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Abstract: Internet users are encouraged to rate and review all kinds of services and products. These kinds of reviews are described as eWOM (electronic Word-Of-Mouth). Our central question is: are consumers using these reviews, and what is the role of eWOM as compared with commercial-marketer-generated information and advertising on the Internet. The vacation decision process was used as the domain of investigation, but also these results are compared with four other domains. The conclusion is that the roles of both types of sites are complementary. Furthermore, it was found that overall, positive and neutral/mixed contributions to consumer-generated websites are far more frequent than negative ones. Based on these findings, the implications for marketing and advertising strategies are sketched out: additional to existing strategies, market research has to monitor the eWOM about brands and, by using this information companies should flexibly adapt their advertising to the discussion points raised at the consumer-generated sites.

Consumergenerated versus marketergenerated websites in consumer decision making

Consumergenerated versus marketergenerated websites in consumer decision making

ABSTRACT

Internet users are encouraged to rate and review all kinds of services and products. These kinds of reviews are described as eWOM (electronic Word-Of-Mouth). Our central question is: are consumers using these reviews, and what is the role of eWOM as compared with commercial-marketer-generated information and advertising on the Internet. The vacation decision process was used as the domain of investigation, but also these results are compared with four other domains. The conclusion is that the roles of both types of sites are complementary. Furthermore, it was found that overall, positive and neutral/mixed contributions to consumer-generated websites are far more frequent than negative ones. Based on these findings, the implications for marketing and advertising strategies are sketched out: additional to existing strategies, market research has to monitor the eWOM about brands and, by using this information companies should flexibly adapt their advertising to the discussion points raised at the consumer-generated sites.

Introduction: from WOM to eWOM, from opinion leaders to e-fluentials

The hypothesis that ideas flow from mass media to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population, was tested and confirmed back in the 'fifties (Katz 1957). In this two-step flow, informal communication, denoted as Word-Of-Mouth (WOM), played a crucial role. Now, 50 years later, this WOM concept has been revitalised and given new significance through the use of the Internet (Dellarocas 2003). As a result, a less personal form of WOM has come into vogue (Sen & Lerman 2007), but a form which offers more self-disclosure opportunities due to the greater anonymity offered by the Internet (Sun, Youn, Wu & Kuntaraporn 2006). These authors also coined the term "e-fluentials" to describe the opinion leaders who spread information via the Internet. This new process of spreading information via "e-fluentials" and Internet was first described as online WOM behaviour (or on-line interpersonal influence), but from 2004 onwards the term 'electronic Word-Of-Mouth' became popular (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler 2004)

Consumer generated websites are mainly product review sites where Internet users are rating and reviewing all kinds of services and products – such as airline companies, mobile phone providers, restaurants, wines, resorts. The number of these reviews increases enormously (Hu & Liu 2004) and the rating of products has been shown to affect the likelihood that an item will be bought (Leskovec, Adamic & Huberman 2007). This new phenomenon of eWOM websites can be investigated from different angles, for example, why do people contribute to these sites (see for different motives Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003) or what is the actual use of this information.

A recent paper by Litvin et al. (2008) ends with a call for more practical research concerning the new dynamics created by eWOM. They say (p.466): "Study should be made of what kind of information consumers seek online and how they actually use the information they acquire online from other consumers to make theirdecisions". Following this information use perspective, our focus will be mainly directed towards the advice-seeking aspect of information. Our central question is: do consumers seek information from these reviews during their decision process, and what is the role of this eWOM information (consumer-generated information) as compared with commercial marketer-generated information and advertising? To investigate the roles of consumer-generated and marketer-generated websites in more detail,

it is necessary to find a product category that provided the right context. In our view, a fitting product category should at least satisfy the selection criteria below:

1. There should be a substantial amount of information about the product available from consumer-generated as well as marketer-generated websites.
2. Obtaining information is important for making the right choice. Thus there should be substantial involvement of the consumer and taking the wrong decision will result in some negative experiences.
3. Consumer-generated information matters for the decision, because not all information about a product and its features can be obtained before the purchase decision. In other words, some product features can only be assessed after buying or consuming it.

Based on these criteria, we decided to take holidays as the primary product category to investigate. In addition we will compare the results for this domain with four other product categories to see if there are similarities and differences/

To summarise: this paper investigates the role of consumer generated sites, as compared with those of marketer generated sites, during consumer decision making and more specifically during vacation decision making.

Consumer-generated sites versus marketer-generated sites: research questions

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004 p.39) present a definition of eWOM: “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”. So customers or – interchangeably – consumers (Dwyer 2007), generate content, independent of commercial influence. To reduce perceived risks, consumers seek out and rely on this content, produced by a diverse array of “experts”, to help guide their everyday lives (Hung & Li 2007). Recently, a study was carried out to examine consumer adoption of Web 2.0 and the impact those comments and reviews have on purchasing decisions today (Riegner 2007). However, less attention has been paid to a comparison of the role of these consumer-generated sites with the role of commercial marketer-generated sites. According to Dellarocas (2003), there is only anecdotal evidence that people now rely increasingly on opinions posted on consumer-generated sites and, accordingly, base their decisions less on advertising or professional advice. From a practical perspective, comparing the use of consumer-generated websites with the use of marketer-generated websites is important, as this will influence marketing strategies. The main question in this respect is whether the consumer-generated sites will substitute for marketer-generated sites or whether they are complementary. Frias, Rodriguez and Castenada (2008) concluded in their study about the role of travel agencies and Internet, that substitution between them is not likely and that one could expect cooperation rather than substitution between the Internet and travel agencies. Also Leskovec et al. (2007) conclude in their study that eWOM is of great value in fortifying advertisements.

In the literature, findings about eWOM, as contrasted with advertising, are not very consistent. Gruen et al. (2006 p.449) write: “Similar to WOM, research has shown that eWOM may have higher credibility, empathy and relevance to customers than marketer-created sources of information on the Web”. As is well known, source credibility is a very important factor in determining the use of information sources. Higher perceived credibility of customer endorsement enhances customer’s behavioural intents (Appiah 2007). A recent worldwide Nielsen study gives insight into the trust people have in both types of sites (Nielsen 2007). They surveyed consumers on their attitudes toward 13 types of advertising – from conventional newspaper and television ads to branded web sites and consumer-generated content. From this research it emerged that eWOM and brand websites had the same level of trust. This finding is contrary to a statement by Buhalis and Law (2008, p.612): “Virtual communities are gradually becoming incredibly influential in tourism as consumers increasingly trust better their peers,

rather than marketing messages”. It should be noted that trust in this context does not imply that consumer-generated websites cannot be “seeded” by stealth marketing strategies of firms (Dellarocas, 2006). We only focus on the *perceived* trustfulness of consumer-generated websites, not if this trust is justified.

Another issue is that with eWOM, it’s difficult to judge whether a message sender is an “expert” or not. As Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007 p.7) say: “however, in the online environment, such evaluations must be made from the relatively impersonal text-based resource exchange provided by actors in the site network”. Another difficulty could be establishing a perceived similarity between the consumer seeking for information at a site and the reviews by different consumers. Their appeal may depend on the perceived similarity between them and the audience members (Appiah 2007), or as Eccleston and Griseri (2008, p.575) say “people trust other people, especially those ‘like themselves’ ”. If the difficulty of establishing the credibility of a source and similarity in life-styles is important in source selection, then in our study we would expect results to be more in line with the Nielsen findings (both type of sites equally trusted) than with those (consumer-generated sites more trusted) of Gruen et al. (2006) and Buhalis and Law (2008).

Based on these considerations, the first two research questions concerning a comparison between consumer-generated sites and marketer-generated ones are formulated:

RQ 1: What is the profile of visitors to consumer-generated and marketer-generated sites?

RQ2: Are there differences in levels of trust and other criteria for both types of sites?

The third research question is not about information search but about information providing, in particular the nature of the contribution of consumers to review sites, which can be positive, negative or a mixture of both. Buttle (1998) concludes that negative WOM has a more powerful impact than positive. Unhappy customers will tell their story to more people than happy ones. However, Sen and Lerman (2007 p.92) conclude: “Within the parameters of our study, the results suggest that marketers of hedonic products need not be as concerned about negative reviews for their products as marketers of utilitarian products should be”.

RQ 3: What is the nature of the contribution by active participants to consumer-generated sites?

The fourth research question has to do with the type of sub-decisions into which consumer decisions can be decomposed.

RQ 4: What is the effect of type of sub-decision upon use of different sites?

Like many consumer decisions, the vacation decision process can be reduced to a series of sub-decisions (Jenkins 1978; Litvin, Xu & Kang 2004), with different characteristics. This is relevant as one cannot assume that information search can be unambiguously identified for a vacation as a whole. Kerstetter and Cho (2004) say that documenting search behavior regarding specific types of vacation decisions (for example, where to stay, when to visit, which activities to engage in) can lead to different conclusions about the information search process. These different characteristics have to do with the difference between services and products. Holidays are a mixture of service-like features and product-like features about which sub-decisions must be taken. The first type of aspects are characterized by intangibility and difficulty of evaluating (see Huang, Chou & Lan 2007), leading to an increase in perceived risk of the decision (see for example also Murray & Schlacter 1990; Murray 1991). The second type of aspects are tangible and easier to evaluate. From the literature (Fodness & Murray 1999) it is known that these features influence information search behavior of consumers. *Search-determined sub-decisions* are defined as those dominated by attributes for which full information can be acquired *prior to purchase*. *Experience-determined sub-decisions* are dominated by attributes that cannot be known *until purchase and use* of the product, or for which information searching is more costly and/or difficult than direct product experience (Bei, Chen & Widdows 2004). Several ideas

about the relation between information search and experience- versus search-determined sub-decisions can be found in the literature. Bei et al (2004 p.450) say “The intrinsic attributes of search products are easy to access, concrete and more objective for comparing the quality of the product. In contrast, consumers rely on more extrinsic cues to judge the quality of experience products or services.....Consequently, the recommendations of others would be used more for experience products than search products”. In line with this, Huang, Chou and Lan (2007 p.302) state “The intangible and heterogeneous nature of services increases perceived risks and makes consumers more likely to seek WOM information”. Also Harrison-Walker (2001) notes that when it is difficult to assess a product or service, consumers depend on WOM information. Based on this, it is expected that consumers will use consumer-generated sites more frequently for experience determined sub-decisions and marketer-generated sites more frequently for search-determined sub-decisions.

Research design

The sample is a sub-sample drawn randomly from the sample of the Dutch “Continu Vakantie Onderzoek” (CVO – Continuous Vacation Panel; see also Bargeman & van der Poel 2006; Bronner & de Hoog, 2008). This panel consists of respondents who report on their vacation behaviour four times a year. It is refreshed annually. The sample encompasses about 7000 respondents. The CVO data are weighted for socio-demographics, resulting in a sample that can be considered as representative for the Dutch population for variables crucial for the vacation decision. All tour-operators in the Netherlands make use of these data, and the study is considered to be the standard for obtaining insight into holiday plans and decisions. This panel is the sampling frame for the study. The fieldwork was carried out by TNS NIPO, a large Dutch market research agency. For data collection CASI (Computer Assisted Self Interviewing) was used. This customer-friendly approach increases response and data quality (Bronner & Kuijlen 2007). Within this CVO panel, a sub-sample of respondents was drawn randomly by the research agency which conducts the CVO. The questions are referring to the main summer holiday. The field work was carried out shortly after August 2007. 1650 respondents cooperated (response rate nearly 90%). Of the questions asked, the ones listed below are relevant for this paper:

- consumer-generated sites: visiting behaviour, evaluation (5 attributes: reliable/unreliable, extensive info/limited info, new unknown info/well-known info, useful info/not useful info, superficial info/in-depth info), participation
- marketer-generated sites: visiting behaviour, evaluation on the same 5 attributes
- 4 sub-decisions for holidays (character, quality, service, geographical situation of an accommodation. This set is based on extensive research with tour operators and consumers in 2001 and has been validated as covering the most important sub-decisions on the longitudinal data collection from the CVO 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005). Which type of sites are consulted for sub-decisions, and are sub-decision seen as search- or experience-determined
- socio-demographics.

To compare our results with other product categories, a nationwide study concerning information searching by consumer decisions is used. This survey consisted of an online survey conducted in June 2008 with 546 completed questionnaires. Respondents were recruited from the TNS/NIPO online panel. The sample is representative on crucial socio-demographics and represents people living in The Netherlands aged 18 or above.

Results

In this section we will investigate the four research questions (RQ 1-4).

RQ1: Site visits and visitor profiles

Table 1 shows the overall site visiting behaviour for the entire sample.

Insert Table 1

From Table 1 it is clear that many consumers use Internet sites for obtaining information about holidays (59%). Most people (25%) use information from both types of sites. Those who use only one type of site, use mainly marketer-generated sites. Exclusive use of consumer-generated sites is limited to 11% of the respondents, which could be related to the rather recent emergence of these sites. These results are in line with results found in the US, Litvin et al. (2008) report that 67% of US travellers have used the Internet to search for information on destinations or check for prices or schedules. Frias et al. (2008) report 40% visitors of marketer-generated sites, which is in line with the 49% in Table 1.

We checked whether there are differences in use of sites as regards five main socio-demographics: gender, social class, region, family composition, age (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2

As can be seen from Table 2, there are not many differences between user profiles for both types of sites. Significant differences (family composition and age) are the same for both types of sites. Families and the 35-55 age group use both consumer-generated sites and marketer-generated sites more frequently than other groups.

The results from Tables 1 and 2 indicate that both types of sites are used and the profiles of the users are similar. These findings support the notion that both types of sites can complement each other in the search for information about holidays.

These results can be compared with the results from the other study (TNS/NIPO 2008) on information search by consumers. Data are available for four domains: cooking at home for friends, home accessories, clothing and healthy life style. For each domain, the respondents indicated how frequently they did find information on consumer-generated sites and marketer-generated sites (see Table 3)

Insert Table 3

Comparing Table 3 with Table 1, we can conclude that similar to holiday choice:

- Both types of sites are visited
- Marketer-generated sites are more visited than consumer-generated sites

This supports our conclusion from the holiday study, when extended to a greater number of sectors, that both types of websites are complementary in the consumer decision process.

RQ2: How are sites evaluated?

The literature cited in the theory section is not univocal about consumers' evaluations of different types of sites. Table 4 shows the results for the five evaluation criteria selected for this research.

Insert Table 4

In line with the Nielsen data and contrary to, for example, Buhalis and Law (2008), trust (“reliable”) is the same for both types of sites. The same holds true for extensive information and in-depth information. Consumer-generated sites score higher than marketer-generated sites on new/unknown information and useful information. This appears to be another confirmation of the notion that both types are complementary. The higher score of consumer-generated sites on these two criteria may reflect their ability to deliver more specific and more tailored and updated information about holiday sub-decisions than marketer-generated sites, which, by their nature, have to cater for a larger and more diverse domain, sacrificing specific details for overall relevance.

RQ3: Active participation in consumer-generated sites.

Consumer-generated sites provide an opportunity to contribute to the site. Schlosser (2005) makes a distinction between ‘posters’ (those who post their product experiences on the Internet) and ‘lurkers’ (those who read only others’ postings). Table 5 shows how this opportunity for posting is taken up by people in the sample.

Insert table 5

As can be seen in Table 5, 11% of the respondents engage in active participation. Text with a rating is most popular, followed by text with advice. Surprisingly perhaps, the great majority of the contributions (75%) are positive, something also found by Pan, MacLauren and Crotts (2007) in their analysis of the content of Weblogs for the city of Charleston. This seems to contradict the findings by Buttle (1998) that dissatisfied customers are likely to tell twice as many people as satisfied customers and negative information from fellow customers has a more powerful impact than positive information. It might be expected that if negative information has a higher attention value than positive information, people would put more effort into publicising negative experiences (unless, of course, there were not many negative experiences in the sample).

Just as for site visiting, we can use the results of the data described above for a comparison with other domains. Table 6 shows for the same domains as in Table 3, the active participation of consumers in consumer-generated sites and the nature of their contributions.

Insert Table 6

When compared with Table 5, we can conclude that participation in consumer-generated websites is very much the same. In all five domains the participation is between 10 and 20 percent. There is obviously a very large gap between the number of posters and the number of lurkers. In the other domains than holiday decisions, the amount of negative contributions is also negligible, which is not in line with the notion that negative eWOM has more impact than positive (see the theoretical section of the paper).

RQ4: what is the effect of type of sub-decision upon use of sites?

The overall holiday decision was decomposed into four sub-decisions regarding the holiday accommodation which, following Bei et al. (2004), can be situated on a continuum ranging from mainly search-determined to mainly experience-determined. This can be done a priori by the researchers (see for example Bronner & de Hoog, 2008) or can be based on consumer perceptions. In this research the last approach was chosen. For each of the four sub-decisions the following question was posed: “Can the <sub-decision> of an accommodation in your

opinion (7= be judged adequately before the holiday) (1=be judged during the holiday)". Based on the averages of the sub-decisions on this 7-point scale, they can be ordered on the continuum ranging from search-determined to experience-determined (see Figure 1).

Insert figure 1

As can be seen from Fig. 1, the most search-determined sub-decision, in the eyes of the holiday-makers, concerns the location of the accommodation, while the most experience-determined one concerns the quality of the service at the accommodation. For these two extremes on the continuum (location and service), it was checked if there are differences between visiting consumer-generated sites and visiting marketer-generated sites as expected (vacation decision makers will use consumer-generated sites more frequently for experience determined sub-decisions and marketer-generated sites more frequently for search-determined sub-decisions).

Insert table 7

The most important conclusion from Table 7 is that in order to start searching for information at all, the sub-decision must be perceived first and foremost as one for which searching could make sense. When one sees a sub-decision as mainly an experience-determined one, the incentive to search for additional information, on the Internet at least, is rather low (70% do not visit a site).

Table 8 presents the results for the next step: if one decides to search for additional information on the Internet, where does the vacationer turn to? This table shows the results relating to the people in the column "at least one type of site visited" in Table 7.

Insert table 8

From Table 8 and the associated T-test, it can be derived that, given the fact that people search for information when a sub-decision is seen as one for which information can be found on the Internet, they will visit consumer-generated sites more frequently than they visit marketer-generated sites. The reverse does not hold true.

Based on the results shown in Tables 7 and 8, the postulated preference for eWOM sources when dealing with experience-determined sub-decisions is only confirmed when first a decision was taken to search at all. As a consequence, the original theory of Bei et al. (2004) has to be modified into a two-step process: the first step is to believe that you can find useful information for a sub-decision at websites. If this is answered positively, in the second step people tend to turn to consumer-generated sites more frequently than to marketer-generated sites when a sub-decision is seen by them as an experience-determined one.

Conclusions and implications

Summary and conclusions

This study investigated the role of different types of Internet sites in consumer decision making, following the increasing interest in electronic-Word-of-Mouth, or eWOM. In particular we made a distinction between the use of consumer-generated sites and marketer-generated sites during consumer decision making. As main domain the focus was on vacation decision making, but also a comparison with four other domains was made.

Based on a nation wide sample in The Netherlands we can answer the *first* research question: 59% of the holiday decision makers visited a site during their decision making process; 49% a marketer-generated site and 36% a consumer-generated site. Also the user profiles for different

types of sites are the same. This shows that both types of sites play an important role in pre-trip information search. Only a few years ago the same people would primarily base those decisions on advertisements and professional advice (Dellarocas 2003).

Comparing with the other domains (cooking for friends, home accessories, clothing, healthy life-style), it can be concluded that similar to holiday choice:

- Both types of sites are visited
- Marketer-generated sites are more visited than consumer-generated sites

This supports our conclusion from the holiday study, when extended to a greater number of sectors, that both types of websites are complementary in the consumer decision process.

There are not many differences in the ways people evaluate these different sources, the topic of the *second* research question; in particular, trust in the sites is equal. An explanation could be the difficulty of ascertaining the background of people posting information on consumer-generated sites, for example whether they have the same life-style (perceived similarity) as the user of the information or whether they are really capable of passing judgments.

Concerning active participation (the *third* research question), most contributions on consumer-generated sites deal with the positive aspects of holidays, only a small minority convey negative information. The same small amount (below 5%) of negative postings was found for the other domains. This is a surprising result, as it is known from the literature that negative information has more impact than positive information on consumer decisions and is communicated to a wider range of consumers.

Finally the *fourth* research question addressed the effects of type of sub-decision upon the use of sites. Concerning the effect of type of sub-decision (search-determined versus experience-determined), people start searching for information on sites only when they perceive that information can be found at all. When they search on sites, there is a difference. When sub-decisions are seen as more experience-determined ones– that is, one can only know the actual information when one consumes the product – there is a tendency to turn to eWOM (consumer-generated sites).

Summarizing, we can say that both types of sites are complementary to a large extent, but eWOM plays a more important role in experience-determined sub-decisions. Based on our findings, it seems unlikely that eWOM will make obsolete other sources of information used in consumer decision making. They may even reinforce each other's effects: eWOM can be of great value in fortifying advertisements (Leskovec et al. 2007). This is also in line with the Nielsen study cited in section 2. Another reason for this "symbiotic relationship" can be found in the content analysis results of Pan & Fesenmaier (2006): the terminology used in consumer-generated sites and marketer-generated sites differs markedly, each stressing different but, for the vacation as whole, relevant features and sub-decisions. In this way they together cover the information needs of vacation decision makers.

Implications for market research and marketing

As there is no doubt that eWOM is clearly on the rise, especially when the product becomes more intangible and service-like (see our data about site visits, but also Riegner 2007), the consequences for marketing and advertising must be investigated. The currently common practice in consumer marketing is to carry out market research, to identify the most important attributes and to use these attributes in advertising. But to our way of thinking, a valuable addition to existing strategies would be to continuously monitor in parallel the eWOM about a brand and to flexibly adapt the advertising to the discussion points raised at the consumer-generated sites. Market research agencies are already beginning to offer monitor services of this type. For the small amount of *negative* information one should keep in mind that these postings

are small in number but can be large in impact. So it is still important to focus on this negative information and the topics of discussion, and focus on these aspects in order to give contrary information. Litvin et al. (2008) support this view when they advise (p.462): “From an informational perspective, procedures need to be established that allow hospitality and tourism marketers to harvest discussion and feedback created online”. To capitalise on *positive* information, a strategy might be to convince people that sub-decisions which appear to be experience-determined are in fact search-determined, because information can be found at consumer- and marketer-generated sites. Given the fact that the majority of the information is positive, this increases the likelihood that consumers are exposed to this positive information. Green (2007) proposes: “The highest and best use of social media – and the way in which a travel marketer can most effectively respond to consumer commentary on the well-known review sites – is to engage customers and prospects in conversations to understand their needs, develop relationships and interact with them before a purchase, during the purchase process, and after a purchase is made”.

More generally, the increasing importance of eWOM calls for a more agile and flexible marketing strategy, requiring on-going monitoring of eWOM information in parallel with the familiar questionnaire-sample approach used in traditional market research.

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Table 1 Site visiting during vacation decision-making.

Site visiting	<i>% in sample (n=1650)</i>
Marketer-generated sites only	24
Consumer-generated sites only	11
Both types visited	25
No sites visited	41

Table 2 Profile of vacation site visitors

Socio-demographics	<i>consumer-generated sites</i>	<i>marketer-generated sites</i>
Gender	ns	ns
Social class	ns	ns
Region	ns	ns
Family composition	sign.*	sign.**
Age	sign.***	sign.****

*Singles fewer visits than families ($\chi^2=20.3, df=3, p<.05$)

**Singles fewer visits than families ($\chi^2=8.2, df=3, p<.05$)

***Age group 35-55 more than younger and older groups ($\chi^2=31.4, df=2, p<.05$)

****Age group 35-55 more than younger and older groups ($\chi^2=21.6, df=2, p<.05$)

Table 3 Site visiting in domains different from holidays

Site visiting	Cooking for friends (n=487)	Home accessories (n=520)	Clothing (n=544)	Healthy life-style (n=499)
Marketer-generated sites	66%*	87%	79%	78%
Consumer-generated sites	39%	79%	49%	64%

*Reading example: 66% of the sample (=Dutch population 18+) visits frequently or sometimes a marketer-generated website to get information about cooking at home for friends.

Table 4 Evaluation of both types of holiday sites

Evaluation criterion	<i>consumer-generated sites</i>		<i>marketer-generated sites</i>		<u>T-value</u>	<u>sign.</u>
	<i>(n=585)</i>		<i>(n=794)</i>			
Information is....*	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Reliable	4.7	1.2	4.8	1.1	1.56	ns
Extensive	4.7	1.2	4.7	1.2	0.16	ns
New/ unknown	4.8	1.2	4.3	1.2	7.34	P<.05
Useful	5.1	1.2	4.9	1.2	3.12	P<.05
In-depth	4.2	1.2	4.1	1.2	0.78	ns

*Measured on a 7-point rating scale, bi-polar, higher score is more positive

Table 5 Active participation in consumer-generated holiday sites

<i>Participation</i>	<i>% in sample (n=1650)</i>
• Yes	11
• No	89
<i>Type of content (more answers allowed)</i>	<i>% of participants (n=182)</i>
• Text with rating	79
• Text with advice	42
• Photographs/pictures	14
<i>Nature of content (one answer allowed)</i>	
• Positive	75
• Neutral	9
• Negative	5
• Mixed positive-negative	11

Table 6 Active participation of consumers in domains other than holidays

	Cooking for friends (n=487)	Home accessories (n=520)	Clothing (n=544)	Healthy life-style (n=499)
<i>Participation</i>				
• Yes	13%	13%	12%	19%
• No	87%	87%	88%	81%
<i>Nature of contribution*</i>				
• Positive	41%	24%	26%	22%
• Neutral/mixed	59%	71%	72%	76%
• Negative	0%	5%	2%	2%

* The question of the nature of the contribution is only posed to participants, excluding don't know, for cooking n=51, for home accessories n=51, for clothing n=46 and for healthy life style n=82.

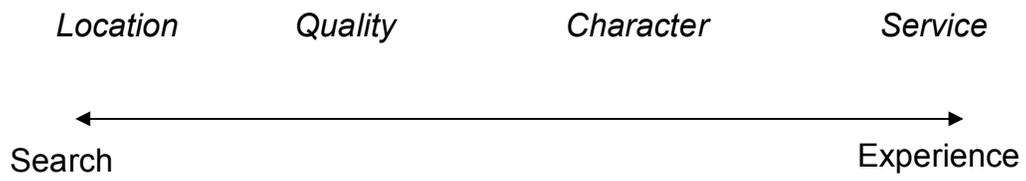


Figure 1 Holiday sub-decisions and the search/experience-determined continuum (based on respondent perceptions)

Table 7 Site visiting when searching for information about search- and experience-determined sub-decisions (percentages horizontal)

Sub-decision about accommodation	<i>% at least one type of site visited</i>	<i>% no site visited</i>	<i>N</i>
Search (Location)	49*	51	1650
Experience (Service)	30*	70	1650

*T=8.88, p1=49, p2=30, n=1650, p<.05

Table 8 Type of sites visited when searching for information about search- and experience-determined sub-decisions (percentages horizontal).

Sub-decision about accommodation	<i>% visiting only consumer- generated sites</i>	<i>% visiting only marketer- generated sites</i>	<i>% visiting both type of sites</i>	<i>n</i>
Search (Location)	17*	28	55	804
Experience (Service)	25*	26	50	500

*T=3.50, p1=17 n1=804, p2=25, n2=500, p<.05

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Dear Mr. Mouncey, dear Peter

Attached you can find our thoroughly revised paper “Consumergenerated websites versus marketergenerated websites in consumer decision making” for re-submission to the International Journal of Market Research.

First, we like to say that we have addressed all points raised by the reviewers and reduced the length to 5000 words (excluding references, abstract and acknowledgements). Below we describe in more detail the changes we made.

General

We added relevant literature, in the first place Ecclestone & Griseri (2008), furthermore Dellarocas (2006) about stealth marketing and strategic manipulation (in relation to a question of the second reviewer) and Schlosser (2005) about posting and lurking, and Buhalis & Law (2008).

The style was adapted and made more formal, for example by substantially reducing the “We” form and modifying active form into passive form. Also some lack of rigour (as noted by the first reviewer) was addressed (for example, TNS/NIPO is not characterized anymore as “the leading” market research agency but as “a large” one).

Reviewer 1

We simplified the theoretical part by focusing on straightforward research questions and removing the more complex hypotheses. Also we removed the part that dealt with the influence of the family context, as this could make the paper too complex. In this way we reduced the theoretical part to four simple research questions concentrating upon one line of reasoning, the complementary role of different types of websites.

1. The remark about category or subject matter specific conclusions is taken up by including data about other domains. We managed to get hold of new data from a large survey about information search of consumers in The Netherlands, which appeared after the initial submission of the paper summer 2008. These data allow us to make a comparison between the role of consumer-generated websites and marketer-generated websites across product categories (cooking at home for friends, home accessories, clothing and healthy lifestyle). Results are presented in Tables 3 and 6. Furthermore we added more justification why holidays are a fitting domain to investigate (see final paragraph of the Introduction section).
2. The fact that eWOM is an evolving phenomenon and can change at an individual level over time is an important research question. However this requires a longitudinal study which is not the approach followed in our research. As a consequence, we can only raise this point in a speculative manner without empirical data to underpin it.
3. Concerning the eWOM monitoring strategies for marketers we now reformulate them as being additional to existing strategies. Moreover, we mention that market research agencies are already starting to offer monitor services of this type. Finally, we paid more attention to different marketing strategies that can be followed for positive and negative eWOM information across product categories.

Reviewer 2

1. As stated above (see point 1 reviewer 1), we added in the paper a complete new data set with the aim of better supporting conclusions that cover a greater number of product sectors. We conclude, based on a comparison between holiday choices and other consumer choices, that both types of websites play a complementary role in the consumers' decision making process. This is in line with the findings of the Nielsen study and our data do not support the expectations of Gruen et al. (2006) and Buhalis & Law (2008) that consumers trust better their peers than marketing messages.
2. The seeding of consumer-generated websites is now discussed using the paper by Dellarocas (2006), but in our research we measure the trust of a consumer, not if this trust is justified, so we cannot make empirically founded statements about the latter.

We hope that major revisions described above based on new data makes the paper fit for publication in the International Journal of Market Research.

Don't hesitate to contact us if you feel that the questions raised by you and the reviewers were not properly addressed.

With kind regards,

Fred Bronner & Robert de Hoog

November 14th, 2008

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Response to reviewers

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