



Online reviews: Influence on Decision of the World Wide Web Consumer

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Abstract

The main consideration in online reviews is informing the experiences, assessments, and opinions of the consumer market. It is relatively recent phenomena in the tourism business. This electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication becomes an e-channel for discussing products and services of brands, organizations or anything else. Based on the feature of the Internet, individuals, unpaid contributors, can create the user-generated content and is accessible via social media. Previous studies have shown that online reviews have important impacts on consumers' decision to purchase. The present article examines consumers' online reviews communication in theoretical perspective as well as analyzing the use of the central route and the peripheral route of consumers to consider online reviews. The suggestions provide an explanation for a tourism business organization's long-term strategy. Online reviews, therefore, should be applied to marketing strategies and communication of the organization through these routes of thinking and consideration based on elaborate-likelihood theory.

Introduction

The increasing globalization of world business has brought significant benefits to developing all aspects of business in Thailand. Recent developments in communication technology creates more feasibility of usage in daily life. Online media, websites or social network sites, are becoming central to the major industrial sectors. According to the survey of Electronic Transactions Development Agency (Public Organization) or Electronic Transactions Development Agency (2018), during the working day Internet users spend an average of 6.30 hours on the Internet through their own mobile devices or computers and 6.48 hours during the holidays. On an average the hours spent online were around 1-2 percent higher than last year. Online usage is now an

inevitability of everyday life whether to purchase goods or use services.

The presence of the internet as a medium offering products or services in tourism settings has increased dramatically and continues to accelerate. At the same time, as Office of Industrial Economics (2017) suggests, the tourism industry should use online innovation to keep up with the changing world. The stance each country takes is that the paradigms may point to substantially strengthen for competitive advantage in global travel markets rather than create an award-winning display at the international level. The internet in Thailand can shed light on 'information need', as seen in, for example, Electronic Transactions Development Agency (2018) report that applies a wide range of survey approaches

regarding the most popular online activity of Internet users. Evidently, computer users now make 86.5 percent of the information search, compared to 79.7 percent a year ago, and more than half the shoppers decide to purchase from websites through their devices.

Today, it can be argued that online reviews, appearing on travel agency websites, have acquired over the last few years in terms of information resource: buying goods and services-hotels' accommodation, transportation, tourist attraction, and communicating or sharing the direct experience with other consumers who are planning or deciding through online reviews on websites. Noone & McGuire (2013) explain further that most consumers use online reviews based on other consumers' direct experience to easily make decisions rather than information provided by tourism organizations.

In sum, this article attempts to discuss consumers' online reviews communication based on the theory of elaborate-likelihood and analyze how online reviews on the online travel agency websites can persuade other consumers to make decisions. Eventually, it can lead to understanding a persuasive effect of online reviews that affect the decision-making of the digital travelers and implement an online marketing plan and communication strategy in practice.

Online reviews

Online reviews refer to the digital information to which consumers or reviewers wrote reviews (Bae & Lee, 2011). They, however, are a huge factor in a consumer's decision-making process, as Park, Lee, & Han (2007) point out, 'it is a new word of mouth format'. More people are turning away from traditional advertising, towards social recommendations and review sites, more and more businesses are currently using online reviews as the first line of their reputation management. In fact, according to Sparks & Browning (2011), not only do consumers increasingly read online reviews to delve into useful information or compare it to the others, but also make their choice for travel plan or accommodation selection. Xiang, Wang, O'Leary, & Fesenmaier (2015) provided an illuminating example of how tourists make plans for their journey. In the case of hotel selection, for instance, trippers are curious to get adequate information about prices, reviews, photos, and location before reaching a decision.

The growth of online travel agency websites (OTAs) is most noticeable in the last decade and have succeeded in making accessible to a wider source of

information on which consumers decide. In Quambusch's (2015) study, found that 95.3 percent of consumers stated they are likely to check online reviews on OTAs before buying products or services. This finding is in line with Gretzel & Yoo (2008), in which consumers agree that OTAs reviews are the most important source in their search for up-to-date, enjoyable, and reliable information, ranking them as more influential than the official sites of travel companies.

In the information of online travel agency websites, the work of Lee, Park, & Han (2007) has been very influential. They distinguished between attribute-value information (or a quality of online reviews) and recommendation from various information sources. The former is that consumers decide in favor of the online reviews. In this dimension, they do not risk purchasing the product and service unless there is sufficient information to know and convince. The latter is that comments from unknown people are extremely difficult proving the quality and credibility. This dimension involves making positive and negative comments about the products or services.

It is interesting to note that every online review, whether consumer's thought, belief, emotion, and attitude, is entirely different and run to an inconsistent communication format (Park, Lee, & Han, 2006). Online reviews that provide such positive information include the following: "impressive and relaxed" or "clean, quiet, perfect for relaxation" (an excerpt from Booking.com). In contrast, "not enough parking, stay very far" or "must queue for breakfast, lots of people but a few staffs" (ibid.) are negative examples for the reviews. The previous excerpts from the opinions appear in the same accommodation. According to Ladhari & Michaud's (2015) findings, positive reviews improve consumers' attitude and intention to book a hotel higher than negative reviews.

Moreover, online reviews regarding products and services from experienced consumers affect other consumers' choices discussed by Lee, Park, & Han (2007). Three key concepts are said to be necessary for carrying out a decision-making process: (1) online reviews approach the clients with more and better consumer-oriented information; (2) they display additional attribute value information from customer's experience; and (3) they are facts for other consumers who are actively seeking information from all types of sources to guide their travel plans or purchase decisions nowadays.

Elaborate-likelihood theory

Elaborate-likelihood theory is now the most widely used psychological theory for grasping how people process intended messages to be persuasive (Petty, & Cacioppo, 1986). It was first formulated in 1979 in the field of psychology and applied to consumer behavior study in the next four years. Researchers have generally adopted this theory to assess the impact on consumer behavior in such various aspects as individual respondent's satisfaction from online advertising, or trust in online purchasing (SanJosé-Cabezudo, Gutiérrez Arranz, & Gutiérrez Cillán, 2009). The article consequently challenges the view that online reviews are underpinned by elaborate-likelihood theory which affects travel decision-making process.

This theory elucidates there are two routes of the attitude change in information processing which are dissimilar in terms of evaluating information. The two types of process need to be distinguished: *the central route and the peripheral route*.

The central route refers to a consideration of factual information and its components to make a judgment on the benefits. Specifically, the quality of opinions is required and likely to be consistent with the readers' point of views. Much of the opinions that are high quality or very meaningful to the reader to support their beliefs and attitudes as well as deeply affect the individual's attitude and long-term behavior change. The low-quality opinions, on the one hand, lead to an undesired effect of the attitude or behavior change. Bhattacharjee & Sanford (2006) describe that when individuals carefully consider persuasive messages, the central route is used to think critically about the argument quality, scrutinize the pros and cons, and pass (or not to pass) judgment on opinions. They often deliberate whether opinions are consistent with their initial attitude through seeking credible sources (Sothanasathien, 2016).

The peripheral route, on the other hand, is a highly subjective word. Petty & Cacioppo (1986) account for the evaluation process of the acquired messages or low levels of the relevant message. The decision may not solely depend on the message but the external cue, including perception, message format, emotion, and so on. Three main ways to evaluate messages or external cues are (1) source credibility, (2) consensus between source and individual, and (3) likableness. A highly credible source may induce more persuasion, regardless of controversy surrounding. A belief from a favorite person could have a substantial effect on attitude,

intention, or behavior change. In other words, the change of attitude and behavior are temporarily affected by the outer route.

In the case of route selection, there are dual factors to process information: *ability* and *motivation*. *Ability* refers to the understanding of an issue-related message. *Motivation* comprises three essential elements as follows: (1) message relevance-when individuals receive related messages, they think twice before proceeding; (2) source credibility-individuals have a mental process that involves the central route only when receiving information from reliable sources and (3) disposition-central route is probably used by individuals with analytical and critical thinking. By acknowledging the process routes, these are vital methods employed for the acquired messages which exerts an influence over individuals' attitude. As Petty, Barden, & Wheeler (2009) argue, the central route is more likely than the peripheral route to affect an attitude.

Online reviews communication: Theoretical perspective

Receivers may take two routes to process information - the central route and the peripheral route. The highly motivated person often uses the central route to receive information with data processing capabilities - less motivated person, on the other hand, tends to select the peripheral route for information inquiry and are overcome with emotions and feelings. For example, in online reviews context, positive reviews influence consumer to trust a business or the 4.0-5.0-star ratings and more reviews can easily persuade them to change their mind. Indeed, a traveler needs to obtain useful information from online reviews (central route) to check the accommodation's quality or fact (e.g. room rates, location, and facilities) which is involved in the decision-making. Moreover, consumers will merely seek for the hotel information corresponding to the fact (peripheral route) such as total reviews of experienced users or star rating (Lin, Lee, & Horng, 2011).

The central route usage

Consumers, who search for information, will use the central route when assessing their obtained message deliberately. Success in communication by the central route depends on how a consumer critically considers core content, searches for more information, and thinks deeply. A buyer in the central route will, therefore, heed the content's quality or factual information. Following

the pivotal work of Li, Huang, Tan, & Wei (2013), people's attitudes have changed under serious consideration of factual information in the central route rather than the peripheral or emotional. Lee (2009) reported that factual information, in online reviews, prevails over the emotion or personal feeling. In addition to Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy (2007) survey, 77.9 percent of consumers believe that online reviews are of considerable importance for determination. An outstanding accommodation holds the first rank and is followed by restaurant, activity, tourist attraction, and duration of stay. A decision-maker inquires as much crucial information as possible through the central route based on two inducements:

1. *Quality content of the accommodation on OTAs website.* Hotel owners or data providers, typically, illustrates how perfect the accommodation (room rate, availability, amenity, promotion, facility, location, map, and photo) on the official website with a plentiful supply of details. When taking a decision about accommodation, an individual consider options and details based on quality, utility, and value.

2. *Argument quality of relevant online reviews.* There are four main issues for considering the central route usage:

2.1 *Room rate* is an essential determinant of information gathering. A reasonable price is cautiously calculated and a comparison is drawn among OTAs websites to get the best rate. Written comments, "value for money" or "for a clean room it's worth it" (an excerpt from Agoda.com), are included in the determination. The room is, consequently, easily sold. As Emir, Halim, Hedre, Abdullah, Azmi, & Kamal (2016) emphasize, the room rate has attracted a lot of attention in the online reservation. On OTAs website, a customer actively looks at a hotel offered service and facilities that fetches a good price and launches effective promotional strategies, weights, and cogitates as the initial choice of reservation. An appropriate room rate for the booking will be to determine whether it offers great value for money.

2.2 *Accommodation offer* is paramount in the latter decision. Both positive and negative online reviews on room size, cleanliness, facility, or even environment outside the hotel, for example, "clean and spacious room", "stunning room," or "plenty of space, we see a view of the entire city" (positive); and "room equipped without soundproofing", "small room" or "old room" (negative). In addition, the neutral online reviews, "normal room" (an excerpt from Agoda.com) influence the reader to

think more carefully about the information shown on the website.

2.3 *Location*, as Dallen & Victor (2009) indicates, a traveler compares the hotels in attractive locations with major tourist attractions, travel convenience, accessible places to eat and drink. This, of course, assumes that if he requires great restaurants and cafés within walking distance, the location will be a landmark decision. There is no doubt that the traveler focuses on, for instance, "prime location and situated at the heart of the city" or "good location in downtown of Chiang Mai, a night market is less than 5 minutes from a hotel" (an excerpt from TripAdvisor.com). Contrary to expectations, the traveler uses the peripheral route to adjudicate the reviews "actual location is far from the main road which I have to walk on the narrow pavement, but I think that it is a very charming stylish boutique hotel" for example (an excerpt from TripAdvisor.com). It is important to remember that the negative fact and emotional information have a huge amount of influence over the indecisive consumer. Some negative reviews, however, are very valuable to every hotel marketer and helpful in enhancing the business.

2.4 *The facility* is a wide array of services, places, amenities to make guests as comfortable and relaxing as possible. Online reviews such as "complimentary arrival and departure transfer", "all rooms with Phuket ocean view", "pool bar offering drinks and light snacks", or "free Wi-Fi internet access throughout the hotel" (an excerpt from Agoda.com) are used by the central route to transmit factual information to other consumers. Receivers are confident of good value by marvelous examples of reviews and lead them into the decision-making process.

The results indicate that most consumers process what they have experienced with all information in order to confirm or cancel the booking, based on two key points: *quality content* on OTAs websites, and *argument quality* of high-involvement online reviews for which it takes the central route to consider. The accommodation rooms on the web should cover what the consumer needs are in more details. If they perceive some benefits, they will not hesitate to make a room reservation. Consumer's decision-making habits are influenced by online reviews as decisive factors by which they consider these opinions to be consistent with the factual information obtained.

The peripheral route usage

In an online mode, the peripheral route is an

indispensable part of awareness regarding a vast array of accommodations on OTAs websites. An individual makes full use of the peripheral route with emotions and simple perception to transform attitudes, for instance, one tends to have a favorable attitude to the hotel since its online reviews are satisfied with all the prior requirements for the reservation. Hotel ratings, according to Lin, Lee, & Horng (2011) research, have expanded into focus on the hotel experience as wholes. They illustrate how interesting the average score and online reviews are for other customers. However, broader perspectives of the peripheral route in the online reviews are:

1. *Reviewers* play a central role in customers' accommodation evaluation - in conveying a sense of emotion for another consumer. Online reviews, which state in the same feeling that "decoration is elegant, many places for a selfie", "pretty room, but bathroom makes it less attractive", or "cramped bathroom, TV is not user-friendly" (an excerpt from Agoda.com), are easily perceived and processed. Positive and negative online reviews in the same hotel, furthermore, make consumers find them difficult to choose the right choice. Online reviews were posted from consumers' feelings (the peripheral route); they are unable to provide them an estimate. Positive review in a single accommodation is, for example, "good service from staff, customer-friendly, comfortable mattress, and clean room", and negative one is, for example, "we stayed in three rooms - all female staffs deliver good customer services, but males are not good (I do not recognize their name), unfriendly - bedroom is clean, light, and airy but mattresses are old and lumpy". These reviews are complicated by the strong feelings that consumers will weigh heavily against further perceived information.

2. *Hotel rating* depends on the sentiment and emotion consumers share. This is only provided by personal opinions, not fact. Evaluating more information is an important part of the process. Not all rating information is reliable or true, nor will they be suitable for making a decision. As a result, the average review rating varies according to the opinions and feelings, and at the same time, the average rating and score of the accommodation may have a significant differences among OTAs websites.

One longitudinal study of hotel rating presented in the 2011-2014 global hotel surveys conducted by TripAdvisor.com is that a businessman rather than other occupations actively spends time describing in detail in

their review and manages to score the lowest satisfaction. A happy couple on average has a relatively high level of overall satisfaction, higher than other types of traveler. In addition, the remarkable result points out that the number of online reviews will be listed in searching for more room details on TripAdvisor.com. Specifically, for a higher rating hotel, consumers will continually visit an official website. Findings of TrustYou (2015) fully supports that when the review score on TripAdvisor increased by 10 percent, consumers will make a booking according to the average review score rose by 14.7 percent in Asia and 8.6 percent in Europe.

3. *The number of online reviews* in one accommodation exerts a powerful influence over the booking decision. A positive attitude, in particular, increases good comments and endorses more popular accommodation which a customer's online reservation intention is a dramatic growth. Thus, the longer online reviews are written, the easier it is for consumers to connect to their own intention. In the light of this evidence, the findings in the current series of Park & Kim (2008); Park, Lee, & Han (2007) are agreeable. They point out that the quality of online reviews has a profound effect on decision-making. The reviews not only provide a lot of useful accommodation information for readers, but their easy-to-understand feature also increases a high level of interest and willingness to make reservations. Despite all mentioned issues are influential on booking, the real customer photos on OTAs websites are arguably the single most valuable, digestible, and actionable to the peripheral route consumers which generate more content and more conversation around the accommodation.

In fact, the explanation for two routes in elaborate-likelihood theory can clearly be stressed that since attitude and behavior have definitely been changed by persuasive information, a convincing theoretical explanation for the peripheral route usage is divided into three keystones based on Petty & Cacioppo (1986) approach is provided.

1. *Source credibility* is the belief that reviewers are credible, expertise, knowledgeable, and trustworthy (Zhu, Chang, & Luo, 2016). The number of reviews and types of traveler also establishes a deep sense of consumers' trust. The peripheral route is used to consider relevant information about accommodation rather than core content. Anonymous reviewers who express their feeling towards accommodation on OTAs websites gain less credible in the source, and moreover, for the sake of known reviewers, who identified their

personal information – name, occupation, or status, it is important to inevitably improve source credibility and consumer's trust (Promma & Worapishet, 2015). Additionally, different online reviews from a single person (e.g., TripAdvisor.com), which are identified as a frequent traveler, contribute to their reliable information and adopt a consumer's attitude. Following the result of Li, Huang, Tan, & Wei (2013), participants place their trust in the product or service reviews from experienced consumers rather than experts.

2. *Consensus* of information, prior knowledge, and attitude are arranged on a continuum. A consumer then processes them all in one direction; conversely, unless reviewers' information conforms to the consumer's prior knowledge and attitude, the consumer processes them against the reviewers. As Zhang & Watts's (2003) study, when newly acquired information is consistent with the internet users' prior knowledge and attitude, this influence to trust in the information provided.

3. *Likeableness*, in an online environment, of consumers is defined as the customers' satisfaction degree in written format and style of experienced consumers or reviewers. For example, "despite I travel alone, I feel comfortable because of good service from staffs and, moreover, airport transfer is free of charge – unlikely, at other hotels I cannot put a price on peace of mind, I am often overcharged (300-800 baht)", "a hotel near to the noodle bar which is expected to be delicious but it is not. Fried Thai noodle with tiger prawns at the hotel is highly recommended" (an excerpt from TripAdvisor.com). In sum, the information searcher implementing the peripheral route temporarily affects attitude and has less influence over behavior change than the central route.

As mentioned, source credibility becomes highly influential among the attitude and behavior change. Online reviews will be more credible unless the sources (or reviewers) conceal the personal demographic characteristics (Promma & Worapishet, 2015). A number of reviews from a single reviewer have also encouraged their reliabilities. In addition, a remarkable correspondence with online reviews and likeableness are crucial factors in the information evaluation on OTAs websites in order to make the right choice. At the same time, the central route is applied to search for factual and qualitative information. Eventually, Figure 1 below demonstrates the relationship between central and peripheral routes in online reviews for hotel booking decision based on elaborate-likelihood theory.

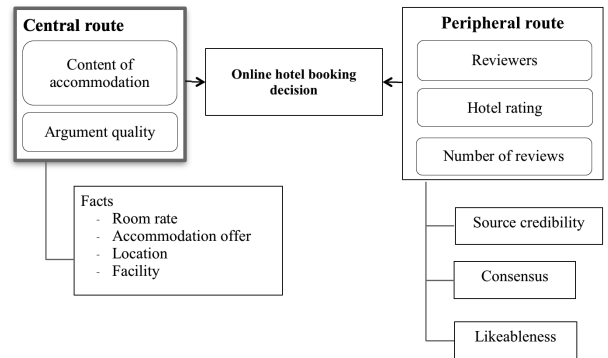


Figure 1 Relationship between the central route and the peripheral route in online reviews

Conclusion

Online reviews on OTAs websites reflect the noteworthy communication roles. These personal opinions of reviewers or experienced consumers who express their own emotions, feelings, or direct experience deeply affect other consumers who are curious about information to make the best trip. All reviews are considered through both central and peripheral routes prior to the determination. Understanding each route usage for evaluation has a profound influence on consumers and influence the decision to purchase after the attitude change by online reviews. They are a relatively phenomenon in electronic communication channel between reviewers or direct experienced consumers in the World Wide Web era connected by the Internet. Furthermore, online reviews will be of great benefit to the hotel booking engine providers and the hotel entrepreneurs for business management, marketing plan, and communication strategy. It is worth remembering that online reviews are an electronic word-of-mouth communication which attracts a lot of interest from consumers and have significant influence on their decision-making behavior for the digital age.

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