University of Massachusetts Amherst
ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst

Silent Travlers: Barriers to Providing eWOM

Rebecca Gunn

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/ttra

Silent Travelers: Barriers to Providing eWOM

Introduction

It is often stated that humans are creatures of habit and generally favor that which is familiar. This is similar within the consumer experience as well; once a consumer finds a product that fills a particular need and does so at a satisfactory level, it will take a competing product that can craft a story that showcases how it can meet the need better while also motivating the consumer to take a risk and purchase something unknown. The more risk inherent with a purchase, the more hesitant a consumer may be in making a final selection and as a result, turn to those who have experienced the very product. Word of mouth communication has been an integral part of the consumer buying process among consumers for centuries (Dellarocas, 2003) but it has only recently leaped to an online format in the last decade.

Not only is electronic word of mouth (eWOM) boundless in where and who it can reach, it also has the potential to have an endless lifespan (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). With the prevalence of the Internet and smart technology, consumers have a greater opportunity to seek eWOM than ever before (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012). As the risk for making certain purchases increases, the likelihood of consumers seeking eWOM is also greater (Racherla, Connolly, & Christodoulidou, 2013/2012). One industry which carries more risk than its physical counterparts is that of the travel and hospitality industry. As consumers are unable to un-experience part of a travel or hospitality adventure, it comes with an increased amount of risk compared to tangible products. In addition, nearly the entire travel and hospitality occurrence is composed of several intangible experiences, driving consumers to generally evaluate more than one aspect of their trip.

eWOM is considered a wealth of information to the investigative traveler. While research has analyzed the motivations that cause consumers to provide content regarding their experiences with both tangible and intangible products (e.g. Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Murphy, Gil, & Schegg, 2010; Wilson, Murphy, & Fierro, 2012; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), what has been considered less is why many have remained silent and not contributed eWOM relating their thoughts. As eWOM is considered a highly influential factor in consumers choosing what they purchase (Grimes, 2012), it is important to understand what barriers may be facing those who choose to remain to silent in an attempt to overcome those obstacles. The focus of this research centers on determining the barriers that hinder eWOM contribution, specifically in the travel and hospitality industry. The following research questions are considered: **Research Question 1**: Do the barriers that hinder the contribution of eWOM differ among the type of UGC site accessed? **Research Question 2**: Who does not contribute on different UGC sites (in terms of demographic characteristics)?

This research adds to the literature by providing insight into the barriers that hinder consumers, specifically travelers, from initiating any eWOM communication regarding their experiences. As an industry which carries a higher risk for its consumers with its intangible experiences, the travel and hospitality industry provides an eWOM platform that many rely on before finalizing decisions. From this research, an examination into barriers hindering eWOM is provided which can then be used when attempting to encourage eWOM from consumers.

Literature Review

Since it was bestowed its term of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in 2004 (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), researchers have been seeking to give eWOM roots and develop various streams of thought as it pertains to areas such as the motives behind contributing eWOM (e.g. Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), who contributes eWOM (e.g. Chetterjee, 2011; Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011; Munzel & Kunz, 2014; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), locations around the globe where it is influential (e.g. Bronner & de Hoog, 2011), when it is accessed by potential consumers (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009), and the content of the eWOM contributed (e.g. Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Moe, Schweidel, & Trusov, 2011).

While research has begun to make strides in understanding more of that which surrounds eWOM, one avenue that has had less research is in the area of passive consumers who do not contribute their own eWOM (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003). Little is known regarding the barriers that hinder these consumers from offering eWOM, particularly in a highly involved industry such as the travel and hospitality industry. Over the past decade few studies have called into question what factors hinder the generation of eWOM and have included the feeling of not needing to provide information, desiring to know more about a particular group, believing it would be more beneficial to not contribute, giving up on understanding the technological parameters required to provide eWOM, not wanting to be a part of a particular group, not having time, wishing to remain anonymous, and fearing commitment (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004). Other studies have revealed concerns for safety (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003), the desire to not offend, and fears over a loss of privacy (Bishop, 2011). Studies specifically in the area of travel have suggested various barriers such as the time to post travel experiences (Gretzel et al., 2007), a lack of confidence in providing content, believing they had nothing unique to offer, a lack of time (Murphy et al., 2010), a compromise of user identity, keeping experiences a secret (Wilson et al, 2012), fear of retribution, security and privacy concerns, a lack of motivation (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), and forgetting.

From these potential barriers, four overarching themes were found to overlap among previous research and were studied within this research. They consist of the following: 1) privacy and security concerns, 2) a lack of confidence, 3) time constraints, and 4) technology issues. In addition to the four barriers described, a fifth element was considered and consisted of the potential barrier of concern for the company. For example, if a loyal consumer of an accommodation location experienced a negative situation, that traveler could consider the experience to be abnormal and choose not to divulge the negative experience and potentially harm the company. This could also take place if a confirmation bias of not enjoying a certain accommodation is experienced differently but the traveler could still withhold information in an attempt to balance their beliefs.

While eWOM communication is considered to be available or created by anyone, user-generated content (UGC) sites are considered to be free from company-elicited material and relies solely on the basis of consumer contributions (Kozinets de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Within the travel and hospitality industry, UGC sites have been categorized into several areas: 1) social networking sites (SNSs), 2) review sites, 3) supplier sites, and 4) visual media sharing sites (Murphy et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012).

Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) are considered a social media platform in which connections are built on communication among members and members have the authority to determine who may or may not access one's information (Chatterjee, 2011; Coulter & Roggeveen,

2012). Review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor) are considered to be those sites that are operated by a third-party; they are not the providers of a service (Murphy et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012). Supplier sites (e.g. hotel websites, tourism organizations), which could also be considered as commercial sites (Bingley, Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2010), is one where it is obvious that the operator of the site is also the same as the provider of a service (Murphy et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012). Visual media sharing sites include video and photo sharing sites (Murphy et al., 2010). As motivations for contributing eWOM on visual platforms may differ from contributing on more textual focused platforms (Susarla, Oh, & Tan, 2016), this research focuses primarily on eWOM contributed through the written word and not though visual illustrations.

Methodology

Nearly 400 respondents were surveyed through a Qualities purchase panel regarding their access of UGC sites and their behavior regarding whether they engaged in creating content relating their travel and hospitality experienced. The survey included several filtering questions and was distributed six weeks after a new year.

After confirming that the respondents had the information required to continue with the survey, they were asked questions determining their travel behavior, eWOM behavior, and their demographic characteristics. If they had accessed UGC sites but had not offered their own eWOM regarding their travel and hospitality experiences, they were provided a list of 16 statements gathered from previous literature in Likert format. In an effort to provide additional validity, the statements appeared in a different randomized order for each respondent.

To reduce the sixteen statements that could serve as potential barriers that hinder the contribution of eWOM on UGC sites, principal component analysis (PCA) was imposed. As consistent with previous research (e.g. Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003), PCA allowed for the condensing of multiple variables into several components to better understand the key factors.

In order to determine whether several demographic characteristics have significance relating to the lack of contribution of eWOM on UGC sites, cross-tabulations and chi-squares are considered. Demographic characteristics include gender, age, education level, income level, and race. Significance among demographic characteristics have been determined through cross-tabulations and chi-squares in previous studies (see Bronner & de Hoog, 2011).

Results

When comparing the differences among the three UGC sites (see Table 1), similarities were easily recognizable. The same three components that became apparent with SNSs were also visible with review sites, just in varying order. Whether contributing written eWOM is avoided on SNSs due to a perceived lack of confidence, concerns for privacy and security, or issues with technology, the same can be portrayed for review sites, with the barriers having different levels exhibited of the hindering behavior.

Table 1. Resulting Barriers from PCA

Social Networking Sites	Review Sites	Supplier Sites
Lack of Confidence	Technological Issues	Privacy & Security Concerns
Privacy & Security Concerns	Privacy & Security Concerns	Technological Issues

Technological Issues	Lack of Confidence	Time Constraints

Privacy and Security Concerns took a secondary seat to the top hindering concern for both SNSs and review sites but resulted in the primary position for supplier sites. In addition, whereas a lack of confidence appeared for both SNSs and review sites, it was not a contributing barrier in avoiding the creation of eWOM on supplier sites. Instead, time constraints emerged as a barrier that causes a lack of contributing eWOM on the particular UGC site. This is the greatest difference among the three UGC sites analyzed in this study. While travelers who use SNSs and review sites may generate a lack of confidence in contributing something of value, this barrier does not appear within the realm of supplier sites. At the same time, while time constraints detract from contributing eWOM on supplier sites, it is not an issue with SNSs and review sites.

As each UGC was evaluated separately to observe differences and similarities, descriptive statistics was provided for each category. Of those who were a part of this study, 115 of 395 respondents selected that they had accessed a SNS in the past 12 months but had not contributed eWOM content relating their travel and hospitality experience. Review sites had the most observational but non-contributing behavior of users of the three UGC sites evaluated with 151 of the 395 respondents admitting only consuming eWOM in the past 12 months. Of the 395 respondents, less than 200 accessed of supplier sites and of those who had accessed a supplier site, only 64 had not contributed to providing written eWOM related to their travel and hospitality experiences. Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 2 for each UGC site and the various demographics characteristics considered within this research.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics by UGC

Gender	SNS	Review Site	Supplier Site
Male	24%	27%	29%
Female	33%	47%	36%
Age			
18-29	28%	42%	39%
30-49	24%	32%	26%
50+	46%	47%	37%
Education Level			
HS, GED, Some College, Other	38%	48%	36%
College	25%	33%	36%
Graduate Degree	18%	25%	19%
Income			
Less than $29999	19%	46%	39%
$30K-$49999	30%	42%	34%
$50K-$74999	24%	36%	29%
$75K-$99999	11%	26%	28%
More than $100K	17%	43%	38%
Race			
Caucasian	30%	39%	34%
African American	36%	50%	33%

Hispanic, Native American, Other	23%	26%	21%
Asian American	22%	36%	33%

These percentages result from those who agreed that they had accessed a particular UGC site within 12 months and then had not provided written content of their own and compared to the overall demographics of the entire study.

Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were conducted to determine significance of demographic characteristics and engagement (or lack of engagement) on a UGC environment. While significance was found with SNSs and review sites, no significance was found with supplier sites across the five demographic characteristics (see Table 3). Gender, age, and education level showed significance for both SNSs and review sites. Income level showed significance with SNSs.

Table 3. Summary of p-values from Demographic Characteristics & UGC Sites

	Social Networking Site	Review Site	Supplier Site
Gender	0.046*	0.000*	0.252
Age	0.003*	0.041*	0.171
Education level	0.003*	0.001*	0.092
Income level	0.021*	0.074	0.822
Race	0.325	0.104	0.657

* indicates significance at p < 0.05

Conclusion and Discussion

Four barriers were recognized as hindrances to providing eWOM across three UGC sites. These barriers included a lack of confidence, privacy and security concerns, technological issues, and time constraints. In addition, it was discovered that the UCG sites of SNSs, review sites, and supplier sites had differing barriers that impact traveler silence. While SNSs and review sites must overcome barriers such as a lack of confidence, concerns over privacy and security, and issues outside of their concern such as technological issues, supplier site barriers are more focused on a lack of time rather than confidence, in addition to privacy and security concerns and technological issues. Through understanding the unique differences and similarities among these UGC sites, travel and hospitality service providers may be able to better communicate with their consumers (in this case travelers) and attempt to overcome the barriers to providing eWOM.

In addition, insight is provided regarding those who access UGC sites but who engage in passive behavior. While previous studies have examined demographic characteristics, they have not been analyzed travelers according their UGC site behavior. For example, Yoo and Gretzel (2011) found significance for gender and income levels while Bronner and de Hoog (2011) and Munzel and Kunz (2014) found significance with some age groups and education levels. However, none of these studies independently evaluated the UGC sites. This research not only allows for a deeper understanding of travelers who are lurking on the sidelines, waiting to be motivated to contribute something worth value without the fear of placing their identities at risk, but it also shows significance among gender, age, education, and income with SNSs. Significance is also shown with gender, age, and education levels as in relation to review site usage. Significance was not present as it related to eWOM engagement on supplier sites. Awareness of these issues can allow

travel and hospitality providers to target specific individuals in motivating them to contribute their eWOM.

This research sought to determine what barriers may hinder travelers from providing eWOM on three different UGC sites. As eWOM is a relatively young topic and has only been studied in depth since the turn of the century, additional studies are required in order to better understand it. This is the first study of its kind that evaluates several barriers to providing eWOM on specific UGC sites rather than grouping all UGC sites into one conglomerated online platform for communicating. Studies focusing on the hindrances of contributing eWOM are few and this research seeks to provide information that can be beneficial to not only the travel and hospitality industry, but also to the broader consumer behavior literature. Online communication is only increasing and seeking to understand what causes some consumers to withhold their experiences can allow managers and marketers to better serve their consumers as well as offer them an encouragement to contribute. For example, Munzel and Kunz (2014) stated that passive observers could be drawn into providing eWOM when they understand how it may be helpful to others. In addition, Gretzel and her fellow researchers (2007) stated that while being aware of the motivating factors that cause travelers to contribute eWOM is a good strategy, decreasing the barriers that hinder contribution may be a far greater strategy.

Several limitations were present within this study. This study was specific to only those in the United States and who are U.S. citizens. Additionally, only those 18 and older who had traveled overnight and had also accessed SNS and review site were included in the survey. In using a panel provider and aggregator, only respondents with access to the provider were given an opportunity to respond. This research was also limited to the industry of travel and hospitality and results could vary depending on different products, risk, or involvement levels.

As few studies have considered barriers to contributing eWOM, less within the travel and hospitality industry, and none pertaining to the separation of the type of UGC sites, additional research is recommended. These areas for research include further research into the barriers that hinder eWOM contribution, further research into the type of UGC site consumers may shy away from in contributing eWOM, consideration of other industries or products (such as tangible products or low risk products), and further research into the demographic characteristics of both active and passive users of UGC sites. Furthering these research areas will provide marketers with additional tools on how best to interact with consumers and encourage eWOM on UGC sites.

References

Bingley, S., S. Burgess, C. Sellitto, C. Cox, and J. Buultjens. (2010). "A Classification Scheme for Analysing Web 2.0 Tourism Websites." Journal of Electric Commerce Research, 11(4): 281-298.

Bishop, J. (2011). "Transforming Lurkers into Posters: The role of the Participation Continuum." In Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Internet Technologies and Application:, 25-32.

Bronner, F. and R. de Hoog. (2011). "Vacationers and eWOM: Who Posts, and Why, Where, and What?" Journal of Travel Research, 50(1): 15-26.

Brown, J., A.J. Broderick, and N. Lee. (2007). "Word of Mouth Communication within Online Communities: Conceptualizing the Online Social Network." Journal of Interactive Marketing, 21(3): 2-20.

Chatterjee, P. (2011). "Drivers of New Product Recommending and Referral Behaviour on Social Network Sites." International Journal of Advertising, 30(1): 77-101.

Chevalier, J.A., and D. Mayzlin. (2006). "The Effect of Word of Mouth on Sales: Online Book Reviews." Journal of Marketing Research, 43(3): 345-354.

Coulter, K.S., and A. Roggeveen. (2012). "'Like it or not': Consumer Responses to Word-of-Mouth Communication in On-line Social Networks." Management Research Review, 35(9): 878-899.

Cox, C., S. Burgess, C. Sellitto, and J. Buultjens. (2009). "The Role of User-Generated Content in Tourists' Travel Planning Behavior." Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management, 18(8): 743-764.

Dellarocas, C. (2003). "The Digitalization of Word of Mouth: Promise and Challenges of Online Feedback Mechanisms." Management Science, 49(10): 1407-1424.

Gretzel, U., K.H. Yoo, and M. Purifoy. (2007). "Online Travel Review Study: Role & Impact of Online Travel Reviews." Laboratory for Intelligent Systems in Tourism. Retrieved from http://www.tripadvisor.com/pdfs/OnlineTravelReviewReport.pdf

Grimes, M. (2012, April 10). "Nielsen: Global Consumers' Trust in 'Earned' Advertising Grows in Importance." Retrieved from http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/press-room/20120nielsen-global-consumers-trust-in-earned-advertising-grows.html

Hair, J.F., Jr., W.C. Black, B.J. Babin, and R.E. Anderson. (2010). "Multivariate data analysis, 7th edition". Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.

Hennig-Thurau, T.,K.P. Gwinner, G. Walsh, and D.D. Gremler, (2004). Electronic Word-of-Mouth via Consumer-Opinion Platforms: What Motivates Consumers to Articulate Themselves on the Internet?" Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18(1): 38-52.

Kozinets, R.V., K. de Valck, A.C. Wojnicki, and S.J.S. Wilner. (2010). "Networked Narratives: Understanding Word-of-Mouth Marketing in Online Communities." Journal of Marketing, 74(2): 71-89.

Lee, H., R. Law, and J. Murphy. (2011). Helpful Reviewers in TripAdvisor, an Online Travel Community." Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 28(7): 675-688.

Mayzlin, D. (2006). "Promotional Chat on the Internet." Marketing Science, 25(2): 155-163.

Moe, W., D. Schweidel, and M. Truvov. (2011). "What Influences Customers' Online Comments?" MIT Sloan Management Review, 53(1): 14-16.

Munzel, A., and W.H. Kunz. (2014). "Creators, Multipliers, and Lurkers: Who Contributes and Who Benefits at Online Review Sites." Journal of Service Management, 25(1): 49-74.

Murphy, H.C., E.A.C. Gil, and R. Schegg. (2010). "An Investigation of Motivation to Share Online Content by YoungTravelers – Why and Where." Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism, 467-478

Nonnecke, B. and J. Preece. (2003). "Chapter 6-Silent Participants: Getting to Know Lurkers Better. From usenet to CoWebs: 110-132. Springer: London.

Preece, J., B. Nonnecke, and D. Andrews, D. (2004). "The Top Five Reasons for Lurking: Improving Community Experiences for Everyone." Computers in Human Behavior, 20(2): 201-223.

Racherla, P., D.J. Connolly, D.J., and N. Christodoulidou. (2013). "What Determines Consumers' Ratings of Service Providers? An Exploratory Study of Online Travel Reviews". Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management, 22(2): 169-179.

Susarla, A., J. Oh, J., and Y. Tan. (2016). Influentials, Imitables, or Susceptibles? Virality and Word-of-Mouth Conversations in Online Social Networks." Journal of Management Information Systems, 33(1): 139-170.

Wang, Y. and D.R. Fesenmaier. (2003). "Assessing Motivation of Contribution in Online Communities: An Empirical Investigation of an Online Travel Community." Electronic Markets, 13(1): 33-45.

Wilson, A., H. Murphy, and J.C. Fierro. (2012). "Hospitality and Travel: The Nature and Implications of User-Generated Content." Cornell Hospitality Quarterly, 53(3): 220-228.

Yoo, K.H., and U. Gretzel. (2008). "What Motivates Consumers to Write Online Travel Reviews." Journal of Information Technology & Tourism, 10(4): 283-295.

Yoo, K.H., and U. Gretzel. (2011). "Influence of Personality on Travel-Related Consumer-Generated Media Creation." Computers in Human Behavior, 27(2): 609-621.