

## ADOPTION OF ONLINE CUSTOMER REVIEWS: THE INFLUENCE OF CENTRAL AND PERIPHERAL ROUTE FACTORS

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The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of the central route factor of argument quality and the peripheral route factor of perceived source credibility on adoption of online customer reviews of guesthouses. The study made use of a descriptive research design. Data was collected from 306 respondents in Gauteng using a structured questionnaire. The study uncovered that both argument quality and source credibility have a significant influence on perceived information usefulness which in turn exerts positive influence on adoption of online reviews. The findings showed that source credibility had a stronger influence on perceived information usefulness than argument quality. The implications for management of guesthouse establishments include the need for them to understand the importance of high quality online reviews in persuading consumers to choose a guesthouse. Managers can encourage their customers to post their guesthouse experiences online and to do so in a comprehensive manner by covering varied aspects of the service.

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# **ADOPTION OF ONLINE CUSTOMER REVIEWS: THE INFLUENCE OF CENTRAL AND PERIPHERAL ROUTE FACTORS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of the central route factor of argument quality and the peripheral route factor of perceived source credibility on adoption of online customer reviews of guesthouses. The study made use of a descriptive research design. Data was collected from 306 respondents in Gauteng using a structured questionnaire. The study uncovered that both argument quality and source credibility have a significant influence on perceived information usefulness which in turn exerts positive influence on adoption of online reviews. The findings showed that source credibility had a stronger influence on perceived information usefulness than argument quality. The implications for management of guesthouse establishments include the need for them to understand the importance of high quality online reviews in persuading consumers to choose a guesthouse. Managers can encourage their customers to post their guesthouse experiences online and to do so in a comprehensive manner by covering varied aspects of the service.

**Key words:** Online reviews, central route factors, peripheral route factors, information usefulness, argument quality, source credibility, information adoption, South Africa.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Developments in information technology over the past two decades, particularly the advent of Web 2.0, has resulted in a fundamental shift in the consumer's ability to engage with brands (Wirtz, Ambtman et al., 2013). Web 2.0 enables interaction and co-creation of knowledge by users of online channels (Orenga-Roglá & Chalmeta 2016). With Web 2.0 consumers are now able to instantly share their experiences of products or services with other customers via various Web 2.0 channels and applications including social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc. (Ballew et al., 2015). The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (2011) highlights the importance of organisations adopting these channels as part of their internal and external marketing mix. These channels permit two-way conversations between customers and organisations, whereas traditionally these communication channels were non-existent. Levy (2009) states that these new channels of communication with both potential and existing clients open a variety opportunities for businesses. Particular benefits include instant communications with clients; storage of information about the business and its subsidiaries and ability to create value through content that entices engagement.

Chen and Xie (2008) state that it is becoming increasingly important for organisations to include Web 2.0 channels as part of their traditional marketing mix as it serves as a referral-based sales assistant that filters and facilitates the customers' choices that best suit their needs before engaging with the brand. Whilst every business sector has been impacted by developments in the Web 2.0 space, the travel and tourism industry is widely acknowledged to be one of the most affected

(Matikiti et al., 2017; Jalilvand & Samiei 2012). Many customers nowadays check customer reviews before deciding on places to visit and/or booking a place to stay. In South Africa, travel and tourism is a key component of the economy. Statistics show that between 2016 and 2017 the industry's contribution to GDP grew from R402 billion or 9.2 percent of the GDP to R412.2 billion (9.4 percent of the GDP) (Smith, 2017). The largest growth was attributed to the category classified as 'other', primarily featuring B&B establishments also known as guesthouses, lodges and self-catering establishments (Business Tech, 2017). SEDA (2017) observed that guesthouses have seen a significant increase in popularity over the last decade. Defined as establishments providing members of the public with meals and overnight accommodation but without the full facilities of a hotel (Lee et al., 2016), guesthouse establishments differentiate themselves from other service providers by offering consumers unique experiences through the satisfaction of their experiential needs. This differentiation strategy has proven to be a difficult task for many guesthouse establishments as, due to their small size, their marketing budgets are often limited. This reality has forced guesthouse owners to acknowledge the importance of leveraging various more affordable marketing channels, such as the internet to spread messages about their services (Lee et al., 2016). The internet, and the continuously expanding pre-purchase information it offers consumers, (Kim & Lee, 2015) particularly online customer reviews can make or break a guesthouse establishment (Lloyd 2016). People read a number of online reviews before making a decision as to which guesthouse to book (Lloyd 2016). These reviews may sometimes convey mixed evaluations of an establishment (Kim & Lee, 2015). It is thus important to examine the factors considered by consumers when deciding whether or not to adopt information available on customer review sites when selecting a guest house. This study does so by examining the influence of central and peripheral route factors on adoption of online guesthouse reviews.

Despite growing academic interest aimed at understanding the factors influencing the adoption of online reviews, not much is known about the influence of online reviews from a guesthouse purchase decision making perspective. Most studies that have looked at adoption of eWOM in the travel and tourism industry have done so from the perspective of large establishments, hotels in particular. This study aims to contribute to existing literature by examining the influence of central and peripheral route factors of argument quality and sources credibility respectively on consumers' decision to adopt online reviews when selecting guesthouse accommodation in South Africa. The key research question addressed in this study is: How does argument quality and source credibility influence the adoption of online reviews? The specific objectives of the study are (i) to investigate perceived usefulness of online customer reviews when selecting a guesthouse; (ii) to examine the influence of argument quality on perceived usefulness of online customer reviews of guesthouses; (iii) to examine the influence of source credibility on perceived information usefulness of online customer reviews of guest houses; (iv) to investigate the relative influence of argument quality and perceived source credibility on perceived information usefulness of online customer reviews and (v) to determine the influence of perceived information usefulness on adoption of online reviews when selecting a guest house.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Underlying Theory of the Study: The Information Adoption Model**

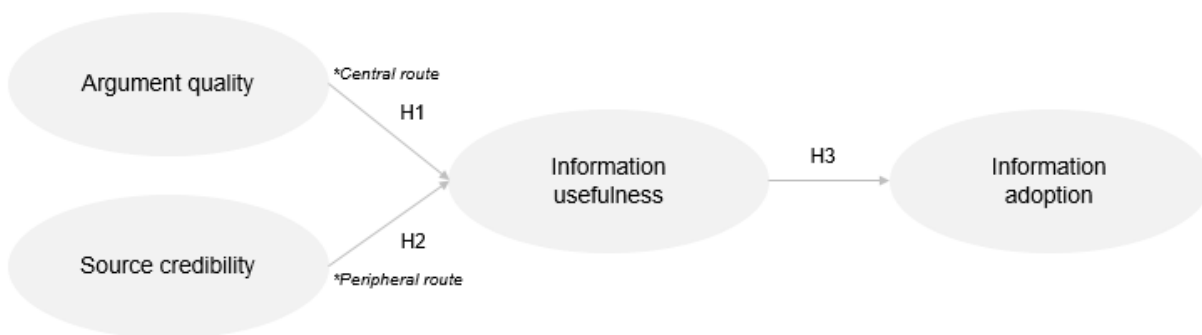
Proposed in 2003 by Sussman and Siegel, the Information Adoption Model (IAM) seeks to explain factors that affect consumers' decision to adopt information. The model is based upon an

integration of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Wang, 2016). The Technology Acceptance Model was proposed by Davis in 1986 to explain consumer adoption of technology. The model argues that a consumer’s motivation in adopting new technology is influenced by two main beliefs namely perceived ease of use (PEOU) and perceived usefulness (PU). It also argues that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness form the foundation of a consumer’s attitude to a technology, which, in turn, impacts actual user behaviour. This model, however, is mainly focused on an individual’s usage of a new technology and excludes the social processes involved (Wang, 2016) hence the need seen by Sussman and Siegel (2003) to consider it in relation to other theories when explaining information adoption.

The ELM, proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), states that information influence takes place through two main routes namely the central and peripheral routes and that each of these routes requires different degrees of elaboration (Wang, 2016). It argues that the central route is used when an individual carefully considers the information. Under the central route high elaboration levels take place which makes information quality critical to understanding adoption. On the other hand, if the individual only has little consideration on the information, low elaboration levels take place, leading to the information influence occurring through the peripheral route (Wang, 2016). On this route factors such as source credibility are considered to be key to explaining information adoption. The IAM combines arguments from the TAM and ELM. In line with the ELM, the IAM argues that the central and peripheral routes are involved in processing information before adoption. The IAM considers the central influence to be through argument quality, and the peripheral influence to be through source credibility. It advances that these factors, i.e. argument quality and source credibility, impact perceived information usefulness, which ultimately impacts information adoption. The posited influence of perceived information usefulness on adoption is in line with arguments in TAM on the role of perceived usefulness on adoption.

**Proposed Conceptual Model for this Study**

Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model for this study. In line with the IAM proposed by Sussman and Siegel (2003) the conceptual model suggests that source credibility and argument quality influence how the consumer perceives the information to be useful to gaining insight on a particular guest house. The conceptual model also suggests that once the information is perceived useful it will then be adopted to choose a guesthouse.



**Figure 1:** Proposed conceptual model for this study

### **Perceived information usefulness**

Perceived information usefulness in the context of this study is about the extent to which consumers feel that the information they review is relevant, informative, adds value and is useful in their search for guest house accommodation. According to Mengxiang et al., (2013), product reviews are considered helpful depending on the degree to which readers/consumers perceive them to be useful in facilitating judgement on purchase decision. Lifang et al., (2016) state that consumers have their own considerations when evaluating online review usefulness. According to Lifang et al. (2016), factors that make information useful include an elaborate description of the product/service, correct information, relevance and ease of understanding. These factors are what argument quality is all about. Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006) defined argument quality as “the influential strength of arguments entrenched in an informational message”. Park et al., (2007) define argument quality as “the content quality of a consumer's review from the viewpoint of information characteristics”. Past studies have shown that the quality of an argument is evidenced by its comprehensiveness, strength, relevance and timeliness (Delone & McLean, 2003). Xu and Yao (2015) found that argument quality influences perceived value of information. Erkan and Evans (2016) found that there is a positive relationship between perceived information quality and its perceived usefulness. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed in this study:

H<sub>1</sub>: Argument quality has positive influence on perceived usefulness of online customer reviews of guesthouses.

### **Source credibility and perceived information usefulness**

Consumers look to each other's experiences as a guide on what to expect. The source of the information can influence whether consumers will regard it as useful and adopt it. Source credibility refers to the extent to which the source of information is regarded as reliable and trustworthy. Research shows that marketer-generated communication often suffers from low credibility as consumers view information coming from this type of communication as designed to solely sell and not necessarily to convey all the truth about what is being sold. It is therefore important that consumers trust the source of the information they review as failure to do so can compromise its adoption. According to Jin et al (2009) as well as Sussman and Siegal (2003) source expertise is also a dimension of credibility. In their studies they found that source expertise exerts positive influence on perceptions of information usefulness. This study hypothesises that:

H<sub>2</sub>: Source credibility has positive influence on perceived usefulness of online customer reviews of guesthouses.

### **Perceived information usefulness and information adoption**

Information adoption refers to purposeful using of information (Cheung et al., 2008). Lifang et al., (2016) states that if the information is useful, consumers will adopt it for their decision making process. Cheung (2014) found that when consumers perceive online reviews as useful, they have a greater willingness to adopt the information. Similarly studies by Shen et al. (2014) as well as Cheung et al. (2008) confirm that information usefulness has a positive impact on information adoption or making purchase decisions. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed in this study:

H<sub>3</sub>: Perceived information usefulness positively influences adoption of online reviews of guesthouses.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study followed a descriptive research design. According to Hair et al. (2013), descriptive research involves the collection of quantitative data in order to answer specific research questions. The population of interest was consumers who had read online guest house reviews within the last six months. Non-probability sampling, specifically quota sampling, was used to select respondents. Non-probability sampling is defined as a sampling design in which the probability of each sampling unit's selection for participation in the study is unknown (Hair et al, 2013). Non-probability sampling was selected as there was no readily available list of the population from which to draw a random sample. Gender was used as the basis for quota sampling. This was done so as to ensure that the different gender subgroups were well represented in the sample. The aim was to ensure that no single gender group made up more than 60 percent of the total sample.

A self-administered structured questionnaire was used to collect the data. This data collection method was selected because it is quick and more cost effective as well as less prone to interviewer influence (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A combination of nominal and ordinal scales were used to capture the demographic information of respondents while a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very strongly disagree to 7 = very strongly agree was used to measure constructs items. Items used to measure all the constructs were adapted from literature. Argument quality was specifically measured using items adapted from Cheung et al. (2008) as well as Teng et al., (2014). Source credibility was measured using items adapted from Luo et al., (2013), as well as Chang and Wu (2014). Information usefulness was measured using items adapted from Cheung et al. (2008), while information adoption was measured using items adapted from Chang and Wu (2014).

The questionnaire was first pre-tested on a convenience sample of 15 respondents before the main data collection was carried out. By the end of the main data collection phase, a total of 306 usable responses were received. Of these 59.3 percent were females while 40.7 percent were male. In terms of age, 51 percent were aged between 18 and 30 year olds, 37 percent were aged between 31-45 year olds and only 12.8 percent of the respondents were aged above 46. 64 percent of the respondents indicated that they had stayed in a guest house 1 to 2 times in the last 12 months, 27 percent had stayed between 3 to 5 times while 5 percent had stayed more than 6 times in the last 12 months. In terms of level of education of the respondents, 25 percent of the respondents have a post-matric qualification, 24 percent of the respondents had a Bachelor's degree, while 26 percent has a postgraduate qualification.

SPSS software, version 24, was used to analyse the collected data. Prior to the main analysis all constructs were tested for reliability using alpha coefficients. The results presented in Table 1 show that all the four constructs were highly reliable as they had alpha coefficients of greater than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013). Regression analysis was used to test the study's hypotheses.

**Table 1:** Construct Reliability

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Number of scale items measured</b>	<b>Cronbach's alpha coefficient</b>
Argument quality	3	0.893
Source credibility	3	0.860
Information usefulness	3	0.938
Information adoption	3	0.934

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics relating to each of the four constructs. The results show that all the four constructs had mean values of higher than 4.5 on the seven-point Likert scale, thus indicating that users agreed with the statements. Perceived argument quality scored the lowest with a score of 4.57 followed by source credibility with a mean value of 4.62. Perceived information usefulness and information adoption had overall mean scores of 5.07 and 4.90 respectively. These findings are consistent with those reported by Chen and Xie (2008), who note that travellers find online reviews' sites useful and that they adopt such information and use it in their purchase decision making. Findings by Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) further support this indicating that customers perceive sources of information in online customer reviews as credible.

**Table 3:** Descriptive statistics

<b>Construct and Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b>Argument quality</b>	<b>4.57</b>	<b>1.21</b>
In general, the reviews available on this site...		
- provide comprehensive information about guest houses	4.74	1.28
- have sufficient breadth and depth for evaluating guest houses	4.52	1.33
- are thorough	4.47	1.39
<b>Source credibility</b>	<b>4.62</b>	<b>1.04</b>
- Reviewers of guest houses on this site are dependable	4.59	1.18
- I think the guest house reviewers on this site are honest	4.62	1.17
- I think the guest house reviewers on this site are sincere	4.65	1.19
<b>Information usefulness</b>	<b>5.07</b>	<b>1.13</b>
IU1 - In general, the guest house reviews on this site are valuable	5.04	1.20
	5.01	1.25

IU2 - In general, the guest house reviews on this site are informative	5.05	1.21
IU3 - In general, the guest house reviews on this site are useful		
<b>Information adoption</b>	<b>4.95</b>	<b>1.28</b>
- I use reviews on this site to make guest house purchase decisions	4.94	1.39
- Reviews on this site influence my selection of a guest house	4.94	1.37
- Reviews on this site impact my guest house selection decisions	4.95	1.34

Table 4 presents the results relating to hypotheses 1 and 2. The results indicate that both argument quality and source credibility have a significant positive influence on information usefulness ( $p = .000$ ). While this is so, the results further show that of these two constructs, source credibility has a stronger influence on perceived information usefulness when compared to argument quality as source credibility was associated with a higher beta coefficient,  $\beta = .491$  compared to argument quality  $\beta = .240$ . Hypotheses 1 and 2 are therefore accepted. The findings support assertions by Cheung et al. (2008) that highly credible sources of information are perceived to be more reliable and are highly effective in facilitating the transfer of knowledge. The findings are also consistent with findings by Xu and Yao (2015) showing that argument quality influences the perceived value of information.

The results in table 4 further show an R square value of .444, meaning that 44.4 percent of the dependent variable of information usefulness was explained by the independent variables of argument quality and source credibility.

**Table 4:** Regression Analysis: Argument Quality, Source Credibility and Information Usefulness

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate		
1	.667	.444	.440	.850		
Model	Independent variable	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Standard Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.621	.245		6.630	.000
	Argument quality	.227	.056	.240	4.095	.000
	Source credibility	.517	.062	.491	8.367	.000

Dependent variable: Information Usefulness



Presented in Table 5 are the results for hypothesis 3. The results indicate that information usefulness has a significant influence on information adoption ( $p = .000$ ;  $\beta = .751$ ). This is consistent with assertions by Lifang et al. (2016) noting that if the information is useful to the consumer, he/she will adopt it for decision making. Cheung et al. (2008) also found that information adoption within online communities is significantly impacted by its perceived usefulness. Accordingly hypothesis 3 is accepted. The results in table 5 show an R square value of .563, meaning that 56.3 percent of the dependent variable of information adoption was explained by the independent variable of information usefulness.

**Table 5:** Regression Analysis: Information Usefulness And Information Adoption

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate		
1	.751	.563	.562	.859		
Model	Independent variable	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Standard Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.619	.242		2.562	.011
	Information usefulness	.859	.047	.751	18.456	.000

Dependent variable: Information adoption

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this study have significant managerial implications. Firstly, the findings in the study provide empirical evidence on the applicability of the IAM in the context of information found on online customer review sites. The findings show how argument quality, source credibility and information usefulness of online reviews affect customer purchase behaviour when choosing guesthouse establishments. Managers need to take cognisance of the fact that customers rely on comments on review sites when making purchase decisions.

Secondly, it is imperative that management understand the importance of high quality online reviews in persuading consumers when choosing a guesthouse. Managers should encourage their consumers to post comprehensive reviews of their guesthouse experiences online covering varying aspects of service, for example staff friendliness, quality of food, room cleanliness, etc. Comprehensiveness of information is a measure of information quality and key to facilitating usage of the information.

Lastly, the research confirms that perceived source credibility has more influence on perceived usefulness of consumer online reviews when it comes to choosing guesthouses. This sheds light on the fact that management should promote credible sources to share their reviews. For example, management can encourage high profile customers that visit their guesthouses to post their reviews on their website.

## LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Whilst the findings of this study provide insight that can be helpful in the management of guesthouse establishments, it is important to note its limitations. These include the fact that the research covered a limited geographical area of Gauteng province only, meaning that findings cannot be generalised to the entire South African population. In addition to this, the sampling method employed was that of non-probability sampling, a method which does not lend itself well to generalisation. Future research should look to including respondents from other geographical areas and making use of a larger more representative sample size. In addition this study focused on only one central and one peripheral route factor, i.e. argument quality and source credibility respectively, in trying to understand adoption of online reviews. Further research can examine additional factors that may also be helpful in explaining consumers' online review adoption.

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