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# USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT IN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY: A USES & GRATIFICATIONS AND DUAL-PROCESS CONCEPTUALIZATION

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## Abstract

*User-Generated Content (UGC) on the World Wide Web has empowered travellers, enabling them to exchange opinions or experiences with others, and consequently, influencing their travel decisions. Travellers are able to make comments in a large variety of forms such as photos, videos, podcasts, ratings, reviews, articles and blogs. When people use the Internet to obtain travel information, they do research about the trip on the Internet, read and generate content and reviews, and interact with other travellers in social networks. This is empowering tourists by giving them the opportunity to receive and pass on recommendations of their travel experiences. Despite the importance of UGC in the travel industry, our understanding of how UGC empowers online consumer remains limited. By employing the Uses & Gratifications and Dual-Process Theories, we propose that Consumer Empowerment in the context of UGC can be formed through Content Empowerment, Social Empowerment and Process Empowerment.*

Keywords: Consumer Empowerment, User-Generated Content, U&G Theory, Dual-Process Theory.

## INTRODUCTION

During the last few years, users have spent more time on the web and shared more information with each other (Enders, Hungenberg, Denker, & Mauch, 2008). In fact, people are making their thoughts and opinions easily available to the world through the Internet (Dellarocas, 2003). Also, new forms of content generation, communication and collaboration have emerged on the web (Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006). For instance, user-generated content (UGC) allows Internet users to make comments in a large variety of forms such as photos, videos, podcasts, ratings, reviews, articles and blogs (George & Scerri, 2007; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Roughly 75.2 million Internet users use UGC in the United States, but this figure is expected to increase up to 101 million in 2011 (eMarketer, 2007). In 2007 approximately 60% of European online users used UGC (Carrera et al., 2008).

Examples of UGC activities that people are using on the web include: reading or writing blogs, reading or writing customer reviews, taking part in social networking sites, listening to podcasts and setting up RSS feeds (Carrera et al., 2008). Unlike the early days of Internet when the websites only broadcasted one-way information, this new Internet trend is empowering the users to create, edit and view information (Carrera et al., 2008). Empowerment is an enabling process, which implies "creating conditions for heightening motivation for task accomplishment through the development of a strong sense of personal efficacy" (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 474).

Some users like to share their feedback and evaluation through a social network site after buying and consuming a product/service. This can create an enormous flow of electronic word-of-mouth, especially when people use Web 2.0 applications. Web 2.0 refers to a second generation of web-based services such as social networking sites, blogging, podcasting, and wikis that enable users to collaborate and share information online emphasizing UGC (Lefebvre, 2007; Reactive, 2007). A study undertaken by Deloitte Touche USA in 2007 showed that 62% of American consumers read user-generated online reviews and 98% of these consumers find the reviews reliable, and lastly 80% of them agree that the reviews affected their buying intentions (Constantinides, 2007).

Consumers feel empowered accessing information and taking independent voluntary action in their own behalf (Freedman, 2007). According to Berman & Phillips (2001, p. 183), "the informational aspect of empowerment concerns the extent to which information contributes to enabling people, as citizens, to develop their full potential". Information is essential for travellers, and the Internet allows them to search for travel-related information (air-ticket bookings, online room reservations, etc) without using travel agencies to undertake this (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Rezaabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). Since the travel and tourism industry is an information-oriented business, the Internet is a suitable environment for building a dynamic platform for information supply and exchange (Ho & Lee, 2007). As evidence of this, travellers are becoming the co-producers and co-distributors of tourism services using UGC activities such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, and map mashups to share their travel experiences with others (Sigala, 2007a).

Although UGC has increasingly been seen as one of the vital information sources to web users and has brought an increased impact on electronic commerce (Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008; Hoegg, Martignoni, Meckel, & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2006), little theoretical work has been done on understanding this new technology phenomenon in the scientific community (Arriga & Levina, 2008; Cheong & Morrison, 2008; O'Connor, 2008).

There are several studies that have explored empowerment (Sehgal & Stewart, 2004), but mostly have used empowerment in terms of authority delegation and decentralisation of decision-making power (Burker, 1986). For this study, empowerment is defined as a motivational construct and is viewed as an enabling process (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Empowerment tends to mean different things to different people (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997). Sehgal & Stewart (2006) did a review of the empowerment concept, and they found out that the concept is misunderstood. They argue that a single common conception of empowerment is not appropriate across all disciplines and across all contexts.

The role of empowerment in UGC context has not been explored. Further, there has been no prior research that assesses how UGC empowers online consumer in the travel industry, even though UGC has been expanding in volume and influence within the travel and tourism sectors (Daugherty, Eastin,

& Bright, 2008). The key objective of this research is to understand the role of consumer empowerment in the context of UGC.

The purpose of this study is to theoretically propose a set of factors that integrate UGC adoption with Consumer Empowerment variables to enhance our understanding of how UGC empowers online consumer in the travel industry. By employing the Uses & Gratifications and Dual-Process Theories, we propose that Consumer Empowerment in the context of UGC can be formed through Content Empowerment, Social Empowerment and Process Empowerment. The Uses and Gratification Theory (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004) is used to unify the components of Consumer Empowerment under one theory. Also, the theoretical lens of Dual-Process Theory (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) is used to help determine the Content and Social Empowerment dimensions of the Consumer Empowerment construct. Thus, this study presents an integrated model based on two theories: U&G and Dual-Process. These theories are used in information systems and communication research.

## **UGC IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY**

User-generated content (UGC), also known as consumer-generated content (CGC), constitutes the data, information, or media produced by the general public (rather by professionals) on the Internet (Arriga & Levina, 2008; Daugherty et al., 2008). Examples of such online content are digital video, blogging, podcasting, mobile phone, photography, wikis, social networks, and user-forum posts (Constantinides, 2007; Daugherty et al., 2008).

In all these UGC activities, the user is the central point being not only consumer, but also content contributor playing simultaneously the roles of producers as well as consumers of the content on the Internet (Arriga & Levina, 2008; Constantinides, 2007). As a result, people are gaining unprecedented power on the web (George & Scerri, 2007). The reasons why individuals generate content on the Internet are (George & Scerri, 2007): analysis and commentary, entertainment, and review (e.g. books, products, restaurants ratings, travellers' comments on hotels).

The Internet in the tourism, travel and hospitality industries is not only part of the mainstream industry management and marketing, but also has changed markets structures, practices, communication and distribution channels (Koumelis, 2008). Increasingly travel organizations have adopted the Internet in their businesses (Doolin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002). More and more tourists are going online and the hospitality and tourism industry must be aware that their consumers are being influenced by the travel sites related to the selling or discussion of tourists' trips (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). For instance, a study with international vacation tourists in New Zealand showed that Internet was rated significantly more useful than other sources of information on making accommodation decisions (Hyde, 2006). Travellers are engaging in online travel communities since they can share knowledge with each other from a previous trip (Arsal, Backman, & Baldwin, 2008). In an online community, tourists obtain travel content, seek suggestions and have fun regarding experiences of trips (Stockdale & Borovicka, 2006).

User-generated content is changing the dynamics of the travel industry profoundly using its global word-of-mouth forces (Arsal et al., 2008; Laboy & Torchio, 2007). Travellers are getting in touch directly with other travellers who have similar destination interests through social networking in the online travel world (Laboy & Torchio, 2007). Gretzel & Yoo (2008) assert that consumer-generated content such as online travel reviews written by tourists on virtual communities are more available and used frequently to transmit travel-related decisions.

Even though UGC concepts are quite recent, they are becoming popular as tourists share their experiences and travel recommendations (Carrera et al., 2008; O'Connor, 2008). A web-based survey carried out by Gretzel & Yoo (2008) showed that 97.7% of Internet users who travel said they read other travellers' reviews during the process of planning a trip. O'Mahony (2008) highlights that in November 2007, Sunday Times Top 100 travel sites was dominated by travel reviews and blogs, where web users can share their experiences and book directly. Examples of websites that help tourists to interact and offer peer to peer advice on the Internet are TripAdvisor.com, IgoUgo.com, WAYN.com, Virtualtourist.com, Trekshare.com, and Lonelyplanet.com (Chung & Buhalis, 2008;

Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Approximately 20 million travellers planned trips through TripAdvisor by September 2007 (Schegg, Liebrich, Scaglione, & Ahmad, 2008). TripAdvisor supports people on the pre-travel phase (researching and bookings) as well as on the post-travel phase, shares experiences, reviews hotels and destinations, posts photos and videos from their trips (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). Indeed, consumer-generated content facilitates tourists to evaluate travel alternatives during decision-making processes on the Internet (O'Connor, 2008). The content generated by the Internet users is empowering online travellers in the planning and buying processes of their trips (Schegg et al., 2008; Sigala, 2007b).

## **EMPOWERMENT**

Various definitions of empowerment exist in literature (Sehgal & Stewart, 2004) and no consensus occurs regarding this concept (Ergeneli, Arl, & Metin, 2007). For the purpose of this study, empowerment is defined as a motivational construct and is viewed as an enabling process (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). According to Conger & Kanungo (1988, p. 474), "enabling implies creating conditions for heightening motivation for task accomplishment through the development of a strong sense of personal efficacy". In order to understand empowerment in motivational terms, Bandura (1986) defines it as a process whereby an individual's belief in his self-efficacy is enhanced.

Empowerment can also be defined as process by which people gain control over their own destiny as well as participation with others to achieve goals (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1987). Consequently, processes involving empowerment are influencing the decisions that affect people's lives (Zimmerman, 1995).

The Internet has enabled people to participate on a more active role in the value chain, influencing individual's decision making (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Berman & Phillips (2001) assert that information technology networking has amplified the extent of empowerment within a community. As an example of this, UGC applications on the web have enabled individuals to generate their own content (Starkov & Price, 2007). In the tourism industry, the content generated by the Internet users is empowering online travellers to plan their own trips on the web (Schegg et al., 2008; Sigala, 2007b).

Although empowerment is discussed with increasing regularity (Harrison, Waite, & Hunter, 2006), there is a lack of a clear definition of a type of empowerment specific to a context (Sehgal & Stewart, 2006). No other study has explored the role of empowerment in the UGC context. With the aim of understanding how UGC empowers online consumer in the travel industry, the consumer empowerment construct is proposed in this study.

## **CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT**

Increasingly technologies have been enabling consumers to learn more about the experiences of other consumers (Newholm, Laing, & Hogg, 2006; Wathieu et al., 2002). With the advent of the Internet, the power of the online consumer has risen (Kucik & Krishnamurthy, 2007). The World Wide Web has empowered consumers allowing them to exchange opinions or experiences with others from all over the world (Litvin et al., 2008), and consequently enabling electronic word-of-mouth communication through bulletin boards and news groups (Niininen, Buhalis, & March, 2007). For instance, consumers are engaging in electronic word-of-mouth websites (e.g., eopinion.com, consumerreview.com, ciao.com) in order to share opinions and experiences about products and services in general (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006).

Since the explosion of the Internet and emergence of UGC, consumers have been more demanding (Verikios, 2007). Constantinides (2007) states that UGC applications have contributed to an increasing consumer empowerment. Therefore, consumers that use these applications do not depend on website owners to publish the information they look for, but they just rely on information provided by their own peers (O'Connor, 2008). Besides, through Web 2.0 tools, users not only have a sense of empowerment, but also feel part of a community (Barsky & Purdon, 2006).

Consumer empowerment has been related to changes in the travel and entertainment industries (Freedman, 2007). For example, before booking trips 61% of travellers consult online search engines (Conrady, 2007). As a consequence, tourists are becoming empowered. Hjalager (2001, p. 289) points out that “a truly empowered tourist is a person who, without much pain or intellectual effort, is able to make an informed choice of services and products in accordance with his/her own preferences”. Indeed, the Internet enables tourists to receive and pass on recommendations of tourist experiences (Hjalager, 2001).

Although user-generated content has contributed to consumer empowerment on the Internet (mainly in the tourism industry), few authors have applied concepts of consumer empowerment to the characteristics of the Internet (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). As well, there has been no prior research that assesses how UGC empowers online consumer in the travel industry

For this study, the research model on consumer empowerment will be grounded on Uses and Gratification Theory (Stafford et al., 2004) and Dual-Process Theory (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Consumer Empowerment is made up of three components: Content Empowerment, Social Empowerment and Process Empowerment. Uses and Gratifications Theory unifies the components of Consumer empowerment construct under one theory.

## **MEDIA USE THEORIES**

Many theories have been developed to explain media use. Three primary theories will be discussed first (Social Presence, Media Richness and Social Influence theory), before explaining why Uses and Gratifications approach is used in this paper.

According to Social Presence theory proposed by Short, Williams & Christie (1976), communication media vary in the degree to which it conveys the physical presence of communicators. Media is arranged along a continuum from low (numerical writing documents) to high social presence (face-to-face interaction). So, individuals will select the medium in which they perceive to have the highest social presence necessary for a specific communication task (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001).

Similar to Social Presence approach, Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) suggests that people choose technologies based mainly on the attributes of the medium. As well, studies on Media Richness Model is more supportive of the media continuum when applied to traditional rather than new media (Fulk & Boyd, 1991). For instance, Daft, Lengel, & Trevino (1987) argue that face-to-face communication is considered as the richest and the most effective medium for reducing task equivocality.

Due to less social presence and less information richness, UGC is described as the data produced by individuals on the Internet, where they exchange opinion/information about a specific content as well as fulfil their social interaction needs (Shao, 2009). Since inconsistent results of social presence and media richness theories were found for the new media, other researchers recommend other factors to assess and select new media, for example: assessment of need fulfilment, social norms and peer evaluations of media (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001).

Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield (1990) proposed the Social Influence Model of Technology Use, where individuals' media perception and use are socially constructed subjective, and assessment of media influences its usage. Authors pointed out that social influences can both positively and negatively influence people attitude toward the use of new media.

Flanagin & Metzger (2001) claim that Uses and Gratifications theory is consistent with Social Influence approaches. This theory perspective states that people select media based on needs (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). Uses and Gratifications theory is also helpful for understanding motivations for using the Internet, largely because its characteristics of active choice of media and user-centered perspective on the relation between users and media (Guo, Cheung, & Tan, 2008). Further, user-generated content is enormously gratifying people who create and view its content (Schwartz, 2009).

## **USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY (U&G)**

Derived from mass communications research, the Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G) refers to users who are keenly involved in media usage and interact with the communication media (Luo, 2002). Also, U&G theory examines motivational and behavioral dimensions to explain the psychological gratification related to a multitude of mediated communication modes (Huang, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000). U&G research is helpful for explaining the social and psychological motives that influence people to choose a specific media to gratify a set of psychological needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

According to U&G approach, when someone make a choice to consume media, he/she is motivated by him/her desire to fulfil cognitive and affective needs (Katz et al., 1974). U&G can be a useful framework for exploring what people get from media and why they use it (Ruggiero, 2000). U&G theory has been used to rationalize consumer behavior and concerns in the context of a number of media (Huang, 2008), for instance television, VCS, telephone, cable TV, and the Internet (Ruggiero, 2000). In the context of Internet, many studies have applied U&G theory to the Internet (Chen & Corkindale, 2008; Guo et al., 2008; Huang, 2008). In fact, U&G approach is quite appropriate to understand Internet-related motivations, enjoyments and needs (Chen & Corkindale, 2008; Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Ruggiero, 2000; Stafford, 2008). In addition, Stafford (2003) claims that U&G theory is very useful for diagnosis Internet-making decisions.

Recently Internet research using U&G theory has examined three components related to consumer motivation for using the Internet: process gratifications, content gratifications, and social gratifications (Stafford et al., 2004). When people use media just for the content carried by a medium, such as information, knowledge or research, this is considered content gratifications. However, when people use a media just for the simple experience, such as browsing or playing with the technology, this is process gratifications. Whereas social gratifications are characterized by a social dimension of U&G, such as chatting, friends, interaction and people. The dimensions from these three U&G components seem very broad and might relate to any content on the Internet. For the purpose of this research, in order to be related to the UGC context the dimensions from content and social gratifications come from the Dual-Process Theory, and the dimensions from process gratifications comes from other U&G studies. Since UGC is affected by informational and normative factors, the informational and normative influence dimensions from Dual-Process theory seem more appropriate in the UGC context.

## **DUAL PROCESS THEORY**

Many theories are applied to investigate how people are influenced by received information, for example the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Heuristic Systematic Model (HSM), and Deutsch and Gerrard's Dual-Process theory of normative and informational influence (1955). ELM and HSM are similar theories in the sense that how different levels of comprehensive processing and heuristic processing affect persuasive communication (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009). While Gerrard's Dual-Process theory is used to view how different types of influences (normative and informational) affect the persuasiveness of information (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

A reader's information evaluation is really affected by informational factors (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). However, since user-generated content is submitted by strangers on the Internet, informational elements would not be enough to evaluate its content. In that case, including normative factors would complement the evaluation of the content due the UGC social aggregation capacity.

Dual-Process theory not only considers the informational social influence, but also the normative power influence from other audiences (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). In other words, informational influence is based on the content of the received information, whereas normative influence is based on the other people's opinions about the received information and how these opinions would affect others' choice preferences (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). The Dual-process approach is useful to explain

communication effectiveness when group opinions/discussion is present (Briggs, Burford, De-Angeli, & Lynch, 2002; Sia, Tan, & Wei, 2002). Thus, this theory is suitable for applying in UGC studies.

Dual-Process theory is used in this study to understand how and to what extent both types of influence (informational and normative) affect the persuasiveness of user-generated content. Informational social influence and normative social influence come from the Social Influence approach (Bearden, Calcich, & Netemeyer, 1986). Therefore, both U&G theory and Dual-Process theory are consistent with the Social Influence theories. These two theories have similarities that make them helpful to conceptualise the UGC issue using the empowerment concept.

Hence, the three components of U&G theory (content, social, and process) are proposed to form the concept of Content Empowerment, Social Empowerment and Process Empowerment, respectively in the Consumer Empowerment construct. Dual-Process Theory is used to help determine the Content Empowerment dimensions (argument quality, source credibility, information consistency, and information framing), and Social Empowerment dimensions (recommendation consistency, and recommendation rating). Process Empowerment dimensions are derived from U&G's process gratifications studies (medium and entertainment). Consumer Empowerment construct proposed in this study is then shown in figure 1.

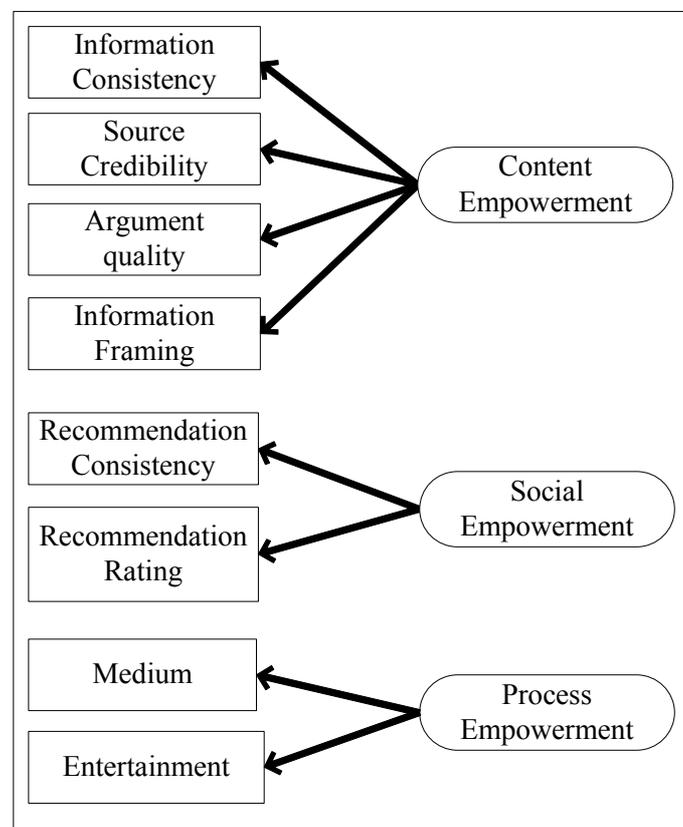


Figure 1. Consumer Empowerment construct

## CONTENT EMPOWERMENT

Content gratifications from U&G theory (Stafford et al., 2004) is characterized as related to information content, and is derived from the use of mediated messages for their intrinsic value for the receiver (Cutler & Danowski, 1980). For the purpose of this study, content gratifications is conceptualised under empowerment theory, and is utilizing informational influence determinants (argument quality, source credibility, information consistency, and information framing) to help define its construct as Content Empowerment.

In informational influence research, four determinants have been used in the studies: argument quality, source credibility, information consistency, and information framing (Cacioppo, Petty, &

Morris, 1983; Cheung et al., 2009; Grewal, Gotlieb, & Marmorstein, 1994; Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Zhang & Watts, 2003).

- **Argument Quality** - Argument quality concerns the quality or strength of the received information (Cacioppo et al., 1983). According to Cheung et al. (2009), when the received information has strong arguments, receivers will develop a positive attitude towards the information.
- **Information Framing** - Information framing refers to the content of the message, if it is positively framed or negatively framed (Cheung et al., 2009). Positively framed information is related to product's strengths, whereas negatively framed information is associated to product's weakness/problems (Grewal et al., 1994).
- **Source Credibility** - People are more acceptable with information that comes from highly credible source, and consequently less likely to accept it when the source has low credibility (Grewal et al., 1994). Lim, Sia, Lee and Bensabat (2006) claim that source credibility can be applied to the online environment.
- **Information Consistency** - Information consistency indicates the extent to which the current message is consistent with the prior knowledge of the member accessing it (Zhang & Watts, 2003). Hence, when people read online recommendations that have advice which confirms the reader's existing belief, they will be more likely to believe the information (Cheung et al., 2009).

## **SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT**

Social gratifications from U&G theory is characterized by chatting and interacting with people over the Internet, and is generally in the form of normative forces (Stafford et al., 2004). For the purpose of this research, social gratifications is conceptualised under empowerment theory, and is utilizing social influence determinants (recommendation consistency and recommendation rating) to help define its construct as Social Empowerment.

Researches related to online consumer recommendations (Cheung et al., 2009; Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2007) have used two types of normative influence determinants in their studies: recommendation consistency and recommendation rating.

- **Recommendation Consistency** - Recommendation consistency refers to the extent to which the current recommendation is consistent with other contributors' experiences regarding the same product/service evaluation (Zhang & Watts, 2003). People likely rate the credibility of the recommendation highly when there is consistency between the recommendations (Cheung et al., 2007).
- **Recommendation Rating** - Recommendation rating refers to the overall rating provided by other people on a recommendation (Cheung et al., 2007). Online consumers can mark a high or low rating depending on the perception of the message (Cheung et al., 2009).

## **PROCESS EMPOWERMENT**

Process gratification is derived from the use of mediated messages for extrinsic values, in contrast to a specific interest in its content (Cutler & Danowski, 1980), where people surfing the web are motivated by the process of browsing for enjoyment (Stafford et al., 2004). For the purpose of this study, process gratifications is conceptualised under empowerment theory, and is utilizing dimensions (medium and entertainment) derived from U&G's process gratifications studies (Stafford & Stafford, 2001; Stafford et al., 2004) to help define its construct as Process Empowerment.

- **Medium** - Process gratifications concern actual use of the medium itself (Cutler & Danowski, 1980). Variables such as "web sites", "search engines", and "technology" can be considered part of the dimension of Internet usage process gratifications (Stafford et al., 2004).
- **Entertainment** - when people obtain gratifications by taking advantage of entertainment offered on the web, it can be considered as a process-motivated gratification (Stafford & Stafford, 2001). Entertainment refers to the extent to which the web media is fun and entertaining to media users (Eighmey & McCord, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

The main significance of this research is the conceptualisation of Consumer Empowerment in the context of UGC in the travel industry. What makes our Consumer Empowerment distinct to the existing perspectives is its measurable context. Thus, this research makes three contributions: First, proposing a new construct of Consumer Empowerment consisting of three components: Content Empowerment, Social Empowerment and Process Empowerment. Secondly, it is a pioneering attempt to conceptualise the UGC issue using the empowerment concept that is developed from two theories: U&G Theory and Dual-Process Theory. Finally, this study will be valuable to web researchers and lodging practitioners interested in designing, implementing, and managing their websites.

Further empirical research will be required to validate the model. The empirical work will strengthen or refute claims of other related studies and will offer theoretical and practical contributions to the field of UGC.

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