

# **Cyber communities and Electronic Word-of-Mouth: The use of Facebook in the promotion of hospitality services**

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## **Abstract**

*Electronic WOM has been developed rapidly in the latest years. Traditional forms of personal and non-personal communication channels in marketing have been narrowed and gave their place to more contemporary ones. Electronic WOM is an example of personal communication channel which is widely spread through internet and it has great effect in today's business world. This study tries to investigate the effect of social network sites and more specifically Facebook in the decision making process of a high involvement service. Facebook is a contemporary mean through which e-WOM is applied among facebook members and groups and it has been chosen for the current study due to its popularity and success in the late years. High involvement services is a domain that has not been thoroughly investigated in related studies and they are characterized by high risk in the decision making process. Hospitality services have been chosen because of their high involvement nature in the decision making process and because they are of the most frequent subjects for discussion in virtual communities.*

*The results of the research indicated that Facebook can be used in combination with other means in the promotion and improvement of hospitality services but it cannot be used as a solid e-WOM mean.*

**Keywords:** electronic word of mouth, virtual communities, hospitality services, facebook, high involvement services.

JEL Classification: M31, M37

## **Literature review**

### **Introduction**

The right communication of a message is crucial for the success of a brand. The person that is going to communicate a message could select personal or non-personal channels of communication (Jennifer Rowley 1998). Personal channels of communication exist when two or more people communicate directly with each other (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). They might communicate face to face, on the phone, through mail or e-mail, or even through an internet "chat". Personal communication channels are effective because they allow personal addressing and feedback. Non personal communication channels are media that carry messages without personal contact of feedback (e.g. newspapers, magazines, radio, television) (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). In the current dissertation the personal communication channel of electronic word of mouth is going to be analyzed.

### **Emerging Issues**

E- WOM is a growing social phenomenon that takes place in internet in many ways such as virtual communities, blogs, social networking sites,

e-mails and it engages many researchers during recent years. The majority of the researchers agrees that e-WOM has an important effect in the profitability of the companies and this is the reason that this phenomenon must be thoroughly investigated (John E. Hogan, Katherine N. Lemon *et al.*, 2005; Michael Trusov, Randolph E. Bucklin *et al.*, 2009; René Algesheimer, Utpal M. Dholakia *et al.* 2005; John A. Deighton, Leora Kornfeld 2007).

Nowadays there are researches about virtual brand communities and their relationship with e- WOM for specific products or services. However, there are no researches about e-WOM in wider virtual communities such as facebook in which there is no focus on specific brands or products a fact that must be further investigated.

Another issue that must be mentioned is that the influence of e-WOM is observed especially in high involvement purchase decisions. A person's level of involvement depends on personal relevance and the inherent interest needs and values of the individual, which motivate them towards the object of involvement (Martin Evans, Ahmad Jamal *et al.*, 2009). If a consumer perceives a product or service purchase to be risky (e.g. uncertainty as to whether it will do the job, or even do them some physical harm, or doubt over self-image enhancement) then the involvement can be higher (Martin Evans, Ahmad Jamal *et al.*, 2009). Hospitality and tourism services are seen as high risk purchases for the reason that the hospitality services are intangible and they cannot be evaluated before their consumption (Lewis and Chambers, 2000). Therefore, having in consideration the statement of Evans and Jamal (2009) it is concluded that buying hospitality and tourism services is a high involvement decision process.

In addition another important issue is that, there is a lack of information about decision making process of lurkers due to the fact that it was impossible for the researchers to capture their opinion because of the nature of the brand communities. On the contrary, the structure and operation of facebook allow us to conduct a research in a wider community including lurkers' opinion.

### **Main Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify the purchase behavior of facebook members as concerns the hospitality services, which is a high involvement purchase decision, based in information retrieved from facebook. This specific issue has been chosen because it combines two issues of a great interest due to the latest rapid expansion of facebook and the need to be investigated a service with high involved purchase process. In the following chapters some basic principles and definitions are being analyzed.

### **Virtual communities**

In order to analyze e-WOM, a brief reference about virtual communities must be presented. A virtual community is a cyberspace built by groups of people who utilize networked computers to form and sustain a community through ongoing communication (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). Its development paralleled technological advancements that rendered networked computers an inexpensive medium accessible to many people around the world. Since there are more and more people communicating via virtual communities, this approach to meet, communicate and relate

to people is emerging as a major social phenomenon. According to comScore Media Metrix (2006), every second Internet user in the United States has visited at least one of the top 15 social networking sites. Approximately 50 social networking Web sites each have more than one million registered users, and several dozen smaller, though significant, sites also exist (e.g., Wikipedia 2008) (Michael Trusov, Randolph E. Bucklin et al, 2009). Having briefly analyzed virtual communities it is possible to proceed to e- WOM definition.

#### **Electronic word of mouth (e- WOM)**

In the late years due to internet expansion and the development and popularity of cyber communities WOM has been evolved to another form that is called e- WOM.

Through web-based consumer opinion platforms (virtual communities) the Internet enables customers to share their opinions on, and experiences with goods and services with a multitude of other consumers that is to engage in electronic word of mouth communication (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, et al. 2004).

Facebook is a virtual community which facilitates e- WOM exchange between its members and is going to be discussed in the next chapter.

#### **Facebook**

As it is mentioned the subject of this project is the use of Facebook as a mean for the promotion of high involvement in the decision process services as hospitality services are. Facebook has been chosen as a wide virtual community which is continuously growing.

Facebook is a global social networking website that is operated and privately owned by Facebook, Inc. Users can add friends and send them messages, and update their personal profiles to notify friends about themselves. Additionally, users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, region and interest. The website's name stems from the colloquial name of books given at the start of the academic year by university administrations with the intention of helping students get to know each other better (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia).

Facebook has more than 300 million current users and half of them are logging in every day (facebook press room). The average user has 130 users on the site while more than 8 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day (facebook press room). As concerns the information flow among the members, the statistics show that more than 2 billion photos and 14 million videos are being uploaded each month, more than 2 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos, etc.) are being shared each week and more than 3 million events are being created each month (facebook press room).

#### **Electronic word of mouth and hospitality services**

Having analyzed the significance of traditional WOM and E- WOM, it is going to be demonstrated how those tools of contemporary marketing are related with the promotion of hospitality services. In many studies, it is mentioned that Word of mouth and therefore e-WOM influence in great degree a consumer's purchase decision (Litvin, Goldsmith et al., 2006 ; John E. Hogan, Katherine N. Lemon et al., 2005; Michael Trusov,

Randolph E. Bucklin et al., 2009) This influence is much more important in companies in hospitality sector because their products are intangible and difficult to be evaluated prior to their consumption and thus the importance of personal influence is elevating (Litvin, Goldsmith et al., 2006).

Many hospitality and tourism products are seen as high-risk purchases, for which the emotional risk of reference group evaluation is an important aspect of the decision making process (Lewis and Chambers 2000). Hospitality and tourism products are both seasonal and perishable, raising marketing stress levels for providers (Rao and Singhapakdi 1997). The hospitality and tourism industry is intensely competitive, suggesting that the use of online interpersonal influence may provide important competitive advantages for early adopters. Considering the dearth of hospitality and tourism industry specific literature (Litvin, Goldsmith et al., 2006) related to the issue, it appears that the industry lags behind others in the development and discussion of strategies for managing interpersonal influence in an electronic environment.

Recent work in a broad range of nations in the tourism and hospitality industry it is demonstrated that there is an influence of both positive and negative WOM upon tourism products. Among researches, Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott's (2003) New Zealand based research noted that negative WOM can have an overwhelming impact upon a destination's image, as dissatisfied visitors spread unflattering comments related to their experiences. Crick's (2003) Caribbean study similarly warned that when locals display hostile feelings towards tourists, the result is negative WOM and a likely downturn in the industry (Litvin, Goldsmith et al., 2006). Litvin, Blose et al. (2004) suggested that restaurant marketers seeking the tourist trade shift their emphasis from traditional marketing channels (advertising and public relations) to nontraditional interpersonal marketing strategies.

## Research of the paper

### Research Hypotheses

The purpose of this article is to identify the way facebook users decide about hospitality services purchase, based in information retrieved from facebook. For this purpose, the following hypotheses have been constructed and tested.

- **H<sub>1</sub>: Facebook members who believe that the other facebook members are reliable tend to use the information that retrieve from facebook about hospitality services.**

According to source credibility theory which is an e-WOM attribute (Brown et al., 2007; Buda and Zhang, 2000; Sen and Lerman, 2007), individuals tend to trust more others that seem to be reliable in different ways i.e. (not bending the facts, share critical information etc.). With this hypothesis, it is going to be investigated whether members of facebook are going to use information retrieved from other members that are considered reliable.

- **H<sub>2</sub>: Facebook members who believe that the other facebook members are unreliable, tend to use the information that retrieve from facebook about hospitality services.**

This hypothesis is also based on source credibility theory by the difference that is investigated the unreliability of facebook members related with the use of information about hospitality services.

- **H<sub>3</sub>: High degree of involvement in the decision process about hospitality services leads to high degree of lurking and posting.**

➤ H3a: Facebook members who believe that hospitality services purchase is a high involvement decision process tend to spend more time in lurking.

➤ H3b: Facebook members who believe that hospitality services purchase is a high involvement decision process tend to spend more time in posting.

Hospitality services require high involvement in the decision making process according to the theory that has been analyzed. In addition, researchers have suggested that WOM behavior is motivated by involvement (Engel et al. 1993). In e-WOM this behavior is expressed through lurking and posting. This hypothesis is going to investigate this issue in the frames of hospitality services via facebook. During the analysis of the results it must be considered that posting requires more effort than lurking.

- **H<sub>4</sub>: Facebook members who have frequent communication with their "friends" tend to use the information that retrieve from facebook about hospitality services.**

Tie strength is another issue that is examined with the above hypothesis. "Friends" in facebook are people who belong to each other's contact lists and the weak or strong tie depends on the frequency of communication between them. When ties are strong, the receiver of a message feels that the sender is credible and as a consequence he uses the information that he receives.

- **H<sub>5</sub>: Facebook members who believe that other facebook members may possess information and specific knowledge about hospitality services tend to use this information.**

This hypothesis also is going to examine the issue of source credibility by the view of expertised knowledge concerning hospitality services. When someone gives or possess expertise knowledge, then the e- WOM information that he sends may be viewed as more credible, relevant and emphatic than marketing provided sources of information (Bickart and Schindler, 2001).

- **H<sub>6</sub>: Facebook members who believe that hospitality services purchase is a high involvement decision process tend to use relative information gained from other facebook members.**

High involvement in the purchase of a product or service leads to a higher degree of information searching and requires a bigger degree of source credibility in order someone to use the information. The issue

that is going to be investigated in this hypothesis is whether members who consider that hospitality service purchase is a high involved decision would use information from facebook to decide about the purchase.

In the next page, the graphical representation of the hypotheses is demonstrated.

In the following chapters the statistical results and the methodology of the research are going to be presented.

## **Methodology**

In order the hypotheses to be tested the quantitative method has been chosen. Quantitative research design is a very good way to prove whether a hypothesis is valid or not. In addition, quantitative research allow for greater objectivity and accuracy of results plus the fact that it is possible to compare and analyze the results of the current research with similar studies. Kruger (2003) confirms that 'quantitative methods allow us to summarize vast sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories and over time'.

An online questionnaire with 52 questions and 13 constructs has been developed through the webpage surveygizmo.com. Surveygizmo.com is a platform for building online forms and surveys for marketing, lead generation and research projects.

All the items except demographics are measured with the use of 7-point Likert-type scale. Moreover, all the questions have been taken from other academic sources and have been transformed in order to fit in the context of the study and also all have a high cronbach's alpha.

Some remarks about constructs can be demonstrated. The construct of "Trust" refers to the members' trust in other members of Facebook and was measured by the items developed by Wong and Sohal (2002). One more item that asks about members willingness to provide personal information to others in facebook was added to include the specific feature of trust in the online community (Schoenbachler and Gordon, 2002).

The construct of "Attitude of the messages" refers to the frequency and the kind (positive or negative) of the messages posted in facebook about hospitality messages.

Participation is defined as an individual's lurking time per week and posting time per month (Rong-An Shang, Yu-Chen Chen et al 2006). In the questions the most active period and the present time period are investigated for both posting and lurking.

The constructs above have been retrieved by Rong-An Shang, Yu-Chen Chen et al (2006).

The items of the construct about "the degree of involvement in the decision making process" have been retrieved as follow: Interest towards hospitality services were adopted from standard advertising theory (Machleit et al. 1993). Intention to use in decision making has been taken by Sen and Lerman (2007). Questions related to the intention of spreading information via e- WOM, credibility of information about hospitality services in facebook and degree of

involvement have been taken by Lethagen & Modig, (2008) and they were modified for the purposes of the current study.

"Motivation" is commonly viewed as a force that directs individuals toward goals (MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989; Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997) and incorporates readiness, willingness, interest, and desire to engage information processing has been adopted from MacInnis *et al.*, (1991). Extending this to our context, motivation can be translated as the driving force that makes facebook members to exchange information.

"Customer to customer know-how exchange" can be translated as the exchange of information among facebook members that enhances their knowledge and experience.

Thus, some participants in know-how exchange are gaining direct utilitarian value while others may derive hedonic value such as self-enhancement from participation as one feels good about helping other users to solve problems or answer about a product's use (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004).

"Ability" is the extent to which consumers have the necessary resources (e.g., knowledge, intelligence, money) to make an outcome happen (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997). Extending the original definition to our context ability can be defined as the skills and competencies of facebook members which make them capable to communicate with other members.

"Opportunity" reflects the extent to which a situation is conducive to achieving a desired outcome (MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989) or the lack of impediments for achieving a desired outcome (MacInnis *et al.*, 1991). Extending this definition to our context, opportunity is assumed the availability of facebook members to reach facebook without any practical or theoretical restriction (downtime of the webpage, not enough time to navigate or restriction from organizations).

As concerns the "overall value" construct, marketing as a discipline has embraced as a core concept the notion of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), which is generally viewed as the perception of benefits received by the customer from the offering provided by the firm in relation to the cost or sacrifice made to obtain those benefits (Zeithaml, 1988). The primary target of the marketer is to provide to the customer value and firms try to offer a marketing mix to the customers that satisfy them.

Relationship managers are interested in the loyalty intentions of customers who have been successfully attracted to the firm's offering (Bhattacharya, 1998; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Customers tend to stay loyal and they recommend to others products or services that they have used and they are satisfied by their consumption or service.

Motivation, C2C Know-How, Ability, Opportunity, Overall Value and Loyalty intentions constructs have been retrieved from Thomas W.Gruen, Talai Osmonbenkov *et al* (2005) and they have been modified to fit to the context.

"Interpersonal connectivity" refers to the "social benefits derived from establishing and maintaining contact with other people, such as social support, friendship, and intimacy." It has been viewed as a determinant of consumers' participation in a virtual group community

(Dholakia, Bagozzi *et al.*, 2004). Strong group-person connectivity is a motive for easier transmission of information and it is examined whether this fact drives to enhanced e- WOM communication. This construct has been retrieved by Dholakia, Bagozzi *et al.*, (2004) and it has been modified to fit in the context of the research.

As concerns the last construct "Intention to participate in the hospitality search-based referral campaign", it has been retrieved by Verhoef, Franses *et al.* (2002).

In the next chapters the demographic and statistical analysis of the questionnaire results is discussed.

## Questionnaire analysis

### Demographics

The initial sample of the survey was 494 persons. However, as expected not everyone completed all the questions. From this sample 131 questionnaires were abandoned and 61 were partially completed. The difference between the two categories is that the abandoned questionnaires do not have any questions filled. Therefore the actual sample that was possible to be used for the statistical analysis was 302 people (157 women and 145 men) of different age, income, profession and financial status. More than 70% of the sample has a degree of higher education, 23,25% degree of lyceum and 0,66% did not continue their education after high school. As concerns the income level, the largest percentage of the sample (61%) has income less than 15.000€, 34% 15.001€-30.000€ and 5% more than 30.000€.

**Table 1: Sample of the survey**

	Sample	Percent
Gender		
Male	145	48 %
Female	157	52 %
Age		
18-25	99	33,7 %
26-36	138	45,6 %
37-47	44	14,5 %
48-57	14	4,63 %
58-68	6	1,98 %
>68	1	0,33 %
Ethnicity		
Residence		
Village	14	4,6 %
Town	38	12,5 %
City	250	82,7 %
Educational level		
High school	2	0,66 %
Lyceum	70	23,25 %
Bachelor degree	162	53,48 %
Master's or Ph.D	68	22,59 %
Occupation		
Pensioner	8	2,6 %
Unemployed	30	9,9 %

Housekeeping	8	2,6 %
Private employee	89	29,4 %
State servant	49	16,2 %
Freelancer	35	11,5 %
Businessman	14	4,6 %
Student	69	22,8 %
Annual Income		
<15000	186	61 %
15001-30000€	102	34 %
30001-50000€	11	4 %
50001-100000€	3	1%

## Statistical results and discussion

### Reliability testing

The questionnaire included 52 questions divided in 13 constructs. For the interpretation of the sample the statistical software MINITAB 15.1 was used due to its good interactivity and precision to its outcomes. For all the constructs except the demographics and those who had less than 3 questions Cronbach's method has been used in order to test the reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha test measures the internal consistency of the constructs and it is the most frequent used test. Reliability estimation gives us to what extend the study is free from random errors and therefore gives consistent results from different independent observations (Peter, 1979). By using this method it was possible to identify which questions were really useful for the survey and by this way to avoid misleading data. The most important figure in cronbach's analysis is the  $\alpha$  which has to be greater than 0.7 in order a construct to be considered as a strong one.

Questions between 8-16 were belonging in the construct of TRUST. The initial Cronbach's analysis gave us Cronbach's Alpha = 0,7006. Despite this value can be considered as a satisfactory one because is slightly above the minimum accepted, it has been decided question 16 to be excluded from the Cronbach's analysis. The result of this action was the significant increase of  $\alpha$  something that indicates the validity of the construct. The rest of the constructs gave high Alpha value varied from 0,7246 to 0,9281 without adding or removing any question. This means that the data gathered from the questionnaire are able to be used further in regression analysis. In the table below there is in summary the **Cronbach's Alpha** of each construct:

**Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha**

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Trust	0,8137
Participation	0,7595
The degree of involvement in the decision making process	0,8676
Motivation	0,7246
Customer - to- Customer Know - how	0,8617
Group-person connectivity	0,8309
Intention to participate in the hospitality search-based referral campaign	0,9281

Ability

0,8596

### Analysis of the results

The aim of the analysis was to examine whether the research hypotheses are accepted or rejected. For every hypothesis one independent and one dependent variable has been used. The variables were the constructs that extracted from factor analysis by calculating the mean of items which belong to the same construct. Below the results of regression analyses of the hypotheses are being presented.  $R^2$  has been used in order to be identified a primary relationship between the two variables in each case.

The  $R^2$  results are being presented in the next table:

**Table 3:  $R^2$**

Hypotheses	$R^2$
H <sub>1</sub>	72,4%
H <sub>2</sub>	38,3%
H <sub>3a</sub>	54,9%
H <sub>3b</sub>	77,9%
H <sub>4</sub>	24,4%
H <sub>5</sub>	11,7%
H <sub>6</sub>	29,9%

H1: It can be observed that R-sq is big enough and it does indicate significant relation between the variables. Therefore H1 is accepted. This result was expected because as source credibility theory states individuals seek for credibility in the source of the message in order to use it.

H2: From the results can be observed that R-sq is small and it does not indicate significant relation between the variables. Therefore H2 cannot be accepted. This is a result that it was also expected because an unreliable source of messages cannot send credible information that it can be used without hesitation.

H3a: In this case a relation can be observed between lurking and involvement. Despite it is medium correlation it cannot be ignored that it exists.

H3b: In H3b strong relation is observed. That means that there is strong connection between involvement and posting frequency. The results of posting and lurking were almost expected because when someone is highly involved in the purchase of a product then he will spend more time in posting and lurking. Something that it was not expected is the fact that despite posting needs more effort than lurking, the members of facebook that feel involved in the process of purchasing a hospitality service, tend to spend more time on posting than lurking.

H4: As it can be observed R-sq is very low and therefore no relation can be proved. So this hypothesis cannot be accepted. This result was

Outcomes of  
e- WOM

not expected due to the fact that despite friends may be a good source of credibility that provides us with useful information the term "friends" in facebook has another notion. Apparently, the ties of facebook friends are not so strong and this is a reason that many facebook members do not feel that they can use information that comes from other members without hesitation.

H5: H5 cannot be accepted because R-sq is very low and this indicates that there is no relation between information use and the possession of expertised knowledge about hospitality services. This result was not expected because it is generally accepted that in case someone is an expert in a domain his information are considered useful. This general assumption is not valid in facebook as concerns high involvement decision process about a purchase of hospitality services. This result can maybe be explained by the fact that despite the fact that someone may be expertised in case he is not credible his information cannot be easily used.

H6: This hypothesis cannot be accepted because R-sq is very low (29,9%). This result indicates that members of facebook cannot trust only other members of facebook in order to decide about a hospitality service purchase because it is a high involvement decision and more credible sources of related information are needed.

In the diagram below it is demonstrated which of the hypotheses are accepted and which are not according to R<sup>2</sup>. The hypotheses which are not accepted are the ones in orange color. Light orange color in lurking indicates the medium relation between involvement and lurking.



Figure 2: Hypotheses' results representation

## **Marketing strategies proposals**

The results of the hypotheses in this research can become useful information for businesses in the tourism sector in order to promote their services more efficiently. More specifically, facebook can be used by managers in tourism sector for advertising their companies by e- WOM. Viral marketing is the e- WOM technique that companies use in order to attract customers. This technique is applied by individuals inside the company who watch the comments of other members and make their own positive and some negative posts, in order to increase the source credibility and the posted information. Nevertheless, the ethical part of this technique that has been mentioned above must not be ignored.

However, facebook is not enough by its self. Companies must exploit the fact that in other more expertised virtual communities, individuals feel that they take more credible information. In the present research the hypotheses results emphasized on the reliability of the source and it is an issue that must be taken into consideration.

Another issue that emerges is that hospitality services is a high involvement purchase decision and the information search about relative services cannot be narrowed in the frames of a virtual community and even more if it is not expertised one like Facebook. An internet user feels the need to search more in other internet sources such as travel blogs, travel sites and related official sites.

Additionally, due to the high degree of customer involvement in hospitality services, managers must focus more on lurking than on posting in virtual communities in the frames of the application of viral marketing. More specifically, by lurking, managers can identify what customers say - good or bad- about their experiences monitoring the reputation and the image of their company and of the competitors. Furthermore, with lurking, managers can enhance the quality of their services by viewing the comments of the communities' members and by discovering the actual needs of potential customers.

In conclusion, facebook must not be the unique place for the promotion of hospitality services but it must be combined with other means of e- WOM and non-electronic marketing.

## **Limitations**

The current research focused in a new growing social network community and to the promotion of high involvement services of a specific domain. Thus, some limitations of this study should be noted in order to be taken into consideration for future researches.

Firstly, there were some constructs that have not been used in our analysis like the ability of someone to navigate on facebook and the opportunity to reach facebook during the day. Those constructs could give important results and they could be connected with the effect that they would have in e- WOM. In our research there was not enough time more hypotheses to be investigated, something that can be done in future researches.

Also, the current research focused on services of high involvement in the decision process but it would be interesting a research to be conducted about the impact in the promotion of low involvement products or services via Facebook. Maybe the results could be different and Facebook could be more appropriate for the promotion of such kind of products or services.

Finally, it would be interesting from managerial perspective for another research to compare the differences in the behavior among members of two similar communities as Facebook and Myspace concerning high involvement and low involvement products or services.

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