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DOES THE COMPLEXITY OF A TRAVEL WEBSITE AFFECT CONSUMERS' WILLINGNESS TO WRITE A RECOMMENDATION?

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Abstract

Paid promotions have become less significant for modern travelers due to the high risk involved in the decision-making process. Instead, non-commercial and limitless Internet recommendations (electronic word of mouth - eWOM) are considered as crucial sources of information. Therefore, the subject of this paper is the eWOM recommendation system, with a particular emphasis on travel websites. Over 30% of Internet users have rated products and/or services at least once through the network. However, very little is known about what influences travelers to share their experiences, beyond their concern for others and desire for enjoyment/positive self-enhancement. To analyze the influence of travel website complexity (presence of text, ease of use, and updated content) on consumer behavior, Pearson's Correlation test is used. The analysis results indicate that attitude toward the travel website has a positive effect on the consumers' willingness to write a recommendation. The main findings suggest how to effectively design engaging travel websites that can compete successfully in a highly competitive information environment.

Key Words: *recommendations, eWOM, consumer behavior, travel website, tourism*

JEL classification: *M31, Z32*

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Introduction

The tourism sector has been experiencing a dramatic transformation as a result of the Internet. Nearly 95% of Internet users have searched for travel-related information on the World Wide Web (WWW), and 93% visited a travel website at least once (Hyman & Luna-Nevarez, 2012). In other words, the Internet has proved to be an important tool in tourism marketing and is still growing in popularity (Tsang et al., 2010). Thus, many studies have been conducted since the beginning of the twenty-first century trying to understand consumer behavior concerning information technology in tourism (Xiang et al., 2015). However, there is still a literature gap in line with constantly shifting consumer behavior during the process of making decision. The authors Dwityas & Briandana (2017) have stated that consumers make decisions in phases: pre-travel, during a travel, and post-travel. In the pre-travel phase, consumers are seeking for travel information to minimize a potential risk. Vice versa, in the post-travel phase they may share information to show their experiences (Wang et al., 2022). Hence, consumers search and read travel-related information on the Internet, but also write and post. Customer-generated content appears in a wide range of media forms, yet one of the most accessible is content presented as reviews and online recommendations. Over 30% of Internet users have rated products and/or services at least once through the network (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Therefore, the subject of this paper is the electronic word of mouth system - eWOM, particularly emphasizing travel websites.

Only a few research studies have been examining what impacts consumers' willingness to write a travel recommendation in the context of eWOM communication. The authors Yoo & Gretzel (2008) have analyzed 'the influence of concerns for other consumers, helping the company, venting negative feelings, and collective power enjoyment/positive self-enhancement'. The authors Hussain et al. (2020) have explored 'how social ties influence the motivational participation of tourists'. The authors Fine et al. (2017) have investigated 'the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, service quality, and age on consumers' eWOM behavior'. Nevertheless, relatively little has been explored about the travel websites influence, even though there has been a sharp increase in the total amount of websites over the past decade (Fu Tsang et al., 2010). Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the influence of travel website complexity (presence of text, ease of use, and updated content) on consumer

behavior. Based on the literature overview and research objectives, the following hypotheses were set:

- H₁: Updated content has a positive effect on the consumers' attitude toward the travel website.
- H₂: Ease of use has a positive effect on the consumers' attitude toward the travel website.
- H₃: The presence of text has a positive effect on the consumers' attitude toward the travel website.
- H₄: Attitude toward the travel website has a positive effect on the consumers' willingness to write a recommendation.

In line with that, the paper starts with an introduction chapter providing the subject, aim, and research contribution. The second chapter gives an overview of the theoretical background, while the following chapters focus on empirical research and the research findings. The concluding section presents both limitations and recommendations for additional studies.

Literature review

Travel-related consumer behavior has been fundamentally changed by the Internet (Choi et al., 2007), meaning the crucial travelers' information source word of mouth system - WOM has become digital (Kanten et al., 2013). The authors Jalilvand et al. (2011) define the electronic word of mouth system - eWOM as a positive or negative online comment uploaded by potential, existing, or previous consumers about a company, product, or service. In contrast to traditional WOM, eWOM allows Internet users to gather information from a large number of anonymous worldwide users (Park & Lee, 2009). The authors Aych et al. (2013) describe Internet platforms as „coffee shops” since the consumers can meet and discuss the others who have similar interests. Thus, the Internet's increasing popularity resulted in plentiful user-generated content (UGC) travel websites and travel communities. Travelers are especially driven by UGC, since the travel products are not tangible and cannot be evaluated until the purchase, making the decision-making process highly risky and interpersonal influence quite important (Burgess et al., 2011). According to the authors Zhang et al. (2009), travelers may minimize perceived decision-making risk by reading other consumers' recommendations based on experiences. In the context of the Internet, information exchanges arise when travelers submit content to express their opinions and experiences regarding products they have purchased (Burgess et al., 2011). Travelers often share photos, videos, and

comments on travel websites and travel communities, making eWOM a powerful weapon in tourism marketing (Leung et al., 2013). Despite being recognized as an essential promotional tool, UGC travel websites and travel communities have not received sufficient attention in analyzing consumers' attitudes (Jiménez-Barreto & Campo-Martínez, 2018). The authors Elsharnouby & Mahrous (2015) defined consumers' attitudes toward a website as dispositions to respond unfavorably or favorably to it. This paper provides the insights of how travel website complexity (presence of text, ease of use, and updated content) impacts the consumers' attitudes toward a website and consumers' willingness to write a recommendation. The presence of text, i.e. website content, is defined as the information presented on the travel website (Tang et al., 2012). In other words, the main reason consumers use travel websites is to seek information, and plan a trip (Yeon Song & Wen, 2021). By successfully gathering valuable information, consumers may have more positive attitudes toward a website and become more satisfied (Carlson & O'Cass, 2010). Otherwise, if travel websites do not present information consumers need, they may have more negative attitudes toward a website and become more dissatisfied looking somewhere else for needed information (Bai et al., 2008). According to the authors Everard & Galletta (2005), a website's incompleteness is a factor that may threaten consumers' confidence. In that sense, a website may have „coming soon“ pages, non-loading photos, or outdated content or links that are considered incomplete. Thus, visitors are likely going to stop visiting a stale website. The ease of use is defined as simple-to-use navigation of the content layout. Easy-to-navigate websites minimize visitors' efforts and provide rapid access to the needed information (Ab Hamid et al., 2011). Therefore, website designers should aim to develop travel websites both helpful and user-friendly (Alcántara-Pilar & García, 2015). A simple and effective graphical navigation system (search tools, ease of navigation, speed in browsing, pages' layout, links among pages, etc.) helps users feel „at home“, increasing the chances of returning to the website (Romanazzi et al., 2011). Perceived usefulness refers to how much website users believe an IT system is going to help them accomplish their tasks more efficiently (Kim et al., 2016). Authors Luna-Nevarez & Hyman (2012) state how important it is to evoke an enjoyable impression, especially if it is the first impression, since the visitors may easily exit the website through a one-time click. In brief, the way a website is navigated may have a direct negative or positive impact on travelers' behavior while arranging a trip (Romanazzi et al., 2011). The authors Nilashi et al. (2022) have defined 'the number of eWOM presented for a particular

item or service, pictures that are posted from an external source within the eWOM, and source credibility’ as the part of the updated content (p. 3). The eWOM credibility is identified as the level to which the consumer recognizes the recommendation as true (Cheung et al., 2009). In a credibility context, traditional WOM and eWOM differ significantly since the eWOM recommendations can be made by unknown individuals (Bronner & De Hoog, 2011). As a result, many websites use security features like secure servers, third-party agencies, and electronic certificates (Ab Hamid et al., 2011).

Methodology

The data was collected on the territory of the Republic of Serbia in the period from July to September 2022. In line with the post COVID-19 period, an online questionnaire was conducted on social media platforms Facebook and LinkedIn. Also, the data was collected digitally using a „snowball sample“ method due to the modern lifestyle of tourists and the growing popularity of social networks. To ensure the accuracy of the data, the respondents were required to have used the travel website within the past two years (during the COVID-19 pandemic period). The final sample is composed of 268 respondents who use travel websites (N=268). The respondents filled in a survey that had been made up of two sections. The first section of the survey contained socio-demographic questions, whose results give valuable insights into consumers' socio-demographic profiles. Table 1 gives the presentation of the consumers' genders, age groups, education levels, employment status, etc.

Table 1: *Socio-demographic structure of the participants (N = 268)*

Feature:	Item:	Frequency:	Percentage:
Gender:	Female	164	61.19
	Male	104	38.81
Age:	18 - 20	11	4.10
	21 - 30	167	62.31
	31 - 40	48	17.91
	41 - 50	33	12.31
	50+	9	3.36
Education level:	Secondary school diploma	65	24.25
	Bachelor's degree	118	44.03
	Master's degree	62	23.13
	Ph.D.	23	8.58

Employment status:	Student	59	22.01
	Employed	176	65.67
	Unemployed	16	5.97
	Retired	2	0.75
	Employer	15	5.60
Marital status:	Married	63	23.51
	Single	205	76.49
Mode of travel:	Solo	8	2.99
	Friends	101	37.69
	Family	70	26.12
	Partner	89	33.21
Frequency:	Once a year	74	27.61
	Twice a year	77	28.73
	Several times a year	117	43.66
Usage of travelers' website:	0-2 years	128	47.76
	3-6 years	100	37.31
	More than 6 years	40	14.93

Source: *The authors' research*

The most dominating profile was female consumers with the following characteristics: from the 21 - 30 age group, employed, with a bachelor's degree, single, who travel with friends several times a year, and who use travel websites 0-2 years.

The second section of the survey contained statements related to online recommendations and the 5-point Likert scale, as it is considered one of the most fundamental tools for marketing research. The statements were created by Nilashi et al. (2022) and modified by the authors taking into account the aim of the research. The paper presents a part of the research testing correlations of the consumers' willingness to write a recommendation and several variables related to attitude toward the travel website, presented in Table 2.

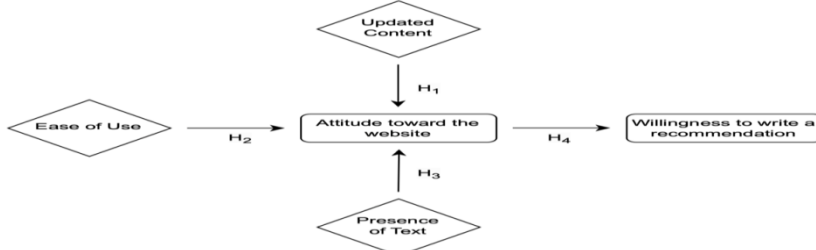
Table 2: *Survey items significant for the paper*

Survey items:	
'The number of eWOM presented for a particular item or service.'	Updated Content 1
'The evaluation of the customer to the believability of a source of the eWOM.'	Updated Content 2
'The representations of items as pictures that are posted from an external source within the eWOM.'	Updated Content 3
'The easiness of finding reviews on the website.'	Ease of Use 1

‘The easiness of posting reviews on the website.’	Ease of Use 2
‘Presenting tourist reviews in a clear way.’	Presence of Text 1
‘The easiness of the textual content of a specific eWOM for readers to comprehend.’	Presence of Text 2

Source: *The authors’ research based on the survey created by Nilashi et al. (2022). Following the theoretical background in the second part of the paper, a research model consisting of primary variables and hypotheses was established.*

Illustration 1: *Research framework*

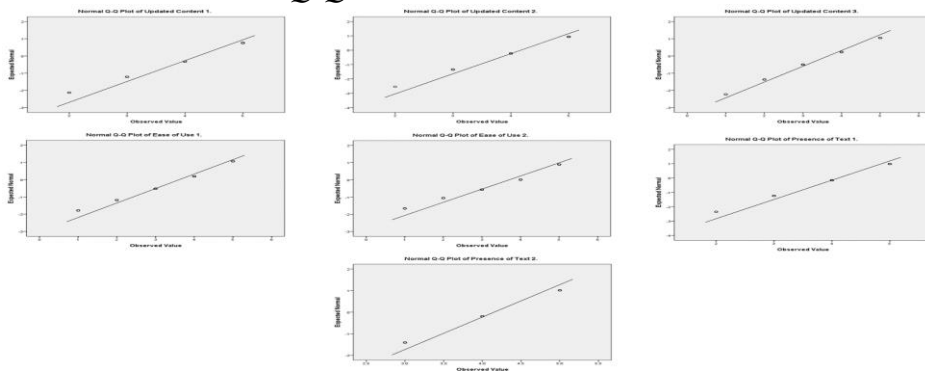


Source: *The authors’ research*

To further examine if the complexity of a travel website affects consumers' willingness to write a recommendation, the significant variables were processed using a statistical software platform IBM SPSS Statistics.

Results and discussion

Illustration 2: *Normal Q-Q Plots*



Source: *The authors’ research*

The hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H4 were tested through Pearson's Correlation test, with previously tested assumption of normality. Illustration 2 presents Q-Q plot for each variable, confirming the normal distribution since the data points are close to the diagonal line.

The results of Pearson's Correlation test are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *Pearson's Correlation test results*

Attitude toward the travel website				
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	N	Correlation
Updated Content 1	.27**	.001	268	Positive Significant relationships between variables
Updated Content 2	.34**			
Updated Content 3	.18**	.002		
Ease of Use 1	.23**			
Ease of Use 2	.29**			
Presence of Text 1	.33**			
Presence of Text 2	.26**			
Willingness to write a recommendation	.51**	.001	268	Positive Significant relationship between variables

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: *The authors' research*

All the variables have statistically significant relationships, given the fact that p is < 0.001 and 0.002 , which is lower than the significance limit, i.e., $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed). The relationships are characterized by low intensity, i.e., intensity in the set $0.1 - 0.3$ (coefficient r) between attitude toward the travel website and updated content 1 and 3, ease of use 1 and 2, and presence of text 2. The relationships are characterized by medium intensity, i.e., intensity in the set $0.3 - 0.5$ (coefficient r) between attitude toward the travel website and updated content 2, and presence of text 1. Finally, the relationship is characterized by high intensity, i.e., intensity > 0.5 (coefficient r) between attitude toward the travel website and willingness to write a recommendation. The positive sign indicates that the increase of one of the variables is going to affect the increase of the other. In other words, if the attitude toward the travel website is positive, it is more likely that tourist consumers are going to write a recommendation. Based on the research findings, the previously established hypotheses H₁, H₂, H₃, and H₄ have been confirmed.

Conclusion

In a modern environment, consumers often share their thoughts and experiences on user-generated content travel websites and travel communities. The majority of research studies (Bronner & De Hoog, 2011, King et al., 2014, Yen & Tang, 2015) have tested consumers' motives to engage in eWOM in the context of consumer psychographics, self-enhancement, social, functional, quality assurance, economic, entertainment, altruistic and product-related motives. Only a few research studies have been examining what impacts consumers' willingness to write a travel recommendation in the context of travel website complexity. In line with that, the subject of this paper is the electronic word of mouth system - eWOM, particularly emphasizing on travel websites. Based on the research findings, the previously established research hypotheses H₁ (updated content has a positive effect on the consumers' attitude toward the travel website), H₂ (ease of use has a positive effect on the consumers' attitude toward the travel website), H₃ (the presence of text has a positive effect on the consumers' attitude toward the travel website), and H₄ (attitude toward the travel website has a positive effect on the consumers' willingness to write a recommendation) have been confirmed. Similar results were presented by the authors Jiménez-Barreto & Campo-Martínez (2018), whose findings have confirmed 'the positive correlation between attitudes toward the website, website quality, and willingness to participate in online co-creation experiences'. The author Loureiro (2015) confirmed that the 'attitude towards travel websites has a positive effect on the intention to visit and leave a recommendation'. Also, the authors Chung et al. (2015) have confirmed 'the positive relationship between the intention to use the website, website quality, and the intention to visit the destination'.

In brief, this research study fully supports that high-quality websites are essential because more and more travelers nowadays do online search for information (Dickinger & Stangl, 2013). However, this study has a limitation of quite a small number of respondents, meaning future research should be expanded with a wider range of respondents in the database. The second limitation of this study refers to narrowed research objectives, i.e. survey items, while the third limitation pertains to the location of the respondents. The conducted survey referenced the COVID-19 period in the Republic of Serbia, creating an assumption that international travelers might have different behaviors in the tourism sector

since countries had established different travel restrictions during the pandemic. Future research should be expanded with more statements related to online recommendations and travel websites and respondents with more different socio-demographic characteristics. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the willingness of different groups of consumers to write a recommendation. Additionally, it would minimize the research gap that has been noticed in domestic and foreign literature. Despite the limitations, the research findings can make an important contribution providing unique insights into a part of travelers' behavior in the Republic of Serbia. Comprehending the factors that impact consumers in eWOM participation can help organizations understand their target groups and leverage their feedback regarding travel websites. Considering the research findings, tourism marketers can also understand how to design engaging travel websites that can successfully compete in the competitive information space.

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