business at all and frankly it’s too expensive to join for what you get out of it”* (FE1).

Lack of Equity. In Franklin County, the tourism development efforts are affiliated with feelings of frustration. Specifically, there was a common sentiment that the initiatives take time and resources but create few benefits for participants.

It’s easy to get groups together but what are they getting out of it? They pull people together here and they take from everybody, but it never comes back. After you do

that a few times you stop doing it... There has to be some equity to the relationship.

(FE1)

Yet, study participants still expressed interest in taking part in well-planned efforts although they were skeptical of meetings without clearly defined goals and metrics. *“I don’t mind putting in a lot of work. I don’t mind putting my network together to build something big, but I want to be part of something big that works”* (FE5).

Slow Growth. Both counties recognized the potential for growth from their bordering urban county. Although Hoke County entrepreneurs aren’t seeing a lot of tourism growth, the development from the base gives them hope of a larger market base. *“With the development of having Fort Bragg continue to grow, it’s going to bring more and more people in to Hoke County, so more and more people are going to be hearing about us and coming to visit”* (HE2). In Franklin County a similar growth is occurring, though the overall feeling was that tourism growth is all but stagnant.

The money as a whole is moving out here, [the people with money are] 20 minutes away when [they were] an hour and a half away in Cary when we moved out here. Wake Forest is throwing [opportunities] at us and if we don’t grab it I don’t know what’s wrong with us. (FE5)

The entrepreneurs recognize growth opportunities but seem unable to tap into it on their own and don’t feel the existing support systems are providing adequate assistance. Of the two, Franklin County seems closest to articulating its needs in a way to which support agencies can respond. As one entrepreneur stated:

Part of it is just us, talking us industry people, taking enough time to explain it to them so they can understand a little bit more, or maybe taking the time to understand what they can do for us. Both sides need to do a better job on that. (FE4)

As the entrepreneurs in both counties contend with the challenges discussed here, they are also faced with challenges common to SME's.

SME Challenges

This section of findings will discuss the challenges particular to SMEs. These businesses face challenges directly related to their size, access to resources, and power within the community. The businesses interviewed discussed these challenges as well as techniques they've used to overcome these issues.

Limited Marketing. The small businesses in Hoke and Franklin are faced with limited resources and time, which limits their ability to take on larger challenges. One entrepreneur pointed out that

The problem with small businesses, whether you have a small restaurant, a small farm, a small automotive repair shop, whatever, is you have to do the activities that you're in business to do; and they're time consuming. Marketing is also a full time job. (FE1)

Marketing was expressed as a considerable limitation for small rural tourism businesses. One entrepreneur shared the follow sentiments:

The marketing I see is this is who I am and this is what I do and I'm going to go out and tell everybody what I do. You need to find out what the person wants to do, they

want to eat, and they want entertainment...fine, I'm going to give them that. Then they come here and we can tell them about what we're doing. (FE2)

Each business had their own way of utilizing limited resources and training but even the more established businesses reported having trouble bringing in new customers.

So we're a destination. We've been doing it a long time, and so we do have a pretty solid brand, and name, which helps. Where we struggle is with new people from outside of the area. Okay. And where we can't afford to really hit the TV or the radio and that sort of thing, we have to do a lot of our stuff on the computer through social media sites, and then word of mouth. (FE6)

Social media was a marketing method utilized by most of the entrepreneurs interviewed.

Social Media Marketing. Social media has demonstrated its effectiveness in removing some of the barriers to the small business in both counties. “*Social media has helped a lot. If you're creative; if you put the sweat equity in there, you can get your word out*” (FE4). With the benefits of removing the funding barrier and easing the learning process, most of the business interviewed had some social media experience. “*We will be doing much more social media as I said, using Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and hopefully YouTube videos. We're going to be going from the cave time into the next generation*” (HE4).

Liability Insurance. Liability insurance was another common issue discussed, especially among the agritourism and smaller accommodation entrepreneurs interviewed. Participants explained that their business models encompass liability needs ranging from farming to events to food. This proved complicated when finding a broad enough plan that induces a feeling of security.

We do have a special blanket policy with our insurance but different insurance companies say different things and when I had the parade they said it was an extension of my farm and I was covered, but I was always worried about having that many people. I did not feel protected. (FE5)

Participants also expressed concern with the cumulative effect of these challenges, and that without proper support and understanding, the small businesses that make up rural tourism can make uninformed and unproductive decisions.

It's too complicated for small business people... What happens is either small businesses either hides from it and don't have benefits that they could get by complying with, or they spend so much effort trying to comply that they don't focus on being productive. Regulations and policies which stifle productivity are not in the best interests of the state. (FE1)

These challenges could likely be more effectively met through networking and community support; however, the lack of networks in these counties has affect their abilities to face the challenges as a whole.

Network Development

There are far fewer examples of networks and network development in these counties than I initially anticipated. There are clear differences in the level of experience each county has with tourism development initiatives; however, only one example of a networking initiative that produced successful results, according to this study's informants, was identified. This experience demonstrated to participating entrepreneurs how collaboration can enhance tourism development.

Table 4: Network Development

	Hoke County	Franklin County	Recreation	Retail	Lodging	Food Service
Themes						
Network Development						
• Lack of Networking	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Joint Efforts		X	X	X	X	
• Lack of Cohesion	X	X	X	X		
• Growth Potential	X	X	X	X	X	X

Lack of Networking. When asked about other businesses they connect with on a regular basis, the most common answer was along the lines of “*I don’t know that we contact anyone for any reason really*” (HE1). Another entrepreneur explained “*I don’t interact with any of them on a regular basis. It’s just if they do something and catch my eye, I’ll try to participate. And if it doesn’t, I don’t*” (FE1). Without the expectation that they will see some direct benefit, they have little incentive to develop networks with these other businesses.

Franklin County entrepreneurs expressed a greater level of experience with different tourism development initiatives than those in Hoke County, but with discontent. As previously discussed, this was evidenced by their frustration with efforts that take up time and produce no direct impact. However, this frustration has not completely removed their understanding of how networking can help them with long-term success; it has simply made them more wary of the efforts in which they participate. For example, one participant

explained, *“what we have figured out is that we can’t go alone on this thing... The inputs, the costs that are involved in what we do are continuing to go up, and so we need a wide net”* (FE4). Even with this understanding, attempts to form connections with other business are rare.

Joint Efforts. In Franklin County, the agritourism entrepreneurs were able to compare other joint efforts to the successes of prior farm tours. Seeing the results of a successful networking initiative demonstrated the power of group efforts to attract visitors. *“The closest thing to being pulled together that we had was with the County farm tour and then with this NC Farm Stewardship Tour”* (FE5). Although each entrepreneur appreciated the power of that initiative to bring outside money into the county, they noted that *“On a farm tour weekend, maybe two days, we'd have 3 or 400 people come through here. But they would never come back. There was no reason to come back. They're not going to come back to buy produce--it's too far”* (FE2). It is not enough to bring them in a few times a year; the remote location, as previously mentioned, affected their success. Similarly, another entrepreneur explained that *“there are various festivals that different communities have but those are very intermittent. Again, there’s not a lot of everyday things”* (FE7).

From these joint events, entrepreneurs seemed to recognize the power of joint marketing and building on each other’s strengths, but there was little discussion of the power to change policy. One entrepreneur touched on the issue for small business and insurance, but their answer was for the support agencies to handle it.

Right now they put the burden on you--you have to get insurance, but just try and get it. Where are you going to get it from? Insurers don't want the risk. A big entity like the County could do it, but as an individual, nobody will talk to you. (FE2)

Other small non-traditional businesses expressed having the same issue, and a sentiment of the power to join forces was found. *“If everybody in the group is going through the same thing it would be very nice to know the words to say to an insurance company to make sure that’s the policy you have in place”* (FE5). However, the entrepreneurs often felt powerless to make a difference. One entrepreneur expressed frustration in their inability to enact change as:

I’ve pushed, and I’ve talked to all the people here [in the county] the same way, I do it in spurts and then I go away for a year or two because they’re not ready to hear it now. [I’ll say] this is what you need to do, something like this, you’re not doing anything and you’re not getting any results and nothing has changed. (FE4)

Lack of Cohesion. As noted in the Remote Location theme above, the entrepreneurs in Franklin County don’t see that they have similar goals when developing their individual products. One entrepreneur felt that not having a common goal would affect their ability to establish tourism networks. *“I don’t think it would be particularly effective in Franklin because we don’t really have something to coalesce around”* (FE2). Clearly they share a number of similar challenges, but sharing challenges can lead to finding common ground. As one entrepreneur put it, *“If you interact with people who have the same challenges that you do, either because they’re in the same business or because they’re also a small business...you find, oh, yeah, you’ve got a lot in common here”* (FE1). Thus, these

entrepreneurs would benefit from an opportunity to get together and discover that common ground out for themselves.

Of the individuals I talked to in Hoke County, only the Chamber representative provided examples of networking efforts and expressed frustration over the lack of buy-in from their members.

Just educating the business owners, whether they're members or not, what the Chamber has to offer them. Having an educational luncheon and inviting the businesses to come and see how networking together can be, how this business may think they have absolutely nothing that this business can need and then getting them together and find out, well yeah I do need this ... because they're not communicating. I just think educating, you know, but then you have the problem of getting the businesses there. Sometimes people get very set in their little world and that's all they need. (S1)

Growth Potential. Although the entrepreneurs interviewed in Hoke County often failed to see how networking with other tourism businesses could benefit them directly, they generally seemed open to learning more about collaboration. *"I wouldn't mind sitting in on something and offering my two cents worth...How much good the tourism brainstorming would do me per say, as far as my business, I don't know"* (HE2). Additionally, although no strong tourism networks were found, each entrepreneur identified the same list of businesses as providing tourism. Building a formal network that enables recognition of how important each business is to bringing visitors into the county, and the potential for synergy between businesses, could be an important step in building ties for tourism development.

Certain tourism businesses were seen as having a greater positive effect on the county than others, but they were rarely recognized as something that could change the direction of development in the area. The businesses that are considered large enough to be influential generally received more judgment on their networking efforts in the community. How they interacted and supported smaller tourism businesses often leaned to either positive or negative perceptions. For instance one entrepreneur stated *“I don’t see the horse park doing much for me ‘cause that’s in the other part of the county. Maybe some golfers or something might come through, that’s basically it”* (HE1).

The Horse Park and the golf courses are some of the more developed tourism businesses in the county and are located in a growth area. This area is made up of more affluent homes, and residents tend to identify more directly with the Southern Pines area, which is just across the county border, rather than the centrally-located community of Raeford. Recently, a change in management has altered the way one of these influential organizations thinks about community interaction. This informant explained that *“we have to get involved in the community and the community has to get involved in us”* (HE4). Thus, there is recognition that their distance from the community in the past has only hurt them in the long run. Fortunately, the groundwork for collaboration has already begun with a meeting between the business and a local festival representative. This branching out will hopefully begin a conversation that benefits more Hoke County tourism businesses and enhances networking among tourism entrepreneurs.

Recently both counties have seen the initiation of a project that has the potential to link a wide range of SMEs together. The developing relationships in Hoke County between

the entrepreneur discussed above and the festival representative could produce a bridging link with the Chamber and other businesses, as the event will likely draw community involvement and enhance the vision for this well-appointed event site. By bringing other tourism entrepreneurs into this collaboration, an opinion leader may be identified who can assist in further tourism growth.

In Franklin County, different representatives from Louisburg College are working on an initiative that could bring together the agritourism community, the historic community, and the support agencies.

There's efforts underway, we're working pretty closely with Louisburg College...

We're trying to put an offer together that's tied in locally with food and history... It's an initiative, we're putting a lot of effort behind it, my feeling is get on board, stop being skeptical, do whatever you can to help them try to get this thing going. (FE2)

This again could be the source of bridging ties led by an as yet unidentified opinion leader.

The entrepreneurs in these counties demonstrated a wide range of understanding about the role networking can play. Overall they recognized some of the benefits and challenges inherent in collaboration. Franklin County's greater experience with collaboration led to a deeper discussion of needs to enhance networking opportunities, as well as reservations about future collaborative ventures; much of the enhancement discussion focused on how conversations between businesses can affect new ideas and innovations. Despite the lack of formal networks, I will describe how entrepreneurs in these two counties currently share information and what kind of information is being disseminated.

Knowledge Exchange

Due to the lack of formal network development and limited association use found among entrepreneurs in these counties, most knowledge being shared is informal and passed through word of mouth. Although there is both tacit and explicit knowledge being shared, businesses sharing their personal experience makes up the majority of shared knowledge and the only explicit knowledge comes from limited exchanges with business associations.

Table 5: Knowledge Exchange

	Hoke County	Franklin County	Recreation	Retail	Lodging	Food Service
Theme						
Knowledge Exchange						
• Tacit Knowledge		X	X	X	X	X
• Link with CES	X	X	X	X		
• Start-up Tips		X	X	X		
• Educating Visitors		X	X	X		
• Prefer Own Experiences	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Integrate Explicit Knowledge		X	X	X		
• Lack of Support Experience		X	X	X		

Tacit Knowledge. Tacit knowledge exchange was much more prevalent among the agritourism businesses in Franklin County than other segments of tourism. However, the knowledge being exchanged is primarily farming information and support. One agritourism entrepreneur noted that the only information they get is agricultural knowledge “*I don’t have anybody in terms of tourism*” (FE7). Conversely, a recreation provider outside of agritourism noted that they “*don’t have anybody that we ask advice for, and just try to figure it out on our own. We’re not doing a very good job I’d have to say*” (FE8).

Tacit agriculture knowledge being exchanged informally has been fundamental to the success of agritourism entrepreneurs, as most of the agritourism farmers interviewed did not grow up on a farm. One entrepreneur explained:

I thought it would be hard for me as an outsider to build relationships with the old farmers, but that was where I got all my support, because their children weren’t interested in the farm and I was...Everything I needed I had an old guy help me and we were totally different, but we had something in common. I was really interested and I needed the help, and they were looking for somebody to share with. (FE2)

Further, it was explained that this farmer has become a source of knowledge for other new farmers moving into the area.

Link with CES. In addition to sharing agricultural knowledge among themselves, the majority of farmers had a great deal of trust in the agricultural information provided by CES. Only one entrepreneur had received information from the Tourism Extension specialists in the past. “*They [Tourism Extension specialists] work together, to kind of help us on some of our stuff, which was really nice*” (FE4). However, this entrepreneur explained that there is a

lack of continued support for tourism information from local agents. This experience is promising for the role CES can play in assisting rural tourism businesses, but only one entrepreneur had heard of these tourism services. Further, CES's traditional focus on agriculture knowledge could mean little enhancement to knowledge exchange for non-agricultural related businesses.

Start-up Tips. The agritourism entrepreneurs in Franklin County also prioritized sharing information developed through experience with new agritourism start-ups. For individuals looking to get into agritourism, one entrepreneur offered a set of questions to think about.

The first thing I say to them is well how many people are around you? You may be rural. But from a geographic standpoint can a lot of people get to your farm in about 30 minutes?...You need to look at the demographics...there can be a decent amount of people around there; though not what I would consider to be people with a lot of expendable income. So you look at that... The second thing I ask them is, well do you like people? (FE4)

Another entrepreneur explained how some farmers fail to recognize how direct sales change their business practices, and what skills are necessary:

The customer will sometimes buy because of who they're buying from, not just what it is. It's hard to explain that to some of our vendors. There's a lot more to it than just putting your stuff out and expect people to buy it. You have to have the retail mentality; you have to enjoy interacting with the public. There are numbers of farmers that really don't want to deal with people. (FE7)

Educating Visitors. When working with visitors, one entrepreneur hopes to improve the success of small farms by educating the public about what goes into running these farms and why their support is critical.

I'm explaining about the economics of farming because I want the public to understand those things when they say, why am I paying this price for eggs when I could buy eggs at the grocery store for less. Let me explain the economics of that to you and the different quality. I want to do that because I think it's important for other farmers who are selling for their customers to know that. Most farmers are not good at explaining that stuff. (FE7)

This need to provide information that helps small farmers as a whole was something discussed by the agritourism entrepreneurs interviewed and demonstrates a sense of common success or failure which can support future networking.

Prefer Own Experiences. Although agritourism businesses showed an interest in sharing their knowledge with a wide range of individuals, most Franklin County participants expressed that they were unlikely to use information on best practices. Comments such as, “*We are relying on our own business experience to do these things and make our own decisions*” (FE2), were typical when asked about their likelihood to use best practices. One entrepreneur noted that businesses “*can fall into a trap of thinking that we know better than anybody, and because we're so close to it, we don't see an opportunity, or we don't see that we need to change*” (FE4). A few entrepreneurs recognized the drawbacks of only taking their own counsel, but this recognition was rare among those interviewed.

In Hoke County, there were no clear instances of information being shared among businesses, which was likely due to the limited number of network links. When asked whether or not they would use best practices information, one Hoke County entrepreneur also stated, “*Probably not; I’m kind of hard headed about stuff like that*” (HE1). There was a sense that no one can know their customers or their challenges as well as they do and, thus, the information wouldn’t be useful. The only case of information disseminating to a tourism entrepreneur came from the rare instances of interaction with that business’ specific association¹, which provided explicit knowledge on that sector’s practices.

Integrate Explicit Knowledge. Business association participation (external to the TDA and Chambers of Commerce) was sporadic among entrepreneurs in both counties. As previously mentioned, associations that were utilized were specific to the business sector. For example, a few agritourism entrepreneurs in Franklin County were members of the NC Agritourism Networking Association (ANA), which provided them access to information and networking opportunities. Entrepreneurs affiliated with associations typically used them for networking outside the county and for explicit information exchange, whereas entrepreneurs unaffiliated with an association primarily mentioned marketing assistance as the benefit of membership. This finding indicates that the more experience individuals have with integrating external knowledge, the more they appreciated and depended on it for their day-to-day business. One entrepreneur noted that they are overwhelmed by the information they receive. “*With the ANA we’re inundated with information about how to do this and that. Fix this and that. I feel*

¹ There was only one participant from this business sector. To maintain confidentiality, the business sector is so specific that it is not mentioned in association with this finding.

like I get as much as I need to do [for] what I'm doing and to the level I want to do it" (FE9).

It should be noted that this entrepreneur has no interest in growing their business as any additional growth would require them to hire additional staff, and that this was the only instance of an overabundance of information mentioned. Despite the potential benefits of membership, one entrepreneur worried that being tied to an association would cause them “*to just be comfortable within what they're doing rather than branching out to do something totally off the wall that people get excited about" (FE5).*

Lack of Support Experience. Another entrepreneur had an issue with how tourism associations share knowledge and assistance.

I think a lot of times tourism associations feel more like hands off consultants, and they do not realize that when they work with small farms or small businesses they actually have to be more hands on. You can't handle a small farm the way you would handle Wal-Mart. When people's heads are barely, barely out of the water, you have to work to bring them life rafts and paddles and point, "It's over there. That's where the shallow water is. That's where you can get your feet up under you." (FE1)

A different entrepreneur perceived government organizations as the entities lacking necessary experience and credited tourism associations with experience without as many resources.

I think that organizations like Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, Agritourism Network Association, will have much better expertise than the government entities in terms of their people. I think they [government entities] have more resources to work with but not a lot of expertise. (FE7)

These differences may be attributed to differences between associations and the role they play for businesses. The level of experience necessary to assist these businesses seems tied to the specificity of the association and the types of information it provides. However, it seems that much of the networking opportunities these associations provide may form outside county lines. Thus, the lack of ties within the county also prohibit the sharing of information about what associations provide the most pertinent services.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a more in-depth understanding of how rural tourism networks are organized and utilized. My aim was to understand how tourism knowledge flows through rural tourism networks by comparing the perspectives of SMEs within counties with and without a formal tourism development agency. To answer this question, I wanted to examine: (a) the connections between homogeneous entrepreneurs; (b) how these entrepreneurs connect with support agencies and respected community members; (c) perceptions of trust within networks; and (d) how tacit and explicit knowledge are disseminated through rural tourism networks.

Because the entrepreneurs interviewed were so heterogeneous across socioeconomic characteristics, true homogeneous groups did not emerge; however, homogenous groups based on business sector did emerge, which was more indicative of existing entrepreneur linkage than classification as rural tourism providers. Specifically, agritourism businesses interacted more frequently with each other due to the annual farm tours and involvement in existing CES programs. Most other entrepreneurs interviewed had either no linkages with other businesses or formed connections with similar businesses outside the community.

Interactions between entrepreneurs and support agencies in both counties are mixed. Interactions with CES were generally positive, but were more typically aligned with agriculture information exchange than tourism development information, as CES agent duties do not typically explicitly include tourism development and no agents have tourism appointments in either Franklin or Hoke Counties. Interactions with the Chambers and the

TDA were more limited, but where those ties did exist often there was a sense of frustration. By failing to identify and utilize opinion leaders in the community, the Chambers and TDA were unable to overcome their resource limitations to meet the needs of smaller businesses, a finding that mirrors Smerecnick and Anderson's (2011) study of diffusion of sustainability innovations in hotels and ski resorts. Additionally, the frustration felt by a number of entrepreneurs arose from the resistance to change seen in the power structures of the county, as well as the lack of equity felt by entrepreneurs during these interactions, which is commonly noted in the literature (Nunkoo et al., 2012; Halme et al., 2000).

As long as entrepreneurs feel this power imbalance, trust of local government and support agencies will be limited (Nunkoo et al., 2012). Trust appeared stronger for CES and sector specific business associations; however, few of those groups provided specific tourism materials or reached a broad range of tourism businesses. Importantly, trust for other entrepreneurs seemed to increase where previous interaction had occurred. Additionally, those individuals or organizations that were perceived to be most trusted were also those who tended to provide the most pertinent information and resources. Yet, it is unclear whether that trust was built on receiving useful information over time (Saxena, 2003) or that information was taken more seriously because of the trust that previously existed (Levin et al., 2004).

Previous research suggests that trust between entrepreneurs is critical to spread tacit knowledge within agriculture and tourism networks (Scott et al., 2008; Saxena, 2005; Levin et al., 2004). Notably the agritourism sites were more interested in sharing their experience—primarily through word of mouth—not only with other farmers but also with prospective entrepreneurs, visitors and their communities; these findings mirror those found by Shaw et

al. (2011) among a wine tourism network in California. Specifically, the agritourism providers recognized the power of their own knowledge formed through experience and wanted to pass that along for the benefit of others. Yet, like Hawkins' (2000) explains, these providers who were interested in sharing their own experience were also less open to learning from others. Very few of the entrepreneurs interviewed could name a source of dependable information and even fewer could provide tourism-specific information or knowledge sources. The main exception was when entrepreneurs were members of business associations, who cited the association as their main source of explicit tourism knowledge.

Given the unexpected findings (i.e., the overall lack of SME networks and information exchange among providers), the critical factors for support agencies when disseminating services and information are not clear cut or simple. Developing materials that are both pertinent and trusted will require closer interaction with different business sectors and appropriate responses to their needs (Dudensing et al., 2011). Entrepreneurs expect some targeted materials (Scott et al., 2008; Saxena, 2005), but their greatest demands, similar to those found by Cervigen and Kesgin (2007), were for services and information that individuals have limited access to and control over (e.g., destination marketing & insurance). Other research suggests that by providing a venue for entrepreneurs to come together and discuss their common goals and priorities, key challenges and needs can be identified by support agencies, and products and services can be created in response with the support of stakeholders (Dudensing et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2008).

After analyzing the interviews, it became clear that Franklin and Hoke Counties are in different stages of TALC (Butler, 1980); however, entrepreneurs within the county share

very similar challenges and needs. Hoke County is in the exploration stage and only has a small number of tourists, very limited infrastructure, and most residents see little to no effect from visitors. Franklin County is just reaching the involvement stage as the entrepreneurs interviewed have established their market area and developed basic targeted marketing strategies. Further, the entrepreneurs in Franklin County paint a future of success: visitation to the County will increase, particularly as entrepreneurs push for more involvement and information from local support agencies. This assessment of early life cycle stages for both Hoke and Franklin Counties suggests that each area has the potential to become a destination. However, the weak networks and limited ability of existing tourism support agencies to enhance knowledge exchange indicate that each county's capacity to become a true tourism destination is constrained.

Limitations & Recommendations

Going into this study I expected to find some existing connections and networks among tourism entrepreneurs. After the initial interviews, I began to see that although individuals recognized some of the benefits of working with others, their willingness to invest time and energy in that networking was very limited. They were willing to take part if someone else took the initiative and led the way. As the interviews progressed, it was clear each individual felt they had the best way of doing things and they were willing to share their advice with others. By only being interested in disseminating knowledge, these entrepreneurs are missing the great ideas held by people just down the road. These individuals shared many of their tips and ideas with me during these interviews, and I will be creating a fact sheet that not only reports my findings but also includes the "tips" they shared with me. I hope that they

will be able to use the information to help in their own business development, and recognize the benefits of learning from others experience.

My expectation to find strong networks in at least one county also meant that many of my questions assumed the existence of regular interaction and information sharing among businesses. Without strong connections or cross-sector networks, I was unable to find enough links to successfully create a network map, and I could see the frustration of some participants as I continued to ask the questions about their external interactions. Additional frustrations surfaced when asking questions about tourism in general, as many entrepreneurs didn't even think of themselves as tourism businesses. Why would they connect with these other businesses if they didn't think they shared any common goals or needs? It is likely that by framing my questions in the context of tourism I missed some information that could have pointed to a prospective opinion leader in the community. Opinion leaders can provide information on multiple topics, which Rogers (2003) calls polymorphism. By narrowing my questions to only tourism, I may have missed an opinion leader who does not currently offer tourism information, but who is trusted by the entrepreneurs in a way that would allow him or her to disseminate tourism information from a support agency.

My greatest limitation in this study was an inability to find the right time or method to connect with restaurants. If I called when they were open, they were too busy to talk, and if I called when they were closed, no one was available. Many restaurants in the counties did not have answering machines and a number of them were closed. The two restaurant interviews I was able schedule included showing up during meal times, buying food and asking to speak to the owner. Face-to-face interaction and support of their businesses allowed me to set up a

time to return while they were closed for the interview. I hope that future researchers working with restaurateurs can learn from my experiences and be as flexible as possible in setting up interviews that work with small business owners' schedules. My broad availability was helpful in setting up interviews with all types of tourism businesses, as many of these entrepreneurs worked six or seven days a week without a set schedule.

The majority of my interviews were with agritourism businesses, which is logical given the agricultural backgrounds of these counties; however, the cooperation of agritourism businesses was also likely influenced by my connection with NC State University and CES. Previous positive experience with the program, and the hope of some further assistance helped me gain entry among these entrepreneurs. I wish that I could have received as positive a response from entrepreneurs offering recreational activities besides agritourism (e.g., performance spaces, skydiving companies, & tour companies), as it would have enhanced the depth of the study and applicability of the results to more types of rural tourism SMEs. The heavy participation by agritourism entrepreneurs shows both the strength of CES and the current limits of their reach.

Beyond having professional connections, I was likely better able to gain access to and connect with the owners of agritourism business because of my background in small-scale agriculture and my continued interest in learning about the challenges they face. I was able to facilitate openness during my interviews by identifying portions of their business they were proud of and asking specific questions about that aspect. Because they recognized my sincere interest in their organization, they were more likely to answer truthfully and in detail. I found

that it's important in qualitative interviews to not allow your interview protocol to limit and control your interaction, but to simply provide direction.

During interviews, a number of entrepreneurs asked me for help with particular challenges they had been facing, such as social media or customer service. Because they took time out of their busy schedules to help me, I wanted to make sure they got something positive out of the experience as well. Therefore, I made a point of letting them know that I would share my perspectives and provide relevant feedback after the interviews concluded. It is likely that my willingness to “give back” also enhanced openness and trust.

My final recommendations are based on the fact that the two counties so clearly fit with Butler's (1980) TALC model, which reiterated the strength of this framework. There has been little to no research on the stages of TALC and networks between entrepreneurs and between entrepreneurs and support agencies. Future research is needed to better explore how these factors interact, and how networking can be strengthened within communities during early stages of destination development. Thus, similar studies should be conducted in counties with more established tourism businesses to continue cataloging networking characteristics at different developmental stages. For example, replicating this study could produce very different results in rural communities with a more established tourism system or in communities with a distinctive common resource such as a state park. It would be fascinating to understand how that common resource affects how networks are formed and, moreover, what key attributes enhance knowledge exchange within rural tourism networks.

Conclusion & Implications

Due to the lack of existing networks, this study was unable to identify critical factors that tourism support agencies should take into account when developing and disseminating information among rural tourism SMEs. Based on the interviews conducted, the lack of strong ties between tourism entrepreneurs in Franklin and Hoke Counties, the distrust of county-level associations, and a “go-it-alone” mentality has weakened the ability of existing support networks to exchange tacit or explicit tourism knowledge. Other challenges, such as lack of support from those in power, limited tourism infrastructure, and the overly complicated and expensive liability insurance, were identified as further deteriorating countywide efforts. Further, the existing support agencies face their own set of challenges. In particular, the support agency informants in Hoke County explained that many entrepreneurs are resistant to change and support agencies in both counties explained that their organizations lack sufficient resources to provide targeted information and initiatives.

Although there was some resistance to taking part in something that might or might not provide benefits, because these entrepreneurs already share a common image—even if it is unknown that it is shared—and they recognize the existence and role of their fellow tourism entrepreneurs, they have a solid foundation for growing tourism initiatives. Until entrepreneurs have opportunities to develop more consistent communication among themselves and with external support organizations and associations, they will likely continue to fail to see the benefits of integrating outside knowledge into their day-to-day decision-making (Baggio et al., 2010). Additionally, for tourism development to succeed, these businesses will need to start branching out and sharing information across tourism

sector lines as seen in the tourism sustainability study conducted by Halme et al. (2001). There may be enough demand for new tourism innovations that these entrepreneurs can initiate networking initiatives, but research has shown that it is often necessary for outside intervention (Dudensing et al., 2011; Baggio et al., 2010). This intervention is not currently coming from the existing support systems.

Interestingly, this deficiency of tourism support is more noticeable in Franklin County, which is farther along in the TALC model (Butler, 1980) and has a better articulated idea of what changes are needed. Some entrepreneurs in Franklin County have discovered the necessary resources in business associations and partnerships with other entrepreneurs outside the community. Despite these external connections, they have yet to form networks with other tourism businesses in their own county. Recent initiatives by community members may hold the promise of connecting groups of tourism entrepreneurs and identifying recognized opinion leaders who can enhance knowledge exchange and build in-county networks.

In Hoke County, both the Chamber informant and the entrepreneurs interviewed recognize the challenges they face with limited resources and existing infrastructure. However, some entrepreneurs noted that the growth of Fort Bragg could grow the current pool of visitors. In addition, there may be increased opportunities for networking and joint initiatives, as interest among some tourism businesses to become more involved with tourism development appears to be increasing.

By identifying the primary constraints to tourism development in these rural counties, support agencies can better prioritize their use of limited staff and resources. Additionally,

identifying and fostering initiatives for network development would allow support agencies to improve their relationships with entrepreneurs. However, tourism support agencies will need to base their decisions on entrepreneur needs and experiences rather than their own theories and assumptions (Saxena, 2005). Without the input of their stakeholders, the trust necessary for successful information dissemination will not develop (Levin et al., 2004).

These findings also hold utility for the tourism entrepreneurs in both counties. As current networking opportunities are typically being led by individuals outside the existing tourism support system, more conscientious effort is needed to involve a wide range of tourism entrepreneurs in the early stages of development. The ineffective attempts to develop Franklin County as a tourism destination, given that efforts have not provided a consistent flow of visitors to the county, as well as the lack of coordinated efforts in Hoke County, suggest that these counties need a more robust funding mechanism to support tourism development. The absence of dedicated (i.e., paid) personnel may be a key constraint inhibiting the type of network expansion and knowledge exchange necessary to create a destination (Pechlaner, Kozak, & Volgger, 2014). However, it seems that such an individual(s) will have to build trust among the entrepreneurs for any initiative to succeed.

Another key finding is that previous joint events conducted in Franklin County have seen significant numbers of tourists. However, the limited contact between the business owners and the lack of communication about tourism development goals failed to create the pull necessary to draw visitors more consistently to the area. To overcome these obstacles, prior research suggests that the businesses will need to broaden their interaction beyond the events held (Stokes, 2006).

Such community led initiatives may help support Tourism Extension's goal of more equitable representation within tourism development. By using the findings from this study, Tourism Extension specialists can make more informed decisions about the products they produce and the information they disseminate through CES agents to tourism entrepreneurs in rural counties. However, additional research will be necessary to determine the best mechanisms to enhance information flow within rural tourism networks. Although there was only one entrepreneur interviewed who had previous experience with Tourism Extension services, the majority of entrepreneurs had some experience with CES and commented that they generally trusted the information disseminated through the agents. This positive relationship with entrepreneurs provides a solid base on which to develop tourism knowledge exchange. A challenge for CES county agents may be stepping outside the more traditional agriculture role to support tourism knowledge dissemination and to reach a broader sector of tourism-related businesses.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Entrepreneur Interview Protocol

Entrepreneur Survey:

I appreciate you taking the time to participate in this interview. I am interested in how rural tourism businesses interact and share tourism knowledge as well as how tourism support organizations such as Tourism and Economic Development Agencies can best reach entrepreneurs. I am also interviewing staff from these support agencies. This interview will help me to understand these topics from your point of view and if you are interested, when my study is complete, I would be happy to share my results with you.

Business Characteristics & Introduction

I just want to take a minute to get to know you a little better and get a feel for your business.

1. [ice breaker]: How long have you been in business? [probe: were you always located here? Why did you select this town/county?]
2. [if undetermined prior to interview] I see you dabble in multiple business endeavors, which business endeavor contributes most to your income? Which are you most passionate about?
3. How many years have you lived in the community?
4. Are you locally owned and operated, owned by someone who doesn't live in the area, or part of a franchise?
5. Are you the Owner, Manager, of the business, or do you serve another role in the business?
 - a. [owner] How long have you owned the business?
 - b. [If someone other than the Owner] How long have you worked here?
6. How many full and part-time employees do you have?
7. Have you or any of your employees studied tourism in some capacity, either through schooling or training?
8. Are you a member of the local Chamber of Commerce?

Defining the Destination

These next questions will help me understand how you look at and define tourism in your area.

9. Why do you think tourists visit your business? Why do tourists visit this area? [probe: when you think about the area – what would you consider to be its boundaries? Your town, county, region?]
10. What are common natural or cultural resources that link your business with other tourism businesses in the area?
11. Have you participated in a tourism destination branding effort? If yes, explain... If no, have you considered it? Do you think there is a need?
12. How would you describe the overall tourism image your area has to offer?

Tourism Perceptions

13. Do you feel tourism is growing in your area?
14. Do you feel like your town supports tourism development? Your county?
15. What has helped/hindered tourism growth in your area?
16. How do you feel tourism development could be improved?
17. What specifically do you feel you need to enhance your business?

Tourism Entrepreneur Networks

Great... now I'd like to switch gears a little. This section will help me understand how tourism information is shared between businesses in this area. Are you familiar with what tourism associations are? Tourism associations are organized groups of tourism professionals that can provide access to new information, training, and networking. I'll be asking about them in the next section.

18. Are you participating in or have you participated in any tourism associations or partnerships?

If yes:

- a. Did it have a name?
- b. Who else was involved?

- c. Was there a coordinator? Do you know who that was?
- d. How often did you interact with this group (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually)?
- e. How much did you trust the information you received from this group [scale: 1-5]? Why?
- f. What kind of information did it provided?
- g. What were the main sources of information shared?
- h. What were the main reasons for you to join? Were there any fees associated with it?
- i. How long have you been/were you a part of that network?
- j. What were the major benefits of being a part of that group?
- k. How could it be improved?
- l. Would you take part in another tourism partnership or association? Why or Why not?

If no:

- m. Have you heard of any tourism partnership or associations that relate to your business?
 - n. Would you join a tourism partnership or associations? Why or Why not?
 - o. What would be your greatest need from a partnership or associations?
19. What are your main reasons for contacting other tourism individuals inside and outside your community?
- a. What do you receive from them?
 - b. How frequently do you contact those inside/outside your community?
 - c. Do you trust that there will be mutual benefit?

- d. Are these professional exchanges only or do you also receive social benefits, such as friendship?

20. Please name 5 other tourism entrepreneurs you interact with on a regular basis.

- a. How often do you interact with them (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually)?
- b. Are these interactions face-to-face, by phone, or online?
- c. Are these local or external to your community?
- d. Are these commercial, knowledge sharing or social based interactions?
- e. How much do you trust each of these individuals (on a scale from 1-5)

Name	Amt. Interact	Method	Local vs. Extern.	Com./Know./ Soc.	Trust

21. When looking for information or resources, do you primarily use local services or do you depend on organizations outside your area?

22. Please name the top 5 sources of tourism information that you use, this can be people or other resources such as websites or journals.

- a. How often do you use/access these resources (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually)?
- b. What kind of information do they provide?
- c. How useful is this information to your business (Scale: 1-5)?
- d. How much do you trust these resources (Scale 1-5)?

Source	Amt. Used	Type	Useful	Trust

23. Do others seek your expertise on tourism business strategies? What kind of information do you share?

24. Name at least 2 individuals you feel provide the most useful information to you and other entrepreneurs.

- a. What is their role within the community?
- b. What kind of information do they provide?
- c. How often do you interact with these individuals (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually)?
- d. What is the primary method of interacting with them?
- e. How much do you trust these individuals and why?

Name	Role	Type	Amt. Interact	Method	Trust

25. Of all the individuals you have listed above, are any of these your go to person for tourism information? Why?

26. Are your primary competitors local or external to the area?

27. Do you have access to a resource that provides best-practices of businesses like yours?

- a. What is that resource?
- b. How often do you use that resource?
- c. How much do you trust that resource?
- d. If you had access to these resources, how likely would you be to use them?
- e. Who do you think would provide the best information (e.g. CES, TDA, EDA, CoC)?

Experience with Support Agencies

This section of questions will take a closer look at your past experiences with any tourism support agencies.

28. Have you worked with or are you currently working with any tourism development organizations?

If you have:

- a. Did you or the organization make first contact? How was that contact made?
- b. What information have you found most useful, and in what form did you receive it?

If you haven't:

- c. Are you aware of support agencies in your county or community?
 - d. Have you seen resources from these agencies? Were they pertinent to you?
 - e. Would you be interested in working with any of these agencies?
29. Are you aware the Cooperative Extension Service provides tourism materials?
- a. Have you ever heard of Tourism Extension Office out of NCSU?
 - b. Would you trust information provided by CES, why/why not?
 - c. Would you use information provided by CES, why/why not?
30. Do you generally trust local government agencies? Why or why not?
31. Do you feel tourism support agencies are sensitive to the needs of businesses like yours? [probe: rural areas?]

Participant Demographics

This last section of questions will help me better understand and compare your answers to other entrepreneurs and the answers provided by tourism support agencies. Feel free to not answer any question you are uncomfortable with. All responses will be kept confidential.

32. What is the highest level of education you received? *If college level:* What was your degree in?
33. What is your race?
34. How old are you?
35. What is your annual income?
36. Can you recommend any other tourism businesses I should contact in the area?

I appreciate you taking the time to answer my questions, and sharing this information with me. If you have any questions you can feel free to contact either me or my advisor. Our contact information is on the sheet I provided you at the start of the interview. I look forward to following up with you once I complete my research.

Appendix B: Tourism Support Agency Interview Protocol

I appreciate you taking the time to participate in this interview. I am interested in how rural tourism businesses interact and share tourism knowledge as well as how tourism support organizations such as Tourism and Economic Development Agencies can best reach entrepreneurs. I am also interviewing tourism entrepreneurs throughout the county. This interview will help me to understand these topics from your point of view and if you are interested, when my study is complete, I would be happy to share my results with you.

Agency Characteristics and Introduction

The first few questions will help me get a feel for your agency and the services you provide.

37. In order to make sure my records are correct is this organization government based or an NGO? This organization is a _____ (TDA, EDA, CoC, DMO)
38. What type of services do you typically provide to tourism businesses?
39. What methods do you use to disseminate each of these services?
 - a. In an ideal world, what would be your preferred dissemination strategy(s)?

Entrepreneur Interactions

The rest of my questions will give me an idea of how you interact with tourism entrepreneurs.

40. What types of tourism businesses do you work most closely with?
 - a. Is there a reason that you focus on those types of business and not others?
What is it?
41. Do you seek out new tourism businesses or do you focus on those that approach you?
Why?
42. Are there individuals in the community that your organization uses to connect with the broader network of entrepreneurs?
 - a. If so, can you provide me with a list of those individuals?
 - b. What is the best way to reach them?
 - c. How frequently do you use them (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually)?

d. How did you find them?

e. Why do you use them?

Name	Contact Info	Amt. Interaction	Found	Use

43. Do you feel your organization is reaching those entrepreneurs that most need your help? Why/why not?

a. How could this be improved?

44. Do you feel your organization is reaching all levels of tourism businesses? Why/why not?

45. Do you feel that the resources you provide are a source of trusted information among the entrepreneurs in your area? What makes you think so/not?

a. How would you improve this?

46. What organizations or entrepreneurs do you recommend I contact to get the best idea of how the tourism entrepreneur network is organized in this area?

a. What is the best way to reach them?

b. How often do you interact with them (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually)?

Name	Contact Info	Amt. Interaction

I appreciate you taking the time to answer my questions, and sharing this information with me. If you have any questions you can feel free to contact either me or my advisor. Our

contact information is on the sheet I provided you at the start of the interview. I look forward to following up with you once I complete my research.

Appendix C: IRB Letter of Approval

North Carolina State University is a land-grant university and a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina.

Office of Research and Innovation
Division of Research Administration

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Campus Box 7516
Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-7516

919.515.8756 (phone)
919.515.7721 (fax)

From: Jennifer Ofstein, IRB Coordinator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: May 21, 2014

Title: Knowledge Dissemination in Rural Tourism Networks: Implications for Tourism Support Agencies

IRB#: 4009

Dear Jennifer Iyengar,

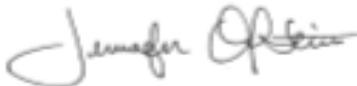
The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (Exemption: 46.101. b.2). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review. This approval does not expire, but any changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

NOTE:

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU projects, the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
2. Any changes to the research must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.

Please forward a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor, if applicable.
Thank you.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Ofstein
NC State IRB