

Twenty-five years of Word-of-Mouth studies: A critical review of tourism research

Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication is a dominant force in the marketplace. Firms are interested in measuring and controlling this important tool, as it might contribute to promoting a specific product or service by customers (Mangold *et al.*, 1999; Harrison-Walker, 2001). Moreover, due to the spread of information and communication technologies, it is not surprising that virtual interactions among consumers have proliferated, particularly for services (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Litvin *et al.*, 2008).

According to a recent Nielsen study, 92% of consumers around the world say they trust earned media, such as WOM and recommendations from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising. Online consumer reviews are the second most trusted form of advertising, with 70% of global consumers surveyed online indicating that they trust this platform, an increase of 15% in four years (Nielsen, 2012).

Given that WOM is also considered an important service outcome construct (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2003), it is crucial that firms understand the impact that relationships and service quality have on cultivating, for instance, positive WOM behaviours among customers (Ng *et al.*, 2011).

Tourism is a good example of a sector in which consumers share their opinions offline and online. Interpersonal influence is important because of its intangible nature, and the fact that it cannot be evaluated before the purchasing (Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Philips *et al.*, 2013).

Previous studies in tourism and hospitality journals have addressed WOM. One of the first studies related to WOM communications was conducted by Woodside and Moore (1987). The authors analysed customers' WOM communications across hotels, via a questionnaire sent to samples of customers from six hotels.

Since then, the majority of articles have employed empirical study. They highlight, for instance, the motivating factors for consumers to seek or spread WOM recommendations, in both offline and online environments (Murphy *et al.*, 2007; Simpson and Siguaw, 2008; Stringam and Gerdes, 2010; Park and Allen, 2013). Although WOM in the tourism industry has been addressed in many of the major tourism and hospitality journals for 25 years, there has not yet been a thorough synthesis of these studies, nor has there been an analysis of the approach and the direction the research has taken. Few articles provide an overall picture of the topic (see Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Tham *et al.*, 2013; Leung *et al.*, 2013). The few that have appeared are limited to the online context or electronic WOM, or to a specific period.

This article addresses that deficiency, collecting and analysing the existing research without limitation of time and following this stream as a whole both offline and online, utilising a technique known as the paradigm funnel (Berthon *et al.*, 2003). This allows researchers 'to reconcile the observed and the assumed while assessing the methods and implicit assumptions underlying a particular stream of literature' (Nairn *et al.*, 2007).

Very few studies have applied this technique to literature reviews (Berthon *et al.*, 2003; Nairn *et al.*, 2007; Breazeale, 2009). For the purposes of this article, the author employed this technique's criteria, placing the reviewed articles into one of five categories (representing the levels of the paradigm funnel), based on the primary purpose of each article. The primary objective of each article was determined by examining the authors' explicit intentions, the content of the article and the research methodology.

The paradigm funnel can highlight the way in which research effort is distributed at a point in time. This allows an understanding of how a community as a whole is tackling an issue. For researcher focusing on this topic it is challenging to provide her/him with a tool which does not just give an overview of the existing research but with the distribution/categorization of the research among empirical, theoretical, methodological or conceptual works.

The paper is structured as follows. The literature background section will introduce the topic of word of mouth related to the tourism area and the paradigm funnel approach. The Method section will discuss the appropriateness of the paradigm funnel technique for this review, and will then explain the selection of articles for review and the review process. Then each category of research will be described, and 46 representative articles discussed. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion of the gaps and possible future directions for this stream of research.

Literature background:

WOM and tourism

WOM can be defined as ‘an oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product, or service’ (Arndt, 1967). A number of studies have shown that WOM has an important influence on consumer purchases, and that this influence is particularly strong when a consumer is considering purchasing a new product or service (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Engel, *et al.*, 1969). Moreover, consumer-created information is likely to be more credible than seller-created information, because credibility of information is often positively related to the trustworthiness of the information source (Wilson and Sherrell, 1993). An important aspect that leads firms to consider and analyse WOM is that WOM from satisfied customers lowers the cost of attracting new customers and enhances the firm’s overall reputation, while dissatisfied customers naturally have the opposite effect (Fornell, 1992; Anderson, 1998).

The influence of WOM has increased through the proliferation of online feedback mechanisms, which have changed people’s behaviour in important ways. Consumers increasingly rely on opinions posted through such systems to make a variety of decisions. A study confirmed that online user reviews have become an important source of information to consumers, substituting and complementing other forms of business-to-consumer and offline WOM communication about products (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). This development has led customers to be connected in ways that were unavailable in the past, such as through social networking sites, blogs, wikis,

recommendation sites and online communities (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010; Wuyts *et al.*, 2010).

In this context, services become the natural subject of WOM communication among consumers. Services are generally difficult to evaluate prior to purchase (Zeithaml, 1981) and therefore are perceived as high-risk (Guseman, 1981; Murray 1991; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). For this reason, consumers often engage in WOM for high-risk products in general (Rogers, 1983), and for services in particular, to gain information that will reduce risk, help make comparisons between or among service alternatives or to understand the service prior to delivery and consumption (Bristor, 1990). Many marketers—particularly those selling professional services—rely on these informal information channels (Reingen and Kernan, 1986). Thus, WOM is particularly valuable for services that are high in experience and credence qualities (Anderson, 1998), such as tourism.

Some studies on the effectiveness of WOM have been applied to tourism, demonstrating the influence of both positive and negative WOM upon tourism products across a range of locations (Cheng *et al.*, 2006; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Park and Allen, 2013). A recent study demonstrated that good WOM does not only create a positive image of a destination, it can also increase awareness of a destination to those unfamiliar with it (Philips *et al.*, 2013).

With the advancement of Internet technology, increasing numbers of travellers are using the Internet to seek information on destinations and to conduct transactions online (Jalivand and Samiei, 2012). One of the main challenges for tourism destinations and businesses is the rise of social media and networking platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Myspace), which allow tourists to interact and share their views and experiences (Sigala *et al.*, 2012). An increasing number of studies have addressed the role of ‘electronic WOM’ (*eWOM*) in tourism destination choice (Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Park and Gretzel, 2007; Zhu and Lai, 2009), focusing on specific issues such as the marketing potential of tourists’ narratives as digital WOM (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2008), the role and profile of opinion leaders (helpful reviewers) in online

travel communities (Lee, Law, and Murphy, 2011) and hotel performance in viral or social media marketing (Chan and Guillet, 2011).

Within the context of the increasing influence of *eWOM* and online reviews in tourism destination marketing, it is argued that the topic needs further investigation to improve theoretical knowledge of how tourists use *eWOM* in their decision processes (Sotiriadis and van Zyl, 2013). Moreover, researchers will have to devise new methods in studying offline and online interpersonal influence, so that they can test theoretical propositions derived from the existing literature on social influence (Litvin *et al.*, 2008).

Despite increasing interest in the topic, only a few studies have addressed the need for an overall synthesis of the articles and their analysis for a better understanding of the main directions the research has taken. One example is provided by Litvin *et al.* (2008), suggesting a conceptual model including sources, mediating variables, and motivations for contributing and seeking WOM, with a discussion of how electronic WOM differs from traditional WOM. Tham *et al.* (2013) advanced the understanding of electronic WOM by presenting its distinctive dimensions. Finally, Leung *et al.* (2013) reviewed and analysed research articles appearing in academic journals between 2007 and 2011, on social media in the tourism and hospitality fields. However, these studies were intended to provide only a review of *eWOM* use in tourism, and/or consider a specific period.

The study reported herein was designed to provide an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of previous tourism and hospitality research about WOM, including both offline and online contexts, and to explore directions for future research.

An innovative literature review technique: the paradigm funnel approach

Literature review is a central component of much academic research. It can take the form of a description of previous studies, or provide a more insightful critical analysis of previous research (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998). Several approaches can be applied when conducting a literature review. The challenge is to find the most suitable tool to enable the research to produce a holistic overview of a body of literature, and the assumptions

that underpin it. This becomes more challenging in the case of literature comprising different research methods, the adoption of multidisciplinary perspectives and application to different objects of study, common in marketing studies.

This study adopts a particular tool known as the paradigm funnel. This first appeared in an article by Berthon, Nairn and Money published in *Marketing Education Review* in 2003. This tool allows researchers to investigate, categorise and analyse the composition and dynamics of change within a body of literature (Nairn *et al.*, 2007). The term 'paradigm' started to appear in the natural sciences after Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which focused on the historical evolution of the natural sciences. Kuhn's definition of the paradigm is that it is related to 'the entire constellation of beliefs, values and techniques, and so on shared by the members of a community, where science involves matching these with observations of nature' (1970, p. 175). Thus, a paradigm can range from deep, implicit assumptions to explicit tools, such as practices and the selection of problems and facts. Science includes puzzle solving, in which data and theory are matched. This process is 'a strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature into...conceptual boxes' (Kuhn, 1970, p. 5). The interest in paradigms has meant that the social sciences have adopted paradigm classification (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), wars (Willmott *et al.*, 1993) and reconciliations (Lewis and Grimes, 1999).

Kuhn (1970, p. 25) identified three foci for factual scientific investigation: (1) the determination of significant fact, (2) matches of fact with theory, and (3) the articulation of theory. The determination of significant fact comprises empirical observation of key variables and constants. The matching of fact and theory comprises refinement of analytical convention. Finally, the articulation of theory results in the modification and development of underlying assumptions.

Building on these distinctions, the paradigm funnel was, at a later stage, developed by Berthon *et al.* (2003). It differentiates four levels, ranging from the 'explicit, observable' to the 'implicit, unobservable' (Nairn *et al.*, 2007):

- Level 1 of the funnel represents those articles of a primarily empirical nature, whose main goal is the determination of significant fact, comprising empirical observation of key variables and constants.
- Level 2 contains articles that address mainly analytical methods, with the aim of analysing current perspectives on methodology.
- Level 3 includes articles constituted by specific theories, with the objective of building theories of advancement.
- Level 4 of the funnel consists of core ontological, epistemological and methodological articles that assume or compare suppositions and particular perspectives about a specific topic, such as WOM in the tourism industry.

The logic of allocating a study within one specific level is that it helps in understanding whether the main purpose of the article explicitly refers to the generation of data, facts, analytical methods, theories or deep assumptions. If data or facts do not accord with a particular theory, there is a need to question how the data is analysed. If no solutions are given at this second step, a specific theory generating a set of hypotheses might be underpinned. From explicit to implicit and core assumptions, theories might be discussed underlining the need to develop a deep assumption about the discipline or science (Berthon *et al.*, 2003). In sum, starting at the first level, research may need a deeper level in order to find alternative data manipulation techniques, or to rethink theories, and, finally deep assumptions underpinning a theory.

As Brezeale (2008) did in his study, we also added Level 5 to the existing paradigm funnel to include articles which describe ‘overview articles’, such as those pertaining to specific topics that do not fit the previous four levels (an illustration of the paradigm funnel can be seen in Figure 1).

Please insert Figure 1.

Regarding the shape and the distribution of the research within the funnel levels, we expect, as in previous studies, there will be an unequal distribution of research between levels. Once a paradigm has become established, we would expect that most of the

research would concentrate at the shallowest level of the funnel (empirical observation, Level 1). Once a researcher finds a concentration, for instance at Level 2 (analytical methods), s/he might be led to consider whether this distribution signals a paradigm shift toward the need for new theories. Our study will adopt this tool to structure a historic body of research on WOM in the tourism industry. This will be realised in order 'to go beyond simply listing a series of past studies providing a structured analysis of the body of research which can generate research thinking' (Nairn *et al.*, 2007, p. 257).

Methodology

This study reviewed Word of Mouth articles related to travel/tourism and hospitality that were published until August 2013 with an aim of classifying them into the paradigm funnel categories.

Articles were selected on the basis of their relevance to word of mouth in the tourism and hospitality fields.

We have decided to first consider the articles emerging from our search which have been published from all the major tourism and destination academic peer to peer journals. Book chapters, book reviews, editorials, introductions to other works and conference articles were excluded.

All articles focus on topics related to WOM, both in offline and online contexts, applied to specific tourism categories, destinations and hospitality facilities. Suitable articles were identified by searching four of the largest and most popular online databases and search engines for scientific research covering different disciplines (Ip *et al.*, 2011): EBSCOhost, ISI Web of Knowledge, Scopus and Google Scholar. In order to categorise articles based on research themes, methods and setting, electronic databases are the generally preferred sources. These are primarily searched for keywords (Gross *et al.*, 2013). We believe that using the four databases provides the most cost-effective way of locating academic literature on WOM in tourism.

The keywords searched included ‘word of mouth’, ‘electronic/online/internet/e word of mouth’ and ‘review’. These keywords were combined with ‘hospitality’, ‘tourism’, ‘hotel’, ‘resort’, and ‘travel’.

In our study, we considered all the articles from peer to peer journals, without considering any rating classification. As Table 1 illustrates, 21 peer to peer journals have published important studies in this field, capturing the diversity in approach that the authors chose to adopt.

Comparing our list to those focusing on academic journals primarily focused on tourism and hospitality, we noticed that most of the journals belonging to our list fit in the list of 64 major tourism and hospitality journals compiled by Mc Kercher, Law, and Lam (2006).

In addition, we also considered articles from journals not primarily targeting tourism and hospitality issues when their primary focus was on word of mouth within the tourism area, in order to consider a multidisciplinary perspective and provide a more comprehensive review with wider applicability. However, the distribution of articles focusing on this topic is concentrated in tourism journals.

After careful screening, 46 articles were selected. The first article on WOM applied to tourism appeared in a major tourism journal in 1987, and research on the topic has been steadily increasing since then (see Figure 2).

Please insert Figure 2.

Please insert Table 1

In order to classify the articles based on the paradigm funnel, we had to decide what constituted the primary objective of each article. Was it to show what was observed in nature, to test analytical methods, to verify or explore a theory, or to question the core metaphysical assumptions of an existing theory? In making this decision, we examined the explicitly stated objective(s) of the articles, their content and the research methodology employed, following the procedure suggested by Berthon *et al.* (2003) and

Nairn *et al.* (2007). Following this, the total dataset was re-established using Excel software, recording attributes such as authors, titles, year of publication, publication source, main keywords, abstracts and key sentences providing information on research purposes and types of analysis relevant for the article classification.

These articles were also exported as pdf files and next imported into NVivo, a qualitative research software, where we performed the content analysis procedures, which was used to support data analysis and reliability. The notes were made in it directly when reviewing the articles. To ensure the reliability and validity of the coding, two researchers coded the texts separately (Wan, 2002). Double-checks were made through discussions of each coding result. Where there were disagreements that could not be resolved, a third person was introduced into the discussion. We perform content analysis, using as an orientation framework the keywords and the previous knowledge on the concept of paradigm funnel, yet drawing on categories building in a grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). We use Nvivo queries to explore and test results, and we extract information via reports and specific matrix-coding queries, to support each category with specific number of references and citations.

To summarize, the above procedure provides stronger evidence for a better conclusion through convergence and collaboration of findings and add insight and understanding that might be otherwise missed when only a single method is used (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

In the next stage, the collected articles were categorised using the paradigm funnel.

Findings

Five levels emerged from the literature review. Those classified as Level 1 (empirical studies, describing the various realities within the tourism area, collecting data and analysing case studies) constituted the majority of articles (65.2%). Articles classified as Level 2 (research-based articles applying and comparing different methods) constituted 6.5% of the total. More articles (19.6%) were categorised as Level 3 (studies related to the implementation, validation or generation of a specific theory). Level 4 articles (explaining particular conceptual or ontological issues) made up just 6.5%. Finally, we found just one Level 5 article ('overviews'), 2.2% of the total.

Please insert Figure 3.

Level 1: empirical research

Thirty articles sit in this largest part of the funnel (65.2% of the 46 articles). An examination of the articles in this level provides the reader with an idea of why the funnel is an appropriate metaphor for this type of review. With the exception of a small number of articles (Hartline, 1996; Kim *et al.*, 2001), the studies belonging to this level were conducted in the last decade (2003–2013), suggesting that journals are considering research focusing on specific realities within tourism, collecting and generating data through recent case studies.

The overall focus of each article in this level is the generation of data. All articles employ empirical methods to determine facts about WOM in the tourism industry. For example, Phillips *et al.* (2013) explicitly state the objective of their article is ‘to assess the relationships among the three constructs (which are destination images, perceived value and satisfaction) and their effect on intentions to revisit and recommend a rural tourism destination, specifically North Dakota’ (p. 94).

In detail, articles in this level of the funnel use both quantitative (Heung, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2001) and qualitative methods (Arsal *et al.*, 2010; Leung *et al.*, 2013) of gathering data. In terms of data analysis methods, some articles adopt descriptive discussion (Arsal *et al.*, 2010), while others use content analysis (Leung *et al.*, 2013) and statistical analyses (Hartline, 1996; Heung, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2009).

Several themes permeate the empirical articles. A main topic is the influence of WOM on travel decisions, such as the influence of residents (Arsal *et al.*, 2010), or of friends and relatives as opposed to other travellers on travel choices (Murphy *et al.*, 2007; Leach *et al.*, 2008). Some studies focus on online WOM, exploring the patterns and features of online reviews (Stringam and Gerdes, 2010; Racherla *et al.*, 2013; Park and Allen, 2013), understanding their influence on travel decisions (Patterson, 2007; Black and Kelley, 2009; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013), and on consumers’ attributions of service

quality (Browning *et al.*, 2013). Another study highlights the motivating factors behind consumers seeking WOM; namely, convenience, quality, risk reduction and social reassurance (Kim *et al.*, 2011).

A list of Level 1 articles and their purpose can be found in Table 2.

Please insert Table 2.

Level 2: analytical methods

The number of articles in this part of the funnel decreases steadily to 6.5% of the total. The primary focus of these articles is the selection, evaluation or comparison of appropriate methodologies for the study of WOM in the tourism industry. All articles are relatively recent (Ye *et al.*, 2009; Berezina *et al.*, 2012; Jalivand *et al.*, 2012). For instance, one article tests whether breaches of information security impact hotel guests' perception of service quality, satisfaction, likelihood of recommending a hotel and revisit intentions (Berezina *et al.*, 2012). The main intention of this article was not to describe data but apply 'this instrument targeted to the assessment of service quality of the respondents' last hotel stay using the SERVPERF scale' (p. 998). Another study suggests and implements a model of tourists' destination choice process in the context of online communications, by proposing an integrated approach. This model includes *eWOM*, destination image and tourist attitude toward destination as the major determinants of tourists' travel intention (Jalivand *et al.*, 2012). The third article compares three supervised machine learning algorithms (Naïve Bayes, Support Vector Machine (SVM) and character-based N-gram model for sentiment classification of the reviews) on travel blogs for seven popular travel destinations in the United States and Europe (Ye *et al.*, 2009). The focus of all three articles is the ordering, structuring and manipulation of data through the testing of models, methods and applications.

Please insert Table 3.

Level 3: specific theory

Level 3 comprises 19.6 % of articles reviewed. The focus of all nine articles in this category is the articulation of theoretical generative mechanisms or theory implementation, eventually associating empirical propositions applied to WOM. Psychological theories, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Cheng *et al.*, 2006; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012), are natural candidates in helping understand WOM in the tourism industry.

For instance, the authors of one article in this category clearly state that the objective of their research is ‘to apply the TPB in measuring the negative WOM communication intention of Chinese consumer in the context of high-class Chinese restaurants’ (Cheng *et al.*, 2006, p. 97). Another study applies the consideration of set theory to model the impact of online hotel reviews on consumer choice (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). One recent article focuses on the foundations of digital communication, and empirically investigates its validity by examining the factors influencing tourism consumer behaviour (Sotiriadis and van Zyl, 2013).

It would be useful for further research to test theories from other disciplines. A list of articles grouped in Level 3 can be found in Table 4:

Please insert Table 4.

Level 4: core assumptions

Three articles, only 6.5% of the total, were assigned to this level of the funnel. The smallest group of articles, together with Level 2, represents a challenge to the deepest assumption of WOM theory in the tourism industry. The focus of these articles is questioning deep ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological assumptions.

Haywood (1989) suggests a conceptual approach to control WOM, considering a wide spectrum of stakeholders. Litvin *et al.* (2008) consider electronic WOM at a theoretical level, stating that they provide a ‘conceptual model including sources, mediating variables, and motivations for contributing and seeking WOM, with a discussion of how *e*WOM differs from the traditional WOM’ (p. 459). A more recent article (Tham *et al.*, 2013) discusses the distinctive characteristics of *e*WOM, which are little known, such as source-receiver relationships, channel variety, presentation of contents, opportunities for information solicitation, message retention capabilities and content provider motivations for disclosure.

Please insert Table 5.

Level 5: overview articles

One reviewed article did not fit into the paradigm funnel, as it was a review and analysis of the literature on social media in the tourist industry.

Please insert Table 6.

Discussion and implications

This article discusses the state of research on WOM in the tourism industry, and provides an overview of what has been studied, offering some insights into future research topics. It is evident that research into this academic argument has been increasing over the last two decades.

The method by which we examined the state of the literature—the paradigm funnel—provides an interesting way to understand how academic studies analyse and evaluate WOM, and represents an underexplored technique, as only three previous studies applied it to different topics (Berthon *et al.*, 2003; Nairn *et al.*, 2007; Breazeale, 2009). This innovative method might be helpful for other critical reviews on tourism and hospitality topics, particularly suitable for young scholars. Moreover, this tool allows researchers to examine how a specific research area has developed over a specific period. In addition, the paradigm funnel highlights that the majority of studies were focused on empirical observation and data generation (Level 1). Less attention was paid

to contributions with the aim of comparing or implementing different analytical methods, or articles focusing on deep ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological assumptions. This might confirm the perspective suggested by Nairn *et al.* (2007), stating that once a paradigm is well established in the literature, research aims at focusing on the empirical observations and the determination of significant fact (Kuhn, 1970), until empirical works fail to match established theory, moving toward the need to find new theories or question deep assumptions (Nairn *et al.*, 2007).

The concentration of articles related to WOM in tourism at Level 1 might also be related to the propensity of journals to publish, or the interest of researchers to write, articles providing managerial implications and describing the reality of tourism experiences and choices, and how these are influenced by WOM.

The articles analysed in this study represent a wide variety of themes, from investigating the impact of WOM and *e*WOM on choice of tourism destination, to understanding the motivating factors for consumers to not only seek but also spread WOM.

In the future, researchers could better explore several issues; from applying the paradigm funnel tool to other topic and research areas, to evaluating different research methods or applying multidisciplinary theories to the study of WOM in tourism. Summarising the main themes recently developed within this area of research, we propose a scheme that starts from the main themes at present and tries to design the topics of tomorrow, with the help of the future research suggested by authors (Figure 4). This might help researchers and managers to understand the main issues and theoretical and practical trends that could be considered in future research.

Please insert Figure 4.

Future research provided by several authors recommends replicating these studies in other contexts (Arsal *et al.*, 2010), such as different online travel communities, hotels and destinations. In addition, developing a better understanding of consumers' verbal

behaviour related to services such as tourism should be of interest globally to marketing managers and researchers. Future researchers might also enrich their findings via cross-cultural studies (Jalivand and Samiei, 2012). Another issue that could be further developed is investigation into other characteristics, such as trip type, family life cycle, cultural differences and the travel motivation of different people, all of which may be useful to future research efforts regarding WOM and wide spreading processes (Murphy *et al.*, 2007).

Litvin et al. (2008, p. 476) ended their study with the following questions:

“How much weight do tourists give personal sources versus impersonal sources? When information from personal and impersonal sources is acquired, do consumers maintain these source distinctions, or do they treat all the information as if it came from one source? In case of online contexts, lacking face-to-face contact with opinion givers, what cues do consumers use to assign trust to online social influences?”

These issues remain, in part, open to debate and could be developed further.

Conclusion: implications and limitations

The aim of this review was to provide evidence of the existence of numerous peer-reviewed articles focusing on WOM, specifically focusing on the tourism industry. This study strives to provide a better understanding of the existing research on this topic by adopting the paradigm funnel approach. Researchers and practitioners could consider the major findings provided here, to develop additional understanding about this phenomenon. This could thereby provide new core assumptions and related theoretical background, suggesting new analytical methods and finally enriching existing empirical studies. Thus, managers could better understand the increasing importance of WOM, and the empowerment it has given to consumers. Managers need to understand the potential this tool has to monitor the health of their brand, the level of customer preference related to a hotel, a destination or a tourism service. In doing so, they should properly address their marketing and activities toward the measurement, evaluation and stimulation of this powerful tool.

Some limitations arise from this study. Applying this approach to a literature review necessitates interpretation from the researcher, in order to allocate the articles collected for the paradigm levels.

Another limitation relates to the keywords selected, which could have eliminated important articles on the topic. For instance, as “social media” was not included as keywords, research on social media which does not contain the word: “WOM” might be excluded from the present study. At least this limitation can be addressed in future research.

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