

Full Length Research Paper

The influence of online word of mouth communications on tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations and travel intention: Evidence from Iran

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Accepted 15 June, 2012

The purpose of this paper is to examine the theoretical and empirical evidence on the causal relationships among online word of mouth (WOM), tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations, and travel intention. Questionnaires were distributed to international tourists in Isfahan through a nonprobability convenience sampling approach. Respondents were selected at different tourist attractions of Isfahan. Reliability and validity of the measurement scale were established through average variance extracted (AVE), Cronbach's alpha analyses, and intercorrelation analyses. A structural equation model (SEM) test with maximum likelihood estimation was performed to test the relationship among online word of mouth, tourists' attitudes, and travel intention using 189 participants. Empirical results from the structural model suggest that online word of mouth communications positively influence tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations and travel intention. In addition, tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations are significantly associated with intention to travel. Convenience sampling method restricts the representativeness of results across all international tourists. Future studies can examine the influence of culture, national and multiculturalism on using electronic word of mouth (eWOM). This study can also be replicated with larger sample sizes.

Key words: Online word of mouth communications, tourists' attitude, travel intention, Islamic destination, Isfahan.

INTRODUCTION

Word of mouth (WOM) is communication about products and services between people who are perceived to be independent of the company providing the product or service. This informal communication is among people who have little commercial vested interest in persuading someone else to use the product and therefore no particular incentive to distort the truth in favor of the product or service (Silverman, 2001: 25). WOM is acknowledged to play a considerable role in influencing and forming consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions

(Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Sen and Lerman, 2007; Smith and Vogt, 1995; Xia and Bechwati, 2008). With the spread of the internet, virtual interactions among tourists have become commonplace, which has led some tourism researchers to point out that online WOM plays an important role in the acquisition and retention of tourists in the e-commerce era (Litvin et al., 2008; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). For example, Compete (2007) found one-third of travel purchasers visit message boards, forum, or online community before their online travel purchasing because they believe online reviews help in making purchase decisions. Forrester Research (2006) estimated that 34.7% of total online spending is related to travel, and a recent survey indicated that more than 74%

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of travelers use comments of other consumers as reliable information source when planning trips for pleasure (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). In total, online reviews influence more than US\$10 billion in online travel purchases every year (Compete, 2007). Previous studies suggested that influence of user reviews is particularly significant for experience goods (Klein, 1998), as their quality is often unknown before consumption (Nelson, 1970) and consumers have to rely on WOM and online reviews to make inferences about such goods. In fact, a large number of tourists utilize the internet and online resources for their information needs (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004). To bridge the gap in the online WOM and attitude literature in the context of tourism industry, the main purpose of this study was to examine the theoretical and empirical evidence on the causal relationships among online WOM, tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations, and travel intention. The rest of the current study is organized as follows. The literature, including theoretical support for study hypotheses, is reviewed and discussed in the next section. Then, methodology and results are presented. Finally, the implications and limitations of the current study findings and some directions for future study are discussed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Tourism industry in Iran

The country of Iran, known as Persia until 1935, described by Baum and O'Gorman (2010: 1) as a 'combination of Persia and Islam', has its roots firmly embedded in over 5000 years of civilization. However, it was also one of the first countries to be occupied by the Islamic armies coming out of Arabia in the seventh century. In spite of this occupation, Iran has managed to hold on to its distinctive culture, for example, retaining its own language and attaching itself to the Shia interpretation of Islam (U.S. Department of State, 2005). The countries that are identified as being in the Middle East are fluid, and it often depends on the purpose at hand (Alavi and Yasin, 2000). Iran is neither an Arab country, nor one, according to the definition of the UNWTO (The World Tourism Organization), that resides in the Middle East, and yet it is often perceived otherwise. Its location as a land bridge between Asia Minor and Asia made it a natural transit route before air transport for world travelers for trade, religious endeavours or leisure. The country's environmental assets and exotic culture, combined with a versatile climate and major heritage assets, provide it with a sound platform from which to build a diverse, unique and dynamic tourism industry.

In spite of the fact that Iran ranked in the top 10 countries with respect to its ancient and historical sites, experts believe that its coastal areas, mountains, deserts and rivers have remained untapped because the state

has either ignored or given too little attention to the tourism industry.

Isfahan as tourism destination in Iran

Isfahan is counted as the third largest city of Iran. This city can be sited along the lush plain of the River of Zayandeh. It is located at the foothills of the Zagros Mountains. It is because of the favorable climate that large number of visitors from all over the world flocks to this destination. Isfahan boasts of its Islamic architectural brilliance. We can find many stunning avenues, covered bridges, grand palaces, magnificent mosques and towering minarets. It captures the true spirit of the Islamic country of Iran.

The tourist attractions in Isfahan uphold the rich cultural heritage of the country. Some of the major Isfahan tourist attractions include the following: Naghshe Jahan Square (or Imam Square), the Ali Qapu Palace, Si-o-Se-Pol Bridge, Grand Bazaar, Meydan Square, Shahshashan Square, Talar Ashraf, Chehel Sotoun, Shah Mosque, Friday Mosque, Esfahan Jame and Various other places of interest (Tourism Bureau of Isfahan, 2012).

Online word of mouth communications in tourism industry

The importance of WOM on business has been widely discussed and researched, particularly since the worldwide adoption of internet technologies which has revolutionized the distribution and influence of WOM (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Stokes and Lomax, 2002). Through the internet, individuals can make their ideas and opinions more easily accessible to other internet users (Dellarocas, 2003). Online user-generated reviews about travel destinations, hotels, and tourism services are important sources of information for travelers (Pan et al., 2007), with reports indicating that each year hundreds of millions of potential visitors consult online reviews (Tripadvisor.com., 2006). Among these potential visitors, 84% are affected by reviews when making their travel reservations (Travelindustrywire.com, 2007). Goldenberg et al. (2001) stressed that consumer decision-making processes are strongly influenced by WOM from other consumers. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) further found that reviews provided by other travelers are often perceived by readers to be more up-to-date, enjoyable, and reliable than information provided by travel service providers. Dellarocas (2003) indicated that online WOM can have important implications for managers in terms of brand building, product development, and quality assurance. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) also revealed that positive online reviews improve the perception of hotels among potential consumers. Litvin et al. (2008) described online interpersonal influence, or eWOM, as a potentially cost-effective means for marketing hospitality and

tourism, and discussed some of the nascent technological and ethical issues facing marketers as they seek to harness emerging eWOM technologies. They defined eWOM “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.” This includes communication between producers and consumers as well as those between consumers themselves—both integral parts of the WOM flow, and both distinctly differentiated from communications through mass media (Litvin et al., 2008). eWOM is considered an important information source influencing tourists’ travel intention and choice of destination (Yun and Good, 2007; Soderlund and Rosengren, 2007; Ying and Chung, 2007; Grewal et al., 2003). Findings of recent studies show different effects of online reviews on the product/service sales. For instance, Chevlier and Mayzlin (2006) and Ye et al. (2011) also indicated that online reviews have a significant impact on online sales. Since online traveler reviews are important sources of information to both travelers and tourism firms, researchers have attempted to analyze and understand online traveler reviews by sophisticated technologies (Govers and Go, 2005; Ye et al., 2009a, b; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). Zhou and Lai (2009) studied how online information influence tourism destination choice. They found that the volume of online reviews and the tourists’ blogs correlate significantly with the actual tourist reception population, but comments grades and the volume of travel consultation do not correlated significantly with tourist reception population. Park and Gretzel (2007) also investigated success factors for destination marketing web sites using a qualitative meta-analysis. They proposed a unified framework of commonly used Web site success factors which emerged from the analysis and included nine factors: information quality, ease of use, responsiveness, security/privacy, visual appearance, trust, interactivity, personalization, and fulfillment. There have existed much opinion regarding the power of eWOM, and most prior literature on this topic is survey based in which respondents were asked to report the impact of online reviews on their travel-related decisions (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). For example, Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) conducted an experimental study among 168 participants to determine the impact of online reviews on the attitudes of travelers to hotels, and revealed that exposure to online reviews enhance the awareness of hotels and positive reviews can improve the attitudes of travelers toward hotels. Castaneda et al. (2009) showed the importance of tourists’ attitude towards the web site and tourists’ attitude towards the internet in explaining attitude towards the brand and consumer behaviour. Dennis et al. (2009) developed a conceptual model to explain e-consumer behaviour. In their model, e-consumer intention to purchase from an e-retailer is positively influenced by positive attitudes towards the e-retailer. We thus propose the following:

hypotheses on the basis of literature:

H₁. Electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant impact on tourists’ attitudes toward Iran.

H₂. Electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant impact on intention to travel.

Attitudes toward destination

Attitude, which is a relatively permanent and stable evaluative summary about an item, is an important psychological construct because it influences and predicts many behaviors (Kraus, 1995). Attitude toward a behavior can be defined as “the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question” (Ajzen, 1991: 188). In general, the more favorable the attitude toward the behavior, the stronger will be an individual’s intention to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 2001). In our case, the target behavior is the intention to travel, and the attitude is that toward destination. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis on the basis of these findings:

H₃. Tourists’ attitudes toward Iran have a positive and significant impact on intention to travel (Figure 1).

METHODOLOGY

Sample design and data collection

The empirical study was carried out in Isfahan, an attractive tourism destination in Iran. The target population for the study was international visitors who travel for tourism or other purposes. Since accurate data of the size and location of this population was not available, probabilistic sampling techniques could not be used. Sample selection was as a result of the convenience method. International visitors were selected at different locations including Naghshe Jahan Square, Atashgah, Hasht Behesht, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Menar Jonban, Thirty three Bridges, and Ali-Qapu. These locations were chosen based on their popularity as tourist attractions in Isfahan.

As to size, although initially 205 questionnaires were collected, some had to be rejected because they were not correctly filled, finally resulting in a sample of 189 valid respondents. Data was collected during the month of January 2012. The questionnaire was administered personally to each respondent. Of the satisfactorily completed questionnaires, 59.8% of the sample was male respondents while 40.2% of the sample represented female respondents. The sample profile is displayed in Table 1. With regards to education level, 11.6% of the respondents were in primary school; 28% of the respondents were in secondary school while 60.4% of the respondents were in university. Further, the research project was conducted across various nationalities with the most dominant nationalities being American and Canadian (33.3% of the sample). There were more individuals who did not have previous experience of international travel (46%). The majority of respondents were in the ranges of 25-34 years (24.9%) and above 55 years (25.9%). Finally, with regard to trip purpose, the majority of respondents travelled to Iran for holiday (42.35%).

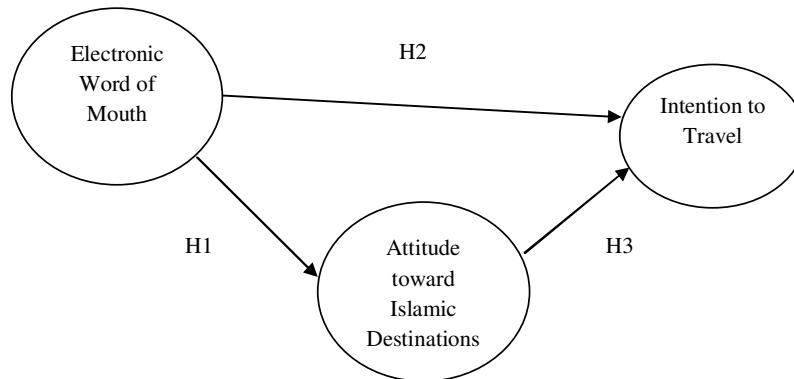


Figure 1. The research model. It summarizes the relationships in the five hypotheses.

Questionnaire design

The primary goal of this study was to examine the influence of online WOM on tourists' attitude towards Islamic destinations and intention to travel. To do so, the researchers modified existing scales. The questionnaire was in four parts: a first part with questions about online WOM; a second part with questions about tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destination (Iran); a third part capturing travel intentions, and a fourth part to identify the sample's socio-demographic characteristics. Socio-demographic information of research participants was obtained by items including gender, age, country of origin, education level, trip purpose, and previous experience. Following Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011), we measured using electronic WOM by employing six items. Attitude was measured by using modified scales developed by Gamble et al. (2009). Items included were very bad/very good, very worthless/very valuable, and very unpleasant/very pleasant. Finally, to measure travel intention, we modified and used a scale with three items developed by Jalilvand and Samiei (2012). The final questionnaire included a total of 12 items, and the format was a seven-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Table 2 lists the items and their descriptive statistics.

Data analyses

Before analyzing predictor variables, we analyzed descriptive statistics and psychometric properties of the measurement scale. Structural equation model (SEM) test with maximum likelihood estimation was employed to test the relationships between the research variables using AMOS 7.0. Several goodness of fit indices were evaluated including chi-square statistic (χ^2), normed chi-square statistic (χ^2/df), standardized root means square residual (SRMR), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and comparative fit index (CFI). The cut-off value of normed chi-square (χ^2/df) is less than 3.0 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The SRMR value should be less than 0.05 in a well-fitting model (Byrne, 1998). The RMSEA value below 0.05 indicates an excellent fit (Steiger, 1989) and values below 0.06 indicate a good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The GFI is an absolute index and measures the relative amount of variance and covariance in the sample data (Byrne, 1998). The CFI value takes sample size into account and should be the index of choice (Bentler, 1990), and values equal to or greater than 0.95 indicative of good-fitting model (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

For consistency reliability and validity scale measures were tested (that is, Cronbach alpha and average variance extracted

(AVE)) and discriminant validity (that is, interfactor correlations) were tested. Alpha reliability coefficients (Cronbach, 1951) were calculated for the identified factors. Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.07 are acceptable and deemed to be adequate (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). AVE values above 0.50 are considered to be adequate (Hair et al., 2006). Discriminant validity is established when the estimated correlations between the factors is below 0.85 (Kline, 2005). Additionally, Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested that discriminant validity is evident when the squared correlations between one construct and any others are lower than the AVE for each construct.

RESULTS

Reliability and validity

Table 2 shows indicator loadings, critical ratios, Cronbach's alpha, and AVE values of each factor. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all ten factors were greater than 0.70, ranging from 0.804 (electronic WOM) to 0.832 (travel intention) and the AVE value of the factors are greater than 0.05, ranging from 0.722 (attitude toward destination) to 0.763 (electronic WOM). Table 3 presents the interfactor correlation analysis among electronic WOM, tourists' attitudes and travel intention. They were all below 0.85, ranging from 0.593 (between electronic WOM and attitude toward destination) to 0.688 (between travel intention and electronic WOM) and the correlation was significant by $p \leq 0.01$. All squared correlations were less than the AVE value for each factor, representing good discriminant validity.

Structural equation model (SEM) test

As a next step, SEM was tested. The results of maximum likelihood estimation suggested that the model fit to the data well ($\chi^2 = 49.721$, d.f. = 51, normed chi-square = 0.975, $p < 0.05$, RMSEA = 0.000, CFI = 0.998, GFI = 0.958, SRMR = 0.48). All of the links were significant and positive. Figure 2 shows the specified relationships among model constructs.

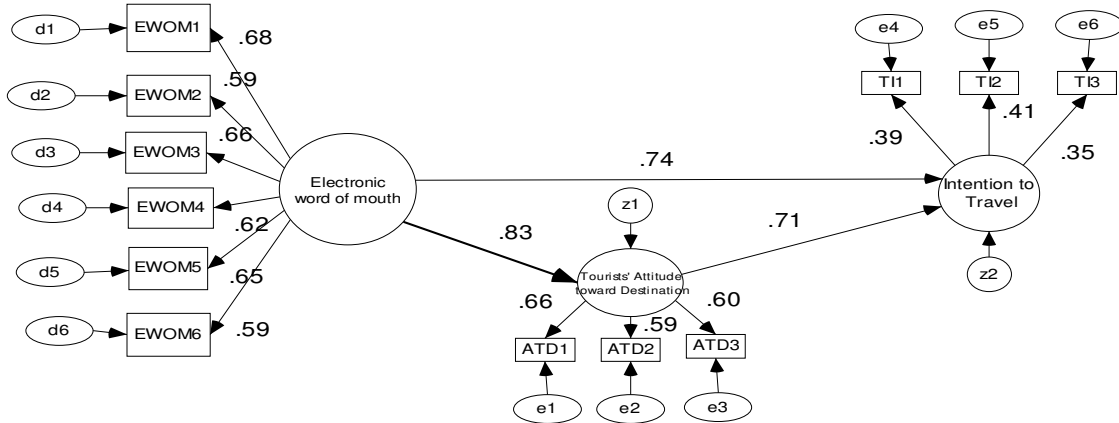


Figure 2. Results of structural equation model (N = 189).

Table 1. Demographic and travelling characteristics of sample (n=189).

Parameter	Frequency	Percent (%)
Country of origin		
USA and Canada	63	33.3
Australia and East of Asia	27	14.3
Germany	20	10.6
UK	21	11.1
Other countries	58	30.7
Age (years)		
Under 24	37	19.6
25-34	47	24.9
35-44	24	12.7
45-54	32	16.9
55 or Above	49	25.9
Gender		
Male	113	59.8
Female	76	40.2
Education		
Primary	22	11.6
Secondary	53	28
University	114	60.4
Main purpose of visit		
Holiday	80	42.3
VFR	46	24.3
Business	35	18.5
Other	28	14.8
Previous experience		
Never	87	46
1 time	44	23.3
2 times	26	13.8
3-5 times	16	8.5
6 or more	16	8.5

The three hypotheses were tested. As shown in Table 4, the results supported the hypothesized relationships among EWOM, ATD, and TI. Consequently, hypotheses H₁, H₂, and H₃ were supported. Specifically, electronic WOM was a significant predictor of tourists' attitudes toward destination (H₁: β = 0.870, t = 5.801, p < 0.001), and electronic WOM was significantly and positively associated with intention to travel (H₂: β = 0.320, t = 2.510, p < 0.05). Further, tourists' attitude toward destination was significantly and positively associated with travel intention (H₃: β = 0.290, t = 2.278, p < 0.05).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of findings

We attempted to identify the tourists' destination choice process in the context of online communications. Our model included eWOM and tourists' attitudes toward destination as major determinants of the tourist's travel intention. The impacts of eWOM were then hypothesized and validated with two different cases: (1) eWOM impact on attitude toward destination, and (2) eWOM impact on travel intention. We proposed two hypotheses about the impact of eWOM on tourists' attitudes and travel intention. Further, we proposed another hypothesis about the impact of tourists' attitudes on travel intention. Using newly developed measures, an experimental survey was conducted. 189 responses from a survey were analyzed using SEM. Finally, all of the three hypotheses were supported as summarized in Table 4.

Contribution and implications

Our study made an important contribution to knowledge. We proposed and validated an integrated framework of the tourists' travel intention model, which could be applied in other service contexts. We provided the

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, indicator loadings, critical ratios, Cronbach's alpha (α), and AVE values.

Factor/item	Mean (S.D)	Indicator loading	Critical ratio	α	AVE
Electronic word of mouth (EWOM)					
(EWOM1) I often read other tourists' online travel reviews to know what destinations make good impressions on others	4.77 (1.123)	0.681	7.184	0.804	0.763
(EWOM2) To make sure I choose the right destination, I often read other tourists' online travel reviews	4.29 (1.195)	0.590	6.489		
(EWOM3) I often consult other tourists' online travel reviews to help choose an attractive destination	4.65 (1.018)	0.657	7.015		
(EWOM4) I frequently gather information from tourists' online travel reviews before I travel to a certain destination	4.34 (1.272)	0.621	6.735		
(EWOM5) If I don't read tourists' online travel reviews when I travel to a destination, I worry about my decision	4.27 (1.147)	0.647	6.935		
(EWOM6) When I travel to a destination, tourists' online travel reviews make me confident in travelling to the destination	4.37 (1.212)	0.594	-		
Attitude toward destination (ATD)					
As a tourism destination, I think that Iran is:					
(ATD1) very bad/very good	5.34 (1.150)	0.660	6.652	0.825	0.722
(ATD2) very worthless/very valuable	5.23 (1.223)	0.595	6.205		
(ATD2) very unpleasant/very pleasant	4.84 (1.266)	0.598	-		
Travel intention (TI)					
(TI1) I predict I will visit Iran in the future	6.15 (0.749)	0.390	-	0.832	0.727
(TI2) I would visit Iran rather than any other tourism destination	6.16 (0.857)	0.409	5.462		
(TI3) If everything goes as I think, I will plan to visit Iran in the future	6.08 (0.808)	0.355	5.060		

Table 3. Correlations.

Component	Electronic word of mouth	Attitude toward destination	Intention to travel
Electronic word of mouth	-	0.593*	0.688*
Attitude toward destination	0.593*	-	0.622*
Intention to travel	0.688*	0.622*	-

* $p \leq 0.01$.**Table 4.** Maximum likelihood estimates for research model ($n = 189$).

Independent variable	Dependant variable	Estimate	Standardized estimate	Standard error	t-statistic	p
Electronic word of mouth	Attitude toward destination	0.870	0.827	0.150	5.810	**
Electronic word of mouth	Intention to travel	0.320	0.774	0.128	2.510	0.012*
Attitude toward destination	Intention to travel	0.290	0.709	0.127	2.278	0.023*
		Structural model	Cut-off value	Structural model	Cut-off value	
Model fit statistics		Chi ² = 49.712		GFI= 0.958	> 0.90	
		d. f = 51		CFI= 0.998	≥ 0.95	
		p-value < 0.05		SRMR= 0.048	< 0.50	
		Normed chi-square = 0.975	< 3.0	RMSEA= 0.000	< 0.06	

**, Significant at the $p < 0.001$ level (two-tailed); *, significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (two-tailed).

comments easily and deliver better and improved tourism services. Third, the proactive use of online WOM information could prove to be an important competitive advantage for early adopters. In tourism industry, there are empirical evidences that tourists' satisfaction is a strong indicator of their intentions to revisit and recommend the destination to other people (Kozak, 2001; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Satisfied tourists are more likely to return to the same destination, and are more willing to share their positive traveling experience with their friends and relatives. Fourth, Islamic destination managers should adopt each way to motivate the travelers to publish tourist reviews about the destination. For example, they can give some prizes to a tourist who is the member of community if he/ she published a tourist review. The characteristics of an online travel community (such usefulness and ease of use) may also help to form more positive tourist attitudes. The results suggest that online user reviews have a significant impact on travel intention, and confirm the importance of online WOM for tourism firm performance, as has been found in other industries like online retailing (Chevlier and Mayzlin, 2006) and movie industry (Duan et al., 2008).

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

We examined the impact of eWOM on tourist attitude and tourist travel intention to determine the effect of destination information on the tourists' decision-making process. Findings revealed that online word of mouth has a significant impact on tourists' attitude towards Islamic destinations and consequently, travel intention. By considering the effects of eWOM on attitudes toward destination and travel intention, we were able to identify the decision process, which provided a rationale for the tourists' travelling behavior in the context of online communications. Tourism marketers must understand that their guests are going online in increasing numbers and that in their electronic universe these consumers are exposed to and are likely influenced by the many sites devoted to the selling or discussion of travel. Tourism marketers should take the lead in understanding and utilizing the emerging technologies, rather than being driven by the adoption of strategies by their competitors. The study, however, had two limitations. First, the questionnaire used a convenience sampling method, thus the sample could not be treated as representative of all international tourists from the destination's major source markets. The impacts of culture, nationality and multiculturalism on using eWOM and decision-making process needs more study. Second, sample size constituted 189 respondents. Kline (2005) suggested that an ideal goal for the ratio of the number of observations to the number of free parameters in SEM is 20 and a realistic minimum target is 10. The present study falls short of the suggested ideal goals, which suggests that the study be replicated

the study be replicated with a larger population. Future research related to the application of eWOM strategies should now move to the practical, with studies designed to measure the cognitive, affective, and behavioral implications upon traveler behavior and the new dynamics created by eWOM. Researchers will have to devise new methods to study online interpersonal influence so that they can test theoretical propositions derived from the existing literature on social influence. The area is likely to provide a rich and interesting stream of exploration. For example, study should be made of what kind of information consumers seek online and how they actually use the information they acquire online from other consumers to make their travel and hospitality decisions.

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