

Converting Opinion Seekers in Opinion Givers in the Tourism Industry: Building Trust is Critical!

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Abstract With the Web 2.0, the interpersonal influence now includes its extension in cyberspace with electronic word of mouth. Thus, consumers become producers of information and create content. However, companies face difficulties in making them “partial employees” who will actively participate in co-creating value, in content production and in promoting their products on the web. From a literature review and a qualitative study, we identify eight possible antecedents of consumer participation and customer engagement towards a brand. Using structural equations modeling, we test our model in a French Ski Resort ($N = 1352$) and demonstrate that consumers actively participate in opinion platforms to help companies (resort, destination) and not to vent negative feelings. The low level of consumer participation in opinion platforms is mainly due to their high level skepticism regarding the sincerity of online reviews and the companies' opportunistic and manipulative practices (false reviews, etc.). Companies should trust their customers if they want them to become active promoters of their services on the internet.

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1 Introduction

The development of Web 2.0 breaks the rules of many industries, and especially of the tourism industry. Tourism providers (hotels, restaurants etc..) do not even fully control their communication and have to face three new phenomena:

1. the omnipresence of specialized community sites, and in particular Tripadvisor (40 million unique visitors / month, 40 million reviews, 14 languages),
2. the rise of online travel agencies (opodo, booking, expedia, etc.) that gather almost 3/4 of published comments today,
3. the emergence of new “voices” on travel blogs, travelers’ forums and on social networks (Facebook, etc.).

Companies have then two contradictory objectives: On the one hand, they aim at controlling and influencing what is said online, since they do not really trust their customers and are afraid of the potential negative impact of negative word of mouth (WOM); on the other hand, they want to have engaged customers, who articulate themselves on the Internet, express positive WOM and generate contents on their websites (Van Doorn et al, 2010). However, they face many difficulties to engage their customers to participate in content production on the web 2.0. From our empirical study in France for instance, we found that 56% of consumers read the other tourists’ online reviews before a journey, but only 28% actively participate and give their opinion after their journey. Companies then have to fight against the passivity of the silent majority of customers who passively read online reviews (opinion seekers) but do not actively participate (opinion givers) (Moe et al, 2011).

Empirical studies have been done to examine what generally motivates consumers to articulate themselves offline (Dichter, 1966; Engel et al, 1993; Sundaram et al, 1998) and online (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004; Moe and Trusov, 2011). While the literature looks at what motivates consumers to post online reviews in general, our study aims at understanding what is the impact of individual factors (such as self-confidence) about a specific brand (a ski resort) with the backdrop of the consumer/brand relationship (brand attachment). Furthermore, prior research underestimates the potential impact of consumers’ skepticism about opinion platforms, which is growing, because companies manage their e-reputation

and are suspected to manipulate online reviews. Given that companies aim at controlling and managing their e-reputation on opinion platforms, consumers might be more reluctant to post comments and evaluations and to be actively engaged towards brands. The purpose of this paper is therefore to better understand why and how tourists participate in the web 2.0 and decide to post online reviews on different opinion platforms, such as specialized community websites, online travel agencies' websites, hotels and restaurants' websites, blogs, travelers' forums and social networks. While previous studies highlight general motives for eWOM (altruism, revenge, etc.), we hereafter also consider the individual factor of self-confidence, consumer skepticism about opinion platforms and consumer attachment to the brand.

Firstly, we present a brief literature review on consumer participation in the web 2.0 and on customer engagement to highlight the potential antecedents which have already been emphasized in prior research. Secondly, we present the results of a qualitative study that aimed at deeply understanding the way tourists act and react to opinion platforms. This allows us to highlight additional antecedents to eWOM. From the literature review and the preliminary qualitative study, we then elaborate a conceptual framework and develop hypotheses. Afterward, we show the results of a quantitative study conducted among tourists of a French Ski Resort (Le Grand Bornand, N=1352). Finally, we will draw conclusions from our studies and discuss theoretical and managerial implications.

2 Literature review: Antecedents of customer engagement

For Keller and Berry (2006), 90% of word of mouth conversations take place offline, and these "conversation catalysts" now rely heavily on the Internet as a resource to convey this information to their families and friends. This marketing communication model is more horizontal and customer engagement behavior (CEB) is a key objective. Van Doorn et al (2010) defined CEB, beyond brand communities, as "*the customer's behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers. CEBs include a vast array of behaviors including word-of-mouth (WOM) activity, recommendations, helping other customers, blogging, writing reviews, and even engaging in legal action*". Web

2.0 could be both an opportunity (interactivity and value co-creation) and a threat (loss of control over reputation). According to Moe et al (2011), customers always seek the opinions of others before making a purchase and it is much less common for customers to share their opinions online.

They show that the opinions that potential buyers and social media strategists read only come from a small segment of consumers. But the objective of web 2.0 is not just to identify a relative small number of influential, knowledgeable, communicable and innovative opinion leaders having an influence on a large number of followers. The electronic word of mouth relies heavily on thousands of customers having a personal experience with specific products and services. Therefore, we need to determine what could lead the majority of customers to break the silence. Most empirical studies (see Table 1) do not relate opinion seeking and opinion giving, whereas opinion giving may also depend on consumers' opinions and skepticism concerning opinion platforms.

While the literature looks at what motivates consumers to post online reviews in general (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004), we still miss empirical studies which consider the potential impact of individual factors (such as self-confidence) about a specific brand (Le Grand-Bornand resort) with the backdrop of the consumer/brand relationship. We aim at filling this gap.

3 Qualitative Study

During a first stage, a qualitative study was conducted with the intention to understand why people seek and share personal opinions on the Internet and the way they do it. It was conducted at Le Grand Bornand, a French-Alps ski resort. The semi-directive interviews were conducted as individual interviews with 16 tourists. Each interview lasted 45 minutes. The first part of the interview guide that we developed dealt with the experience of tourists to the station. Respondents were then placed in front of a computer and they had to post a comment about their stay and then, they had to consult comments on the web and react. This allowed us to put them in the position of opinion-platforms users and bring out a number of themes that are omnipresent in the discourse of Internet users. To analyze the content, a thematic analysis was conducted by

Table 1 WOM and eWOM antecedents

AUTHORS	Dichter (1966)	Engel et al (1993)	et al Sundaram et al (1998)	Hennig-Thurau et al (2004)
CONCEPTS	Word-of-Mouth (WOM)			Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)
CONCEPT DEFINITION	WOM is an informal mode of communication between private parties concerning the evaluation of goods and services	WOM is an interpersonal information sought as well as given.	WOM is a form of interpersonal communication where consumers are concerned with their personal experiences with a firm or product. It can be positive or negative (NWOM). The NWOM is correlated with negative consumption experiences.	eWOM is any positive or negative statement made by potential, former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet
IDENTIFIED ANTECEDENTS	Product involvement	Involvement	Product involvement; vengeance; anxiety reduction	Venting negative feelings
	Self involvement	Self enhancement	Self enhancement	Enhance their own self work; positive self enhancement
	Other involvement	Concern for others	Altruism; helping the company	Concern for other; helping the company
	Message involvement	Message intrigue Cognitive dissonance		

grouping by themes the respondents' observations (Savoie-Zajc, 2000). We then carried out the coding operations of the observations. The aim during this content analysis phase consisted of applying to the corpus data processing that allows the access to a different meaning without distorting the original content. Therefore, we have categorized the topics putting together common elements under the following headings: exerting power and setting freedom of expression, rewards and punishments given to professionals, self-confidence in the ski resort choice, skepticism concerning the potential influence on others, difficulty in forming an opin-

ion based on very different evaluations, distrust toward the professionals' practices on the web (hotels, restaurants, etc.), and attachment to the resort.

This research confirms and complements previous studies (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004) which underline general personal motivations, but fail to consider individual factors (self-confidence) and consumers' skepticism about opinion platforms. We also note that consumers do not seek the approval of others and ego-reinforcement through web 2.0 participation. In most opinion platforms, most comments and evaluations are totally anonymous (except for social networks). In this qualitative study, we simultaneously consider opinion seeking and opinion giving and show that these activities are not totally independent. Moreover, in the tourism industry, we note that consumers' identification and affiliation with the resort strongly influences their participation in opinion platforms: The more committed to the service brand the consumers are, the more active they are likely to be on opinion platforms.

4 Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Based on prior literature and qualitative study, we elaborate a conceptual framework to explain consumer participation in opinion platforms in general as well as customer engagement behavior regarding a specific brand in particular (see Fig. 1). Firstly, we highlight personal motives, which lead consumers to articulate themselves on opinion platforms. Previous studies (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004) underline that consumers express their opinions to:

1. help other consumers (altruism), without expecting any rewards in return,
2. exert power, e.g. influence companies' decisions and restore equity in consumer-company relationships,
3. venting negative feelings (vengeance) and attribute rewards and punishments to companies,
4. helping the company, in improving its services and developing its activities.

We also assume the potential role of three types of consumer confidence:

1. confidence in themselves in their skills and ability to select a good product/service (self-confidence is a dimension of personality that reflects a person's perceived control over him or herself and the environment, which is based on a personal history of successful goal-directed behavior, Tafarodi and Swann (1996)),
2. confidence in others' comments and evaluations, in particular in the sincerity of the opinions delivered online,
3. confidence in the marketers' online practices.

Previous studies (Sher and Lee, 2009) underline that online reviews foster consumer skepticism and cast doubts on trustworthiness of these online messages. The authors see consumer skepticism as a consumer tendency to believe or disbelieve in online reviews. In our study, we postulate that skepticism is not a consumer individual variable but a situational variable based on online reviews' perceived sincerity. When consumers are suspicious about the companies' practices on opinion platforms (false comments, e-reputation management, etc.), they are less likely to participate. In contrast, when they believe in the sincerity of other consumers' comments and evaluations found on these platforms, they are more likely to share and express their opinions with them by reciprocity. The source credibility remains a key driver of communication. Furthermore, self-confident consumers are less reluctant to share their opinions, since they believe they have an expertise in the field (tourism, ski resort, etc.) which could be useful for others. We also integrate an additional antecedent to consumer participation on opinion platforms concerning a specific brand: consumers' attachment to the brand. Park et al (2010) define "*brand attachment as the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self*". Since the brand represents who they are (e.g. an identity basis) or because it is personally relevant (an instrumentality basis), consumers are more likely to actively promote its products and services online and to become its "advocates" in opinion platforms. Therefore, we develop our hypotheses by drawing upon the theoretical frameworks on the motives of WOM and eWOM that we discuss above (Tabular 1). Our main hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1.

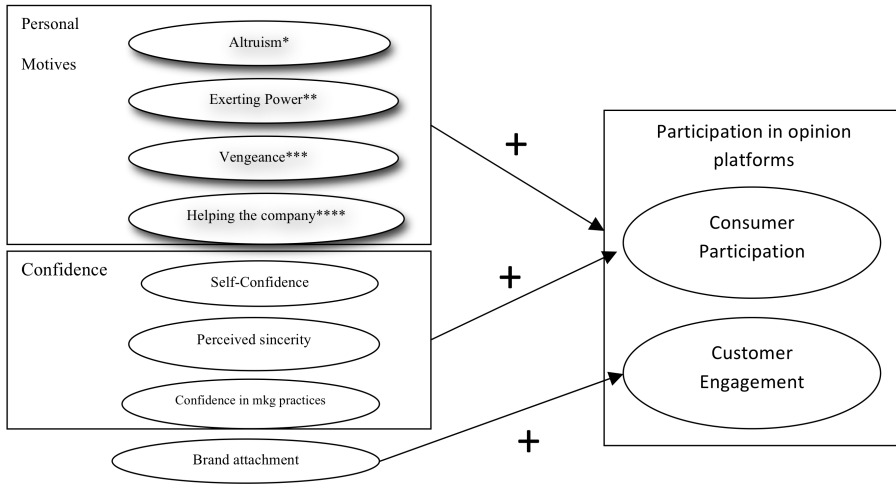


Fig. 1 A conceptual framework of the study

5 Quantitative Study

During a second stage, a quantitative study was conducted with the intention to measure the impact of the previously identified variables on Internet-users information seeking and participation on the web 2.0. We sent a message to an emailing list provided by the Grand Bornand Tourist Office (Savoy). The survey was self-administered by the Internet using software sphinx online, we collected 1385 answers from Le Grand-Bornand tourists. To estimate general consumer participation, we asked them whether they have posted reviews, gradings or evaluations (yes / no) on six types of opinion platforms: Specialized community websites (trip advisor for instance), online travel agencies websites (expedia, etc.), hotels and restaurants' websites, blogs, travelers' forums and social networks (facebook for instance). Then, we summed up the scores to capture the level of consumers' participation in web 2.0 platforms (from 0 to 6). To apprehend customer engagement toward the Grand Bornand, we asked them to indicate how frequently they have posted online reviews concerning this ski resort during the last year (from 1 "never" to 5 "very often").

To measure the eight independent variables shown in Figure 1, we refer to measurement scales which have been developed in the literature (see Table 2). These measurement scales were then adapted to the e-

Table 2 Questionnaire

First part: “You and the tourism”	We asked questions about the frequency of holidays, ways of booking, behavior in case of satisfaction and dissatisfaction and trip preparation.
Second part: “You and the Internet”	We asked questions about Internet and opinion platforms uses. We used our qualitative results to workout items about exerting power, desire for vengeance, altruism toward company and toward other consumers, skepticism toward professionals’ practices, willingness to help companies (resorts)
Third part: “You and Le Grand-Bornand”	We asked questions about frequency, pattern, location and behavior on the web regarding Le Grand Bornand. We also measure the psychological attachment between the individual and the ski resort (Lacoeuilhe: brand attachment scale, 1999)

tourism context and translated into French. We used the same format for all items - Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) - in order to make answering easier and increase the response rate. As suggested by Churchill (1979), we implemented an iterative process to improve the measurement scales’ reliability and validity. The questionnaire was first administered to master’s students and then, after measurement scale purification, to the final sample. Our constructs were then refined in order to improve the psychometric qualities of our measurement scales. We first performed an exploratory factor analysis (oblimin). As expected, this led to the extraction of ten factors. The measurement scales show the psychometric qualities (reliability and validity) to be adequate, even though the items were mixed in the questionnaire so as to not artificially increase the validity of the measures. Then, using the structural equations method (AMOS software), we performed a Confirmatory Factor Analysis with these 8 constructs (latent variables) and 32 items (manifest variables). We observe that all constructs exhibit a satisfactory degree of convergent validity: standardized factor loadings are all significant and vary between 0.60 and 0.94; the average variances extracted vary between 0.50 and 0.78, which means the variance of each construct is better explained by its measures than by error (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Reliability coefficients (Rho) are also satisfactory (between 0.80 and 0.91).

Table 3 Results

Antecedents	Consequences	Standardized Coefficient	P
Consumer participation			
Altruism		-0.00	0.99
Exerting power		-0.05	0.55
Vengeance		0.02	0.75
Help the company		0.36	0.00
Self-confidence		-0.07	0.06
Perceived sincerity of online reviews		0.22	0.00
Confidence in marketing practices		-0.07	0.04
Customer engagement			
Altruism		0.07	0.33
Exerting power		-0.12	0.12
Vengeance		0.04	0.63
Help the company		0.32	0.00
Self-confidence		0.01	0.74
Perceived sincerity of online reviews		0.15	0.00
Confidence in marketing practices		-0.03	0.47
Brand Attachment		0.19	0.00

6 Main results

From our total sample (N=1382), we found that 753 (56%) are opinion seekers and have read or posted online reviews during the last five years. While 56% read online reviews on tourism, half of them (28%) are opinion givers and have already posted comments, reviews, evaluations, etc. on - at least - one of the web 2.0 platforms (specialized community websites, online travel agencies websites, blogs, travelers' forums or social networks). Since we address the issue of converting these opinion seekers in opinion givers, we hereafter focus on these 753 consumers and do not consider other tourists who have no experience with opinion platforms. We apply structural equation modeling (Amos software) to test our hypotheses presented in Figure 1 (RMSEA=0.06). Results are shown in Table 3.

Our main findings are: Firstly, consumers tend to post online reviews to help the companies in improving their services and promoting their destination. It has an effect on general consumer participation ($\beta=0.36$, $P < 0.01$) and also on customer engagement towards the Grand Bornand ski resort ($\beta=0.32$, $P < 0.01$). Secondly, the perceived sincerity of posted reviews is critical to consumers' general participation ($\beta=0.22$, $P < 0.01$)

and engagement ($\beta=0.15$, $P<0.01$). To convert opinion seekers in opinion givers, managers have to build consumer confidence in opinion platforms. Thirdly, as expected in Figure 1, brand attachment has also a positive influence on customer engagement on opinion platforms ($\beta=0.19$, $P<0.01$). Fourthly, contrary to our expectations, we found that consumer skepticism concerning online marketing practices tends to enhance their participation in opinion platforms. In other words, consumers aim at fighting against marketers' manipulative practices by sharing their own experiences with other consumers. The more skeptical they are, the more active they will be. Fifthly, contrary to prior literature on WOM and e-WOM, altruism, exerting power or desire of vengeance are not drivers of consumer participation on opinion platforms dedicated to tourism. These personal motives do not have any impact. Finally, self-confidence has no significant influence on consumer participation and customer engagement. However, we note that self-confidence has a negative effect on consumer participation at the $p < 0.10$ level ($\beta=-0.07$, $P<0.10$). This raises additional questions, since, contrary to our expectations, the more self-confident tourists are, the less active they are on opinion platforms. Given their subjective expertise, they may believe they do not need any information from other customers.

7 Discussion

The purpose of our study was to explore the effects of personal motives, confidence and brand attachment on consumer participation on opinion platforms dedicated to tourism, and the mechanism supporting the effects. A qualitative and a quantitative study were conducted. Two major findings emerged: first, the perceived sincerity of online reviews has a major role in consumer participation and second, the desire to help the company influences consumer participation and customer engagement towards the ski resort. Our empirical study ($N = 1352$) also leads to results which contradict prior literature on WOM and e-WOM. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the mechanism of online consumer participation and customer engagement antecedents. Most tourists want to help companies (resort, destination) and do not see their participation in opinion platforms as destructive acts (vengeance). Man-

agers in tourism should therefore communicate on the sincerity of online reviews and avoid opportunistic online practices. They can trust their customers and let the “invisible hand” regulate the consumers’ opinions. Otherwise, they will not be able to convert their customers in opinions givers, content generators and promoters of their destination.

Further investigation is needed concerning the possible opposite effects of skepticism on customer participation (Boush et al, 1994; Forehand and Grier, 2003): some consumers who are skeptical towards opinion platforms might be reluctant to make efforts and write comments, considering their lack of power or influence. In contrast, as we show, some consumers who are skeptical towards opinion platforms might also increase their participation in online opinion platforms to “tell the truth”, contribute to more transparency and authenticity, and regulate the markets. Depending on the customer (age, gender, personal innovativeness, etc.), skepticism might lead to activity or inactivity. To uncover the mechanisms that block users from writing online reviews, personal barriers such as fear, ego, shyness, etc. might also be investigated. Companies could make use of these differences and differentiate their strategies.

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