



# Hotel attribute performance, eWOM motivations, and media choice



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## ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study are to match the motivations for posting about hotel experiences with the online media chosen and to identify the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) motivations that are affected by hotel attribute performance. The results show that altruism and platform assistance motivations were positively correlated with consumer opinion sites. Extraversion, social benefits, and dissonance reduction were positively correlated with social network sites. Economic incentives did not improve the likelihood of posting eWOM on consumer opinion sites but reduced the likelihood of posting on social network sites. Finally, hotel attribute performance had a significant effect only on extraversion and dissonance reduction motivations.

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## 1. Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has long caught the attention of researchers and practitioners in the hospitality and tourism industry because of its ability to reduce consumers' perceived risk in purchasing intangible and high involvement offerings. With the popularity of consumer opinion sites, WOM took an electronic form (eWOM). Due to the speed, convenience, and one-to-many reach, eWOM's influence has projected far beyond the reach of traditional WOM (Sun et al., 2006). However, this early version of eWOM lost the "interpersonal" (de Matos and Rossi, 2008) and "face-to-face" (Jeong and Jang, 2011) characteristics that make traditional WOM powerful. Online comment readers have difficulty determining the credibility of the information (Park and Lee, 2009) because the information is posted anonymously and may come from the merchant (Jeong and Jang, 2011).

The lack of personal touch and the weak credibility of the early form of eWOM were alleviated by the popularity of social network sites. With visible personal profiles and embedded social networks, social network sites inherited the interpersonal, face-to-face nature that makes traditional WOM powerful. Social network sites provide a dynamic and interactive eWOM environment where individuals

can be opinion providers, seekers, and transmitters at the same time (Chu and Kim, 2011). The information is customized and relevant to the users (Daugherty et al., 2008). On social network sites, eWOM can be exchanged easily and quickly among a large body of participants while retaining the trust produced by interpersonal exchanges in traditional WOM.

Based on the eWOM motivations identified in the extant literature (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), the present study aims to extend the eWOM literature by (1) examining the effect of hotel attribute performance on eWOM motivations and (2) linking eWOM motivations with the choice of eWOM media. This study focused on motivations for posting eWOM because a minority of eWOM providers can influence the majority's perception of a product or a brand (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). Understanding what drives this group is essential in formulating strategies for managing the interaction with these opinion leaders.

For the first objective, Westbrook (1987) showed that affect, as a motivation factor, was directly stimulated by the consumption experience. This suggested that eWOM motivations might be directly linked to attribute performance. The results indicated that not all motivations are equally affected by hotel attribute performance. This finding not only establishes the links between attributes and eWOM motivations but also provides a direction for prioritizing hotel attribute. For the second objective, Wilson et al. (2012) argued that what and where to post eWOM are intrinsically linked. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) also showed that the frequency of platform visits and comment writing are correlated with different sets of motivations. Since consumer opinion sites and social network sites are very different in the nature of content, users of the

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two types of websites might have different motivations for posting eWOM. The result confirmed the conjecture that eWOM motivations affect media choice. Theoretically, this finding shows that motivations do not affect eWOM behavior the same way. Managerially, this study helps identify the observable behaviors (i.e., media choice) that can be used to operationalize Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) motive-based segmentation.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

As online media gained a role in marketing, traditional WOM took electronic form and became eWOM. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p. 39). Because of the Internet, eWOM not only reaches a larger audience than WOM, but also opinions and comments can exist for a long period and be found by anyone interested in the products or companies. These features allow web users to congregate online and form virtual communities that can exert power over a company (Jeong and Jang, 2011). eWOM is especially important for the hospitality and tourism industries because consumers are more likely to rely on interpersonal communications in the service context due to the intangibility and experiential nature of services (Harrison-Walker, 2001). Litvin et al. (2008) summarized five reasons why eWOM is important in the hospitality and tourism industries. First, the offerings are intangible. Consumers cannot evaluate offerings before consuming them. Second, hospitality and tourism offerings are perceived as high-risk purchases with a high level of customer involvement. Third, seasonal and perishable offerings place marketing stress on providers. Fourth, competition is intense, and successfully managing online interpersonal influence may provide important competitive advantages. Finally, the industry is still in the nascent stage of developing strategies for managing online interpersonal influence.

### 2.1. eWOM motivations

To summarize a comprehensive list of eWOM motivations, the present study started from Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) seminal study on eWOM motivations. From an economics perspective, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) used Balasubramanian and Mahajan's (2001) framework and developed two eWOM-specific utility sources to arrive at eleven motivations. After empirical testing, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identified five significant motivations as shown in Table 1. From non-economics perspectives, the present study also incorporated eWOM motivations from Daugherty et al.'s (2008) psychology-based study. Finally, to include motivations that are specific to the present study's context, study results based on the travel review context (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011; Cheung and Lee, 2012; Jeong and Jang, 2011; Yoo and Gretzel, 2008), and the social network site context (Chu and Kim, 2011; Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012) were incorporated. As a result, the present study summarized seven eWOM motivations listed below.

(1) *Social benefits*. Daugherty et al. (2008) argued that social function compels consumers to seek out activities that are favored by important others and give them opportunities to associate with friends. Posting eWOM is a way to connect with others. Seeking social benefits consistently emerges as an eWOM motivation in most empirical studies regardless of the theoretical foundation and the context. For example, it is identified as an eWOM motivation by Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) economics based study, studies in the context of travel and hospitality

consumptions (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011; Cheung and Lee, 2012), and studies in the context of social network sites (Chu and Kim, 2011; Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Therefore, the present study identified social benefits as a motivation of posting eWOM.

- (2) *Self-enhancement*. Self-enhancement, defined as enhancing images among other consumers by projecting oneself as an intelligent shopper (Sundaram et al., 1998), is another motivation that is consistently found to be significant across studies. Studies based on consumer opinion sites (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Yoo and Gretzel, 2008) usually found the motivation for self-enhancement to be indistinguishable from the enjoyment of sharing positive experiences. However, Nadkarni and Hofmann's (2012) Facebook-based study found self-enhancement to be a standalone eWOM motivation. Since one of the goals of this study is to match motivations with the choice of online media, motivations for self-enhancement and enjoyment of expressing positive experiences are identified as two separate motivations in this study.
- (3) *Extraversion and (4) Dissonance reduction*. When there is a strong positive or negative consumption experience, people experience psychological tension within. In such a situation, people seek to restore the equilibrium of the originally balanced state (Zajonc, 1971). The tension may be reduced by writing comments on online opinion sites. Therefore, expressing positive emotions or venting negative feelings is two motives for eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

In the hospitality and tourism context, people simply enjoy sharing their travel experiences. Post-trip sharing is often considered as one of the joys of travel (Litvin et al., 2008). Jeong and Jang (2011)'s empirical study also found expressing positive experiences to be a significant motivation for posting eWOM in a restaurant context. The term “extraversion” from Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) was adopted to refer to the enjoyment of expressing positive experiences.

As a response to the negative affect arising from the consumption experience, consumers would share their experience to reduce cognitive dissonance (Engel et al., 1993). It serves to minimize one's self-doubts and defend one's self image. Daugherty et al. (2008) identified five motivational sources of creating eWOM and found that “protect people from internal insecurities or external threats” to be a significant motivation for posting eWOM. Bronner and de Hoog's (2011) self-directed motivational factor also includes the concepts of venting negative feelings. Therefore, the present study adopted dissonance reduction as a motivation for posting eWOM.

- (5) *Altruism*. The act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return (Sundaram et al., 1998). In a consumption context, this concept is manifested as a desire to help fellow consumers make purchase decisions (Engel et al., 1993) and helping the company by providing feedbacks (Sundaram et al., 1998). This concept is found to be a significant motivation for posting eWOM on consumer opinion sites in the hospitality and tourism context, including travel (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011) and dining (Jeong and Jang, 2011) experiences. This motivation is associated with both positive WOM (hoping others to share the same positive experience) and negative WOM (hoping others to avoid the problems they encountered).
- (6) *Economic incentives*. This includes giving eWOM for the purpose of seeking monetary rewards and non-monetary rewards such as reward points, discounts, or free upgrades. While economic incentives are a significant motivation in Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) study, in the context of hospitality and tourism, only Bronner and de Hoog (2011) found it to be significant as a part of the self-directed motivation, which includes self

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