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Bronner, F.; de Hoog, R.

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Vacationers and eWOM: Who Posts, and Why, Where, and What?

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Fred Bronner¹ and Robert de Hoog²

Abstract

Vacationers not only read and use information from the Internet during their choice process, but also *post* information on the Internet. This posted information is described as eWOM (electronic word of mouth). The central questions are, which type of vacationers do post, with which motivations do they post reviews, on which type of site, and what are the message characteristics? These questions are approached in a way that differs from the usual site-centered approach. It is topic-centered and independent of a specific review site, and it focuses on motivations for all vacation sites. The conclusion is that why a vacationer makes a contribution influences the choice of a site to which he or she contributes and what he or she contributes. The main discriminating motivational factor is the one that sets vacationers with a primarily self-directed motivation apart from those with a more other-directed help motivation. Implications for tourism research and vacation marketing are discussed.

Keywords

electronic word of mouth (eWom), posting on vacation review sites, motivations for posting, vacation marketing

Introduction

To reduce uncertainty and perceived risks, consumers search for information when making purchase decisions. In addition to the mass media channels, word of mouth (WOM) and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) are used during their choice processes. WOM refers to traditional offline interpersonal information sources; for example, as regards holiday choice, asking a friend to recommend an excellent camping site in France. By contrast, eWOM involves consumers' comments about products and services posted on the Internet; for example, as regards holiday choice, the rating on a 10-point scale of a hotel and textual comments on the service and location. Consumers can nowadays easily express to fellow consumers their experiences concerning products and services (Schindler and Bickart 2003). The Internet has created a huge community of unconstrained consumer voices. The big difference between WOM and eWOM is that in eWOM, recommendations are typically from unknown individuals with whom strong ties are lacking, so "online consumers have difficulty in using source similarity to determine the credibility of information" (Park and Lee 2009, p. 61). An advantage of eWOM is that this channel offers more self-disclosure opportunities because of the greater anonymity offered by the Internet (Sun et al. 2006). Sun et al. (2006) also coined the term *e-fluentials* to describe the opinion leaders who spread information via the Internet and, when comparing WOM and eWOM, conclude that "compared to

traditional WOM, online WOM is more influential due to its speed, convenience, one-to-many reach, and its absence of face-to-face human pressure" (p. 1105). Leskovec, Adamic, and Huberman (2007) also underline the influence of eWOM in the consumer choice process: "the rating of products and merchants has been shown to effect the likelihood that an item will be bought" (p. 5). Also in tourism research, Ye, Law, and Gu (2009) show that the content of consumer reviews influences the number of bookings in a hotel. This process of spreading information via e-fluentials and the Internet was first described as online WOM behavior, but from 2004 onwards the term *electronic word of mouth* became popular (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). We will use this term in this article.

Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) define eWOM and present a typology of eWOM channels. Their definition is as follows: "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers" (p. 461). This includes communication between

¹University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

²University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Robert de Hoog, University of Twente, Faculty of Behavioral Sciences,
P.O. Box 214, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands
Email: r.dehoog@gw.utwente.nl

producers and consumers as well as those between consumers themselves. Their typology is two-dimensional:

- communication scope: from one to one such as emails, via one to many (review sites), to many to many (virtual communities)
- level of interactivity: from asynchronous (emails, review sites, blogs) to synchronous (chatrooms, newsgroups, instant messaging)

In our study, review sites are the focus of research (one to many and asynchronous), as they have a high influential power (Buhalis and Law 2008), and using information from these sites not only reduces uncertainty but also enhances the quality of the choice (Fodness and Murray 1999). Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) describe additional reasons for consumer attention to WOM and eWOM as follows: “the expectation of receiving information that may decrease decision time and effort and/or contribute to the achievement of a more satisfying decision outcome” (p. 398).

What holds true for consumers in general also holds true for vacationers. Choosing a vacation is a high-involvement decision, with a mix of emotional and more rational choice criteria and with substantial family interaction and negotiation (Bronner and de Hoog 2008a, forthcoming-a). As Buhalis and Law (2008) state, “The Internet has changed tourism consumer behavior dramatically. Prospective travelers have direct access to a much greater wealth of information provided by tourism organizations, private enterprises and increasingly by other users/consumers” (p. 611). Currently, most research on this topic has focused on readers of review information. However, it is not only reading and using the greatly increased amount of information about vacations that is important. As vacationers contribute more and more to this information pool, using in particular Internet sites where they can post their experiences with a “holiday product,” an interesting question is whether one can find some kind of profile of these posters. As frequent posters on the subject of vacations can be seen as the e-fluentials for vacations and tourism, knowing more about their characteristics can contribute to better-targeted marketing messages. Currently, advertising is strongly focused on the readers of the review sites, which is understandable, as the content of the sites will likely influence buying behavior. However, finding out who is the person behind a review is at least as important. Insight into their motivations is relevant for tour operators and other suppliers of vacation services, but also for review sites, which depend on consumer-generated content (like, e.g., Tripadvisor). However, finding posters is more difficult than finding readers, as the latter are far more numerous than the former. Bronner and de Hoog (forthcoming-b) found that in a large nationwide sample of 1,650 vacationers, only 11% of the respondents can be characterized as posters on consumer-generated sites

and 36% as readers. Furthermore, from our earlier study we know that readers and posters are using a variety of sites, ranging from fully marketer generated via mixed ones to fully consumer-generated sites. Based on these considerations, we can state the theoretical framework that drives our research. It consists of a problem description with four components:

“Which *type of vacationers* (1) do post with which *motivations* (2) reviews and/or ratings on which *type of site* (3) with what *message characteristics* (4)?”

This framework leads first to considering the profile of vacationers who post messages as compared with those who do not. Next, the motivations of the vacationers for posting information are examined and are related to the type of site on which they post. Finally, attention is directed at the characteristics of the message that is posted. The general framework leads to four more specific research questions:

Research Question 1: Which vacationers post reviews, and what are the characteristics of these vacationers?

Research Question 2: What are the motivations for posting a review on a site?

Research Question 3: Is there a relation between the different motivations and the type of site on which information is posted?

Research Question 4: What are the message characteristics of the messages posted by the vacationers?

Research into the posting of consumer reviews on sites can be carried out in two ways: *site-centered* or *topic-centered*. Nearly all research in this field is site-centered, which means the researcher selects a site X and the study focuses on people’s motivations for putting their reviews and/or ratings on site X only. This is a fairly easy way to collect data about this phenomenon, as there is no need for a priori screening.¹ The drawback, of course, is a strong sampling bias, because only contributors to that particular site end up in the sample. Moreover, to make generalizations based on findings from only one site (which has specific properties that are not necessarily present on other sites) and then apply them to other sites is a questionable procedure. The site-centric approach could work for virtual communities that are arranged around a site dealing with a very specific product (e.g., Harley-Davidson motorbikes). Their main objective is mutual reinforcement, and such sites persist over a long period of time. For these, it is likely that the site-centric approach captures the relevant information of posters who are interested in this specific product or brand. For vacations, the situation is different. Vacations are not a “single” product but are highly configurable, leading to a potentially endless number of products. Commitment in

terms of mutual reinforcement by members is low, which makes the participation of vacationers in sites more ephemeral and diverse. Therefore, this study opts for a more realistic *topic-centered* approach, independent of any specific site. The topic is the main summer holiday, and a random sample of vacationers is traced who posted about this topic (i.e., main summer holiday 2008) on sites they mentioned themselves. We choose the main summer holiday as this is the vacation on which Dutch vacationers spend most money and time, making it a high-involvement decision for which risk reduction is important.

In the next section, the four research questions are discussed in more detail.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: Which Vacationers Post Reviews, and What Are the Characteristics of These Vacationers?

In the Introduction, the term *e-fluent* was used for people who put information on a review site. Schlosser (2005) introduces the terms *posting* versus *lurking*. Posters post their experiences on the Internet, and one objective of the research is to investigate what profile these posters have as compared with the general vacationer. Are they younger, more highly educated, more likely to be single?

Research Question 2: What Are the Motivations for Posting a Review on a Site?

Several empirical studies examine consumers' motivations for seeking information and/or posting information, which may differ. Schindler and Bickart (2003) focus on motivations for reading eWOM, which is *different* from the perspective chosen for this study because the motivations for *posting* information will be traced. They relate these motivations to the specific type of eWOM, following a typology of sites like the one proposed by Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008). This perspective is *similar* to the one chosen for this study: relating motivations to the use of different types of eWOM sites. Of course, there may be similar motivations behind contributing information and reading and using information, and the latter can serve as a first idea about what the former may be. Schindler and Bickart (2003) discern three motivational types and relate them to different types of channels (see Table 1).

First, consumers can seek out eWOM as informational input to specific purchase decisions. As Schindler and Bickart (2003) state, "consumers with information motivations often rely on posted consumer reviews." (p. 54). A desire for support and a sense of community is another motivation, and consumers motivated by this desire often appear to rely on discussion forums and seem to value dialog. Finally, some consumers read eWOM purely for its entertainment value

Table 1. Summary of Motivations for Using Different Types of eWOM Channels (Based on the Classification of Schindler and Bickart 2003, p. 54.)

Motivation Type	Type of eWOM Channel Used	Type of Content Favored
Information	Posted reviews	Comparisons, negative information
Support and community	Discussion forums	Positive information, stories
Entertainment	Discussion forums, chats, instant messaging	Extreme viewpoints, humor, photographs

and are more interested in discussion forums and chats. The crucial point these authors make is that motivations for use (search and/or posting) of types of eWOM sites are not the same for *all* types of sites but differ for the various types of sites. This point of view is an exception. Other motivational studies connect the motivations to just *one* type of eWOM channel. In addition, the study by Gretzel and Yoo (2007, 2008) found that for travel review readers, the type of site where the review is posted is critical when evaluating a review. As posters are also readers, it seems likely that when they decide on where to post a review, the type of site is also important. In terms of our theoretical framework, it is expected that *why* you want to contribute influences *where* you are going to make your contribution.

Studies concentrating on motivations are, for example, the studies of Hennig-Thurau and colleagues (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), Wang and Fesenmaier (2003, 2004), Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Klein Pearo (2004), Zhao and Deek (2004), Sangwan (2005), Bonaccorsi and Rossi (2006), Huang, Chou, and Lan (2007), and Gretzel and Yoo (2007, 2008). Nearly all studies measure motivations for contributing to online communities or participating in a virtual community. As virtual communities differ in several aspects from review sites such as, for example, the level of interaction, level of involvement, and feeling more a member than a participant, other motivations can play a key role for the latter. The expectation is, for example, that in virtual communities the relaxation motivation—to escape from daily responsibilities and the need for entertainment and having fun—will be more important than on review sites, which are more linked to actual choices (a Harley-Davidson virtual community site will not often be visited by people who want to buy a motorcycle). In the literature, motivations for participating in virtual communities are far more extensively studied than motivations for participating as a poster in review sites; however, those motivational factors are also a source of inspiration for this study. A variety of motivations are found in the motivational studies. Table 2 summarizes the general lines of empirical findings (see the literature mentioned above in this paragraph). All these factors are

Table 2. Classification of Consumers' Motivations for Participating in Electronic Word-of-Mouth Channels^a

General Motivation Category	Specific Motivations	Examples of Items ^b
1. Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-expression • Self-enhancement • Status/power/prestige • Extraversion • Venting negative feelings • Revenge • Gaining self-esteem • Self-discovery • Self-reference 	<p>I feel good when I can tell others about my buying successes</p> <p>The company harmed me, and now I will harm the company</p>
2. Social benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group attachment • Interconnectivity • Sense of belonging • Group commitment • Meeting friends and nice people • Group reference 	<p>It is fun to communicate this way with other people in the community</p> <p>I meet nice people this way</p>
3. Social concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficacy • Concern for other consumers • Being helpful to others • Future exchange with others • Expectancy: providing but also getting advice 	<p>I want to help others with my own positive experiences</p> <p>I expect to receive tips or support from other users</p>
4. Functional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time saving • Purposive value • Learning to consume • Getting information • Solving problems • Making decisions 	<p>Learning how to do things</p> <p>Making better decisions</p>
5. Quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer empowerment • Enforcing service excellence • Influence on companies 	<p>I believe companies are more accommodating when I publicize the matter</p>
6. Economic incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting rewards or incentives • Remuneration 	<p>I receive a reward for the writing</p>
7. Entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun, amusement, and relaxation • Need to unwind from daily responsibilities • Extending experience • Escape 	<p>To be entertained</p> <p>To relax</p>
8. Helping the company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulate success of company • Good companies should be supported 	<p>I am so satisfied with a company and its product that I want to help the company to be successful</p>

a. Based on a literature review: Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003); Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004); Wang and Fesenmaier (2003); Wang and Fesenmaier (2004); Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Klein Pearo (2004); Zhao and Deek (2004); Sangwan (2005); Bonaccorsi and Rossi (2006); Huang, Chou, and Lan (2007); Gretzel and Yoo (2007).

b. Items taken from the literature.

incorporated in our study to identify the motivations for contributing to review sites. Using the data collected, a typology of motivations for contributors to *review sites* will be constructed, which is to be used for investigating the other research questions.

Research Question 3: Is There a Relation between the Different Motivations and the Type of Site on Which Information Is Posted?

To answer this research question, a typology of vacation review sites is needed. It should be noted that this typology

is limited to sites that fall within the above-mentioned one-to-many/asynchronous class. First, reviews can be posted on different type of sites: (1) commercial-marketer-generated Web sites in which a "corner" for posting vacationers' opinions is available, (2) fully consumer-generated sites on which vacationers publish their product opinions on their "own" sites, and (3) mixed forms, which means commercially exploited sites on which more than just a "corner" is available. Bronner and de Hoog (2008b, forthcoming-b) show that consumer-generated sites and marketer-generated sites fulfill complementary roles. Both types of sites play an important role in pre-trip information searching and thus can be expected to be seen by contributors as different channels,

since many contributors are also readers. In addition, sites can be classified according to other criteria that can influence posters' decisions as to where to put their reviews. Three characteristics were selected based on considerations concerning the use of the review by other vacationers:

Expressiveness: the way in which one can *express opinions*—solely with numerical ratings versus numerical ratings combined with textual comments, this influences the amount of information that can be conveyed in a post

Perceived similarity: sites that ask for *profiles of the reviewers* versus sites without such profiles, making it easier or more difficult to assess the similarity between a poster and a reader, which has been shown to influence the credibility of a post

Accessibility: sites where contributions are *accessible to others* or not (see also Note 2); this determines the range of influence of the posted message

Research Question 4: What Are the Message Characteristics of the Messages Posted by the Consumers?

The last research question investigates the “what” part of the theoretical framework. As Park and Lee (2009) state, “little research addresses how eWOM message configurations affect the eWOM effect” (p. 61). There is already evidence from older WOM studies that people put more weight on negative information than on positive information (Arndt 1967; Skowronski and Carlston 1987; Buttle 1998). In line with this finding, the question is whether consumers tend to place more negative or more positive information on the review sites.

Sweeney, Soutar, and Mazzarol (2005) conclude that negative WOM is more emotional, is associated with dissatisfaction, and is almost twice as likely to influence the receiver's opinion of the firm. However, Sen and Lerman (2007) conclude the opposite: “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” (p. 92). This makes it interesting to explore these contradictory views. Besides the positive or negative nature of contributions, other characteristics of the message can depend on the motivation of posters. One important factor concerns which aspects of a vacation the message addresses. The vacation decision process can be reduced to a series of aspects about which a vacationer must take subdecisions (Litvin, Xu, and Kang 2004), for example, the location and service quality of accommodations. It is not only important to discover about *which* aspects and subdecisions messages are posted but also to ascertain the *number* of aspects and sub-decisions mentioned in posts, as they are

indicative of the variety of the content of a contribution. In addition, form and layout features (photos or not) can play a role, as they also indicate the expressiveness of a posting.

Research Design

The sample in this research is a subsample from the sample of the Dutch “Continu Vakantie Onderzoek” (CVO [Continuous Vacation Panel]; see also Bargeman and van der Poel 2006; Bronner and de Hoog 2008a). This panel consists of respondents who report on their vacation behavior four times a year. It is refreshed annually. The CVO data are weighted for sociodemographics, resulting in a sample that can be considered as representative of 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. The fieldwork is carried out by TNS NIPO, one of the leading Dutch market research agencies. For data collection, computer assisted self-interviewing (CASI) is used. Respondents can answer the questions at home at a time that is convenient to them and can take the time they need to answer the questions. This customer-friendly approach increases response and data quality (Bronner and Kuijlen 2007). Within this CVO panel, all participants who took a main summer holiday in the Netherlands or abroad in July, August, or September 2008 ($n = 3,500$) are asked the following filter question:

“In relation to your summer holiday (in 2008), did you post a rating, review, experiences, suggestions or critical remarks on a travel site?” yes/no

If the answer is yes, they receive the questionnaire for posters on a site (consumer-generated and/or marketer-generated and/or mixed). About 10% of the posters delivered messages to more than one site; in that case the questions are directed to the contribution that a poster perceives as being the most important one. In a few cases (4%) the respondent could not choose the most important contribution and answered these questions for more than one post. In this case of equality of importance, one site is randomly selected afterwards by the researchers for the analysis. It must be stressed that all questions to posters refer to the recent summer holiday and to one specific posting on one site. This makes it less probable that respondents are confused about which post the questions refer to.

The field work was carried out shortly after the holiday period (September 2008) to make sure that memory loss is minimized. As stated above, this procedure differs from many other motivational studies, because those usually use self-selection samples from participants in eWOM sites (see Wang and Fesenmaier 2004). The approach in this study is as follows: from a random sample of vacationers, all eWOM

posters are interviewed, independent of the site(s) on which the information is posted.

For this research the following questions are relevant:

- Sociodemographics like age, sex, region, life cycle phase, family composition (asked of all the 3,176 respondents of the originally approached 3,500 respondents)
- Motivations: 20 motivations selected based on the literature review, each motivation item is measured using a 5-point applicability scale ranging from 5 = *very similar to my motivations for contributing to the site* to 1 = *very dissimilar*
- Name/type of site: "What is the name of the site you posted on?" All sites mentioned by the respondents who posted were visited by the researchers and coded on four characteristics:
 - Type of site: consumer generated, mixed, marketer generated
 - Way of expressing opinions: text only, rating and text combination
 - Contributor profile: reviewers have to give at least a limited profile (age, family composition, and traveler segment), no profile needed
 - Accessible to others: 1 = *reviews/ratings accessible to others*, 2 = *not accessible to others*
 - Message characteristics (referring to one specific post about the summer holiday)
 - "To which vacation aspect(s) did you refer in your contribution: character/cost/quality/price-quality/service/location/other attribute?"
 - "Was your contribution positive/neutral/negative?"
 - "Did you put photos on the site?"

Findings

Profile of Contributors (Research Question 1)

Research Question 1 addresses the question as to what characterizes vacationers who contribute to sites. Of the entire sample, 439 respondents of the 3,176 (14%) can be characterized as posters. One year before, in 2007, in a comparable sample, Bronner and de Hoog (2008b, forthcoming-b) found that 11% of the respondents posted comments about their main holiday on a site. This is in line with what may be expected: a slightly increasing trend.

Analyzing posters as compared with nonposters on several sociodemographics leads to the following results. No significant relations are found with gender, social class, or region. Significant relations are found with:

- Age group ($\chi^2 = 7.9$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$); people older than 55 contribute less than people younger than 55

- Income ($\chi^2 = 10.8$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$); people with high and lower-middle incomes contribute more than people with low and higher-middle incomes
- Family composition ($\chi^2 = 3.9$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$); singles contribute less than couples with or without children.

This is partly in line with findings in a comparable sample (see Bronner and de Hoog 2008b) regarding age group, but not as regards income and family composition.

Motivations of Contributors (Research Question 2)

Research Question 2 addresses the motivations of those vacationers who contribute to sites. The motivations are measured using 5-point rating items linked to the categories listed in Table 2. The motivation items are analyzed on their fit with the categories in Table 2, by means of an exploratory principal components analysis. This procedure better fits the exploratory state of the typology, which is mainly based on site-specific contributions, while this research is about topic-specific contributions across sites. Table 3 shows the results of this analysis after applying a Varimax rotation on the principal components extraction. Included in the table are all factors with an eigenvalue >1 and factor loadings $>.50$. For items loading higher than .50 on a factor, a reliability analysis was performed, and the associated Cronbach's α is shown. Before the analysis, 20 subjects who answered "Don't know" 18 times or more on the items were removed. All analyses with motivation variables that follow are based on $n = 419$.

Compared with the categories in Table 2, the following factors can be identified in the data in Table 3.

- Factor 1: Self-directed (equals Personal)
- Factor 2: Helping other vacationers (equals Social concern)
- Factor 3: Social benefits (equals Social benefits)
- Factor 4: Consumer empowerment (equals Quality assurance)
- Factor 5: Helping companies (equals Helping the company)

Factors that are not found in the data of this study are Functional (partly included in the Helping other vacationers factor) and Economic Incentives and Entertainment (both partly included in the Self-directed factor). These factors are quite similar to the ones found by Gretzel and Yoo (2007, 2008). This indicates that motivations are probably not very different between Europe and the United States.

In the column "% applicable" in Table 3, the percentage of posters for which the motivation is similar to their own is shown. It is striking that harming the company is of minor

Table 3. Vacationers' Motivational Factors for Posting Information on Internet Sites

Factor	Indicator	% Applicable ^a	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Self-directed $\alpha = .82$	It brings me financial advantage in general	3	.81				
	I receive a financial reward from site (specific)	6	.76				
	The company harmed me and now I will harm the company	6	.71				
	I had to pass the time	5	.71				
	To shake off frustration	11	.65				
	To impress other vacationers	10	.62				
Helping vacationers $\alpha = .78$	To enable other vacationers to make a good decision	70		.83			
	To help other vacationers with my own experiences	69		.83			
	One can take better decisions	52		.66			
	Because I expect to get the contributions of other vacationers	41		.62			
Social benefits $\alpha = .60$	In this way I could express my holiday experiences to others	49			.69		
	Because it's nice to tell other vacationers about my experiences	49			.57		
	To come into contact with similar vacationers	10			.53		
Consumer empowerment $\alpha = .54$	Because I expect that companies will be more willing to change something when I tell it in public	36				.69	
	It's more convenient than writing to or calling the company	37				.66	
Helping companies $\alpha = \text{n.a.}$	Because I want to help the travel company	30					.91
Explained variance			28%	15%	6%	5%	5%

a. Top two boxes from 5-point scale: % (very) similar to my motivation.

importance compared to helping the company (6% harming; 30% helping). This ratio of 1:5 is almost the same as the ratio between the two found by Gretzel and Yoo (2007). This low frequency of the harming motivation underlines that reviews can be a tool to harm, but in practice this tool is not wielded often in vacation reviews. The most frequently mentioned motivations are the ones related to helping other vacationers (for 70% of the posters, a motivation is to enable other vacationers to take a good decision).

Based on this analysis, a single scale is constructed for each of the five motivational factors, which is used in all analyses involving motivational factors.

Profiles of contributors from the previous section can be related to contributors' motivations for posting reviews. A set of 30 ANOVAs is performed, with the motivation category scales as the dependent variables and sociodemographics as independent variables. From these 30 analyses, the following ones are significant using a Bonferroni post hoc test:

- Age group: the middle-aged group (35-55) is least self-directed ($F = 7.69$, $df = 2/416$, $p < .05$) as

compared with the high- and low-age groups and is more motivated to help other vacationers ($F = 3.68$, $df = 2/416$, $p < .05$) than are the high- and low-age groups.

- Income: the low-income group is more self-directed than the other income groups ($F = 5.47$, $df = 3/415$, $p < .05$)

Taken together, there are only minor differences regarding sociodemographics in terms of the motivations of different contributors in the sample.

Motivations and Site Characteristics (Research Question 3)

Research Question 3 focuses on whether there is a relation between motivation and the characteristics of the site to which vacationers contribute.

From the answers given, the sites to which the posters contribute can be traced. All these sites were visited by the researchers and were classified on four characteristics (see also the Research Design section):

- Type of site: consumer generated, mixed, marketer generated
- Way of expressing opinions: text only, rating and text combination
- Contributor profile: reviewers have to give at least a limited profile (age, family composition, and traveler segment), no profile needed
- Accessible to others:² reviews/ratings accessible to others, not accessible to others

Overall, more than 20 different sites are mentioned by 1% or more of the sample. This shows that posting about vacations can take place at many different sites. To get a complete picture of posting behavior, limiting the research to one site only misses a substantial part of the posting population.

Concerning the type of site, the results show that 55% of the posts is on consumer-generated sites (e.g., Zoover.nl; Vakantiereiswijzer.nl), 37% of the posts is on marketer-generated sites (e.g., Arke.nl, Kras.nl, Sunweb.nl), and 8% on mixed sites. Based on these data, we can conclude that a topic-centered approach to posting captures more posters than an approach based on a single site. In the Dutch context, Zoover is the leading consumer review site, but the position is not as dominant as the position of Tripadvisor in the United States, which makes it more necessary to include a broader range of sites.

The five motivation scales are categorized with the aim of obtaining three more or less equal segments (low, medium, high), which was not always fully realized because of the distribution of the frequencies in the middle categories of the scales. Based on this categorization, the relation between *type of motivation* of contributors and *type of site* is analyzed first. Table 4 shows the results, with significant differences indicated in boldface.

Table 4 shows the following differences between the motivation categories of contributors and the type of sites they contribute to (number in boldface):

- Vacationers with a low to medium self-directed motivation contribute more to consumer-generated sites, and vacationers with a high self-directed motivation contribute more to marketer-generated sites.
- Vacationers with a high helping-vacationers motivation contribute more to consumer-generated sites and vacationers with a low helping-vacationers motivation contribute more to marketer-generated sites.
- Vacationers with a medium to high social-benefits motivation contribute more to consumer-generated sites, and vacationers with a low social-benefits motivation contribute more to mixed sites.
- Vacationers with a low consumer-empowerment motivation contribute more to consumer-generated sites.
- Vacationers with a low helping-companies motivation contribute more to consumer-generated sites,

Table 4. Relation between Motivations of Contributors and Posting on Type of Site (Row Percentages)

Motivation	% Posted on Type of Site			
	Consumer Generated	Mixed	Marketer Generated	100%
Self-directed ^a				
Low	59	9	32	113
Medium	60	10	29	96
High	44	6	50	98
Helping vacationers ^b				
Low	35	14	51	77
Medium	54	8	37	155
High	76	3	21	75
Social benefits ^c				
Low	47	19	35	86
Medium	57	5	38	113
High	59	4	37	108
Consumer empowerment ^d				
Low	67	11	22	81
Medium	47	8	46	146
High	58	8	35	80
Helping companies ^e				
Low	71	5	24	114
Medium	53	10	37	96
High	37	10	53	97

Note: Boldface indicates significance.

a. $\chi^2 = 11.1$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$.

b. $\chi^2 = 26.6$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$.

c. $\chi^2 = 16.3$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$.

d. $\chi^2 = 12.9$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$.

e. $\chi^2 = 25.2$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$.

and vacationers with a high helping-companies motivation contribute more to marketer-generated sites.

From these results, it can be seen that there are indeed differences between vacationers' motivations for posting and the type of site they contribute to. Consequences of these differences for tourism research and vacation marketing are discussed in the Summary and Implications section.

As regards *way of expressing the contribution*, a relation is found with a helping-vacationers motivation ($\chi^2 = 15.0$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$): vacationers with a higher helping-vacationers motivation contribute more to sites with a combination of text and ratings than to sites with text only or ratings only, and vacationers with a lower helping-vacationers motivation contribute more to sites with text only.

As regards whether or not a *contributor profile* is asked for, one significant relation is also found: people with a high social-benefits motivation ($\chi^2 = 9.3$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$) contribute less to sites that ask for a profile. This might look contradictory, as one would expect that vacationers with a high social-benefits motivation would be more inclined to provide information about themselves. This result may be due to the fact that these vacationers post relatively more

frequently on the consumer-generated Zoover site, which does not ask for a profile.

Concerning *accessibility to others*, it is found that vacationers with a high helping-vacationers motivation post more on sites that are accessible to other vacationers ($\chi^2 = 6.0$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$).

Motivations of Contributors and Message-Content Characteristics (Research Question 4)

Research Question 4 addresses the question as to whether there are differences between vacationers in terms of the characteristics of the messages they post. The following message characteristics are measured (see the Research Design section):

- Aspects addressed in the contribution (one to six aspects)
- Nature of contribution (positive, neutral, or negative)
- Photo(s) included (yes or no)

Table 5 shows the relation between the average number of aspects mentioned in a post and the motivation categories. From Table 5, it can be seen that people with a high self-directed motivation contribute mainly on a smaller number of aspects, and people with a high helping-vacationers motivation contribute on a larger number of aspects.

Table 6 explores the differences concerning the nature of the post. Table 6 shows that vacationers with a high self-directed motivation post more negative contributions, which also holds true for vacationers with a low helping-vacationers motivation (boldfaced numbers 16 and 12). Conversely, vacationers with a low to medium self-directed motivation and vacationers with a medium to high helping-vacationers motivation make more positive contributions (boldfaced numbers in the first column of Table 6).

Results concerning inclusion of Photos are only significant for vacationers with a social-benefits motivation (see Table 7). It can be seen from Table 7 that vacationers with a high social-benefits motivation post more photos.

Based on the findings reported in this section, a tentative typology of posters about vacations will be presented in the next section.

Summary and Implications

Summary

Based on the answers to the four research questions, a profile can be sketched of vacationers contributing to review sites. They are as follows: (1) more frequently from the age group younger than 55; (2) more frequently from the high and lower-middle income groups; (3) more frequently from

Table 5. Relation between Motivations and Average Number of Aspects of a Vacation Mentioned in Posts

Motivation	Average No. of Aspects Posted About	Standard Deviation	n
Self-directed ^a			
Low	3.7 ^a	1.8	135
Medium	4.0 ^a	1.8	132
High	2.9 ^b	1.9	139
Helping vacationers ^b			
Low	2.8 ^a	1.8	113
Medium	3.5 ^b	1.9	199
High	4.4 ^c	1.6	94

a. $F(2, 403) = 12.3$, $p < .05$; mean scores in the same column with different superscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

b. $F(2, 403) = 20.8$, $p < .05$; mean scores in the same column with different superscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 6. Relation between Motivations and Nature of Post (Row Percentages)

Motivation	Nature of Contribution, %			
	Positive	Mixed	Negative	100%
Self-directed ^a				
Low	80	19	1	148
Medium	72	22	7	137
High	55	28	16	134
Helping vacationers ^b				
Low	58	30	12	114
Medium	74	19	7	209
High	74	23	3	96

Note: Boldface indicates significance.

a. $\chi^2 = 32.5$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$.

b. $\chi^2 = 12.5$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$.

Table 7. Relation between Motivations and Whether or Not Photos Are Included (Row Percentages)

Motivation	Photo Posted	No Photo Posted	100%
Social benefits ^a			
Low	9	91	132
Medium	7	93	149
High	15	85	138

Note: Boldface indicates significance.

a. $\chi^2 = 5.9$, $df = 2$, $p = .05$.

couples, with or without children. The motivations for contributing can be set down in five main categories: (1) self-directed, (2) helping other vacationers, (3) social benefits, (4) consumer empowerment, and (5) helping companies.

The main discriminating motivational factor appears to be the one that sets vacationers with a primarily self-directed motivation apart from those with more of an other-directed

Figure 1. The typology of motivations of posters and their different site and message characteristics

(helping other vacationers) motivation. Based on the empirical findings in the study, they can be distinguished using the different characteristics of sites and messages (see Figure 1).

Based on the findings shown in Figure 1, it can be concluded that motivation does indeed influence the type of site chosen by vacationers and the way in which they express themselves on review sites, or to put it another way: *why* you want to contribute influences *where* you are going to make your contribution and *what* you are going to contribute. This leads to a tentative typology of posters about vacations. Vacationers who post and are having a largely other-directed motivation prefer consumer-generated sites, comment on more aspects of a vacation, post mainly positive reviews, are more inclined to express themselves by combined use of text and ratings, and contribute more to sites accessible to other vacationers. Vacationers who post and are having a largely self-directed motivation, prefer marketer-generated sites, comment mainly on a limited number of aspects of a vacation, post more negative reviews, and contribute more to sites not accessible to other vacationers.

Implications for Tourism Research

The research reported on in this article allows an investigation of the relation between the motivations of contributors to sites and the characteristics of sites because of the topic-centered approach chosen. Most of the other research on posters' motivations cannot answer this question because such research takes a single site as its point of departure and only asks contributors to this site for their motivations. As a consequence, site characteristics cannot be used as variables. Although this can be a good approach for virtual communities built around well-established consumer items, it is probably less suitable for research into vacations. Vacations are ephemeral products and vacationers have very weak ties. This makes it far more likely that they will engage in fairly brief and shortlived public communication activities concerning their vacation, which gives them much more choice in terms of media and messages. From this perspective, the findings can be the basis for future research and

for theory-building concerning the relation between the motivations of vacationers and the choices they make when going public with their experiences, thus extending the typology introduced above.

The research reported is based on summer vacation trips, but are the results applicable to other kind of trips? We think that the motivations for contributing to review sites are largely the same for business and conference travel (ego vs. social). These motivations are probably linked to personality traits, which are fairly stable. However, the aspects about which comments are posted will be different. For example for business trips costs will be less important and distance to meeting points or conference venues will be more important. An interesting question for future research is if the type of site is also different. One could hypothesize that business travelers are more likely to contribute to mixed sites (like bookings.com) than to consumer-generated sites because the former are more specialized and often more concise than the latter.

Implications for Vacation Marketing

These findings can have also implications for two players in the vacation field: on one hand, tour operators and other suppliers of vacation services and on the other, independent review sites that depend on consumer-generated content.

For the first category (suppliers of holiday services), insight into vacationer satisfaction is a major factor for the evaluation and improvement of their products and services. Simply observing and applying a content analysis to the reviews may be sufficient for general suggestions for improvement, but this does not directly lead to a differential marketing strategy. Such a strategy of differentiation needs information about the background of contributors.

For other-directed contributors, this may mean that brands can try to attract them more to their own sites and away from the consumer-generated sites that they now mainly use. Positive reviews to help other consumers—but posted on a

marketer-generated site—can reinforce the relation between the positive experience and the brand.

As regards self-directed contributors, one should try to minimize their frustration by means of quick and to-the-point feedback about their complaints. As the feedback is aimed at self-directed vacationers who are mainly concerned about themselves, it would be a good idea to do this bilaterally.

As regards the second category, independent review sites, their first concern is to increase the number of posters and to bring readers and posters more into balance. Increased traffic on a site will also imply that advertisers will be interested in putting banners on a site, for example. To begin with, one can focus more on the elderly vacationers, some income categories and singles, based on their posting behavior. Furthermore, these sites can show self-directed vacationers that negative reviews on independent sites have an impact on suppliers of vacation services, by checking whether complaints are dealt with and communicating this back to the complainers. For other-directed vacationers, reinforcement is the major strategy. This can take the form of rewards, which can either be monetary or nonmonetary incentives. The latter can include recognition of contributions highly valued by other vacationers or simply by the sending of e-mails with expressions of thanks.

Notes

1. As the number of posters is still relatively small, a large sample is needed to find a sufficient number of posters on whom statistical analyses can be performed.
2. Some sites, in particular those of tour operators, give vacationers the opportunity to contribute their experiences, but these are not accessible to other vacationers.

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Bios

Fred Bronner, PhD, is a full professor in the department of communication science at the University of Amsterdam. His current research interests include multimedia synergy, advertising and family decision making, eWOM, and holiday decision making.

Robert de Hoog, PhD, is a full professor in the department of instructional science at the University of Twente. His current research interests include information and knowledge management, decision support, and vacation choice processes.