

CHAPTER FOUR

ONLINE REVIEWS CREDIBILITY: IMPLICATIONS ON TRAVELLER'S DECISION MAKING

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Abstract

The social web is the ideal place to share information, experiences and preferences among consumers. Nowadays, online reviews and recommendations are becoming increasingly important and seen as a new digital form of word-of-mouth, a key topic for researchers. Despite the significant body of literature about electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM), there is a lack of research that analyzes the phenomenon in the context of the hospitality industry, its drivers, conditioning factors and impacts. This research aims to highlight the online reviews as a reliable and important source of information for travellers, with possible implications in their decision making process. It is expected to yield some relevant contributions to academia, marketing and management in the tourism and hotel businesses. **Keywords:** EWOM, online reviews, credibility, consumer behaviour.

1. Introduction

Word-of-mouth or simply interpersonal communications between tourists and their peers, have been recognized as influential for shaping tourism demand. Some studies suggest that word-of-mouth (WOM) communications can significantly influence travel decisions (Cox *et al.*, 2009). With the emergence of the world-wide-web, the original concept has changed and evolved. Electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) is seen and addressed as a development of WOM, and an important topic of research, as evidenced

by the growing number of publications in top level marketing journals in the last decade (Breazeale, 2009). However, despite the significant body of literature, there is a lack of studies on the effect of social media and user generated content (UGC) in tourism businesses (Cox *et al.*, 2009).

Tourism marketers are very keen to devise strategies to manage EWOM, bearing in mind the intangible characteristics, the emotional influences and the high risks involved in the decision-making process (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). On the other hand, tourism products are both seasonal and perishable, operate in very competitive markets, and some competitive advantages can be achieved with online interpersonal influence (*ibid.*). For that reason, with this research, we expect to contribute to a better understanding of the impacts of EWOM in tourism.

Nowadays there is a belief that high-quality information is difficult to find on the Internet, due to the amount of lower quality, unfiltered and sometimes contradictory information, provided by an unlimited number of unknown participants. This raises questions about the credibility of online reviews (Cheung *et al.*, 2009).

Therefore, the main purpose of this research is to investigate to what extent online reviews act as a reliable and important source of information for travellers, with possible implications for their decision-making processes. We focus on three stages of the traveller decision making process: before the booking, during the stay, and after the tourist experience (see Figure 1 for the conceptual model employed).

First, it is intended to understand the factors that affect the perceptions of credibility of online reviews. Positive and negative reviews can create expectations in the tourist who read the reviews. Therefore, it is important to know if the expectations were realized, i.e., to comprehend the impacts of the online reviews on the traveller's satisfaction. Moreover, given that most e-commerce intermediaries, like hotel booking websites, invite tourists to write a review after a hotel stay, it is intended to test the impact of perceived value and satisfaction on EWOM activity. Finally, it is considered whether the degree of tourist commitment with the online travel agency may mediate the effect of these two constructs on EWOM activity.

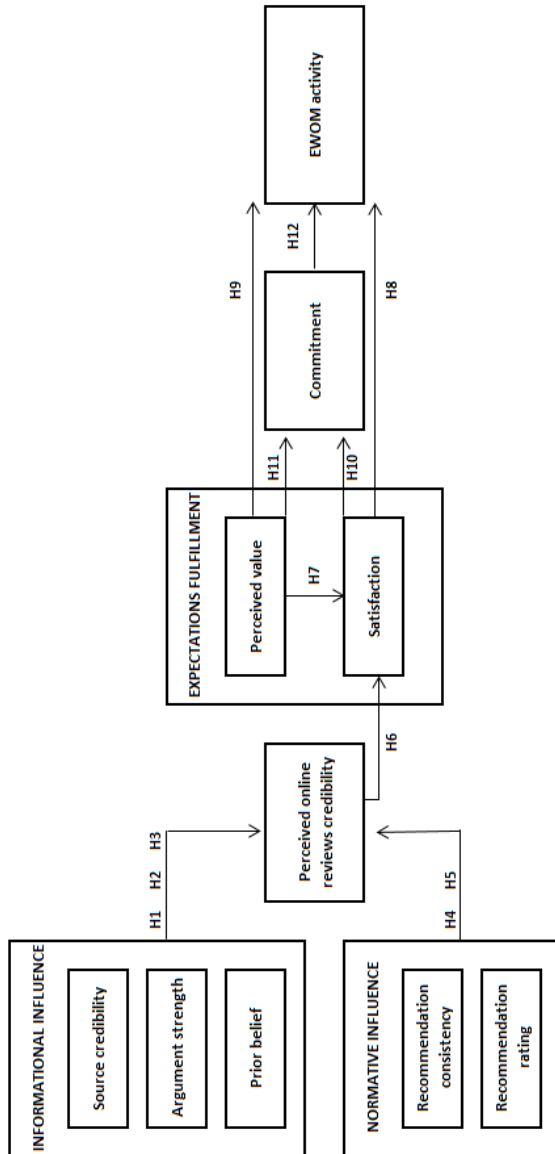


Figure 1 – Conceptual Model

2. Dual Process theory

In order to better clarify the process by which EWOM is being used, it is important to understand how people evaluate the credibility of online recommendations (Cheung *et al.*, 2009). The dual-process approach (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) is a psychological theory and a useful framework for explaining communication effectiveness, especially when group opinions/discussions are present, such as in EWOM communications (Cheung *et al.*, 2009).

According to this theory the “informational” and “normative” determinants are two types of social influences that contribute to shape the reader’s judgment. The “informational” component is based on the receiver’s own judgment of the received information. The “normative” refers to the influence of the norms/expectations of others that are implicit or explicit in the choice preference of the group (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

Source credibility and argument strength have a significant role in judging information on the web (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). In addition, prior beliefs may also affect evaluations of an incoming message, and so are also seen as an important informational determinant (Zhang & Watts, 2003). Recommendation consistency and recommendation rating are the most popular and significant normative factors, frequently adopted for evaluations of EWOM credibility (Cheung *et al.*, 2009; Vandenbosch & Higgins, 1996). Therefore, they will be included in the research model.

2.1. Source credibility

Credibility is one of the criteria used to filter information (Wathen & Burkell, 2002), and an important antecedent of EWOM adoption (McKnight & Kacmar, 2006). Internet users are vulnerable to the inaccuracy of web-based information and need to evaluate it critically to avoid misinformation (Iding & Crosby, 2009). In order to manage efficiently the amount of information presented in the web, people use some judgments as filtering mechanisms. Internet users check the URL address and they prefer educational, non-profit, and government sources (i.e., .edu, .org or .gov), rating them as more credible than commercial sites (i.e., .com) (Rieh & Belkin, 2000).

The extraordinary growth in the EWOM phenomenon is an indicator of the perceived credibility and independence of tourists’ opinions, compared to traditional tourist information sources (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). On some tourist websites that offer travel advice to its readers/users, fictitious reviews are clearly problematic and the main concern is to ensure

that reviews are credible (Jeacle & Carter, 2011). Indeed, tourists' reviews available on the web will only be accepted if perceived as credible by the reader (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H1 Source credibility will have a positive effect on perceived credibility of online reviews posted by tourists.

2.2. Argument strength

The argument strength is an important element used to evaluate incoming communications, and is associated with information accuracy, i.e., the quality of the received information (Cheung *et al.*, 2009). Thus, "Readers do not simply follow comments blindly. Even in the presence of normative information, receivers still believe in opinions that are supported by valid and strong arguments" (Cheung *et al.*, 2009, p.29). So, the use of stronger arguments in messages leads to a better perception of the information's usefulness (Kempf & Palan, 2006). For instance, a purchase can be a consumer's behavioural response regarding the quality of information presented in the online reviews (Hu *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, argument strength significantly influences perceived EWOM credibility (Cheung *et al.*, 2009).

Therefore, a touristic online review, perceived as having valid arguments, will probably be considered by other tourists as valid information. On the other hand, the same is expected to be true in the opposite situation. So, we suggest:

- H2 Argument strength will have a positive effect on perceived credibility of online reviews posted by tourists.

2.3. Prior belief

Consumers can detect the level of confirmation/disconfirmation between their prior beliefs and the information received on the evaluation of a product or service (Festinger, 1957). When the information content is consistent with their expectations or previous knowledge, they have more confidence in the information received and this criterion is applied in subsequent purchasing decisions (Zeithaml, 1988; Zhang & Watts, 2003).

The process of confirmation/disconfirmation of prior beliefs has a significant influence on the credibility of information received (Fogg *et al.*, 2001). The comments of tourists brought online allow potential

customers access to prior service experiences. Consequently, they can support their beliefs that a firm will deliver quality service (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Therefore, an online review posted by a tourist that confirms the reader's prior beliefs will probably be considered as credible information. On the other hand, the reader will probably refuse the validity of an online recommendation when perceived as a disconfirmation of a prior belief. Hence:

- H3 The confirmation of the receiver's prior belief will have a positive effect on perceived credibility of online reviews posted by tourists.

2.4. Recommendation consistency

Recommendation consistency refers to the degree of similarity between different opinions about the same product or service (Zhang & Watts, 2003). A recommendation that is inconsistent compared to most others, will be perceived as less credible (Vandenbosch & Higgins, 1996). On the other hand, a recommendation consistent with previous ones, is perceived as more credible, because people tend to follow and believe normative opinions (Zhang & Watts, 2003).

Online reviews are submitted by different persons, with different experiences and sometimes with contradictory opinions, and tourists can compare them easily. Tourists use online consumer reviews as a way to reduce risk and uncertainty in the purchase situation (Hu *et al.*, 2008). For instance, the reviews can help determine if the reader can trust the hotel under consideration (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Thus:

- H4 Recommendation consistency will have a positive effect on perceived credibility of online reviews posted by tourists.

2.5. Recommendation rating

Not all reviews have the same influence on consumers. For instance, tourists might be selective and pay attention to comments written by reviewers with a better reputation, expecting these to be more trustworthy and reliable (Hu *et al.*, 2008).

In the online consumer discussion forums, readers can assess the review with a high or low rating score, depending on their perception of it. The total score represents how previous readers reacted to the review (Cheung *et al.*, 2009). Further, "Review scores are based more on

reviewers' own experiences rather than on underlying characteristics of the product" (Hu *et al.*, 2008, p.205). Accordingly, recommendation rating reflects third parties' perceptions of the current review. Moreover, it may have significant influence on the credibility of the information perceived by readers (Cheung *et al.*, 2009).

If most readers give a high-level rating to a message posted by tourists, it probably means they classify the review as useful. Conversely, a very low rating may indicate that most readers classify the online review as not useful, which may raise suspicion about the credibility of it. So, we propose:

- H5 Recommendation rating will have a positive effect on the perceived credibility of online reviews posted by tourists.

3. Expectations, Perceived Value and Satisfaction

The decision-making process is strongly influenced by WOM. In a website context, for instance, online recommendations can influence the product's sales (Hu *et al.*, 2008). This influence is particularly important for experience goods, such as in the hospitality and tourism sector, because their quality is only perceived after consumption (Ye *et al.*, 2009).

Positive online reviews can significantly increase the number of bookings at a hotel. According to Ye *et al.*'s (2009) findings, a 10% improvement in reviewers' ratings can increase sales by 4.4%, and a 10% increase in review variance can decrease sales by 2.8%. Despite being considered as having lower credibility than traditional WOM (Dellarocas, 2006), perceived credibility of online reviews (EWOM) has been shown to affect participants' intention to book the hotels reviewed on the web (Xie *et al.*, 2011).

Online communities have a strong influence on the image and the marketing of hotels. For instance, negative WOM can have a huge impact upon a destination or hotel's image, because dissatisfied visitors spread negative comments about their experiences, sometimes unfounded (Burgess *et al.*, 2009). On the other hand, online reviews can also increase tourists' expectations (Díaz-Martín *et al.*, 2000), i.e., their predictions and beliefs (Spreng & Page, 2001).

Tourists will compare the information gathered and prior beliefs with their own experience at the destination in order to see if their expectations were achieved (Seabra *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, expectation fulfilment is shaped and affected by different information sources obtained in the pre-purchase stage by the consumers (Spreng & Page, 2001), such as via the

internet (Seabra *et al.*, 2007). Tourists who obtain more information about the destination are more likely to have realistic expectations (Seabra *et al.*, 2007).

So, tourists will expect a specific level of service, and if they perceive that they received an equal or higher level of service, satisfaction will be achieved. On the other hand, service perception that falls below the tourists' expectations will lead to dissatisfaction. As a result, satisfaction has played an important role in tourism marketing (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Tourist satisfaction is a crucial element in explaining successful destination marketing because it influences the choice of destination, the consumption of products and services, and the decision to return (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Therefore, it is expected that the information gathered on the internet about a hotel, i.e., the perceived credibility of online reviews may affect the degree of satisfaction about the hotel reviewed. Thus:

- H6 The perceived online reviews credibility will have a positive effect on the degree of satisfaction with the hotel.

The real value, or the post-purchase perceived value, arises after the consumption of the product (Sánchez *et al.*, 2006). Value is seen as an extremely complex concept with regard to consumers (Gallarza & Gil Saura, 2006), and it should be better studied and measured by researchers, especially in the tourism field (Murphy *et al.*, 2000). Perceived value is "the overall assessment of the utility of a product based on the perceptions of what is received" (Zeitham, 1988, 14). Research indicates a strong correlation between satisfaction and value (Gallarza & Gil Saura, 2006). Therefore, it is expected that the degree of satisfaction with the hotel will also be affected by the perceived value of the hotel. As a result:

- H7 Perceived value of the hotel will have a positive effect on the degree of satisfaction.

4. EWOM Activity – Writing an Online Review

Tourists are ever more informed and demanding, searching for unique experiences. Therefore, tourism and leisure organizations need to give memorable experiences, in order to capture an intangible differentiation (Williams, 2006). With the development of web platforms available, tourists are increasingly interested in booking hotels on the internet (Miguéns *et al.*, 2008). Visitors' experiences and their reactions to what

they found are the basis for future decisions, i.e., whether or not to repeat or recommend the destination (Vaughan & Edwards, 1999).

Internet users may have different motivations in using or generating EWOM (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). It can be a way to reduce risk and uncertainty in the purchase situation (Chen, 2008), a question of saving time in the decision-making process, or of arriving at a better buying decision (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). When customers participate in EWOM, they derive not only social and economic value (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001), but they may also expect other benefits, like hedonic experiences (Parra-López *et al.*, 2011). Consumers derive pleasure from the emotional significance attached to products consumed, and this is a characteristic of the tourism business (Botterill & Crompton, 1996). Further, these emotional components that are present in customer satisfaction can be a stronger predictor of future behavioural intentions (Martin *et al.*, 2008).

Thus, when a hotel exceeds their customers' expectations, it is likely that these customers feel motivated to share their own positive experiences with other potential customers spread across the web. The online environment can also be ideal for customer revenge, especially after a service failure. Indeed, some research supports the significant effect of satisfaction on WOM (Matos & Rossi, 2008), as well as service failures and complaints (Park *et al.*, 2008): "When a marketer delivers high satisfaction to consumers, the expectation is that the consumers will spread positive WOM" (Brown & Barry, 2005, p.125). So, it is expected that:

H8 Satisfaction with the hotel will have a positive effect on EWOM activity.

Service offerings such as hotel accommodation can be conceptualized in terms of tangible features (e.g., hotel room size) and person-based service (e.g., the sympathy of a hotel receptionist) (Danaher & Mattsson, 1998). Despite this perspective, the perceived value also has an influence on WOM (Hartline & Jones, 1996), and it has been addressed as a predictor of and a correlate with WOM activity, especially in the service context (Hartline & Jones, 1996; Matos & Rossi, 2008). Therefore:

H9 - Perceived value will have a positive effect on EWOM activity.

5. The Mediating Role of Commitment

In the relationship marketing field, several authors have focused on the concept of commitment, which can be defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman, 1992, p.316). Further, “Relationships are built on the foundation of mutual commitment” (Berry & Parasuraman, 1993, p.139), and “successful relationship marketing requires relationship commitment and trust” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p.20).

In the model proposed, commitment will mediate the relationship between EWOM activity and expectations fulfilment, i.e., satisfaction and the perceived value of the hotel. In other words, “Satisfaction has a strong effect on long-term variables such as commitment and retention” (Hennig-Thurau, 2004, p.472). Furthermore, the relation between satisfaction and retention is strong in the case of travel agencies (Hennig-Thurau, 2004).

Naturally, tourists may disregard some of the online reviews they have read. However, after arriving at the destination/ hotel, they have a more grounded view. Therefore, it is expected that the perceived value could affect the level of commitment regarding the service provided by the online travel agency. The same effect is expected regarding the level of satisfaction. Thus:

H10 Satisfaction will have a positive effect on commitment.

H11 Perceived value will have a positive effect on commitment.

When a company recognizes and rewards the customer as someone special, the latter’s commitment to the company tends to increase (Lacey *et al.*, 2007). Customers committed to the company demonstrate higher identification with their products/services and tend to value and maintain this relationship. This example reinforces the affective dimension of the construct (Harrison-Walker, 2001).

Indeed, there is a positive relationship between commitment and WOM (Lacey *et al.*, 2007). Thus, it is expected that someone committed to the online travel agency would like to maintain and nurture the relationship. This means the tourist might continue to read reviews, book hotels and post comments on the same website. So:

H12 Commitment will have a positive effect on EWOM activity (online reviews).

6. Conclusion

In the last couple of years, EWOM has received significant attention in the hospitality sector (Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Ye *et al.*, 2009) Nevertheless, there appears to be a lack of studies on the effect of social media and user generated content (UGC). Therefore, with this research model, it is intended to investigate to what extent online reviews act as a reliable and important source of information for travellers. On the other hand, we intend to emphasize the importance of the social web for tourism providers and marketers. We believe that the conceptual model proposed may allow a broader approach in order to explain this complex phenomenon.

Tourism providers need to improve their marketing strategy, especially their relationships with actual and potential customers, in order to exceed tourists' expectations, instead of simply providing a satisfactory service. Indeed, after recognizing the importance of the feedback created online and free of charge, hotel managers might use the online hotel booking websites in order to: (1) interact with actual customers or potential ones; (2) understand tourists' expectations, experiences and satisfaction levels; (3) solve problems and avoid or respond to negative comments; (4) analyze competitors' strategies; (5) monitor the company's image and reputation; (6) obtain information from customers which can be very innovative; and (7) for revenue generation purposes.

Several suggestions are also provided for further research using this conceptual model. The framework presented is a useful guide for future qualitative and quantitative investigations at different stages. As stated by Litvin *et al.* (2008), a service provider may be reviewed by a large number of customers with diverse backgrounds. In this sense, a cross-cultural approach might be useful in identifying different profiles. Moreover, some reviews could be seen as either a recommendation or a complaint. As evidenced by Xie *et al.* (2011), the valence of the review is sometimes not clear when ambivalent reviews are posted online.

This research also has some limitations. For example, tourists may have different motivations for choosing a destination, different expectations, satisfaction levels and standards. As a result, the evaluation of tourists' satisfaction may need to be considered in multiple dimensions (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Furthermore, the outcome of the research model (EWOM activity) implies that a traveller will write a review on the same website where the hotel reservation was made. Thus, to conduct the empirical study it will be necessary to request the cooperation of an online hotel booking website that ensures that the online reviews are genuine, i.e.,

correspond to the people who made their reservations through the site and have stayed at the hotel.

Finally, as evidenced, the online travel market is of considerable size, and continuing growth is predicted over the coming years (Gretzel *et al.*, 2007; Miguéns *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, many new avenues and opportunities are likely to arise for future research.

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