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# UNDERSTANDING ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH IN TOURISM IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

Ping Wang



Turun yliopisto  
University of Turku

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, social media has fundamentally changed how communication takes place in business. It has contributed to the evolution of the Internet from a broadcasting medium to a participatory and interactive platform which allows users to generate and share information and become part of the media. For instance, social media has enabled the creation and exchange of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). We have witnessed the popularity of eWOM in travel and tourism industry.

EWOM behaviour among individuals and the impact of eWOM on organizations have become important research focuses in eWOM research. However, the extant research has ignored the important function of social media platforms as both hedonic and social-oriented information systems (IS) for users, and few researchers have tried to explain eWOM use from the social, hedonic, and technology perspectives. eWOM application from the organizational perspective has also attracted the attention of researchers. Most prior studies in this field have focused primarily on the impact of eWOM on business performance and organizations' eWOM strategy. However, the understanding of how social media platforms can be used to co-create value with customers and how eWOM can help organizations to engage customers is still fragmented. What is more, the understanding of the interplay between an organization's activity and social media technology remains obscure.

The objective of this study is threefold: 1) to explore eWOM use and generation behaviours among individuals by taking eWOM content, as well as the social media platform—that is, the channel of eWOM generation and use—into consideration; 2) to explore the value creation of social media and eWOM in organizations; and 3) to examine how social media and eWOM connect individuals and organizations and uncover the myth of how eWOM benefits both individuals and travel organizations.

A combination of quantitative survey research and qualitative case study is used in this study. In particular, quantitative survey research method was used to explore the eWOM use among individual user's to solve the research questions regarding the determinants of travellers' eWOM use and generation behaviours. Qualitative case study method was used to solve the questions regarding how can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers and to engage with customers via eWOM communication. This research includes em-

pirical data collected from individual tourists in China and tourism organizations from both China and Finland.

This study contributes to the understanding of eWOM in tourism context. Specifically, it contributes to the understanding of customers' eWOM behavior by taking the social and hedonic functions into consideration, and sheds light on the understanding of eWOM application in organizations. This study also integrates eWOM research from both individual and organization perspectives and helps to explain the eWOM interplay between them. From practical view, the results of this study have important implications for tourism e-service practitioners in their understanding of customers' decision making process, and the strategy to facilitate customers' propensity of eWOM generation behavior. It also helps eWOM website designers to make successful eWOM websites. The findings also shed lights on e-service providers on how to co-create value with customers via social media platform and how to engage customer via eWOM communication.

## TIIVISTELMÄ

Sosiaalinen media on ratkaisevasti muuttanut tapaa jolla liikeviestintää hoidetaan nykyvuosikymmenellä. Se on muuttanut Internetin yksisuuntaisesta julkaisukanavasta yhteisölliseksi ja interaktiiviseksi alustaksi joka mahdollistaa käyttäjien informaation tuottamisen ja jakamisen, heidän tulemisensa osaksi mediaa. Esimerkiksi, sosiaalinen media on mahdollistanut eWOM-ilmion, jolla tarkoitetaan asiakkaiden ja käyttäjien jostain kohteesta tekemien arvioiden antamista ja jakamista sähköisillä alustoilla. eWOM on osoittautunut erittäin suosituksi matkailun ja turismin alalla viime vuosina.

eWOM-yksilökäyttäytyminen sekä se miten eWOM vaikuttaa organisaatioihin ovat tulleet tärkeiksi tutkimuskohteiksi eWOM-tutkimuksessa. Kuitenkin nykyinen tutkimus on jättänyt ottamatta huomioon sen että sosiaalisen median alustat toimivat myös mielihyvää tuottavina ja sosiaalisesti orientoituneina tietojärjestelminä käyttäjille, ja vain vähäinen tutkimus on yrittänyt selvittää eWOM-käyttöä sosiaalisesta, hedonisesta ja teknologisesta näkökulmasta. eWOM tutkimus organisatorisesta näkökulmasta keskittyy pääosin siihen miten eWOM vaikuttaa liiketoimintaan ja organisaation eWOM-strategiaan. Kuitenkin sen ymmärtäminen miten sosiaalisen median alustoja voidaan käyttää arvon yhteiseen tuottamiseen ja kuinka eWOM voi auttaa organisaatioita sitouttamaan asiakkaan on yhä sirpaleista. Lisäksi, organisaation toiminnan ja sosiaalisen median teknologian vuorovaikutuksen ymmärtäminen on yhä häilyvää.

Tällä tutkimuksella on kolme tavoitetta: 1) tutkia eWOM-käyttöä ja tiedon tuottamista yksilötasolla ottamalla eWOM-sisältö samoin kuin sosiaalisen median alusta – kanava eWOMin tuottamiseen ja jakamiseen – huomioon; 2) tutkia eWOMin sosiaalisen median arvontuottoa organisaatiossa; 3) tutkia miten sosiaalinen media ja eWOM yhdistävät yksilöitä ja organisaatioita, jotta voitaisiin selvittää myytti siitä miten eWOM hyödyntää sekä yksilöitä että organisaatioita.

Tässä tutkimuksessa käytettiin kvantitatiivisen kyselytutkimuksen ja kvalitatiivisen tapaustutkimuksen yhdistelmää. Erityisesti, kvantitatiivista kyselytutkimusta käytettiin tutkimusmenetelmänä tutkittaessa yksilöiden eWOM-käyttöä, jotta voitiin vastata tutkimuskysymykseen koskien matkustajien eWOM-generoinnin ja –käytön keskeisiä suureita. Laadullista tapaustutkimusta käytettiin tutkimusmenetelmänä selvittäessä sitä miten organisaatiot käyttävät sosiaalista mediaa tuottaakseen lisäarvoa asiakkaiden kanssa ja miten ne sitouttavat asiakkaat eWOM-viestinnän keinoin. Tämä tutkimus sisältää empiiristä dataa jota on

kerätty sekä yksittäisiltä matkustajilta Kiinassa sekä matkailualan yrityksiltä sekä Kiinassa että Suomessa.

Tämä tutkimus lisää ymmärrystä eWOM-ilmiöstä matkailussa. Erityisesti se tuottaa tietoa asiakkaiden eWOM-käyttäytymisestä ottamalla eWOMin sosiaaliset ja hedoniset aspektit huomioon, ja tuottaa tietoa eWOMin käytön ymmärtämiseksi organisaatioissa. Tämä tutkimus integroi eWOM-tutkimuksen sekä yksilön että organisaation näkökulmasta ja auttaa ymmärtämään näkökulmien yhteydet. Käytännön näkökulmasta tämän tutkimuksen tuloksilla on tärkeitä viestejä sähköisen palvelutuotannon toteuttajille kun he pyrkivät ymmärtämään asiakkaan päätöksentekoa. Se myös auttaa eWOM-suunnittelijoita tekemään onnistuneita eWOM-verkkopalveluita. Tutkimustulokset myös kertovat verkkopalveluiden tuottajille miten tuottaa lisäarvoa yhdessä asiakkaiden kanssa sosiaalisessa mediassa ja miten sitouttaa asiakkaat eWOM-kommunikaation avulla.

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6.6.2018  
*Turku, Finland*  
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Research article #2: Wang, P., Li, H., Liu, Y. Discovering the Impact from Channel Gratifications on Individuals' Electronic Word-of-Mouth Use: A Uses & Gratification Perspective. Submitted manuscript, *under review*.

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Research article #4: Wang, P., Li, H. Understanding the Antecedents and Consequences of Perceived Usefulness of Travel Review Websites. Submitted manuscript, *under review*.

Research article #5: Wang, P., Li, H., Suomi, R. (2016). Value Co-creation in Business via Social Media: A Technology Affordance Approach, Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems (PACIS), Taiwan.

Research article #6: Wang, P. (2017). The Role of eWOM in Customer Engagement in Travel Service Organizations: An Affordance Perspective, The 16th Wuhan International Conference on E-Business (WHICEB2017).

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Social media has become an attractive way for business organizations to reach, attract, and interact with customers. In recent decades, social media has fundamentally changed how communication takes place in business (Kietzmann et al. 2011). It has contributed to the evolution of the Internet from a broadcasting medium to a participatory and interactive platform which allows users to generate and share information and become part of the media (Leung et al. 2013). For instance, social media enabled the creation and exchange of *electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)*.

We have witnessed the popularity of eWOM in travel and tourism industry. Travellers are increasingly using social media to search for travel-related information, make their travel plans, and share their travel experiences with others on platforms such as social networking websites, blogs/microblogs, and travel review websites. eWOM is becoming increasingly important for travellers. Before travelling, travellers use eWOM to obtain information to support their decisions on travel-related products and minimize the risk in decision-making. During their travels, they use eWOM to support their purchase decisions or guide their trips, and after travel, travellers share their travel experiences with others via eWOM and give feedback to travel service providers via social media. eWOM use and generation are the two main behaviours of travellers that have caused concern for both practitioners and academics.

For travel organizations, eWOM affects their business performance and business strategy. An increasing number of organizations have employed social media to facilitate reviews from customers to improve their business performance and customer relationship management. For example, TripAdvisor, one of the largest travel websites in the world, offers user-generated reviews to support travellers who are making their travel decisions, such as where to go, what to do, where to stay, and where to eat. Travel organizations can use TripAdvisor to know about their business performance, to interact with customers, to manage their online reputation, and to decide on their business development strategies.

In the literature, it has been argued that eWOM benefits individual customers, such as through the provision of purchase decision support (Mauri and Minazzi 2013, Zhang et al. 2014) and the influence on attitude formation towards a product or service (Aggarwal et al. 2012, Huang and Korfiatis 2015). Thus, eWOM



use and generation have become important research focuses. Prior research on eWOM use mainly explained it from the utilitarian perspective—more specifically, how the helpfulness (Hu, Chen, and Lee 2016) or usefulness of eWOM (Racherla and Friske 2012) and the trust (Banerjee, Bhattacharyya, and Bose 2017) or credibility of eWOM determine eWOM use. Individuals are using eWOM generated via social media platforms. However, the extant research has ignored the important function of social media platforms as both hedonic and social-oriented information systems (IS) for users, and few researchers have tried to explain eWOM use from the social, hedonic, and technology perspectives. In addition, prior research on eWOM generation behaviour is mainly from the socio-psychological motivation perspective (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Ben-Shaul and Reichel 2017). Thus, there is a need to examine eWOM use and generation through a different lens to acquire a deep understanding of its use and generation behaviours among individuals, including from the perspectives of use and gratification, technology usefulness, and information and system quality.

eWOM application from the organizational perspective has also attracted the attention of researchers. Most prior studies in this field have focused primarily on the impact of eWOM on business performance and organizations' eWOM strategy. For instance, eWOM has been found to impact retail sales and reputations (Lu et al. 2013, Liang et al. 2015), as well as organizations' eWOM response strategies (Lee and Cranage 2014). However, the understanding of how social media platforms can be used to co-create value with customers and how eWOM can help organizations to engage customers is still fragmented. What is more, the understanding of the interplay between an organization's activity and social media technology remains obscure. This is the second research gap in this study.

Additionally, most research on, and the current understanding of, eWOM in tourism are either from an individual perspective or an organizational perspective; few researchers have attempted to explain eWOM by integrating the individual and organizational perspectives and addressing how eWOM can benefit individual customers and organizations simultaneously at the same time. As eWOM is a highly interactive bridge connecting individual travellers to tourism organizations, it is essential to uncover the myth of how eWOM benefits both individuals and travel organizations by taking both sides into consideration.

This research is contextualized in the tourism industry. In recent decades, tourism has become one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors. It is a significant driver of economic growth, contributing over 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and accounting for 10% of jobs worldwide (Crotti and Misrahi 2017). Additionally, as an information-intensive industry of an intangible and experiential nature, tourism is deeply influenced by information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially eWOM and social media applications (Chung and Koo 2015). Social media has been playing an important role as

an information source for travellers (Xiang and Gretzel 2010), and it enables tourists to challenge, and collaborate in producing, consuming, and distributing, travel-related information online.

This research includes data collected from individual tourists in China and tourism organizations in both China and Finland. Among other foreigners, Chinese tourists have increasingly become one of the major visitor groups to Finland. According to a recent report, Alitrip, one of the largest online travel agencies in China, has announced its plan to bring as many as 6,000,000–8,000,000 visitors, coming primarily via Helsinki to Europe in 2020 (2017). Despite this, the understanding of Chinese tourists' eWOM behaviours, such as eWOM use and generation, is gradually becoming a concern among most tourism organizations.

## 1.2 Research questions and objectives

Based on the research gaps discussed above, the objective of this study is three-fold: 1) to explore eWOM use and generation behaviours among individuals by taking eWOM content, as well as the social media platform—that is, the channel of eWOM generation and use—into consideration; 2) to explore the value creation of social media and eWOM in organizations; and 3) to examine how social media and eWOM connect individuals and organizations and uncover the myth of how eWOM benefits both individuals and travel organizations. Therefore, this research focuses primarily on the following three aspects: individuals' eWOM generation behaviours, individuals' eWOM use behaviours, and organizations' social media and eWOM strategies.

Based on the research objectives, the following research questions are proposed in this study:

**RQ1.** What determines travellers' eWOM use and generation behaviours?

*1.1 What are the determinants of travellers' eWOM use behaviour?*

*1.2 What are the determinants of travellers' eWOM generation behaviour?*

**RQ2.** How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers and eWOM to engage with customers?

*2.1 How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers?*

*2.2 How can tourism organizations use eWOM to engage with customers?*

### 1.3 Overview of this study

To explore the research questions outlined above, six research articles, which form the core contribution of this dissertation, were selected. Articles #1 to #4 contributed to the investigation of eWOM from the individual perspective, exploring in particular eWOM use and generation behaviours through different lens. Two articles, Articles #5 and #6, were dedicated to investigating the role of eWOM in customer engagement and value co-creation from the organizational perspective (see Figure 1).

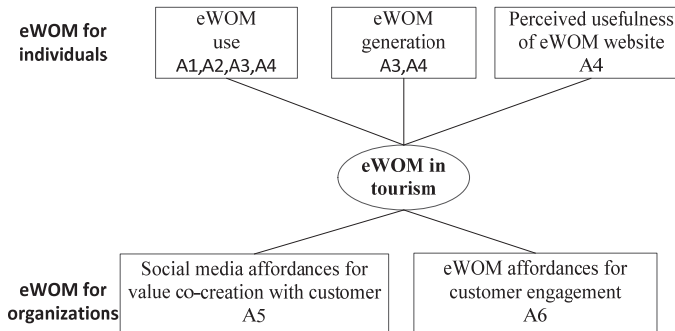


Figure 1 The research framework

### 1.4 Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured into five main chapters and consists of six selected research articles. Chapter 1 introduces the research, including the research background, the research gap, the research questions, an overview of the six research articles that were selected, and a brief introduction to the structure of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the key relevant research and elaborates on the main theories used as the theoretical foundations of the six research articles. As the main concentration of this research is eWOM in tourism, a literature review of eWOM characteristics, as well as eWOM research in the IS and tourism fields, from both individual and organizational perspectives is included in this chapter.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the research methodology. The research paradigms in IS are introduced, after which the choices and justifications for the research approaches adopted in this dissertation are presented. Data collection methods and data analysis are also discussed.

Chapter 4 presents the main empirical research results. A summary of the findings of the six selected research articles is presented from the individual and or-

ganization perspectives, and the eWOM interplay between individuals and organizations is discussed.

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by summarizing the answers to the research questions and outlining the implications for research and practice. The research limitations are discussed, and there is a call for future research on eWOM.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

### 2.1 eWOM characteristics

eWOM is defined 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” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). The prevalence of Web 2.0 and social media facilitated eWOM dissemination on the Internet. eWOM is communicated via Internet-based technology related to “the usage or characteristics of particular goods, and services, or their sellers” (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan 2008). In this section, the main characteristics of eWOM—including its various dispersion channels, enhanced volume, and valence—will be summarized.

**Various dispersion channels and enhanced volume of eWOM.** eWOM communication takes place in a complex information technology-mediated context, which allows for the dispersion of eWOM via various channels—such as blogs, microblogs, online forums, social networking sites, virtual communities, e-commerce websites, and third-party rating websites—to a broad group of audiences.

The multi-directional nature of the Internet as a mediation communication platform enormously enhances the volume of eWOM, which has reached an unprecedented level and keeps growing at a rapid speed. eWOM communication is asynchronous, and the messages are able to be retained online and are more accessible to a wider audience than traditional WOM. As indicated by Kiecker and Cowles (2002), both eWOM generators and receivers have many options in terms of products and services. A large volume of eWOM, together with the valence of eWOM, can raise awareness of products and services (Vermeulen and Seegers 2009). However, the influence of eWOM volume on customers’ decision making is not sufficient, and different effects of the quality and quantity of eWOM on sales were found; for example, Blal and Sturman (2014) found that the volume of reviews has a great effect on lower-tier hotels.

**Valence of eWOM.** Like traditional WOM, eWOM can be positive, negative, or neutral. Positive eWOM usually includes “relating pleasant, vivid, or novel experiences; recommendations to others and even conspicuous display,” and negative eWOM includes behaviours such as “product denigration, relating unpleasant experiences, rumour, and private complaining” (Anderson 1998, p. 6).

The valence of online reviews was found to have an asymmetric, U-shaped effect on the usefulness and enjoyment of eWOM—that is, consumers perceive extreme ratings (positive or negative) as more useful and enjoyable than moderate ratings (Park and Nicolau 2015). eWOM valence influences product sales. Positive eWOM content together with numerical rating details were found to increase customers' booking intention and trust in eWOM (Sparks and Browning 2011). For instance, in the tourism context, the more positive the eWOM about a hotel, the more likely it is that customers will book this hotel (Ladhari and Michaud 2015). Although positive eWOM was found to contribute to higher perceived product quality and lead to higher product sales than negative ones, Lin and Heng (2015) found that positive eWOM might lead to a decrease in subsequent WOM and may, thus, dampen sales.

Conversely, it has consistently been shown that negative reviews have a greater influence on product sales than positive reviews (Cui, Lui, and Guo 2012). This negative bias is explained by the fact that people are more alert to risks in the environment because such risks are critical to our survival (Vaish, Grossmann, and Woodward 2008). Normally, there will be positive, negative, and neutral eWOM about a product/service, but not one polarity (Chaves, Gomes, and Pedron 2012). Research has found that ambivalent online reviews with the presence of personal identifying information will significantly lower consumers' hotel booking intention regarding lodging services (Xie et al. 2011).

The valence of eWOM also affects consumers' perceptions of the useful/helpfulness of eWOM. There is no consensus on the impact of eWOM valence in the literature. For instance, Sparks and Browning (2011) found that consumers seem to be more impacted by the negative information than positive information included in eWOM, especially when the overall set of reviews is negative. Park and Nicolau (2015) also found that negative reviews are more useful than positive ones but that positive reviews are associated with greater enjoyment. Yin, Mitra, and Zhang (2016) incorporated the importance of consumers' initial beliefs and confidence in their beliefs into their evaluation of eWOM, and they found that consumers have a tendency to confirm rather than disconfirm their initial beliefs when using eWOM. This confirmation bias leads to them having a helpfulness perception of positive eWOM if the average rating for the product is high, while they have a helpfulness perception of negative eWOM when the average rating for the product is low.

## **2.2 eWOM research**

To gain an overall understanding of the academic research on eWOM, a literature review was conducted in this section. The current research on eWOM is presented from the individual perspective and organizational perspective in the fields of IS and tourism.

### 2.2.1 Literature search

A two-step process was used to search the initial articles due to the interdisciplinary nature of eWOM research. As recommended by Webster and Watson (2002), leading journals are more likely to make a major contribution to the field in question. As this study is positioned to contribute primarily to the IS literature, the first article-retrieval step was focused on premier high-quality journals in the IS discipline. In addition, this research was conducted in the context of the tourism industry. Thus, the second step of the article retrieval process involved searching the leading journals in the field of hospitality and tourism.

In previous IS research, one group of senior scholars' basket of journals from the Association for Information Systems (AIS) was highly regarded as the leading journals in the field. The journals included in the Senior Scholars' basket are the *European Journal of IS (EJIS)*, *Information Systems Journal (ISJ)*, *Information Systems Research (ISR)*, *Journal of the Association of Information Systems (JAIS)*, *Journal of Information Technology (JIT)*, *Journal of Management Information Systems (JMIS)*, *Journal of Strategic Information Systems (JSIS)*, and *MIS Quarterly (MISQ)*. Lowry et al. (2013) developed a second list of top IS journals consisting of two-tier clusters. Tier 1 comprises *MISQ*, *ISR*, and *JMIS*, and Tier 2 comprises the rest of the six basket journals plus *Information & Management (I&M)*, *Decision Support Systems (DSS)*, and *International Journal of Electronic Commerce (IJEC)*.

In this research, the two-tier journal list for IS was followed. A list of search strings was used, including "eWOM," "online review," and "electronic word-of-mouth." The timeline for the review was set between 2007 and early 2017, covering a 10-year period. eWOM became a prevalent research topic after the popularized concept of Web 2.0 in late 2004 (O'reilly 2005). Since then, eWOM has become a concentration in both academia and practice. However, we found that in the first two years—2005 and 2006—scarcely any literature existed on the IS two-tier journal list regarding empirical findings on eWOM use and generation, especially eWOM use in organizations. Thus, 2007 was selected as the starting point of literature identification. The main literature that has been included is from 2007 to 2016, as the literature review was started in early 2017 in order to present the most updated research stream in the last 10 years. The early cited articles from 2017 were also included to make the review more complete.

All the results were filtered according to the following criteria: 1) the study focuses on eWOM, 2) the study has empirical methodology and findings, and 3) the study concentrates on eWOM application at either the individual level or the organizational level. The results are presented in Table 1.

The second step of article retrieval was conducted with a specific concentration on hospitality and tourism. eWOM is an influential phenomenon in the digi-

tal age, and it has increasingly become an important information source for tourism-related decision-making. Tourism-related information searches are a significant part of the purchase decision process due to the information-intensive nature of the industry and the intangible experiential products and services in tourism. Social media is becoming increasingly important in the online tourism domain and in the context of online travel-related information searches (Xiang and Gretzel 2010). Therefore, researchers in the field of tourism and hospitality have also dedicated much attention to travel-related eWOM.

To identify the most influential and related research articles, data were collected from five leading journals published in the hospitality and tourism field in the 10-year period between 2007 and 2017. The five leading journals in hospitality and tourism include *Annals of Tourism Research (ATR)*, *Journal of Travel Research (JTR)*, *Tourism Management (TM)*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management (IJHM)*, and *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research (JHTR)*. Keywords such as “eWOM,” “electronic word-of-mouth,” and “online review” were used to search related articles published in each journal between 2007 and 2017. All the results were filtered according to the same criteria used in the IS literature. The results are displayed in Table 2.

The literature review on eWOM indicates that four main research concentrations on eWOM exist: (1) the motivations and factors impacting eWOM use, (2) the motivations and factors impacting eWOM generation, (3) the impact of eWOM on individual consumer behaviour, and (4) the impact of eWOM on organizational performance and strategy. In the following section, these four research concentrations will be reviewed.

Table 1 Search results for eWOM research in the IS field (2007–2017)

Journal	Number of articles
<i>MIS Quarterly</i>	5
<i>Information Systems Journal</i>	0
<i>Information Systems Research</i>	7
<i>Journal of Management Information Systems</i>	7
<i>European Journal of Information Systems</i>	1
<i>Journal of the Association of Information Systems</i>	2
<i>Journal of Information Technology</i>	0
<i>Journal of Strategic Information Systems</i>	0
<i>Information &amp; Management</i>	8
<i>Decision Support Systems</i>	22
<i>International Journal of Electronic Commerce</i>	10
Total	62



Table 2 Search results of eWOM research in the hospitality and tourism field (2007–2017)

Journal	Number of articles
<i>Annals of Tourism Research</i>	3
<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>	7
<i>Tourism Management</i>	12
<i>International Journal of Hospitality Management</i>	13
<i>Journal of Hospitality &amp; Tourism Research</i>	7
Total	42

### 2.2.2 eWOM use

eWOM can provide diagnostic value for individuals across different stages of the purchase decision. The purchase decision process includes the stages of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation (Pan and Fesenmaier 2006). eWOM use in the literature investigates the factors impacting users' perceptions of the helpfulness and trustworthiness of eWOM, the motivation of eWOM users, the actions taken after reading eWOM, and the detection of fraudulent reviews.

The credibility and helpfulness of eWOM have long been the area of focus of researchers from IS and research in the tourism context. A helpful eWOM is defined as “a peer-generated product evaluation which facilitates the consumer's purchase decision process” (Mudambi and Schuff 2010, p.136).

**Perspective from eWOM information content.** Some researchers have found that the information content and style of eWOM—including the valence, writing style, review length, rating, etc.—are the most important cues influencing users' trustworthiness and helpfulness evaluations. Mudambi and Schuff (2010) were among the first to explore the helpfulness of eWOM. They found that *review depth* and *review length* positively influence the helpfulness of reviews, as longer and more in-depth reviews include more product details and are considered more helpful for evaluating the quality of products (Mudambi and Schuff 2010). Filieri (2016) later confirmed that short reviews without specific details tend to be perceived as untrustworthy and that only lengthy reviews which contain factual, detailed, and relevant information tend to be perceived as trustworthy. They also found that some lengthy reviews can still be perceived as untrustworthy if the details are irrelevant to consumers or products.

*Valence* of eWOM was also found to determine consumers' perceived usefulness (PU) of a review. Hu, Chen, and Lee (2016) found that both positive and negative sentiment features had strong effects on review helpfulness. Park and Nicolau (2015) found that the valence of eWOM has a U-shaped effect on use-

fulness and that negative reviews are more helpful than positive reviews in the context of consumers' restaurant information processing. It was also found that *extreme reviews*, which are often overly positive or overly negative, are viewed as untrustworthy, as it is believed that these reviews are more likely to be manipulated—that is, posted by the establishment, competitors, or overly critical people (Filieri 2016). The *sidedness* of eWOM was also a determinant of eWOM's helpfulness and trustworthiness. For instance, two-sided reviews were found to cause a positive expectancy violation, resulting in greater credibility attribution (Jensen et al. 2013), and Filieri (2016) found that reviews with moderate ratings and two-sided information are perceived as highly trustworthy, as they provide balanced and plausible opinions.

As eWOM has become prevalent in influencing customers' purchase decisions, some companies are motivated to manipulate reviews and ask people to write fake reviews about them and their competitors. Therefore, textual characteristics and ratings were also used as methods to help detect manipulated, fraudulent, and fake reviews. A series of studies focused on the detection of fraudulent reviews was conducted to explore how consumers can detect fraudulent reviews and avoid being trapped by their manipulation (e.g. Hu et al. 2011, Hu et al. 2012, Hu, Liu, and Sambamurthy 2011). Textual information was analysed—in particular, the writing style of reviews—and the effectiveness of manipulation through ratings, sentiments, and readability was investigated. It was found that, in the context of online bookstores, consumers are able to detect manipulation through ratings only—not through sentiments.

Tourism researchers have also explored eWOM's communication characteristics and travel-related characteristics. They have found that eWOM communication in the tourism context is based on social relationships—that is, it relies on strong, middling, or weak social ties. Typically, the communication is structured, loose-knit, flat, of high centrality, and dominated by travel interests (Luo and Zhong 2015). A study of hotels' eWOM characteristics, conducted by Chaves, Gomes, and Pedron (2012), showed that, rooms, staff, and locations are the most frequently mentioned concepts in hotel-related eWOM.

***Perspective from the source of communication and the peripheral cues.*** The second group of factors identified as impacting eWOM's helpfulness and trustworthiness related to the source of communication and the peripheral cues, including the *reviewers' characteristics*, such as identity information and reputation, review platforms, types of website, sellers' credibility, etc. On most social media and eWOM websites, reviewers' personal information is presented as reference. Baek, Ahn, and Choi (2012) indicated that consumers focus on different information sources of reviews based on their own purposes for reading eWOM—that is, for searching for information or for evaluating alternatives. They found that both peripheral cues—including *review rating* and *reviewers'*

*credibility*—and content will together influence the helpfulness of eWOM. The presence of *personal identity information* positively affects the perceived credibility of online reviews (Xie et al. 2011). *Reviewers' reputation* is also an important cue that is positively associated with the trustworthiness of eWOM. Cheung, Sia, and Kuan (2012) suggested that reviewers with a favourable reputation could be identified on the basis of members' trust network and their review behaviour (average product rating in a specific category), which enables eWOM users to determine whose reviews they can trust. Filieri and McLeay (2014) implied that high-involvement travellers adopt both central (information quality) and peripheral (*product ranking*) routes when they process information from ORs. To evaluate review helpfulness, Hu, Chen, and Lee (2016) explored *reviewer features*, including the reviewer's gender, community experience, and contribution to the community.

Some researchers also pay attention to the phenomenon of seller manipulation of *fraudulent reviews*. Lai, Li, and Lin (2017) developed a social referral mechanism to estimate the trust values of sellers to help buyers avoid transactions with fraudulent sellers in the online market. The different *review channels* are also factors impacting the trustworthiness of eWOM. Dickinger (2011) compared three different online channels of eWOM in tourism—that is, personal, marketing, and editorial. They indicate that user-generated content is highly trustworthy due to its high levels of integrity, whilst editorial content providers are perceived as the most capable information providers. Their results confirm that different dimensions of trustworthiness act as determinants of the trustworthiness of different types of online channel.

Some researchers have identified the factors moderating the evaluation of eWOM's helpfulness and trustworthiness, including product type, emotions included in review expression, customer's experience, consumer's involvement, and sense of membership. Mudambi and Schuff (2010) found that *product type*—search goods or experience goods—moderates the factors contributing to the helpfulness of eWOM. Moderate reviews are more helpful than extreme reviews (strongly positive or negative) for experience goods, but not for search goods. Review depth has a greater positive effect on the helpfulness of reviews for search goods than for experience goods (Mudambi and Schuff 2010). Ahmad and Laroche (2015) demonstrated that discrete emotions, such as hope, happiness, anxiety, and disgust, included in reviews also influence the helpfulness of eWOM. eWOM readers' sense of membership positively moderates the effects of argument strength, sidedness, and rating on eWOM credibility, and the positive effect of argument strength on review credibility was greater with the increase in sense of membership (Luo et al. 2015). Filieri (2016) found that *consumer involvement and experience*, as well as the *type of website*, affect the way in which consumers assess trustworthiness. Hong et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis,

which revealed that *helpfulness measurement*, *online review source*, and *product type* are responsible for most of the extant contradictory findings on eWOM helpfulness.

Some literature explored the motivation and factors contributing to consumers' eWOM adoption behaviour and intention to act regarding the purchase of a product after reading eWOM. Although eWOM has been proven to be effective communication for intentionally influencing the consumer decision, understanding when eWOM users act upon a recommendation was an issue that also attracted certain researchers. Drawing on relationship theories and trust research, Matook, Brown, and Rolf (2015) found that *closeness in online social network*, *excessive posting behaviour*, and *past recommendation experience* positively impact consumers' intention to act on the recommendation from eWOM. Filieri and McLeay (2014) conducted research in the accommodation context and found that *product ranking* and *eWOM information quality*, including accuracy, relevance, value-added information, and timeliness, are strong predictors of travellers' eWOM adoption intention. Ayeh, Au, and Law (2013) found that travellers' perceptions of *similarity of interest*, *trustworthiness*, and *enjoyment in consumer-generated media* play significant roles in impacting the intention to make travel plans after utilizing user-generated media, such as TripAdvisor. Trust in the user-generated media is also confirmed to be an antecedent of consumers' intention to follow other users' advice, according to research by Filieri, Alguezaui, and McLeay (2015).

### 2.2.3 eWOM generation

eWOM generation research focuses on two main topics: (1) why consumers generate eWOM—eWOM generation motivation—and (2) who generates eWOM—eWOM generator profiles, including positive and negative eWOM generators, as well as fake review generators. This part of the review will also include the main research in the IS field, as well as in the tourism context.

**eWOM generation motivation.** For both customers and marketers, eWOM is an opportunity that both sides can take advantage of. However, all of these advantages are based on the generation of eWOM. How to elicit more eWOM from customers is one of the tenets of the modern marketers who want to leverage the value of eWOM. Thus, understanding the motivations for eWOM generation is one of the issues of most concern in recent studies. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) started the exploration of eWOM motivations and identified five significant motivations for eWOM generators—that is, social benefits (social interaction), self-enhancement, extroversion, altruism, and economic incentives. Serra Cantallops and Salvi (2014) later reviewed eWOM publications in the context of hotels, and

they found that service quality, customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction, failure and recovery, sense of community belonging, social identity, pre-purchase expectations, and helping other vacationers or companies are the main factors influencing review generation.

Motives from the customer's perspective are most important with regard to eWOM-generation behaviour (Ben-Shaul and Reichel 2017). In particular, they found that the most meaningful predictors of consumers' active contribution to eWOM are *socio-psychological motives*, followed by *hedonistic* and *functional motives*. These motives are positively associated with the frequency and duration of visits to the eWOM platform (Ben-Shaul and Reichel 2017). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) revealed that information influence and relational influence are two key factors motivating eWOM searching and generation. Shih, Lai, and Cheng (2013) further demonstrated that eWOM communication is an information exchange, as well as a social exchange. They indicated that the dedication-based relational influence from the psychological perspective is more significant than the informational influence in regard to motivating eWOM behaviours. Moreover, the psychological perspective focusing on affective attitudes is more important in determining eWOM intention than cognitive attitudes from the economic perspective.

Among the motivations identified, **altruistic motivations** are the most mentioned. The aim of altruistic motivation, which differs from egoistic motivation, is to help others and increase their welfare (Batson 1987). Altruistic consumers tend to provide practical recommendations which can contribute to improving the experience quality and well-being of others. The altruistic motivation behind eWOM communication is activated when consumers want to help other consumers make better purchase decisions—that is, either to recommend a good-quality consumption experience with positive eWOM or use negative eWOM to warn them about risk purchases. In regard to eWOM communication, as revealed by Bronner and De Hoog (2011), 70% of vacationers post eWOM to motivate and help other vacationers to make good decisions. Tong et al. (2013) found that consumers' perceived satisfaction gained from helping other consumers, as well as influencing merchants, influence their eWOM generation intention. It is also an empirically tested fact that the enjoyment derived from helping others is positively related to one's eWOM intention on consumer opinion platforms (Cheung and Lee 2012). In a recent study of eWOM intention in the context of tourism and hospitality, altruistic motivation was confirmed to motivate positive eWOM regarding dining (Jeong and Jang 2011) or restaurants (Yang 2017), hotel booking (Yen and Tang 2015), and travel decision-making (Bronner and De Hoog 2011). Munar and Jacobsen (2014) found that eWOM motivation factors differ depending on content type and social media type and that altruism is one of the most relevant motivations for information-sharing behaviour.

**Social motivation.** Also mentioned in eWOM-generation behaviour, social motivation includes *social benefits*, *social identity*, and *sense of belonging*. Social motivations are akin to “real life” social networks, such as emotional support, social ties with current friends, or the making of new connections in virtual worlds (Ben-Shaul and Reichel 2017). Social identity is a part of individuals’ self-concept, and they define themselves in terms of their interactions with others (Tajfel 1981). Tong et al. (2013) revealed that consumers’ perceived probability of self-image enhancement is positively related to their eWOM contribution intention. Posting eWOM is a way to connect with others, and the social benefits of eWOM motivation have been widely regarded in empirical research as a motivation. Researchers, such as Cheung and Lee (2012), have found that reputation and sense of community belonging are positively related to one’s eWOM intention, as when people identify themselves as part of a community, they align their goals with the community and contribute their knowledge to benefit other members of this community. Further, Yen and Tang (2015) explored eWOM intention regarding Facebook and consumer opinion platforms, such as TripAdvisor, and found that psychological factors, such as social benefits, can motivate eWOM posting behaviour on Facebook but not on consumer opinion sites, such as TripAdvisor.

**Purchase experience.** Consumers’ satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service also motivates them to generate eWOM. This is also referred to as dissonance reduction (Yen and Tang 2015). When there is a strong positive or negative consumption experience, consumers experience psychological tension. This tension may be reduced by generating positive eWOM to express their positive emotions or generating negative eWOM to vent about their negative consumption experience (Yen and Tang 2015). As Sánchez-García and Currás-Pérez (2011) asserted, regretful consumers who have experienced service or product dissatisfaction are more likely to generate negative eWOM in order to warn others. This is especially significant in the tourism context of the experience goods type. Satisfactory experiences with high-quality services and products will motivate positive eWOM, which is also motivated by the concern for others (Jeong and Jang 2011). Simpson and Siguaw (2008) also found that satisfaction with a tourism destination experience will promote consumers’ intention to recommend the destination via eWOM.

**Economic incentive.** As eWOM has been recognized as highly persuasive and has been widely accepted by consumers, companies have used monetary incentives to influence customers’ eWOM communication behaviour. Economic incentive has been identified as an important motivation for general human behaviour, and receiving economic rewards from platform operators was revealed as a motivation for eWOM generators (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Tong et al. (2013) later found that the **economic rewarding mechanism** can facilitate consumers’

eWOM generation behaviour, especially if consumers perceived a high probability of self-image enhancement or a low cost of cognitive perception.

However, there is also a controversial finding on the relationship between economic incentives and eWOM intention. Yen and Tang (2015) found that, for hotel consumers, economic incentives did not increase their likelihood of choosing the consumer opinion platform TripAdvisor to post eWOM, but they significantly reduced their intention to post eWOM on social network site Facebook. This indicates that the motivations for eWOM generation are not universally equal and that it may be correlated to different factors based on consumers' diverse experiences, cultural backgrounds, pre-existing beliefs, etc. Economic incentive was also found to be a motivation for the fake reviews phenomenon (Choi et al. 2017). Some companies have begun to invite people to generate fake reviews about their business or their competitors, aiming to mislead consumers. Research by Choi et al. (2017) found that powerless individuals are more likely to be motivated by the monetary incentive to post fake reviews.

**Cultural background.** This factor was taken into consideration in regard to its impact on eWOM generation behaviour. Li, Qiu, and Liu (2016) explored the two significant cultural values—*face* and *guanxi*—related to Chinese consumers' eWOM behaviour in the hospitality service context. They found that the concern for *face* can increase the intention to spread negative eWOM regarding experience, service, or product failure, while *guanxi* between hotels and customers can reduce negative eWOM generation intention. Additionally, *guanxi* can moderate the *face* influence on customers' direct complaint intention regarding hotels. Balaji, Khong, and Chong (2016) found that consumers' concern for face is one of the key antecedents of negative eWOM generation when they experience injustice. Hong et al. (2016) found that collectivist culture customers were less likely to express emotion in eWOM which deviates from average prior ratings. Reviews that exhibit high conformity with group reviews and include intense emotions are perceived as less helpful.

Despite all the above-mentioned personal-centred motives, studies have also revealed the role of eWOM **platform-related factors** in impacting customers' eWOM generation behaviour. The platform-related motivations concern customers' experiences with the eWOM platforms, such as sense of belonging to a community, PU of a specific eWOM website, trust in the platform, etc.

Social media adopts different forms, which vary greatly in ways such as interactivity, media richness, reach, and control (Munar and Jacobsen 2013). Thus, studies indicate that consumers' eWOM generation motives also vary according to different eWOM platforms. Filieri, Alguezaui, and McLeay (2015) found that trust in consumer-generated websites, such as TripAdvisor, influences consumers' intention to foster positive WOM. Yang (2017) found that the PU of an eWOM website has a significant effect on eWOM intention. The PU of eWOM websites

significantly moderates the relationships between satisfaction/egoistic needs and eWOM intentions. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) also found that *community-related motivation* is among the most relevant for eWOM sharing and, more specifically, social networks that allow audience control are most popular for online sharing. Leung, Bai, and Stahura (2015) revealed that hotel customers' positive social media website experiences lead to positive attitudes to hotel booking intention and, in turn, intentions to spread eWOM. Thus, they suggest business organizations should make their social media pages more interesting, informative, and interactive so that consumers can enjoy their social media experience and may be more willing to spread eWOM. Yen and Tang (2015) explored the relationship between eWOM behaviour and media choice, and they indicated that the operators of consumer opinion websites (such as TripAdvisor) should emphasize the reach and influence of their sites to attract more eWOM contributions to their sites. They also indicated that the operators of social network websites (such as Facebook) should emphasize the emotional connections which can be built on their platforms.

**eWOM generator.** Studies on eWOM generation also profiled the eWOM generators, including their characteristics and strategies. Empirical results have revealed that the *demographic characteristics* and *consumption experiences* of consumers are the main traits differentiating eWOM generators and browsers and eWOM generation behaviours. In tourism research, Bronner and De Hoog (2011) sketched the profile of eWOM generators. They found that vacationers who generate eWOM more frequently are those who are a younger *age*, have higher *incomes*, and are couples. Rong et al. (2012) suggested that demographic characteristics and travel motivations, such as age, education level, income level, *travel experience* level, are the factors differentiating eWOM generators from browsers. They found that young people are more likely to search and share their travel experience. Past travel experiences also impact travellers' eWOM behaviour. The further travellers went, the more likely they would be to search information online, and travellers who have overseas travel experience spend more time reading and generating eWOM. Ip, Lee, and Law (2012) also confirmed that travel website users were those who were younger, had a high education level, and had a high personal income level. Travellers' propensities to generate information about their travel experiences online decreased with age. Their willingness to generate this information increased with their education level up to college/university, but it decreased with a higher level of education than college/university.

Product type is one of the factors influencing customers' eWOM generation behaviour. Dellarocas, Gao, and Narayan (2010) found *ceteris paribus* that consumers prefer to generate eWOM for less available and less successful products on the market than for products with many available reviews.



As eWOM generation is also initiated by social motivation, eWOM generators have their own **strategies for increasing reputation** or competition for attention among reviewers. Goes, Lin, and Yeung (2014) found that as online review website users become more popular, they tend to generate more reviews and more objective reviews; however, their numeric ratings become more negative and more varied. Online reviewers also have their own strategies for how to choose the right products to review and the right ratings to post to gain their own reputations and attention among reviewers. For instance, Shen and Rees Ulmer (2015) found that on review platforms with reviewer ranking systems, such as Amazon, reviewers are more sensitive to the competition, avoid the crowded reviews that exist, and post more differentiated ratings. However, in a review system without a reviewer ranking system, reviewers are less strategic regarding their eWOM generation behaviour.

Consumers' **eWOM generation behaviour is also influenced** by certain external factors, such as the *review environment*, *customer engagement* in the community, the retailer's invention, etc. The existing review environment impacts eWOM generating behaviour; for instance, Moe and Schweidel (2012) found that *positive ratings environments* increase posting incidence, whereas *negative ratings environments* discourage posting. What is more, *less frequent* posters exhibited bandwagon behaviour and were more active customers, revealing differentiation behaviour. Empirical evidence was also found in support of the fact that reviews from experts impact consumers' reviewing behaviour. Zhang, Zhang, and Yang (2016) found in the hotel rating context that as the *expert review number* increases, future ratings from hotel consumers will increase. With the increase in their *review expert levels*, consumers' ratings become more negative. Because many retailers now want to elicit more reviews from consumers after their consumption, reviewers' eWOM generation behaviour is also impacted by *retailers' inventions*. Askalidis, Kim, and Malthouse (2017) found that retailers can overcome social influence bias on reviewers by sending review invitations and not exposing them to the existing reviews while they are writing their reviews. Additionally, they found that when consumers are able to read existing reviews, self-motivated eWOM decreases in regard to star ratings, while retailer-prompted ratings remain constant. Wu, Fan, and Zhao (2017) found that *consumer engagement in a brand community* increases the intention to generate eWOM after consumption and also makes it more likely that consumers will post positive eWOM.

### ***2.2.4 Impact of eWOM from the individual perspective***

eWOM has long been a form of persuasive communication impacting both individuals and companies, and numerous researchers have analyzed the impact of eWOM from two perspectives: the impact on individual customers and the impact on companies. eWOM has become an important information source impacting individual consumers' behaviours, such as their purchase decisions (Li and Hitt 2008, Lee and Lee 2009, Mauri and Minazzi 2013), attitude formation (Huang and Korfiatis 2015), and intentions to take action (Wang 2011). This section will review the extant research, with the main focus being on the impact of eWOM from the individual perspective.

Factors such as **source credibility**, **review quality and quantity**, **eWOM valence**, and **gender** are frequently included when discussing the impact of eWOM on customers' decision-making. Zhang et al. (2014) explored the influence using the dual-process, heuristic-systematic model, and they identified one systematic factor (argument quality of reviews) and two heuristic factors (source credibility and perceived quantity of reviews) affecting customers' purchase intention. Consumers examine the content of reviews to form informative and persuasive perceptions; meanwhile, they also refer to cues, such as review sources' ranking levels and numbers. Consumers are more likely to purchase products with more online reviews. In addition, the impact of eWOM on different genders and culture varies. In regard to the gastronomy blogs of food markets, Wang (2011) found that content inspiring taste desire (the experience appeal, generating empathy), forming taste awareness (providing image, presenting guides), and facilitating interpersonal interaction (social influence and cyber-community influence) were the critical components impacting online eWOM readers' intention to taste food. Awad and Ragowsky (2008) found that eWOM's impacts on consumers' trust in e-commerce and on their intention to shop online are stronger for women than for men. Men value their ability to post eWOM, whereas women value other consumers' responsive interaction with their own posts. Professional reviews were also empirically tested and found to have mediation effects on consumers' decisions—that is, a higher professional rating directly promotes customers' purchase intention and facilitates active eWOM interactions among users (Zhou and Duan 2016).

Research also demonstrates that the **valence of eWOM** has a strong influence on consumers. It has been found that exposure to both positive and negative online reviews enhances product consideration and awareness among consumers (Vermeulen and Seegers 2009). Positive eWOM improves attitudes towards products, while negative eWOM increases the awareness of products. Mauri and Minazzi (2013) found that positively framed eWOM increases both consumers' hotel booking intention and their trust in a company, and negative reviews have a

detrimental effect on perceived company reliability and purchase intentions. Conversely, previous studies have found that with regard to purchase intention and consumers' attitude formation, the impact of negative eWOM is greater than that of positive eWOM (Aggarwal et al. 2012, Huang and Korfiatis 2015). In the tourism context, Sparks and Browning (2011) indicated that consumers seem to be more influenced by early negative information, especially when the overall set of reviews is negative. It is the general consensus that the more positive the eWOM, the more positive the purchasing intention (Ladhari and Michaud 2015). It was later found that when there is high agreement regarding negative WOM, potential consumers exhibit a greater amount of attitude change in a negative direction (Lee and Cranage 2014). Yin, Mitra, and Zhang (2016) revealed that *confirmation bias* existed while evaluating the helpfulness of eWOM of different valences. Consumers tend to perceive as more helpful the reviews that confirm their initial beliefs, and this confirmation bias leads to greater perceived helpfulness for positive reviews when the average product rating is high, and vice versa.

Research has also focused on the individual impact of eWOM *in the context of tourism*, such as on tourists' hotel booking intention (Sparks and Browning 2011, Vermeulen and Seegers 2009). Online traveller reviews are a prevalent source that influences travel purchases. Book et al. (2015) revealed the strong social influence of eWOM on travellers' resort evaluations and post-decision dissonance. Serra Cantallops and Salvi (2014) summarized the impact of eWOM on individuals in the context of hotels and indicated that eWOM influences consumers' booking intentions, hotel comparisons, hotel brand awareness, loyalty, risk reduction, product acceptance, and decision-making processes. The impact of eWOM also extends to different domains, such as the professional service of medical practitioners (Gao et al. 2015), financial products (Aggarwal et al. 2012), and electronic applications (Huang and Korfiatis 2015).

While both customers and businesses are empowered by eWOM, there is also the *dark side of eWOM's impact* on customers' decision-making. Liu and Karahanna (2017) discovered the "swaying" effect of eWOM—that is, it is possible that attribute preferences are more influenced by online reviews than by the relevance of attributes in the consumer's decision-making context.

### ***2.2.5 eWOM from the organizational perspective***

As eWOM has become one of the key factors influencing consumers to obtain product information and reduce uncertainties and impacting their purchase decisions, online retailers are prompted to actively solicit eWOM from consumers, going beyond passively hosting it. The discussion on eWOM's impact from the

organization's perspective mainly includes two aspects: the impact on business performance and business strategies regarding eWOM.

### ***The impact of eWOM on business performance***

eWOM was empirically found to impact business performance, such as retailer sales (Lu et al. 2013, Ambler and Bui 2011, Liang et al. 2015, Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld 2008, Duan, Gu, and Whinston 2008), the popularity of companies (Zhang et al. 2010), and retailing strategies (Bai et al. 2017).

eWOM can be an information source conveying product reputation, brand reputation, and even the reputation of complementary products, and it impacts companies' sales as a result (Ambler and Bui 2011). eWOM communication can act as routes to social influence while information about products is gathered. Considerable social interaction is also involved in obtaining empathy or having intimate discussions between friends. Lu et al. (2013) proved that the influence of eWOM on retailers' sales can be a substitute for promotional marketing strategies, such as offering coupons.

eWOM was found to impact retailers' sales of different types of products, and this impact on sales differs according to product type. Researchers explored the different impacts of eWOM on products, including high-involvement products such as cameras and restaurant food (Gu, Park, and Konana 2012), as well as low-involvement products, such as books and CDs (Ambler and Bui 2011). Duan, Gu, and Whinston (2008) have shown that in the movie market, eWOM has little persuasive effect on consumer purchase decisions but that the volume of reviews influences sales significantly. However, in the lodging market, Nieto, Hernández-Maestro, and Muñoz-Gallego (2014) showed that both customer ratings and review numbers determine business performance (such as business owners' satisfaction, profitability, and market perceptions). Positively valenced reviews increase business performance, while negatively valenced reviews decrease it. However, with greater review quantity, whether positive or negative, all performance improves. Similar findings presented by Ye, Law, and Gu (2009) also indicated that positive online reviews can significantly increase hotels' booking numbers, while the variance or polarity of eWOM has a negative impact on sales. Further, Lee, Lee, and Shin (2011) offered a new type of product categorization through its evaluation standards—that is, products with objective evaluation standards (such as search goods and vertically differentiated goods) and products with subjective evaluation standards (e.g. experience goods and horizontally differentiated goods). They concluded that the impact of eWOM on the sales distribution of each product type differs.

Some research explored the eWOM-related factors impacting retailers' sales, such as review valence, volume, eWOM from different platforms (external websites or retailer-hosted internal websites), and eWOM from different generators

(customers' reviews or editors' reviews). For instance, Xie, Zhang, and Zhang (2014) revealed that *review valence*, *review variation*, and *review volume* are positively associated with hotel business performance. According to Gu, Park, and Konana (2012), eWOM from *external websites* plays a more important role in customers' information search processes than from retailer-hosted internal websites. As the prevalence of eWOM has increased, *retailer-hosted internal websites* have also proliferated. eWOM from retailer-hosted internal websites has less and more limited influence on their sales of high-involvement products (such as digital cameras), compared with eWOM from external websites, such as third-party opinion websites (Gu, Park, and Konana 2012).

Zhang et al. (2010) showed that in the context of restaurants, consumer ratings and customer review volume are positively associated with restaurants' popularity, whereas *editor reviews* are negatively associated with consumers' intention to visit a restaurant's web page. Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld (2008) affirmed that the disclosure of generators' identity-descriptive information, such as shared geographical location, while generating eWOM increases the impact of eWOM on product sales. Further, as eWOM usually includes comments on multifaceted elements, Liang et al. (2015) explained the impact of two types of sentiments included in eWOM—product quality sentiment and service quality sentiment. They suggested that both the product quality and service quality included in eWOM are taken into consideration by customers before their purchases. To succeed in the competitive market, it is necessary for retailers to improve both product and service quality.

### ***eWOM management strategy***

Having realized the critical role of eWOM in business performance, business managers have become increasingly aware of the need to actively communicate with consumers by responding to their reviews online and formulating business strategies related to eWOM management.

*Organizational response strategy to eWOM.* Several studies have examined how business organizations can respond appropriately to consumers' eWOM, especially negative eWOM, and manage their online reputations via eWOM communication. Park and Allen (2013) investigated hotels' eWOM response strategies and found that hotels with different response frequencies differ in their understanding of consumers' reviews. Those hotels with higher response frequencies consider consumers' reviews an honest gauge of their sentiments, whereas those with low response frequencies regard consumers' eWOM as representing only extremely positive or negative views. In addition, they also found that hotels have different eWOM management strategies. Frequent responders have a collaborative communication style and internal staff who focus on han-

dling social media, while infrequent ones only meet as needed and rely on some external corporate manager to handle social media.

As negative eWOM influences business performance more strongly than positive ones, several researchers have explored organizational *response strategies related specifically to negative eWOM*. For instance, Lee and Cranage (2014) found that when there is widespread agreement on negative eWOM about the organization, providing an apology combined with an internal explanation (i.e. accommodative response) or no response is better than an external explanation (i.e. defensive response). With internal explanations or no response to negative WOM, the potential for consumers' attitudes to change in a negative direction is less. McQuilken and Robertson (2013) further revealed that the greater the level of consumer participation in making a purchase decision, the more likely it is for the consumer to exit the site or generate negative eWOM. The presence of stable service failure has the largest effect on consumers' complaint behaviour. Therefore, they suggest that organizations should train service providers to establish which customer is responsible for making the choices among a group of customers and satisfy the decision-maker. To prevent negative eWOM, they should also be able to explain the service failure and to guarantee that the failure is unlikely to recur. Sparks, So, and Bradley (2016) demonstrated that the provision of organizational responses to online criticism would enhance customers' inferences of trust and concern. Specifically, a timely response with a human voice style was more effective in yielding favourable consumer inferences.

However, it is argued that eWOM from consumers can be an effective way to tune into the market and improve organizations' service level to enable them to gain a competitive edge in the market. Therefore, managers should not only concentrate on monitoring the critical aspects of consumers' negative reviews but also strive to comprehend the service expected by consumers (Mauri and Minazzi 2013). Sparks and Bradley (2017) presented a typology of management responses to negative eWOM for hotel managers based on service recovery, justice, and the eWOM literature.

Some researchers found that the presence of managers' *responses to guests' reviews decreases consumers' purchasing intentions* (Xie, Zhang, and Zhang 2014, Mauri and Minazzi 2013). According to these authors, consumers can easily perceive managers' responses as marketing information, and most management responses tend to immediately follow the complaints included in the negative reviews, leading to consumers' automatically connecting management responses with negative eWOM and bad service/product quality (Xie, Zhang, and Zhang 2014). An important point in regard to responding to consumers' eWOM is not whether to reply but how and where to reply (Mauri and Minazzi 2013). The corporate response should consider the context and the information included in the message, rather than considering only the valence of the review, which

may easily be perceived as an advertisement and may not be viewed by consumers as credible.

*Impact on the retailer's business strategy.* Several studies have examined retailers' business strategies in the eWOM era, such as identifying key eWOM disseminators and the effective use of eWOM from opinion leaders, monitoring the antecedents of customers' satisfaction and dissatisfaction, designing review systems, and formulating marketing strategies. Bao and Chang (2014) found that companies can increase product sales via the effective use of eWOM from opinion leaders. These authors identified three types of opinion leaders regarding eWOM—communicative (they have the ability to communicate with other consumers about their product experiences), buzz-generating (their eWOM reaches a large number of consumers and, thus, creates a buzz), and trustworthy (their eWOM is a trusted source that provides helpful information). They demonstrate that eWOM by opinion leaders using their experience and knowledge of the product can promote product sales. Similar suggestions, also given by Aggarwal et al. (2012), indicate that eWOM from popular bloggers can help ventures to get high funding amounts and valuations.

Banerjee, Bhattacharyya, and Bose (2017) demonstrated that reviewer trustworthiness has a positive impact on business sales and that businesses should focus on building good review-based reputations and encourage the most trustworthy reviewers to review their products and services. The prevalence and dynamism of eWOM have forced business organizations to design organizational strategies and keep monitoring the opinions expressed in eWOM. According to Xu and Li (2016), eWOM is an important source used by companies to identify the antecedents of consumers' satisfaction and dissatisfaction. They found that some positive core attributes in hotels, such as location, staff, and rooms, contribute to customer satisfaction. However, for each type of hotel, the importance of the determinants of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction varies. Business organizations have also realized the challenge that eWOM has created for their reputation management practices; for example, Baka (2016) presented a conceptual model for managing online reputation in the era of eWOM.

Regarding the impact of eWOM on retailers' marketing strategies, Bai et al. (2017) found that decision-makers and managers from highly rated restaurants were more likely to be attracted to coupon revenues and felt confident that their good ratings would continue. Additionally, the greater the volume of eWOM for a restaurant, the greater the likelihood that this restaurant would initiate a Groupon deal. With a high tendency for companies to host their own review systems, Jiang and Guo (2015) pointed out that it is beneficial to host a review system only when the product valuation is higher than a particular threshold. They also suggested offering different review strategies for different product types,

such as choosing low rating scale cardinality for niche products and high rating scale cardinality for mainstream products.

## **2.3 Main theories used in this research**

In this section, the main theoretical foundation for this study will be introduced. In this study, four theories are employed to discuss individuals' eWOM behaviours and the affordances of eWOM for travel-service providers, aiming to answer the research questions that have been raised in this study.

### ***2.3.1 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)***

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM), which originates from social psychology, indicates that an individual's attitude can be changed via two distinct routes: central and peripheral (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983) (See Figure 2). ELM illustrates that the routes that individuals are persuaded to take vary according to the extent to which they are willing to engage in the elaboration of the persuasive issues. Individuals who take the central route think more critically about issue-related arguments in the message content, and they carefully scrutinize the arguments prior to forming their target behaviours (Bhattacharjee and Sanford 2006). In contrast, for individuals taking the peripheral route of attitude change, relatively less cognitive effort is needed. A person may simply rely on cues related to the target behaviour, such as prior users, prior related personal experience, and credibility. The central route is message-related and argument-oriented, while the peripheral route is process cues-oriented. "Elaboration" is defined as "the extent to which the individuals engage in information contained in the communication, and mentally modify or process the issue" (Priester and Petty 2003). The term "likelihood" illustrates whether elaboration is likely or unlikely, and it is also used to describe the fact that individuals may add something of their own to a given information source during a specific communication process (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983, Bhattacharjee and Sanford 2006).



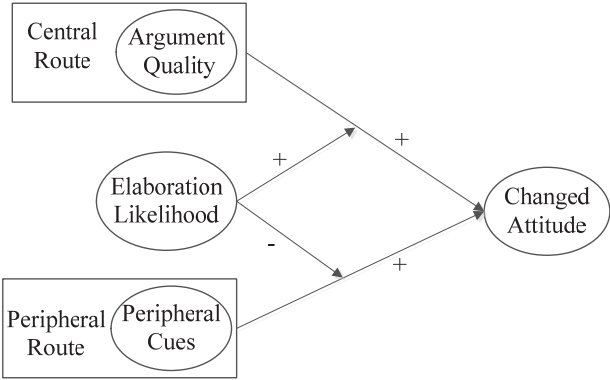


Figure 2 Elaboration Likelihood Model

Some researchers have applied ELM in the eWOM context to understand how eWOM persuades people. For instance, drawing on ELM, Luo et al. (2014) explored how cultural background moderates eWOM readers’ perceptions of eWOM credibility and found that individualistic culture positively moderates the effects from information sidedness to information credibility and negatively moderates the effects from information consistency and information rating to information credibility. Filieri and McLeay (2014) applied ELM to understand the antecedents of consumers’ adoption of eWOM to support their decision-making.

ELM is suitable for explaining the attitude change and the persuasive process in communication; thus, ELM has been selected as one of the theories used in this study to investigate the influence of eWOM on tourists’ visit intention and the influence of the persuasive process on tourists’ attitude changes. This theory is applied to answer RQ1 of the study, contributing to the exploration of eWOM use from the individual perspective.

2.3.2 *Uses and Gratifications*

According to the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory, an individual’s use of the media is selective and is motivated by his or her rational self-awareness of his or her own needs, as well as the expectation that these needs can be gratified by particular types of media and content (Ruggiero 2000). The U&G theory has been widely applied in research to explain individuals’ use of media—such as traditional media (e.g. newspaper, radio, and television) (Babrow 1987)—and new media, including social network sites (Wang, Segev, and Liu 2015) and virtual communities (Nambisan and Baron 2009). Individuals obtain different gratifications from various media uses due to the different characteristics of each media.

Prior research mainly applies U&G to explore how the gratification from a certain platform or technology leads to the technology use behaviour. For in-

stance, it is found that utilitarian, social, and hedonic gratifications were important determinants of the use of social network sites (Xu et al. 2012), social network games (Li et al. 2015a), and virtual communities (Hsu et al. 2015). Little research has explored whether U&G can help explain other media-related behavioural outcomes, such as eWOM generation and use. Specifically, whether the gratification derived from eWOM platform use motivates individual users to generate eWOM on the platform or adopt the eWOM on the platform to support their purchase decisions.

The U&G framework has been selected as one of the theories in this study because it is one of the most appropriate theoretical frameworks used for studying the psychological and behavioural tendencies associated with mediated communication (Lin 1999). One of the main research objectives of this study, RQ1, is to explore the impact of platform-related factors on eWOM use behaviour. Thus, U&G has been selected in this study to solve RQ1. In addition, the selection of U&G in this study leads to an exploration of whether eWOM use can be explained from media communication perspectives and whether U&G can be extended to explain eWOM use behaviour.

### 2.3.3 Information Systems Success

DeLone and McLean (1992) synthesized previous research involving MIS success into a more coherent body of knowledge and provided guidance to future researchers. The model consists of six interrelated dimensions of success: system quality, information quality, system use, user satisfaction, individual impacts, and organizational impacts (see Figure 3). In this taxonomy, system quality measures technical success, information quality measures semantic success, and the others measure system effectiveness. DeLone and McLean (2003) decided to add service quality to their updated IS success model, as suggested by Pitt, Watson, and Kavan (1995) based on the SERVQUAL marketing literature, stating that “the changes in the role of IS over the last decade argue for a separate variable—the service quality dimension.” Therefore, three quality dimensions are measured using the IS success model: system quality, information quality, and service quality (see Figure 4).

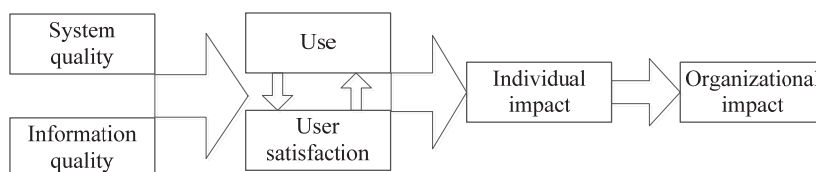


Figure 3 DeLone and McLean's IS success model (1992)

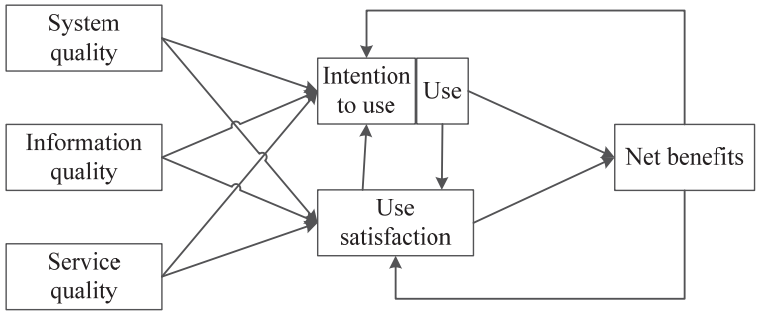


Figure 4 Updated DeLone and McLean IS success model (2003)

The DeLone and McLean (D & M) success model has been widely used by IS researchers to understand and measure the dimensions of IS success in different contexts, such as knowledge management (Jennex and Olfman 2002, Kulkarni, Ravindran, and Freeze 2006), e-commerce (Molla and Licker 2001, Zhu and Kraemer 2005), virtual communities and blogs (Zheng, Zhao, and Stylianou 2013, Wang and Lin 2011) and blog learning (Wang et al. 2014).

The selection of success dimensions and specific metrics depends on the research context, such as the nature and purpose of the system being evaluated (Petter, DeLone, and McLean 2008). In this study, the dimension of the system success of *use* refers to travellers’ use of eWOM on channels, as well as eWOM generation on the channels.

The D&M success model has been selected as one of the theoretical foundations of this study, as it provides a framework to investigate the different dimensions of IS success, including information quality, service quality, and system quality. It can help explain individuals’ eWOM generation and eWOM use behaviour from a system perspective by taking technology-related factors into consideration together with information quality, thus contributing to answering RQ1 regarding the determinants of individuals’ eWOM generation and use.

2.3.4 Technology Affordance

The notion of affordance originated from ecological psychology, and the concept of affordance was formulated by perceptual psychologist Gibson (1978). Affordance represents the “opportunities for action,” as perceived by an organism in its environment, and it refers to “what an individual or organization with a particular purpose can do with a technology or information system” (Majchrzak and Markus 2012). The concept of affordance considers the properties of an object (e.g. social media or eWOM website) and a perceiving entity (e.g. users) simultaneously. The affordance concept was later adapted by scholars in the field of

technology design (e.g., Gaver 1996) and to explore the dynamics of technologically occasioned social change (Treem and Leonardi 2012).

Following the concept of affordance, scholars in the IS field refer to technology affordance as “an action potential, that is, to what an individual or organization with a particular purpose can do with a technology or information system” (Kessler 2013, p. 832-845). Affordance focuses on the intersection of two entities, given their respective characteristics (Cabiddu, De Carlo, and Piccoli 2014). In the literature, technology affordance has been employed to explore social media adoption by organizations. For instance, Wagner, Vollmar, and Wagner (2014) applied the affordance concept to outline the potential of social media to support knowledge creation within organizations. Majchrzak et al. (2013) identified four social media affordances in knowledge conversations from the technology affordance perspective.

The affordance theory has been selected in this study for two main reasons. First, the affordance lens offers the opportunity to consider the symbiotic relationship between the action in context and the capability of the technology, which is appropriate for explaining the phenomenon of the case studies in research articles #5 and #6—that is, value co-creation with social media and customer engagement with eWOM (Zammuto et al. 2007, Maier and Fadel 2009). Second, the affordance theory provides a useful lens through which to examine eWOM and its role in affecting customer engagement, which is suitable for explaining the phenomenon of customer engagement in organizations via eWOM communication. Therefore, the technology affordance theory is used in this study to explain the role of eWOM and social media use in organizations, thereby answering RQ2. A more detailed discussion can be found in research articles #5 and #6.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research paradigms in Information Systems

Research methods make assumptions about the nature of the world and knowledge. Drawing on the classification of the assumptions constituting the philosophical stance by Chua (1986) that researchers adopt towards the world and their work, there are three sets of beliefs that “delineate a way of seeing and researching the world.” They are (a) beliefs about knowledge (epistemological and methodological assumptions); (b) beliefs about physical and social reality (ontological assumptions), which may be presumed to exist objectively and external to a scientist or to exist subjectively only through the actions of humans in creating and recreating it; and (c) beliefs about the relationship between theory and practice, which concerns the role of theory in practice and reflects the value and intentions that researchers bring to their work. It has been conventional since Kuhn (1970) called particular combinations of assumptions *paradigms*. Mingers refers to paradigm as a construct that “specifies a general set of philosophical assumptions covering ontology (what is assumed to exist), epistemology (the nature of valid knowledge), ethics or axiology (what is valued or considered right), and methodology” (Mingers 2001, p. 242). Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) discussed the three research paradigms in IS: positivist, interpretivist, and critical.

Positivist IS researchers assume the independent existence of objective physical and social worlds from human beings. The positivist perspective is concerned with the empirical testability of theories—that is, whether they can be “verified” or “falsified.” They search for the general connections between information technology and the changing environmental conditions or organizational forms. Positivists believe that scientific inquiry is “value-free.” As impartial observers, researchers can objectively evaluate or predict actions or processes without themselves being involved in moral judgement and without subjective opinions. This stance contradicts the beliefs of those who hold interpretivist and critical perspectives. With its roots in logical positivism, the positivist IS research philosophy also has its problems. Positivist researchers hold the value-neutral stance of being, but in practice, all researchers are inherently implicated in the object under research, as argued by interpretivist and critical researchers.

Interpretivist, unlike positivist, asserts that reality and knowledge are socially constructed and that they are incapable of being understood independent of both

social actors and researchers. The interpretive perspective emphasizes the importance of subjective meanings and social-political and symbolic action in the processes through which humans construct and reconstruct their realities (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). Interpretive researchers believe that understanding social processes needs researchers, or those who generate it, to be involved in (Rosen 1991). Research methods such as field studies, which can enable the examination of humans within their social settings, were considered appropriate for contributing valid interpretive knowledge. According to interpretive researchers, the researcher is always implicated in the phenomenon under study rather than being value-neutral.

Critical philosophical perspective researchers attempt to critically evaluate and transform the social reality under investigation, which distinguishes them from positivists and interpretivists with regard to predicting or explaining the phenomenon. The essential tenet of critical philosophy is the belief that social reality is historically constructed and that everything has an unfulfilled potentiality rather than existing in a particular state (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991, Chua 1986). Thus, researchers holding a critical philosophical perspective should recognize these possibilities and act to change their material and social circumstances. Critical philosophical perspective possesses a dialectical understanding of elements and the whole. Social reality is believed to be produced and reproduced by humans, along with objective properties which dominate human experience. Researchers are considered as bringing to consciousness the restrictive conditions of the status quo and initiating change in social relations and practices (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). Therefore, social research and theory are regarded as social critique. However, critical philosophy also has deficiencies, such as the fact that critical researchers are often not critical enough of their concepts or theoretical models, and “critical theorists do not share common philosophical standards for the evaluation of theories” (Chua 1986).

However, adopting one particular research paradigm for viewing the world is like investigating the world via one instrument. Each reveals certain aspects while being blind to others (Mingers 2001). IS research is multidisciplinary, which draws upon a variety of disciplines, such as information technology, psychology, economics, sociology, management, and mathematics, which have a plurality of research paradigms (Mingers and Stowell 1997). For any discipline that researches the complexity of the social aspects of the world, it is advocated that the world must conform to one paradigm to “commit the epistemic fallacy, or more generally the anthropic fallacy” (Mingers 2001, p. 243). Thus, a combination of positivist and interpretivist paradigms is used in this study. Specifically, the positivist survey research method and interpretive case study method were used in regard to different research questions, which will be introduced in detail in the following sections.

### 3.2 Combination of qualitative and quantitative research

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are the most common classifications of research methods. Quantitative research methods are rooted in natural sciences, which are used to study natural phenomena, and appropriate research methods include survey methods, laboratory experiments, formal methods, and numerical methods (Myers 1997). Qualitative research methods were developed in the social sciences and enable researchers to understand people and study social and cultural phenomena with which they live (Myers 1997). Appropriate qualitative research methods include observation, interviews and questionnaires, and documents and texts. According to Yin (2013, p.9), the choice of research method usually depends on three concerns: the type of research question, the extent of control that the research has on actual behavioural events, and the degree of focus on contemporary events as opposed to historical events.

All research methods are imperfect and incomplete (McGrath 1981). No one will capture the richness of the whole at one glance, and a single method cannot explain the whole phenomenon comprehensively. Only a limited view of a particular research situation can be achieved by adopting only one research method; thus, methodological pluralism is encouraged (Mingers 2001). The IS researcher also suggests a combination of different research methods, preferably from different paradigms. This pluralism will offer richer and more reliable research results than a single method (Mingers 2001). As pointed out by Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007), a combination of quantitative and qualitative research provides a fuller and deeper understanding of a phenomenon than employing only one of them and meets the aims of a research project.

Therefore, in this study, a combination of the qualitative case study method and the quantitative survey research method were used. In particular, the quantitative survey research method was used to explore eWOM use at the individual user's level to solve the "what" questions related to RQ1: "What determines travellers' eWOM use and generation behaviours?" As indicated by Pinsonneault and Kraemer (1993), survey research is especially well suited to answering questions about the "what." The qualitative case study method was used to solve the "how" questions related to RQ2: "How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers and eWOM to engage with customers?" As recommended by Yin (2013), the case study method is preferred in situations in which the main research questions are "how" or "why," the researcher has little or no control over the behavioural events, and the focus of the study is a contemporary phenomenon. Explaining the affordances of social media and eWOM within organizational settings is complex, and social media and eWOM use in organizations is a contemporary phenomenon; thus, the case study is well suited to answering RQ2. The research methods used in this study are summarized in

Table 3, which also presents the research articles which are utilized and the questions to be solved, respectively.

Table 3 Research methods and articles applied

Research method		Article applied	Research question solved	
Quantitative	Questionnaire survey	Article #1	<b>RQ 1.1:</b> What are the determinants of travellers' eWOM use behaviour?	To explain the impact of eWOM on individuals' decision-making.
		Article #2		To extend understanding of the determinants of eWOM use behaviour.
		Article #3	<b>RQ 1.1:</b> What are the determinants of travellers' eWOM use behaviour? <b>RQ 1.2</b> What are the determinants of travellers' eWOM generation behaviour?	To explain factors predicting customers' eWOM use and generation behaviour
		Article #4		To explain the PU of eWOM websites in predicting purchase intention, as well as eWOM use and generation behaviours.
Qualitative	Case study	Article #5	<b>RQ 2.1</b> How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers?	To understand how social media encourages organizations to engage customers, as well as the opportunities that social media offers for organizations to co-create value with their customers.
		Article #6	<b>RQ 2.2</b> How can tourism organizations use eWOM to engage customers?	To understand how eWOM enhances customer engagement in the context of travel organizations.

### 3.3 Survey research method

IS researchers have been using survey methods as a means of exploring and explaining practical phenomena for a long time. Surveys are among the most popular methods used in the IS research community because it has certain merits, which include the following: They are “easy to administer and simple to score and code,” they “allow the researcher to determine the values and relations of variables and constructs,” they can be used to predict behaviour, and the results can be generalized to similar populations (Newsted, Huff, and Munro 1998, p.553). The survey research method has three distinctive characteristics: (1) the purpose is to produce statistics—that is, quantitative or numerical descriptions of certain aspects of the population of interest; (2) the main data collection method



is carried out by asking respondents structured and predefined questions; and (3) the information collected is sample-based rather than from all members of the population, and the findings can be generalized to a similar group or population (Pinsonneault and Kraemer 1993, Fowler 2009).

Survey research can be used for three purposes: exploration, description, and explanation (Pinsonneault and Kraemer 1993). The aim of survey research that is used for exploration is to elicit a variety of responses from individuals with different viewpoints in a loosely structured way, offering the basis for a more carefully designed survey. The aim of descriptive survey research is to find out which situations, events, attitudes, or opinions are occurring within a population. The main aim of descriptive survey research is to ascertain facts, not test theories. Explanation survey research is used to test theories and causal relationships.

A good survey design comprises three essential elements: sampling, designing questions, and data collection (Fowler 2009). Sampling, rather than census, is the selection of a small subset of a population that is representative of the whole. Good sampling entails giving all population members the same chances to be selected as respondents. A good survey instrument design involves selecting survey questions that meet the research aim, testing them to make sure that they can be asked and answered as planned, and presenting them in a format that makes them easy to answer (Fowler 2009, p.114). As a good survey instrument design is essential for data collection, it is recommended that the survey questions should be well understood and meaningful and that the wording of the questions should be objective (Fowler 2009, p.126). The data collection unit in survey research is usually individuals. Data collection in survey research can be in the form of mail questionnaires, telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, and, in today's world, via the Internet. The collection mode is directly related to the sample frame, research topic, sample characteristics, and available resources, such as the staff and facilities (Fowler 2009, p.68). The use of multiple methods for data collection is recommended, as it permits researchers to have more complete data on the phenomenon, a richer understanding of it, and data of an enhanced quality (Pinsonneault and Kraemer 1993).

According to Pinsonneault and Kraemer (1993), survey research is especially well suited to answering questions about what, how much, and how many, and it can be used for exploration, description, or explanation purposes. Yin (2013) indicated that the survey research method is suitable for research that is focused on contemporary events with little control of researcher over behavioural events.

In this study, one of the premier research questions in this study, RQ1, aims to understand from the individual perspective *what determines travellers' eWOM use and generation behaviour*. Given the explanatory nature of the research question, the survey research method is appropriate for answering RQ1. Several theoretical foundations were chosen to explore the relationships between certain antecedents and eWOM use and generation behaviour.

### 3.4 Case study method

The case study method is one of the most popular qualitative research methods in social science research, and it has been widely applied in IS research (Dubé and Paré 2003). According to Yin (2013), the case study method is preferred in the following situations: (1) when the main research questions are “how” or “why”, (2) when the researcher has little or no control over behavioural events, and (3) then the focus of the study is a contemporary phenomenon. A case study comprising the key characteristic of holistic investigation is suitable for this study, as it enables understanding of the complex and ubiquitous interactions among organizations and individuals via social media and eWOM (Dubé and Paré 2003). A case study can be carried out by taking any philosophical stance, be it positivist, interpretivist, or critical, depending on the assumptions that the researcher makes, as discussed in the previous section (Cavaye 1996, Myers 1997).

The case study method used in this study is interpretive in-depth case studies. The case studies in this study focus on the organizational perspective and help to explain the action of value co-creation with customers, customer engagement, and the interpretation of the use of social media and eWOM during value co-creation and customer engagement (Walsham 1995).

An interpretive case study is used in research articles #5 and #6 to explore the value co-creation and eWOM interactive process between organizations and customers through social media platforms and to answer RQ 2: “How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers and eWOM to engage with customers?” According to Yin (2013), case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over the events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.

### 3.5 Data collection

#### 3.5.1 Data collection timeline

The data collection for this study was conducted in four steps, as illustrated in Figure 5.

- 1) March–June 2014, questionnaire survey in China incorporated with Visit Finland
- 2) May–July 2015, case study on online service Company G (anonymous) in China
- 3) May–July 2016, questionnaire survey data collection in China

4) September–December 2016, case study on Visit Turku and Visit Finland

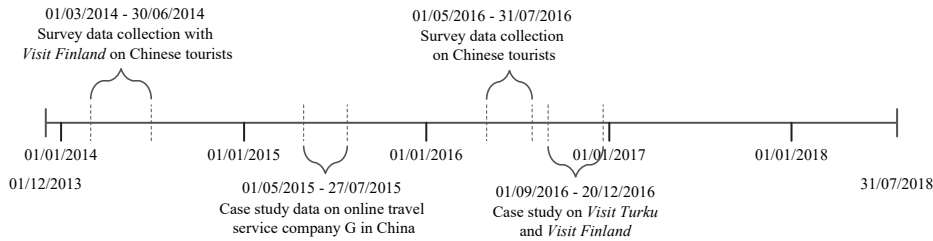


Figure 5 Data collection timeline

3.5.2 Survey data collection

The survey data collection was conducted in two stages. The first data collection survey was conducted with the Finnish Tourist Board (VisitFinland) in 2014, and the second survey was conducted with the help of a tourism e-service company in China in 2016.

In the *first data collection survey*, a structural questionnaire was designed to collect data from the potential Chinese tourists who would like to visit Finland. The original questionnaire was designed in English. Prior to data collection, a pilot study was conducted among the experts and professionals in tourism from the University of Turku and some staff on the Finnish Tourist Board to test the logic and validity of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then translated into Chinese and proofread by some bilingual individuals proficient in both Chinese and English to ensure the consistency of the questionnaire. Another pilot survey of the Chinese questionnaire was conducted among 15 Chinese people to ensure that the language and logic of the questionnaire in Chinese were sound. The final version was obtained after pilot surveys and discussions with experts were carried out.

The data were collected via an online survey. As the population under research comprised those who were interested in Finland, the survey was conducted among followers of the official Visit Finland social media account. Due to the prevalence of social media platforms for both organizations and individuals, a social media platform was used for this data collection. In particular, the social media channel of the Finnish Tourist Board (VisitFinland) in China was used to distribute the questionnaire via, for example, the official accounts of Visit Finland on WeChat and Weibo (two of the most popular social media sites in China), as it is likely that the followers of the official social media accounts of the Finnish Tourist Board comprise the group that is most likely to pay attention to Finland as a travel destination. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents

in June 2014, and 1,549 responses were collected in four weeks. The demographic distribution is presented in Table 4.

Among the data collected, only those pertaining to individuals who have never travelled to Finland but have read eWOM about Finland were selected. The aim was to investigate how eWOM impacts individuals' behaviour—that is, their visit intention. A final sample of 195 respondents was selected for analysis from the data collected from the first survey. The descriptions of the 195 respondents are presented in Table 5.

Five constructs were included in the research model for Article #1 (Table 6): argument quality, source credibility, attitude towards destination, WOM intention, and visit intention. Each construct was measured using multiple items adapted from previous literature to validate its content. Necessary modifications were done according to the current research context of travel decision-making. A five-point Likert scale, anchored from “Disagree” to “Agree,” was used to measure each item, and no reverse item was used in the survey.

Table 4 Demographic characteristics for all the respondents in the first survey conducted in 2014 (N=1549)

Sample characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	372	24.0
	Female	1,177	76.0
Age (years)	Below 20	188	12.1
	20–30	811	52.4
	31–40	387	25.0
	41–50	125	8.1
	51–60	32	2.1
	Above 60	6	0.4
Education	Below bachelor's degree	333	21.5
	Bachelor's degree	973	62.8
	Master's degree	222	14.3
	Doctoral degree	21	1.4
Family size	Single	942	60.8
	Couple without children	186	12.0
	Couple without children at home	43	2.8
	Couple with children at home	323	20.9
	Other	55	3.6
Outbound travel frequency (in the last three years)	0	646	41.7
	1	245	15.8
	2	207	13.4
	3	161	10.4
	4	66	4.3
	5 or more	224	14.5

Table 5 Sample characteristics for the impact of eWOM on visit intention (N=195) (first survey in 2014, Article #1)

Sample characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	54	27.7
	Female	141	72.3
Age (years)	Below 20	6	3.1
	20–30	94	48.2
	31–40	76	39.0
	41–50	15	7.7
	51–60	4	2.1
	60+	0	0.0
Education	Below bachelor's degree	22	11.3
	Bachelor's degree	130	66.7
	Master's degree	40	20.5
	Doctoral degree	3	1.5
Family size	Single	95	48.7
	Couple without children	44	22.6
	Couple without children at home	5	2.6
	Couple with children at home	48	24.6
	Other	3	1.5
Income per month (RMB)	Less than 5,000	41	21.0
	5,001–10,000	69	35.4
	10,001–20,000	51	26.2
	20,001–30,000	20	10.3
	More than 30,000	14	7.2
Outbound travel frequency (in the last three years)	1	95	13.8
	2	44	17.9
	3	5	26.2
	4	48	8.2
	5 or more	3	33.8

Table 6 Survey instruments (first survey in 2014)

Constructs		Items (1–5 Likert scale)	References
Argument Quality	AQ1	Information offered is helpful.	Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006)
	AQ2	Information offered is persuasive.	
	AQ3	Information offered is valuable.	
Source Credibility	SC1	The website(s) for the online travel experience or review is/are (an) expert(s) in tourism.	Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006)
	SC2	The website(s) for the online travel experience or review is/are trustworthy.	
	SC3	The website(s) for the online travel experience or review has/have good knowledge on tourism.	
Attitude	ATT1	Your overall attitude towards travel to Finland is (very unenjoyable...very enjoyable).	Han, Lee, and Lee (2011)
	ATT2	Your overall attitude towards travel to Finland is (very bad...very good).	
	ATT3	Your overall attitude towards travel to Finland is (very unpleasant...very pleasant).	
WOM Intention	WOM1	According to my knowledge about Finland, I will recommend to my friends that they travel to Finland.	San Martin, Collado, and del Bosque (2013)
	WOM2	I will share my knowledge about Finland with my friends.	
	WOM3	I will recommend Finland as a destination if my friends are planning to travel to Europe.	
Visit Intention	INT1	In the coming years, if I plan outbound travel, I will visit Finland.	Han, Lee, and Lee (2011)
	INT2	If I plan a trip to Europe, I will visit Finland.	
	INT3	In short, I think Finland is a good place that deserves to be visited.	

The second survey data collection was conducted in 2016 with the help of an online travel service company in China. The company offers online travel services—such as local tour guides, customized travel service, and ticket booking—to both domestic and international outbound travellers in China. The company mainly offers services to individual customers or self-organized travel groups. The link to the questionnaire was distributed to the customers and the followers of the company's official social media account via its main social media channel, WeChat, in China in 2016. Once they respondents completed the survey, they were enrolled in the draw for a gift. The questionnaire ran for two weeks, and in total, 351 responses were collected. Of these, 31 were excluded from subsequent analysis because the respondents' answers were not complete or were not consistent. Eight respondents were excluded because they had never used a travel review website before. The final valid sample consisted of 312 respondents.

The socio-demographic and other descriptive characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 7. Of the respondents, 82% had made at least two

leisure trips in the previous year, and 93% of them preferred a self-organized or customized travel style, which indicates a propensity for referring to their peers' travel reviews when making their travel decisions.

Table 7 Demographic description of the valid respondents of eWOM users in the second survey in 2016 (N=312)

Dimension	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	187	40.1
	Male	125	59.9
Age (years)	18–25	97	31.1
	26–30	109	34.9
	31–40	80	25.6
	41–50	23	7.4
	>51	3	1.0
Income (RMB/month)	≤5000	111	35.6
	5001–10,000	124	39.7
	10,001–15,000	42	13.5
	15,001–20,000	13	4.2
	≥20,001	22	7.1
Leisure travel frequency last year	0	9	2.9
	1	47	15.1
	2	113	36.2
	3	60	19.2
	4	25	8.0
	≥5	58	18.6
Preferred travel style	Self-organized	212	67.9
	Group	16	5.1
	Customized	81	26.0
	Others	3	1.0

The aim of the second survey was to explore the determinants of eWOM use and generation behaviour from various perspectives. The measurements of each construct were adapted from previously validated scales, and multi-item scales were used to improve the reliability and validity of the measurement. The wording of the items was modified to fit the research context of travel review websites. The original questionnaire, which was in English, was translated into Chinese. A back-translation from Chinese to English was performed by two bilingual researchers who are capable of speaking both Chinese and English, thus ensuring the consistency of the questionnaire. A pilot study among 20 Chinese users of travel review websites was conducted to test the logic and understandability of the texts before data collection. The questionnaire was composed of closed-ended questions. The target sample was focused on the users of online travel review websites who had recently read eWOM on these websites. All measurement scales used in the present study were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree), as summarized in Table 8.

Table 8 Survey constructs and questions

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Items</b>
Information accuracy (Wixom and Todd 2005)	The eWOM provided the correct information for my travel plans. There were few errors in the information I obtained from the eWOM. The information provided by eWOM is accurate.
Information completeness (Wixom and Todd 2005)	The eWOM provided me with complete information for my travel. The eWOM provided me with comprehensive information for my travel. The eWOM provided me with all the information I needed for my travel.
Information relevance (Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn 2008)	The eWOM on the travel review website was relevant to my travel plans. The eWOM on the travel review website was appropriate for my travel plans. The eWOM on the travel review website was applicable to my travel decision-making.
Information sidedness (Cheung, Sia, and Kuan 2012)	The eWOM included both the pros and cons of the discussed product/service. The eWOM included both positive and negative comments.
Information timeliness (Wixom and Todd 2005)	The eWOM provided me with the most up-to-date information for my travel-related decision. The eWOM produced the most current information for my travel-related decision. The eWOM from the travel review sites is always up to date.
eWOM information quality (Wixom and Todd 2005) (Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn 2008)	The eWOM provided the correct information for my travel plans. The eWOM provided me with complete information for my travels. The eWOM on the travel review website is relevant to my travel plans. The eWOM provided me with the most up-to-date information for my travel-related decision.
System reliability (Wixom and Todd 2005)	The travel review website operates reliably. The travel review website performs reliably. The operation of the travel review website is dependable.
System integration (Wixom and Todd 2005)	The travel review website effectively integrates data from different aspects of travel. The travel review website pulls together information that used to come from different websites and information sources. The travel review website effectively combines data from different aspects of travel.
System flexibility (Wixom and Todd 2005)	The travel review website can flexibly adjust to new demands or conditions during my usage. The travel review website is versatile in addressing needs as they arise.



Dimensions	Items
System response time (Wixom and Todd 2005)	It takes a short time for the website system to respond to my requests. The travel review website system provides information in a timely fashion.
Enjoyment (Agarwal and Karahanna 2000)	It is fun to use this travel review website. It is very enjoyable to use this travel review website.
Curiosity fulfilment (Agarwal and Karahanna 2000)	Using this travel review website arouses my imagination about travel. Using this travel review website makes me curious about new travel. Using this travel review website and reading other tourists' stories excites my curiosity about a new travel experience.
Social interaction (Ko, Cho, and Roberts 2005)	Using travel review websites enables me to see what other travellers said. Using the travel review websites enables me to keep up with what is going on with regard to my travel. Using the travel review websites enables me to express myself freely regarding my own travel.
Social presence (Gefen and Straub 2003)	There is a sense of sociability on the website. There is a sense of human contact on the website. There is a sense of human warmth on the website. There is a sense of existence on the website.
eWOM use (Sussman and Siegal 2003)	I used eWOM on the website for travel-related decision-making. The eWOM provided on the website motivates you to take action/reserve it. I agree with the eWOM provided on the website.
eWOM generation behaviour (Munar and Jacobsen 2014)	I shared my travel-related experiences on the website. I provided my travel experiences at the request. I posted my comments on the website after my travel.
Perceived usefulness (Agarwal and Karahanna 2000)	Using this review website . . . Would be useful for my knowledge of the tourism product. Would help me get travel information more quickly. Would help me get travel information more efficiently. Would help me make travel decisions more efficiently.
Purchase intention (Taylor, Houlahan, and Gabriel 1975)	After using the review website . . . I might make a travel-related purchase decision. I am sure I will purchase some travel-related product. I can make a decision.

To explore the different determinants of *eWOM use and generation behaviours*, the subsample of respondents who have used and generated their own eWOM on travel review websites was selected. Among the 312 valid respondents who were eWOM users, only 204 were selected, as they have both used and generated eWOM. The socio-demographic and related descriptive characteristics of the respondents are displayed in Table 9. Males comprised 42.6% and females

comprised 57.4% of the sample. Among the respondents, 91.7% had made at least two leisure trips in the previous year. A total of 69.1% of the sample preferred a self-organized travel style and 26% preferred a customized travel style, thereby indicating a propensity for reading online reviews during their travel decision-making processes. Of the respondents, 67.2% had eWOM generation experience.

Table 9 Demographic description of the users who generated and used eWOM in the second survey in 2016 (N=204)

Dimension	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	87	42.6
	Male	117	57.4
Age (years)	18–25	62	30.4
	26–30	68	33.3
	31–40	54	26.5
	41–50	18	8.8
	>51	2	1.0
Income (RMB/month)	<=5000	61	29.9
	5001–10,000	84	41.2
	10,001–15,000	33	16.2
	15,001–20,000	11	5.4
	>=20,001	15	7.4
Leisure travel frequency last year	1	19	9.3
	2	75	36.8
	3	46	22.5
	4	17	8.3
	>=5	47	23.0
Preferred travel style	Self-organized	141	69.1
	Group travel	10	4.9
	Customized travel	52	25.5
	Others	1	0.5
eWOM generation frequency	Sometimes	186	91.2
	Often	18	8.8

For the exploration of the PU of eWOM websites and eWOM use and generation behaviours, a subgroup of 199 valid respondents were selected from among the 312, as they have generated their own eWOM on travel review websites. The socio-demographic and related descriptive characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 10. Of the respondents, 90% are younger than 40 years old, 47.2% made at least two leisure trips in the previous year, and 94.4% preferred a self-organized or customized travel style, indicating a propensity for referring to their peers' travel reviews when making their travel decisions.

Table 10 Socio-demographic and descriptive characteristics of the respondents for research of PU of eWOM website (N=199)

Dimension	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	116	58.3
	Male	83	41.7
Age (years)	18–25	59	29.6
	26–30	67	33.7
	31–40	53	26.6
	41–50	18	9.0
	>51	2	1.0
Income (RMB/month)	<=5000	58	29.1
	5001–10,000 (inclusive)	83	41.7
	10,001–15,000 (inclusive)	32	16.1
	15,001–20,000 (inclusive)	11	5.5
	>=20,001	15	7.5
Preferred travel style	Self-organized	138	69.3
	Group travel	10	5.0
	Customized travel	50	25.1
	Others	1	0.5
Leisure travel frequency last year (times)	1	19	9.5
	2	75	37.7
	3	44	22.1
	4	16	8.0
	>=5	45	22.6
Social media usage time (hours/week)	<=5	50	25.1
	6–10	59	29.6
	11–20	41	20.6
	>=21	49	24.6

### 3.5.3 Case study data collection

According to Walsham (1995), interviews are the primary data source for interpretive case studies. The data collected for the case studies related to RQ2 are mainly interviews, together with some public information about the organizations selected for our case study.

To answer RQ2—“How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers and eWOM to engage with customers?”—and the two sub-questions, two case studies were conducted at different stages. The first was a single case study conducted in June 2015 at an online travel service, Company G. The second was a multiple-case study conducted from June to December 2016 at two organizations: (i) Visit Turku, the Southwest Finland Tourist &

Congress Bureau, from June to December 2016 and (ii) Visit Finland, the Finnish Tourist Board, in December 2016.

The *first case study* was conducted at Company G in June 2015. Company G targets domestic tourists travelling to or planning to travel to Sanya in China. It offers various online travel services to tourists, such as travel consulting, travel planning, travel photography, car rental, hotel booking, tourist attraction ticket booking, and restaurant booking. Public information about the case company was referred to for a better understanding of it. All Company G's official accounts on different social media channels were reviewed. The online shops via social media platforms were also reviewed to investigate Company G's social media applications in business. A semi-structured interview questionnaire based on the research objective (RQ 2.1)—that is, "*How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers?*"—was designed.

The interviewees were selected based on their involvement in social media and eWOM, such as their responsibilities for social media strategy development or eWOM or for customer interaction via social media. Four individual interviews and one group interview were conducted with Company G. The interviewees were the vice chief executive officer, the resource manager, the customer service manager, and a social media consultant. The group interview was conducted with the resource manager, the customer service manager, the social media consultant, and two customer service staff members who were responsible for interaction with customers via social media. The scheduled interview time was 90 minutes per interviewee. Details of the interviewees are displayed in Table 11.

Table 11 Interviewees for the first case study in June 2015

Interviewee	Responsibility	Interview time
Vice CEO	Strategic decision-making and operational control	60 minutes
Resource Manager	Management of all travel products resources and price negotiations	120 minutes (individual interview ) 40 minutes (group interview)
Customer Service Manager	Customer service management, accident management, internal coordination	30 minutes (individual interview) 40 minutes (group interview)
Social Media Consultant	Social media content writing and publishing	90 minutes (individual interview) 40 minutes (group interview) Follow-up interview in Aug. 2015
Customer Service Representatives A and B	Customer service, travel consulting, reply reviews	40 minutes (group interview)

The *second case study* was conducted from June to December 2016 at two tourism organizations in Finland. The first organization is Visit Turku, the Southwest Finland Tourist & Congress Bureau. Visit Turku provides travel information about Southwest Finland for both the inhabitants of and visitors to this region. To promote Turku to travellers, Visit Turku has been taking advantage of social media channels and trying to inspire and attract tourists.

Before our formal interview, public information about Visit Turku and Visit Finland, especially their official accounts on different social media channels, were reviewed to enable a better understanding of their social media usage and eWOM interaction with tourists via social media platforms. During our observation from June 2016, we found that they highlighted the value of social media and eWOM generated on various social media channels. Meanwhile, as travel service providers, they both sought to optimize the potential of eWOM for customer engagement.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire, based on the research objective—to answer *RQ 2.2*: “How can tourism organizations use eWOM to engage customers?”—was designed. The interviewees were selected based on their involvement in social media and eWOM—for example, their responsibilities for social media strategy development, eWOM, or customer interaction via social media.

A face-to-face interview was conducted with the social media manager at Visit Turku. E-mail interviews were conducted with two of the travel advisors responsible for both customer review interaction and travel information reception. The email interviews were conducted at the interviewees’ convenience due to the limited flexibility of their work times at the reception desk.

The interview at Visit Finland was conducted in November 2016. The primary aim of Visit Finland is to promote Finland to a worldwide audience as an attractive tourist destination. Visit Finland works closely with travel service providers, transport companies, and Finnish regions. Visit Finland works primarily on research, product development, and the marketing of leisure tourism to Finland. Visit Finland has employed various social media channels in different target markets to interact with tourists from all over the world, such as distributing information and interacting with customers on different social media channels in different languages—for instance, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. They have realized the power of social media and eWOM, and they pay for an independent freelancer to manage their social media channels in different market destinations. The e-mail interview was conducted due to the social media manager’s tight work schedule. The details are displayed in Table 12.

Table 12 Interviewees (second case study in 2016)

Organization	Interviewee	Responsibilities	Interview time
Company G	Vice CEO	Strategic decision-making and operational control	60 minutes (individual interview)
	Resource manager	Management of all travel products, resources, and price negotiations	120 minutes (individual interview) 40 minutes (group interview)
	Customer service manager	Customer service management, accident management, and internal coordination	40 minutes (group interview)
	Social media consultant	Social media content writing and publishing	90 minutes (individual interview) 40 minutes (group interview) Email interview in Aug. 2015
	Customer service staff A and B	Customer service, travel consulting, and reply reviews.	40 minutes (group interview)
Finnish Tourist Board (Visit Finland)	Social media manager	All social media channels and work with native social media administrators (e.g. in the Chinese, Japanese, and Russian languages) on a daily basis	Email interview
Visit Turku	Social media manager	Content distribution on multiple social media channels and social media strategy	60 minutes (individual interview)
	Travel advisors A and B	Customer review interaction online and tourist information reception	Email interview

## 3.6 Data analysis

### 3.6.1 Structural equation modelling

In four articles—Articles #1 to #4—structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to evaluate the research model and hypotheses. SEM is a statistical methodology that adopts a hypothesis-testing approach to conducting multivariate analysis of a structural theory regarding some phenomenon. Typically, the theory represents causal processes that generate observations of multiple variables. It enables researchers to incorporate unobservable variables measured indirectly by indicator variables (Hair et al. 2013). Researchers have long realized the advantages of structural equation models with unobserved constructs for parameter

estimation and hypothesis testing in causal models (Fornell and Larcker 1981). SEM has received growing interest and is becoming increasingly prevalent among IS researchers, as it enables researchers to answer a set of interrelated questions in a single, systematic, and comprehensive analysis (Gefen, Straub, and Boudreau 2000).

Two approaches are used to estimate the relationships in a structural equation model. One is the partial least squares algorithm (PLS-SEM) employed in PLS, and the other one is covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) approaches, employed in LISREL, AMOS, and EQS. The two methods of analysis differ in their objectives, statistical assumptions, and the nature of the fit statistics they produce (Gefen, Straub, and Boudreau 2000). CB-SEM is primarily used to confirm or reject theories, which it does by determining how well a proposed theoretical model fits the covariance matrix of the empirical data. Partial least square-based algorithm aims to develop theories in exploratory research, and the focus is on explaining the variance in dependent variables (Hair et al. 2013, p. 4).

Researchers should focus on the characteristics and objectives that distinguish the two methods. According to Hair et al. (2013, p. 14), in situations in which the theory is less developed, PLS-SEM should be considered as an alternative approach to CB-SEM. The primary objectives of PLS-SEM are the prediction and explanation of target constructs. PLS-SEM uses the ordinary least squares regression-based method of estimating coefficients that maximize the  $R^2$  of the target endogenous constructs, the aim of which is prediction. Several critical issues that are relevant to the choice of PLS-SEM are suggested (Hair, Sarstedt, Pieper, et al. 2012, Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, et al. 2012): 1) data characteristics—PLS-SEM is suitable for small sample sizes; 2) model properties—PLS-SEM can handle easily reflective and formative measurement models; 3) model evaluation issues—PLS-SEM does not optimize a unique global scalar function, which is its major drawback. PLS-SEM focuses on the discrepancy between the observed values of dependent variables and the values predicted by the model. Researchers choose PLS-SEM to judge the model quality based on the model's predictive capabilities.

Hair et al. (2013, p. 19) exhibited the rules of thumb for choosing between the two SEM analysis approaches. They suggested that researchers choose PLS-SEM if the goal is predicting some key target constructs or identifying key “driver” constructs; it also works better if formatively measured constructs are part of the structural model and with small sample sizes. For Articles #2, #3, and #4, the objective of the research is to examine the determinants of eWOM behaviours from different perspectives, for which the predictive-oriented PLS-SEM approach is most suitable. Thus, in these three selected articles, the PLS-SEM approach is used for model analysis. The details of the model-testing results for

each article can be found in Articles #2 to #4, which are enclosed in the appendices.

CB-SEM techniques emphasize the overall fit of the entire observed covariance matrix with the hypothesized covariance model, and they are the most suitable for confirmatory research (Gefen, Straub, and Boudreau 2000). CB-SEM is recommended when the research goal is theory testing, confirmation, or the comparison of alternative theories; when the error terms require additional specification; or when the structural model has non-recursive relationships or requires a global-of-fit criterion (Hair et al. 2013, p. 19).

In Article #1, the primary goal was to test the extended theory of ELM in the context of eWOM usage. Thus, the CB-SEM analysis approach and AMOS was used in Article #1. The reliability and validity—including the convergent validity and discriminant validity—of the scales used in Article #1 were tested, and the goodness-of-model fit was also tested in AMOS.

### 3.6.2 Case study data analysis

In the *first case study*, conducted at the travel service Company G in China, content analysis was used to analyse the transcript. All transcripts were first coded in Chinese, according to the affordances for value co-creation and interaction. The coded transcripts were translated into English by the author and then independently back-translated into Chinese by another researcher. The two versions of the coded Chinese transcripts were compared, and the translated English transcripts were jointly revised. According to Yin (2013), the most important use of the documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources. Thus, the coded English transcripts were analysed in conjunction with all the above-mentioned available information sources.

The data analysis was conducted in three steps. First, the company's social media use was summarized, including its social media channel and its features, functions, and main business usage (see Table 13). Thereafter, based on the content analysis, the four affordances of social media for value co-creation were discussed to illustrate how social media affordance can help enhance value co-creation for companies.

Based on the interviews and the practical social media usage of Company G, the four affordances of social media—dialogue affordance, accessibility affordance, monitorability affordance, and transparency affordance—were identified as resulting in value co-creation, clearly indicating that the technology affordances of social media can help companies with their business.

Content analysis was also used to analyze the transcript in the *second case study*, which comprised three case organizations. As the first interview regarding



case organization was conducted in Chinese, all transcripts were first coded in Chinese, based on the eWOM affordances for customer engagement. The coded transcripts were translated into English and then independently back-translated into Chinese. The two versions of the coded Chinese transcripts were compared, and the translated English transcripts were jointly revised. The other two case studies were conducted in English. The transcripts of the interview records and emails were coded to identify the eWOM affordances for customer engagement. All the coded English transcripts from three travel service providers were analyzed in conjunction with all the above-mentioned available information sources.

Table 13 Social media usage at Company G

Social Media	Main Features	Main Usages
Sina Weibo	User-generated content, interaction with other users, identification, verified account, easy access via multiple channels.	Information sharing; interactive activity
WeChat Subscription Account	Instant interaction, feeds sent to subscribers, message sent once per day.	Information sharing; interaction with followers
WeChat Service Account	Instant interaction, message sent to followers four times per month, alert and push service, customization of the interface menu, multiple QR codes (enables tracking of the source of followers), e-commerce (WeChat payment).	Reservation/purchasing service; online customer service; travel information sharing
WeChat Mall	In-App (WeChat) shopping mall, easy access via WeChat	In use from June 2015; online booking service

The data analysis for the second case study was conducted in three steps. First, the eWOM channels employed by the three organizations were summarized (see Table 14). Second, based on the content analysis of the interview data, the affordances of eWOM for customer engagement were identified. Third, all the identified eWOM affordances were discussed to illustrate how eWOM communication can help enhance tourism organizations' capabilities to engage with customers.

Table 14 eWOM channels in active use for the three cases

eWOM channels	Company G	Visit Finland	Visit Turku
Online shop reviews	x		
Facebook		x	x
Sina Weibo	x	x	x
Twitter		x	x
WeChat	x	x	
Instagram		x	x

## 4 EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### 4.1 Summary of research articles

This dissertation comprises six research articles answering the two main research questions proposed in this study. In this section, the six research articles will be summarized. Specifically, the aim of each article will be highlighted, and the research approach, key findings, and their contributions to the synopsis and the two main research questions and sub-questions will be presented.

#### *4.1.1 Research Article #1: Exploring the Influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Tourists' Visit Intention*

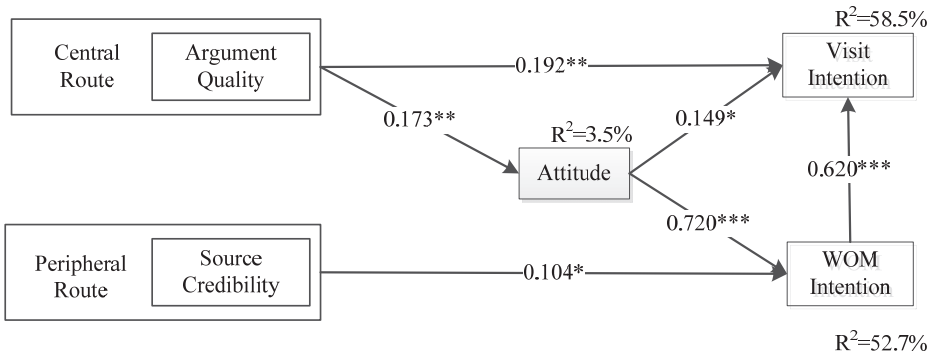
Article #1 was the first article published in 2015 to explore the influence of eWOM on tourists' behaviour based on ELM. It was also the article that started the journey of exploring the role of eWOM in tourism in the social media era.

It explored how eWOM influences tourists' attitudes towards a destination, as well as their visit intention and recommendation intention. Specifically, it endeavoured to identify the impact routes, such as the central route from content quality or the peripheral route from source cues of eWOM on individual customers' visit intention and WOM intention. The ELM (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983) was the theoretical foundation for this article. The research model proposed in this article incorporated the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991) into the ELM to extend the research to behaviour intention. Empirical data were collected with the help of Visit Finland from potential Chinese tourists who are interested in choosing Finland as an outbound travel destination.

This article contributed to our understanding of the impact of eWOM on customers' decision-making from the dual-process perspective. The findings from this article indicate the following:

Tourists' attitudes towards a destination and their intentions to visit a destination were positively influenced by the argument quality of eWOM, but not the source credibility of eWOM.

Tourists' intentions to recommend a destination to others were positively influenced by the source credibility of eWOM only, but not by the content quality of eWOM (Figure 6).



Notes: n.s.= not significant, \*\*\*p<0.001, \*\*p<0.01, \*p<0.05

Figure 6 Impact of eWOM use on tourist behaviour (Article #1)

**4.1.2 Research Article #2: Discovering the Impact from Channel Gratifications on Individuals’ Electronic Word-of-Mouth Use: A Uses & Gratification Perspective**

Research Article #2 is the second article that concentrated on eWOM from the individual perspective. As confirmed in Article #1, eWOM use can shape tourists’ visit intentions via the central route of the argument quality of eWOM content and on their recommendation intentions via the peripheral route of eWOM source credibility. This article extends the understanding of determinants of eWOM use behaviour from the U&G perspective.

The U&G theory was selected as the theoretical foundation for this article with the aim of exploring how gratifications gained from eWOM argument content and from an eWOM platform, such as an eWOM website, impact individuals’ eWOM use behaviour. Three categories of gratifications were proposed in the model in this article: content gratification, social gratification, and hedonic gratification. Each category of gratification was explored via multiple dimensions. Respectively, content gratification gained from eWOM includes information accuracy, completeness, timeliness, relevance, and sidedness; social gratification gained from eWOM websites includes social interaction and social presence; and hedonic gratification gained from eWOM websites includes enjoyment and curiosity fulfilment.

The second survey data collection was conducted to test this model. The empirical results indicate that all three categories of gratification proposed in the model impact tourists’ eWOM use behaviour. Content gratification from eWOM is a factor leading to both social gratification and hedonic gratification in regard to travel review website use. The results are presented in Figure 7.

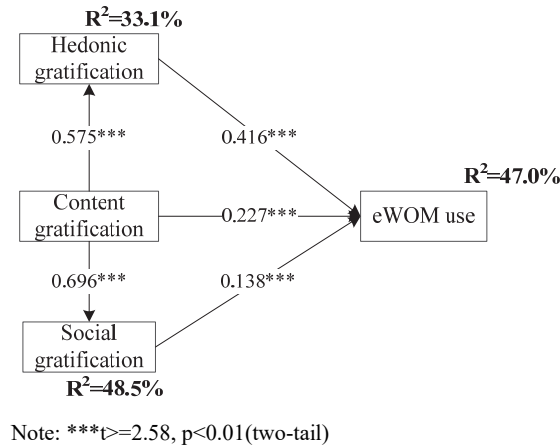


Figure 7 The impact of three categories of gratification on eWOM use behaviour (Article #2)

Not all dimensions included in each gratification category have significant impacts on eWOM use. Two dimensions of content gratification (i.e. eWOM accuracy and relevance), one dimension of social gratification (i.e. social interaction), and both dimensions of hedonic gratification (i.e. enjoyment and curiosity fulfilment) have significant impacts on eWOM use behaviour (see Figure 8).

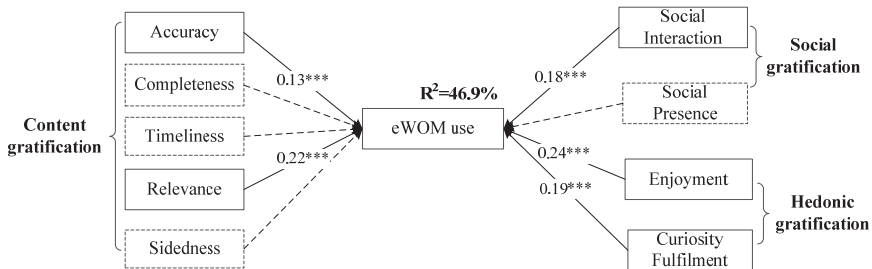


Figure 8 Results of the sub-dimensions of the impacts of three categories of gratification on eWOM use behaviour (Article #2)

The findings from this article contribute to knowledge on the exploration of information use behaviour from the U&G perspective, which advances theoretical development in regard to understanding individuals' information use behaviour in the social media era. The results of this paper also indicate that individuals' eWOM use behaviour is not only utilitarian-oriented behaviour but also hedonic- and social-oriented behaviour. In previous studies, it has been confirmed that the information content in eWOM is an important determinant of eWOM use. This article further reveals that not all dimensions of information quality are equally important in determining tourists' eWOM use, and in the case of this

study, information accuracy and relevance are the two most important dimensions in determining content quality that leads to eWOM use.

#### ***4.1.3 Research Article #3: Determinants of Customers' eWOM Behaviour: A System Success Perspective***

Consumers are both receivers and generators of eWOM. Being eWOM receivers, consumers can possess valuable messages for decision-making, whereas being eWOM generators, consumers create unique contents, according to their prior experience, so as to influence peer shoppers. Travellers share travel-related experiences with others by posting opinions on purchased products and services whilst adopting the reviews of prior travellers for their purchase decision-making.

Research rarely focuses on the factors related to the quality perception of eWOM communication channels. According to U&G theory, consumers will choose the specific communication medium that can best satisfy their expected uses and gratifications (Blumler, Katz, and Blumler 1974). The characteristics of different eWOM channels vary in regard to their degrees of interactivity, scope, media richness, reliability, etc., which inevitably makes different types of gratification inherent to them. Whether as eWOM receivers or generators, consumers' attitudes towards eWOM communication vary across different media channels (Gvili, Levy, and Jansen 2016). Therefore, consumers tend to select eWOM channels that cater to their preferences for eWOM communication.

The IS success model by DeLone and McLean (1992, 2003) provides a comprehensive understanding of IS success by identifying multiple dimensions of system success measurement. Thus, the main objective of this study is to understand eWOM behaviour—both eWOM use and generation behaviour—from the IS success perspective.

A theoretical framework predicting customers' eWOM use and generation behaviour is proposed and is then tested using empirical data. The empirical data were collected in the second survey, and 204 valid respondents who have used and generated eWOM on travel review websites were selected for the model testing in this article. The results are illustrated in Figure 9.

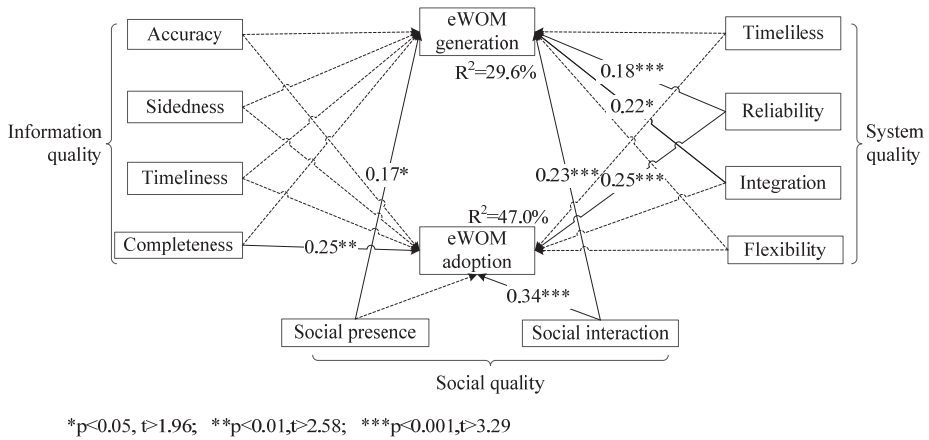


Figure 9 Results of research article #3

All three dimensions—information quality, system quality, and social quality—were found to impact travellers' eWOM use behaviour, whilst, only system quality and social quality impact travellers' eWOM generation behaviour significantly. Furthermore, the empirical results show that information completeness is not only the strongest but also the only significant factor related to information quality to influence eWOM use behaviour among the group selected in this article.

System reliability is the most vital antecedent of system quality for eWOM use behaviour. The social quality of social interaction was a significant determinant for eWOM use. The system quality of reliability and integration were the most significant factors that influence eWOM generation behaviour. Both dimensions of social quality—that is, social presence and social interaction—were found to be significant determinants of eWOM generation behaviour.

This article incorporated social quality into the original D&M IS success model and tested the model in the eWOM context. Perceived social quality was found to be an important determinant contributing to system use in the context of the online review system. Because eWOM is a social phenomenon that occurs in group settings with electronic elements facilitated by continuous new communication media, the more consumers interact in a virtual group, the more likely they will be to use eWOM. Consistent with the findings in Article #2, social presence was not a significant determinant of eWOM use behaviour, but we found that social presence is a significant determinant of eWOM generation behaviour.

#### 4.1.4 Research Article #4: Understanding the Antecedents and Consequences of Perceived Usefulness of Travel Review Websites

The fourth article aimed to explore eWOM use and generation behaviour at the individual level. This article focused on the PU of an eWOM website in predicting eWOM-related behaviours, such as the relationship between the PU of the eWOM website, purchase intention, and eWOM use and generation behaviours.

In this article, an integrated model was proposed to explore both the antecedents and consequences of the PU of eWOM websites. The model was empirically tested using data from 199 customers of a travel service company. Our findings show that both the utilitarian perceptions (such as information quality) and the hedonic perceptions (i.e. curiosity fulfilment and enjoyment) of travel review websites determine their PU, which, in turn, impact travellers' eWOM use and generation, as well as their purchase intention (see Figure 10).

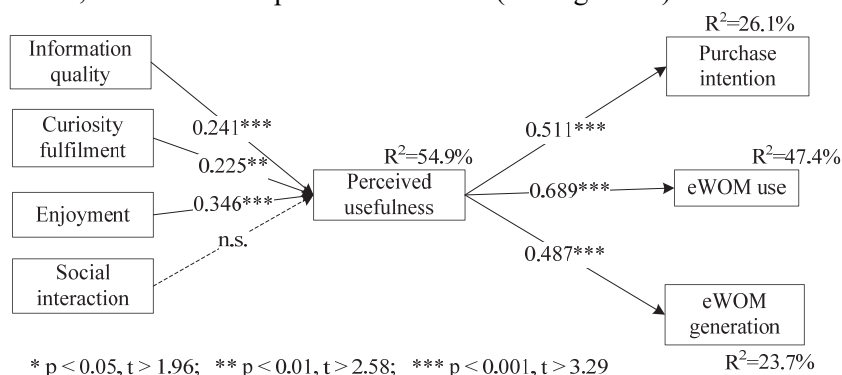


Figure 10 Results of research article #4

This article contributed to knowledge of individual eWOM use and generation behaviours via a decomposed approach by exploring the antecedents, as well as the consequences, of the PU of eWOM websites.

In Article #2, the information quality of eWOM, perceived curiosity fulfilment, and enjoyment from eWOM websites were found to exert a direct positive significant impact on eWOM use behaviour. In Article #4, the PU of the eWOM website was found to exert a mediation effect on these relationships. This mediation effect confirmed the significant role of the PU of eWOM channels in predicting customers' eWOM behaviours, such as their eWOM use and generation behaviours. Additionally, the underlying impact mechanism and influencing process of eWOM website usage experience on travellers' purchase intentions and eWOM behaviours was explained.

#### ***4.1.5 Research Article #5: Value Co-creation in Business via Social Media: A Technology Affordance Approach***

Article #5 explored social media from the organizational perspective. eWOM has become prevalent in the social media era, and to understand the role of eWOM in organizations, it is important to understand how social media encourages organizations to engage customers, as well as the opportunities that social media offers for organizations to create value with customers and other external stakeholders. Based on the technology affordance theory and value co-creation theory, this study examines how social media can help to leverage value co-creation with customers.

Though social media for business has attracted certain attention from researchers, most of them focus on investigating how social media acts as a technology enabler by impacting customers' behaviour. Some have explored the technology affordances of social media for internal or external organization communication (Treem and Leonardi 2012, Argyris and Monu 2015). However, researchers have rarely examined how social media enables organizations to co-create value with customers. This article selected the technology affordance approach to explore the role of social media in organizational co-creation with customers. The technology affordance concept was introduced earlier in this synopsis (Section 2.3). Affordance focuses on the intersection of two entities and simultaneously considers the properties of an object and the perceiving entity, such as the interaction between social media and the perceiving entity of social media users.

This article attempted to explore the cooperative usage of social media in businesses from the value co-creation perspective. The concept of co-creation has become a new paradigm since the early 2000s (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000). Co-creation is the process by means of which consumers can take an active role and co-create value with businesses. In this article, the DART framework proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy was referred to, meaning that the co-creation process with customers includes dialogue, access, risk management, and transparency.

An exploratory case study based on the qualitative data collected at an online travel service company was conducted. It was found that the case company selected in this article applies social media due to its dialogue, accessibility, monitorability, and transparency affordances, which aid in cooperation, and the co-creation of value, with customers. The results are illustrated in the framework in Figure 11.



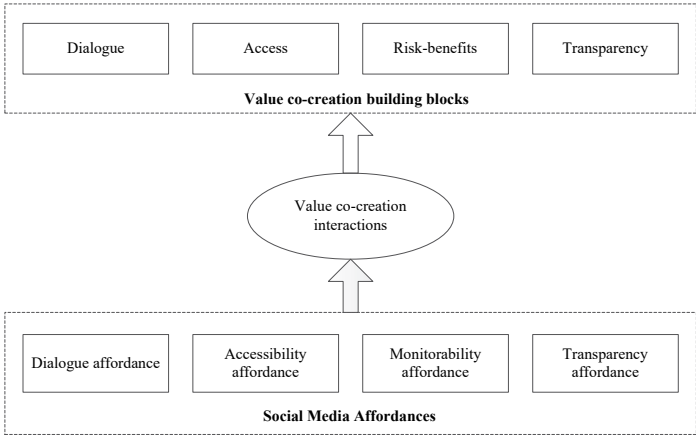


Figure 11 Social media affordances leading to value co-creation

Based on the technology affordance approach, this article offered insights into how social media can be used for co-creation with customers. Four affordances were identified based on the four building blocks (i.e. dialogue, access, risk, and transparency) of value co-creation proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000). The first block—dialogue in value co-creation—can be facilitated via social media platforms with the dialogue affordance, which offers a high degree of editability, visibility, and persistence for firms and customers to present themselves in their preferred ways. The second block—access to product and service information—is made easier with social media, which enables firms to present information in a visible and persistent way and reach a wide range of customers. Social media also enables customers to assess the probability of the risks involved in value co-creation activities via the affordance of the accessibility of social media. Meanwhile, with the monitorability affordance of social media, it is easy for companies to observe and monitor the reactions and feedback from customers, which improve companies’ risk management capabilities. Regarding the last block of value co-creation—transparency—social media contributes to offering visible information about a company’s products and services and decreases the information asymmetry between companies and customers.

**4.1.6 Research Article #6: The Role of eWOM in Customer Engagement in Travel Service Organizations: An Affordance Perspective**

Social media offers fertile ground for eWOM communication. After enabling the understanding of the affordances of social media in the interaction and co-creation with customers, Article #6 further delved into the affordances of eWOM, which forms the essential aspect of social media technology. This article explored the role of eWOM from the organizational perspective—particularly,

how eWOM enhances customer engagement in the context of travel organizations.

In Articles #1 to #4, I presented how eWOM impacts customers’ purchase behaviour, as well as the factors impacting customers’ eWOM use and generation behaviours. eWOM transformed consumers’ decision-making processes, especially in regard to the travel industry of “experience goods.” eWOM has been identified as a motivational driver which can enhance an organization’s capability to engage with customers (Van Doorn et al. 2010), and it is also a key engagement consequence (Hollebeek and Chen 2014). Customer engagement refers to “a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in focal service relationships” (Brodie et al. 2011, p. 260).

Despite the acknowledged importance of eWOM as a new channel for customer engagement in the tourism industry, our understanding remains limited, especially regarding the unique features of eWOM in the interaction between customers and businesses. This article utilized affordance theory to explain how eWOM helps to realize customer engagement in the context of travel organizations, considering the symbiotic relationship between human activities and technological capabilities.

A multiple-case study was conducted among three travel service providers—a travel service company in China, Visit Turku, and the Finnish Tourist Board (Visit Finland). Six affordances of eWOM were identified as supporting customer engagement—that is, interactive, reach, sharing, visibility, monitorability, and co-creation. The results are illustrated in Figure 12.

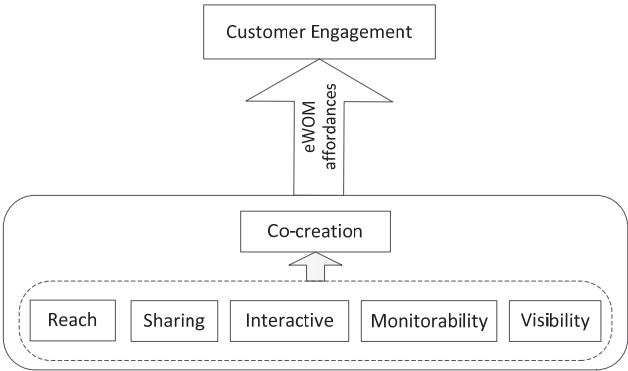


Figure 12 eWOM affordances for customer engagement

Among the six affordances, it was also found that co-creation affordance was facilitated by the other five affordances. The analysis of eWOM affordances in this article contributes to our understanding of the unique capacities that eWOM can offer to organizations, expanding previously known information about the rule of eWOM in customer engagement. eWOM has distinctive properties that

can enable organizations to engage with customers. This study also contributes theoretically to affordance theory in the IS discipline by enriching the technology affordance research by investigating eWOM application in organizations.

## 4.2 eWOM for individuals

Four selected articles—Articles #1 to #4—in this synopsis concentrated on eWOM from the individual perspective, exploring the impact of eWOM on individuals' behaviour and the antecedents of different eWOM behaviours—that is, eWOM use behaviour and generation behaviour. Individual customers' behaviours were found to be impacted significantly by eWOM via either the central route of information quality or the peripheral route of source cues, as indicated in Article #1. Tourists' attitudes towards their destinations were positively influenced by the argument quality of eWOM ( $\beta_1 = 0.173$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).<sup>1</sup> The argument quality of eWOM impacts tourists visit intentions ( $\beta_1 = 0.192$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while their recommendation intentions were positively influenced by only the source credibility of eWOM ( $\beta_1 = 0.104$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Four aspects of eWOM-related factors were taken into consideration in this dissertation: eWOM content-related factors and three eWOM platform-related aspects (perceived social aspects, hedonic aspects, and system aspects). All the results are illustrated in Figure 13.

**eWOM use behaviour** was found to be influenced by all four aspects. In detail, three dimensions of *eWOM content*—that is, accuracy ( $\beta_2 = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), relevance ( $\beta_2 = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and completeness ( $\beta_3 = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ )—were found to be determinants of individuals' eWOM use behaviour. The results also indicated that the impact of eWOM content on eWOM use behaviour differs among different groups and that information completeness impacts only the eWOM use behaviour of those who have generated their own eWOM on online review websites (see Article #3). *Social interaction* from the social aspect of the eWOM platform was found to be a significant determinant of eWOM use behaviour for both groups investigated in Articles #2 ( $\beta_2 = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and #3 ( $\beta_3 = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The *hedonic* aspects of the eWOM platform, perceived enjoyment ( $\beta_2 = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and curiosity fulfilment ( $\beta_2 = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) were significant determinants of eWOM use behaviour. *System reliability* was also found to impact individuals' eWOM use behaviour with a path coefficient at 0.25 ( $\beta_3 = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

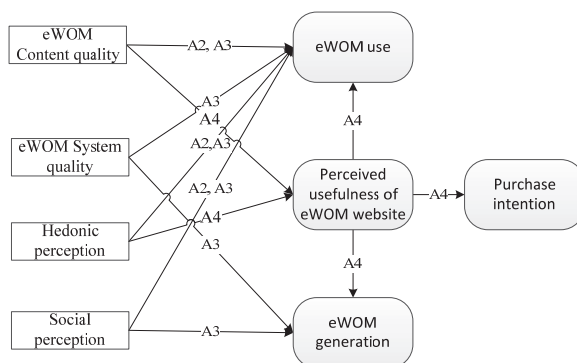
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<sup>1</sup>  $\beta_1$  refers to the path coefficient in research article #1;  $\beta_2$  refers to the path coefficient in research article #2;  $\beta_3$  refers to the path coefficient in research article #3; and  $\beta_4$  refers to the path coefficient in research article #4.

Two aspects that were investigated were found to impact **eWOM generation behaviour** significantly: social and system aspects. In particular, two dimensions of social aspects investigated in this study were found to significantly influence eWOM generation behaviour, social interaction ( $\beta_3 = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and social presence ( $\beta_3 = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Additionally, it was found that the quality of system reliability ( $\beta_3 = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and system integration ( $\beta_3 = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) also determine consumers' eWOM generation behaviour.

Regarding **the PU of eWOM websites**, information quality and hedonic aspects of perceived curiosity fulfilment and enjoyment were significant determinants. Curiosity fulfilment impacts the PU of an eWOM website at a path coefficient of 0.225 ( $\beta_4 = 0.225$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and enjoyment at 0.346 ( $\beta_4 = 0.346$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Information quality was investigated in regard to its impact on individuals' PU of eWOM websites and was measured using four items representing eWOM information accuracy, completeness, relevance, and timeliness (see Article #4). *Information quality* was found to impact PU significantly ( $\beta_4 = 0.241$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Additionally, the relationships between the three eWOM-related dependent variables—eWOM use behaviour, eWOM generation behaviour, and the PU of the eWOM website—were also explored in this study. It was found that the PU of the eWOM website significantly influences individuals' eWOM use ( $\beta_4 = 0.689$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and generation behaviour ( $\beta_4 = 0.487$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), as well as customers' purchase intentions ( $\beta_4 = 0.511$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) after using the eWOM website.



Note: A2: results found in research article #2; A3: results found in research article #3; A4: results found in research article #4.

Figure 13 eWOM from the individual perspective

### 4.3 The affordances of social media and eWOM for tourism organizations

Two research articles, articles #5 and #6, included in this dissertation aimed to investigate eWOM in organizations. To understand the role of social media and

eWOM in organizations, the technology affordance theory was selected as the theoretical foundation for these two articles.

Social media offers a platform for organizations' value co-creation with customers. Based on the value co-creation building blocks presented by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) and the technology affordance approach, four social media affordances were identified in the analysis of Article #5 with regard to the organization's value co-creation with customers. Co-creation is a process by means of which customers play an active role and co-create value with organizations (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004a). In the social media era, customer-business interaction has become a new trend. Customers can easily interact with organizations and other individuals, sharing their purchase experiences, etc. This refines the role that customers play in innovation and value creation (Dahan and Hauser 2002).

Four social media affordances for co-creation with customers were identified: dialogue affordance, accessibility affordance, monitorability affordance, and transparency affordance. These affordances are closely related to the four building blocks of value co-creation proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004b). Dialogue affordance creates and maintains a loyal community, and it enables the discussion of the common interests between consumers and firms (Wang, Li, and Suomi 2016). Via dialogue affordance, companies can involve consumers in their activities, such as product design. As the interviewee from one company mentioned: "The most important thing is to interact with customers, as it helps increase our tailored service level . . . such as inviting customers to vote for our products and comment on them." The *accessibility affordance* of social media makes it convenient for customers to gain access to original and rich product-related information. In the case of Company G, they used one of the most prevalent social media platforms, WeChat, for their brand promotion, and they appear on most of the popular social media platforms to "*ensure we can make our brand recognized and known by as many potential customers as possible*." The *monitorability affordance* of social media enhances organizations' risk-management capabilities, as it is easier for organizations to observe customer reactions and feedback related to organizations' actions. This affordance supports the risk-management block of value co-creation with customers. In the social media era, the more visible and persistent information produced on social media allows both customers and organizations to access rich information. Product- and service-related information or customer-generated content are more easily available for customers and organizations, which increases the transparency level. ***Transparency affordance*** is always combined with other affordances, which can facilitate collaboration between customers and organizations.

Having realized the affordances of the social media platform for value co-creation with customers, the author of this dissertation took a further step by in-

vestigating the role of eWOM in organization–customer interaction in Article #6. It was found that eWOM communication on social media is essential to collaboration between organizations and customers. eWOM communication on social media can be used as an efficient firm–customer interaction for co-creation in the virtual environment (Sawhney, Verona, and Prandelli 2005).

eWOM circulated on social media is two-way communication, which can improve the understanding between service providers and consumers. Co-creation affordance is the capability to bring different parties together and jointly produce mutually valued outcomes. For instance, in the current research context of tourism, tourists get rich information resources via eWOM and get decision-making support from peers, while tourism organizations understand customer needs and feedback about the products or services they provide to cater to customers' preferences (Wang 2017).

By enabling interaction between organizations and customers, eWOM can increase organizations' capabilities to engage with customers. Customer engagement refers to "a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in a focal service relationships" (Brodie et al. 2011, p. 260). The results in Article #6 investigated the role of eWOM in organizations' customer engagement practice. Beside co-creation affordance, another five eWOM affordances were identified: interactive affordance, reach affordance, sharing affordance, visibility affordance, and monitorability affordance (Wang 2017). *Interactive affordance* allows potential customers to easily interact directly or indirectly with tourism organizations. Interactive affordance also enables tourism organizations to show their care for customers. For instance, an interviewee from Visit Turku stated, "We try to answer questions as soon as possible from all the contacts raised in Facebook and Twitter . . . just to let them know that we are always supporting them." *Reach affordance* is the ability of eWOM to reach a wide range of individuals. eWOM takes place in various computer-mediated contexts, such as Facebook and TripAdvisor. Visit Turku has nearly 40,000 followers on Facebook, and with this user base, it is possible for any eWOM posted on it to reach a broad audience. The *sharing affordance* of eWOM refers to the feature which enables the joint use of eWOM content, as well as the process of distributing and disseminating eWOM. The *visibility affordance* of eWOM enables the generated eWOM to be visible to all others who have access to the platform. Organizations can benefit from the visibility affordance of eWOM, as it makes their brands more visible to potential customer groups. The *monitorability affordance* of eWOM enables organizations to observe customers' reactions to services/products. eWOM that is generated online enables organizations to take immediate action whenever negative eWOM happens, as this contributes to problem-solving and even organizations' reputation management.

4.4 eWOM in interactions between individuals and the organization

The above discussion on eWOM for individuals and organizations in the context of tourism, eWOM plays an important role in the interaction between individual customers and tourism organizations. eWOM can not only impact customers’ purchases and visit intentions but can also enable tourism organizations to co-create with and engage with customers, as illustrated in Figure 14 below.

Social media offers platforms of eWOM communication, either on organization-hosted eWOM platforms (referred to as internal eWOM platforms) or third party-hosted eWOM platforms (also referred to as external eWOM platforms), such as TripAdvisor. As eWOM generators or readers, their eWOM generation and usage behaviours are impacted by different groups of determinants.

Social media can facilitate an organization’s co-creation capability with customers via its four affordances for value co-creation, based on the four building blocks of value co-creation interaction (Wang, Li, and Suomi 2016). Conversely, as the most essential interaction on the social media platform, eWOM communication enables organizations to engage with customers via the six identified affordances: interactive, reach, sharing, visibility, monitorability, and co-creation affordances (Wang 2017). Thus, with its unique affordances, eWOM communication facilitates the interaction between individuals and organizations.

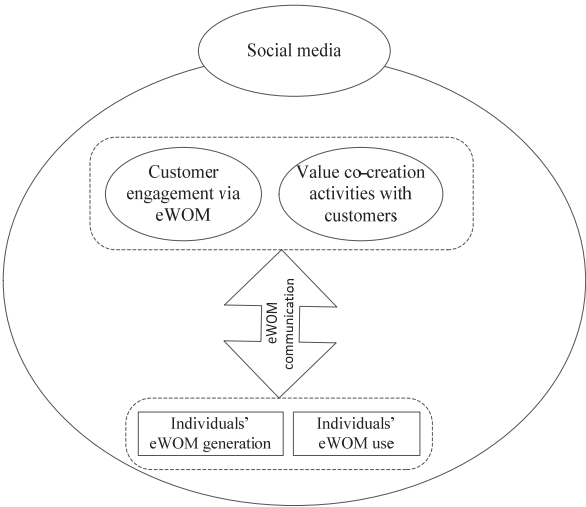


Figure 14 The role of eWOM in the interaction between individuals and organizations

## 5 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this final section, the answers to the research questions presented in this dissertation will be summarized first. It will then address the implications of the findings for academia and practitioners. Finally, the limitations and future research will be discussed.

### 5.1 Summary of answers to research questions

This study set out to fulfil three research objectives. Two premier research questions were proposed in this study, and to answer the two main research questions, two sub-questions were raised for each.

#### *RQ1. What determines travellers' eWOM use and generation behaviours?*

To answer the first main research question, two sub-questions were answered. Individual consumers' eWOM communication can be facilitated via boosting their eWOM use and eWOM generation behaviours.

##### *1.1 What are the determinants of travellers' eWOM use behaviour?*

eWOM use behaviour is influenced by the antecedents of four aspects: the content-related (accuracy, relevance, and completeness), social (social interaction), hedonic (perceived enjoyment, curiosity fulfilment), and the system-related aspect of eWOM platform (system reliability).

The aspect of eWOM content was concentrated on the most in previous studies (such as Filieri and McLeay 2014, Mudambi and Schuff 2010, Park and Nicolau 2015). Five sub-dimensions of eWOM content quality were investigated in this study: accuracy, timeliness, relevance, completeness, and sidedness. Three of these (accuracy, relevance, completeness) are important determinants influencing travellers' eWOM use, which is consistent with the prior research findings of Filieri and McLeay (2014); Xu, Benbasat, and Cenfetelli (2013); and Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn (2008). However, two (timeliness and sidedness) of the five dimensions are not significant determinants for eWOM use, which differs from the previous findings of Filieri and McLeay (2014) and Cheung (2014).

The social aspect of the eWOM platform (social interaction) is a significant determinant of eWOM use, which is consistent with the previous findings of Keng and Ting (2009) and Cheung and Lee (2012). Social aspects of social pres-



ence are not significant determinants of eWOM use, which is surprisingly different from the previous findings of Xie et al. (2011) and Cyr et al. (2007).

The hedonic aspect of the eWOM platform (perceived enjoyment and curiosity fulfilment) and system aspect of the eWOM platform (system reliability) are the new findings from this study, which indicate that social media platforms, such as eWOM platforms, are multipurpose-oriented systems. This is consistent with some of the previous research findings in the IS field, which indicate that IS are designed for multiple purposes—not only for utilitarian, hedonic, or social purposes (Van der Heijden 2004, Li et al. 2015b, Qiu and Benbasat 2009). Additionally, eWOM use behaviour is positively influenced by the PU of the eWOM platform. Detailed discussions are presented in research articles #2 and #3.

### *1.2 What are the determinants of travellers' eWOM generation behaviour?*

eWOM generation behaviour is impacted by the determinants of social and system aspects. In particular, eWOM generation behaviour is determined by the perceived social interaction and social presence of the eWOM platform, as well as the system reliability and system integration of the eWOM platform. Additionally, eWOM generation behaviour is influenced by the PU of the eWOM platform.

The extant literature on eWOM generation mainly focuses on socio-psychological factors (Ben-Shaul and Reichel 2017), service quality, and customer satisfaction (Serra Cantallops and Salvi 2014, Tong et al. 2013). Thus, this study offers new insights to enhance our understanding of individuals' eWOM generation behaviour from a platform-related perspective. A detailed discussion of this finding is presented in research article #3.

## ***RQ2. How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers and use eWOM to engage with customers?***

### *2.1 How can tourism organizations use social media to co-create value with customers?*

Social media can facilitate organizations' co-creation capability with customers via its four affordances: dialogue affordance, accessibility affordance, monitorability affordance, and transparency affordance.

The extant IS research applied only the affordance approach to understanding social media communication inside organizations (Treem and Leonardi 2012), external communication (Argyris and Monu 2015), or social media adoption within organizations (Majchrzak et al. 2013, Evans et al. 2014). This finding offers new insights into social media application in organizations by investigating the affordances of social media in value co-creation with customers. A detailed discussion of this finding is presented in research article #5.

## 2.2 How can tourism organizations use *eWOM* to engage customers?

*eWOM* can increase organizations' customer engagement capabilities via six affordances: interactive affordance, reach affordance, sharing affordance, visibility affordance, monitorability affordance, and co-creation affordance.

In previous research, *eWOM* has been identified as a motivational driver of customer engagement, as *eWOM* communication can increase an organization's capability to engage with customers by enabling organization–customer interaction (Van Doorn et al. 2010). *eWOM* is also a key engagement consequence as positively valenced engagement tend to generate positive *eWOM* and vice versa (Hollebeek and Chen 2014). This study is the first to explore the role of *eWOM* in customer engagement using the affordance approach, and it identified the unique features of *eWOM*. A detailed discussion of this finding is presented in research article #6.

Based on the findings related to RQ1 from the individual perspective and RQ2 from the organizational perspective, we also found the *eWOM* connection between these two sections. Social media offered a platform for *eWOM* communication, and the social and system aspects of social media platforms and the PU of the *eWOM* review website will impact individual customers' *eWOM* generation behaviour. The social and hedonic functions of social media platforms, together with the utilitarian function of *eWOM*, impact individual customers' *eWOM* use behaviour.

Organizations can co-create value with customers via social media platforms by encouraging customers' *eWOM* generation behaviour, which will also benefit customers, as the *eWOM* generated by them has become an important information source for other individual customers. Customers' *eWOM* use and generation behaviours will again deepen engagement with organizations.

## 5.2 Research implications

This study has made theoretical contributions to the understanding of *eWOM*, specifically in regard to individuals' *eWOM* behaviours, *eWOM* application in organizations, and the role of *eWOM* in the organization–customer interplay.

First, this study contributed to the understanding of customers' *eWOM* behaviour through different lens, including the U&G and IS success approaches. In this study, despite the significant impact of the content quality of *eWOM* on its use (Park and Nicolau 2015, Ullah et al. 2016), the *eWOM* system, social perception, and the hedonic perception of *eWOM* channels were also investigated in regard to their impacts on *eWOM* use behaviour.

In doing so, the U&G and IS theories were selected and extended to the context of *eWOM* use. U&G is one of the most appropriate theoretical frameworks

used to address the psychological and behavioural tendencies related to the media use (Lin 1999). This study offers evidence that eWOM communication can also be explained using media communication theory.

Additionally, this study extended the IS success model by incorporating social quality into the quality dimensions of the original D&M success model (Wang et al. 2017). The D&M IS success model (2003) includes three quality dimensions: system quality, information quality, and service quality. The prevalence of social media and user-generated content has made social quality an important predictor of system use. In addition, social interaction with other peers in the review system is important attributes contributing to system success.

Second, this study contributed to the extension of IS theory to eWOM behaviour research by incorporating the PU of the eWOM website. The evidence from this study suggests that users' eWOM use and generation behaviours can also be explained from the IS perspective. In this study, the usefulness of eWOM websites was found to be a mediator between the antecedents and eWOM-related behaviours. Most eWOM research focuses on its motivators and consequences (Hu, Chen, and Lee 2016, Filieri 2016). The findings in this research have enriched the existing literature on eWOM from the usefulness of IS perspectives and have extended the prior literature from the motivations of eWOM use and generation and the consequences of eWOM from an IS usefulness perspective.

Third, this thesis shed new light on the understanding of eWOM application in organizations, and it integrated individual and organizational eWOM research. eWOM research from the individual perspective and the organizational perspective used to be two separate research streams (Huang and Korfiatis 2015, See-To and Ho 2014). Via the technology affordance theory, the findings in this study have contributed to our understanding of how eWOM can be used to facilitate organizations' customer engagement capabilities, as discussed in research article #6 (Wang, Li, and Suomi 2016). This finding has laid the groundwork for future research into the eWOM strategies employed by organizations.

This study appears to be the first that attempted to investigate eWOM communication via the affordance approach. The affordance concept can be used to consider the properties of an object (such as social media and eWOM) and perceiving entity (such as an organization or individual customer) simultaneously, which can offer new insights into the investigation of eWOM interaction between individual users and organizational users. This study enriched the use of technology affordance in IS application, such as social media adoption and communication in organizations (Majchrzak et al. 2013, Evans et al. 2014), applying it to the context of eWOM communication, as presented in research article #6.

### 5.3 Practical implications

This study contributed to a number of practical implications based on the current research context of tourism.

First, the results of this study have important implications for tourism e-service practitioners in regard to their understanding of the customer's decision-making process. Any e-service providers who want to harness the power of eWOM should understand how customers are influenced by it and what influences eWOM use behaviour. This study offered empirical evidence of the factors influencing tourists' travel-related decision-making. Traveller's intentions to visit a travel destination are mainly influenced by the content quality of eWOM, whereas their intentions to recommend a destination are mainly influenced by the credibility of eWOM. This indicates that if companies or destination managers want to take advantage of the strength of customers' WOM even before their own travel experiences, they should offer more credible information sources related to destinations (Wang 2015).

Second, this study contributed to helping eWOM website managers' understanding of how to make successful eWOM websites. They should pay attention to the categorization of the different attributes of the information contained in eWOM, as well as the social, hedonic, and system quality perceptions of the eWOM system. Review system providers should monitor different dimensions of information quality in eWOM publishing, as they influence information use by customers. In addition, travellers use eWOM review systems not only for their utilitarian value but also for the social and hedonic values of eWOM systems. A recommendation for e-tourism service providers is that a persuasive and effective eWOM website should offer high-quality eWOM and provide social and entertaining gratifications by taking advantage of information and communication technology.

Third, this study contributed to helping tourism practitioners who aim to facilitate customers' propensities for eWOM generation behaviour on review websites. As an eWOM generator, the traveller's generation behaviour is determined primarily by the eWOM system's reliability and integration and the perceived social interaction on the review website, rather than the information quality of eWOM. Review system managers and e-tourism practitioners should concentrate on improving the technical function of the system and make it reliable, dependable, and capable of integrating data from various sources, such as links to their firms' information. Among the four dimensions of system quality that were evaluated, reliability was found to be the only significant determinant for both a consumers' eWOM use and generation behaviour. This confirmed the importance of the system reliability of the eWOM website in affecting consumers' eWOM communication behaviours.

This research showed that the PU of the eWOM website is also a factor motivating customers' eWOM generation behaviour. As indicated in previous research, website design positively stimulates users' perception of pleasure, arousal, and information quality, and it indirectly influences customers' WOM intentions (Ha and Im 2012). Thus, eWOM website practitioners need to provide customers with eWOM platforms that are perceived as useful in terms of their performance. As such, despite the measures encouraging customers' eWOM contributions—for instance, economic rewards or inviting them to provide post-purchase eWOM—cooperation with useful eWOM websites or the facilitation of their own eWOM websites with more useful characters, as identified in this research, also contribute enormously.

Fourth, the findings in this study will help e-service providers to understand how to use the affordance of social media to co-create value with customers and how to improve their customer engagement capabilities via eWOM communication. Within the interactive, dynamic business environments in the social media era, eWOM communication has become a promising way to engage customers. Customer engagement represents a strategic imperative for generating enhanced corporate performance (Brodie et al. 2011). Thus, e-service providers who aim to capture the business opportunity to engage and co-create value with customers should realize the distinctive affordances of social media and eWOM in practice.

## **5.4 Research limitations and future research**

The present study has a number of limitations, which can also be viewed as future research areas. The first is that the current study did not distinguish between the eWOM generated for the different sectors of the travel industry—for instance, accommodation, destination, and restaurants. eWOM may also vary due to the various attributes of different travel products. Hence, future research might replicate the research model by focusing on different product types.

Second, as the quantitative questionnaire survey method is the main research method used in this study to explore eWOM among individuals, the instruments used in this research model were adapted from previous literature, and only limited factors related to each aspect are included. There are other external factors that may also influence PU. Future research could include more about eWOM, such as eWOM generation factors (King, Racherla, and Bush 2014) and subjective norms (Venkatesh et al. 2003) to increase the explanatory power of the model. Additionally, the results may be limited in terms of the ability to capture rich information on individuals' eWOM behaviour, such as the types of gratification that users obtained during eWOM channel usage or the other perceptions moti-

vating their eWOM behaviours. Future researchers could conduct qualitative interviews to enrich the findings on individuals' eWOM behaviours.

Third, this study on individuals' eWOM behaviour focused on exploring this behaviour on only one eWOM communication channel—that is, a travel review website. The explanation for eWOM behaviour would be more elaborate, taking other eWOM channels into consideration for the purposes of comparison.

Finally, the research is contextualized in the tourism industry, and the data collected on eWOM affordances were based on three case organizations. To further foster the understanding of eWOM affordances, future research could refine or expand upon our findings of six affordances of eWOM in other contexts. The studies in different industry settings could potentially increase the applicability of the theoretical findings.

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