Electronic word of mouth’s effect on travel decision in Egypt: opportunities and challenges
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Abstract
Traditional Word of Mouth (WOM) is a mode of communication that was described originally as a means of sharing opinion and comments as regards to the products and services that people were transacting. Word-of-mouth (WOM) is ranked the most important information source when a consumer is making a purchase decision. WOM is especially important in the hospitality and tourism industry, whose intangible products are difficult to evaluate prior to their consumption.
When WOM becomes digital (electronic word of mouth), it induces new ways of capturing, evaluating, understanding, and managing the influence that one consumer may have on another. The substantial growth in online platforms has vastly expanded the potential impact of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on consumer travel decisions. The objective of this paper is to contribute to the existing pool of research on eWOM by particularly exploring the nature of electronic word-of-mouth among Egyptians travelers and discusses some of its distinctive characteristics. In addition; the paper examines the effect of sociodemographic characteristics of the travelers on how eWOM influences their travel decisions. An online survey is employed to investigate how travelers are affected by eWOM through different online platforms. The paper shows that managers should consider various eWOM facets and try to motivate Egyptian tourists for participating in online travel communities and to build online travel communities as a potentially cost-effective means for marketing hospitality and tourism.

Keywords: eWOM, travel decision, tourism website, online reviews, marketing hospitality and tourism.

Introduction
When planning a trip, tourists need information on their travel destinations and hotels to ensure that they make the best possible choice. Travel products as high-risk ones involve difficult decisions associated with high costs (Lin et al., 2009; Reza and Samiei, 2012). Recommendations from friends, relatives, and acquaintances which known as word of mouth (WOM) have become one of the main factors that lessen perceived risk when making a decision to travel (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015). Thus, WOM play a particularly significant role for those services that have high-credence qualities, such as tourism industry (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). Some research in the tourism area has established the influence of both positive and negative WOM upon
tourism products in studies across a broad range of nations (Litvin et al., 2008; Zhu and Lai, 2009; Jalilvand et al., 2012; Filieri and McLeay, 2014). With the advancement of Internet technology, an increasing number of travellers are using the Internet to seek information on destinations and to conduct transactions online (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) has evolved into a new form of communication, namely electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. E-WOM has been defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). This new type of WOM has become an important venue for consumer opinions (Mayzlin, 2006) and it is assumed to be even more effective than WOM in the off-line world due to its greater accessibility and easy reach (Chatterjee, 2001). The internet also allows an individual to provide feedback to many others by means of broadcast e-mails, web blogs, or discussion board postings, resulting in a “written” form of eWOM which has higher reliability than marketer created sources of information on the internet (Fong and Burton, 2008).

Within the context of the increasing influence of eWOM in the form of 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 Zyl, 2013). The aim of this paper is to contribute to the existing pool of research on eWOM by particularly exploring the nature of electronic word-of-mouth among Egyptians travelers and discusses some of its distinctive characteristics. In addition; the paper explores the influence of social and cultural factors on using eWOM through examining the effect of sociodemographic characteristics of the travelers on how eWOM influences their travel decisions.

The importance of eWOM

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is one of the most influential sources of information on the web (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016). Online WOM is a form of written memo on the web, usually posted by experienced or previous consumers (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2014a, 2014b). This written memo influences the behavior of prospective customers (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2013). People often make offline decisions on the basis of online information; furthermore, they tend to rely on the opinions of other consumers when making decisions (Dellarocas, 2003). The eWOM memo leads to information diffusion because it can be accessed anytime, anywhere, and forwarded to other consumers (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2013). Besides, eWOM is the most confirmed source of information for consumers, and it is considered to be
twice as inspiring as traditional advertisements (Hung and Li, 2007; Mayzlin, 2006). Although eWOM presents a high similarity in terms of characteristics with traditional WOM communication, it presents an entirely new perspective to WOM. One notable and unique characteristic that eWOM has is the fact that it reaches or can reach more than one member of a group (Almana and Mirza, 2013). It introduces a capability of WOM reaching an exceptional number of people all at once. Millions of people have access to a single online review, and this is where the power of eWOM lies (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Cheung and Thadani, 2010).

Secondly, eWOM communications are more persistence and accessible (Cheung and Thadani, 2010). The presentation format, quantity and persistence of eWOM communications have made them more noticeable. Word-of-mouth information available online is far huge in quantity compared to information obtained from traditional contacts in the offline world (Chatterjee, 2001). Lastly, traditional WOM comes from a sender who is known to the receiver of the information, therefore the reliability of the communicator and the message is known to the receiver. In contrast, the electronic nature of eWOM in most applications reduces the receiver’s ability to judge the credibility of the sender and his or her message (Cheung and Thadani, 2010; Tham et al., 2013).

**Online Reviews and Travel industry**

Various researches indicated that eWOM has a strong influence in the travel industry, primarily due to the intangible nature of tourism services (Casaló et al., 2015; Ayoun et al., 2015). In the travel industry, online reviews (ORs) are the form of eWOM and consist of comments published by travelers on the tourism products, services, and brands they experience. 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). Travelers write ORs to share their own experiences with a product and/ or service and describe their levels of satisfaction to help other travelers (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). Internet consumer opinion portals (COPs) (Burton and Khammash, 2010) are enabling travelers to review any aspect of a vacation, including accommodation, restaurants, destinations, and other tourism-related products such as tour operators. The importance of ORs is also growing among e-travel agencies that are providing their sponsored products with customer reviews (e.g. e-booking.com, expedia.com, hotels.com) or are encouraging travelers to post product reviews on their websites (Mayzlin 2006). In this context, two typologies of COPs could be distinguished;
independent websites (e.g., TripAdvisor.com) and e-merchants (e.g., Booking.com). E-merchants publish ORs written only by travelers who have previously purchased a product, while in an independent website traveler’s only need a valid email address to publish a review (Filieri and McLeay, 2014). Travelers may believe that the accuracy of information provided in independent COPs may be higher than the information provided in brand websites (Filieri and McLeay, 2014).

Reports indicate that each year hundreds of millions of potential visitors consult online reviews (Tripadvisor.com, 2015). Potential visitors consult online reviews because the tourism product and service is not accessible until the moment of its consumption thus the risk and uncertainty associated with it is increased (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2013). Moreover, some studies indicate great potential impact that online reviews can have on the tourism decision making (Tham et al., 2013).

During the purchasing process, consumers want product attribute-value information and recommendations from various information sources. By acting as an informant and recommender, online consumer reviews have the capability of influencing the decision-making process of consumers (Lee et al., 2008). As an informant, online consumer reviews provide the type of product information that is similar to the information provided by sellers. However, online consumer reviews offer more consumer-oriented information, whereas sellers offer more product-oriented information such as product attributes. On the other hand, online consumer reviews describe product attributes in terms of usage situations and measure the product performance from a user’s perspective (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). As a recommender, online consumer reviews make recommendations about a product or a seller in a manner similar to traditional WOM communications (Chatterjee, 2001; Chen and Xie, 2008). However, online consumer reviews have the advantage of their distinctive characteristics as mentioned before with regard to measurability, source, volume, and reachability (Chatterjee, 2001; Chen and Xie, 2008). Taking the above mentioned into consideration, online reviews (ORs) are continuing to foster a renewed spread of word-of-mouth in the travel industry. Travelers are increasingly using ORs to inform them about accommodations and other tourism-related products. As such, it is important to improve our understanding of the behavioral consequences of e-word-of-mouth (Filieri and McLeay, 2014).

Reviewing the literature review of the phenomenon in Egypt, there are few recent studies consider the effect of eWOM on purchasing decision especially in the hospitality sector. Tag-Eldeen (2012) evaluated the role of eWOM as a promotional tool and explored the awareness of hotels managers of it as important technique. On the other hand, Abd-Elaziz et al., (2015) considered the determinants of eWOM influence on hotel customers’ purchasing
decision. Their results indicate the importance of some factors the effects the influence of eWOM such as source credibility, valence, and volume of information. The current study emphasizes the pattern of Egyptian Travelers eWOM. The research enquire who, when, why and how Egyptian traveler use eWOM, as well as the influence the effect of sociodemographic characteristics of the travelers on how eWOM influences their travel decisions.

**Methodology**

The aim of the research is to explore the nature of electronic word-of-mouth among Egyptians travelers and discusses some of its distinctive characteristics. In addition; to investigate how travelers are affected by eWOM through different online platforms. Finally, it examines the effect of sociodemographic characteristics of the travelers on how eWOM influences their travel decisions. Therefore, a quantitative approach was employed to examine these relations (Saunders et al., 2009). Survey has been chosen as a method within the quantitative methodology approach. Surveys are a good way of collecting data about the opinions and behaviour of large numbers of people (Easterby-Smith, 2011). An online questionnaire was chosen as the survey instrument for collecting the data to answer the research questions. Data was analyzed statistically using SPSS version 18.

A self-administered web-based survey (Saunders et al., 2009) was distributed during January and February 2016 among Egyptian travellers who used online reviews before any of their previous travel plans. The snowball technique was adopted as participants were asked to forward the questionnaire to other online reviews users (Veal, 2011). This form of non-probability sampling (Easterby-Smith, 2011) was suitable for the purpose of the research as the criteria of inclusion in the sample was defined (users of online reviews) then individuals who meet the criteria are included (Egyptian travelers who use online reviews when planning their trips) are included in the sample then asked whether they know others who meet the criteria. This helps getting reliable answers based on real experience of the respondents in order to draw clear pattern of using eWOM.

The questionnaire was divided into two main sections; the first one embraced the attribute variables (Sociodemographic questions) as well as behavioral variables on the general use of the internet on their purchase decisions. The second section contained the behavioral and opinion variables on the use of online reviews in travel decision. To establish the reliability of the questionnaire, the reliability and internal consistency were measured. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to examine reliability. The scale was found to be internally reliable, (alpha= 0.872). It exceeds the minimum standard (0.70) recommended by Nunnally (1978).
407 questionnaires were forwarded and 172 completed questionnaires were analyzed (with a response rate 42.3%). The result will be discussed in the subsequent section.

**Results and discussion**

In order to profile the Egyptian Travelers usage of the online reviews and how it affects their travel decision, a number of variables relations has been tested statistically. First of all, As Show in table (1) the results were cross-tabulated to reveal the pattern of using the internet of each age segment. A chi square test was conducted to show whether there is an association between age and the pattern of using the internet to access reviews. Chi square $\chi^2 =22.944$ p value = .028. Hence, there is a significant association between age and using internet to access the reviews. Younger age groups are more likely to access the online reviews to search information before their purchasing process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE GROUP</th>
<th>USE THE INTERNET TO ACCESS REVIEWS</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sample</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Constantly, table (2) shows cross-tabulated results to reveal the pattern of using the internet of each gender segment. A chi square test of association was conducted to show whether there is an association between age and the pattern of using the internet to access reviews. Chi square $\chi^2 =15.708$ p value= .003. Again, there is a significant association between gender and using internet to access the reviews. Females are more likely to access the reviews before purchasing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>USE THE INTERNET TO ACCESS REVIEWS</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unexpectedly, results showed that there is no significant relation between using the internet to access the reviews and the educational level.

Table 3: Access the online Reviews by educational level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL OF EDUCATION</th>
<th>USE THE INTERNET TO ACCESS REVIEWS</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above detected results reveal the pattern of using the internet of educational level segment. A chi square test of association was conducted to show whether there is an association between education and the pattern of using the internet to access reviews. Chi square $\chi^2 = 16.678$, p value = 162. There is no significant association between gender and using internet to access the reviews.

There is a substantial association between sharing opinions about some purchases people’s and negative experience about the purchases (Pearson Correlation = .478, Sig. (2-tailed) = .000). The respondents indicated that they tend to share opinion about their purchase with others more when their experience is negative.

Sample respondents who access the internet to search online reviews considered it an information source more than recommendation one, there is a significant association between accessing the reviews and considering them as information (Pearson Correlation coefficient = .353, Sig. (2-tailed) = .000) while the correlation coefficient value of it as recommendations source = .271, Sig. (2-tailed) = .000).

To outline the usage pattern of Egyptian travelers of online reviews on the travel process specifically, they were asked about booking their trip while using online reviews as a form of e-WOM. Analyzing the answers statistically exposes the following:

There is important correlation between booking the trip and searching others opinion online Pearson Correlation coefficient = .539 & Sig. (2-tailed) = .000. Respondents also considered eWOM as a vital information source when booking their trips (Pearson Correlation coefficient = .410 & Sig. 2-tailed = .000) as well as a source of answering all their enquiries about the trip.
(Pearson Correlation coefficient =.395 & Sig. 2-tailed =.000). This confirms that online product reviews have become a major informational source for consumers due to the fast spread of e-WOM communication (Hu et al., 2008). Previous research explores that negative comments have an interesting positive effect. Negative WOM communications are more credible than positive WOM communications (Crowley and Hoyer, 1994). In addition, Lee et al. (2008) state that a message that includes some negative information is generally considered more reliable. Therefore, the sample respondents were questioned if when positive and negative online consumer reviews coexist, the difference in the number of positive and negative online consumer reviews influence the their attitude. The results reflects that there is no effect of the positive or negative content of the review and trusting and using them (Pearson Correlation coefficient =.066, Sig. (2-tailed)= .338 ≥ .05. For the sample respondents all Cops (consumer opinion portals) are equal. In other words, there is no weighty association between seeking travel reviews and the type of portals they are written on it (Pearson Correlation=−.008 &Sig. 2-tailed =.914) independent websites (i.e., Tripadvisor.com), e-merchants (i.e., Booking.com) and social media. The questionnaire was examining if the travelers may believe that the accuracy of information provided in independent COPs may be higher than the information provided in brand websites. However, the result confirms what was found by Lee and Youn (2009) as they found no difference in the influence that branded review websites and independent COPs exercise on travelers’ WOM recommendations.

Figure 1: eWOM is reliable

As shown in Fig (1), for 68% of the respondents, eWOM is useful, trustful and reliable source of information when book their trips (Pearson correlation}
There is also strong relation between relaying on eWOM and considering it a source of answering all questions related to booking the trip (Pearson correlation = .346 & Sig. 2-tailed =.000).

Conclusion & Future Implications
The advancement of Internet technology 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. Thus an increasing number of travellers are using the Internet to seek information on destinations, accommodations and other tourist products.

It could be concluded that as with traditional WOM communications, online consumer reviews as form of eWOM are important for driving the actions of consumers. This research specifies that Egyptian travelers increasingly rely on opinions posted online to make their travel decisions. The study confirmed that online user reviews have become an important source of information to consumers, substituting and supplementing other forms of business-to-consumer and offline WOM communication about products.

Online product reviews have major implications for management activities such as reputation building and customer attainment. As referral value may predict organisations performance better than traditional measures such as customer satisfaction (Reichheld, 2003). Therefore, Egyptian tourist organisations can supply promotional reviews to influence consumer attitude and purchasing decisions. Online reviews can be used also by businesses to make corrective or improvement measures on their products and services (Almana and Mirza, 2013).

References


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أثر الكلمة المنقولة الكترونية على قرار السفر في مصر ( الفرص و التحديات)
نرمين عبد الحميد مرسي
كلية السياحة و الفنادق - جامعة الأسكندرية

تعتبر الكلمة المنقولة (WOM) أحد أشكال الإتصال والتي تنطوي على تبادل الآراء و المعلومات عن المنتجات و الخدمات التي يحصل عليها الأفراد. وتصنف الكلمة المنقولة كأهم مصدر للمعلومات يستخدم من قبل المستهلكين قبل قرار الشراء. وللكلمة المنقولة أهمية خاصة في مجال السياحة و الضيافة نظرا للطبيعة غير الملموسة للمنتج مما يجعل عملية تقييمه قبل الشراء غير ممكنة.

ومع التطور التكنولوجي أصبحت الكلمة المنقولة ذات طبيعة الكترونية مما أحدث نقلة نوعية في انتشارها وبالتالي حجم التأثير الذي تمثله على المستهلكين. وتهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى رسم صورة عن طبيعة وخصائص الكلمة المنقولة الكترونية بين السائحين المصريين و كذلك مدى تأثير الخصائص الديموغرافية للسائحين المصريين على استخدامهم و تأثرهم بالكلمة المنقولة الكترونيا
على مختلف المواقع الإلكترونية.

واكدت نتائج تحليل المسح الالكتروني الذي استخدم للتحقق من أهداف الدراسة أن كلمة المنقولة ذات تأثير واضح بين السائحين المصريين وأن مستوي التسويق في المنتشآت السياحية و الفندقية المختلفة يجب عليهم أن يوازيها مزيد من العناية كأحد أدوات التسويق الاقتصادية و الفعالة.

الكلمات الدالة: الكلمة المنقولة الكترونيا، قرار السفر، التسويق السياحي و الفندقي، آراء السائحين المشورة الكترونية.