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TITLE:

Perception of trust in the era of electronic word of mouth marketing: An investigation of independent travellers' preferred information sources

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Foreword

This thesis represents the results of a two years study period of the Master of Science in Hotel and Tourism Leadership program at University of Stavanger, Norway. The topic of the thesis is chosen based on the researcher's personal interest in online consumer behaviors in tourism. During the time doing this thesis, the researcher had received help and collaborations from various individuals as well as organizations, without which it would be impossible to finish this paper. Therefore, the following words are dedicated to express the researcher's gratitude toward the helps she had received from:

Professor Torvald Øgaard, who supervised the thesis and provided the researcher with various valuable comments, suggestions, and instructions throughout the whole period of doing this paper. All of the comments had contributed a great deal in leading to the final outcomes of the thesis.

Professor Tone Linge, who helped the researcher collecting data from the group of master students at the Norwegian school of Hotel Management; professors and the administration office at the Norwegian school of Hotel Management, who helped the researcher collecting data from the bachelor students in the school; and students from different faculties at University of Stavanger, Norway, who had willing to corporate in filling the survey questions, thus providing the valuable data for this thesis.

Finally, a big thank is dedicated to family members and friends of the researcher, who has been the greatest support from the beginning until the very end when this thesis is finished.

Abstract

The thesis focuses on understanding independent travellers' behavior patterns regarding online travel planning, specifically on how travellers consider and evaluate information provided by different channels. The research was conducted based on data collecting from 88 students at the University of Stavanger, Norway.

The main aim of the thesis is to find out the traveller's most preferred information provider, using Conjoint Analysis as the main research instrument. Four different information channels were included in the research, i.e. information from local tourism authority, recommendations from the traveller's friends or relatives, reviews and ratings from the website TripAdvisor, and promotional information from accommodation providers. Findings from the study suggest that recommendations from friends or relatives and reviews from TripAdvisor are considered significantly more important than the other two resources. Nevertheless, due to the issue of content's integrity on the website TripAdvisor, friends or relative's recommendations is considered the most reliable information source. Small analysese focusing on gender, experience and TripAdvisor usage difference also show interesting results regarding how travellers in different categories react to information provided by the four channels.

In general, this study offers a number of interesting new theories and contributes significantly to the overall understanding of online consumer behaviors in tourism. In order to further developed these findings, recommendations for further studies in the field were also suggested.

Keywords: conjoint analysis, TripAdvisor, online consumer behavior, trust

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Introduction

1. Research background

Verbal consumer to consumer communication, often referred to as "word of mouth" (WOM), has long been considered as one of the most effective marketing tools (Whyte, 1954. as cited in Haugtvedt, Machleit & Yalch, 2005). It empowers the customers and allows them to freely discuss and evaluate the products prior to purchasing, thus it also enriches the marketing field. In recent years, the booming development of internet has led to the appearance of a new form of WOM communication (Granitz & Ward, 1996. as cited in Schindler & Bickart (2005). These new communication forms, known as eWOM, can be defined as all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008).

In the tourism industry, it is undeniable that its products' special intangible characteristics make the consumer behaviour patterns quite complicated and thus, increase the power of WOM and eWOM. Crick's study about Caribean tourism (2003) (as cited in Litvin et al., 2008) proved that when locals display hostile attitudes toward tourists, it will likely lead to negative WOM and downturn the industry. Shanka, Ali-Knight, and Pope's (2002) (as cited in Litvin et al., 2008) study of destination selection methods found that a majority of Western Australia travel decisions were based upon WOM communications. Since WOM become digital, the large scale and anonymous nature of the Internet has dramatically altered the ways customers influencing each other and thus make the consumer behaviour pattern more complicated than ever. According to the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA, 2005.as cited in Litvin et al., 2008), 67 percent of US travelers have used the Internet to search for information on destinations

or check prices or schedules. Even more impressively, 41 percent of US travelers have booked at least some aspects of their trips via the Internet.

This phenomenon leads to a big question regarding the real power of WOM and eWOM in consumer behavior. As an example, the website TripAdvisor.com and all of its branded sites claims to make up the largest travel community in the world, with more than 260 million unique monthly visitors, and over 125 million reviews and opinions covering more than 3.1 million accommodations, restaurants, and attractions. These number portraits the influence of eWOM through showing the amount of people that actually visit the sites for information and opinions from other travellers, but it does not show the connection between the influence and the final buying behavior. While other travellers' opinions are important factor to consider, it should be noted that there are also other essential factors forming the buying behavior such as price, personal experience or marketing activities. Therefore, it will be interesting to look at this issue and to discover whether travellers consider eWOM more important than other factors, particularly in making accommodation purchasing.

This research will focus on investigating in order to find out the travellers' most preferred information provider that greatly influences their purchasing decision. In order to obtain this result, the study applies a research instrument known as Conjoint Analysis, which is of great beneficial when studying consumer behavior pattern and decision making process, since it forces the respondents to make trade off decisions instead of answering the normal importance question, as regularly in various consumer behavior research. Thus, by applying this method in the chosen subject, hopefully a detailed answer to the research question can be obtained properly.

2. Structure

The thesis consists of five chapters with the structure as followed:

Introduction

Literature review

Research design and methodology

Findings and discussions

Conclusions and recommendations

The first chapter of the thesis provides a general overview of the research background as well as the interesting phenomenon that lead to the main idea of the research. This chapter is followed by a detailed literature review that consists of necessary theories related to the researched subject. The methodology part describes the chosen design to be applied in the research in order to obtain the most optimal results. The results will be presented and discuss in the discussion part. Finally, conclusions and possible recommendations will be provided in the last chapter of the paper.

Literature review

1. Travel planning and consumer behaviors in tourism

1.1. Consumer behaviors

There have been various discussions regarding the importance of consumer behavior, especially in the marketing field. From a marketer's point of view, a good knowledge of consumer behavior will lead you straight to people's needs and consequently help you to position your product successfully. Nevertheless, it has only been studied intensely in the last several decades. Therefore, it is still a young and dynamic field that is constantly changing and richening itself through obtaining knowledge from almost all social science disciplines, plus a few from the physical sciences and the arts for good measures (Solomon, 2011). In terms of definition, most researchers refer to consumer behavior as a process. Chmabers, Chacko and Lewis (1995, as cited in Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 2006) summarized the basic knowledge about consumer behavior in five points as following: consumer behavior is purposeful and goal oriented; the consumer has free choice, they do not have to pay attention to your marketing communication and they can process the message selectively; consumer behavior is a process; consumer behavior can be influenced; and there is a need for consumer education. Solomon (2011) define consumer behavior as the "processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experience to satisfy needs and desires". It is a complicated process that involves many different actors. Also, according to Kotler & Amstrong (2004), consumer behavior can be understood as "the buying behaviors of final consumers – individuals and households who buy goods and services for personal consumption." The final purpose of a consumer behavior study is to understanding the relationship among various factors that influence consumer behavior.

Marketing and other Stimuli		Customer's black box	Response
Production	Economic	•Buyer's characteristics	•Product choice
Place	Cultural		•Brand choice
Promotion	Political	•Buyer's decision	•Purchase timing
Price	Technolo-gical	process	•Purchase amount
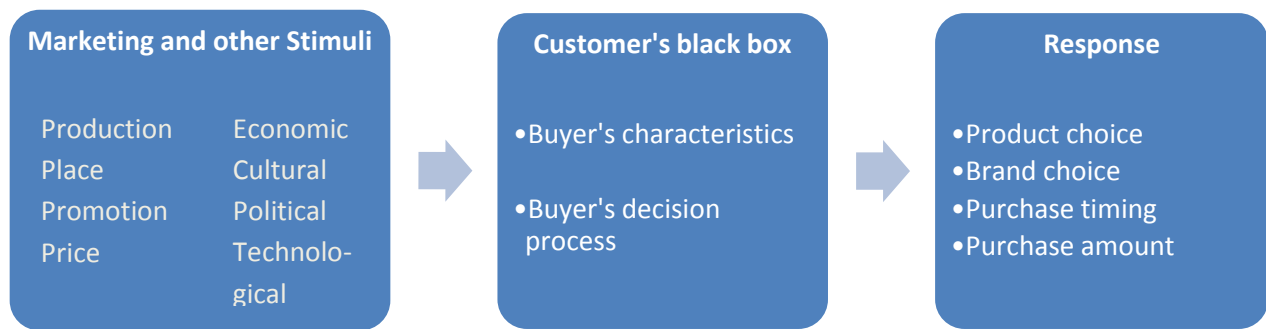
Figure 1. Model of buyer behavior or the stimulus – response model (adapted from Kotler & Amstrong, 2004)

The above model, developed by Kotler & Amstrong (1996), is one of many examples of models that have been developed in an attempt to fully understand the concept of consumer behavior. It explains all of the factors that contribute to the final buying decision of a customer. Various factors from the internal and external environment, as well as personal characteristics of the buyer have been taken into consideration.

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Need          Information   Evaluation    Purchase      Post-
recognition   search        of            decision      purchase
                            alternatives                behavior
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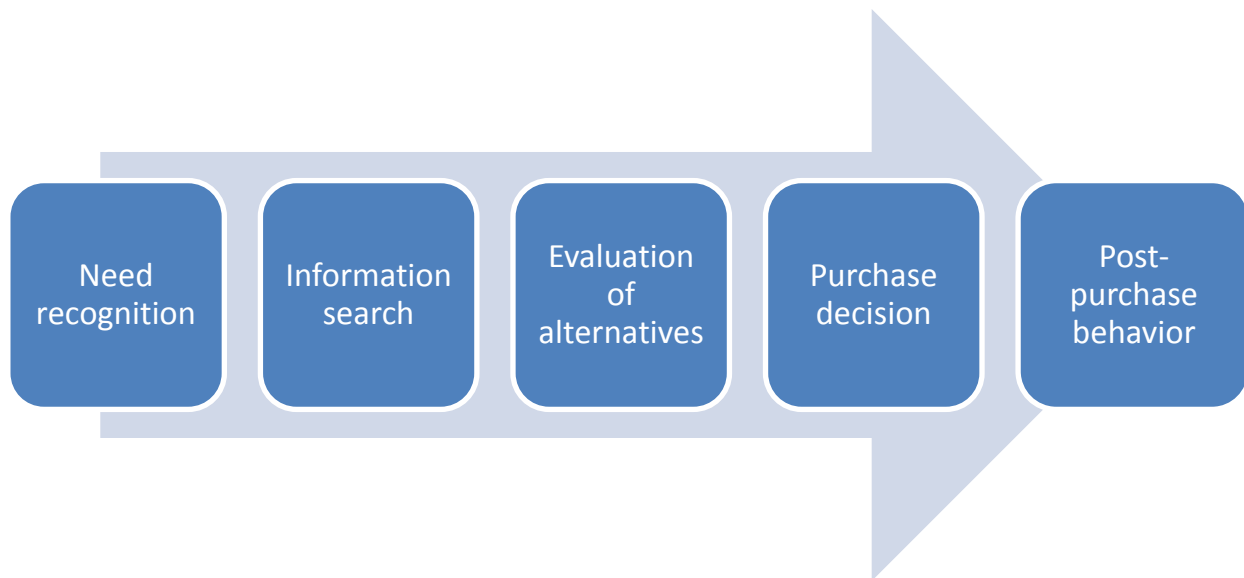
Figure 2. The buying process (adapted from Kotler & Amstrong, 2004)

Kotler & Amstrong (2004) also developed another model which step by step illustrates the actual buying process. According to the authors, the buying process starts with the customer recognizing a certain need. This need will lead to the information searching step where the customer proceeds to gather all necessary information regarding to the products that might be suitable to satisfy their needs. The next step in the buying process is the evaluation of the alternatives where the customer judging and choosing between different products based on all the information that he or she has gathered in the previous step. This evaluation will lead directly to the purchasing decision. The final step in the process is the post-purchase behavior in which the customer will evaluate his or her satisfaction toward the purchased product. This satisfaction judgment completes the buying process and adds more information to the customer's knowledge of the product, thus contribute in his or her buying decision in the future.

1.2. Consumer behavior in tourism

1.2.1. Tourism product

First of all, it is necessary to clearly define tourism product as well as its characteristics. In terms of general product definition, Kotler (1983) (as cited in Smith, 1994) conceptualizes product as "anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption that might satisfy a want or need. It includes physical objects, services, persons, organizations, places and ideas. Observably, it is clear that tourism product can fit quite well in this definition, since what a tourism product offers is not simply a tangible object.

Tourism product can be defined as a bundle of activities, services and benefits that contribute to the entire tourism experience (Medlik and Middleton, 1973, as cited in Smith (1994)). This bundle consists of five components: destination attractions, destination facilities, accessibility, images, and price. Jefferson and Lickorish (1988) offer another approach to the definition of tourism product. Two views was provided: the tourism product is a "collection of physical and service features together with symbolic associations which are expected to fulfill the wants and needs of the buyer" and, more succinctly, the tourism product "is a satisfying activity at a desired destination". Criticizing this approach, Smith (1994) states that it fails to properly describe the structure of the tourism product and how that product is produced. Lewis and Chambers (1989, as cited in Smith (1994)) have another view of tourism product definition. According to these authors, tourism product is the combination of goods, services and environment. Additionally, tourism product can also be divided into three different levels: the formal product which is the product that customers think they are going to buy; the core product or the actual product that customers are purchasing; and the augmented product, which is the core product plus any other values or benefits provided by the suppliers.

According to Middleton (2001); Rey (2004); Seaton (1994); Kotler *et al.* (2005) and Swarbrooke & Horner (2007), it is agreed that the main characteristics of the tourism product are the followings:

- Intangibility: Services cannot be seen, smelled or even touched, which means that they cannot be perceived from the senses. This characteristic leads to the fact that tourism products cannot be tested before consuming, which consequently make tourism purchasing a high risk decision.

- Heterogeneity: It is very difficult for the tourism provider to give the exact same level of service at every consumption time. Customer's mood and attitude will affect their overall evaluation of the service. As expectation and attitude change along with experience level, how consumer perceive the service will never be the same.

- Perishability: tourism products cannot be resell. Products that cannot be sold in one day cannot be stored and resell in another day, thus it will result in unrecovered revenue lost.

- Inseparability: the act of consuming and producing tourism products happen simultaneously, at the same time and same place.

- Seasonality: demand for tourism product constantly fluctuates among the seasons of the year.

- High fix costs of operations: the basic infrastructures for the tourism activity suppose great fix costs. (E.g. buildings and transport infrastructures)

- Interdependence: Tourists consume not just a single product or service but a bunch of services and products combinations, thus all of them are interdependent

In an attempt to have a proper approach to consumer behaviors in tourism, Swarbrooke and Horner (2007) summarized all characteristics of a tourism product as following:

- Tourism product is a complex and multi-layered product which:

  o Has both tangible elements (hotel beds, food, transportation, etc.) and intangible elements (service delivery)

  o Can range from a one night stay in a hotel or a day trip to a theme park to a three weeks trip around Europe

- The tourists buy an overall experience rather than a clearly defined product. The experience has several clear phases:

  o The anticipation phase before the trip starts

  o The consumption phase during the trip

  o The memory phase after the trip has ended

- The tourist is a part of the production process in tourism.

  o The tourist's moods, attitudes and expectations affect his or her overall evaluation of the experienced tour, rather than just the quality of the trip offered by the industry.

  o When traveling in group, the tourist's behaviors directly impact the experience of other tourists in the group.

- The tourist experience is heavily influenced by external factors which are beyond the control of the tourist or the tour operator. These factors include weather, strikes, war, and outbreaks of disease.

Tourism, by its very nature, is a service rather than a product which will have significant effects on consumer behaviors (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Specifically, its intangible nature and the high spending aspect, tourism purchasing is considered a high risk decision-making process. Naturally, purchasing a tourism product usually means that customers will have to pay a rather

larger amount of money for a product that they cannot test or evaluate in advanced. As Seaton (1994) mentioned, the opportunity cost of the holiday is irreversible, which means that if for some reasons, the holiday went wrong, most people will have to wait until they have time and money to try out another trip.

Similar to other industries, there are many factors that contribute to the final purchasing act of a tourism product. Schmoll (1977) (as cited in Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007) developed a model which includes all possible factors that affect the consumer behaviors in tourism. According to the author, the following factors should be taken into consideration:

- Travel stimuli, including guide books, reports from other travellers and advertising and promotion.

- Personal and social determinants of travel behaviors including motivators, desires and expectations.

- External variables, including destination images, confidence in travel trade intermediaries and constraints such as cost and time.

- Characteristics and features of the service destinations such as the perceived link between cost and value and the range of attractions and amenities offered.

Clearly, it is not easy to include and investigate every single factor that might affect the final buying decision of a tourist. Better yet, to be able to understand consumer behavior in any field, it is essential that the motivating factors are taken into consideration properly. Swarbrooke and Horner (2007) in their research regarding consumer behaviors in tourism has spent a significant amount of time on factors that motivate tourists as well as factors that determine the final details of the purchased product. The following part of the thesis will present the work in details.

1.2.2. Motivators

In tourism, the motivating factors, or motivators, can be in a wide range. Generally speaking, they can be divided into two main groups: those that motivate people to take a holiday and those that motivate people to take a particular holiday to a specific destination at a particular time. Nevertheless, there are a number of factors that can be related to either or both of these categories; hence it makes it difficult to identify the motivator. It is difficult to identify and categorize all of the existing motivating factors in tourism. However, the authors have attempted to include some of the main factors in their model as presented below.
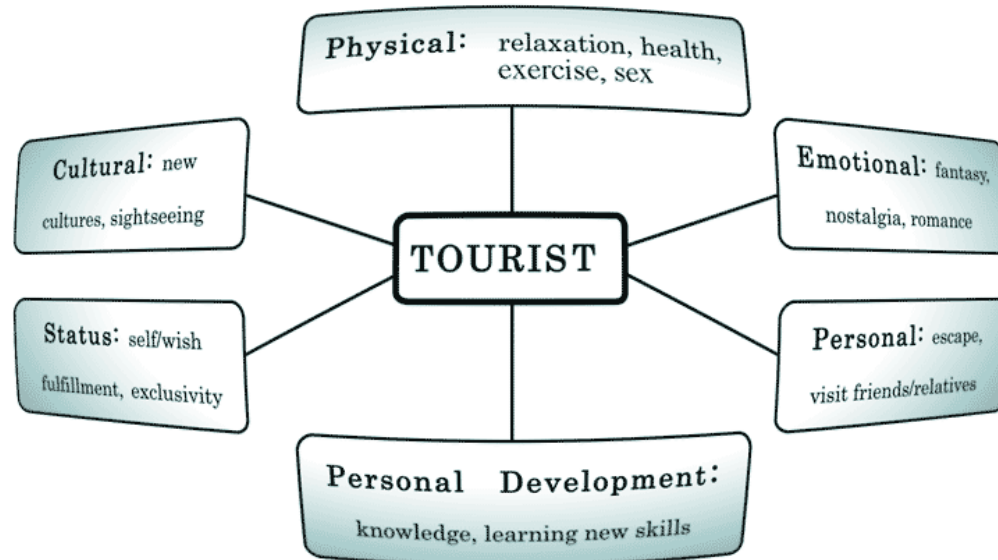

Figure 3. A typology of motivators in tourism (Adapted from Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007)

Another approach to tourism motivators is to look at the differences between motivators for individual and for groups of tourists.

- Motivators for individual tourists

Every tourist is different from the other, therefore the factors that motivate them to purchase a tourism product are also various. According to the authors, some of the possible individual tourist's motivators can be as followed:

- o The tourist's personalities
- o The tourist's lifestyle
- o The tourist's past experience as a tourist and particular types of holiday, both positive and negative.
- o Their past life, for motivations such as most notably nostalgia are a direct result of people's life to date
- o Their perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses whether these relate to their wealth or their skills.
- o How they wish to be viewed by other people.

It should also be taken into consideration that motivators change over time for each individual in response to changes in their life. Additionally, it is unlikely that a tourist is influenced by a single motivator. Usually, tourists are affected by a number of motivators at one time.

- Motivators in groups of tourists

For tourists that travel in groups or with a partner, it should be noted that the one that travel with you has an influence over the factors which influence our decision. It is rare that every member of a holiday group shares exactly the same motivators. Therefore, it is normal for group member to compromise with each other, though usually, the views of a dominant member may prevail.

- Other motivating factors

Kaynak et al. (1996, as cited in Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007), in the study of Irish travellers regarding factors that affect the destination choice, stated that there are significant difference in terms of age, gender, educational attainment, income and marital status. According to the study, young people tend to choose vacation that has a wide range of activities, while old people usually seek for restful destinations with sightseeing opportunities. In terms of income level, the research found out that those on lower incomes consider their holiday a chance to get away from the monotony of everyday life, and build up their self-confidence through a activities; higher-income earners, on the other hand, prefer intellectually stimulating holiday with excitement and the chance to increase their knowledge. Ryan (1995, as cited in Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007) also noted some difference between sexes in terms of holiday choice. According to the author, women tend to place more value on using the holiday to relax emotionally and physically, as well as to avoid daily hustle and bustle.

1.2.3. Determinants

Determinants are factors that determine whether or not someone will be able to take a trip or not; and factors that decide the type of the trip if the holiday is a possibility.

According to Swarbrooke and Horner (2007), these determinants can be divided into personal or internal factors and external factors. Some of these factors are listed in two below figures.
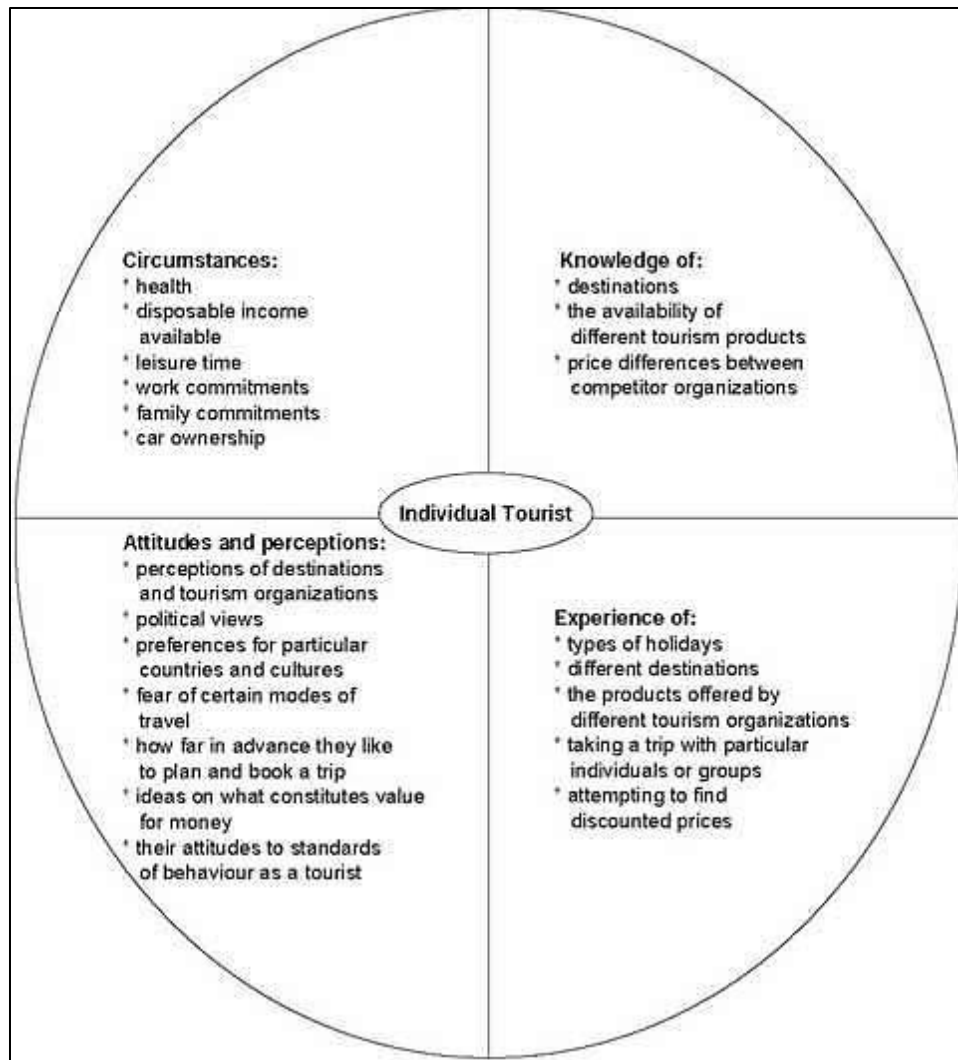
Figure 4. Personal determinants of tourist behavior (adapted from Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007)

Among all of the listed factors, there are factors that will have complete effect on the tourist's possibility of taking a holiday, such as health, leisure time or work commitment, etc. Other factors will simply have an effect on the type of trip to be taken. It should also be noted that the weight of each factors on the tourist's final decision are different. Each tourist will consider certain factors more important than the others, based on their personalities, attitudes or past travel experience. Even for the same tourist, each factor might change their role over time with changes in the tourist's personal life.
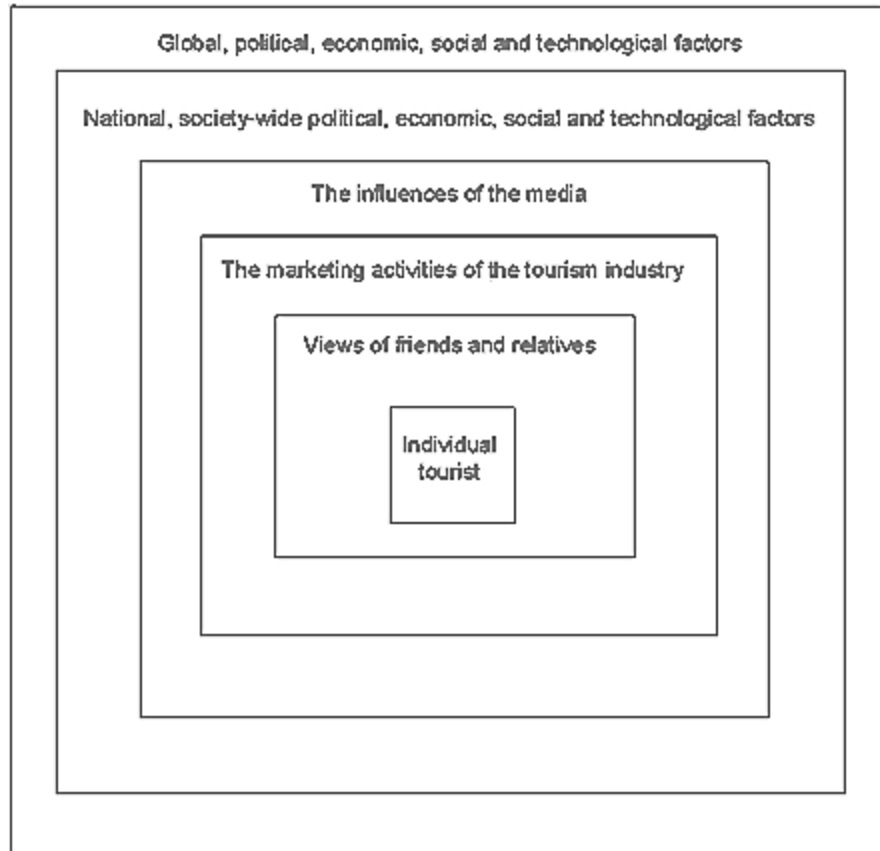
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│        Global, political, economic, social and technological factors      │
│   ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐   │
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│   │   │            The influences of the media            │   │   │
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│   │   │   │  The marketing activities of the tourism industry │   │   │   │
│   │   │   │   ┌─────────────────────────────┐   │   │   │   │
│   │   │   │   │    Views of friends and relatives    │   │   │   │   │
│   │   │   │   │     ┌───────────────┐     │   │   │   │   │
│   │   │   │   │     │   Individual  │     │   │   │   │   │
│   │   │   │   │     │    tourist    │     │   │   │   │   │
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Figure 5. External determinants of tourist behavior (adapted from Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007)

Beside these internal or personal determinants, it is obvious that factors from the tourist's surrounding environment also have a certain factors on his or her final decision. As can be seen from Figure 5, some of the influential elements from the external environment can be as followed:

- Views from the tourist's friends and relatives

- The tourism industry's marketing activities such as destination's advertising campaigns, special promotions offered by tour operators or the availability of brochures, etc.

- The influence of media such as travel programs on television, newspaper or radio, guidebooks or non-travel media such as news or scientific programs.

- Social, economic, political and technological factors in national as well as global boundaries such as the changes in a country's political issues, terrorism, visa policy, etc., can also either positively or negatively affect the tourist's final decision

According to Swarbrooke & Horner (2007), whether personal or external determinants have a bigger influence on the tourist's final decision depends on his or her personalities and lifestyle. Extrovert or outgoing people tend to be easily influenced by external factors such as the media or opinions of their friends and relatives. Introvert people, on the other hand, might rely on their own experiences. Social and economic issues might be influential factors for those who are interested in learning about the world, while uninterested people will not consider these factors important.

1.2.4. The complexity of consumer behavior in tourism

As mentioned in the previous part, tourism product is multi-layer and highly complicated. Its special characteristics highly affect customer's behaviors in making a purchasing decision. Swarbrooke & Horner (2007) has summed up some the complexities that affect the customer when purchasing a tourism product.
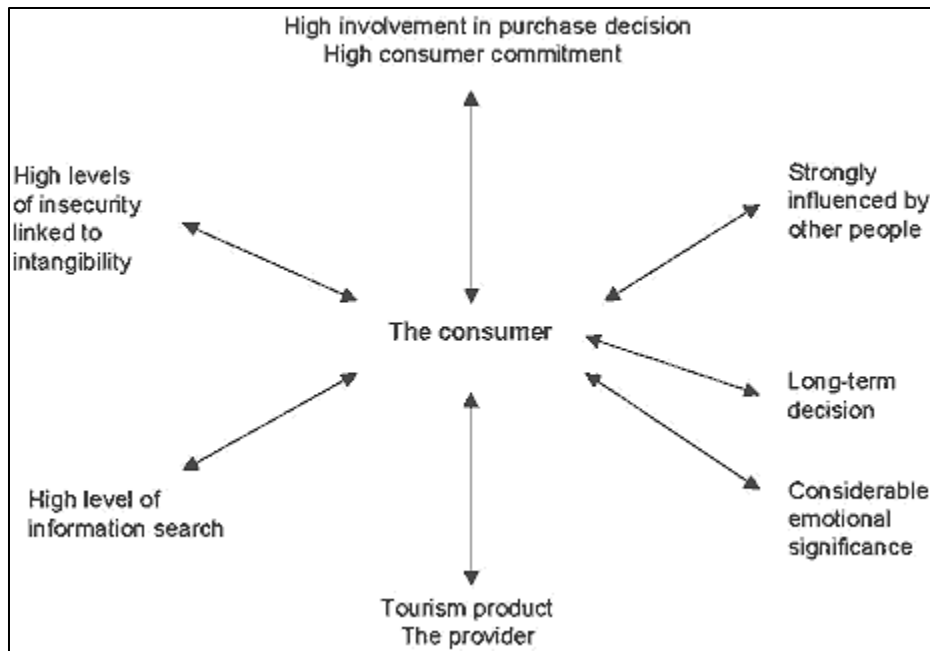
High involvement in purchase decision
High consumer commitment

High levels
of insecurity
linked to
intangibility

Strongly
influenced by
other people

The consumer

High level of
information search

Long-term
decision

Considerable
emotional
significance

Tourism product
The provider

Figure 6. The complexity of consumer behavior in tourism: the demand side (adapted from

Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007)

- High involvement in purchase decision and high consumer commitment

Due to the nature of the product, customers usually spend a rather significant amount of time to "shop around" before coming to the final decision, and will be actively involved in the whole buying process.

- High levels of insecurity linked to intangibility

As tourism products are intangible, it is almost impossible for the customers to test the product beforehand. Therefore, the customer's behavior patterns will be highly complex and involve many people and agencies. It is also not unusual for the customer to take advice from friends, relatives, travel agencies, etc. before making the final purchasing decision.

- Strongly influenced by other people

Individuals are likely to be strongly influenced by others during the buying process, due to the intangibility of tourism products. It is understandable that customers feel the need consult other people's opinion and experience regarding a certain product, since it is very difficult to test a tourism product. However, it should also be noted that the people's opinion and experience change over time, therefore it makes the customer's behavior patterns very complicated.

- High level of information search

Customers usually carry out an extensive information search before making the final choice. This will involve consultation with individual, groups, organizations and media reports before the decision is made.

- Long-term decisions

Despite the growth and strong effect of the last minute deals, most decisions regarding tourism products purchasing are made well in advance. This means that the customer will be at a completely different mindset when they make the purchase than when they are actually at the holiday destination.

- Considerable emotional significance

As the decision of purchasing a tourism product strongly affect the customer, it should also be noted that other members of the customer's family and relatives will also be affected. Therefore, sometimes compromises have to be made and the holiday or vacation might be replaced by things that satisfy the mutual needs.

1.3. The travel planning process

Consumer behavior is purposeful and goal oriented, therefore it places an emphasis on the free choice of an individual in the process of their consumption decisions (Cooper et al., 2005). Consumer behavior is also normally perceived as a process of stages. For consumer behavior in tourism, the steps include in this process can be:

- need arousal;

- recognition of the need;

- involvement – the amount of time and effort invested in the decision process, for example the search or consulting for travel information;

- identification of alternatives – initially, there will be some brands come to the tourist's mind when considering a purchase. However, at this stage, opinions or information from friends, relatives or travel agencies will provide additional or alternative choices for the tourist;

- evaluation of alternatives – comparisons are made based on the initial and main criteria of the purchase;

- decision made;

- purchase action;

- post-purchase behavior – the overall experience of a tourist after the vacation is finished. Usually, in travel decision, the tourist will doubt the wisdom of their choice and have a need for reassurance to what is known as dissonance or disequilibrium (Cooper et al., 2005).
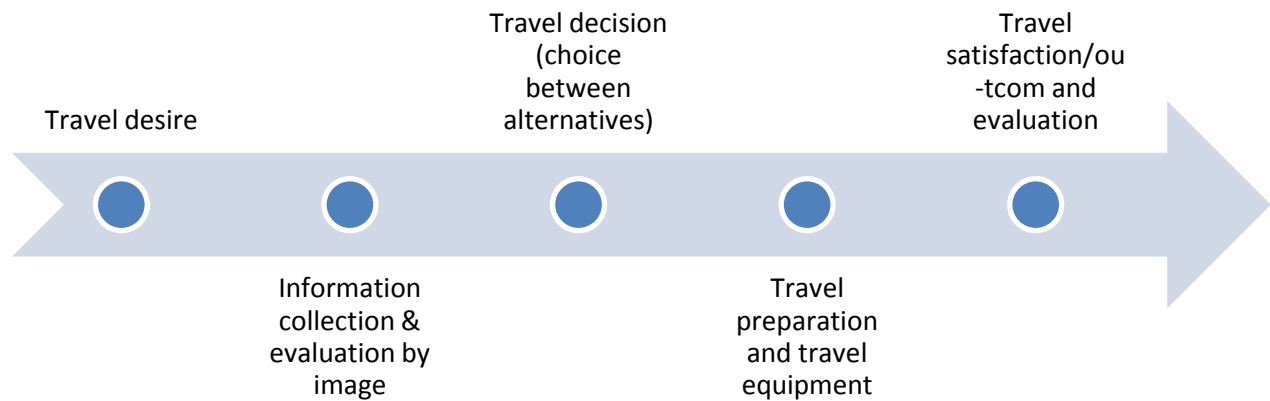
Figure 7. Travel buying behavior (adapted from Mathieson and Wall (1982), as cited in

Swarbrooke & Horner (2007)

The above model explains the decision-making process in tourism quite clearly is the one

developed by Mathieson and Wall (1982). The authors divide the whole process into five steps,

as presented in Figure 9.

- Felt need or travel desire: a desire to travel is felt and reasons for and against that desire

  are weighted.

- Information and evaluation: Potential tourists use travel intermediaries, brochures and

  advertisements as well as friends, relatives and experienced travellers. This information is

  evaluated against both economic and time constraints as are factors such as accessibility

  and alternatives.

- Travel decision: the tourist proceeds with decisions regarding destination, mode of travel,

  accommodation and activities.

- Travel preparation and travel equipment: travel takes place once booking are made and confirmed, budgets organized, clothing and equipment arranged.

- Travel satisfaction and evaluation: during and after travel the overall experiences are evaluated and the results will affect the later travel.

Figure 8. The travel planning process. (Adapted from Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (1990) and Woodside and Lyonski (1989).as cited in Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Buultjens, 2009)

The above model is another one that describes the planning process in tourism. As can be seen, it followed the original five steps decision-making process. However, when adapted to the tourism and hospitality industry, it is commenced with the pre-trip need recognition and information search phases, followed by the actual conduct of travel (during trip) and concluded with the post trip evaluation phase.

2. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in tourism

2.1. WOM communication

In terms of definition, Arndt (1967) (as cited in Lindberg-Repo, 1999) defines word of mouth (WOM) as the "oral, person to person communication between a receiver and communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial regarding a brand, a product, or a service." Gronroos (1990) (as cited in Lindberg-Repo, 1999) also has a similar approach toward WOM. According to this author, WOM communication "is the message about an organization, its credibility and trustworthiness, its way of operating and its services, communicated from one person to another." With its special characteristics, WOM has been widely acknowledged as an informal but effective communication source between consumers (Arndt, 1967, Dichter, 1996, Murray, 1991, Haywood, 1984, Gremer, 1994, as cited in Lindberg-Repo, 1999). In marketing research, WOM has also been referred to as the primary source of informational influence in both consumer purchasing decision progress as well as the post purchase evaluation (Tax et al., 1993, as cited in Lindberg-Repo, 1999). Studies in consumer behavior have consistently regarded WOM to be particularly powerful in affecting customers. Alreck and Settle (1995) (as cited in Haugtvedt, Machleit & Yalch ,2005) stated that for a service product, advice from other customers has a greater influence on consumers than the effects of all marketer-generated sources of information combined. According to Solomon (2011), WOM is especially powerful when the consumer is relatively unfamiliar with the product category. Therefore, one way to reduce the uncertainty about the wisdom of a purchase is to talk about it. Talking gives the consumer an opportunity to gain supports for the purchasing decision from others.

2.1.1. Why do consumers spread WOM

According to Westbrook (1987.as cited in Litvin et al., 2008), positive and negative feelings associated with a product experience created inner tension and called for a discharge in the form of WOM. Other literatures also suggest that consumer's affective elements of satisfaction, pleasure and sadness all motivate consumers to wish to share the experiences with others (Dichter, 1966; Neelamegham & Jain, 1999; Nyer, 1997. as cited in Litvin et al., 2008).

Solomon (2011) states three possible reasons why people involve in the talks sharing purchasing experience. According to the author, a person might be highly involved with a type of product or activity and enjoy talking about it. Another reason that urges a person to share experience might be that the person is knowledgeable about a product and use conversation as a way to let others know it. Thus, WOM communication sometimes enhances the ego of the individual who want to impress others with his or her expertise. Finally, a person might initiate a discussion out of genuine concern for someone else and want to make sure that the people he or she cares about buy the good product.

2.1.2. Where do WOMs originate?

According to Litvin et al. (2008), the key WOM player is the opinion leader, an active user who interprets the meaning of media message content for others, i.e. opinion seekers. Opinion leaders are people who is frequently able to influence others' attitudes or behaviors through expertise knowledge about products and whose advice are taken seriously by others (Solomon, 2011). Opinion leaders normally are interested in particular product fields, make an effort to expose themselves to mass media sources, and are trusted by opinion seekers to provide knowledgeable advice (Walker, 1995.as cited in Litvin et al., 2008). In a study regarding a provider of obstetric services by women of child-bearing age conducted by Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, and Harrell

(1997.as cited in Litvin et al., 2008) showed that while the originators of WOM can be from strong ties such as close friends, family, or relatives, they can also originate from weak ties such as acquaintances or strangers as well.

Solomon (2011), in defining the concept of opinion leaders, state that opinion leaders are often among the first to buy new products, so they absorb much of the risk. This experience reduces uncertainty for the rest of the people who are not as courageous. Additionally, while company marketing communication tends to focus solely on the positives aspects of a product, the hands-on experience of opinion leaders makes them more likely to encounter both positive and negative information of the product. As a result, their opinions are considered much more credible.

2.1.3. The expected effects of WOM

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from various studies is that favorable WOMs increase the probability of a purchase, while negative WOMs have the opposite effects (Litvin et al., 2008). Interestingly, it has been proved that customers weigh negative WOM more heavily than they do positive comments. According to a study by the White House Office of Consumer Affairs, 90 percent of unhappy customers will not do business with a company again (Solomon, 2011). Researches also shows that negative WOMs reduce the credibility of a firm's advertising and influence consumer's attitudes toward the product as well as their intention to buy it (Lenski, 1954.as cited in Solomon, 2011).

2.2. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM)

2.2.1. Definition of eWOM

Interpersonal influence or WOM have always been considered one of the most primary sources of informational influence in consumer pre-purchase decision-making, as well as an effective

channel to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction regarding a product experience (Tax et al., 1993.as cited in Lindberg-Repo, 1999). As tourism and hospitality products are intangible and are considered a high – risk purchase, the need to reconfirm and ensure the quality of the chosen products are significantly high. In many cases, consulting opinions of reference groups such as friends, family or other travellers becomes an important aspect of the decision making process. When WOM becomes digital and transform to another form known as electrical WOM (eWOM), the large-scale and anonymous nature of the Internet induces new ways of capturing, analyzing, understanding, and managing the influence that one consumer may have on another. Using the Internet, consumers can now easily publish their opinions, providing their thoughts, feelings and viewpoints on products and services to the public at large. As access to and usage of the Internet continues to grow, the importance and potential power of eWOM also increase accordingly (Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

According to Litvin et al. (2008), eWOM can be found in several different typologies known as one-to-one communication (email, instant message, etc.), one-to-many communication (websites) or many-to-many communication (discussion forums, blogs, social media, etc.). In other words, the Internet has provided consumers with a large and diverse set of opinions about products and services from individuals with whom they have little or no prior relationship (Schindler & Bickart (2005)). The weak tie between people who share stories and experiences can be considered the main difference between traditional and electronic WOM. In comparison to traditional WOM, eWOM can bring three possible benefits to consumers. First of all, the weak ties between consumers allow for more potential input into a decision (Friedkin, 1982.as cited in Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Secondly, information distributed via the Internet should be more diverse than the one obtained through traditional channels. Finally, since eWOM allows

consumers to access information from more expertise sources, it enables them to have higher quality input into their decision (Constant et al., 1997.as cited in Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Nevertheless, along with these benefits, it should also be noted that eWOM does have its drawbacks, the biggest of which is the ability for consumer to testify the quality of the obtained information. Due to the weak ties between consumers, it is undoubtedly hard for consumer to know the motives of the informant for providing information, and it may be difficult to access this person's background and expertise on the topic (Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

2.2.2. Motivations for using eWOM

Table 1. Summary of Motives to use eWOM (adapted from Schindler & Bickart (2005))

Motive type	Examples	Common types of eWOM used	Types of Content Favored
Information	• Risky purchases • Infrequent purchases • Distance-related • Gifts	Posted reviews	Negative information; comparison
Support and community	• Relieving dissonance • Dealing with problems	Discussion forums	Positive information; stories
Entertainment	• Views of enthusiasts • How own views compare with those of others	Discussion forums; chats; instant messaging	Extreme viewpoints; humor; photograph; etc.

Schiffman and Kanuk (2000.as cited in Schindler & Bickart, 2005) stated that perhaps the most basic motive for a consumer's attention to WOM is the expectation of receiving information that might decrease decision time and effort and/or contribute to the achievement of a more satisfying decision outcome. Due to the weak ties between consumers that produce diverse and unbiased information, it can be tentatively concluded that information searching is one of the main motives for using eWOM.

Schindler & Bickart (2005) concluded that besides searching for information, a desire for support and community and entertainment are also two motivations that urge people to use eWOM. Cumming & Venkatesan (1976.as cited in Schindler & Bickart, 2005) stated that informants

appeared to look for positive information to reduce dissonant thoughts related to a specific purchase decision. In addition, consumers also sought out solutions to specific product problems and guidance on how to consume products or service. Consumers with support and community motives also often reply to forum discussion, exchange stories about their product experiences, helping others deal with common problems and building a community among product owners, users or enthusiasts (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001.as cited in Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

Consumers with entertainment motivations seem to enjoy the views of enthusiasts and comparing their own opinions and experiences with those of others. Entertainment-seeking consumers appear to specifically value content presenting extreme viewpoints and humorous exchanges. It has also been noted that these consumers may be more interested in special features of eWOM, such as photographs. Previous researches has shown that consumers in a recreational shopping mode are more highly involved with the product category, engaging in ongoing search and consequently spending more money in the product class. Additionally, these consumers also tend to be opinion leaders (Bloch, Sherrell & Ridgway, 1986.as cited in Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

2.2.3. Effects of eWOM on the Consumer Decision Process

According to Schindler and Bickart (2005), all the possible effects of WOM on the consumer decision process could also occur for eWOM. Typically, WOM is considered as one of the external sources of information that consumers can reach during the information-search stage of the decision process (Westbrook & Fornell, 1979.as cited in Schindler & Bickart, 2005). It has been shown that an important outcome of the information search stage is a set of alternatives that the consumer must take into consideration in order to decide. Therefore, WOM input may add to

the customer's consideration set by presenting interesting ideas or cause the deletion of certain alternatives by presenting negative information about the items.

WOM and eWOM can also have certain effects on other stages of the decision process as well. As an example, product awareness created by using WOM or eWOM could redirect the customer's idea to a completely different direction, and thus cause new problem recognition. Additionally, WOM and eWOM can also contribute a great deal to the evaluation stage. It can also help the customer to decide where the product can be purchased as well as influence the post-purchase evaluation either by helping decrease dissonant cognitions or by other means (Schindler & Bichart, 2005).

2.3. eWOM in the hospitality industry

Due to the huge amount of information available, searching has become an increasingly dominant mode in traveller's use of the Internet. As an example, research by the Travel Industry Association of America found that roughly two third of the American travellers (64%) use search engines for travel planning (TIA, 2005.as cited in Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Another research has also concluded that search engines serves as number one tool for online information needed in planning vacation among American travellers (eMarketer, 2008.as cited in Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Researches regarding the influence of eWOM and online reviews in the hospitality have been carried out by many researchers, covering different aspects of the issues. For instance, it been established that online reviews has a bigger impact on smaller, less well-known hotels than the big and luxury hotel chains (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). In terms of reviews polarity, Ye, Law and Gu (2009) claims that 10% improvement in reviewers' rating can increase sales figure by 4.4%, while 10% increase in review variance, as in the disagreement among reviewers, can

decrease sales by 2.8%. It has also been argued that for some travellers, strongly negative reviews will have a bigger impact than strongly positive reviews (Clemons & Gao, 2008).

Another approach regarding the influence of eWOM is through the availability of social media in search results. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) in their recent research has found out that social media sites feature frequently and immediately in travel search results, among which TripAdvisor.com was the most prominently site.

From the traveller's point of view, researches have tried to learn the real impact of eWOM on their decision making process. It is obvious that the growth of eWOM is clearly affecting the travellers' decisions. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) suggests that eWOM can be used in various stage of the decision making process. According to the authors, most travellers use online reviews in the middle of the process to narrow down choices. It is also common for travellers to get inspired by eWOM in the beginning of their trip planning process. Also, interestingly, online reviews are also used quite often in the post-purchase stage when travellers compare note and share the experience with others. In terms of information evaluation, most readers perceive travel reviews to be more likely to provide up-to-date, enjoyable and reliable information in comparison to what is provided by travel service providers. Also, frequent travellers consider peer reviews as superior and tend to be highly influence (Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy, 2007.as cited in O'Connor, 2008).

Tourism is an information intense industry with products that are considered high risk purchases (Sheldon, 1997.as cited in Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Therefore, it is crucially important to understand the changes in technology and consumer behaviour that affect the distribution and accessibility of travel-related information. Also, it has been suggested that understanding the

nature of the online tourism domain, i.e. the composition of online travel information that are available to consumers, will provide an solid foundation for the development of successful tourism marketing program as well as a better tourism information system (Xiang et al., 2008.as cited in Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

3. Price and promotion programs

3.1. Perceived price in tourism

As tourism is always considered a high-risk purchase, it is understandable that price plays a vital role in shaping the consumer's final buying decision. Additionally, the tourism products contain mainly intangible characteristics that make the information seeking and alternatives evaluating process significantly more complex than it is of the normal goods industries. Therefore, when a traveller evaluates different alternatives for his purchase, he has to pay more attention to the external signs of quality, such as price of the product (Andreassen & Lindestand, 1998.as cited in Campo & Yagüe, 2007).

When consumers proceed to purchase a product or service that requires a high level of commitment, they consider the available price options of different brands a key factor in making the decision. These prices are perceived differently by each individual through his or her price perceptive process (Campo & Yagüe, 2007).

Past researches has clarified that consumer's price perceptive process is formed based on the internal and external reference price information (Shirai, 2003.as cited in Campo & Yagüe, 2007). The internal reference price is defined as the standard price that is utilized by the consumer when evaluating a product offering price. This price information is exposed to the consumer over time and is stored in his or her memory. During the price perceptive process, this

stored information is being used to compare to selling price at the point of sales, which is called external reference price (Mayhew &Winer, 1992; Pedraja & Yagu¨ e, 2000; Rajendran &Tellis, 1994.as cited in Campo & Yagüe, 2007).

When the consumers plan to make a purchase, the price perceptive is described as followed: if the selling price offered by the service provider is higher than the internal reference price, it will be considered negatively by the consumers. Conversely, if the product is offered at a lower price than what the consumers expect to pay, it will be considered positively, hence boost the consumers' purchase intent (Kalwani & Yim, 1992; Oubina, 1997, as cited in Campo & Yagüe, 2007).

3.2. Effects of price promotions on traveller's choice

There have been a number of past researches that analyzed the effects that price has on tourist's choice of destination as well as accommodation at the destination. Regarding destination choice, a negative relationship between price and destination choice is found by Riera (2000) and Siderelis and Moore (1998) in the case of natural parks. Similar findings that are applied for choice of country were also found by Haider and Ewing (1990) and Morley (1994) (as cited in Nicolau & Más, 2006). This knowledge can be considered a logic foundation that many tourism business providers base on, to create promotional and discount programs in order to boost sales in the short term as well as in the low demand seasons.

Price promotions, which is referred to as a "temporary and random discount to retailers from a product's wholesale price" (Nagle and Holden, 1994, p. 255.as cited in Campo & Yagüe, 2007), is a common tool for attracting customers used by tourism business providers. There is an ongoing debate concerning the real impact of price promotions in long term business. This

debate includes three groups of opinions. The first group, based on Self-Acceptance or Behavioural Learning theories, argued that discounts and promotion programs decrease consumer's loyalty when withdrawn (Shoemaker & Shoaf, 1977; Dodson et al., 1978; Jones & Zufryden, 1980; Guadagni & Little, 1983; Kopalle et al., 1999.as cited in Campo & Yagüe, 2007). On the contrary, another group of researchers argue that there is a positive relationship between price promotion and customer's loyalty, since preference of the brand and discounts as a reward will reinforce the probability of repeat purchase (Cotton & Babb, 1978; Rothschild & Gaidis, 1981; Bawa & Shoemaker, 1989; Lattin & Bucklin, 1989.as cited in Campo & Yagüe, 2007). Finally, there is also a group of opinions that suggests there is no existed relationship between price promotion and customer's loyalty (Neslin & Shoemaker, 1989; Davis et al., 1992; Ehrenberg et al., 1994.as cited in Campo & Yagüe, 2007).

Regardless on the ongoing debate concerning the impact of price promotions, it is undeniable that this is still a regularly used tool that tourism business providers are using to develop their business. In the accommodation and lodging industry nowadays, with the power of the Internet, chains and independent hotels use the Internet as a primary outlet for their lowest prices, as is evident in hotel web site slogans such as "lowest price guarantees" and "last-minute deals" (Olearchik, 2003; Thompson & Failmezger, 2005.as cited in Chen & Schwartz, 2008). These strategies obviously has an impact on the hotel sales, since it attracts price-aware customers to book their accommodation in advanced, thus enable the hotel to have a better control of their room availability (Chen & Schwartz, 2008). It has been suggested that over utilizing this strategy will put the hotel in a bad situation, in which customers develop strategies to get access to the most last minute deals possible, hence negatively affect the hotel's revenue. Nevertheless, the popularity of discount and promotion programs in the hospitality industry and the fact that

hoteliers still rely significantly on this tool to control their business somewhat indicates a high

level of interests from the customers toward these programs. Therefore, it would be interesting to

find out how interested the customers are in these discount and promotion programs and if they

are really the key factor that determines the customer's final choice.

Methodology

1. Research questions and the model

The thesis focuses on investigating the travellers' preferred travel information providers or channels that affect the most to his or her final purchasing decision. Based on the review of available literature, the chosen channels to be investigated in the thesis represent both traditional and non-traditional information providers. The chosen traditional channels are official travel information provided by local authorities and information provided by the traveller's friends or relatives. Non-traditional channels are represented by social media, in particular TripAdvisor reviews and ratings. Additionally, promotion program offered by tourism business providers is also included in the investigation in order to create a broader overall picture of the situation, so that possibly proper and more exciting findings can be reached.

Research question: *How do consumers weight the value of eWOM (TripAdvisor reviews and ratings) in comparison to other factors (information provided by local authorities, promotion & friends/relatives' opinion) when purchasing travelling accommodation?*

Sub questions:

- *Which factor has the biggest effect in shaping customers' final decision in purchasing accommodation when travelling?*

- *How do gender differences affect the traveller's preference of tourism information providers?*

- *How does experience in purchasing travel accommodation affect the traveller's preference of tourism information providers?*

- *How does the amount of TripAdvisor usage affect the traveller's preference of tourism information providers?*
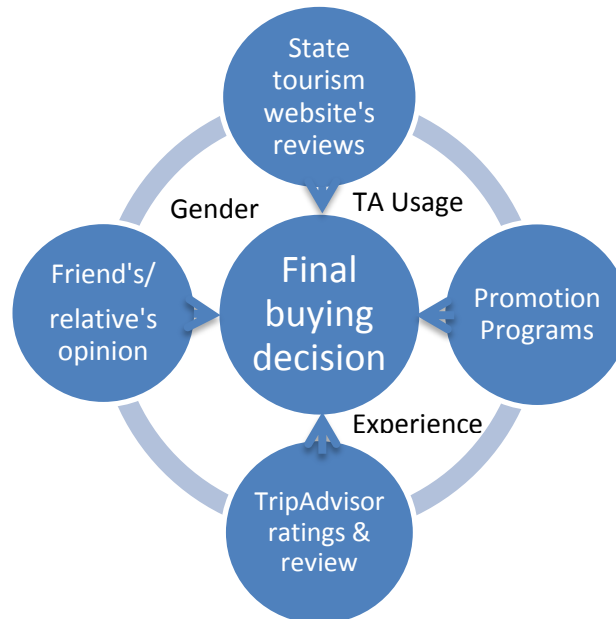
The model:

Figure 9. Research model

2. Research design

2.1. Quantitative oriented research

The main purpose of all research is to be able to collect empirical data systematically and to examine data patterns so phenomenon in social life can be better explained and understood (Neuman, 2011). Since previous studies have suggested several possible answers for the main question of the research, it is interesting to retest these conclusions by using a different method. According to Neuman (2011), retest, verify or falsify a hypothesis we already have in mind is one of the most popular use of quantitative oriented research. Additionally, one of the characteristics of quantitative oriented study is that this design emphasizes on precisely measuring variables, hence it is possible to provide clear data which bases mainly on numbers

and scales which will lead to clear and structural analysis (Neuman, 2011). Therefore, this study design seems to be the most suitable design for the purposes of this thesis.

2.2. Research instruments

2.2.1. Conjoint analysis

As the main purpose of the research is to find out which factor is paid more attention by the travellers when making the buying decision, it can be compared to a study of the customer's preference feature of a certain product and how they make trade-offs among competitive products. Therefore, the most suitable research design for the study is conjoint analysis. In studying of customer's preference regarding a product, conjoint analysts uses various models to infer buyers' part-worths for attribute levels, and enters the part-worths into buyer-choice simulators to predict how buyers will choose among products and services (Green, Krieger & Wind, 2001). In simple words, conjoint analysis studies attributes in different levels and create stimulations in which different levels of different attributes are included. Based on this, the researcher can learn what is considered an optimal choice for the customer and which factor or attribute are considered the most important.

Even though conjoint analysis involves more sophisticated survey design and analysis, and possibly more effort by respondents, simpler approaches might be unrealistic or even useless, if the research aims to find out the importance differences between various attributes (Orme, 2006). Researchers can employ a normal method using importance survey questions, where respondents are asked to rate how important each factor is to the overall product, to collect data. Orme (2003.as cited in Orme (2006)) stated that an average time for a person to finish an importance survey questionnaire is five second. Nevertheless, most respondents answer with high ratings,

while the bottom half of the scale is largely ignored. This results in insufficient data for statistical analysis i.e. skewed distributions, with typically little differentiation between attributes (Orme, 2006). On the other hand, conjoint analysis and conjoint questions force respondents to make difficult trade-off, thus enable the researchers to learn the true value of product alternatives. Conjoint analysis aims for greater realism, grounds attributes in concrete descriptions and results in greater discrimination among attribute importance (Orme, 2006). Given the main purpose of this study is to find out the most important travel information channel for an independent travel, it is the most appropriate that conjoint analysis is employed.

2.2.2. Survey as a data collecting tool

2.2.2.1. Why survey?

Survey is the most widely used social science data-gathering technique. Surveys have many uses and take many forms such as phone interviews, Internet opinion polls and various types of questionnaires. Surveys can provide us accurate, reliable and valid data, given that serious effort and thought are put in (Neuman, 2011). Most surveys ask a large number of people, also called respondents, about their beliefs, opinions, characteristics and past or present behaviours. Therefore, surveys are appropriate when we want to learn about self-reported beliefs or behaviours. Most surveys ask many questions at once, hence many variables can be measured. This also enables the researcher to gather descriptive information and test multiple hypotheses in a single survey or questionnaire (Neuman, 2011). According to all these characteristics, questionnaire has been chosen to be the data collecting tool for the thesis.

2.2.2.2. Survey design

Since the study employs conjoint analysis as the main analysis tool, the survey design process has been developed slightly differently than that of the normal survey. The survey consists of two parts, the non-conjoint or descriptive part which aims to collect general descriptive information of the sample, and the conjoint part which provides main data for the analysis.

The non-conjoint part of the survey includes questions related to the respondents' gender, experience with social media and their experience in booking travel accommodation online during the last 12 months. These questions aim to collect descriptive information of the sample, as well as to provide controlling variables for the analysis, in order for the results to be better discusses and explained.

The conjoint questions in the survey are designed as a part of the experiment, in which the respondents are asked to imagine they are preparing for the trip to Vienna (Austria) and need to look for accommodation. The respondents are then asked to rate how likely will they to book a hotel based on the information provided by different channels, including information from wien.info, TripAdvisor, opinion of a friend or relative who have stayed at the hotel before, and promotional programs offered by the hotel. In conjoint analysis design, these four chosen channels are considered attributes. In order to create the conjoint experiment, these attributes are divided into different levels, based on which different scenarios are created in order to test the respondent's change of choices. Each of these scenarios consist of different information, thus it enable the respondents to make different choice as well as help the researcher to judge the respondent's most preferred information provider, based on their trade-off behaviours during the experiment. In this experiment, the attributes as well as levels are chosen based on the literature reviews, with details as followed:

Table 2. Attributes and levels included in the experiment

Attributes	Levels
Reviews from vien.info	• Very good • Good • Satisfactory
TripAdvisor reviews and ranking	• High (4 – 5 stars) • Neutral (3 stars) • Low (1 – 2 stars)
Friend's/Relative's opinion	• Recommended • Not recommended
Promotion programs	• Hot deal discounts • No promotion

After the attributes and levels are clarified, they were put into IBM Conjoint software which helps creating different stimulations or scenarios. Manually calculating, with four factors, two of them have three factor levels and the other two have two factor levels, the total number of possible scenarios should be 36. Nevertheless, a potential problem with using full-profile approach is that all the possible combinations of the levels become too great for the respondents to rank or score in a meaningful way (IBM SPSS Conjoint 21, 2012). Therefore, in SPSS Conjoint 21, the full-profile approach uses what is termed a fractional factorial design, which presents a suitable fraction of all possible combinations of effects for each factor level. The resulting set, called an orthogonal array, is designed to capture the main effects of each factor level. Interactions between levels of one factor with levels of another factor are assumed to be negligible (IBM SPSS Conjoint 21, 2012).

Based on the attributes and their levels, 13 scenarios/stimulations was created and put into use in the experiment. Each of these stimulations is placed as a separated question in the survey/experiment, in which the respondents are asked to use a scale from 1 to 10 to rate how likely they will book the hotel based on these information.

Table 3. Example of stimulation created by IBM Conjoint

Profile Number 1

Card ID	reviews from wien.info	TripAdvisor reviews and rankings	friends opinion	price promotion
1	very good	neautral (3 stars)	not recommended	no discount

2.3. Sampling

In terms of sample, the chosen population is the group of people who are familiar with online reviews, particularly the website TripAdvisor. Due to the time and economic limitation of the thesis, the chosen sample group is students at University of Stavanger, both from the Norwegian Hotel School and other departments. The total sample includes of 43 students from the Norwegian Hotel School (20 master students and 23 bachelor students) and 45 students from other departments at University of Stavanger, Norway. The data collection process for the group of students from the Norwegian Hotel School was conducted through a short presentation of the research during one of the classes that the students were attending. The rest was data was collected through random survey distribution in the university campus area, with the subjects doing the survey under the loose supervising of the researcher.

Clearly, this is not a random sample group and thus, it might affect the generalization of the study's results. Nevertheless, this group does possess certain characteristics that represent the

majority of young and independent travellers, which is the target research group in this project, such as the flexibility in creating itinerary, the avoidance of package travel arrangements, or the relatively high level of familiarity with social media, especially TripAdvisor. Hyde and Lawson (2003) has also specifically pointed out that students and young professionals represent the majority of independent travellers, since they represent Cohen's (1972.as cited in Hyde & Lawson (2003)) drifters and explorers. Due to these reasons, it can be tentatively argued that the chosen sample represent the target research group, hence enable the possibility to generalize the results of the study to some extents.

Findings and discussions

1. The analyses

First of all, it is important to clarify all of the analyses that have been done in the thesis under the construct of conjoint analysis. The program that is employed to run all the analyses is IBM SPSS Conjoint 21, which, as mentioned in the sample discussion, is responsible for generating all the stimulations (situations) that are used in the survey. The final version of the survey was distributed to the chosen sample group. After that, the results were entered to the program manually by the researcher.

When all of the results have been successfully entered into the program, a syntax command was carried out based on instructions given by the IBM SPSS Conjoint 21 booklet. The syntax command results in a number of analyses with details as followed:

- The utility scores table, which shows the preference of each factor level. Higher utility values indicate greater preference.

- The relative importance table measures how important each factor is to the overall preference. Factor with great utility ranges play a more significant role than those with smaller ranges. This measurement is one of the main reasons that make conjoint analysis a powerful tool in terms of researching customer's preference.

- The correlations report that provides measures of the correlation between the observed and estimated preference. In every orthogonal design, there is a number of holdout cards that are rated by the subjects but not used in the Conjoint procedure for estimating utilities. Instead, the Conjoint procedure computes correlations between the observed and predicted rank orders for these profiles as a check on the validity of the utilities.

- The reversals report that keeps track of the number of subjects whose preference showed the opposite of the expected relationship. This report appears when factors in the design follow the LINEAR model, which in the case of this thesis is applied for all four factors. Therefore, it is significantly interesting to investigate this report, in order to find out whether the relationship between the subject's preference and the factor levels are as expected.

- The simulations and Preference Probalities of Simulations is claimed to be the real power of Conjoint Analysis. This analysis predicts preference for product profiles that were not rated by the subjects. By creating simulations that included all desired value, the researchers can rely on this function of Conjoint analysis to predict the preference probabilities of each simulation, under there different probability-of-choice models.

2. Findings and discussions

2.1. General findings

Results collected from a group sample of 88 students at University of Stavanger were carefully

analyzed. First of all, the overall utilities table shows the factors' utility level as expected; with

lower factor level receive higher utilities score. This result confirms the logic in the orthogonal

design as well as tentatively presents the reliability of the design.

Table 4. Utilities table from general sample

Utilities		Utility Estimate	Std. Error
wien.info	very good	-,485	,088
	Good	-,970	,176
	Satisfactory	-1,455	,264
TripAdvisor	high (4 - 5 stars)	-1,241	,088
	neautral (3 stars)	-2,481	,176
	low (1 - 2 stars)	-3,722	,264
friend	recommended	-2,835	,152
	not recommended	-5,670	,305
promotion	hot deals discount	-,835	,152
	no discount	-1,670	,305
(Constant)		13,962	,387

In terms of relative importance, the general report shows a clear difference between two groups:

the information from local tourism authority and promotion programs vs. the information from

TripAdvisor and friends.
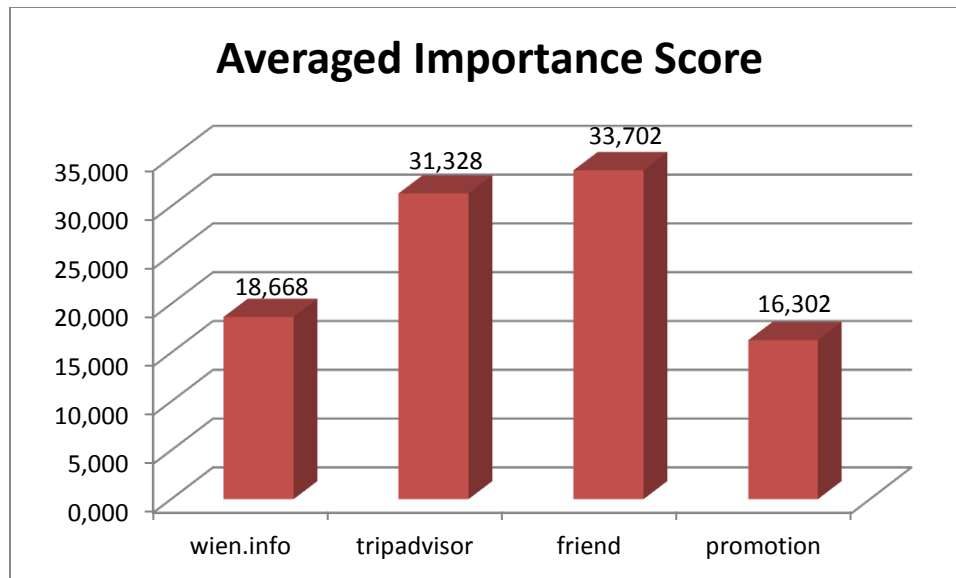
Figure 10. Averaged importance score for general sample

As can be seen, the second information group's average importance score nearly doubles that of the first group, clearly indicates the distinct gap of preference. Nevertheless, the difference is not significant between members in one group. Individually, information from friend appears to be the most preferred source of information, followed closely by information from TripAdvisor. Information from local tourism authority ranks the third preferred source of information with a relatively big gap between itself and the second source, while promotion programs ranks the least important source of information among all.

This result shows the gap between two information groups, with WOM and eWOM source information clearly on the lead. The ranking position of local tourism information source, however, question the real power of this information source and provides a new and rather conflicting look into the findings from Cox et al. (2009), who concludes that information from tourism authority is the most important source for independent travellers.

Another interesting result from the analysis to be looked at is the reversal reports, which shows the number of subjects that has a preference that is not as expected.
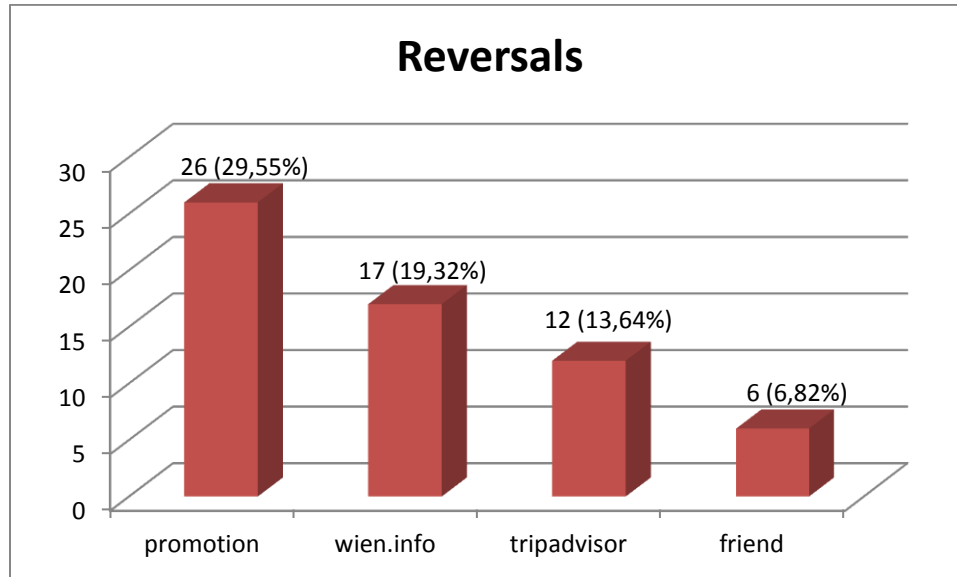
Figure 11. Number of reversals for general sample

As can be seen, 26 subjects has a reversal report in terms of promotion information, indicating that among 88 subjects, 29.55% of them would prefer to stay at a hotel with no hot deal discount. Similarly, 19.32% of people would stay in a hotel that receives a satisfactory label on wien.info; 13.64% of people would stay in a hotel with negative ranking on TripAdvisor; and only 6.82% of people would stay in a hotel which their friends do not recommend.

This result shows some interesting indications of how independent travellers react toward the information from certain sources. It should be noted that while the importance score of TripAdvisor and friend' information do not differ significantly, the numbers and percentage of reversals regarding these two sources are significantly different, with the percentage of TripAdvisor reversals nearly double that of information from friends. With this finding, it can

tentatively indicate that the travellers do have ambivalence feelings toward the quality of reviews

on TripAdvisor.

2.2. Gender differences

Table 5. Gender statistic

Subject gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	31	35,2	35,2	35,2
	Female	57	64,8	64,8	100,0
	Total	88	100,0	100,0	

As can be seen from the above statistic report, in the total of 88 subjects, the numbers of male

subjects are 31, adding up to 35.2 % of the total population. The female subjects tentatively

dominate the sample population with 57 subjects, adding up to 64.8% of the total population.

It would be interesting to investigate whether there are differences in preferred information

source between genders. First of all, the utilities reports from both the male and female subjects

appear to be as expected, with all factor levels' receive the expected range of utilities scores.

Nevertheless, in terms of averaged importance score, there is a small ranking difference between two genders. Although WOM information from friends and eWOM from TripAdvisor still dominate the chart for both genders with friend's information taking the lead, the male subjects appear to rank friend's recommendation tentatively higher than information from TripAdvisor, while according to the female subjects, there is no significant difference between these two resources. The male subject's importance score for these two resources also higher than that of the female subjects. Interestingly, the female subjects appear to pay more attention for information from local authority and promotion information than the male subjects.

Averaged Importance Score

	wien.info	tripadvisor	friend	promotion
Male	16,82	31,85	36,27	15,06
Female	19,67	31,04	32,30	16,98
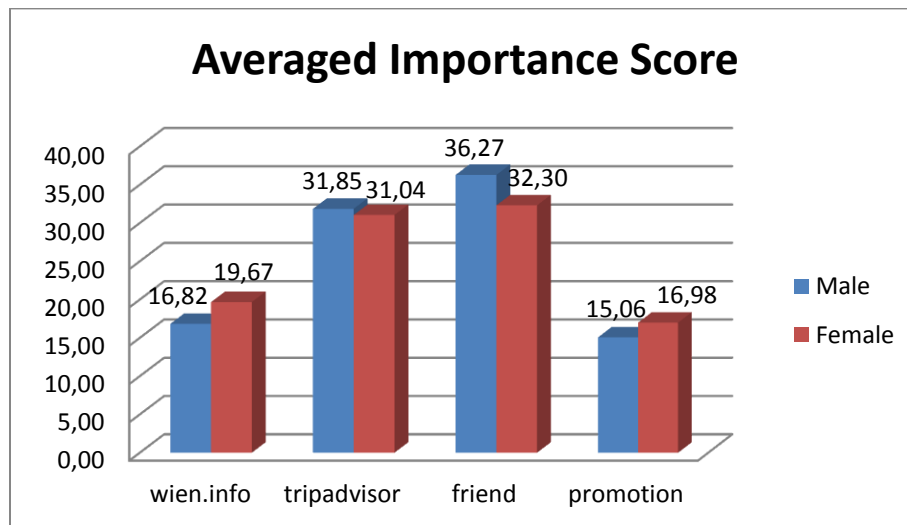
Figure 12. Gender difference in Averaged Importance Score

In terms of reversals report, both genders clearly show a relatively high percentage of reversals regarding promotion information, which indicates that quite a few people from both genders would willing to stay in a hotel with no discounts or promotion program. More than 16 percent of the male subjects would stay in a hotel with negative reviews from both wien.info and TripAdvisor, while these numbers for the female subjects are 21.05% and 12.28%. Finally, only 3 percent of the male subjects would stay in a hotel which their friend do not recommend, while more than 8 percent of the female subjects would do the same.
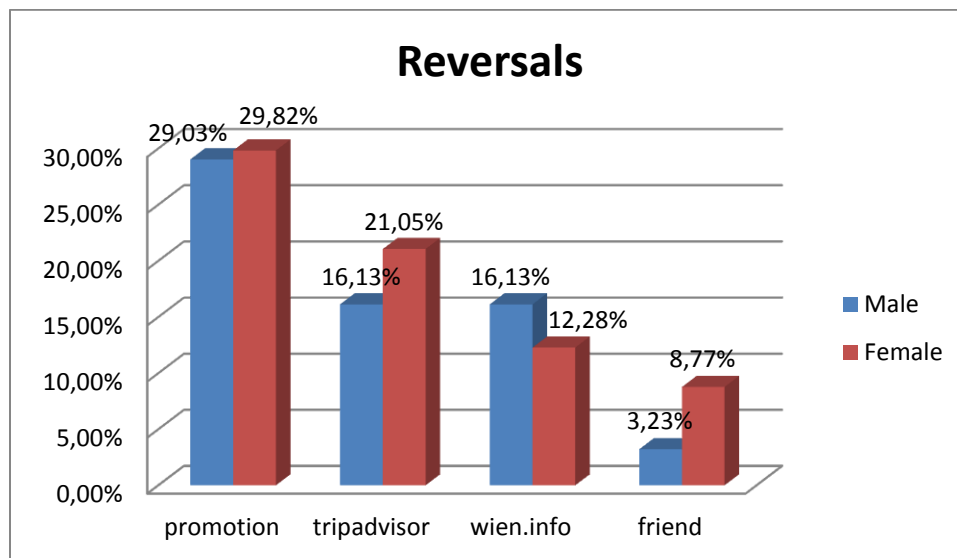
Figure 13. Gender difference in the percentage of reversals

These findings are in line with the general findings, especially in terms of promotion information. Nevertheless, compared to the male subjects, the female subjects appear to show a more significant ambivalence attitude towards the quality of information on TripAdvisor. Additionally, the female subjects rely more on information from local tourism authority and less on information from their friends, while findings from the male subjects show the opposite.

2.3. Experience differences

In this thesis, experience is represented by the numbers of times that the subjects had actually booked travel accommodation during the last 12 months. Although this type of measurement may not accurately add up to the subjects' overall travel experience, it does, to some extends, shows the subjects' level of involvement with travel related decisions, i.e accommodation bookings.

Table 6. Experience statistics report

Experience in accommodation online booking during the last 12 months		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	None	13	14,8	14,8	14,8
	1 - 2 times	33	37,5	37,5	52,3
	3 - 4 times	16	18,2	18,2	70,5
	More than 4 times	26	29,5	29,5	100,0
	Total	88	100,0	100,0	

As can be seen from the above report, subjects with experience of 1-2 times making accommodation during the last 12 years make up the most of the total population with 33 subjects, equal to 37.5%. This group is followed closely with subjects that have more than 4 times making accommodation arrangement. Each of the other two groups, i.e subjects with no experience and subjects that have 3-4 times arranging accommodation during the last 12 months, make up to less than 20% of the total population.

In general, findings from the analyses are in line with the overall findings, with information from friends and TripAdvisor on the lead, and information from local authority and from promotion programs receiving relatively low score.
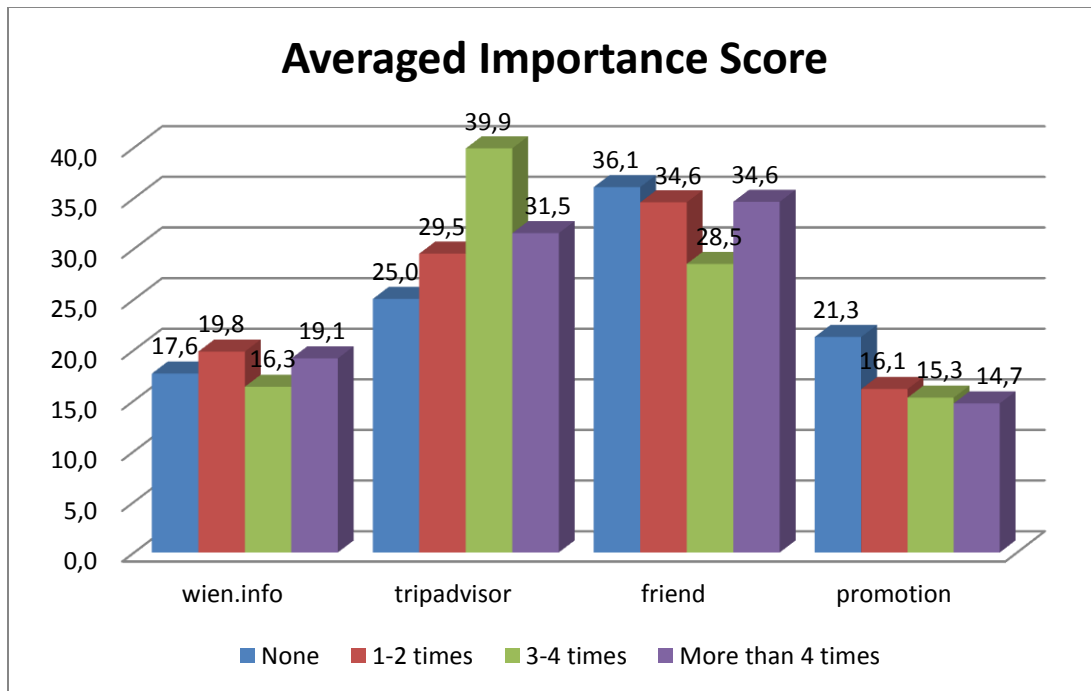
Figure 14. Experience difference in Averaged Importance Score

As can be seen, for subjects with no experience in the last 12 months, the gap between information from promotion programs, tourism authority and TripAdvisor are not significant. However, information from friends strikes up as the most important source, with significant gap between itself and the second source – TripAdvisor's information. This gap is evidently reduced for subjects with 1-2 times experience in the last 12 months, and the positions completely reverse for the group subjects with 3-4 times experience, with significant gap between the two sources. Nevertheless, friend's information claims back its position as the most reliable source of information for subjects that had more than 4 times booked accommodation for leisure travel during the last 12 months.
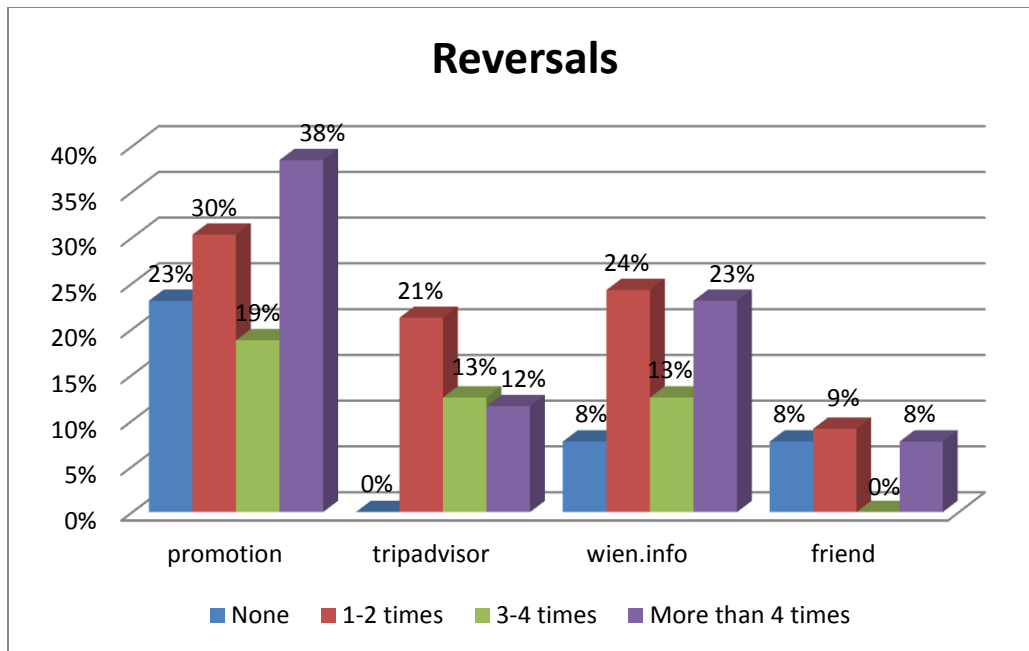
Figure 15. Experience difference in percentages of reversals

In terms of reversals, promotion information still on the lead with the most reverses situations where subjects are willing to book the accommodation despite the unfavored promotion information. Information from wien.info initiates the second most reverse situation, followed by TripAdvisor's information, and information from friends is still considered the most reliable information source, since it initiates the least cases of reversals.

It should also be noted that subjects with 1-2 times experience of booking accommodation during the last 12 months appear to have the most reversal cases in almost all categories except promotion. This is also the group with the most subjects (33 subjects). The most experienced group, with 26 subjects, seems to have distinct attitude towards information from wien.info and promotion information. Although several reversal cases were found, friend's information and TripAdvisor's information still are the favored information sources with insignificant gap between the two sources.

2.4. TripAdvisor usage differences

Table 7. TripAdvisor usage statistic

TA consult

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	17	19,3	19,3	19,3
	2	9	10,2	10,2	29,5
	3	8	9,1	9,1	38,6
	4	11	12,5	12,5	51,1
	5	20	22,7	22,7	73,9
	6	14	15,9	15,9	89,8
	7	9	10,2	10,2	100,0
	Total	88	100,0	100,0	

The TripAdvisor (TA) usage in this research is determined through the question of how often the subject consults reviews from the website TripAdvisor.com when making travel related decisions. Subjects are given a scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always) and answer the question based on this scale. Accordingly, the subjects are then divided into three different groups. The group of subjects with low TA usage is subjects that choose 1 – 3 from the answering scale. The neutral TA usage group consists of subjects that choose 4, and the high TA usage group consists of subjects that choose 5 – 7 from the answering scale.

As can be seen from the statistics report, the high TA usage group makes up the most of the population with the total of 43 subjects, followed by the group of low TA usage with 34 subjects. The group of subjects with neutral TA usage consists of only 11 subjects.
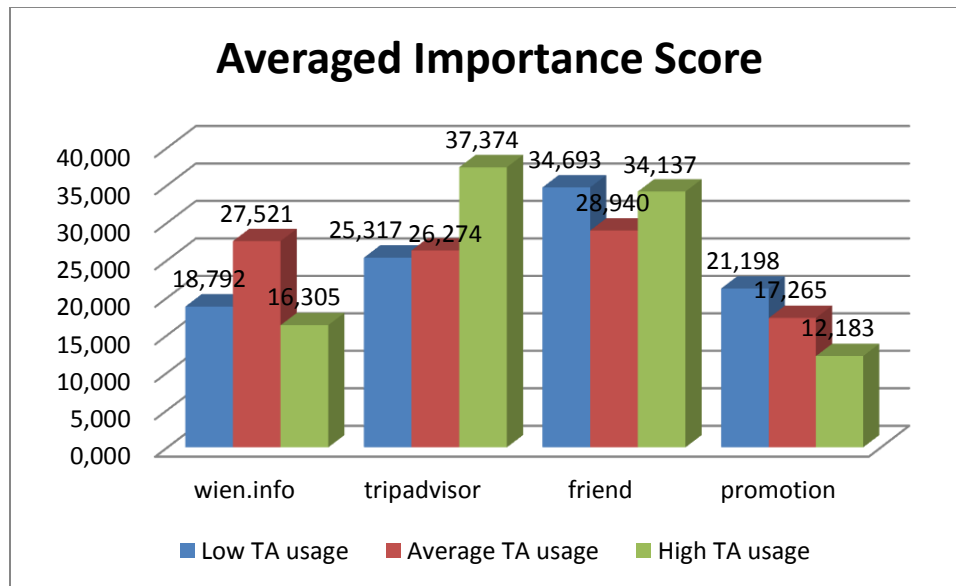
Figure 16. TA usage difference in Averaged Importance Score

Subjects with different level of TripAdvisor (TA) usage expose very different views toward the importance of each information source. As can be seen, for subjects with low level of TA usage, information from friends is considered the most reliable source. Unsurprisingly, information from TripAdvisor is considered insignificantly better than information from promotion programs, both of which are considered evidently less reliable than the first source. Interestingly, wien.info, which is considered the least favorite information source for subjects with low level of TA usage, is considered the second most reliable information source for subjects with average level of TA usage. The gap between itself and the most reliable one, which is friend's information, is very insignificant. TripAdvisor's information ranks the third, and promotion information is again, the least importance source. Unsurprisingly, subjects with high level of TA usage rank information from TripAdvisor as the most important source. Nevertheless, information from friend also receives high importance score from this group with a very small gap separate itself and the first source.

In general, these results once again confirm the importance of information from friend, in comparison to the other three resources. As can be seen, with only the exception of the subjects with high level of TA usage, information from friends always ranks the most important source to consider when making travel related decisions. The level of importance of TripAdvisor's information changes in accordance with how frequent the subjects use TripAdvisor. Information from promotion programs and wien.info do not appear to have significant impact on subjects of all groups.
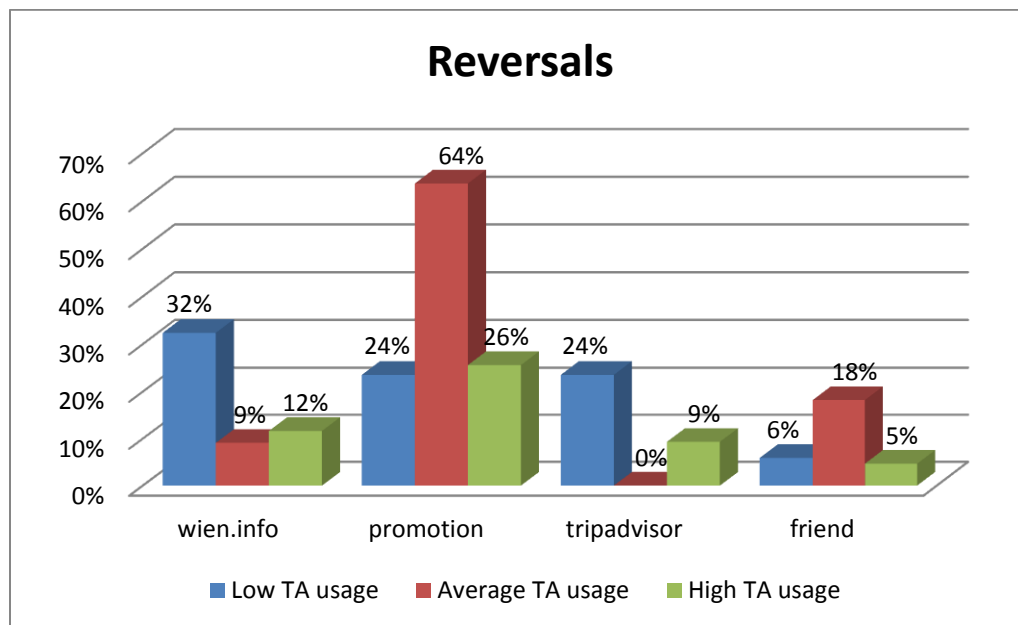
Figure 17. TA usage difference in percentages of reversals

It can be seen that results of reversal cases based on the subject's level of TA usage offer a numbers of interesting insight looks. First of all, it is interesting to notice that subjects with average level of TA usage are the ones with no reversal cases regarding TripAdvisor's information. On the other hand, those with high level of TA usage are actually questioning the website's information quality, as 9% of them willing to book an accommodation that receive negative reviews on the website. Understandably, this number for the group of subjects with low

level of TA usage is 24%. The TripAdvisor average users also appear to have the most reversal cases in regards of promotion information. Additionally, with 18% of them willing to book an accommodation that their friends are not recommend, while only 9% of them would do so if the information on wien.info are negative, it offers a rather interesting findings that somewhat conflict with the average importance score.

2.5. Simulations cases

As mentioned in the research design, the chosen information channels in this thesis represent traditional and non – traditional WOM, i.e. information from friend and wien.info represent traditional WOM, and TripAdvisor's information represents eWOM. Based on the results of all the performed analyses, it is clear that among four information channels, information from friend and TripAdvisor are considered significantly more important than the other two. It can also be seen that representatives of both types of WOM communication are on the lead, with very insignificant gap between each other. Therefore, it would be interesting to use the simulations analysis to retest and further expands these findings in terms of predicting customers' preference regarding certain choices. This analysis is considered the real power of Conjoint Analysis, since it is able to predict customer's preference for certain situations, based on the collected data. Its calculations including the preference score report and the percentage of preference probabilities for each simulation case.

In order to perform this analysis, two simulation profiles were manually entered into the conjoint plan file. The first simulation profile includes positive information from the two traditional WOM channels, and negative information from the eWOM channel as well as the promotion information. The opposite situation is included in the second simulation case.

Table 8. Simulations cases

Simulation no.	Wien.info	TripAdvisor	Friend	Promotion
1	Very good	Low (1-2 stars)	Recommended	No discount
2	Satisfactory	High (4-5 stars)	Not recommended	Hot deals discount

These simulations profiles were put into the main conjoint plan and an overall analysis was performed. Results of this analysis show a normal and expected pattern of the utilities scores as well as the averaged importance score. Nevertheless, the preference scores and the preference probabilities of simulations are of interest.

The preference scores of simulations clearly show the first simulation is the preferred one. With the preference score of 5.250 out of 10, although the score is not ideal, the traditional WOM channels still have a bigger influence on customers' decision than the non-traditional WOM channels. At their bests, the combination of the most positive TripAdvisor review and promotional information only score 4.761.

Table 9. Preference Scores of Simulations

Preference Scores of Simulations

Card Number	ID	Score
1	1	5,250
2	2	4,761

The preference probabilities of simulations analysis offer another calculation that further back up the results from the preference scores. This analysis consists of three different probability-of-choice models. The maximum utility model determines the probability as the number of respondents predicted to choose the profile divided by the total number of respondents. For each respondent, the predicted choice is simply the profile with the largest total utility. The Bradley-Terry-Luce (BTL) model determines the probability as the ratio of a profile's utility to that for all simulation profiles, averages across all respondents. The Logit model is similar to the BTL

model but uses the natural log of the utilities instead of the utilities (IBM SPSS Conjoint 21,

2012).

Table 10. Preference Probabilities of Simulations

Preference Probabilities of Simulations[b]				
Card Number	ID	Maximum Utility[a]	Bradley-Terry-Luce	Logit
1	1	57,4%	52,7%	56,1%
2	2	42,6%	47,3%	43,9%
a. Including tied simulations				
b. 88 out of 88 subjects are used in the Bradley-Terry-Luce and Logit methods because these subjects have all nonnegative scores.				

According to the above preference probabilities, it is clear that the first simulation profile would

be preferred more than the second one. All through three models, only the BTL model displays a

rather small gap between the preference probabilities of the two profiles (roughly 5%). Other

than that, both the Maximum Utility and the Logit model show a clear dominance of the first

profile. Although the differences are both a little more than 10%, but it still indicates the

predicted preference that clearly lean toward the first profile. These results once again confirm

the influence of traditional WOM as a comparison to non – traditional WOM or eWOM.

3. Additional discussions

3.1. Perceptions of trust in online travel planning

Trust is the belief that a party's word or promise is reliable and that the party will fulfil his or her obligation in an exchange relationship (Schurr & Ozanne, 1985.as cited in Wen, 2008). According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975.as cited in Wen, 2008), while attitude refers to a person's favourable or unfavourable evaluation of a subject, beliefs represent the information that he has about the subject. Accordingly, belief will lead to behavioural intentions. Studies have shown that trust is the most effective uncertainty reduction method in e-commerce and plays a critical role in purchasing processes where consumers look for high quality goods or services (Gefen, 2010.as cited in Wen, 2008). Trust serves to reduce perceptions of risk and is a vital antecedent for consumer online purchase intention and an important ingredient for buiding relationships with consumers (Gefen et al., 2003; Liu et al., 2000; McCole, 2002.as cited in Wen, 2008).

Trust can be analysed as personal based trust and system based trust. According to Mayer et al., (1995, p.712.as cited in Jeacle & Carter, 2011), trust is best defined as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor." To further explain the concept, the author has provided three characteristics that constitute trustworthiness of the trustee. Accordingly, these three factors include ability, benevolence and integrity. Ability refers to a group of skills, competencies and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain. A person's ability guarantee the accuracy and reliability of the provided information, hence it has a positive impact on trust creation (Jeacle & Carter, 2011). The second antecedent of trust is benevolence, which refers to "the extent to which the trustee is believed to want to do the good to the trustor, aside from egocentric profit motive" (Mayer et al., 1995, p.718.as cited in Jeacle & Carter, 2011). The last factor is integrity, which assumes that the trustee sticks to a set

of principles that the trustor finds acceptable (Mayer et al., 1995.as cited in Jeacle & Carter, 2011). The interrelationship between the three factors lies at the fact that if a trustor believes that the ability, benevolence and integrity of the trustee are high then a high level of trust is established and vice versa. Nevertheless, the author notes that the trustor's propensity to trust should also be taken into consideration in each scenario. This factor, according to the author, can be influenced by the passage of time, i.e. trust is generally viewed as a phenomenon that increases over time (Boon & Holmes, 1991; Lewicki & bunker, 1996; Powell, 1996; Zaheer, McEvily & Perrone, 1998.as cited in Jeacle & Carter, 2011).

Besides personal based trust, system trust should also be taken into consideration. Within this concept, symbolic tokens and expert systems are identified as central concepts (Giddens, 1990.as cited in Jeacle & Carter, 2011). "Symbolic tokens are media of exchange which have standard value, and thus are interchangeable across a plurality of context" (Giddens, 1991, p. 18.as cited in Jeacle & Carter, 2011). In the hospitality industry, symbolic tokens can be the star rankings system of hotels and the brand names of particular international hotel chains. The expert systems are another form of disembedding mechanism that forms the second component of abstract systems. In relation to travel, the act of going to a travel agent and booking a week's holiday is predicated on the functioning of an expert system (Jeacel & Carter, 2011). Encounters with experts might be frequent or consultations might take place on a more episodic basis. The moment when the client visits a travel agent is called the access point, and it is important in instilling both credibility and trust in the client's mind. Nevertheless, when the client decides to become an independent traveller and make the booking directly with an hotelier, the access point between the client and the expert systems changes. It is no longer premised upon the face-to-face interaction between the client and the agent, instead the system is accessed via the Internet.

Additionally, the client's trust is placed in their interactions with newly emerging customer review sites such as TripAdvisor, while previously it is vested in the traditional intermediary. This newly placed trust, according to Giddens (1990, p. 88.as cited in Jeacle & Carter, 2011) is much since they are "places of vulnerability for abstract systems, but also junctions at which trust can be maintained or built up".

The question, however, remains unanswered that who do the travellers trust, if he intends to arrange the trip himself? Would it be the traditional intermediary, or the social media, or their relatives? In 2009, Cox et al. conducted a research that studied the preferred information source among Australian traveller when making travel arrangements. Finding from this study suggest that state tourism website is considered the most important information source, followed by street directories and information given by tour operator. This study also concluded that travel reviews written by independent travellers on websites and social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube or MySpace are proven to be not significantly reliable.

Another study that attempt to find out the credibility of travel blog was carried out by Mack, RBlose and Bing Pan (2008). Findings from this study suggest that the perceived credibility of travel blogs is no comparison to that of the traditional WOM. This study concluded that blogs can be distinguished from traditional WOM by the perceived trust among consumers, and that travel blogs are perceived to be significantly less trustworthy than traditional WOM. To further understand the findings, the authors argue that this issue can be explained by the nature of listeners and the message givers when exchanging information, since it had been proven by previous researches that a consumer might interact in different levels with close acquaintances such as family, friends and online strangers with whom he has weak or no ties.

Conducting a relatively similar research to Cox et al.'s study (2009) but using sample that are travellers reside in the Former Soviet Union Republics, Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (2012) came up with the conclusion that among all resources, information provided by friends and relatives are the most trustworthy source, followed by information provided by other travellers in various websites. Advertisement and information available in the mass media are considered the least trustworthy source, according to the study's findings. These results are somehow inconsistent with the ones provided by Cox et al. (2009), nevertheless, the authors argue that the different findings might be caused by the difference in sample's characteristics, especially in terms of social media use. Nevertheless, the findings are somewhat in line with what was presented in Mack, RBlose & Bing Pan's study (2008), which might confirm the level of trustworthiness of information provided through traditional WOM.

It is clear that findings from this research are in line with that of Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides's findings (2012), and thus are somewhat conflicting with findings from Cox et al.'s research (2009). Possible reasons for these conflicting results are the different in social media usage across nations, which has once been suggested and confirmed by Gretzel et al. (2008). Cox et al. (2009) used sample which are residents of Australia, while Fotis, Buhalis and Rosside (2012) employed sample groups which are residents of the Former Soviet Union Republics, and in this research, the sample group are all young Norwegian students. Due to the differences in culture, social as well as economy situations, each sample group might expose a different reaction towards eWOM.

It should also be noted that the power of friend's information, which represent the traditional WOM is confirmed by the findings in this research. It is completely in line with findings from Mack, RBlose and Bing Pan (2008), which stated that information from travel blogs is no

comparison to the traditional WOM. Fong (2010), in a recent research regarding the power of online review, has also confirmed that online reviews have been found to be less influence than the views of friends and families.

3.2. Ambivalent feelings toward TripAdvisor's credibility: the integrity of TripAdvisor's reviews

One of the interesting findings that were clearly shown in the research is the percentage of consumers who are willing to book an accommodation despite the unfavored information of the place on TripAdvisor. In all analyses, while the percentage of consumers who would go against recommendations from their friends stay consistently under 10%, the proportion of people who would book the accommodation against the recommendations from TripAdvisor fluctuates significantly, with the range from 0% up to 24%. It should be noted that in the Average Importance Score report for all analyses, the gap between friend's recommendation and TripAdvisor's information is insignificant, which indicates that consumers consider these two sources equally important. However, with the percentages of reversals report, it is clear that consumers still express concerns toward the credibility of information in this website. It is clear that the nature of TripAdvisor's reviews is user generated content (UGC), hence it is understandable that its credibility is questionable. According to Ayeh, Au & Law (2013), some of the concerns regarding this type of information lie at the subjective nature of the views of UGCs contributors. When evaluating UGC, consumers are faced with the difficulty of evaluating information from complete strangers (Dellarocas, 2003; Park, Lee & Han, 2007; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008.as cited in Ayed, Au & Law, 2013). Additionally, the population of UCG contributors is a blend of amateurs, semiprofessional and professional people, thus making the value of the information questionable (Burgess et al., 2009.as cited in Ayed, Au & Law, 2013).

It should also be noted that in evaluating the quality of eWOM's content, the source credibility also plays an important role on determining the quality of the message. Information about the source, the writer, or the website where the message is published is often evaluated by the consumers, along with the content of the message. A source should be perceived as more credible when it possess great expertise and less prone to bias (Brown, Broderick & Lee, 2007). Source expertise refers to the perceived competence of the source providing information, while source bias refers to the possible incentives that might show in the source's information. According to Gotlieb and Sarel (1991.as cited in Brown et al., 2007), individual evaluation of the WOM's trustworthiness will be decided in terms of the receiver's belief that the sender's opinion are unbiased. Ratneshwar and Chaiken, 1991 (as cited in Schindler & Bickart, 2005) suggested that cues that give a source the appearance of expertise, such as credentials and past achievements, can also help increasing the persuasive effect of a eWOM message. Brown et al.'s study also suggests that the quality of the website where eWOM messages are published is also considered an important factor. It assumes a predominant place in individual's evaluation of source credibility.

In the case of the website TripAdvisor, it is clear that the website is in fact considered a quality forum where travellers can freely discuss various topics in many aspects of the tourism industry. In order to ensure the quality of the review's content, all users are required to register their personal details with them, and commercial email addresses are not allowed. The headline 'we have zero tolerance for fake reviews!' is also carried on top of the webpage whenever users enter the website to write a review, and certain acts to control and monitor all reviews are also performed, such as showing the user's number of reviews, helpful votes, or number of reviewed properties, etc. Nevertheless, despites all of this acts, the issue of fictitious reviews and the

submission of biased reviews still remain a huge concern for the website (Jeacle & Carter, 2011). This can be due to the ease of changing identities in TripAdvisor, as similar to many other UGCs websites, that makes itself vulnerable to strategic manipulations and abuses (Dellarocas, 2003.as cited in Ayed, Au & Law, 2013), thus creating a challenge to the interpretation of the published information. Apparently, findings from this research once again confirm the customer's concerns regarding the quality of TripAdvisor's information, despite their relatively high level of dependency on this information source in making final purchasing decision.

4. Reliability & validity of the study

4.1. Validity

4.1.1. Face validity

Face validity refers to the judgement by the scientific community that the indicators really measure the construct. The face validity of a measure instrument determine how well understood the measurement can be, it concerns the question that, on the face of it, do people believe that the definition and the method of measurement fit (Neuman, 2011). In this thesis, the face validity of the measure instruments was tested by a professor in the Tourism and Marketing field, along with 5 convenient samples.

The first design of the questionnaire includes of all conjoint questions (scenarios) in its basic design, plus two questions concerns the respondents' gender and age and two yes/no questions concerns the travellers level of social media involving when making travel related arrangements. This version of the questionnaire was tested by 3 respondents (convenient samples) and received relatively good comments. The overall comments refer to the fact that the non-conjoint questions are easy to understand and easy to answer. The conjoint questions (scenarios) were a bit confusing and repetitive due to the long introduction with some special words. This comment has been taken into consideration to fix the questionnaire accordingly.

After this step, the questionnaire was judged by a Tourism and Marketing professor who has deep knowledge at modern research methodology as well as Conjoint Analysis. In this step, the questionnaire received various constructive comments that lead to the final and most optimal version of the instrument. First of all, question regarding respondent's age was taken away, since the researcher only plan to use sample that are students at University of Stavanger. This sample group are age limited, thus including an age related question will not lead to desired research

outcomes, as compared to research with wider sample group. Second of all, the yes/no questions concerning the respondent's familiarity with social media were changed into scale questions. A 7 points Likert scale was included, as the scale will help capture the whole phenomenon more fully and properly. Finally, in the conjoint part, pictures was included in each question (scenario) to help respondents imagine the scenario more easily, thus make it simple for the respondents to answer the questions.

4.1.2. Internal and external validity

Internal validity refers to the fact that there is nothing else but the independent variables that influence the dependent variable, while external validity refers to the ability to generalize findings beyond a specific study (Neuman, 2011). According to Green & Srinivasan (1978), the validity of a conjoint analysis can be reported in terms of correlations between the input and the estimated values of the dependent variables. In this research, the report of the Pearson's R, which represents the mentioned correlations, shows significant data. Additionally, as part of the conjoint design, four conjoint questions were categorized as hold out cases. These profiles were rated by the subjects but not used by the conjoint procedure for estimating utilities. Instead, the conjoint procedure computes correlations between the observed and predicted scores for these profiles as a check on the validity of the utilities. Details of the report are as followed:

Table 11. Pearson's R and Kendall's tau for holdouts report

Analysis	Pearson's R		Kendall's tau for holdouts
General	0.997		1.000
Gender difference	Male	0.993	0.944
	Female	0.997	1.000
Experience difference	None	0.983	0.667
	1-2 times	0.989	0.913
	3-4 times	0.988	1.000
	More than 4 times	0.996	0.944
TripAdvisor Usage difference	Low	0.997	0.667
	Neutral	0.992	0.930
	High	0.995	1.000

It can be clearly seen from the above report, the Pearson's R for all analyses are very significant. All of the analyses report Pearson's Rs that are over 0.9, with the highest case of 0.997 and the lowest case of 0.983. Since these data represent the correlations between the observed and estimated preferences, it can be concluded that with significantly high Pearson's R, the estimated and observed preferences are very close to each other.

The Kendall's tau for holdouts has a slightly fluctuate pattern. In four analyses, the Kendall's tau is bigger than the Pearson's R, which is considered an abnormal behaviour of the data (IBM SPSS Conjoint 21, 2012). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the small amount of holdout cases in the design can make it easy to predict the preference, thus inflate the correlations. For the rest of the analyses, Kendall's tau for holdout profiles is smaller than the Pearson's R, and still very

significant, with the lowest case of 0.667 and the highest case of 0.944. Thus, it can be tentatively concluded that the validity of the research is confirmed.

4.2. Reliability

4.2.1. Manipulation check

The reliability of this research is tested using manipulation checks and the test – retest method. Manipulation check refers to a separate measure of independent or dependent variables to verify their measurement validity and experimental realism (Neuman, 2011). As questions in this research's survey were built based on certain real life situations, a manipulation test question was introduced in the end of the survey. The subjects were asked to rate how closely related the experiment is to real life situations, using a scale from 1 to 10. Result from this manipulation check is the mean score of 6.94, with the minimum score of 2 and the maximum score of 10.

Table 12. Manipulation check's mean score

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Manipulation check	88	2	10	6,94	1,698
Valid N (listwise)	88				

Clearly, 6.94 over 10 is not a very significant result. Although it is not a negative result, it still shows that the experiment have not covered all aspects of real life situations, thus make the experiment unreliable to some extends.

4.2.2. Test - retest

To further test this issue, a test – retest method was applied, using a second survey that includes a subset of the conjoint questions. This simple survey consists of a question regarding the gender of the interviewed subjects, and 8 conjoint questions that have already been used in the main survey. Order of these conjoint questions in this second survey was changed, nevertheless all information were kept the same as it was of the original survey. A sub sample group, which are

21 students from the Norwegian Hotel School, participated in this test 3 weeks after the original survey has been conducted. Results from this test show a very similar pattern of behaviours from the subjects, as related to the original sample group. A very significant Pearson's R was also reported, confirming the validity of the retest. Details of the test are as followed:

Table 13. Gender statistics from sub sample group

GENDER

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	11	52,4	52,4	52,4
	Female	10	47,6	47,6	100,0
	Total	21	100,0	100,0	

In terms of sample description, among all 21 subjects, 11 of them are male subjects, adding up to 52.4% of the total sample population. 10 of the subjects are female subjects, adding up to 47.6 of the population sample. Both genders were represented quite equally in this test, which might contribute positively to the quality of the results.
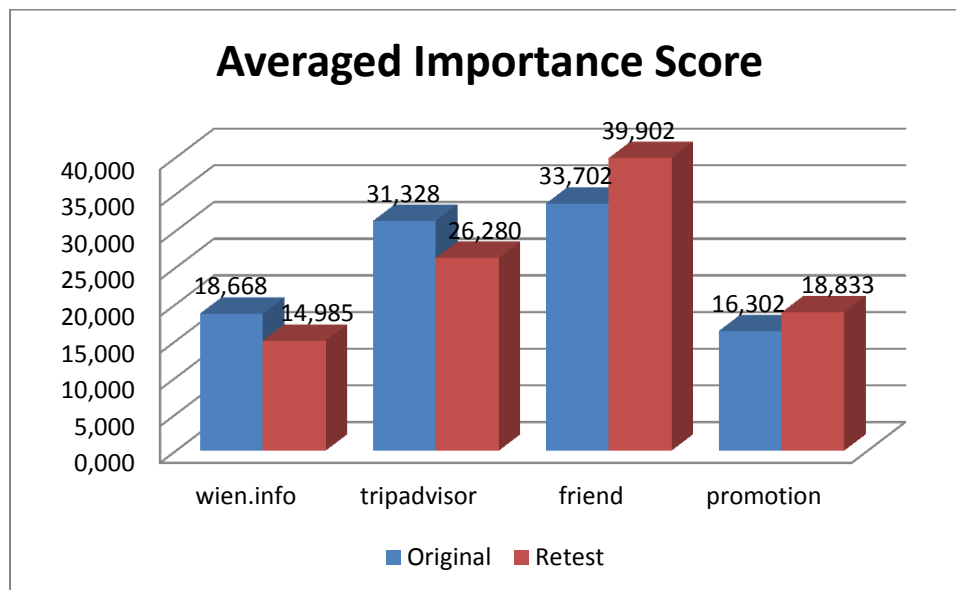
Figure 18. Averaged Importance Score Comparison

In terms of findings, as the most important issue in this test is to test if the subjects rate the importance of each factor consistently. Based on the results of this test, it can be tentatively

concluded that this is the case. In the retest, subjects rate information from friends as the most important information source, followed by TripAdvisor's information. Information from wien.info and promotion programs is still considered insignificant, in comparison to information from the first two sources. Although the in this retest, promotion's information outranks information from wien.info, and the gap between TripAdvisor's information and friend's information are increased quite significantly, the overall results are very similar to that of the original test. Additionally, the retest also obtains a very significant Pearson's R of 0.996, which validates the results of the retest. All in all, the combination of a significant Pearson's R in the retest, and similar results in terms of averaged importance score between the retest and the original research can be used as a proof of the reliability of the research.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Conclusions

In this part of the thesis, conclusions will be drawn from the findings and discussions part, in the contour of the research's questions. It is crucial that the results from all analyses contribute significantly in answering the research question as well as the sub questions that were raised earlier in this paper.

The main research question concerns the traveller's evaluation of eWOM, in the form of TripAdvisor's reviews and ratings, in comparison to other information sources, i.e. local tourism authority, friends' recommendations, and promotion programs. Based on the analyses' results, it can be concluded that information from the website TripAdvisor is considered significantly more important than information from local tourism authority and promotion programs. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the quality of this information source remains questionable, as travellers seem to express an inconsistent level of trust toward TripAdvisor's reviews and ratings. This finding reconfirms the concerns regarding the integrity of TripAdvisor's content, which has been acknowledged by not only the website itself but also a numbers of scholar researches.

Besides the main research question, several others issues which had been mentioned as the research's sub questions have also received tentatively sufficient answers. Regarding the question of the most preferred information channels among all four investigated ones, it is evident that throughout all analyses, recommendations from friends and relatives remain the most reliable and preferred source of information. Although the level of importance gap between itself and information from TripAdvisor is relatively small, it is the nature of friend's recommendations as traditional WOM, i.e. the strong ties between the message givers and receivers (Mack, RBlose & Bing Pan, 2008), in combination with the questionable quality of

information from TripAdvisor that makes friend's recommendation the most favorite travel information source.

In terms differences in gender, experience, and TripAdvisor usage, results from the analyses show some interesting outcomes. In all these additional analyses, information from friends is considered the most reliable sources, followed by TripAdvisor's reviews and ratings; information from promotion programs and local tourism authority are considered significantly less important than the other two sources. In regards of gender differences, with higher percentages of reversal cases in all categories, it appears that the female subjects are more skeptical in terms of trusting these sources of information. Findings from the experience difference analyses show that travellers with less experience tend to trust local tourism authority and promotional programs more than experienced travellers. Finally, one of the most interesting results from the TA usage difference analyses show that those with high level of TA usage actually trust information from friends more than information from the website, and vice versa for the group of subjects with average level of TA usage.

2. Recommendations for future researches

All in all, results from this study contribute significantly in understanding the travellers' behavior patterns in terms of online travel planning, as well as offer a number of interesting findings that can be of great useful in explaining independent travellers' online behaviors. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are certain issues in the paper that might negatively affect the generalization of the findings, of which the most concerned one is the size and demography of the sample. The chosen sample group in this paper is students from the University of Stavanger, Norway, thus the possibility to generalize findings in other circumstances might be limited, due to demographic limitations. As argued in the sample planning, this group of sample does possess

certain characteristics that represent the targeted investigated group, i.e. independent travellers, thus, to some extends, findings from this paper can be applied to other certain circumstance. Nevertheless, it would be desirable that future researches can employ a more diverse group of sample, i.e. including subjects with various age ranges, occupations, marital status, average incomes, and geographic bases, so that these findings can be tested and confirmed or denied if they are applicable in a larger context. Additionally, since this paper focuses on investigating the travel information providers only, some of the other important factors that greatly affect the consumers' choice of accommodation have been left out. Therefore, it is recommended that future researches take into consideration factors such as hotel location, hotel price range or the hotel type (hostels or bed & breakfast, middle range hotels or luxury hotels, etc.), while investigating the traveller's preference in terms of choosing accommodation, so that a broader understanding of the phenomenon can be formed properly.

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Appendix

List of tables

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