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Does social climate influence positive eWOM? A study of heavy-users of online communities.

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Abstract This paper provides a deeper understanding of the role of social influences on positive eWOM behaviour (PeWOM) of heavy-users of online communities. Drawing on Social Interaction Utility Framework, Group Marketing and Social Learning Theories, we develop and test a research model integrating the interactions between the social climate of a website and Interpersonal Influences in PeWOM. 262 Spanish heavy-users of online communities were selected and the data analysed using partial least squares equation modelling. Overall, the model explains 59% of the variance of PeWOM on online communities. Findings reveal that interaction with other members of the online community (Social Presence) is the main predictor of PeWOM. Social Identity is a mediator between Social Presence and PeWOM. Interpersonal Influence has an important role as a moderator variable; the greater the impact of Interpersonal Influence, the stronger the relationship between Social Presence and PeWOM.

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Introduction

The development of online communities where consumers can exchange comments on, and assessments of, trips and accommodation has revolutionised the tourism industry (Banerjee and Chua, 2016; Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2016; Filieri et al., 2015). Online comments have become a key component for customers' choice of tourism services (Bigne et al., 2017; Hur et al., 2017). With the emergence of social media technologies available to Internet and smartphone users, online communities such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com and Venere have empowered consumers to engage in product-related electronic word of mouth and have emerged as promotional tools for marketing and eCommerce. Given the wide variety of opportunities for existing customers to interact (Matute-Vallejo et al., 2015), this study focuses on positive electronic word of mouth (PeWOM) which means any positive comment made by current or potential consumers available to many people and institutions through the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Recent research on social media and eWOM (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Filieri et al., 2015; Godes and Silva, 2012) has

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mainly focused on two topics. First, it has analysed the characteristics of social networking sites and customer reviews, which increase their credibility and usefulness for users, including source credibility, length of comment, volume of reviews, valence, etc. (Babić et al., 2016; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Yan et al., 2016; You et al., 2015). Second, academic research has analysed the motivations and characteristics of individuals, like altruism, self-enhancement and curiosity that encourage active participation on websites (Babić et al., 2016; Bigné et al., 2015; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). However, the social dimension of consumption and the group-level antecedents of eWOM communications have been neglected in previous studies on social media.

Due to the intense competition in the tourism sector, incorporating consumers' social identification processes in the formation of PeWOM communications is a significant issue (Harris and Goode, 2004; He et al., 2012). Obviously, the proliferation of online communities creates advantages for consumers because of the broad range of opportunities they provide. But this forces travel operators to ensure PeWOM communication on the part of the users to maximise their competitive position. eWOM communication is a dimension of loyalty (Zeithaml et al., 1996) and, therefore, is a key factor for profitability (Reichheld, 1993; Ehigie, 2006). Despite recent research (e.g., Chu and Sung, 2015; Oh et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2016) that postulates that social influences affect group members' intentions and, ultimately, their behaviour, to the best of our knowledge there is a lack of research testing the influence of social climate on consumer's eWOM behaviour. Moreover, previous research on social media has mainly followed a normative approach to explain social influences on consumer decision-making (Zhou et al., 2011), neglecting the role of voluntary influences (friends, colleagues, etc.).

When booking tourism products on an online community, consumers are generally unable to make valued judgements prior to purchase because of the lack of information regarding product quality, so they rely heavily on external advice to make decisions. Experience products, such as accommodation and restaurant services, are habitually reviewed by professional critics on different websites (e.g., www.lonelyplanet.com) and hotels and restaurants are rated on tourist guides. For tourist products, expert reviews are a major source of reliable information (Bigne et al., 2017; Chossat and Gergaud, 2003; Ho and Dempsey, 2010; Zhang et al., 2016).

An understanding of the mechanisms that drive PeWOM behaviour when consumers interact with technology is of high importance for tourist companies that seek to increase their customer base. However, from a theoretical perspective, studies still highlight a need for more empirical research on how to increase consumer participation in the use of social media and the factors that impact on intention to share information among travel-related social media users (Ayeh et al., 2013; Bigné et al., 2015; Hur et al., 2017). This paper examines group level antecedents of PeWOM on the heavy-user segment. Heavy-users are the most attractive segment for online communities. Therefore, understanding how to encourage them to provide active recommendations to other members is important both from a retention point of view (spreading PeWOM is an important indicator of loyalty among these highly attractive members) as well as an acquisition point of view (it helps attract new members to the travel review site, and given that the recommendations are provided by heavy-users, it is likely that these consumers will attract other heavy-users). According to Media Dependency Theory, the intensity of the relationship between consumer and media predicts the likelihood of a media message impacting individual's attitudes and behaviour (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). Consumers who use online reviews more often will be more willing to spread eWOM as a result of their dependency on media information resources (Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2014). Therefore, heavy-users are more likely to forward online information to other consumers than light users (Andreu et al., 2017; Ho and Dempsey, 2010).

The aim of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the role of social influences on PeWOM behaviour of heavy-users of online communities. Understanding the role of social influences on PeWOM communication is strategically important for tourism companies and responds to recent calls for studies that go deeper into the antecedents of word-of-mouth communication (Filieri et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2016). This study intends to make three specific contributions to the literature. Previous research carried out on online communities highlights the role of Social Identity and affective commitment towards the community on online community participation (Arenas-Gaitan et al., 2013; Casaló et al., 2010). This paper analyses the direct and mediating effects of the components of social climate (Social Identity and Social Presence) of the online community on heavy-users' PeWOM behaviour. Following Group Marketing Theory (Harmeling et al., 2017), we argue that Social Identity mediates the relationship between Social Presence and PeWOM disseminated by heavy-users of an online community. Second, the conceptual model proposed integrates the effect of social climate with the moderating role of informational influences on the relationship between social climate and consumer recommendation to use online travel communities to make purchases (PeWOM). In this respect, some authors (e.g., Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007; Casaló et al., 2011) suggest that the analysis of the direct effects of Interpersonal Influence may only be restating the obvious and, therefore, we investigate the moderating effects of personal attributes. The third contribution is that the paper focuses on heavy-users of online communities who, despite their potential as a profitable segment for tourist companies, have been scarcely investigated.

The work is divided into two parts. The first, theoretical part is made up by the literature review, hypotheses and the methodology. The second, with an empirical study of a sample of 262 heavy-users of online communities, examines the impact of different types of social influence on the decision to make PeWOM communications on online communities.

Conceptual framework

A central research question in social psychology concerns the degree to which the evaluations of others have consequences for information processing and behaviour (Ferguson et al., 2005). Group marketing is the use of the psychological mechanisms underlying group influence to drive behaviours

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