A Study on the Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) on Consumer Purchase Behavior- A Review on Tourism Industry

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Abstract

Consumers in the 21st century are technology savvy; internet users spend most of their time for product information virtually in gaining knowledge through shared opinions and experiences posted through eWOM. These information may help alter the purchase behavior of a potential consumer. The main objective of this study is to summarize the past studies about the influence of eWOM on consumer buying behavior and also discovering the gaps in the present researches. There have been a pool of knowledge available one WOM, however few studies have been conducted on eWOM in context to consumer purchase behavior in the tourism industry. The study offers a comprehensive examination of journals, articles and research papers related to eWOM, underlining the research gap and recommending new directions for future investigation into the hotel and hospitality industry.

Keywords: Internet users, Purchase Behavior, Tourism and Hotel Industry, eWOM,

Introduction

"The best ad is a good product." - Alan H. Meyer (1908 - 1976), American Aviation Pioneer

The goodness of a product or service would always be talked in the world of marketing. People rarely acquire essential, expensive or risky items on a whim, they move through a few steps, considering options and examining alternatives before a purchase. As technology savvy of this generation, internet users spend most of their time for product information and knowledge through shared opinions and experiences posted through eWOM. According to the Father of Marketing -Philip Kotler (Barich H & Kotler P 1991) "Need identification, information search, alternative evaluation, buying decision and post-purchase evaluation'' are some of the steps associated to purchasing decisions. Based on the needs, a consumer looks for information on the products they want to buy. The total number of internet users worldwide in June 2016 was 3.611 billion. Of the 4.052 billion consumers utilizing the Internet worldwide, 1,792 billion were

accounted for Asia. In particular, Vietnam ranked 15th in the world with the number of 49.063 million people (Internet World Stats, 2016). Similarly, as per 2023 statistics on global internet users, 5.30 billion are using internet globally equivalent to 65.7 percent of the world's total population (datareportal.com 2023). Have Approximately 5.35 billion people used the internet as of January 2024, making up 66.2 percent of the world's population (statista.com 2024).

With the development of internet, online reviews and feedback has gained much significance in various services from online shopping facilities, reserving hotel rooms, flight tickets, booking an adventure activity to reserving a restaurant table as per the convenience of the consumers. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) or information media over the internet has become the most preferred medium for the general population in current scenario to search for requirements, gather information, examine alternatives and make purchase choices. It has created new avenues for connection. When clients shop online, they often rely on electronic word of mouth (eWOM) for information. This novel means of exchange has become a necessity for consumer purchase (Kuan et al. 2015) .Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), in their journal on Electronic word of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: defined eWOM as a statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multiple of people and institutions via the Internet" where forums, blogs and review sites are different types of eWOM platforms. It is also defined as a written memo on the website shared by experienced consumers that has the capacity to influence the buying behavior of a consumer (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2013). Earlier study by Westbrook (1987) stated WOM as Informal exchange of communications with other customers regarding ownership, application or features of specific products and services .Nowadays, WOM exists in a different format called eWOM, which is housed in a virtual server (Minxue, et al. 2011).Recent studies have shown that e-WOM encourages consumer buying behavior making it more effective than conventional advertising media.These finding have prompted additional research and changes to numerous organizations' marketing tactics. Henceforth, the prospects of e-WOM could be extensively utilized in the tourism industry. Likewise, the effective adoption of technologies is subject to the perceived ease of use (Davis, Bagozzi, and Warshaw 1989). (Adjei et al, 2010; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012) revealed that consumers are proactive to gather significant information before buying a product. It is stated that reviews posted online are found 12 times more trustworthy by consumers as compared to advertisements made by the companies this have led to the acceptance of eWOM majorly by consumers. Acceptance of eWOM message refers to trusting the feedback and recommendations that is available in the form of comments and reviews which helps influence consumers' buying behavioral (Saremi and Montazemi, 2019). Previous study by Gangadharbatla, H. (2008) revealed that more than 90% of the respondents in the study indicated that they are engaged in more than one social networking sites.

With the emergence of various Social Networking Sites like Myspace, Youtube Instagram, Facebook etc. consumers prefer convenient and reliable methods for product information by relying on the content shared the form of videos, blogs, texts and pictures. Before purchasing tourism products like air ticket and hotel accommodation, consumers view and analyze the opinions shared by the previous guests in the form of photos or statement reviews. This helps develop destination trust and revisit intentions among the consumers (Cheung &Thandani 2012).

In an article on Facebook's Bid Ad Plan, Klaassen (2007) stated that Mark Zuckerberg, CEO facebook introduced "social ad," a concept designed to advertise local and national business like hotels, restaurants, cafes, health fitness centers etc where users can interact with different brands for reviews through peer network. Therefore this article offers a summary of literure in the field of EWOM with context to tourism and travel industry. The study offers a comprehensive examination of journals, articles and research papers related to eWOM, underlining the research gap and recommending new directions for future investigation into the hotel and hospitality industry.

Literature Review

Concepts on Word of mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

With the expansion in the digital era, the world has seen a swift from the traditional print media to online platforms. Apart from print media, there are several other platforms like television, radio and internet available to offer information to the consumers (Beneke, et al. 2016).With the increasing information and statistics offered by various types of platform it has become difficult for consumers to choose the right platform for making their travel decisions. Therefore, word of mouth (WOM) has become an important platform for the right source of information (Abalaesei & Sandhu, 2014). With the evolution of the internet services it has allowed WOM communications a space to share experiences and personal ideas. This exchange of information in an electronic mode is known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as the addition to traditional WOM in a virtual setting. Both are flexible, multi-purpose and effortlessly woven into the communication exchange. WOM, and by extension eWOM, is still considered to be the most frequently and highly regarded source of information for tourist decision making. (Tham et al. 2013).

Ishida & Siamionava, (2013) pointed out that both forms of WOM have their own differences. Firstly, Information distributed through the virtual context in eWOM causes knowledge to spread extremely quick and secondly online customer reviews are available for a longer period of time which allows for non-simultaneous communication between senders and recipients. These findings also matched with the previous studies of Dellarocas, 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; where information, speed and privacy in the communication were main factors related to Ewom. Similar to this, eWOM communication yields quantifiable results since it leaves behind lasting proof of the content delivered on digital channels. (Hung & Li, 2007; Lee et al., 2009; Yen & Tang, 2015). Despite a number of differences, eWOM communication has a significant impact on consumers since there is a wealth of information from numerous users available on internet platforms without any geographical constraints (Sun et al., 2006; Tsao et al., 2015). Thus, eWOM have eminent features as compared to WOM in determining the perception and buying behavior of a consumer.

eWOMon Tourism and Hospitality

Potential tourists consult their peers for travel related information which increases confidence in choosing a travel destination (Bickart& Schindler, 2001; Casaló et al., 2015). Several evidence

indicated that online reviews have significant impact on creating positive image of a tourist destination and revisit intentions (Govers& Go, 2004; Mridula, 2009; Quintal & Polczynski, 2010; Kim et al., 2012).Tourists may now evaluate data from different review websites and online applications to decide upon travel destination (Cantallops et al., 2018).Several eWOM media channels such as "social media websites, third-party review sites and company websites" have helped information searchers in obtaining complete and trustworthy information on various products and services accessible in the travel and tourism sector (Werenowska et al. 2020). Similar study by Cantallops & Salvi 2014, revealed that with the easy accessibility of eWOM media outlets, consumers evaluate data and choose the most appropriate tour. Word-of-mouth is an influential marketing technique for influencing prospective clients (Elwalda et al. 2016). A handful of studies noted that demographic status of the consumers such as gender have shown different buying behavior in terms of Ewom reviews and posts. (Chen et al., 2015; Slyke et al., 2010).According to social role theory, common expectations about what constitutes proper behavior for men and women are the root cause of gender inequalities in social behaviors.In context to the cyber world men and women exhibit differences on several dimensions like cultural, social &psychological factors and portray different purchase behavior (Dittmar et al, 2004). Another study by Olsen and Cox (2001) revealed that female gender are more risk-averse (less risk taking) than male gender irrespective of the same level of experience and knowledge.

Tourism products are produced and consumed simultaneously, destination marketers need to make sure that the services advertised and promoted are delivered as promised. Evidence from Ogut et al (2012) provide support that promotions through Ewom have a positive influence and recognized as a prerequisite for consumer return intentions. Prospective travelers were more inclined to enquire friends, co-workers and family members who had visited the place for information .In this regard, advertising through eWOM is established to be more reliable as compared to WOM due to its unknown nature and lack of incentives, thus creating a correlation between brand trust and eWOM (Lee et al., 2007; Long-Yi & Ching-Yuh, 2010).Marketers in tourist destination need to understand the interest for tourist revisit intention where several evidence in travel industry have shown online consumer reviews favorable when it comes to airline and hotel room booking (Vermeulen &Seegers, 2009; Ogut&Tas, 2012; Duverger, 2013).A study conducted by Zhang, Z et al, (2010)pointed out that consumer based opinions on hygiene standards, food quality, services and facilities have positive association with the online acceptance of restaurants and lodging properties whereas online product reviews have negative association in terms of revisit intention and product purchase. In contrast to findings by previous studies, eWOM have no influence on consumer buying intention by (Jalivalcand et al. 2012; Torlak et al.2014), a study was conducted by Luong, et al,(2017) to evaluate the effect of eWOM on consumers buying intention in tourism products, identified that eWOM advertisements strongly influences consumers decision when choosing tourism products. This means consumers pay attention to the comments and reviews shared for the products experienced.

In a study conducted by Vinnakota &Marwat (2017) on the influence of (eWOM) on consumer purchase intentions in the hospitality industry of Australia revealed an interesting fact that consumers have significant trust on reviews related to 4 and 5 star ratings existing on several social networking platforms for making purchase decision. The findings have supported that

information sharing, which is one of the most important factors of eWOM allows consumers to evaluate and compare the lodging properties that is suitable for selection. Besides destination tourism research has shown that Ewom communications accelerates the purchase behavior for medical tourism .For instance health data collected from Pew Research Center stated 80% of US citizens searched for information on medical aspects ,56% searched for medical treatment and 44% searched for information on health centers (Pew Research Center, 2011).Likewise, in a study conducted by Hamdani & Maulani (2018), on factors influencing consumers purchase behavior through eWOM on local culinary business in Indonesia stated that 76% of instagram followers accepted the significance of eWOM for impacting the purchase intention due to correct information and positive responsiveness .Conjecturing the current data, people around the globe are increasingly looking information from eWOM for deciding their purchase in several sectors like retail, pharmaceutical, telecommunication, banking, hospitality & tourism etc. (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010).

EWOM and Hotel Industry

With the swift development of Web 2.0 applications like Youtube (video sharing sites), Flickr (image sharing sites), Facebook and Blogs there has been a flood of bidirectional communication on tourism products and services. Online notifications, reviews, opinions and recommendations have become an indicator for trustworthy information (Cheung & Thadani 2012).Global tourism have expanded with overseas arrivals hitting a record 1.14 billion in 2014. From a tourism standpoint, eWOM looks to be the panacea for cost-effective means of engaging with potential travelers in the competitive industry (Ladhari& Michaud 2015) .Global tourism includes international and national tourism products such as hotels and restaurants, transport and communication, hospitals, theme parks like Disney land etc act as "Brand Components". Pricing, parking, food availability, directions, weather and other features are considered as "Informative Components". Previous studies indicated that online reviews have a substantial impact on the perception and buying behavior of a potential tourist destination. (Govers & Go, 2004). In the hospitality industry, infome diaries like travel agents and tour operators play a crucial role during the pre-purchase stage by facilitating information exchange through eWOM (Hidayat, R. (2015). Incase of the hotel industry, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is critical as it not only enhances the company's reputation but also helps to attract new customers (Cardona and Cantallops, 2018).

Research Methodology

Previous research encompasses the study of the phenomena related to information search, online communities, word-of-mouth, and its influence. The main database research engine that was used was (Science Direct, Emerald Insight, and Google scholar) in order to collect the related articles for the study. This study follows an inductive approach to develop an understanding of the impact of eWOM on purchase decision of the consumer in case of tourism industry. The research articles collected have been selected and analyzed so that the data is relevant to the main aim of the study. Further papers were analyzed to identify important gaps in the past studies and formulate the future perspective area of study.

Conclusion and Future Studies

Various journals and articles have been explored and reviewed in relation to eWOM and tourism industry for conceptualizing the understanding of the topic. The literature review have been categorized into three sections to emphasize the importance of eWOM for different industries. The first section help in understanding the concept of WOM and eWOM followed by review on eWOM and Tourism & Hospitality Industry with eWOM and Hotel Industry in the last section.

The result of this analysis showed that majority of the articles for the influence of eWOM on consumer purchase behavior, indicated that research variables like demographic profile, brand, trust worthiness, attitude, perception and behavior of the consumers towards eWOM played a significant role in influencing the purchase decision of the consumers.

After an extensive literature review, it is apparent that various studies have been done in the field of tourism and transport industry in context to the influence of eWOM on consumer purchase behavior. However, there are very less research for proven weight-age of eWOM solely in purchase decision for tourism product. It has been observed that there are other factors synchronous for the purchase decision in mind of the consumers like the reliability of the reviewer site, ease in user interface of the website, staunch reviewer and convenience. Further possibilities of research could be in the field of electronic word of mouth in accordance with other factors that influence the decision making process in tourism industry. Most of the publications and researches demonstrate for revisit intention, however more studies are possible in this field of eWOM and the dilemma of trustworthiness that is directly proportional to consumer experience. The study offers a comprehensive examination of journals, articles and research papers related to eWOM, underlining the research gap and recommending new directions for future investigation into the hotel and hospitality industry.

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