The influence process of electronic word-of-mouth on traveller’s visit intention: a conceptual framework

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Abstract: With the pervasion of information and communication technology (ICT), the valence of user-generated content is an increasing important antecedent affecting customer’s decision-making. The influence is especially significant in the tourism and hospitality industry due to its nature of intangible and experiential. In order to better understand the influence process of electronic word-of-mouth on travel destination decision-making, an integrated model based on the two well-tested model, elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and theory of planned behaviour (TPB), is proposed in the paper. The moderate role of cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance is taken into account in the model. Altogether nine hypotheses are given based on the research model. Implications for theory and practice of this research are discussed, and limitations and future research are also given.

Keywords: tourist decision-making; electronic word-of-mouth; eWOM; elaboration likelihood model; ELM; theory of planned behaviour; TPB; online information sources.


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1 Introduction

With the pervasion of information and communication technology (ICT) and advent of Web 2.0, the valence of traveller generated word-of-mouth on social media websites is an increasing important antecedent affecting customer’s decision-making. According to a new survey by Pew Research Centre in August 2014, 81% of online Americans indicate they are better informed about products and services today than they were five years ago.
The influence is especially significant in the tourism and hospitality industry, which offers products or services difficult to evaluate prior to their consumption and experience (Litvin et al., 2008). Tourist’s decision-making power has been strengthened enormously due to the availability of rich information about travel product through various online information sources (Berne et al., 2012). It is more realisable for tourists to make their travel plan independent of traditional travel agencies and tour operators based on various online information sources and travel services (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006). In addition, travel reviews by users, rather than commercial providers, are particular popular in travel-related information searching process. Therefore, tourists nowadays are increasingly using electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to inform themselves about travel-related services and products, for travel planning and travel related purchasing (Tham et al., 2013; Standing et al., 2014; Amaro and Duarte, 2013).

As eWOM has strongly affected tourism industry especially in tourist’s decision-making process, a considerable amount of literature has been focused on tourist’s travel destination choice, and eWOM in tourism (Gardiner et al., 2013; Mutinda and Mayaka, 2012; Cantallops and Salvi, 2014; Litvin et al., 2008; Jiang et al., 2010; Jeong and Jang, 2011). These studies can be classified into two streams; one stream focuses on exploring the factors influencing eWOM generating motivation (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Li and Liu, 2014); the other stream concentrates on the impacts of eWOM on tourist’s behaviour (Cheung et al., 2008; Verhagen et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the understanding on how eWOM influence tourists’ visit intention is still scant.

The premier object for the current research is to discover the influence routes of eWOM on individual’s decision behaviour in the context of tourism. In particular, the influence routines of eWOM on tourists’ attitude towards travel to potential destinations. This study is theoretically grounded on the combination of elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and theory of planned behaviour (TPB). Those two theories are applied to build hypotheses concerning how tourists’ decision-making are affected by eWOM towards potential vacation destination through various online information sources.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: in Section 2, literature review of prior research on eWOM in tourism and tourist decision-making is conducted. In Section 3, the theory of planed behaviour and ELM are introduced, and a combined conceptual model is proposed. In Section 4, there search model for this study is presented, and nine hypotheses are made based on the research model. At the end, implication for theory and practice of this research are discussed, and limitations and future research are also given.

2 Research background

2.1 eWOM in tourism

With the advent of Web 2.0 and the advancement of ICT, eWOM, a digital form of interpersonal influence becomes pervasive among customers (Litvin et al., 2008). eWOM is defined as all informal communications directed at consumers through internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers (Litvin et al., 2008). eWOM on travel site makes travellers better informed, and is
likely to generate persuasive effects on traveller’s decision-making and behaviour (Shih et al., 2013; Scott and Orlikowski, 2012). Especially in outbound travel context, when travellers are in a higher risk of more uncertainties. It is maintained that consumers engage in preceding consumption information searching to minimise potential risk (Gursoy and Umbreit, 2004). As a well-established field of research, customer’s information searching behaviour prior to purchase decisions is recognised as explicit and external (Jacobsen and Munar, 2012; Gursoy and McCleary, 2004).

2.2 Tourist’s decision-making in Web 2.0 era

Leisure travel decision-making has attracted lots of concentration through various perspectives in prior researches (Decrop and Snelders, 2005; Gardiner et al., 2013). The main research streams can be classified into two perspectives: the travel process decision model perspective, and tourists’ profile perspective.

Travel process-orientated perspective demonstrates that decisions of purchasing tourism services occur in stages (Smallman and Moore, 2010; Smallman et al., 2012; Walls et al., 2011; Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). Concretely information gathering stage, alternatives assessing and eliminating stage, alternative choosing stage, and finally travel undertaking stage (Mansfeld, 1992). In addition, constraints from both external and internal, for instance socio-demography, prior travel experience, etc. (Sharifpour et al., 2014), will make differences during these stages, and resulting in different decision-making. Theoretically, researches of this group tend to construct decision-making model based on several social science theory, asserting that tourism marketing and research should be based on consumer perceptions and preferences, and tourists’ actual destination choice is predicted by their intention and attitude (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989; Hsu and Huang, 2012). One of the first models out of these which has drew much attention is the general model of traveller leisure destination awareness and choice presented by Woodside and Lysonski in 1989 (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989).
Researches from visitor profile perspective insist that vacation decision-making is an ongoing process that cannot be characterised by several sequential stages, and there’ll be no end for the decision-making (Serrato et al., 2010; Decrop and Snelders, 2005). They made classification of different types of vacationers based on tourists’ lifestyle, or variation in decision-making styles. Vacationers of different types will behave differently according to their characteristics during their decision-making process, while different types of decision-making may also be influenced by opportunities, emotions, etc.

In the current study, a decision-making process model is constructed based on the travel process model (see Figure 1). Cultural background is also taken into account due to its possible influence in international travel experience (Money and Crotts, 2003). In addition, this research is contextualised in Web 2.0 era, which is characterised with social media communication applications and user-generated content. Specifically, five main stages identified during a whole outbound travel experience according to the travel process, as shown in Figure 1. Travellers search travel information through various online information channels, including both professional sources and unprofessional sources. Among these various online information sources, traveller generated contents on social media websites were proved to be the most popular information sources (Leung et al., 2013). Then, in decision progress, they decide where to go, how to go, including destination decision, travel style decision and booking style decision. It is suggested that user-generated content on social media influenced travellers destination awareness increasingly and subsequent destination decision (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009). After all these decisions, they will purchase all or part of the whole travel related product or services in advance through online booking websites. In this stage, eWOM on social media websites are playing an increasingly important role in influencing travellers purchasing behaviour. During their travel experience, they could perceive a real image about destination. eWOM on social media websites is now capable of providing real time information to travel customers. This is referred as during-trip phase of traveller’s travel planning process. At last, various after travel behaviour occurs, like sharing travel experience online, recommend the destination to their familiars or not, revisit the attraction or not.

3 Theoretical foundation

This current research is based on well tested theories asserting that human behaviour is determined by behaviour intention. Determinant of the individuals’ behaviour intention are their attitude toward performing the behaviour, while attitude can be influenced through both central route and peripheral cues (Ajzen, 1991; Petty et al., 1983; Sparks and Pan, 2009; Sanfordsource, 2006).

3.1 Theory of planned behaviour

TPB is one of the most researched theories, which enjoys high reputation in the field of psychology, to invest the relationship between motivation and behaviour extended from the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen, 1991). In this model, behaviour is the final dependent determined by behaviour intention. Factors of social and psychological are considered in consumers’ decision-making process, they are variables of subjective norm, and attitude toward the behaviour in the model (see Figure 2). The most basic doctrines in
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This model holds that, intentions to perform different kinds of behaviours can be predicted from attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control with a relatively high accuracy. In addition, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control are shown to be related to sets of relevant beliefs about the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

Figure 2 Theory of planned behaviour

TPB is proved to be a validate model in the context of destination-decision-making. Several previous studies applied TPB in the field of tourism to explore the relationship between tourists’ attitude and behaviour intention, in order to predict tourists’ actual behaviour (Chien et al., 2012; Hsu and Huang, 2012; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012).

The limitation of TPB for understanding the influence of eWOM on their destination decision-making behaviour is that, while it illustrates the relationships of attitude, behaviour intention, and behaviour, it does not consider how the way information sources perceived by tourists works in the most initial attitude formation stage. Potential tourists in nowadays information era are exposed to rich of information sources via variable channels, even can be described with overlapping information, with the pervasion of information and communication technologies. Information searching is the first stage during a tourist’s travel decision (see Figure 1). The image about an unknown destination is formed after that. A dilemma will occur in choosing between safety and new, unique and novel experience that will be provided (Tasci and Boylu, 2010). The problem is how the influence process for an attitude formation after the acquirement of information about the chosen destination. To supplement TPB in this way, we draw on the ELM.

3.2 Elaboration likelihood model

ELM is a dual-process persuasive theory from social psychology, and widely used in social and consumer psychology (Petty et al., 1983; Petty and Wegener, 1999). It views attitude change in two distinct routes: central route and peripheral cue.

Central route views attitude change as a result from “a person’s diligent consideration of information she/he feels is central to the true merits of a particular attitudinal position”, while peripheral route to attitude change refers to “a person may accept an advocacy simply because it was presented during a pleasant lunch or because the source
is an expert” (Petty et al., 1983). In the central route, a person scrutinises more carefully on the related arguments, both pros and cons. After a critical consideration, together with information assessing and elimination, a judgment related to behaviour will be formed. As a result, attitude formed in this central route would be persistent after an in-depth scrutinise.

In contrast, in a peripheral route, a relatively less cognitive effort is needed, where a person simply relies on cues regarding the target behaviour, such as prior users, prior related personal experience, and endorsement from experts or credibility. The central route processes message-related arguments, while the peripheral route processes cues (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006). As argued by Bhattacherjee and Sanford (2006), ELM does not mean that people influenced through different routes resulted in different outcomes. Different individuals may come to the same decision through two different routes, and the influence process of the same individual may vary according to time and technology. Accordingly, attitude formed in peripheral route will be less persistent compared to central route.

The term ‘elaboration’ is used to suggest that people add something of their own to the specific information provided in the communication (Petty and Wegener, 1999; Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006). It is suggested that people with high elaboration likelihood state are more likely to engage in careful scrutinisation, and tend to be more persuaded by argument quality then by peripheral cues. Contrarily, those in low elaboration likelihood will be in lower motivation to think carefully, and then tend to be motivated by peripheral cues. As shown in Figure 3:

**Figure 3** Elaboration likelihood model

3.3 **Combination of TPB and ELM**

Two variables emerging from this model are the central route of augment quality and peripheral route of cues. Motivation and ability discussed in the ELM are intention and behavioural control in TPB respectively (Ajzen, 1991). Specifically, in TPB, Ajzen (1991) assumes that a person’s likelihood of behavioural achievement can be dictated to some extent by the resources available to a person, which is the variable of perceived behavioural control. Therefore, the elaboration likelihood is explained with different level
of perceived behavioural control. If people believe they have little control over performing the potential behaviour because lack of requisite resources, their likelihood will be low, and vice versa (Madden et al., 1992). Therefore, the combined model of TPB and ELM for the current research is shown as follows, Figure 4:

Figure 4  The combination of TPB and ELM

4  Research model and hypotheses

The integrated model is constructed based on TPB and ELM, which will be the basis of our conceptual model. ELM demonstrates a dual-route, multi-process model in which persuasive message works. The cause for two different routes is individual’s involvement level, i.e., people of high involvement tend to central route of argument quality, which has been empirically tested in prior research (Ho and Bodoff, 2014; Tang et al., 2012). Perceived behavioural control as related to potential destination expresses tourists’ confidence to their ability to perform the behaviour (Madden et al., 1992), which is individual’s ability as discussed in the ELM. Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are made as follows:

H1  Tourist with higher perceived behavioural control will concentrate more on the argument quality of available eWOM about potential destination.

H2  Tourist with lower perceived behavioural control will refer to peripheral cues of eWOM about destination.

In addition, argument quality and peripheral cues are the two routes to cause attitude change as explained in ELM. As in the context of tourism, the argument quality refers to the detail information and destination related content included in eWOM, while the peripheral cues refer to the channel where eWOM published on, the eWOM sharer’s information or the credibility of the eWOM. Therefore we propose that tourist attitude toward the destination will be influenced by argument quality and peripheral cues of eWOM.
H3 Argument quality of eWOM will influence tourist attitude toward travel destination.

H4 Peripheral cues of eWOM will influence tourist attitude toward travel destination.

The relationships among attitude, behaviour intention and actual behaviour are the most premier tenets in TPB. Evidence concerning the relationship between attitude and intention, intention and actual behaviour can be collected with respect to many different types of behaviour context (You et al., 2004; Chennamaneni et al., 2012), and also in the context of tourism (Wang and Ritchie, 2013, 2012; Song et al., 2014; Quintal et al., 2010; Lam and Hsu, 2006). In the context of tourism, increasingly amount of travellers used the internet as travel planning resource. A number of scholars have coined the importance of eWOM in travel planning process (Cox et al., 2009; Lo et al., 2011; Yoo and Gretzel, 2010). EWOM produced on social media channels will influence traveller’s image of destination, and subsequently influence their destination choice. Hypotheses 6 to 9 are proposed based on the TPB.

H5 Tourists’ subjective norms positively affect their attitude to travel.

H6 Travel intention will be positively influenced by subjective norm.

H7 Attitude towards travel to the destination will positively affect visit intention.

H8 Travel intention positively affects actual travel behaviour.

Despite that more information on destination available now through various information channels, the nature intangible and experiential of tourism greatly increase uncertainty, especially those without prior experience to the same destination. Therefore, cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance relates to the level of stress in a society in face of an unknown future (Hofstede, 1984). Culture is the programming of mind distinguishing members from different groups or categories of people, and it is a collective phenomenon (Hofstede, 2011). Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which people feel uncomfortable with uncertain, unknown, or unstructured situations (Hofstede, 1984). Tourist from high uncertainty avoidance cultures will perceive higher safety incidents, and a negative attitude to visit the destination will form. Uncertainty avoidance has been successfully tested in the context of tourism (Min, 2007; Money and Crotts, 2003). For instance, the effect of uncertainty avoidance on international tourists’ behaviour in information searching, planning and purchasing to categorise tourists (Money and Crotts, 2003), tourists’ behaviour towards disasters (Min, 2007), international visitors’ culinary choices (Tse and Crotts, 2005). Drawing from this empirical conclusion, we propose that people from high uncertainty avoidance culture will be more likely to be persuaded by safety related information in a central route and have a negative attitude toward travelling to the potential destination, whilst they will be easily to have negative an intention to experience the destination with unsafety perceptions.

H9 Tourist from high uncertainty avoidance culture will negatively moderate the relationship between travel attitude and travel intention.

The final conceptual framework for this paper and hypotheses are presented in the Figure 5. The four determinants in dashed box are the image perception toward travel destination. Tourists’ initial image of travel destination is the result of available
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5 Contribution and discussion

This research provides a synthesised theoretical framework based on two well-known models, which completes each other in a naturally manner. Each model includes the areas of undeveloped for each other. The explanation of attitude from TPB is extended based on the dual-process model ELM. Whilst, the interpersonal communication puzzle is explored further by extending attitude change to individual’s behaviour. This model is aimed to explore the influence process of one of the most influential information sources, eWOM, on vacation traveller’s decision-making behaviour. Travel destination perception comes from different types of online information sources, and eWOM are playing an increasingly important role as information sources for travellers. As revealed in previous study, social media websites are ubiquitous in online travel information search no matter what search keywords a traveller uses. Some travel specific social media sites such as TripAdvisor, VirtualTourist are likely to evolve into primary online information sources (Ulrike, 2009). Whereas, how eWOM influence tourists’ behaviour remains uncovered. Our research contributes a predictive model of behaviour in the context of tourism. Travellers with different type of culture background might be influenced by travel related eWOM through different information components through different persuasive routes. The persuasive routes may also be moderated by perceived behaviour control. In addition, the moderate role of culture dimensions of uncertainty avoidance is also taken into consideration in this model to predict tourist visit behaviour.

This research makes sense in tourism industry for implications on better understanding how eWOM influence tourist decision-making. It is indicated in prior research that understanding the components of a decision strategy will assist in building
systems to support particular decision tasks (Johnson and Payne, 1985). With the rising popularity of social media websites that contain traveller generated contents, destination management organisations have recognised the paramount importance of social media especially traveller-generated content in the travel planning process. The research model proposed in could help tourism stakeholders to gain further insight in tourist segmentation, and how to inform tourist with different cultural dimensions and different perceived behavioural control with customised information. More effective marketing strategy for destination managers and better destination manage policy could be constructed on the basis of testing the hypotheses proposed in the paper.

6 Limitations and future research

As eWOM on social media appears to be an increasingly persuasive information source which travellers consider as an important part during their information searching and decision-making phase. The integration of the two well-tested theory of TPB and ELM enables researches in both IS field and tourism to have a full schematic of the persuasive process of online information sources to final decision-making. While the paper proposed a theoretical conception model and hypotheses, but the empirical validation of the hypotheses need to be tested in future research. In addition, to better understand the influence of eWOM on customers, argument quality and peripheral cue can be decomposed in future research.

References


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