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## **Impact of e-WOM message characteristics on its perceived usefulness in international tourism**

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**Abstract**---Word of Mouth (WOM) is one of the most frequently used term in the modern technology driven society. WOM is a means of direct interaction among consumers, influencing consumption-related decisions. With the massive expansion of internet, social-media and mobile phones, traditional WOM has given way to electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). The significance of eWOM lies in its availability to a wider range of audience, though scattered geographically, connected virtually. Studies show that eWOM can influence travel-related decisions of potential tourists. Also known as user-generated content (UGC), eWOM available through social media and other similar platforms expands the ability of travellers to gather information, choose destinations and tour related services, understand the experiences of previous travellers and make better choices. Literature evidences show that the impact of eWOM on consumer decision making in tourism is greater than that of traditional face-to-face WOM communication. The objective of this study is to investigate the influence of eWOM message characteristics (MC) on its perceived usefulness (PU) among the consumers, in the context of international tourism. The data was gathered applying a validated survey

questionnaire from 833 respondents in the city of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The results show that the message characteristics of eWOM have a considerable positive effect on its perceived usefulness. Among the independent constructs measuring message characteristics, the eWOM quantity is found to have more substantial effect on its perceived usefulness compared to eWOM quality. The results also show that there is a significant difference among various age groups regarding the perception usefulness of eWOM messages.

**Keywords**---word of mouth (WOM), eWOM, perceived usefulness, message characteristics, eWOM quantity, eWOM quality, international tourism, social media.

## **Introduction**

One of the oldest way of passing information from one another is termed as WOM (Dellarocas, 2003). In the context of marketing, WOM is a means of communication that can lead to personal influences on consumer attitude, decision making and action (Ansary & Hashim, 2018). WOM has been a theme of investigation in marketing literature for a long time, as an antecedent, mediator or consequence of consumer behaviour. Consumers are found to be influenced by WOM. One of the earliest definitions of WOM describes it as ‘the interchange of promotional information amongst customers in such a way that it affects buyers’ behaviour and attitude significantly (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Web 2.0 has witnessed the widespread information dissemination, online collaboration, connectivity and sharing of content among users became the norm of society. Customers' choices for collecting impartial product data from other customers have been expanded by the introduction of the internet enabled social-media and other sharing platforms, which also offers the prospect for customers to extend their own consumption-linked suggestions by participating in eWOM (Park & Lee, 2009). Consumers engage in eWOM message using web-based customer opinion platforms (Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

The tourism industry has witnessed a significant boost around the world because to the internet-enabled eWOM. Tourists' information seeking and planning behaviours have begun to be influenced by travel websites, online forums, and social media-enabled interactions. The lack of quick familiarity with a tourism product is one of the most serious difficulties in tourism, and so the benefits of tourism and hospitality products can only be assessed after they have been consumed. User Generated Content (UGC) on social media appears to be an important source of information that visitors investigate as part of their data exploration activity, and social media appears to be everywhere in online tour data searches (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In tourism, eWOM has a higher impact than in other businesses (Wu).

Travelers are using the internet more than ever before to find lodging and travel information for prospective travels. People use the internet to find travel information since it is more convenient and faster. eWOM allows travelers to access a variety of travel information online at any time and from any location.

Consumers' overall perceived risk associated with tour-related decision-making is observed to be lowered when they acquire information and opinions on their future tour via eWOM.

### **Review of Literature**

A systematic evaluation of the literature on the primary characteristics of eWOM that influence perceptions of its usefulness, notably in the context of international tourism, was done. Cheung et al., (2008) investigated how inclined consumers are to accept online customer reviews. They discovered that the most beneficial components of the argument quality leading to eWOM acceptance are eWOM comprehensiveness and relevancy. The perceived usefulness and attitude, the main perceptual drivers of knowledge adoption, are influenced by argument quality and source credibility (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006). Larger quantity of online reviews makes them more observable and attracts customers' attention (Cheung & Thadani, 2010). Quantity and timeliness of eWOM information has significant influence on consumer trust, which has significantly positive influence on purchase intentions (Xiaorong et al., 2011). Liu and Park (2015) looked at the elements that influence the perceived utility of online consumer reviews and discovered that a combination of messenger and message characteristics influenced the perceived usefulness of reviews in a favourable way. They claimed that consumer ratings are especially significant when purchasing experiential items because it is difficult for individuals to gauge the quality of intangible objects prior to consumption. The perceived utility of eWOM is determined by aspects of eWOM like as quality and quantity, source credibility, and the consumer's prior knowledge (Bandyopadhyay, 2016).

The perceived usefulness of customer reviews has been found to be a significant predictor of consumers' intent to comply with a review (Bilgihan et al., 2016). eWOM is perceived to be useful in travel planning and decisions, as travellers think they are credible and of good quality (Chong et al., 2018). Antecedents of the perceived usefulness of travel review websites are useful and hedonic opinions, particularly the data quality of eWOM (utilitarian perceptions), inquisitiveness satisfaction and enjoyment in travel review websites usage. The perceived usefulness of travel review websites certainly affects tourists' eWOM generation, eWOM use and purchase decision (Wang & Li, 2019). While the literature on eWOM and tourism considers the impact of several variables on eWOM's perceived usefulness among the travellers, the researchers have focused on the most significant variables associated with the message characteristics – eWOM quality and quantity and their impact on perceived usefulness, for the purpose of the present research.

### **Theoretical Model**

There are several variables that measure the characteristics of eWOM messages such as its valence, quality, understandability, reliability, visual cues, volume etc. In addition, the source and sender characteristics also play as important determinants affecting eWOM adoption. The intrinsic aspect of eWOM messages measured by its quality and the extrinsic aspect of eWOM messages, measured by its quantity, are found to be the most significant factors determining the eWOM

message characteristics. As per the media richness theory, the quality of messages will have a higher impact on the users' perception of their usefulness. The completeness, objectivity and availability of information in detail determine eWOM quality. This, in turn, reduces potential travelers' uncertainty and increases their confidence in tour related decision making. Due to the uncertainty associated with virtual communications, consumers feel that the opinions of majority are trustworthy. Previous research show that larger the quantity of eWOM, higher is the trust among the customers regarding the perceived usefulness of the messages. Hence, the most predominant variables associated with eWOM message characteristics have been determined as eWOM quality and quantity, for the purpose of this study. Basing the study on Information Adoption Model (Sussman & Siegal, 2003), it may be mentioned that the perceived usefulness of eWOM depends on the quality of the content, along with its volume and source credibility. As per the Elaboration Likelihood Model, eWOM can persuade a person through two routes- the central route and the peripheral route. While the quality of arguments act as a central influence, the volume of arguments persuade individuals peripherally (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). According to Cognitive Fit Theory, a message with many arguments are considered to be useful and acceptable, as people think that more is better (Park & Lim, 2008). These models thus explain that the quality and quantity of eWOM determines the perceived usefulness of messages. Hence the model for the research has been proposed as below:

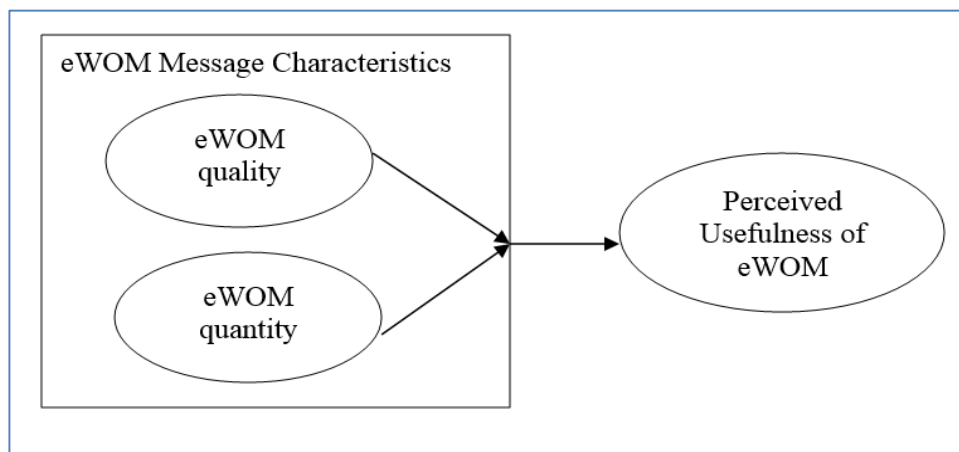


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

### Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The goal of this study is to look at how the qualities of an eWOM message affect its perceived utility, specifically in the context of international tourism. Any virtuous or damaging statement about a product or firm made by prospective, authentic, or previous customers and made accessible to a substantial number of individuals and organizations via cyberspace is referred to as eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The message properties are determined by two factors: eWOM quality and eWOM quantity.

eWOM quantity refers to the size and number of online reviews, and eWOM quality refers to the persuasive strength of arguments included in an informational message (Teng et al., 2014). (Xiaorong et al., 2011). Users' subjective perceptions of how valuable various technologies are referred to as "perceived usefulness" (Davis, 1986).

The interconnected influence of eWOM quality and quantity as the major dimensions of eWOM and their impact on the perception regarding their usefulness is a significant research inquiry in the communication and consumer behaviour literature. The researchers also aim to examine whether there is significant difference among various age groups with regard to the perceived usefulness of eWOM. Accordingly, the following research hypotheses have been proposed for the purpose of this research for empirical testing and validation:

H1: eWOM quality will have significant positive effect on perceived usefulness

H2: eWOM quantity will have significant positive influence on perceived usefulness

H3: There is a significant difference regarding the perceived usefulness of eWOM between various age groups.

## Methodology

The researchers adopted descriptive research design to study the influence of eWOM message characteristics related variables on consumers' perceived usefulness. The researchers adapted the scales available in literature to measure the variables of interest. The scale for 'eWOM quality' was adapted from Cheung et al., (2008); 'eWOM quantity' from Lin et al., (2013); and 'Perceived usefulness' from Gefen et al., (2003). The main data was gathered employing a structured questionnaire. The international tour travellers and potential travellers from Coimbatore city constituted the population for the study. An overall sample size of 833 respondents, who completed the survey, constituted the sample for the study. Statistical analysis included determining the reliability of scales, descriptive & inferential statistics using SPSS to arrive at the findings and test the hypotheses. The reliability of scales was established using Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha=0.784$ ).

## Major Findings

Majority of the respondents (38.4 %) belong to GenY (25-39years). Majority (51.7 %) are graduates. Majority of the respondents (30%) are self-employed as entrepreneurs. 51.3% of the respondents have a family size of 3-4 members. Majority (55.1%) of the respondents are male. About 37.6 % of the respondents have monthly family income of Rs 60001- Rs 90000. 56.4% of the respondents are married. About 46.9% of the respondents are from semi-urban area.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variable	Classification	Frequency (N=833)	Percentage (%)
Age	Up to 25 years	254	30.5

	25-39 years	320	38.4
	40-56 years	259	31.1
	57 years and above	140	16.8
Gender	Male	459	55.1
	Female	374	44.9
Highest Education	Schooling	129	15.5
	Graduation	431	51.7
	Post – Graduation	257	30.9
	Others	16	1.9
Current Occupation	Employed in a private job	201	24.1
	Employed in a Government job	178	21.4
	Self-employed/ entrepreneur	250	30.0
	Not employed	63	7.6
	Student	141	16.9
Family Size	2 or less members	100	12.0
	3-4 members	427	51.3
	5-6 members	263	31.6
	Above 6 members	43	5.2
Monthly Family Income	Up to Rs 30000	205	24.6
	Rs 30001-Rs 60000	202	24.2
	Rs 60001- Rs 90000	313	37.6
	Above Rs 90000	113	13.6
Marital Status	Married	470	56.4
	Unmarried	363	43.6
Area of Residence	Urban	390	46.8
	Semi-Urban	391	46.9
	Rural	52	6.2

Table 2 depicts the travel history and plans of the respondents. It can be observed that 35.4% of the respondents had travelled internationally in last 5 years, before pandemic. 64.1% respondents said they are planning to travel internationally in the near future. 51.3 % of the respondents always use eWOM available through social media for tour planning.

Table 2: Travel History and Plans

Variable	Classification	Frequency (N=833)	Percentage (%)
International Tour In Last 5 Yrs (before pandemic)	Nil	188	22.6
	1-3	262	31.5
	4-6	295	35.4
	7-9	81	9.7
	Above 9	7	8
International Tour Plans for the Future	Definitely Yes	368	44.2
	Probably Yes	313	37.6
	Not Sure	134	16.1
	Probably No	10	1.2
	Definitely No	8	1.0
Usage of eWOM via social media for Tour	Always	427	51.3
	Often	242	29.1

Planning	Sometimes	142	17.0
	Rarely	19	2.3
	Never	3	.4

Table 3 depicts the eWOM usage patterns of the respondents during various stages of tour planning. It may be observed that most of the respondents use online travel reviews (eWOM) during the beginning of their tour, in order to get ideas (M=4.66). eWOM is mostly used by the respondents in order to decide 'where to stay?'- hotels and accommodations (M=4.65), followed by 'where to eat?' - restaurants (M=4.22).

Table 3: eWOM Usage in Tour Planning Phases

Variable	Classification	Mean	SD
Use of eWOM during Tour Planning Phases	Beginning of the Tour, to get Ideas	4.66	.702
	Middle of the Tour, Narrow down Choices	4.06	.890
	At a Later Stage, to Confirm Decisions	3.88	1.124
	During the Tour, to decide what to do at Destination	3.84	1.050
	After the Tour, to Compare and Share Experiences	3.95	1.085
Use of eWOM for Travel-related Decisions	Where to stay?	4.65	.676
	Where to eat?	4.22	.729
	What to do?	3.99	.975
	Where to go?	4.04	.989
	When to go?	4.12	.935
	How to go?	4.15	.875

Table 4 shows the mean scores of the variables under study. The mean scores of all the variables under study are close to 4, indicating that the respondents are nearly 'agreeing' on all aspects of eWOM message characteristics and perceived usefulness ('eWOM quality' - M=3.9306; 'eWOM quantity' - M=3.9306; and 'perceived usefulness' - M=3.8169).

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation

Variable	Mean	SD
Mean eWOM Quantity	3.8625	.61934
Mean eWOM Quality	3.9354	.60336
Mean PUF	3.8169	.72522

Table 5 depicts the regression results of the causal paths between the predictor variables and the dependent variables. The regression results are positive and significant. Accordingly, both the hypotheses H1 and H2 are accepted indicating

that eWOM message characteristics - eWOM quality and quantity have significant positive influence on its perceived usefulness.

Table 5: Regression

Regression weights	Beta coefficient	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P value	Hypothesis supported
QL -> PUF	.576	.279	321.938	.000	YES
QT-> PUF	.582	.299	354.210	.000	YES
Age-> PUF	.696	.333	414.435	.000	YES

Among the constructs, 'eWOM quantity' (B=0.582) is found to have more significant influence on perceived usefulness, followed by 'eWOM quality' (B=0.576). The independent constructs together predicted 'Perceived Usefulness' by 35.4 %. Table 5 depicts anova results of the study.

Table 6: ANOVA Results – Difference in EWOM's Perceived Usefulness among Various Age Groups

Variable		Sum of Squares	f	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Perceived Usefulness	Between Groups	543.889	4	135.972	33.651	.000
	Within Groups	3905.229	29	4.711		
	Total	4449.118	33			

The results show that there is a significant difference in perceived usefulness of eWOM between various age groups, leading to the acceptance of H3 (F=33.651, P<0.05).

## Discussion

Purpose of this research was to establish the relationship between eWOM quality and eWOM quantity with perceived usefulness among the international travelers. The study results report a strong and positive relationship between the variables. Contemporary marketing approaches are clearly distinguishing from the past and making use of online platforms promising better businesses opportunities. (Yao, Shanoyan, Peterson, Boyer, & Baker, 2020, Zhang, Pauwels, & Peng, 2020, Mahmood, & Khwaja, Jusoh, 2019, Khwaja, Jusoh, Nor 2019). Contextually eWOM is a persuasive marketing means because of its inclination to spread a wider audience in a short period of time (Abedi, Ghorbanzadeh, & Rahehagh, 2019, Babic, Sotgiu, De Valck, & Bijmolt, 2016). eWOM which integrates modern online wider platforms such as web log, travelling websites, dialog mediums and review websites [Erkan, & Evans, 2018, Kala & Chaubey, 2018] that create powerful influence on people attitude and their choice of decision making. (Evgeniy, Lee, & Roh, 2019, Mahmood, Khwaja, & Jusoh, 2019, Roy, Datta, & Mukherjee, 2019). The quality of information provided on the website thus lead the travelers to make effective choice regarding the destination of choice as well as

their intention to visit tourists locations. One of the advantages of social media platforms include the reachability of varied form of readers such as past travelers, travel guides, friends, peers, family members and colleagues on a vibrant digital platform (Kala, & Chaubey, 2018). Such platforms provide perfect outlet for them to interact with each other and search for information. However, the quality of information shared in such online sites, have positive and negative impact on varied tourism locations depends on the quality contents incorporated. A final consideration of the choice to visit a tourist location thus depends on varied forms of comments and suggestions added in these websites by the past travelers and tourism operators. The study findings are in line with the past observations which states that eWOM in the form of information quality, information usefulness, and argument quality are turned to be decisive antecedents on perceive usefulness. (Rao, & Rao, 2019, Khwaja, Jusoh, & Nor, 2019). The quality and value-oriented information in the websites passed on the online platforms' figures trust (Zhang, Cheung, & Lee, 2014, Zhang, Wu, & Li, (2019) among the international travelers and thus their selection of tourism locations Kumar & Normala 2020).

The research findings also established the significance of the eWOM quantity of information and its perceived usefulness to visit a touristic destination. Recent developments in the cyberspace and the growth of social-media have endorsed consumer-to-consumer relations through online-forums, computer-generated groups, evaluations, and endorsements, producing better ways of e-commerce that permits travelers to develop travel content and stimulate others in a process of value creation (Hajli, 2013). Identifying the features that stimulate the perceived usefulness of data formed and dispersed in the new digital media, has its powerful influence on travelers' destination choice. Current research findings are in line with the observations made by Erkan and Evans (2016). According to them, information acceptance model demonstrates the effect of online appraisals obtainable on social media be contingent not only on the features of online material, such as quality and credibility, but also depends on users' behavior concerning the data. Reports coming from a meta-analysis conducted by the Babic et al also states the role of eWOM on purchase intention (travelers' intention) spheres in various studies (Ek Styven, & Foster, 2018, Rao & Rao 2019). The current research in the meantime reached modern eWOM dimensions, obtaining from them an information adoption model and constructing its inclination on buying (travelling) intentions (Abedi, Ghorbanzadeh, & Rahehagh, 2019, Erkan, & Evans, 2018). Availability of trustworthy and credible information in the websites and social media platforms will lead to a positive formulation of the destination image, this enhances perceived usefulness. Importance should be given by the tour operators and agencies, the powerful influence of the eWOM in envisioning marketing strategies in tourism and travel. The results of this research also emphasized the imperative role of eWOM messages as an actual basis of information for tour operators and agencies.

### **Practical Implications**

Current research discusses the impact of eWOM on the perceived usefulness of international tourism opportunities. The result gives better insight to the tourism operators and tourism agencies to get an insight into the practical contributions

of the role of eWOM, which makes use of all social media and internet platforms for better reachability to the targeted travelers. Tourism operators and tourism agencies can take advantage of eWOM oriented exchange techniques for tourism products and/or tourism services to gain competitive advantages and better international tourism market share. Though e-WOM has proved its positive impact, the unfortunate part is that several tourism operators and tourism agencies are unaware of the value derived from eWOM that can enhance business opportunities through effective travel planning decisions (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2020; Ayeh et al., 2013). Very few tourism operators are adopting eWOM options to create a positive impact as well as reinforce the destination image.

As previous research scholars have reported, networks are shaped by interactive and interpersonal dynamics, which are frequently shared on social media platforms, particularly about international destinations, resorts, motels, eateries, cafes, restaurants, and so on. The perceived usefulness of the information received from social media platforms inspires travelers to visit international destinations. As far as international travelers are concerned, their major dependency would be the websites of concerned governments, tourism operators, and tourism agencies, in addition to Facebook and other social media-oriented tourism information sharing. Messages incorporated into the website develop a favorable and unfavorable destination image, and based on such assumptions, travelers would make decisions. Travel stories online (blogs, eWOM, VLOG,) or books) have a strong impact on travelers' opinions since they are oriented on the personal experiences of the writers (Seraphin, 2015; Seraphin, 2014). Hence, constant monitoring of the current tourism websites can significantly contribute to travelers' decisions as well as tourism business promotion.

Therefore, it is necessary to ensure the trustworthiness of the information incorporated into the website in order to make the right choice for travelers regarding destinations. The current study is in line with the study observations made by Suh (2017). Comments and feedback of international travelers generated through online media platforms need to be effectively monitored to develop appropriate travel content for its dissemination through the websites. Misleading and vicious comments can develop a negative perception among travelers. Hence, the credibility of the information online can ensure better visibility to travelers, and they will choose the right destinations. Organizations need to focus on the message characteristics as well as make use of eWOM via social media for effective tour planning. The study would be advantageous for marketers as the background of social media has outspread in a varied means. The framework delivers an all-encompassing communication to marketers for evolving active marketing initiatives on e-platforms

### **Theoretical implications**

The study used several models to explain the relationship between the use of eWOM for travel-related decisions and message characteristics on the perceived usefulness of information. The positive findings clearly support the role of the Information Adoption Model (pronounced by Sussman & Siegal, 2003), the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Bickart & Schindler, (2001), and the Cognitive Fit

Theory, Park & Lim, (2008). Such models can adequately explain the role of information dissemination through social media platforms, and tourism operators can integrate useful and acceptable models as travelers think that more is better. The study observations thus facilitate the advancement of the body of literature related to international tourists' perceived usefulness associated with eWOM and the role of message characteristics. Thus, the current research delivers a consolidative model by examining the effect of eWOM predisposition on perceived usefulness of eWOM messages (online opinions, sharing practices, etc.) and the travelers' attitude. E-WOM can decrease the ambiguity triggered by data lopsidedness and hence enhance tourism travel decisions and reservations among international travelers. (Manes & Tchetchik, 2018). The study findings clearly show that word-of-mouth (WOM) has a close association with their evaluation of e-information sources and e-message characteristics when travelers are making a travel decision.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of social networking platforms allow individuals to express themselves by sharing their opinions and experiences. This presents opportunities for the tourism providers, as it allows them to better understand the expectations of their customers and the ways in which they can improve their services. The power of eWOM is widely acknowledged and many marketers are adopting innovative approaches to use eWOM for their benefit. Marketers can identify, reward and encourage influencers and opinion leaders to review their products and services effectively, so that consumers consider their reviews useful and take decisions accordingly. eWOM quantity and quality can be carefully managed by the marketers in such a way that the readers consider the eWOM to be authentic, useful and trustworthy. Getting the right information to the consumers, as per their expectations, can result in higher adoption of eWOM. Marketers can also attempt to mitigate the impact of negative reviews by presenting convincing counter-arguments, with the support of opinion leaders. The findings of this study provide a foundation for future research and practice in the field, showcasing the factors influencing consumer behaviour in a networked world, where marketing efforts need to undergo a dramatic shift when compared to the traditional practices.

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