Consumer Decision Making and Word of Mouth Communication

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Word of mouth (WOM) communication has been a form of additional information for consumers wishing to make a purchase decision where there was uncertainty, lack of knowledge or just a general desire for more information. The increased access and use of social media as well as anonymous opportunities for consumers to provide their reviews on products or services is changing how WOM is used and sought. There is little research on the impact and use of WOM with respect to consumer decision making in a recreation and leisure context. Much research has been focussed on retail experiences and more tangible outcomes. The purpose of this study was to explore the process consumers undertake to seek out, listen and engage in WOM communication when making service purchase decisions. This study took place in a municipality in York Region that offered swimming lessons to the public. Participants were chosen using convenience sampling methodology. 500 surveys were distributed with 301 returned surveys completed to some degree. Study participants were recruited from observers watching a swim class offered by a municipal recreation provider. The survey instrument asked participants to describe themselves in terms of their experience level with municipal recreation programs. It also included three scales relating to susceptibility to influence, self confidence and need for cognition. Participants were exposed to one of five scenarios – one control message contained no treatment information and four scenarios with treatment messages relating to self-confidence and perceived risk. Treatment group members received information suggesting either high and low levels of perceived risk with purchase and high and low levels of self-confidence with knowledge (regarding the purchase decision). Respondents in this study possessed a very high level of self confidence in their program selections; they knew where to find the information and also how to explore program options. Overall this seemed a very well informed and confident group. Results suggest that susceptibility to influence ($t = 5.889$, $p = .000$) and self confidence ($t = -2.174$, $p = .037$) influenced their search for WOM communication.

Need for cognition did not influence the likelihood they would seek WOM communication (t = -1.098, p = .280). Together all three variables explained 50% of the variance (adjusted R^2 = .505) in the dependent variable (likelihood they would seek out WOM to make the purchase). These results indicate that participants were more likely to seek WOM when they were susceptible to influence and when their self confidence levels were low. Results also suggest that consumers were open to on line sources of word of mouth communication. More than that, study participants were generally willing to trust online reviews from people who were not necessarily known to them. As a result, online reviews could greatly influence the program registration numbers. A key question for future research could focus on the role shared experience plays in the evolution of trust between strangers. Many of these respondents would trust the advice of others simply because they reported having shared experience. How far does this trust go? How much risk must be present before they hesitate to take advice from unknown individuals? What are the characteristics or traits that consumers look for when assessing the validity of the reviews. Word of mouth seems a very pervasive and resilient concept. This may be particularly important in situations characterized by risk. Additional research could further explore the concept of word of finger and its influence on the traditional concept of WOM communication.

Acknowledgements

A Masters' degree was never in my original education plan...until, in my final term, I took an Undergraduate class with Dr. Ron McCarville at the University of Waterloo. It was because of him that I began to pursue my Masters' degree. Throughout my time with Ron as my supervisor, he became a good friend, demonstrated immense confidence in me and was my cheerleader all the way. Without his persistence, I would not be where I am today or have enjoyed completing this thesis over the years. When will we have our next tea & tea biscuit?

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To my "other mother" Maggie Evans and good friend Tracy Taves at the University of Waterloo, I can't thank you enough for encouraging me to see this through to the end. It was a long and winding road but I know the trip was certainly worth it. Your friendship and support has meant more to me than any words can express. To my family, my parents Wade and Susan Levy, brother Denton, sister in law Krissy, sister Shannon, I love you all and you constantly demonstrate the value of family and support no matter what you encounter.

Someone once told me that "Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood". I have lived through many lessons during my graduate studies and while I didn't always like the lesson or the message it brought, I eventually came to understand and I thank everyone involved in my journey for playing their part and sharing the lessons with me.

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Chapter 1: Consumer Decision Making and Word of Mouth

Consumption of leisure services requires decision making. Consumers must choose between various offerings; they must make decisions regarding the allocation of resources. When doing so they will often negotiate with fellow participants. Such behaviour rarely occurs without some influence from the external environment or personal predispositions. "No individual decision making is completely independent of the social or collective framework in which it takes place" (Zeleny, 1982, p. 92).

One of the most common forms of communication is Word of Mouth (WOM). The "WOM communication process is one of the most powerful forces in the marketplace and tends to be highly persuasive and, in turn, to be extremely effective. This is primarily because consumers frequently rely on informal and/or personal communication sources in making purchase decisions as opposed to more formal and/or organizational sources such as advertising campaigns" (Bansal & Voyer, 2000, p. 166). WOM communication occurs on a regular basis amongst friends and families and has been "recognized as an important promotional tool" (Wilson, 1994) for organizations. While "mass media are generally effective in generating awareness of consumer products...consumers tend to rely more heavily on WOM when making purchase decisions for services" (Harrison-Walker, 2001, p. 71).

Definition of Word of Mouth Communication

WOM communication is defined as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization or a service" (Harrison-Walker, p. 63). The definition can also be broadened to include "interactions with members of one's social and professional network regarding the (failed) service encounter, usually by talking to family members, friends, relatives, fellow customers and the like. It refers to all communication concerning the evaluations of goods and

services rather than to formal complaints to the organization or its personnel" (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 1999, p. 89). There are two types of WOM communication. "Positive WOM (PWOM) includes recommendations to others, conspicuous display and interpersonal discussions relating to pleasant, vivid or novel experiences. Negative WOM (NWOM) deals with product denigration, unpleasant experiences, and private complaining" (Audrain-Pontevia & Kimmel, 2008, p. 126). Whether WOM is positive or negative, solicited or unsolicited, consumers frequently engage in WOM communication through various social interactions. With regular interactions, WOM will naturally occur as it is "real conversations with real people. It's about trusted opinion" (Newmarch, 2008, p. 6). Identifying individuals who are trusted and respected, allows consumers an opportunity to utilize their trusted as well as informal relationships.

It should be noted the traditional definition of WOM has been supplemented by the term Word of Finger (WOF). There is not much academic research available using this term but as early as 2010, Michael Quinion of the World Wide Words e-magazine defined WOF as a "punning revision of *word of mouth* for the digital age and refers to e-mail, texts and other forms of communication that require typing, even though much of it is undertaken on mobile devices using just the thumbs. By its nature it is both recent and to be found mainly online." This new form of WOM suggests that consumers are finding new ways to seek and share information.

Why We Listen to WOM Communication

Consumers are faced daily with decision making under uncertainty. They must choose between various options in order to fulfill the various requirements of everyday living. They choose one product over another. They select services from the many that are available. While some of these decisions are straightforward and simple, others are more complex (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1997). Complex decision making, the focus of this study, is characterized by information gathering, evaluation of alternatives, and eventual decision making (Rickwood & White, 2009).

Complex decision making is a multi stage process within which consumers engage. The stages are "pre-decision, decision and post decision and they are interdependent on each other" (Zeleny, 1982, p. 86). Typically, consumers conduct a pre-purchase search as part of the pre-decision phase. In the pre-decision phase, the consumers have not yet decided on which program or service they will select. They do not have enough information to make an informed decision. This "information gathering and evaluation process is highly objective and impartial at first" (Zeleny, 1982, p. 88).

The pre-purchase search "has been defined as information seeking and processing activities which one engages in to facilitate decision making regarding some goal object in the marketplace" (Bloch, Sherrell & Ridgway, 1986, p. 120). As the consumer gathers information and addresses concerns such as perceived risk, this process becomes less objective and more biased. It is at this point the consumer is preparing to enter the decision phase.

This information gathering stage is of particular interest in this study. Interpersonal sources can be both passive and active providers of information. In a passive information exchange, information is shared through normal conversations. These conversations are typically general in nature with no specific purpose beyond mutual sharing. An example of this would be the water cooler chat that may happen at a workplace. It is informal and the topics are varied.

Active information sharing is more purposeful. For an active information exchange, the recipients are looking for specific information and may be very deliberate in terms of who they will seek out and what questions they ask. In an active information gathering process, consumers are looking for recommendations, comments or feedback on specific services or products. In a recent Facebook posting, for example, a friend was looking for a vacation location with a beach that was inexpensive and family friendly. Over 10 people commented on this

thread and provided potential locations and places to avoid. This active search from the consumer resulted in the selection of their next vacation location.This insight can assist the consumer with the final purchase decision.

Interpersonal sources serve many needs in the purchase decision process. Through product related discussions, interpersonal sources may provide "new-product or new-usage information. Secondly, they reduce perceived risk by receiving firsthand knowledge from a user about a specific product or brand. Third, they reduce the search time entailed in the identification of a needed product or service. For the reasons listed above, people often look to friends, neighbours, and other acquaintances for product information" (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1997, p. 503).

Consumers engage in WOM communication during this search stage more frequently "largely because personal communication is viewed as a more reliable source than non-personal information, WOM communication is a powerful force in influencing future buying decisions, particularly when the service delivered is of high risk for the customer" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002, p. 232).

When consumer's listen to WOM information, there is a "perception that the WOM communication is unbiased (limited to the extent that there is no monetary or commercial gain to be attained by the sender), and there is an added degree of importance associated with WOM when used as an information source in services that are difficult to evaluate. WOM therefore becomes especially important within the services purchase decision context" (Bansal et al, 2000, p. 167). Consumers appreciate hearing from others regarding their experiences and in a service organization, when there is rarely a chance to redo the experience, WOM can be a valuable communication tool.

The desire for WOM may be influenced by personal predispositions. Personal predispositions may include an individual's need for cognition, knowledge/expertise, and the level of self-confidence/self-efficacy. When making a purchase decision, if a consumer has a high need for cognition, a low level of knowledge/expertise or a low level of self-confidence/self-efficacy, they may be more likely to engage in WOM communication and may place more trust in information from others. This tendency will be exacerbated when the individual has little experience in this purchase situation. The nature of the purchase decision may also influence the desire for WOM communication. For example, purchase decisions involving a high level of real or perceived risk can be characterized by considerable uncertainty. Consequently, decision makers involved in high risk ventures may be more likely to engage in WOM to address concerns and evaluate options. In this way they hope to alleviate and reduce the risk. Conversely, "the influence of WOM on purchase decisions is less dramatic in a low risk scenario as opposed to its more influential effects in a high risk purchase situation" (Bansal et al, 2000, p. 169).

When We Listen to WOM Communication

Consumers engage in interpersonal communication as part of everyday communications. For the purposes of this thesis, the most influential WOM communication occurs in the pre-purchase stage when consumers are evaluating and exploring available options. This "pre-purchase information search is a critical step in the buying process of consumers, especially in the case of highly involving products and services" (Mourali, Laroche & Pons, 2005, p. 308). "Understanding the pre-purchase behaviour is as crucial as the purchase itself" (Rickwood & White, 2009, p. 145). The "consumer's primary motive for pre-purchase search is to enhance the quality of the purchase outcome" (Bloch et al, 1986, p. 120). If consumers are willing to commit financial, emotional and time resources to a program or service, many will conduct a pre-purchase search which may help with the final purchase

decision. During the pre-purchase search, "WOM is the most important source of risk-reducing information and creates an even greater impact on consumers, largely due to clarification and feedback opportunities" (Bansal et al, 2000, p. 169). Consumers listen to interpersonal communication for a variety of reasons which include a personal predisposition to listening, the nature of the purchase as well as the source of the interpersonal communication.

How We Use WOM Communication (Mediums)

It should be acknowledged that individuals are not always seeking information to assist with imminent purchase behaviour. They may engage in WOM simply to discover information that is personally relevant or of interest. For example, a consumer checks his/her Facebook page and notices a friend has commented on a recent camping experience where a lot of wildlife was seen. If seeing wildlife was of interest to the consumer, they may enter into a communication thread with the friend to gather more information and may then plan to attend the same campsite for their next vacation.

Once consumers are satisfied with the information they have gathered, they will progress to the decision phase. In the decision phase, "the decision maker becomes more and more committed to a smaller number of options…the level of commitment reaches the highest point when the final decision has been made" (Zeleny, 1982, p. 91). For a consumer, the commitment to purchase the program or service can be made with confidence. At this point, additional interpersonal information may not be influential to the final purchase decision. Additionally, there is the potential the consumer may opt to not pursue purchasing the program or product if they are not confident in their choice or the information gathered was not what they were expecting.

Post decision has the decision maker continuing to "seek new information. Its purpose now is to increase the decision maker's confidence and to reduce post decision regret and

dissonance" (Zeleny, p. 92). For consumers, if they were not completely satisfied with the program or service, this new information could impact future purchase decisions.

Opportunities for WOM Communication

Through personal interactions, relationships are created and social networks are established. A social network is "a set of people, organizations, or other social entities connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships, in which members participate for a variety of reasons, ranging from socio-psychological needs (e.g., friendship) to more functionally oriented reasons, such as knowledge transfer"(Kleijnen, Lievens, de Ruyter & Wetzels, 2009, p. 16). Social networks have provided consumers an opportunity to send messages and essentially share knowledge of programs and services to a large number of people.

With the introduction of the internet, WOM has become more powerful and increased access to electronic WOM (eWOM) that provides consumers opportunities for easier access to product and service reviews prior to purchase (Park & Kim, 2008). Consequently, at the "November 2000 summit meeting in Brunei, the leaders of APEC declared that they were committed to develop and implement a policy framework to enable the people of urban, provincial and rural communities in every economy to have individual or community-based access to information and services offered via the internet by 2010" (Lu, 2001, p. 1).

While the online component of WOM is not critical to this thesis, it does suggest the variety of sources from which WOM may be collected. Whereas in the past WOM was limited to face-to-face interaction, the internet offers almost unlimited potential for social discourse. With social networks becoming more prevalent in WOM communications and access to the internet more accessible, organizations are experimenting with different ways to maximize consumer awareness of their service or product. In "South Korea, while traditional media have shown a drastic decline as information sources, 80% of consumers refer to the posting about products or

customer reviews on the Internet when they need product information" (Doh & Hwang, 2009, p. 193). Many organizations are providing consumers the opportunities to provide reviews on a product or service, some of which include LL Bean (www.llbean.com), Cineplex Theatres (www.cineplex.com), and Best Buy (www.bestbuy.ca). All these options increase consumers' capacity to seek WOM while they make purchase decisions. The next sections outline 3 separate but related models intended to describe processes that influence WOM communication. The format I have adopted is as follows. The variables in each of the first two models are described briefly. The final (third) model represents an expansion of the first two models. I offer significantly greater explanation of each relevant variable during my discussion of the third model.

Problem Statement

This review suggests that decision makers are constantly seeking information to assist with daily problem solving. The purpose of this study was to explore the process consumers undertake to seek out, listen and engage in WOM communication when making service a purchase decision. The focus was on understanding conditions which lead consumers to rely on or disregard interpersonal communication. This study considered specific instances in which caregivers were exploring a recreation program opportunity for a child. The elements of risk, susceptibility to personal influence and the need for cognition and their impact on decision making processes were explored in this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A Conceptual Model of Consumers' Preference for Interpersonal Information Sources

The following sections outline 3 related models. These models provide a conceptual underpinning for this study. Each model is described in its entirety. I should note that there is considerable overlap between the models so, for the sake of clarity, some variables will be described more than once. Consequently, some descriptions may seem redundant. However, this approach ensured that each model and the related description provide a standalone unit. The author believes that overall clarity is enhanced as a result.

Figure 1 offers a conceptual model that outlines how consumers might utilize interpersonal information sources when making a purchase decision. It suggests that some individuals are more predisposed than others to seek information from such sources.
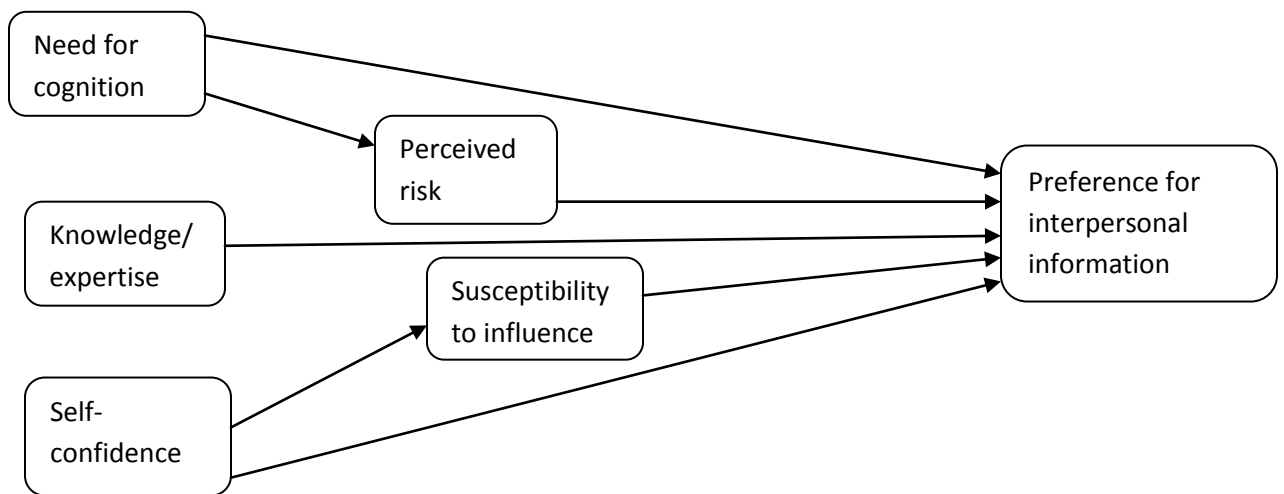
Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Consumers' Preference for Interpersonal Information Sources (Mourali et al)

Need for cognition: Need for cognition is a "personality" variable. While knowledge and risk assessments may be context specific, an individual's need for cognition is typically viewed

as being stable over time. The need for cognition is a function of motivation and suggests

consumers who are highly motivated will utilize various sources and conduct a more thorough

information search. Individuals who are typically a low need for cognition individual are less

motivated and are more prone to use trusted interpersonal sources (Mourali et al, 2005).

Knowledge/Expertise: Situational uncertainty arises from level of knowledge/expertise

and perceived risk. Situational uncertainty may "occur because the consumer lacks the

necessary knowledge about the product category to make a confident decision, or it may be due

to a high perception of risk associated with the purchase situation" (Mourali et al, 2005, p. 309).

For example, a parent whose child hopes to enroll in a swim program may feel uncertain both in

terms of swim program quality and safety. As a result, that parent may wish to consult trusted

others who may offer advice in terms of program and safety information. Listening to the opinion

of others will also assist consumers in "reducing their risk and uncertainty with respect to

products or services" (Kleijnen et al, 2009, p. 17). In this way, both the information and risk

related issues are addressed.

Self-confidence: Self-confidence and susceptibility to influence represent the last two

variables that affect consumers' preference for interpersonal information and these are identified

as personality traits. Self-confidence refers to the "differing ways in which individuals relate to

each other. Some people are inherently more comfortable than others in interpersonal

interactions" (Mourali et al, 2005, p. 309). A parent who is placed in a social setting, for

example, where few social connections to other participants exist may experience low self-

confidence. A higher level of self-confidence may become evident once that parent has

developed stronger connections to participants.

Susceptibility to influence: Susceptibility to influence is a general trait that varies across

individuals and refers to the "willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding

purchase decisions, and/or the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others" (Mourali et al, p. 310). When choosing a recreational program, parents may be influenced by the expectations of their own parents or other family members which may affect the final program selection. Direct observation of a similar program may also influence a final purchase decision. This observation would allow for a richer understanding of the program and may provide additional information to assist in the selection of the program.

Other models offer further clarification of the regarding the importance of WOM. For example, Bansal et al. (2000) offer a model that includes WOM actively being sought by the consumer and tie strength which leads to the influence of sender's WOM on the receivers purchase decision.

Impact of WOM Communication

This next model, offered by Bansal et al. (2000), is comparable in many ways to the previous model. It too includes personal characteristics. It adds additional insight however, in that it includes greater detail on interpersonal influences. It suggests, for example, that issues like sender's perceived expertise and tie strength between the sender of the communication and the receiver of the information may affect the level of influence generated by the sender.
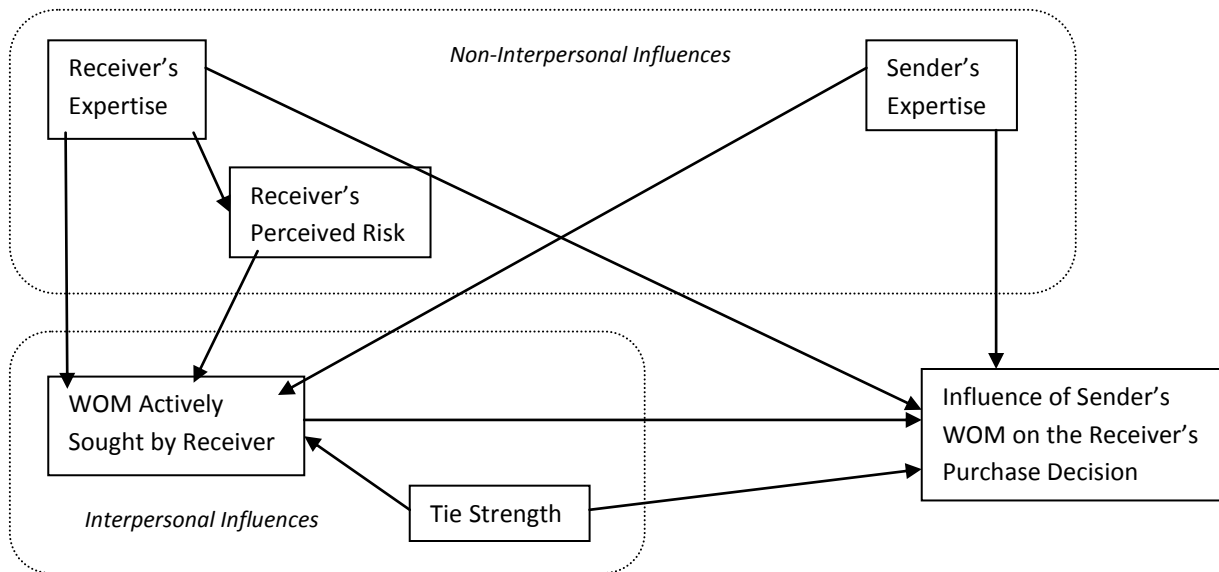
Figure 2: Proposed model by Bansal & Voyer - Impact of WOM Communication

Non- interpersonal influence: Non- interpersonal influence consists of three elements:

receiver's perceived risk, sender's expertise and the receiver's expertise (Bansal et al., 2000).

These elements individually or in combination can affect the purchase decision and how actively

WOM communication is sought. For example, "those with less product experience probably

perceive more risk and have the most to gain from engaging in WOM information gathering"

(Bansal et al., 2000, p. 170). For programs where consumers have no experience to rely upon,

they may conduct an information search in order to increase their knowledge and reduce the

level of perceived risk. In this way, information provided by a knowledgeable sender may help

reduce the level of perceived risk. Alternatively, a consumer who has knowledge of a

recreational program through personal experience (e.g. figure skating) may perceive a low level

of risk when choosing a program for a child.

Receivers' perceived risk: As suggested above, perceived risk may vary from one

consumer to the next; from one purchase decision to the next. With service provision where

many forms of risk exist, Sweeney et al. (2008) identified several possible risks: functional, time,

financial, psychological and social. One or all of these variables can change from experience to

experience as well as between providers and due to this variability, non-interpersonal influences can greatly affect the interpersonal communication sought or received.

Interpersonal influence: Interpersonal influence refers to consumers who actively seek WOM communication through multiple message providers in an effort to develop a coherent understanding of the purchase context. While doing so they often seek the insights of individuals with whom they share a personal relationship. This relationship is often discussed in terms of tie strength and relates to the level and depth of the bond between the two individuals. The bond between individuals can be "short, shallow, and fleeting or at the other end of the spectrum, firmly established, deeply rooted and long lasting but all WOM transactions occur within some social relationship" (Bansal et al., 2000, p. 168).

ADAPTED MODEL

The models by Mourali et al. (2005) and Bansal et al. (2000) both speak to similar interpersonal and personal constructs when attempting to understand consumers' willingness to utilize various communication sources for product or service information. Overall, when it comes to decision making "consumers consider interactions with their peers as a valuable and reliable information source" (Kleijnen et al, 2009, p. 16) and with increased access to social networks, real time interactions between peers will continue to play a role in the decision making process.

Taken together, both models suggest that situational uncertainty, personality traits, and social connections can influence the degree to which consumers seek WOM communication. Each model offers a particular perspective but together they paint a comprehensive picture of the dynamics which surround decision making. However, the literature also suggests other pertinent variables that may influence WOM and decision making processes. All these insights are included in an adapted model (Figure 3) offered below. This model includes components discussed by Mourali et al. and Bansal et al. but explicitly links tie strength and sender

expertise. As well, it adds media type as an important influence on the eventual outcome of the WOM communication.
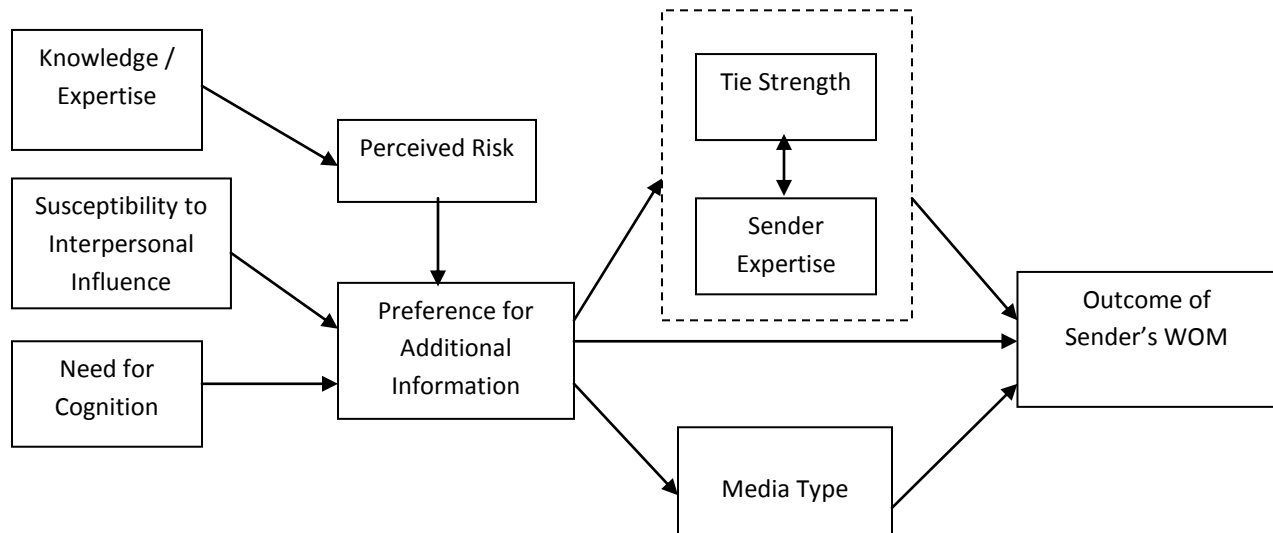
Figure 3: Adapted Model of consumers' preference for interpersonal information sources

model described here. Rather the models were used to guide data collection by suggesting those variables that might best describe dynamics behind the use of WOM. In the adapted model, sender expertise and media type were included because a consumer's belief in their decision making abilities and the increased access to the internet and social networking sites may affect the desire for interpersonal information as well as the influence the message may have on the final purchase decision.

Components of the Adapted Model

There are several personal variables that might influence consumers' desire to seek interpersonal communication. Mourali et al. (2005) suggest that a consumer's preference for an interpersonal source of information is higher in part due to a lack of motivation to search extensively. For example, if a new mom is looking for a parent and tot class to attend and she

has a friend who has recently enjoyed a program, she may choose to attend that program and not conduct a further search.

Preference for an interpersonal source of information may also be a function of situational uncertainty. When a consumer is forced to make a decision within a short time frame, for example in a popular program where there is one available space, there may not be adequate time for a thorough information search. As a result, a consumer may rely on interpersonal sources to help make that decision. In the situation where there is a high level of uncertainty, for example placing a child with special needs in an integrated program, interpersonal communication can alleviate much of the uncertainty experienced by the consumer and possibly the participant.

Knowledge of the Receiver

Knowledge refers to "the information stored within a memory" (Laroche, Vinhal Nepomuceno & Richard, 2010, p. 203). The knowledge a consumer possesses allows the individual to better understand the product or service and therefore make a purchase decision with greater confidence. If a consumer does not have knowledge of a product or service a greater level of perceived risk may exist. Since services are intangible, "knowledge impacts the relationship between intangibility and perceived risk and additional knowledge and information lead to a reduction in perceived risk" (Laroche et al., 2010, p. 203).

Prior to purchase and use of a service, consumers tend to seek reassurance in their program selection (Kleijnen et al., 2009). This can be accomplished through the acquisition of information regarding the program provider as well as services available. For many consumers, "choosing the appropriate service provider is not a simple task. It is not just that there are several options to choose from that makes these decisions difficult; rather it is the intangibility of the offer and the heterogeneity of its delivery" (Zeelenberg et al., 1999, p. 86). Parents with a

child who wishes to learn karate may have several program options and many disciplines of karate to choose from. To make an optimal decision, parents may complete a thorough search of available programs, in an effort to increase their knowledge. This search usually leads to a higher level of satisfaction with the services and program provided.

The interpersonal communication framework proposed by Mourali et al. (2005) used product knowledge theory when explaining the knowledge a receiver may require prior to purchase. This theory suggests that "those with high subjective product knowledge engage in less information search than those with lower subjective knowledge prior to purchase" (Mourali et al., p. 312). In other words, those who believe they have adequate information are unlikely to seek more before decision making.

However, decision making is a dynamic process. Many recreational organizations regularly change the available programs and rely on staff whose schedules and availability may change over time. For example, in the summer months, many municipal recreational programs shift their program focus to summer camps and this limits the selection and variety of other non-camp programs. In this situation, if parents have observed a dance program in the spring session and wish to enroll in that program, they may have to wait until the fall session when the program focus is back to general interest programs. When exploring recreational opportunities, subjective knowledge is constantly being tested as programs are added, rescheduled or cancelled. If a program is modified or changed, program knowledge may seem incomplete. As a result, additional search with new criteria may be required.

Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

The susceptibility to interpersonal influence considers the categories of information acquisition, consideration-set formation, personal outcomes decision making, social outcomes decision making, personal knowledge and market place interfaces.

Expertise of the Receiver

Expertise is the knowledge possessed by the receiver of WOM communication. Experts have "greater awareness of, and knowledge, about product alternatives (Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger, Yale, 1998, p. 85). For example, consumers who have little expertise will seek information that is easy to understand. Unfortunately, they will also be challenged to understand available information. They may find the search process overwhelming and the search may be prematurely abandoned. Conversely, those who feel they have significant expertise may seek information that is more complex and attribute specific (Park et al., 2008). Further, those with greater expertise require less processing time (Bansal et al., 2005). Clearly, as consumers gain expertise through experience or WOM, the demands for future decision making will change.

Consumers who believe they are "high on the expertise scale could be moved into the moderate range by introducing them to doubts and ultimately leading them to conclude that perhaps they do not possess as much expertise as they had initially construed" (Bansal et al., 2005, p. 176). A child registered in a non-contact hockey league who chooses to register in a contact league is an example of how level of expertise may change. In this situation, parents, who may be an 'expert' in non-contact hockey, may find they now possess a lesser degree of expertise. The parent has general hockey expertise but with contact permitted, the 'expert' knowledge may not be as relevant but is still useful. By transferring existing knowledge from one category to the next, consumers can use their knowledge to assist in the decision making process and feel some confidence in their decision (Kleijnen et al., 2009).

Perceived Risk

New situations always have an element of risk. When consumers evaluate service options, they "may experience pre-purchase uncertainty as to type and degree of expected loss resulting from the purchase and use of a product" (Murray & Schlacter, 1990, p. 53). In a situation where a child has a special need, the parent may experience a heightened level of

uncertainty when choosing a program for a child. The need for a more intense evaluation of options available may address these feelings of uncertainty but may not eliminate the level of perceived risk.

Perceived risk could manifest itself anywhere from potential for personal injury to the amount of time required to prepare for and participate in a recreational program. "In consumer behaviour, perceived risk refers to the negative consequences that can arise from the purchase of a product and perceived decision importance increases as perceived risk increases" (Wangenheim, 2005, p. 70). The level of perceived risk between selecting a 9 week recreational volleyball league and a weekend white water rafting will be substantially different. In a 9 week volleyball league, risks associated with the league may include minor injuries, loss of personal time or even convenience loss. For a white water rafting trip, the potential for more serious injuries, financial loss as well as social loss may exist.

The type of risk a consumer may experience can include "financial, performance, physical, psychological, social and convenience loss" (Murray et al., 1990, p. 53). Many recreational providers recognize the risks consumers take when choosing one of their programs. One of the largest risks a consumer takes is financial risk. Asking consumers to commit to a program without seeing or experiencing it can cause an increase in perceived risk. The importance of a positive experience is recognized in various policies and an example of this is an organization's refund policy. Refunds are usually permitted after the start of a program up to a certain number of classes if the participant feels it is not compatible with their skills or needs. The provision of refunds allows risk to be minimized and may encourage consumers to purchase the service or program.

Engaging in WOM communication can play an important role as a risk reduction strategy. Consider, for example, a consumer seeking WOM to reduce risk in the selection of

play structure equipment. Purchasing play structures can be expensive depending on the

accessories that are included. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee the children will enjoy it once

the structure has been purchased. While the tangible cost of the equipment may be known

when purchasing, long term product and other intangible benefits are difficult to fully appreciate

prior to purchase (Murray et al., 1990). Such uncertainty adds perceived risk to the purchase

process. Interpersonal communication for such a purchase can assist a consumer in making an

informed decision thereby reducing perceived risk.

Need for Cognition

The individual's willingness to exert effort when conducting a search for a product or

service refers to an individual's need for cognition. Everyone has "a need to understand...the

experiential world and need for cognition is a stable individual difference in people's tendency to

engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity" (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein and Jarvis, 1996, p.

198). The complexity of the decision and the level of expertise will fluctuate in each situation

depending on the individual. To address any gaps that may be experienced, consumers may

choose to do a comprehensive analysis and information search prior to purchase.

While it "is commonly accepted consumers may engage in pre-purchase information

search before making a buying decision" (Mourali et al., 2005, p. 308), the amount of time

consumers spend conducting research may be directly related to their need for cognition. The

need for cognition can be "derived from past experiences, buttressed by accessible memories

and behavioural histories, manifest in current experience and be influential in the acquisition or

processing of information relevant to dilemmas or problems" (Cacioppo et al., p. 197). Consider

family decision making surrounding a camping trip. If previous camping trips were successful

and generated positive memories, family members will likely not spend much time researching

their options. If the previous trip was not a success and the memories are negative, the family

may spend more time on a pre-purchase information search prior to selecting the final camp location.

Just as an individual's level of expertise may vary, the need of cognition may also vary. Consumers who have a high need for cognition tend to conduct more formal searches and will likely acquire more information (Levin, Huneke & Jasper, 2000). Committing significant time to an information search in order to make an informed decision will help address a consumer's need for cognition. For example, consider two individuals hoping to visit a national park. The individual with a high need for cognition is more likely to gather information from a wide variety of sources (websites, interpersonal communication sources, print resources and other marketing materials) when making a selection. A low need counterpart might be less likely to engage in the same level of search.

Level of cognition may also vary depending on the situation. In other words, need for cognition is intrinsically motivated and can be modified, developed or changed depending on situational variables (Cacioppo et al., 1996). For example, when choosing a recreational program that is low cost and low in perceived risk, the need for cognition is likely relatively low. As a result, the consumer may experience a low level of motivation to conduct an in-depth program search. A drop-in program with an admission fee and supervision is an example of a low risk, low cognition option. Alternatively, a supervised program where a consumer has to pay upfront and commit to multiple weeks of programming, may generate greater uncertainty. As a result, a higher need for cognition may exist.

Self Confidence

"People often fail to perform optimally even though they know what to do and possess the requisite skills" (McKee, Simmers, Licatal., 2006, p. 209). It seems that skill must be supplemented by self confidence or what Bandura called "self efficacy" (Bandura, 1998). Self-efficacy is the belief individuals have in their abilities to control experiences that shape their

lives. "Effective action requires not only knowledge or skills but also the belief that one has the ability to use these assets effectively" (McKee et al, 2006, p. 209).

Individuals who have a high level of self-efficacy feel confident in their ability to make sound choices. Individuals who believe they have the required skills, expertise and knowledge to perform a task or engage in a program will feel more comfortable taking action than those who do not. Further, individuals who possess a high level of self-confidence seem less likely to be influenced by interpersonal communication. These consumers may be more likely to rely on their own knowledge and expertise and not rely on others (Mourali et al., 2005).

Consumers' assessment of their own self-efficacy level will vary depending on the situation (Nichols, Schutte, Brown, Dennis & Price, 2007) and "is specific to a given task, as opposed to generalized perception of ability or self-esteem" (McKee et al., 2006, p. 209). For example, parents taking part in a water baby swimming class (an introductory program for infants between 3 months to a year) for the first time may not feel comfortable 'submerging' their child underwater during the first class. However, as their level of self-confidence rises and they receive instruction from a certified instructor, they may increase their self-efficacy and feel comfortable and confident in their 'submerging' abilities. With each successful submersion, the confidence and efficacy level of the parent will increase. With each skill the parent acquires, self-efficacy will increase and they are more likely to continue to engage in activities where their skills are developed or enhanced (McKee et al., 2006).

Tie Strength

Tie strength is "a construct that represents the relationship between people that is a force that works to bond them" (Bansal et al, 2000, p. 168). In other words, the source of information will influence the credibility and power of that message. Not all sources will possess the same amount of tie strength. "A consumer will interact with people from a spectrum of

various degrees of tie strength, ranging from strong primary (e.g. a spouse) to weak secondary (e.g. a seldom-contacted acquaintance)" (Wirtz & Chew, 2002, p. 145). The source from which the information was obtained may affect the perceived validity of the message. If the communication is received first hand from someone with whom the consumer has a personal relationship, there is an increased chance the message will influence the final purchase decision. If the information is received from someone not known to the consumer or if it comes from a secondary source, the information may be less influential in the final purchase decision.

An example may help make this point. Consumers who wish to engage in a recreational opportunity are more likely to seek out interpersonal communication with a close friend with whom they have a strong bond or relationship. The advantage for the consumer is one of convenience. This "information is more likely to be attained with marginal effort" (Bansal et al., p. 168). Existing research does show the "ability of WOM to operate within a consumer network appears to be influenced by tie strength, or the intensity of the social relationships between the consumers and by how similar (homophily) or dissimilar (heterophily) such consumers are in terms of their backgrounds, opinions, likes and dislikes" (Sweeney et al., 2008, p. 347). The concepts of tie strength and homophily in interpersonal relationships are related yet distinct. "A distinction between these constructs is that homophily refers to similarity in attributes individuals possess who are in relation, whereas tie strength is a relational property that manifests itself in different types of social relations varying in strength" (Brown & Reingen, 1987, p. 354). An example of homophily and heterophily could be consumers who have an interest in International Cricket games. If a consumer joins a group on Facebook relating specifically to International Cricket, they may find they have a more intense homophily with the group than if they just indicated they had an interest in Cricket on their personal homepage. If someone is invited to join a Cricket group on Facebook and they accept the invitation without fully knowing what the

group is about, they may find they are heterophilic to the other members. This may lead to a disinterest in the group and individuals may choose to leave the group.

The concept of 'common identity' may have an impact on the tie strength of a relationship. Common identity is "identity based attachment to a group where those in the group are perceived to be interchangeable and they like the group as a whole" (Ren, Kraut & Kiesler, 2007, p. 380). Common identity allows members interdependence "where they have come together through a joint task, a common purpose, and common fate" (Ren et al., 2007, p. 382). Since the members share a common sense of identity, the information that is shared strengthens the tie felt among each other. The other members of the group may be seen as knowledgeable and well informed and that will bond the group together. If the common goal and purpose of the group changes or no longer exists, the members of the group no longer identify with each other and the common identity no longer bonds the group (Strassenberg, 2002).

Common bond attachment is similar to common identity but the commitment of the group is based on members "liking the individuals in a group. When there is bond based attachment, people feel connections to each other" (Ren et al., p. 380). This attachment facilitates social interaction. This interaction further "provides opportunities for people to get acquainted, to become familiar with one another, and to build trust. The social interaction in a common bond attachment allows for an opportunity to interact with others who share similar preferences, attitudes, and values" (Ren et al., p. 388). Such sharing renders it more likely that members will seek and listen to the ideas and opinions of other group members.

Sender Expertise

Since interpersonal communication regularly occurs both formally and informally, the tie strength alone may not be the only influencing factor in a purchase decision. A consumer may deliberately seek the opinion of another with the purpose of obtaining additional information or

program insight (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). The person sought is usually more experienced and may be seen as what is often referred to as an opinion leader. This person is one who is sought out by a receiver of information in order to provide advice and insight into a particular area in which (s)he is thought to have expertise. An opinion leader "frequently possesses more experience or expertise with the product category. They have also been exposed to or acquired more information about the product" (Lyons et al., 2005, p. 320) than the receiver of the information. For example, a parent looking to register their child in a soccer league for the first time, may seek out the opinion of another parent who has experience with the league and is familiar with the structure and programs of the organization. The more experienced parent plays the role of opinion leader as (s)he educates the new parent on the rules, provide details on the social expectations of parents as well as making introductions to other parents in the league. The opinion leader in this case is considered to be "highly knowledgeable and is eager to advocate this knowledge to others" (Kleijnen et al., 2009, p. 17).

The exchange of information is also influenced by trust in the information source. Trust is a "basic feature of all social situations that demands cooperation and interdependence" (Zaltman & Moorman, 1988, p. 169). When someone seeks information, they trust the message sender to provide them with honest and accurate information. They are relying on the other person to understand the importance of the decision and trusting they will receive information that is relevant and useful. If two friends are going skiing at a resort where one has skied before and the trails are unknown, the inexperienced person will trust the other to ensure the activity will be safe and within their skill ability. The inexperienced person has to be "confident in and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions and decisions of another" (Das & Teng, 2004, p. 92).

There are several mediums through which information might be sought. These mediums could include social media like Facebook, telephone, text messages, face to face interactions, newspapers, marketing publications, informal interactions or surveys. This thesis was concerned primarily with word of mouth communication. Recall that "WOM is a process of personal influence, in which interpersonal communications between a sender and a receiver can change the receiver's behaviour or attitudes" (Sweeney et al., 2008, p. 345). Recent studies identifying WOM communication is often perceived as a more trustworthy and neutral information source (Macintosh, 2007; Audrain-Pontevia et al., 2008). It is perhaps predictable then that "WOM is the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions" (Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik, 2010, p. 1).

Extending the Social Network

A social network is "a set of people, organizations, or other social entities, connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships (Kleijnen et al., 2009, p. 16). An individual's social network usually includes close family and friends as well as acquaintances the individual may have known in the past (Sweeney, 2008). All of these relationships can offer interpersonal communication opportunities and, in turn, influence a consumer's decision to purchase a service. Consumers are now using their social networks and other electronic message opportunities to seek out WOM as they engage in the decision making process. Traditionally, WOM was exchanged on a face to face basis. However the growing popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter suggest that WOM communications can also take place electronically over great distances. Through such means ideas are shared, opinions are sought and offered, and decisions are influenced. These mediums greatly extend consumers social networks.

With the popularity of Facebook and Twitter, many consumers are able to post instant messages on an experience they have had. A recent example is a Facebook user who had participated in a BMW driver training course. The consumer was so satisfied with the program it was posted on her Facebook account with a link to the BMW website and a strong recommendation for others to participate. This positive WOM was probably also mentioned to her family and friends with whom she came in contact after completing the training.

For organizations, the explosion of social network sites has created a new set of challenges when trying to manage negative WOM and promote positive WOM. With many groups being created within the social networks, organizations are faced with the challenge of allowing consumers to voice their opinions while still maintaining a high level of program integrity. "Networked reputation operates as a social substitute for service quality. The act of objectively assessing the quality of a service is transferred to the subjective construction of a socially communicated evaluation" (Gluckler & Armbruster, 2003, p. 282) and as services are subjective, it is the end users opinions who will influence other consumers decisions to purchase.

The decision to purchase a product or service can be lengthy and time consuming or it can be a simple decision. There are many factors that will affect a decision as well as others who will be invited to provide their opinions and suggestions. Depending on the knowledge, experience and relationship between the individuals in the communication, the WOM message can be influential.

These hypotheses guided this inquiry:

Research Question 1: What are the relationships between selected personality variables and use of WOM?

It is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1a Individuals who are more susceptible to influence will be more likely to seek out WOM communication when making purchase decisions.

Hypothesis 1b The more self-confident and individual is, the less likely (s)he is to use WOM communication.

Hypothesis 1c The greater the individual's need for cognition, the more likely (s)he is to seek out WOM communication.

Research Question 2: How might situational variables influence consumers' use of WOM communication?

It is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2a Increased perceived risk is associated with an increased likelihood of seeking WOM communication.

Hypothesis 2b Increased perceived expertise is negatively correlated with likelihood of seeking WOM communication.

Research Question 3: How might participants use internet sources in the collection of WOM?

No hypotheses were developed for this research question. These data were descriptive in nature.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Consumers' selection of a service provider for a recreational pursuit can be very complex. This study explores the relationship between perceived risk, self-confidence and consumers' self reported desire to seek word of mouth communication. It also considered other variables including the role of consumers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

A municipal leisure context was chosen to explore the dynamics surrounding word of mouth communication. Municipal leisure providers tend to offer a variety of programs for families of all sizes and people of all ages. This made the municipal service provider an ideal context for better understanding the role of word of mouth communication in consumers' pre-purchase information search.

Simulation Methodology and Experimental Design

The literature review offered here suggests that consumers making program selection/consumption decisions may seek word of mouth communication to aid in that selection. In particular, as complexity increases, self confidence may be challenged and the desire for additional information may be enhanced. Further, perceived risks associated with that selection may also increase the desire to seek out additional information. This study utilized an experimental design in which level (low and high) of self confidence and perceived risk was varied systematically. The effects of these variations on desire to seek word of mouth communications were monitored. Participants were randomly assigned to various group scenarios that contained a control or one of four treatment messages.

Sampling

Prior to distributing the surveys, each treatment scenario was assigned an arbitrary numeric value. The control group with no treatment message was # 1. The high knowledge and

high risk treatment message was group #2. The high knowledge and low risk group was # 3. The low knowledge and high risk treatment group was # 4 and the low risk, low knowledge was # 5. Next, a list of 500 random numbers between 1 and 5 was generated using an internet number randomization site. The surveys were then organized using this list (2, 4, 5, 5,1, 1, 3, ...) There were no identification numbers put on the surveys. Participants were sampled from parents/caregivers observing children registered in various aquatic programs offered within a municipal recreation facility. Participants were chosen using convenience sampling methodology and there were over 2500 registrants which allowed for a large sample to conduct the survey. Although this sampling method can "seriously misrepresent the population" (Neuman, 2004, p. 137) the intent was not to represent all consumers. Instead, the goal was to explore decision making processes among these decision makers. Results are discussed in terms of these study participants, not all consumers.

Over a six day period (Saturday to Thursday) in October 2011, the researcher was on site between the hours of 8:30 am to 12:00 (noon) and 4:30 – 8:00 p.m. These times were chosen to reach a diverse range of programs and age of participants. For example, preschoolers and their parents tend to attend programs during the day, whereas school age children are participants in the evening. The researcher reviewed the leisure program schedule to determine the start and end times of the sample programs to ensure adequate time was provided to allow completion of the surveys prior to the program ending.

During the regular lesson set each day, the researcher entered the aquatic viewing gallery on the pool deck where caregivers observe children in the swim program. The researcher addressed the caregivers in the viewing gallery with an introduction that addressed the purpose of the study, how results would be utilized and the approximate time required for completing the survey. Prospective participants were informed that participation was completely

voluntary and was not affiliated with the program or participant skill evaluation. Participants could end their participation at any time. There was no remuneration provided for completing the survey. An introductory letter, attached to a paper survey repeated this information. This letter also included contact information for the University of Waterloo faculty supervisor in case the participant were interested in the results or has further questions. As well, the full aquatic staff members responsible for the various programs were briefed on the study and the logistics of the survey collection and their contact information will be available in the form of business cards. Participants were screened so that only adults over the age of 18 completed the surveys.

Completed surveys were placed in a box and taken to the researcher's home at the end of each session. Once all surveys had been collected, the date they were collected as well as an identification number (for tracking purposes) was recorded. They were stored in a locked filing cabinet and once all surveys had been collected and data analyzed, they were taken to and stored at a secure location on the campus of the University of Waterloo. Once the study is complete and the results have been tabulated, the surveys will be retained for 5 years. At the end of 5 years they will be destroyed.

Survey Instrument

Generally, the instrument presented respondents with several items. This information may provide insight into who is the primary decision maker, the family composition, geographic proximity to the facility as well as the financial resources available for disposable income.

The survey instrument asked participants to describe themselves in terms of their experience level with municipal recreation programs. Next, the survey provided scales relating to a consumer's self confidence and susceptibility to influence when making a purchase decision. The next set of statements related to the concept of medium in decision making and

the role it can play in final program selection. The final set of statements related to risk and need for cognition.

In addition the instrument included contextual messages or scenarios. Within those scenarios relevant variables were altered and the results monitored. The scenarios were representative of conditions that may influence typical recreation service purchase decisions. As noted below, these messages included specific contextual information relating to the level of self-confidence a consumer may possess as well as the perceived level of risk associated with participating in a program. These scenarios were intended to offer contexts or frames within which information might be collected and purchase decisions made.

There were five scenarios used – one control message contained no treatment information and four scenarios with treatment messages relating to self-confidence and perceived risk. Treatment group members received information suggesting either high and low levels of perceived risk with purchase and high and low levels of self-confidence with knowledge (regarding the purchase decision). This constitutes a factorial design in which reaction to 2 levels of 2 separate variables can be monitored (figure 4).

Knowledge

	+	-		-	+
Risk	-	-		+	+

Figure 4: Factorial Design for survey instrument

Background Information

The survey instrument begins and ends with general background information. To begin participants were asked how they would describe themselves...are they someone who is familiar with municipal recreation programs and are they someone who has registered others for municipal recreation programs.

Participants were asked about related issues thought to influence word of mouth communications. The first issue was that of common identity and common bond. Common identity refers to "people belonging to a group because they like the group as a whole and common bond refers to liking individuals in a group" (Ren et al., 2007, p. 380). It is relevant here because people may develop strong attachments to programs as well as to the people within the programs. This bond was measured on a 5 point scale as respondents were asked to agree with the statement "I am more trusting of program information when you know you have a shared acquaintance" (Ren et al., p. 388).

Next, the survey instrument focused on relationships. The literature suggests that "people being embedded in concrete, ongoing structures of social relations and the extent of their embeddedness influences their individual behaviour" (Kleijnen et al., 2009, p. 16). The question asked respondents to agree, on a 5 point scale, with the statement "I turn to someone who is highly credible to reduce my risk and uncertainty with my program decision" (Kleijnen et al., p. 17).

Next, the survey asked about interpersonal information sources. Interpersonal information sources refer to a "source which provides an opportunity for clarification and immediate feedback" (Mourali et al., 2005, p. 308). They are relevant here because many times through social interactions, consumers share information, insight and experiences they have encountered. Respondents were asked to agree, on a 5 point scale, with the statement "Program information that is received by a personal source is deemed to be accurate and sufficient to make a decision" (Mourali et al., p. 308).

The instrument concludes with more general statements that ask about socio-demographic information such as gender, family composition, age of respondent, combined family income, marital status, the manipulation check, and if the respondent last registered in a

similar program and what the cost of that program was. This data was used for descriptive purposes.

Addressing Research Questions

Research Question 1: Personality Variables

Recall that the first research asked what are the relationships between selected personality variables and use of WOM? As a result, the survey seeks information on three personality variables. They were self confidence, need for cognition and susceptibility to influence. This information was used to describe patterns in participants' responses.

Three standardized scales were used to measure participants' susceptibility to influence, self confidence levels and need for cognition. None of the scales were adopted in their entirety. This was the case for two reasons. First of all, not all the items were considered relevant in discussions of municipal recreation decision making. Second, the scales were all rather long and, taken together, they represented a challenge in terms of respondent fatigue.

Consequently, a selection process was undertaken. Factors and items (within those factors) were selected according to two criteria. First, consistent with Shrout and Yager's (1989) suggestion, the scales were shortened by selecting those factors and items with the "highest loading" (p. 75). Second, using face validity as a guide, only items that related to the setting under consideration (choosing a municipal leisure program for a child) were included. For example, those dealing with private sector advertising (gimmicks, fantasy, purchasing a dress in a retail outlet) were dropped.

Susceptibility to Influence Scale:

Research question 1a states individuals who are more susceptible to influence will be more likely to seek out WOM communication when making purchase decisions.

Susceptibility to influence refers to the "tendency of subjects to conform to group norms or to modify their judgements based upon others' evaluations and did not address the various types of interpersonal influence operative in a given situation. Only a few studies have addressed the dimensions of susceptibility to interpersonal influence and its effects upon decision processes" (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989, p. 474). As suggested in the literature review this variable is important to establishing the role and importance of word of mouth communications in consumer decision making.

This susceptibility was measured using a second Bearden Scale "comprised of four informational and eight normative items with a seven-place bipolar agree/disagree scale" (Bearden et al., p. 477). The eight normative items relate to a shopping experience and therefore are not included in this study. All 4 informational items were included as they were applicable to a purchase context. Informational influence is defined as "the tendency to accept information from others as evidence about reality. Informational influence may occur in two ways. Individuals may either search for information from knowledgeable others or make inferences based upon the observation of the behaviour of others" (Bearden et al., p. 474).

The four informational items used in the survey instrument were *(1) if I have little experience with a program, I often ask my friends about the program*, (2) *I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a program list*, (3) *I frequently gather information from friends or family about a program before I buy/register* and the item *(4a) to make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what others are buying and using* was modified to read to ensure I choose the right program, *(4b) I observe what others are registering for or talking about.* It should be noted that one item was modified to reflect the scenario of decision making in a municipal setting. As well, the word "product" was replaced with the word "program".

Self-Confidence Scale:

Recall that hypothesis 1b stated the more self-confident and individual is, the less likely (s)he is to use WOM communication. Self-confidence is thought to represent a critical factor in whether or not a shopper seeks word of mouth communication (Bansal et al., 2000). Self-confidence relates to "the extent to which an individual feels capable and assured with respect to his or her marketplace decisions and behaviours. As such, consumer self-confidence reflects subjective evaluations of one's ability to generate positive experiences as a consumer in the marketplace" (Bearden, Hardesty & Rose, 2001, p. 122). In a municipal decision making context, a consumer is usually committing to an extended program and they are always seeking positive experiences in the program as well as in the value for the money spent.

Bearden's (2001) self- confidence scale is designed to "measure the various dimensions that underlie consumer self-confidence" (p. 122). Bearden identified 6 factors measured through 31 items. The six factors are: Information Acquisition (5 items), Consideration-Set Formation (5 items), Personal Outcomes Decision Making (5 items), Social Outcomes Decision Making (5 items), Persuasion Knowledge (6 items), and Marketplace Interfaces (5 items). The items are measured using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely uncharacteristic) to 5 (extremely characteristic).

Two factors of the final 6 factors in the scale contained items that were most relevant to a municipal decision making process. The first factor, Information Acquisition (IA), relates to the "individual's confidence in his or her ability to obtain needed marketplace information and to process and understand that information" (Bearden et al., p. 123). The second factor, Personal Outcomes Decision Making (PO), relates to how "consumers must make decisions routinely regarding the choice and purchase of products and services and that these decisions result in outcomes that generate feelings of satisfaction" (Bearden et al., p. 123). Of the items in the IA

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Factor, 4 of the 5 were included. They are: *I know where to look to find the product information I need* (.82), *I am confident in my ability to research important purchases* (.62), *I have the skills required to obtain needed information before making important purchases* (.64) and *I know where to find the information I need prior to making a purchase* (.80). The PO factor had 2 of five items included. They were *I often have doubts about the purchase decision I make* (.81) and *I often wonder if I've made the right purchase decision* (.73). These two questions were reverse coded.

Need for Cognition Scale:

Recall that hypothesis 1c the greater the individual's need for cognition, the more likely (s)he is to seek out WOM communication. Need for cognition refers to "an individual's tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavours" (Cacioppo, Petty & Kao, 1984, p. 306). In 1982 Cacioppo and Petty developed a need for cognition scale (1982) containing 34 items. The scale was intended to determine if this "characteristic is predictive of the manner in which people deal with tasks and social information" (Cacioppo et al., p. 306). Subsequent efforts by Cacioppo et al. reduced the number of items to 18 while achieving a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .90.

The refined need for cognition scale uses five point items ranging from extremely uncharacteristic to extremely characteristic. Not all 18 items were deemed useful in this study. Six of the 18 items were selected. These items were: (1) *I would prefer simple to complex problems*, (2) *I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking* (3) *thinking is not my idea of fun (reverse coded)*, (4) *I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities*, (6) *I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours*, (7) *I only think as hard as I have to.*

Research Question 2:

Hypothetical Situations/Independent Variables

Recall that research question 2 asks how might situational variables influence consumers' use of WOM communication?. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 5 messages. The first message represented a control message. Participants were told: You are genuinely interested in registering a child under the age of 12 in the municipality's "learn to swim" program. Treatment groups then received that same control but that message was supplemented with a treatment message. The treatment messages were based on situational variables. Specifically, two independent (also referred to as situational) variables were introduced and controlled by the investigator. They were risk and knowledge.

After receiving the same basic control message, each treatment group was then given a hypothetical scenario that modified the level of self-confidence and perceived risk with the purchase decision. Each was approximately two sentences in length. The sentences were crafted such that it should place the participants in a common recreational purchase dilemma (such as enrolling a child in a swimming program). The scenario varied the amount of knowledge the consumer had on the programs available as well as the level of risk associated with the program purchase. The scenario offered a high or low knowledge setting (the "high" knowledge scenario, for example, suggested that the respondents had an adequate knowledge base as they had participated in a swimming program in the past either as a participant or with another child). Specifically, participants were told that "they are genuinely interested in registering a child under the age of 12 in the municipality's "learn to swim" program". The knowledge variable was manipulated by the researcher. Specifically, "you are unfamiliar with the program" and "you are very familiar with the program".

The concept of perceived risk has been defined "in terms of the consumer's perceptions of the *uncertainty and* adverse *consequences* of buying a product (or service)" (Dowling & Staelin, 1994, p. 119). The low and high risk scenarios focussed on the cost of the program. Specifically, perceived risk was varied using the following messages referring to the learn to swim program, "it (the program) costs twice as much as you would expect" and "it (the program) costs about what you would expect".

Dependent Variable

Word of Mouth (WOM) is prevalent in many day to day conversations. The information a consumer obtains through WOM can be factual, relevant, informative or irrelevant to a purchase decision. The decision to seek out and then utilize WOM communication in a decision making process can vary from person to person and situation to situation. As indicated in the adapted model, a consumer's decision to engage in WOM can be affected by the tie strength and sender expertise of the WOM communication. In addition, the medium in which the message is received can also play a role in a consumer seeking WOM communication. This information will be collected using the statement "Thinking about the situation described in the box, what is the likelihood that you will seek advice from others when deciding whether or not to enroll the child in this program? (please offer your response as a percentage – 0% suggests you definitely would not seek advice; 100% suggests you would definitely seek advice) _____%."

Research Question 3:

Finally, recall that Research Question 3 asked "How might participants use internet sources in the collection of WOM?". The survey asked 3 questions to explore these use patterns. Respondents were asked to agree, on a 5 point scales, to the questions:

1. When I buy a product online, I always read reviews that are presented on the website.

2. When I buy a product online, the reviews presented on the website make me confident in purchasing the product.

3. If I don't read the reviews presented on the website when I buy a product online, I worry about my decision.

Chapter 4 – Analyses & Results

Descriptive Data

Analysis - Demographics

The survey was conducted over a 6 day period (Thursday to Tuesday) in October 2011. Over those 6 days, the surveys were distributed during 8 different lesson sets (two lesson sets on Saturday and Sunday). Three hundred and one surveys were completed. Of the 301 completed surveys some were not complete. Consequently, the response totals for each question may vary. Only those survey responses that failed the manipulation check were excluded from that analysis. The distribution of survey participants was fairly consistent across the evening and weekend programs. Just over half 55.5% (N=167) of the total sample was gathered over the weekend. These surveys were collected during two large instructional sets each week end day. The daytime weekend program (Saturday 9:00 – 12:00 p.m. and Sunday 9:00 – 1:00 p.m.) accounted for 29.9% (N = 90) and the evening weekend program accounted for 25.6% (N = 77) respondents. The rest of the respondents were gathered during daytime and evening weekday programs. Just over one third (39.9%, N = 120) responses were gathered from the evening program and 14.7% (N = 14) respondents were found during the daytime weekday program. The daytime program produced the smallest number of responses but it is also the smallest program with 3 to 4 instructors teaching at a time. For the evening and weekend programs, the number of instructors teaching at any one time ranged from 8 – 11.

Recall that there were five variations of the survey. Respondents were randomly assigned to the four treatment and one control group(s). The control group accounted for 19.9% (N = 60) of respondents. The four treatment messages related to feelings of risk (high/low) and program familiarity (high/low). Treatment group one dealt with high risk and high familiarity and accounted for 21.3% of respondents (N = 64). The high risk/low familiarity treatment group was

comprised of 19.3% of the sample (N = 58). The third low risk/low familiarity treatment group made up 20.9% (N = 63). The final high risk/high familiarity treatment group made up 18.6% (N = 58) of the overall group.

Female respondents account for 64.5% of the 274 surveys that were completed. This is consistent with the gender balance in the program viewing areas. The family composition of respondents had one or two children (79% of n 275) and an income of over $90,000 (N = 238). The municipality where this survey was conducted is felt to be fairly affluent in comparison to other municipalities within close proximity and the results of this survey support this observation. Of 274 respondents who answered the question, 255 or 84.7% were married. The average age of the respondents was 38.4 years which is still fairly young.

The familiarity of respondents when registering for a recreation program was felt to be important as it provides the researcher with an idea of a possible correlation between their familiarity and their comfort with registering for a program. Additionally, familiarity and comfort with programs can also be an indication of how much they value recreation programs, how active they are as well as the importance they place on swimming as a life skill they'd like their children to gain skill in. The respondents of this survey are quite familiar with recreation programs and their past experience registering someone for a recreation program before. Most 83.3% (N = 269 of 294) of the respondents indicated they somewhat or truly agreed with the statement "I would describe myself as someone who is familiar with municipal recreation programs". With 23.9% (N = 294) of the respondents indicating the statement was very true (MEAN = 3.71; SD = .97), there is a possibility that this familiarity over rode our treatment messages. In addition, only 31.9% (N = 294) indicated they had not registered others for a recreation program. The respondents also demonstrated a high commitment to the programs of the municipality with 87.4% or N = 263 of 280 responding they have registered for a similar

program in the past (MEAN = 3.81; SD = 1.34) and 67.4% had registered in the past 6 months. This commitment to the programs can be an indication of the quality of program instruction, price satisfaction in relation to risk, a strong marketing campaign that includes a quarterly program publication, website access, on line registration and ease of access of information from customer service representatives. These indicators didn't form part of this study but could be investigated as possible future research.

The majority of the survey was based on various scales relating to need for cognition, self confidence, risk and susceptibility to influence. These data were collected in order to discover respondents' preferences and perceptions. Such data may help understand trends found within the experimental data. First data were collected on Susceptibility to Influence.

Susceptibility to Influence

A susceptibility to influence scale was used to get a sense of how likely these individuals were to seek out and attend to word of mouth communications. The first statement in the scale asked respondents if they had little experience with a program, would they would ask friends about the program". As table 1 identifies, the majority 211 (70.1%, N = 293) of respondents were somewhat to very likely to ask friends for insight (MEAN =2.96; SD=1.06). This statement was fairly general as it didn't specify what kind of friend they would ask. The term friend could have been interpreted as someone on line, someone they see at work and consider a friend or it could have been a friend that had a similar experience in the program they were interested in. These results indicate that those with little experience are likely to seek insight from friends.

Table 1: If I have little experience with a program, I ask my friends about the program

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	35	11.6	11.9	11.9
	Unlikely	47	15.6	16.0	28.0
	Somewhat	81	26.9	27.6	55.6
	Likely	65	21.6	22.2	77.8
	Very Likely	65	21.6	22.2	100.0
	Total	293	97.3	100.0	
Missing	System	8	2.7		
Total		301	100.0		
MEAN 3.27 (SD 1.30)					

The second informational statement asked if the respondent "often consulted other people to help select the best alternative available from a program list". About one in four (26.9%, N = 81) reported being somewhat likely to do so while a comparable number (21.9%, N = 66) noted that they were unlikely to do so (MEAN = 2.77; SD = 1.23. This result could indicate that the choices, the risk and familiarity with a decision situation could play a role in their choice to consult with friends (table 2). Clearly, a consumer's desire to seek insight from others varies from one setting to the next and from one consumer to the next.

Table 2: I often consult other people to help choose best alternative available from a program list

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	57	18.9	19.6	19.6
	Unlikely	66	21.9	22.7	42.3
	Somewhat	81	26.9	27.8	70.1
	Likely	62	20.6	21.3	91.4
	Very Likely	25	8.3	8.6	100.0
	Total	291	96.7	100.0	
Missing	System	10	3.3		
Total		301	100.0		
MEAN: 2.77 (SD 1.23)					

When asked if respondents "frequently gather information from friends or family about a program before buying/registering", the response pattern was very mixed (table 3) (MEAN = 2.99; SD = 1.24). Several reported that they were very unlikely 14% (N = 42) or unlikely 21.3% (N = 64) while a comparable number reported being likely 22.6% (N = 68) or very likely 12.6% (N = 38) to do so.

Table 3: I frequently gather information from friends or family about a program before I buy/register

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	42	14.0	14.3	14.3
	Unlikely	64	21.3	21.8	36.2
	Somewhat	81	26.9	27.6	63.8
	Likely	68	22.6	23.2	87.0
	Very Likely	38	12.6	13.0	100.0
	Total	293	97.3	100.0	
Missing	System	8	2.7		
Total		301	100.0		
MEAN: 2.99 (SD 1.24)					

Respondents were then asked if they observed others' choices to help them in making program choices ("To ensure I choose the right program, I often observe what others are registering for or talking about"). This seemed a popular option in that most reported doing so (MEAN 2.83; SD = 1.27) Of the 289 responses to the statement, 67.2% (N = 202) indicated they would observe programs to ensure they made the right program choice (table 4). Only 29 responses (9.6%) reported they were unlikely to do so.

Table 4: To ensure I choose the right program I often observe what others are registering for or talking about

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	57	18.9	19.7	19.7
	Unlikely	61	20.3	21.1	40.8
	Somewhat	74	24.6	25.6	66.4
	Likely	67	22.3	23.2	89.6
	Very Likely	29	9.6	10.0	99.7
	33.00	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	289	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	12	4.0		
Total		301	100.0		
MEANS: 2.83 (SD 1.27)					

Self Confidence Scale

The next set of statements was gathered from Bearden's Self Confidence scale. They relate to Self Confidence in relation to information acquisition. Recall this concept refers to the "individual's confidence in his or her ability to obtain needed marketplace information and to process and understand that information" (Bearden, 2001, p. 123). The statements related to knowing where to look to find related information, confidence levels in ones' ability to do that research, having the skills to find related information and so on.

Generally respondents were quite confident in their ability to know where to look for information (MEAN = 4.37; SD = .82) with over 84.1% (N = 156) responding likely or very likely being able to do so (table 5). This message again reinforces the respondents felt aware of the information available and how to locate it. In this particular case, information can be found using the "leisure guide" or online through the municipal website. There is very little additional marketing used to promote the available programs.

Table 5: I know where to look to find the product information I need

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	2	.7	.7	.7
	Unlikely	8	2.7	2.7	3.4
	Somewhat	29	9.6	9.8	13.2
	Likely	96	31.9	32.5	45.8
	Very Likely	160	53.2	54.2	100.0
	Total	295	98.0	100.0	
Missing	System	6	2.0		
Total		301	100.0		
MEAN: 4.37 (SD .82)					

The next statement focussed on respondents' confidence in their ability to search ("I am confident in my ability to research important purchases"), the respondents are more spread out (MEAN = 4.18; SD = .89) over the three options of somewhat, likely and very likely (table 6). Only 3.6% (N = 11) of the respondents reported not having that confidence. This low percentage is not surprising given a similar percentage (3.4%, N = 10) indicated they didn't know where to find the product information.

There is a chance that many of these respondents grew up in this municipality and attended programs in a facility when they were a child and they therefore feel they know how best to research information.

Table 6: I am confident in my ability to research important purchases

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	4	1.3	1.4	1.4
	Unlikely	7	2.3	2.4	3.8
	Somewhat	47	15.6	16.2	20.0
	Likely	107	35.5	36.9	56.9
	Very Likely	125	41.5	43.1	100.0
	Total	290	96.3	100.0	
Missing	System	11	3.7		
Total		301	100.0		
MEAN: 4.18 (SD .89)					

When asked if they believed they possessed the skills required to obtain information, again most reported having those skills (MEAN = 4.25; SD = .81) (table 7).

Table 7: I have the skills required to obtain needed information before making important purchases

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	2	.7	.7	.7
	Unlikely	5	1.7	1.8	2.5
	Somewhat	39	13.0	13.7	16.1
	Likely	113	37.5	39.6	55.8
	Very Likely	126	41.9	44.2	100.0
	Total	285	94.7	100.0	
Missing	System	16	5.3		
Total		301	100.0		
MEAN: 4.25 (SD .81)					

Self Confidence Scale

The next set of statements (B10 & B11) related to Personal Outcomes Decision Making (PO). Recall that these scale items relate to how "consumers must make decisions routinely regarding the choice and purchase of products and services and that these decisions result in outcomes that generate feelings of satisfaction" (Bearden, p. 123).

Most (64.4%, N = 194) of the respondents indicated they were unlikely to have doubts about their purchase decisions (MEAN = 2.23; SD = 1.05) (table 8). This is a very strong indication that people still have confidence in their decisions and rarely do they doubt the program they have selected. This can also be an indication the respondents are very satisfied with their previous experiences.

Table 8: I often have doubts about the purchase decisions I make

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	78	25.9	26.8	26.8
	Unlikely	116	38.5	39.9	66.7
	Somewhat	56	18.6	19.2	85.9
	Likely	33	11.0	11.3	97.3
	Very Likely	8	2.7	2.7	100.0
	Total	291	96.7	100.0	
Missing	System	10	3.3		
Total		301	100.0		
MEAN: 2.23 (SD 1.05)					

The second personal outcome factor statement in the Self Confidence scale asked if respondents "often wondered if they made the right purchase decision" (table 9). This was the case for only 10% (N = 30) of the respondents (MEAN 2.36; SD = 2.10). Most (65.4%) were likely or very likely to ponder this statement. This suggests some uncertainty even after purchases were made.

Table 9: I often wonder if I've made the right purchase decision

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Likely	77	25.6	26.6	26.6
	Likely	112	37.2	38.8	65.4
	Somewhat	59	19.6	20.4	85.8
	Unlikely	30	10.0	10.4	96.2
	Very Unlikely	11	3.7	3.8	100.0
	Total	289	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	12	4.0		
Total		301	100.0		
MEAN: 2.36 (SD 2.10)					

The final statement in the Self Confidence scale (table 10) asked participants if they "know where to find the information needed prior to making a purchase". Of the 289 respondents, 274 (92.4%) responded they were somewhat to very likely to know where to find the information (MEAN = 4.03; SD = .94). They seemed to have a sense of where to seek pre-purchase information. Since this statement is very generic in nature and was asked during a learn to swim program, respondents could have applied their learn to swim program knowledge when answering this statement and not really consider other settings and products. This could be a possible area for additional research; that of examining the nuances of how the consumers become educated and how they know where to locate information for future purchases.

Table 10: I know where to find the information I need prior to making a purchase

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	7	2.3	2.4	2.4
	Unlikely	8	2.7	2.8	5.2
	Somewhat	56	18.6	19.4	24.6
	Likely	116	38.5	40.1	64.7
	Very Likely	102	33.9	35.3	100.0
	Total	289	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	12	4.0		
Total **MEAN: 4.03 (SD .94)**		301	100.0		

It is clear that the respondents in this study possessed a very high level of self confidence in their program selections; they knew where to find the information and also how to explore program options. Overall this is a very well informed and confident group. The responses may also indicate the municipality is doing a good job in promoting access to program information and making it easy for participants to gain entry into their programs. Based on the low percentage of respondents who experienced doubt on their selections it may be that the municipality is providing quality programs sought after by these respondents.

Need for Cognition Scale

The need for cognition scale relates to statements when dealing with tasks and social information (table 11). The first statement "I would prefer complex to simple problems" had respondents in the middle choice of somewhat (38.2%, N = 115, MEAN = 2.98; SD = 1.16).

Table 11: I would prefer complex to simple problems

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	39	13.0	13.6	13.6
	Unlikely	47	15.6	16.4	30.0
	Somewhat	115	38.2	40.1	70.0
	Likely	53	17.6	18.5	88.5
	Very Likely	33	11.0	11.5	100.0
	Total	287	95.3	100.0	
Missing	System	14	4.7		
Total **MEANS: 2.98 (SD 1.16)**		301	100.0		

The second factor statement was "I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities" and respondents were somewhat evenly distributed (MEAN = 2.77; SD = 1.11) but there was a higher concentration in the somewhat (34.9%, N = 105) and unlikely (25.6%, N = 77) which indicates when consumers are making decisions, the challenge of making a decision or performing a task is of more interest when there is some challenge or thought required (table 12).

Table 12: I would prefer to do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	39	13.0	13.5	13.5
	Unlikely	77	25.6	26.7	40.3
	Somewhat	105	34.9	36.5	76.7
	Likely	44	14.6	15.3	92.0
	Very Likely	23	7.6	8.0	100.0
	Total	288	95.7	100.0	
Missing	System	13	4.3		
Total **MEANS: 2.77 (SD 1.11)**		301	100.0		

"I only think as hard as I have to" was the next need for cognition factor in our scale (MEAN = 2.86; SD = 1.19) (table 13). The respondents were concentrated in the middle responses of unlikely (23.3%, N= 70) to likely (20.3%, N = 61). This is a somewhat interesting response based on the previous statement where respondents indicated they preferred doing something that challenged their abilities.

Table 13: I only think as hard as I have to

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	43	14.3	15.0	15.0
	Unlikely	70	23.3	24.4	39.4
	Somewhat	86	28.6	30.0	69.3
	Likely	61	20.3	21.3	90.6
	Very Likely	27	9.0	9.4	100.0
	Total	287	95.3	100.0	
Missing	System	14	4.7		
Total **MEAN: 2.86 (SD 1.19)**		301	100.0		

"I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours" was the fourth statement on the need for cognition scale (MEAN = 2.97; SD = 1.05). This statement didn't yield anticipated responses as the majority (38.2%, N = 115) were in the somewhat category.

Table 14: I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	30	10.0	10.6	10.6
	Unlikely	48	15.9	17.0	27.7
	Somewhat	115	38.2	40.8	68.4
	Likely	71	23.6	25.2	93.6
	Very Likely	18	6.0	6.4	100.0
	Total	282	93.7	100.0	
Missing	System	19	6.3		
Total		301	100.0		

MEAN: 2.97 (SD 1.05)

Response patterns to the statement "thinking is not my idea of fun" were not surprising (MEAN = 2.30; SD = 1.10) (table 15). Only 2.7% (N = 8) reported being very positive to this regard. The majority of respondents 80.7% (N = 243) did not agree with this statement.

Table 15: Thinking is not my idea of fun

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	84	27.9	29.6	29.6
	Unlikely	80	26.6	28.2	57.7
	Somewhat	79	26.2	27.8	85.6
	Likely	33	11.0	11.6	97.2
	Very Likely	8	2.7	2.8	100.0
	Total	284	94.4	100.0	
Missing	System	17	5.6		
Total		301	100.0		

MEAN: 2.30 (SD 1.10)

Participants generally agree with the statement "I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking" (MEAN = 3.56; SD = 1.0). Over half (68.2%, N = 205) of the respondents somewhat agreed (N = 104) or agreed (N = 101) with the statement.

Table 16: I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	12	4.0	4.2	4.2
	Unlikely	19	6.3	6.6	10.8
	Somewhat	104	34.6	36.1	46.9
	Likely	101	33.6	35.1	81.9
	Very Likely	52	17.3	18.1	100.0
	Total	288	95.7	100.0	
Missing	System	13	4.3		
Total **MEAN: 3.56 (SD 1.0)**		301	100.0		

Generally, participants enjoyed thinking about and solving difficult problems. Many were also anxious to minimize the amount of work required to solve them. Both conditions suggest the importance these individuals might place on gathering WOM communication to assist with decision making.

Results - Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the relationships between selected personality variables and use of WOM?

It is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1a Individuals who are more susceptible to influence will be more likely to seek out WOM communication when making purchase decisions.

Hypothesis 1b The more self-confident and individual is, the less likely (s)he is to use WOM communication.

Hypothesis 1c The greater the individual's need for cognition, the more likely (s)he is to seek out WOM communication.

A correlation matrix was developed, using the three newly developed composite measures of

the three scales. The matrix suggests that susceptibility to influence and self-confidence were

related. However, need for cognition was not related to the other measures.

Table 17: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	Mean (SD)
Susceptibility to Influence	1			2.96 (1.06)
Self Confidence	.152*	1		3.56 (.61)
Need for Cognition	.152*	.145*	1	2.90 (.56)

The three sub hypotheses were considered simultaneously using linear regression. Means

scores were calculated for each of the 3 multi-item scales) measuring susceptibility to influence,

self confidence and need for cognition - statements B3 – B12 and C13 – C18). The dependent

variable was participants' use of WOM (Q # E). In each case means were calculated and the

mean score was used in the regression analyses.

Table 18: Linear Regression

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	Probability
Susceptibility to Influence	5.971	1.014	5.889	.000
Self Confidence	-3.621	1.666	-2.174	.037
Need for Cognition	-1.376	1.253	-1.098	.280

As the table suggests, susceptibility to influence (t = 5.889, p = .000) and self confidence (t = -2.174, p = .037) influenced WOM communication. Need for cognition failed to offer a significant contribution (t = -1.098, p = .280) but together all three variables explained 50% of the variance (adjusted R^2 = .505) in the dependent variable. These results indicate that participants were more likely to seek WOM when they were susceptible to influence and when their self confidence levels were low.

Research Question 2: How might situational variables influence consumers' use of WOM communication?

It is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2a Increased perceived risk is associated with an increased likelihood of seeking WOM communication.

Hypothesis 2b Increased perceived expertise is negatively correlated with likelihood of seeking WOM communication.

Recall that participants were exposed to one of 5 messages (a control message or one of 4 treatment messages). They were then asked to "think about the situation question described in the box, what is the likelihood that you will seek advice from others when deciding whether or not to enroll the child in this program". One way ANOVA was performed comparing group means in terms of likelihood of seeking advice from another. There were no significant differences (f = 1.233, p = .234) from one group to the next. The role of these variables was insignificant within the context offered to participants.

Research question 3 asked "How might participants use internet sources in the collection of WOM?" For this analysis, we ran frequencies for statement 22 (Information I find on social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace can help me make successful program decisions). Results (table 18) suggest that approximately half (54.2%, N =

155) of the respondents were very unlikely (29.6%, N = 89) or unlikely (21.9%, N = 21.9) to use

these sites to assist in making a program decision (MEAN = 2.37; SD = 1.17). This indicates

social media outlets are not dramatically impacting these consumers' purchase decisions. It is

noteworthy, though, that almost one in 5 (17%, N = 51) reports that internet sources are useful

in making purchase decisions. This high percentage underscores the importance access to

internet sources can play in decision making and future research could explore if this trend

persists.

Table 19: Information I find on social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace can help me make successful program decisions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	89	29.6	31.1	31.1
	Unlikely	66	21.9	23.1	54.2
	Somewhat	80	26.6	28.0	82.2
	Likely	39	13.0	13.6	95.8
	Very Likely	12	4.0	4.2	100.0
	Total	286	95.0	100.0	
Missing	System	15	5.0		
Total **MEAN: 2.37 (SD 1.17)**		301	100.0		

Statement 24 (when I buy a product online, I always read reviews that are presented on

the website) also focused on use of the internet to assist with decision making (MEAN = 3.92;

SD = 1.17). As table 19, suggests, most 69.4% (N = 209) respondents reported they were likely

or very likely to read such reviews. For respondents likely to read the reviews, they may be

more influential than online social networking sites when making decisions.

Table 20: When I buy a product online I always read reviews presented

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	14	4.7	4.8	4.8
	Unlikely	20	6.6	6.8	11.6
	Somewhat	51	16.9	17.3	28.9
	Likely	99	32.9	33.7	62.6
	Very Likely	110	36.5	37.4	100.0
	Total	294	97.7	100.0	
Missing	System	7	2.3		
Total **MEAN: 3.92 (SD 1.17)**		301	100.0		

When respondents were asked "when I buy a product online, the reviews presented on the website make me confident in purchasing the product" (MEAN = 3.50; SD = 1.0), more than half (69.4%, N = 209) responded that this was likely (32.9%, N = 99) or very likely (36.5%, N = 110) the case (table 20). These results demonstrate the power an online, anonymous review can have on many consumers. Where consumers once relied on familiar faces to assist with purchase decisions, many are now comfortable relying on comments from people they don't know.

Table 21: When I buy a product online, the reviews presented on the website make me confident on purchasing the product

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	13	4.3	4.4	4.4
	Unlikely	24	8.0	8.2	12.6
	Somewhat	105	34.9	35.8	48.5
	Likely	104	34.6	35.5	84.0
	Very Likely	47	15.6	16.0	100.0
	Total	293	97.3	100.0	
Missing	System	8	2.7		
Total **MEAN: 3.50 (SD 1.0)**		301	100.0		

Finally, respondents were asked "if I don't read the reviews presented on the website when I buy a product online, I worry about my decision". The results (table 21) suggest some ambivalence in this regard (MEAN = 2.72; SD = 1.18). While 39.8% indicated they were unlikely (21.9%, N = 66) or very unlikely (17.9% N = 54) to worry about such input, another 21.9% (N = 66) did express concern when they were unable to read reviews before making purchase decisions. Responses to this statement were in the middle range of somewhat at 35.5% (N = 107) to unlikely at 21.9% (N = 66).

Table 22: If I don't read the reviews presented on the website when I buy a product online, I worry about my decision

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	54	17.9	18.5	18.5
	Unlikely	66	21.9	22.6	41.1
	Somewhat	107	35.5	36.6	77.7
	Likely	37	12.3	12.7	90.4
	Very Likely	28	9.3	9.6	100.0
	Total	292	97.0	100.0	
Missing	System	9	3.0		
Total **MEAN: 2.72 (SD 1.18)**		301	100.0		

Chapter 5 - Recommendations

Strengths and Limitations

Survey procedures of this type have many advantages. The anonymous nature of participant input encourages honest responses. Respondents can complete the survey on their own time. They could discontinue if they felt any level of discomfort in responding. A limitation to this procedure is that of language. Those whose first language is not English may have been hesitant to take part as a result. To help address this limitation, future researchers could look at providing the surveys in alternative formats and languages.

This study was conducted on a specific group of participants and if conducted at a different location or during a different time of the year, the results may have been different. The number of registered participants was over 2,500 but these results may not be duplicated in other areas of the municipality or in a different program. Many consumers identify learning to swim as a requirement for their children as it is a life skill and parents want to ensure they are safe in and around water. Duplicating this survey in a municipality that has increased access to open bodies of water, could strengthen the results and provide additional information for the municipality if they were looking to expand their program or conduct targeted marketing to reach individuals who were not participating in their program.

Implications for Service Providers

Recreation providers have traditionally relied upon printed brochures as their primary means program information dissemination. While many now use websites to promote programs, and to handle registration demands, these formats tend to be very static in their orientation. Viewers have no capacity to contribute to the information they find presented to them. It was evident that many consumers relied on product reviews provided by other on line users to increase their confidence in their purchase decisions. These results suggest that a more

interactive format may be useful. Providers should create opportunities for users to offer and exchange information as a form of mutual support. The reviews customers are providing can be leveraged by an organization if they incorporate the feedback into the program content and address areas that may be of concern. Once caution however would be to ensure there are adequate resources to moderate the content of the reviews being presented to verify the reviewer actually experienced the program or product they are reviewing.

Traditional word of mouth processes (face to face communication) seem to be changing. These individuals were willing to accept advice from strangers through on line reviews. Program providers could leverage this insight to develop opportunities to allow consumers to provide reviews on their programs and services. The municipality where this survey was conducted does not have a comprehensive social media plan. Enabling the posting of program reviews might prove an important part of any future media plan.

Future Research

This study considered the likelihood that consumers would use WOM communication sources in making purchase decisions. These results suggest that consumers were open to on line sources of word of mouth communication. More than that, study participants were generally willing to trust online reviews from people who were not necessarily known to them. As a result, online reviews could greatly impact the program registration numbers.

A key question for future research could focus on the role shared experience plays in the evolution of trust between strangers. It seems that many respondents would trust the advice of others simply because they have shared experience. How far does this trust go? How much risk must be present before they hesitate to take advice from unknown individuals? What are the characteristics or traits that consumers look for when assessing the validity of the reviews. Word

of mouth seems a very pervasive and resilient concept. This may be particularly important in situations characterized by risk.

The situation box statement (treatment message) did not influence response patterns. The reasons for this are unclear. A manipulation check ensured that respondents read the treatment message but their responses did not vary as a result. It may have been difficult for consumers to relate to the hypothetical nature of the message. Specifically, the respondents for this survey were very knowledgeable with recreation programs 89.3% (N = 269). Further, 87.4% (N = 263) indicated they had previously registered a child for a similar program. They may simply have ignored the message in favour of their own personal experience/knowledge base. Future research could examine the impact of significant risk and uncertainly on participants less familiar with the actual purchase setting.

More than that, response patterns may have been an artifact of the program under study. The messages focused on swim instruction (a program many consumers expect to be offered through a municipality). If the treatment messages focused on a less predictable/familiar offering, the results may have been different.

Conclusion

The researcher provided three models that helped identify the process a decision maker may experience when deciding to use interpersonal sources. While the intention of this thesis was not to test the adapted model, the researcher hoped that, with the addition of media and tie strength and sender expertise, the adapted model has provided additional insight. Having said that, these participants were happy to use online sources (where tie strength and expertise are uncertain) when making purchase decisions. It may be that these variables are of more or less importance depending upon the purchase context. Clearly more research is required. This additional insight can guide future research, marketing initiatives and assist organizations to

increase use of media channels to better leverage and understand the nuances and complexity of word of mouth and the increased use of word of finger.

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The original intent of the treatment messages was to monitor the effect of risk and knowledge in a program setting. Unfortunately, the treatment message failed to be persuasive. Perhaps the nature of the messages failed to cause true reflection on the part of the participants. Future efforts might modify the treatment messages to offer more detail. By including greater descriptions and more complexity to the treatment messages, respondents may be required to allocate greater cognitive resources thereby influencing response patterns.

If the survey was to be replicated, I would place the treatment messages earlier in the survey (to help respondents better understand the purpose of the survey). Additionally, more general and multiple questions about the likelihood use of WOM use (social media, online blogs/reviews, friend/acquaintances) could yield more robust responses and clear up any ambiguity that may develop as a result of the generalized question.

This thesis explored the process consumers undertake to seek out, listen and engage in WOM communication when making service purchase decisions. The focus was on understanding conditions which lead consumers to rely on or disregard interpersonal communication. The elements of risk, susceptibility to personal influence and the need for cognition and their impact on decision making processes were explored in this study. The results indicate that risk (as measured through self confidence) and susceptibility were related while the need for cognition was not related as was originally hypothesized.

Word of mouth has been studied for many years and it has focused on face to face interactions. Throughout this paper, there have been references to word of finger, the online alternative to word of mouth. It would be useful to examine the dynamics behind both processes. Word of finger interactions lack visual cues and are typically undertaken with anonymous strangers. Word of mouth interactions are richer in terms of visual cues are much more personal in nature. Do these contextual differences alter the power of the communication? Understanding the transition from word of mouth to word of finger communications seems ripe for exploration.

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Appendices

Consumer Decision Making and Word of Mouth

September 25, 2011

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s):

   I am a second year Masters student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Professor Ron McCarville. I am conducting research on consumer decision making and word of mouth communication. When registering for leisure services consumers must choose between various offerings and make decisions regarding the allocation of resources. It is my goal to study how such decisions are made. Given your involvement in a registered program, your opinions will be important to this study. I would appreciate you taking the time to complete a brief survey.

    Your involvement in this survey is entirely voluntary and there are no known or anticipated risks to taking part. If you agree to participate, the survey should not take more than about 10 minutes to complete**.** The questions are quite general (for example, *"If I have little experience with a program, I often ask my friends about the program"*). However, you may decline answering any questions you do not wish to answer. We do not collect names so your anonymity is assured. All information you provide will be grouped with responses from other participants. Further, you cannot not be identified by name in any thesis, report or publication resulting from this study. The data collected will be kept for a period of 5 years in my supervisor's office at the University of Waterloo and will then be destroyed.

    If after receiving this letter, you have any questions about this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please feel free to contact Professor Ron McCarville at 519-888-4567, Ext. 33048**.**

   This study has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. Should you have comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Susan Sykes in the Office of Research Ethics at 519-888-4567, Ext. 36005 or ssykes@uwaterloo.ca.

Thank you in advance for your interest in this project. Please read and sign the consent form on the reverse side of this page.

Yours sincerely,

Kristen Levy   Ron McCarville, PhD
University of Waterloo   University of Waterloo
Applied Health Sciences,   Applied Health Sciences,
Dept. of Recreation and Leisure   Dept. of Recreation and Leisure
416-970-9565   519-888-4567 x33048

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. It is being conducted by Kristen Levy, a graduate student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. This survey should take approximately 5 – 10 minutes to complete and all responses will remain anonymous.

If at any point in time you wish to stop, you may return the survey to the researcher or dispose of it.

Several statements are provided below. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

A) I would describe myself as:

	Not at all True		Somewhat		Very True
1. Someone who is familiar with municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5
2. Someone who has registered others for municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5

B) When enrolling in a recreation program provided by the municipality:

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
3. If I have little experience with a program, I often ask my friends about the program.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a program list.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I frequently gather information from friends or family about a program before I buy/register.	1	2	3	4	5
6. To ensure I choose the right program, I often observe what others are registering for or talking about.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I know where to look to find the product information I need.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am confident in my ability to research important purchases.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I have the skills required to obtain needed information before making important purchases.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I often have doubts about the purchase decisions I make.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I often wonder if I've made the right purchase decision.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I know where to find the information I need prior to making a purchase.	1	2	3	4	5

C) When dealing with tasks and social information:

13. I would prefer complex to simple problems.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I only think as hard as I have to.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Thinking is not my idea of fun.	1	2	3	4	5

18. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.　　1　2　3　4　5

D) The next few questions are concerned with personal forms of communication (word of mouth, online reviews, etc) we use when making decisions. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
19. When seeking information I tend to use personal sources.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I turn to someone who is highly credible to reduce my risk and uncertainty with my program decision.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I am more trusting of a source I know personally.	1	2	3	4	5
22. Information I find on social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace can help me make successful program decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Program information that is received from a personal source tends to be accurate and sufficient to make my decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
24. When I buy a product online, I always read reviews that are presented on the website.	1	2	3	4	5
25. When I buy a product online, the reviews presented on the website make me confident in purchasing the product.	1	2	3	4	5
26. If I don't read the reviews presented on the website when I buy a product online, I worry about my decision.	1	2	3	4	5

SITUATION: (Control)

Assume you are genuinely interested in registering a child under the age of 12 in the municipality's "learn to swim" program.

Over ⇨

E) Thinking about the situation described in the box, what is the likelihood that you will seek advice from others when deciding whether or not to enroll the child in this program? (please offer your response as a percentage – 0% suggests you definitely would not seek advice; 100% suggests you would definitely seek advice) _____%

F) Who would you ask? Please offer as much detail as possible and rank in order of importance (friend, family member, co worker, neighbour, online friends/contacts, online product reviews)

_____

_____

G) Why would you choose them? _____

_____

H) Respondent Information – Gender (please circle)

  Male Female

I) Family Composition - Number of Children: _____

J) Your Age: _____

K) Combined Family Income (please circle)

Less than $50,000 $ 50,000 - $ 70,000 $ 70,001 - $ 90,000 More than $ 90,000

L) Marital Status (please circle)

  Single Widowed Divorced Separated Married Common Law

M) Think back to the "situation" box provided earlier in the survey. We asked you to think about registering a child for: (please circle correct response)

  Basketball Gymnastics Swimming Chess

N) Have you registered a child for a similar program in the past? (please circle)

  Yes No

O) If yes, when: (please circle)

  Within the last month Within last 6 months Within last year More than a year ago

P) How much was the registration fee? $_____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. It is being conducted by Kristen Levy, a graduate student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. This survey should take approximately 5 – 10 minutes to complete and all responses will remain anonymous.

If at any point in time you wish to stop, you may return the survey to the researcher or dispose of it.

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2. Someone who has registered others for municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5

B) When enrolling in a recreation program provided by the municipality:

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
3. If I have little experience with a program, I often ask my friends about the program.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a program list.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I frequently gather information from friends or family about a program before I buy/register.	1	2	3	4	5
6. To ensure I choose the right program, I often observe what others are registering for or talking about.	1	2	3	4	5
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8. I am confident in my ability to research important purchases.	1	2	3	4	5
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10. I often have doubts about the purchase decisions I make.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I often wonder if I've made the right purchase decision.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I know where to find the information I need prior to making a purchase.	1	2	3	4	5

C) When dealing with tasks and social information:

13. I would prefer complex to simple problems.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I only think as hard as I have to.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Thinking is not my idea of fun.	1	2	3	4	5

18. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.   1   2   3   4   5

D) The next few questions are concerned with personal forms of communication (word of mouth, online reviews, etc) we use when making decisions. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

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19. When seeking information I tend to use personal sources.	1	2	3	4	5
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SITUATION: (Low Familiarity/High Risk)

Assume you are genuinely interested in registering a child under the age of 12 in the municipality's "learn to swim" program. You are unfamiliar with the program but it costs twice as much as you would expect.

Over ⇨

E) Thinking about the situation described in the box, what is the likelihood that you will seek advice from others when deciding whether or not to enroll the child in this program? (please offer your response as a percentage – 0% suggests you definitely would not seek advice; 100% suggests you would definitely seek advice) _____%

F) Who would you ask? Please offer as much detail as possible and rank in order of importance (friend, family member, co worker, neighbour, online friends/contacts, online product reviews)

_____

_____

G) Why would you choose them? _____

_____

H) Respondent Information – Gender (please circle)

Male   Female

I) Family Composition - Number of Children:_____

J) Your Age: _____

K) Combined Family Income (please circle)

Less than $50,000 $ 50,000 - $ 70,000 $ 70,001 - $ 90,000   More than $ 90,000

L) Marital Status (please circle)

Single   Widowed   Divorced   Separated   Married   Common Law

M) Think back to the "situation" box provided earlier in the survey. We asked you to think about registering a child for: (please circle correct response)

Basketball   Gymnastics   Swimming   Chess

N) Have you registered a child for a similar program in the past? (please circle)

Yes   No

O) If yes, when: (please circle)

Within the last month   Within last 6 months   Within last year   More than a year ago

P) How much was the registration fee? $_____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. It is being conducted by Kristen Levy, a graduate student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. This survey should take approximately 5 – 10 minutes to complete and all responses will remain anonymous.

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26. If I don't read the reviews presented on the website when I buy a product online, I worry about my decision.	1	2	3	4	5

SITUATION: (Low Familiarity/Low Risk)

Assume you are genuinely interested in registering a child under the age of 12 in the municipality's "learn to swim" program. You are unfamiliar with the program but it costs about what you would expect.

Over ⇨

E) Thinking about the situation described in the box, what is the likelihood that you will seek advice from others when deciding whether or not to enroll the child in this program? (please offer your response as a percentage – 0% suggests you definitely would not seek advice; 100% suggests you would definitely seek advice) _____%

F) Who would you ask? Please offer as much detail as possible and rank in order of importance (friend, family member, co worker, neighbour, online friends/contacts, online product reviews)

_____

_____

G) Why would you choose them? _____

_____

H) Respondent Information – Gender (please circle)

     Male   Female

I) Family Composition - Number of Children:_____

J) Your Age: _____

K) Combined Family Income (please circle)

Less than $50,000 $ 50,000 - $ 70,000 $ 70,001 - $ 90,000   More than $ 90,000

L) Marital Status (please circle)

   Single   Widowed   Divorced   Separated   Married   Common Law

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     Basketball   Gymnastics   Swimming   Chess

N) Have you registered a child for a similar program in the past? (please circle)

     Yes   No

O) If yes, when: (please circle)

  Within the last month   Within last 6 months   Within last year   More than a year ago

P) How much was the registration fee? $_____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. It is being conducted by Kristen Levy, a graduate student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. This survey should take approximately 5 – 10 minutes to complete and all responses will remain anonymous.

If at any point in time you wish to stop, you may return the survey to the researcher or dispose of it.

Several statements are provided below. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

A) I would describe myself as:

	Not at all True		Somewhat		Very True
1. Someone who is familiar with municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5
2. Someone who has registered others for municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5

B) When enrolling in a recreation program provided by the municipality:

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
3. If I have little experience with a program, I often ask my friends about the program.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a program list.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I frequently gather information from friends or family about a program before I buy/register.	1	2	3	4	5
6. To ensure I choose the right program, I often observe what others are registering for or talking about.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I know where to look to find the product information I need.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am confident in my ability to research important purchases.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I have the skills required to obtain needed information before making important purchases.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I often have doubts about the purchase decisions I make.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I often wonder if I've made the right purchase decision.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I know where to find the information I need prior to making a purchase.	1	2	3	4	5

C) When dealing with tasks and social information:

13. I would prefer complex to simple problems.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I only think as hard as I have to.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Thinking is not my idea of fun.	1	2	3	4	5

18. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.　　1　2　3　4　5

D) The next few questions are concerned with personal forms of communication (word of mouth, online reviews, etc) we use when making decisions. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
19. When seeking information I tend to use personal sources.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I turn to someone who is highly credible to reduce my risk and uncertainty with my program decision.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I am more trusting of a source I know personally.	1	2	3	4	5
22. Information I find on social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace can help me make successful program decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Program information that is received from a personal source tends to be accurate and sufficient to make my decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
24. When I buy a product online, I always read reviews that are presented on the website.	1	2	3	4	5
25. When I buy a product online, the reviews presented on the website make me confident in purchasing the product.	1	2	3	4	5
26. If I don't read the reviews presented on the website when I buy a product online, I worry about my decision.	1	2	3	4	5

SITUATION: (High Familiarity/High Risk)

Assume you are genuinely interested in registering a child under the age of 12 in the municipality's "learn to swim" program. You are very familiar with the program and it costs twice as what you would expect.

Over ⇨

E) Thinking about the situation described in the box, what is the likelihood that you will seek advice from others when deciding whether or not to enroll the child in this program? (please offer your response as a percentage – 0% suggests you definitely would not seek advice; 100% suggests you would definitely seek advice) _____%

F) Who would you ask? Please offer as much detail as possible and rank in order of importance (friend, family member, co worker, neighbour, online friends/contacts, online product reviews)

G) Why would you choose them? _____

H) Respondent Information – Gender (please circle)

Male   Female

I)   Family Composition - Number of Children:_____

J)   Your Age: _____

K) Combined Family Income (please circle)

Less than $50,000 $ 50,000 - $ 70,000 $ 70,001 - $ 90,000   More than $ 90,000

L)   Marital Status (please circle)

Single   Widowed   Divorced   Separated   Married   Common Law

M) Think back to the "situation" box provided earlier in the survey. We asked you to think about registering a child for: (please circle correct response)

Basketball   Gymnastics   Swimming   Chess

N) Have you registered a child for a similar program in the past? (please circle)

Yes   No

O) If yes, when: (please circle)

Within the last month   Within last 6 months   Within last year   More than a year ago

P) How much was the registration fee? $_____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. It is being conducted by Kristen Levy, a graduate student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. This survey should take approximately 5 – 10 minutes to complete and all responses will remain anonymous.

If at any point in time you wish to stop, you may return the survey to the researcher or dispose of it.

Several statements are provided below. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

A) I would describe myself as:

	Not at all True		Somewhat		Very True
1. Someone who is familiar with municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5
2. Someone who has registered others for municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5

B) When enrolling in a recreation program provided by the municipality:

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
3. If I have little experience with a program, I often ask my friends about the program.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a program list.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I frequently gather information from friends or family about a program before I buy/register.	1	2	3	4	5
6. To ensure I choose the right program, I often observe what others are registering for or talking about.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I know where to look to find the product information I need.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am confident in my ability to research important purchases.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I have the skills required to obtain needed information before making important purchases.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I often have doubts about the purchase decisions I make.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I often wonder if I've made the right purchase decision.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I know where to find the information I need prior to making a purchase.	1	2	3	4	5

C) When dealing with tasks and social information:

13. I would prefer complex to simple problems.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I only think as hard as I have to.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Thinking is not my idea of fun.	1	2	3	4	5

18. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.   1   2   3   4   5

D) The next few questions are concerned with personal forms of communication (word of mouth, online reviews, etc) we use when making decisions. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
19. When seeking information I tend to use personal sources.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I turn to someone who is highly credible to reduce my risk and uncertainty with my program decision.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I am more trusting of a source I know personally.	1	2	3	4	5
22. Information I find on social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace can help me make successful program decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Program information that is received from a personal source tends to be accurate and sufficient to make my decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
24. When I buy a product online, I always read reviews that are presented on the website.	1	2	3	4	5
25. When I buy a product online, the reviews presented on the website make me confident in purchasing the product.	1	2	3	4	5
26. If I don't read the reviews presented on the website when I buy a product online, I worry about my decision.	1	2	3	4	5

SITUATION: (High Familiarity/Low Risk)

Assume you are genuinely interested in registering a child under the age of 12 in the municipality's "learn to swim" program. You are very familiar with the program and it costs about what you would expect.

Over ⇨

E) Thinking about the situation described in the box, what is the likelihood that you will seek advice from others when deciding whether or not to enroll the child in this program? (please offer your response as a percentage – 0% suggests you definitely would not seek advice; 100% suggests you would definitely seek advice) _____ %

F) Who would you ask? Please offer as much detail as possible and rank in order of importance (friend, family member, co worker, neighbour, online friends/contacts, online product reviews)

_____

_____

G) Why would you choose them? _____

_____

H) Respondent Information – Gender (please circle)

Male   Female

I)   Family Composition - Number of Children: _____

J)   Your Age: _____

K) Combined Family Income (please circle)

Less than $50,000 $ 50,000 - $ 70,000 $ 70,001 - $ 90,000   More than $ 90,000

L)   Marital Status (please circle)

Single   Widowed   Divorced   Separated   Married   Common Law

M) Think back to the "situation" box provided earlier in the survey. We asked you to think about registering a child for: (please circle correct response)

Basketball   Gymnastics   Swimming   Chess

N) Have you registered a child for a similar program in the past? (please circle)

Yes   No

O) If yes, when: (please circle)

Within the last month   Within last 6 months   Within last year   More than a year ago

P) How much was the registration fee? $ _____

Ethics Application Information:

A. GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Title of Project: Consumer Decision Making and Word of Mouth Communication

2. a) Principal and Co-Investigator(s)
Name   Department   Ext: e-mail:

2. b) Collaborator(s)
Name   Department   Ext: e-mail:

3. Faculty Supervisor(s)
Name   Department   Ext: e-mail:

Ron McCarville   Recreation & Leisure   33048   mcarvill@uwaterloo.ca
                      Studies

4. Student Investigator(s)
Name   Department   Ext: e-mail: Local Phone #:

Kristen Levy   Recreation &   krislevy@rogers.com   416-970-9565
                Leisure Studies

5. Level of Project: MA   **Specify Course:**

Research Project/Course Status:

6. Funding Status (if there is an industry sponsor and procedures pose greater than minimal risk, then Appendix B is to be completed):

Is this project currently funded? No

- If No, is funding being sought OR if Yes, is additional funding being sought? No
- Period of Funding:

7. Does this research involve another institution or site? No
If Yes, what other institutions or sites are involved:

8. Has this proposal been, or will it be, submitted to any other Research Ethics Board/Institutional Review Board? No

9. For Undergraduate and Graduate Research:

Has this proposal received approval of a Department Committee?   Not Dept. Req.

10. a) Indicate the anticipated commencement date for this project: 09/25/2011

   b) Indicate the anticipated completion date for this project: 10/02/2011

B. SUMMARY OF PROPOSED RESEARCH

1. Purpose and Rationale for Proposed Research

a. Describe the purpose (objectives) and rationale of the proposed project and include any hypothesis(es)/research questions to be investigated.   For a clinical trial/medical device testing summarize the research proposal using the following headings: Purpose, Hypothesis, Justification, and Objectives.
Where available, provide a copy of a research proposal. For a clinical trial/medical device testing a research proposal is required:
The purpose of this study is to explore the process consumers undertake to seek out, listen and engage in WOM communication when making a service purchase decision. The focus will be on understanding the situations which lead consumers to rely on or disregard interpersonal communication. In addition, the role risk, need for cognition and susceptibility to influence play in a decision making process will be explored.

b. In lay language, provide a one paragraph (approximately 100 words) summary of the project including purpose, the anticipated potential benefits, and basic procedures used.
This project will examine the role of Word of Mouth Communication within a Consumer Purchase Decision Making context. The results of this project will provide insight to service organizations on how consumers make purchase decisions and the effects of risk, susceptibility to influence and need for cognition play in the decision. On site survey collection and completion of the survey by an adult will allow for some qualitative and quantitative data collection.

C. DETAILS OF STUDY

1. Methodology/Procedures

a. Indicate all of the procedures that will be used. Append to form 101 a copy of all materials to be used in this study.

Survey(s) or questionnaire(s) (in person)   All are standardized.

b. Provide a detailed, sequential description of the procedures to be used in this study. For studies involving multiple procedures or sessions, provide a flow chart. Where applicable, this section also should give the research design (e.g., cross-over design, repeated measures design).
The researcher will be on site and approach adults in the viewing gallery watching the children during swimming lessons. Surveys will be distributed to each adult (18 years and older) willing to take one, every half hour or when the classes change.
Participants will be provided an opportunity to hand in their completed surveys to the researcher or they will be directed to the information counter where a staff member will

take their completed survey and place in the locked storage container.
Each participant will be provided with a clipboard and pen to complete their survey. There will be 25 clipboards available at any one time.

c. Will this study involve the administration/use of any drug, medical device, biologic, or natural health product? No

2. Participants Involved in the Study

a. Indicate who will be recruited as potential participants in this study.
Non-UW Participants:
Adults
Seniors

b. Describe the potential participants in this study including group affiliation, gender, age range and any other special characteristics. Describe distinct or common characteristics of the potential participants or a group (e.g., a group with a particular health condition) that are relevant to recruitment and/or procedures (e.g., A group with asbestosis is included. People with this condition tend to be male, 50+ years, worked with asbestos.). If only one gender is to be selected for recruitment, provide a justification for this.

The potential participants will be the caregivers of program participants. They will be over 18 years of age. Any gender will be encouraged to complete the survey and only one person from each family will be asked to complete the survey.

c. How many participants are expected to be involved in this study? For a clinical trial, medical device testing, or study with procedures that pose greater than minimal risk, sample size determination information is to be provided, as outlined in Guidance Note C2c.

It is anticipated there will be 200 - 300 surveys completed.

3. Recruitment Process and Study Location

a. From what source(s) will the potential participants be recruited?
Caregivers of Program Participants

b. Describe how and by whom the potential participants will be recruited. Provide a copy of any materials to be used for recruitment (e.g. posters(s), flyers, cards, advertisement(s), letter(s), telephone, email, and other verbal scripts).
The researcher will recruit potential participants through existing programs at a local community centre. The researcher will visit the viewing area of the aquatic program and introduce herself, the study and distribute a letter with basic information pertaining to the study & the use of the data. Potential participants will be identified using the regularly scheduled weekly swim lessons where participants are required to be registered ahead of time.

c. Where will the study take place?   Off campus: Markham, Ontario

4. Remuneration for Participants
Will participants receive remuneration (financial, in-kind, or otherwise) for participation?   No

5. Feedback to Participants

Describe the plans for provision of study feedback and attach a copy of the feedback letter to be used. Wherever possible, written feedback should be provided to study participants including a statement of appreciation, details about the purpose and predictions of the study, restatement of the provisions for confidentiality and security of data, an indication of when a study report will be available and how to obtain a copy, contact information for the researchers, and the ethics review and clearance statement. Refer to the Checklist for Feedback Sheets on ORE web site:
http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/human/application/samples/checklistfeedback.htm
As this is an anonymous survey, communication of results will be difficult to communicate. Many participants may not register again in programs so results may not be known.

D. POTENTIAL BENEFITS FROM THE STUDY

1. Identify and describe any known or anticipated direct benefits to the participants from their involvement in the project.
No benefits

2.Identify and describe any known or anticipated benefits to the scientific community/society from the conduct of this study.
Additional insight into the purchase decision making of consumers with respect to their susceptibility to influence, self confidence and the need for cognition.

E. POTENTIAL RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS FROM THE STUDY

1. For each procedure used in this study, describe any known or anticipated risks/stressors to the participants. Consider physiological, psychological, emotional, social, economic risks/stressors. A study–specific current health status form must be included when physiological assessments are used and the associated risk(s) to participants is minimal or greater.

Minimal risks anticipated.
Minimal risk may exist as the researcher is currently employed by the location of choice and she may have a direct or indirect relationship with some participants. The participants may feel obligated to complete the survey to ensure their child's success is not compromised. The researcher however does not have any influence over the child's progress as they are evaluated by an instructor based on their ability to perform required skills and movements.

If the risk is greater than minimal and the study is industry sponsored, then Appendix B is to be completed.

2. Describe the procedures or safeguards in place to protect the physical and psychological health of the participants in light of the risks/stressors identified in E1.
When introducing the study, the researcher will ensure participants are aware they are to complete this survey independently and they will be able to drop off completed surveys at the information desk where a staff member can file them in the secure tote. No names are required on the surveys and participation is completely optional and they can stop the survey at any time with no chance of repercussion or other consequences.

F. INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS

Researchers are advised to review the Sample Materials section of the ORE website

Refer to sample information letters and consent forms:
http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/human/application/101samples.htm

1. What process will be used to inform the potential participants about the study details and to obtain their consent for participation?
Information letter with verbal consent.

2. If written consent cannot be obtained from the potential participants, provide a justification for this.
Consent would remove the anonymity of the project and is not relevant to the overall findings of this project.

3. Does this study involve persons who cannot give their own consent (e.g. minors)? No

G. ANONYMITY OF PARTICIPANTS AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA

1. Provide a detailed explanation of the procedures to be used to ensure anonymity of participants and confidentiality of data both during the research and in the release of the findings.
Anonymity will be ensured as names will not be required by those completing the survey and all demographic data collected will be generic in nature. Each participant will be asked to complete a survey individually and will be provided with their own clipboard and survey. In the release of the findings, the location details will be very generic and any identification will be removed. No specific reference to an identifiable individual will be used.

2. Describe the procedures for securing written records, video/audio tapes, questionnaires and recordings. Identify (i) whether the data collected will be linked with any other dataset and identify the linking dataset and (ii) whether the data will be sent outside of the institution where it is collected or if data will be received from other sites. For the latter, are the data de-identified, anonymized, or anonymous?
During the data collection phase, all completed surveys will be kept in a locked cabinet where public will not have access. When the surveys are taken off site, they will remain in the tote and used only for analysis. Once the data has been entered, the surveys will be returned to the University of Waterloo for storage in the Supervisor's office in a locked filing cabinet.

3. Indicate how long the data will be securely stored and the method to be used for final disposition of the data.
Paper Records
Confidential shredding after 5 year(s).
Location: University of Waterloo

4. Are there conditions under which anonymity of participants or confidentiality of data cannot be guaranteed?   No

H. DECEPTION

1. Will this study involve the use of deception?   No

Researchers must ensure that all supporting materials/documentation for their applications are submitted with the signed, hard copies of the ORE form 101/101A. Note, materials shown below in bold are

normally required as part of the ORE application package. The inclusion of other materials depends on the specific type of projects.

Researchers are advised to review the Sample Materials section of the ORE web site: http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/human/application/101samples.htm

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Protocol Involves a Drug, Medical Device, Biologic, or Natural Health Product

If the study procedures include administering or using a drug, medical device, biologic, or natural health product that has been or has not been approved for marketing in Canada then the researcher is to complete Appendix A, a Word document. Appendix A is to be attached to each of the two copies of the application that are submitted to the ORE. Information concerning studies involving a drug, biologic, natural health product, or medical devices can be found on the ORE website.

Drug , biologic or natural health product http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/human/researchTypes/clinical.htm

Medical devices: http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/human/researchTypes/devices.htm

Appendix A http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/human/application/101samples.htm

Please **check** below all appendices that are attached as part of your application package:

- Recruitment Materials: A copy of any poster(s), flyer(s), advertisement(s), letter(s), telephone or other verbal script(s) used to recruit/gain access to participants.
- Information/Cover Letter(s)*. Used in studies involving surveys or questionnaires.
- Data Collection Materials: A copy of all survey(s), questionnaire(s), interview questions, interview themes/sample questions for open-ended interviews, focus group questions, or any standardized tests.

* Refer to sample letters:
http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/human/application/101samples.htm

NOTE: The submission of incomplete application packages will increase the duration of the ethics review process.

To avoid common errors/omissions, and to minimize the potential for required revisions, applicants should ensure that their application and attachments are consistent with the *Checklist For Ethics Review of Human Research Application*

http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/form101/checklist.htm

Please note the submission of incomplete packages may result in delays in receiving full ethics clearance.
We suggest reviewing your application with the Checklist For Ethics Review of Human Research Applications
to minimize any required revisions and avoid common errors/omissions.
http://iris.uwaterloo.ca/ethics/form101/checklist.htm

INVESTIGATORS' AGREEMENT

I have read the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans and agree to comply with the principles and articles outlined in the TCPS. In the case of student research, as Faculty Supervisor, my signature indicates that I have read and approved this application and the thesis proposal, deem the project to be valid and worthwhile, and agree to provide the necessary supervision of the student.

_____   _____
Signature of Principal Investigator/Supervisor   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Student Investigator   Date

FOR OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS USE ONLY:

_____
Susan E. Sykes, Ph.D., C. Psych.
Director, Office of Research Ethics
OR
Susanne Santi, M.Math
Senior Manager, Research Ethics
OR
Julie Joza, B.Sc.
Manager, Research Ethics

WHERE THE INFO CAME FROM - SCALE IDENTIFICATION – Answer Key
CONTROL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. It is being conducted by Kristen Levy, a graduate student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. This survey should take approximately 5 – 10 minutes to complete and all responses will remain anonymous.

If at any point in time you wish to stop, you may return the survey to the researcher or dispose of it.

Several statements are provided below. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

A) I would describe myself as:

	Not at all True		Somewhat		Very True
1. Someone who is familiar with municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5
2. Someone who has registered others for municipal recreation programs	1	2	3	4	5

B) When enrolling in a recreation program provided by the municipality:

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
3. If I have little experience with a program, I often ask my friends about the program. **SI – Informational**	1	2	3	4	5
4. I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a program list. **SI - Informational**	1	2	3	4	5
5. I frequently gather information from friends or family about a program before I buy/register. **SI – Informational**	1	2	3	4	5
6. To ensure I choose the right program, I often observe what others are registering for or talking about. **SI – Informational (modified from: To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what others are buying & using)** **** 3 of 4 were used and one was modified**	1	2	3	4	5
7. I know where to look to find the product information I need. **SC - IA**	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am confident in my ability to research important purchases. **SC – IA**	1	2	3	4	5
9. I have the skills required to obtain needed information before making important purchases. **SC – IA**	1	2	3	4	5
10. I often have doubts about the purchase decisions I make. **SC – PO**	1	2	3	4	5
11. I often wonder if I've made the right purchase decision. **SC – PO**	1	2	3	4	5
12. I know where to find the information I need prior to making a purchase. **SC – IA**	1	2	3	4	5

** SC - IA #4 not used, SC - PO # 2, 4 & 5 not used

C) When dealing with tasks and social information:

13. I would prefer complex to simple problems. **NC**	1	2	3	4	5
14. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities. **NC**	1	2	3	4	5
15. I only think as hard as I have to. **NC**	1	2	3	4	5
16. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours. **NC**	1	2	3	4	5
17. Thinking is not my idea of fun. **NC**	1	2	3	4	5
18. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking. **NC**	1	2	3	4	5

** 6 of 18 used - # 5,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17 & 18 not used

D) The next few questions are concerned with personal forms of communication (word of mouth, online reviews, etc) we use when making decisions. Please circle the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement.

	Very Unlikely		Somewhat		Very Likely
19. When seeking information I tend to use personal sources. **WOM**	1	2	3	4	5
20. I turn to someone who is highly credible to reduce my risk and uncertainty with my program decision. **Knowledge & Creation pg 17 under personal attributed**	1	2	3	4	5
21. I am more trusting of a source I know personally. **Identity & Bond pg 388**	1	2	3	4	5
22. Information I find on social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace can help me make successful program decisions. **Identity & Bond general principle**	1	2	3	4	5
23. Program information that is received from a personal source tends to be accurate and sufficient to make my decisions. **Mourali**	1	2	3	4	5
24. When I buy a product online, I always read reviews that are presented on the website.	1	2	3	4	5
25. When I buy a product online, the reviews presented on the website make me confident in purchasing the product.	1	2	3	4	5
26. If I don't read the reviews presented on the website when I buy a product online, I worry about my decision.	1	2	3	4	5

<div style="border:1px solid black; padding:10px;">

SITUATION:

Assume you are genuinely interested in registering a child under the age of 12 in the municipality's "learn to swim" program.

</div>

E) Thinking about the situation described in the box, what is the likelihood that you will seek advice from others when deciding whether or not to enroll the child in this program? (please offer your response as a percentage – 0% suggests you definitely would not seek advice; 100% suggests you would definitely seek advice) _____ %

F) Who would you ask? Please offer as much detail as possible and rank in order of importance (friend, family member, co worker, neighbour, online friends/contacts, online product reviews)

_____

_____

G) Why would you choose them? _____

_____

H) Respondent Information – Gender (please circle)

       Male   Female

I) Family Composition - Number of Children: _____

J) Your Age: _____

K) Combined Family Income (please circle)

Less than $50,000 $ 50,000 - $ 70,000 $ 70,001 - $ 90,000   More than $ 90,000

L) Marital Status (please circle)

    Single   Widowed   Divorced   Separated   Married   Common Law

M) Think back to the "situation" box provided earlier in the survey. We asked you to think about registering a child for: (please circle correct response)

     Basketball   Gymnastics   Swimming   Chess

N) Have you registered a child for a similar program in the past? (please circle)

      Yes   No

O) If yes, when: (please circle)

Within the last month   Within last 6 months   Within last year   More than a year ago

P) How much was the registration fee? $_____