



Why do travelers trust TripAdvisor? Antecedents of trust towards consumer-generated media and its influence on recommendation adoption and word of mouth[☆]



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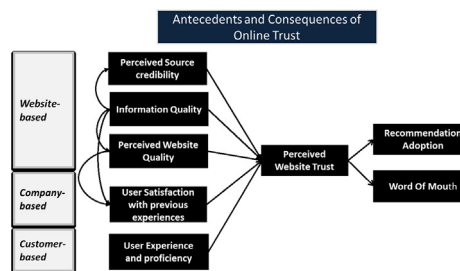
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HIGHLIGHTS

- The study tests a model of antecedents and consequences of trust towards consumer-generated media (CGM).
- Information quality, website quality, and customer satisfaction influence trust towards CGM.
- Information quality predicts source credibility, customer satisfaction, and website quality.
- Trust influences consumers' intention to follow other users' advice and to foster positive word of mouth.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of fake and paid online reviews means that building and maintaining consumer trust is a challenging task for websites hosting consumer-generated content. This study tests a model of antecedents and consequences of trust for consumer-generated media (CGM). Five factors are proposed for building consumer trust towards CGM: source credibility, information quality, website quality, customer satisfaction, user experience with CGM. Trust is expected to predict recommendation adoption and word of mouth. Data from 366 users of CGM were analyzed through structural equation modeling and the findings show that all the aforementioned factors with the exception of source credibility and user experience influence consumer trust towards CGM. Trust towards a CGM website influences travel consumers' intentions to follow other users' recommendations and fosters positive word of mouth. Findings also show that information quality predicts source credibility, customer satisfaction, and website quality.

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1. Introduction

Travelers increasingly rely on travel reviews to plan their trips (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Figures from Google show that more than 80% of people research their holiday online, and typically visit 26 websites and spend over 2 h in their search for the right place and the right deal (Trend, 2013). In the travel and tourism industry, consumers can bypass tour operators

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and agents altogether to get advice from consumer-generated media (CGM) – namely those websites that provide consumer-generated content (CGC) such as online consumer reviews. Travelers' recommendations on CGM influence consumer decisions of where to go on holiday, which accommodation to book, and once there, which attractions to visit and where to go to eat (Dickinger, 2011; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013). CGC such as online travel reviews allows consumers to identify the best hotels, restaurants, and attractions, enabling travelers to avoid the worst products and services, with the final result of improving their decision making (Filieri & McLeay, 2014).

Tourism research has demonstrated that CGC is perceived as more trustworthy when compared to content from official destination websites, travel agents, and mass media (Dickinger, 2011; Fotis et al., 2012). However, in recent years the mass media all over the world have started to question the reliability of the most popular CGM, reporting stories of hotel managers posing as customers or encouraging their staff to write fake glowing reviews about their organization or even negative reviews about their competitors (e.g. Smith, 2013; Streitfield, 2011; Tuttle, 2012). In a bid to expose the apparent failure of TripAdvisor to tackle the phenomenon of fake reviews, a British businessman had set up a fake restaurant which started to receive glowing reviews (Smith, 2013). Thus, it has become apparent to many users that not all consumer reviews are necessarily written by real customers and opinion spam is widespread in consumer review websites (Jindal & Liu, 2008).

Due to this apparently uncontrollable rise of fake and promotional content on CGM, a concept such as trust acquires a particular relevance. The questions that arise are: Why do travel consumers trust CGM like TripAdvisor? Does trust in CGM affect travel consumer behavior? The present research attempts to provide an answer to these questions. Although trust has been identified as a critical determinant of consumer purchase intentions in e-commerce (e.g. Flavián, Guinalú, & Gurrea, 2006; Hoffman, Novak, & Peralta, 1999; Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky, & Vitale, 2000; Lee & Turban, 2001; Yoon, 2002), little attention has been paid to trust towards CGM (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013a; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009) and whether trust affects travel consumer behavior.

In order to fill this gap, this study has tested a new model measuring the antecedents and consequences of trust towards CGM. This study relies on the Beldad, de Jong, and Stehouder (2010) model of the antecedents of trust which attempts to measure the influence of factors like user experience, customer satisfaction, information quality, source credibility, and website quality, on trust towards CGM.

Furthermore, this research explores the influence of trust on two types of travel consumer behavior, namely: consumer intention to spread the word about the CGM website they use to other people in their network (word of mouth), and consumer intention to adopt the advice received from CGM and purchase the recommended product. These predictions were tested by using structural equation modeling with data from 366 travel users of CGM. The results have practical implications for travel operators and for managers of CGM and other online operators in the CGM industry.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on electronic-word of mouth (e-WOM) and trust with a particular focus on CGM. We then present the theoretical framework and formulate the hypotheses of this study, subsequently we introduce the methodology and finally we present and discuss the findings. Managerial implications, limitations and future research directions conclude this paper.

2. Online reviews, consumer-generated media and trust

Consumers often try to get a feel for what a destination or accommodation will be like prior to their travel and for that reason they look for online consumer reviews on websites such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Holiday Watchdog. Online consumer reviews – also known in the literature as CGC – can be considered as a form of e-WOM, which refers to 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former consumers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet' (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39).

Existing research in e-WOM has primarily focused on the motivation of customers who write reviews (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), on the influence of consumer reviews on the purchase decisions of other customers (Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005), and on the role of consumer reviews in affecting the sales of different types of goods (Cui, Lui, & Guo, 2012; Dellarcas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

Research in the travel and tourism industry has provided evidence that online consumer reviews influence hotel rooms sales (e.g. Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009) and travelers' purchase intentions about which destination to travel to (Arsal, Backman, & Baldwin, 2008), and which accommodation to book (e.g. Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Consumer-generated content have been found to be equally important with respect to officially provided information (Inversini, Cantoni, & Buhalis, 2009). Websites like TripAdvisor have become so popular among travelers that they potentially influence the travel decisions of approximately 200 million users who visit the website each month to get recommendations over restaurants, accommodation, and destinations (TripAdvisor, 2014).

However, the mass media all over the world repeatedly report stories of fake and promotional reviews posted on CGM (e.g. Smith, 2013; Streitfield, 2011; Tuttle, 2012). TripAdvisor has recently been forced by the UK Advertising Standards Authority to remove its 'misleading' slogans referring to the trustworthy and honest nature of all the reviews hosted on its website. Thus, maintaining high levels of trust towards CGM seems to be an increasingly challenging task for the managers of these online organizations.

Trust is defined as 'one party's confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity' (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). In this study, the focus is on online trust, which differs from offline trust in that the object of online trust can be a website (Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005), that is CGM websites in this study. Trust in an online retailer has been identified as a central success factor of e-commerce activities (e.g. Flavián et al., 2006; Hoffman et al., 1999; Jarvenpaa et al., 2000; Lee & Turban, 2001; Yoon, 2002); however, little research has investigated the antecedents and the consequences of trust in e-WOM (Ayeh et al., 2013a). Existing research in e-tourism on this topic has investigated the impact of online travel reviews on the credibility of hotels (Sparks & Browning, 2011), and the role that reviews play in reducing travelers' perceptions of risk when booking accommodation (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). The study that more closely focuses on trust towards CGM is Ayeh et al. (2013a)'s on the determinants of travelers' attitudes and intentions towards usage of CGC for travel planning. Ayeh et al. (2013a) adopted the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to measure the impact of factors like usefulness, perceived ease of use, homophily, perceived source trustworthiness, and perceived enjoyment, which – with the exception of perceived trustworthiness – were found to contribute to intentions to use CGM for travel planning. However, in this study we adopt the trust-building model developed by Beldad et al. (2010), which will be discussed in the next section.

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