
*A COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL VS
ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH IN THE
GREEK HOTEL MARKET: AN EXPLORATORY
STUDY*

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ABSTRACT

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication has begun increasing in popularity as a marketing tool. However, research in the area of traditional written forms of WOM communication compared to online travel eWOM review websites is scant. The purpose of this study is to examine international tourists' perceptions of traditional written forms of travel review guidebooks compared to online travel review websites for Greek hotels. This exploratory study utilizes a model developed from previous research to examine the constructs that make up information quality, source credibility, information usefulness, and information adoption. The result indicated that there are different factors which are utilized by consumers in the adoption of information between printed travel guidebooks and online travel reviews.

Keywords: Adoption, Electronic Word of Mouth, Hotel Industry, Information Quality, Source Credibility, Usefulness

INTRODUCTION

Word of mouth (WOM) communication is a form of personal communication in which an individual receives information directly from another individual (Arndt, 1967). This type of communication has been recognized as an effective marketing tool with the potential for significant impact on customer behavior. As the world has become more connected through the use of technology and the internet there has been a shift from traditional verbal and written forms of communication to electronic forms of communication. In recent years, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication has begun increasing in popularity as a marketing tool (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Multiple researchers have examined eWOM from the perspective on the influences eWOM has on consumer loyalty and purchase decisions (Lin, Luarn, & Huang, 2005; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). However, research in the area of traditional written forms of WOM communication compared to online travel eWOM review websites is scant. The purpose of this study is to examine international tourists' perceptions of traditional written forms of travel review guidebooks compared to online travel review websites for Greek hotels.

Literature review

E-commerce development in Greece

E-commerce in Greece is in its infancy compared to that of other regions such as the United States and Northern Europe (Buhalis & Kaldis, 2008; Buhalis & Deimezi, 2004). This is most likely due in part to the relatively low propensity to use the Internet in Greece (Buhalis & Deimezi, 2004). In the same vein, Sigala (2003) found that hotels in Greece use their Internet networks and interactive capabilities in a limited fashion and only a few are using the Internet for more enhanced and sophisticated activities. According to Vrana and Zafiroopoulos (2006) the main barriers to e-commerce and Internet adoption in Greece are the concerns that the Internet would not lead to more efficiency, would not lower

costs, would not bring more revenues as well as the fact that enterprises do not clearly anticipated benefits and in the end they do not feel social pressure to bring e-commerce into their firms. Nevertheless, a recent study showed that hotels in Greece have become increasingly aware of the importance of Internet distribution channels (Buhalis & Kaldis, 2008). This study also pointed out that only organizations that use information and communication technology strategically will be able to develop their electronic distribution channels in a manner which will allow for the achievement a competitive advantages in the future. The Greek hotel industry needs to adopt new technologies and trends for e-commerce as well as to alter hoteliers' attitudes about having an online presence (Zafiroopoulos, & Vrana 2006). In 2009 Greece was ranked 24th among 133 countries in the world for competitiveness in travel and tourism markets (WEF, 2009). However, in order to move Greece forward in the global tourism community the country's e-commerce and electronic communication capabilities must be developed.

The emergence of new forms of e-commerce has altered the world economy (Chen & Chang, 2003). The Internet has allowed organizations to simplify business processes, reduce expenditures, create new relationships, and increase efficiencies (Yeh, Leong, Blecher, & Hu, 2005). The Internet has decreased the limitations of conducting business and retailers are able to market products without worrying about geography or time constraints (Chen & Chang, 2003). As such it is time for the Greek hotel industry to step up and embrace these changes before it is left behind.

Comparison of online review information and traditional marketing

Traditional WOM plays a major role in consumer buying decisions (Engel, Blackwell, & Kegerreis, 1969; Richins, 1983). In a study of marketing types Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) found that WOM ranks as the strongest among traditional marketing formats such as radio advertisements, print ads and personal selling. Likewise, it has been found that consumers consider information obtained through WOM communication to be twice as valuable as information obtained through traditional marketing (Villanueva, Yoo, & Hanssens 2008). Studies on electronic communication have found that, most Internet users evaluate blogs to be more credible than traditional media and that the Internet serves as a

supplement to traditional information (Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 2004). In addition, Chatterjee (2001) argues that eWOM is far more robust in quantity compared to information obtained from traditional contacts. As a result eWOM attracts more readers than traditional media. Parker (2005) reported that both giving and seeking eWOM is pervasive and growing as consumers are approximately 16% more likely to be influenced by eWOM than by traditional advertising media.

Information adoption and usefulness

Information adoption is defined as the extent to which people accept the content of a message and believe it as meaningful, after assessing its validity (Zhang, & Watts 2008). Sussman and Siegal (2003) investigated information adoption in an organizational context with argument quality and credibility source as key propositions. Along with information adoption, information usefulness is considered a key proposition in adoption theories. Cheung, Lee, and Rabjon (2008) found that the information usefulness is a significant factor between the influence processes and information adoption and is strongly related with information quality and accessibility (Kraemer, Danziger, Dunkle, & King, 1993; Saeed & Abdinnour-Helm, 2008). According to Zheng, Youn, and Kincaid (2009) 55% of online review readers find the writers' comments to be useful, and take them into consideration when making purchase decisions. In addition, Jin, Cheung, Lee, and Chen (2009) investigated how to keep members using the information in a computer-supported social network as well as explored the motivations behind information use by integrating the information adoption model with the information continuance. Similarly, Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn (2008) examined the extent to which people were willing to accept and adopt online consumer reviews and the factors that encouraged information adoption and found that information adoption is highly affected by the significant role of information usefulness.

Based on the previous literature the following hypotheses were developed.

Hypothesis 1a: There is a positive relationship between information usefulness and adoptions for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a positive relationship between information usefulness and adoptions for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Information quality

Information quality is identified as the extent to which users think that information is relevant, timely, accurate, and complete (Lee, Strong, Kahn, & Wang, 2002). Olshavsky (1985) found that when information quality meets the customers' needs and requirements, costumers are willing to criticize the value of each product or service based on their purchase decision criteria. Several studies on information quality have underlined the information quality measures used in e-commerce studies such as accuracy, relevance, understandability, completeness, currency, dynamism, personalization, variety, content usefulness, validity, and adequacy (i.e. Auster and Choo, 1993; Ballou, & Pazer, 1985; Doll & Torkzadeh, 1988; DeLone & McLean 2003; Goodhue, 1995; Miller, 1996; Smith, 1997; Wang, & Strong, 1996; Yang, Cai, Zhou, & Zhou, 2005). Park, Lee, & Han (2007) found the quality of on-line consumer reviews have a positive effect on consumer purchasing intention. Nicolaou, Masoner, and Welker (1995) argued that improvements in information quality increases the usefulness of the decision systems.

In general, information quality refers to the level of the content of the information and the suitability of the information for the users' purposes. Lin and Lu (2000) have investigated how user's acceptance is affected by the feature of information quality. In this study information quality is viewed as having seven aspects 1) relevance, 2) understandability, 3) sufficiency, 4) objectivity, 5) timeliness, 6) accuracy and 7) persuasiveness.

Relevance

Information relevance indicates if the information is applicable and is an important element for the decision maker (Dunk, 2004). Past studies argued that relevance and credibility are two key variables for the attitude change (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1966; Hill, 1963; Choo, 1964). Other researchers suggest that relevance elevates the amount of judgmental confidence that individuals need to

have in their own attitudes and/or the confidence they need to have for the validity of the message. (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Kaakinen, Hyönä, and Keenan, (2003) discussed the time spent reading text and showed that low attention span readers slow down their processing of reading relevant information and they read faster when the information is irrelevant. The more relevant the information is, the higher the perceived information usefulness.

Based on the previous literature the following hypotheses were developed.

Hypothesis 2a: There is a positive relationship between information relevance and usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 2b: There is a positive relationship between information relevance and usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Understandability

Understandability of information is related to how much information is clear and conceivable. McKinney, Yoon, and Zahedi (2002) developed a web satisfaction model containing understandability as one of the key dimensions related to the information quality. According to Srinivasan (1985) the ability of a system to help the user, coupled with the accuracy and understandability of the outputs it generates, appear to be strong motivators for system use. The more understandable the information is, the higher the perceived information usefulness.

The following hypotheses have been developed from the previous literature

Hypothesis 3a: There is a positive relationship between the understandability of information and usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 3b: There is a positive relationship between the understandability of information and usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Sufficiency

Sufficiency of the information denotes if the information is complete and comprehensive and it is an important element of web information quality (Doll & Torkzadeh, 1988). Griffin, Neuwirth, Dunwoody, and Giese (2004) proposed information sufficiency to be an important component of people's information seeking behaviors, in an effort to better understand the use of information in risky situations. In general, sufficiency represents the degree to which the system provides all necessary information (Wixom & Todd, 2005). The more sufficient the information is, the higher the perceived information usefulness.

The follow hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 4a: There is a positive relationship between information sufficiency and usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 4b: There is a positive relationship between information sufficiency and usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Objectivity

Information objectivity indicates the impartiality and fairness of the sender of a message. Petty, and Cacioppo (1984) argued that messages which are objective and understandable, are more effective than weak messages, which are emotional and subjective. West and Williamson (2009) investigated whether Wikipedia can be used and recommended as a credible reference or information tool in different academic disciplines and found that overall the articles were objective clearly presented, reasonably accurate, and complete. However, the objectivity scores were influenced by the presence of subjective language, opinions stated as facts, and the omission of alternative perspectives or mention of existing controversy. The more objective information is, the higher the perceived information usefulness.

Base on the previous literature the following hypotheses have been developed.

Hypothesis 5a: There is a positive relationship between information objectivity and usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 5a: There is a positive relationship between information objectivity and usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Timeliness

Timeliness of information indicates currency and continuously updated information. Timeliness is stressed as important factor of web information quality (Bailey & Pearson 1983). In other words, it refers to the degree to which the system offers quicky responses to requests for information or action (Wixom & Todd 2005). The more up-to-date the information is, the higher the perceived information usefulness.

Based on this literature the following is developed.

Hypothesis 6a: There is a positive relationship between timeliness and information usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 6b: There is a positive relationship between timeliness and information usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Accuracy

According to Wixom and Todd (2005) accuracy reflects recipients' perceptions that information is correct. Likewise, accuracy indicates that the information is error-free (Dunk, 2004). The more accurate the hotel information is, the higher the perceived information usefulness.

Hypothesis 7a: There is a positive relationship between information accuracy and usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 7b: There is a positive relationship between information accuracy and usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Persuasiveness

Persuasiveness is the level on how convincing the information content is perceived to be. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) found that the persuasiveness of a message depends on the positive attributes of the communicators. Additionally,

researchers have supported the idea that a highly credible source is more persuasive than a low credibility source when involvement of the reader is low (Johnson & Schilleppi 1969; Rhine & Severance 1970). Uskul, & Oyserman, (2010) examined the persuasive effects of tailored messages and found that European and Asian Americans who read a message that focused on the individual person were more likely to accept the message and find it more persuasive, as they believe they were more at risk and engaged in more message-congruent behavior. The more persuasive information is, the higher the perceived information usefulness.

Based on the previous literature the following hypotheses were developed.

Hypothesis 8a: There is a positive relationship between information persuasiveness and usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 8b: There is a positive relationship between information persuasiveness and usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Source Credibility

Credibility is determined as the extent to which an information source is perceived to be believable, competent, and trustworthy by the information recipients (Petty, & Cacioppo, 1986). Information provided by highly credible sources is considered to be useful and reliable (Ko, Kirsch, & King, 2005).

Extensive research in source credibility has been conducted (i.e. Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1983; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). Much of this research has been related to the extent that users can trust information that is provided by an expert (i.e. Awad & Ragowsky 2008; Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Grewal, Gotlieb, & Marmorstein, 1994; Kuan & Bock 2007). Trustworthiness is defined as a well-intentioned, truthful, unbiased concept which captures the perceived goodness or morality of the source (Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Trust has been conceptualized as an attitude, belief, intention, or behavior in the online context (McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Additionally, expertise is defined as a knowledgeable, experienced, and competent concept which captures the perceived knowledge and skill of the source (Tseng & Fogg, 1999).

In the literature it has been investigated that highly trustworthy and/or expert sources induce more immediate attitude change than do sources having less of these attributes. Additionally, recipients' opinions change in the when the material of information is attributed to a high credibility source than when it is attributed to a low credibility source (Hovland, 1951; Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Miller and Baseheart, 1969; Schulman and Worrall, 1970; Warren, 1969). Fogg et al. (2001) compared respondents from Finland and the US and found that the US respondents assign higher credibility to websites that convey expertise and trustworthiness and Finish respondents report lower credibility for websites that convey commercial implications.

Based on the previous literature the following hypotheses were developed.

Hypothesis 9a: There is a positive relationship between trustworthiness and usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 9b: There is a positive relationship between trustworthiness and usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

Hypothesis 10a: There is a positive relationship between expertise and usefulness for hotel information in printed travel guidebooks.

Hypothesis 10b: There is a positive relationship between expertise and usefulness for hotel information in online travel reviews.

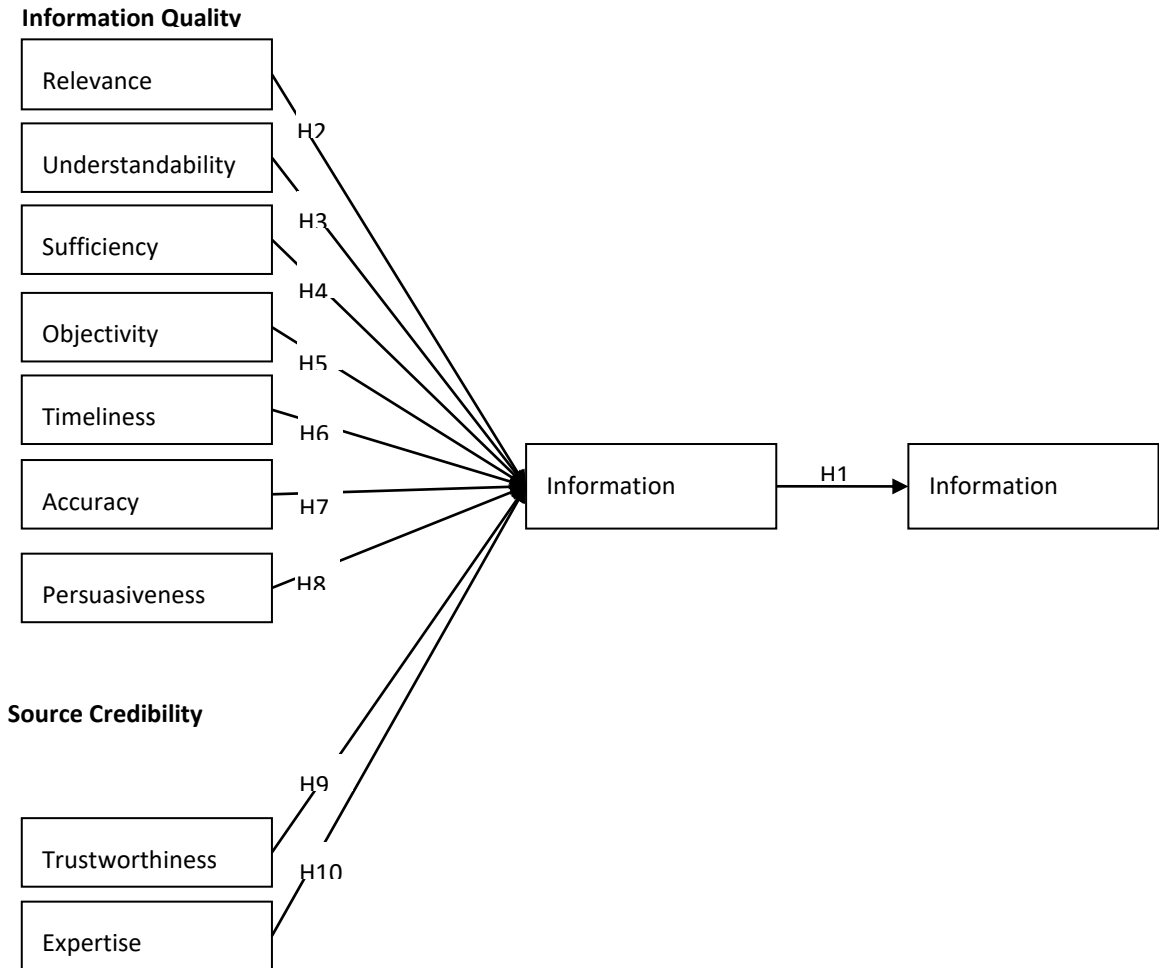
Research Model

The theoretical framework of the research model in this study is shown in Figure 1. This model represents the factors of information adoption in terms of information quality, source credibility, information usefulness and information adoption. The constructs of this model are adapted from research conducted by Cheung, et al. (2008) and modified to fit the context of printed travel guidebooks and online travel reviews.

Methodology

The focus of the study is international tourists who have traveled to Greece or are planning to travel to this destination in the future. Data was collected via an

online survey. The use of an internet survey was chosen since this method has the ability to provide faster data collection than other alternative methods and it offers more geographic flexibility with relatively low costs. **Figure 1. Theoretical Research Model**



Participants were randomly asked to read either a review for a Greek hotel from a travel guidebook or a review from a travel website. The questionnaire was designed to measure the elements of the research model used in this study which

are: Understandability, Sufficiency, Objectivity, Timeliness, Accuracy, Persuasiveness, Trustworthiness, Expertise, Usefulness, and Adoption.

Questions were adapted from previous literature in order to fit the Greek hotel market. The measurement are carried out by a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (7). In addition, demographic information was obtained including average yearly income, education, gender, ethnicity and residence.

RESULTS

Demographics

The results of the study indicate that the ratio of male to female respondents was evenly distributed as 45.5% of the respondents indicate their gender as males and 45.5% of the respondents indicate their gender as females while 9.1% of respondents did not indicate their gender. The age of the majority of the respondents ranged from 26 to 35 years old (54.5%). The respondents were relatively well educated with 90.9% having completed a college degree or higher. Average household yearly income levels ranged from under \$15,000 to \$75,000-\$89,999 with the largest income level being under \$15,000 (36.4%) followed by \$45,000-\$59,999 (27.3%). The primary residence of the respondents of the survey were from multiple location across the globe including the United States (54.5%), France (18.2%), Denmark (9.1%), and Sweden (9.1%). Of those that lived in the United States 50.0% lived in the Midwest, 33.3% resided in the Northeast, and 16.7% were from the West. The majority of the participants were familiar with Greece as 63.7% indicated that they had previously visited Greece with 36.4 indicating that they had visited 10 times or more. The results also indicated that the research participants were fairly well traveled as 54.6% indicated that on average they took at least three business trips per year. While 72.8% indicated that they took at least three leisure trips per year. Table 1 shows the full results of the demographic analysis.

When asked about printed travel guidebooks and online travel reviews a large difference in the amount of usage was observed. Over 90% of the respondents stated that they had previously used an online travel review website. This is in

contrast to only 55% of the respondents who stated that they had previously used a printed travel guidebook.

Linear Regression Analysis

Linear Regression was performed on each on the relationships of the proposed model. This technique was conducted individually for the measurements of the constructs for the online travel reviews and again for the constructs of the printed travel guidebooks. Tables 2 and 3 show the path coefficients and corresponding variances (R^2) for each on the theoretical models.

Table 1
Sample Demographics

Variable	%
Gender	
Male	45.5
Female	45.5
Age	
18-25	27.3
26-35	54.5
36-45	18.2
Education	
College Degree	9.1
Graduate Degree	81.9
Income	
Under \$15,000	36.4
\$15,000 - \$29,999	9.1
\$30,000 - \$44,999	9.1
\$45,000 - \$59,999	27.3
Over \$60,000	9.1
Primary Residence	

Denmark	9.1
France	18.2
Sweden	9.1
United States of America	54.5
<hr/>	
Business Trips per Year	
1 – 2	45.5
3 – 4	27.3
5 – 6	9.1
7 – 9	9.1
10 or more	9.1
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Leisure Trips per Year	
1 – 2	27.3
3 – 4	45.5
5 – 6	18.2
7 – 9	0.0
10 or more	9.1
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Table 2

Influences on Information Quality and Source Credibility of Printed Travel Guidebooks

Item	Path Coefficient (β)	R^2
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Usefulness		
Relevance	0.95*	0.89
Understandability	0.99*	0.99
Sufficiency	0.58*	0.32
Objectivity	0.99	0.99

Timeliness	-0.19	0.02
Accuracy	-0.66*	0.42
Persuasiveness	0.79*	0.61
Trustworthiness	-0.95	0.61
Expertise	0.76	0.56
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Adoption		
Usefulness	0.98*	0.96

Note. * $p < .05$.

The results of the data show that for the printed travel guidebooks there are positive relationships between usefulness and adoption (Hypothesis 1a accepted) as well as between relevance and usefulness (Hypothesis 2a accepted), understandability and usefulness (Hypothesis 3a accepted), sufficiency and usefulness (Hypothesis 4a accepted), persuasiveness and usefulness (Hypothesis 8a accepted), expertise and usefulness (Hypothesis 10a accepted). However, there are negative relationships between accuracy and usefulness (Hypothesis 6a not accepted), and trustworthiness and usefulness (Hypothesis 9a not accepted). In addition to this there are not statistically significant relationships between objectivity and usefulness (Hypothesis 4a not accepted), and timeliness and usefulness (Hypothesis 5a not accepted).

Table 3

Influences on Information Quality and Source Credibility of Online Travel Reviews

Item	Path Coefficient (β)	R ²
Usefulness		

Relevance	0.73*	0.53
Understandability	0.88*	0.78
Sufficiency	0.82*	0.66
Objectivity	0.24*	0.05
Timeliness	0.41*	0.16
Accuracy	0.92*	0.84
Persuasiveness	0.82*	0.66
Trustworthiness	0.96*	0.92
Expertise	0.75*	0.56
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Adoption		
Usefulness	0.52*	0.26

Note. * $p < .05$.

When examining the results for the online travel reviews the findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between all of the constructs of relevance, understandability, sufficiency, objectivity, timeliness, accuracy, persuasiveness, trustworthiness, expertise and usefulness as well as between usefulness and adoption (Hypotheses 1b – 10b accepted).

DISCUSSION

The analysis of online travel reviews show the results to be as expected. This indicates that information relevance, understandability, sufficiency, objectivity, timeliness, accuracy, persuasiveness, trustworthiness, expertise have a positive effect of information usefulness. In other words the great the quality of the

information and source credibility the more useful the online review will be. This leads to a great level of adoption of the information.

However, the analysis of the printed travel guidebooks shows some difference between the online travel reviews. While the constructs of information relevance, understandability, sufficiency, persuasiveness, and expertise have a positive influence on information usefulness the constructs of accuracy and trustworthiness are negatively related to information usefulness. This negative relationship is counterintuitive. As such it is difficult to draw any conclusion thus, necessitating the need for further research. In addition the constructs of objectivity and timeliness were found to be not significant.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study can be of benefit to hotel managers in Greece. By reading online reviews and understanding the important attributes of them managers can gain insight into what consumers believe to be important. Additionally, the results will assist managers in obtaining useful information that can be effectively transformed into marketing guidelines. By knowing how potential consumers perceive different forms of communication a manager can determine the most effect method to advertise his business for the hotel's specific target market. Furthermore, the findings of this study will be of benefit to travel review organizations as a guide for examining reviews posted online in order to determine effective methods to utilize eWOM as well as those organization that specialize in printed travel guidebook. Finally, this study is of value to academics as it provides a basis for future research into the changing role of written communication in the hotel industry.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the unique economic timeframe that this study was conducted the results may be skewed due to travelers' current preferences. If this study were performed during more stability economic times the results may differ.

As with any survey the sample population has a great effect on the results. The majority of the participants of this study were from the United States and were relatively well educated. As such the study may not be generalizable. If this study was conducted with a larger sample size and broader demographics the results may greatly vary.

The theoretical model utilized in this study was found to be a good determinant of information adoption for online travel reviews. However, the same theoretical model failed to explain the relationship between all of the constructs when examining printed travel guides. As such further research should be conducted in the realm of printed travel guidebooks to investigate the attributes specific to this context of information adoption.

This study investigated the opinions of international travelers to Greece. Further research into other international markets may be of interest. In addition an examination from the perspective of the firm responsible for the publishing of printed travel guidebook as well as the maintenance of online travel review websites may be an area which deserves an extensive research.

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