

THE ROLE OF ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH IN THE TOURISM MARKET

Dina Lončarić
Ivana Ribarić
Vlatka Farkaš

Abstract

In the context of contemporary trends in the tourist market, marketing communication has reached a whole new level. As the process of providing information, ideas and emotions, with the ultimate goal of achieving a certain effect, marketing communication is immensely important for the tourism industry. In order to meet the challenges of modern society, marketing experts should recognize the benefits of the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Its characteristics enable a high level of flexibility related to accessibility, a relatively high level of reliability and the possibility of instantaneously reaching a huge audience.

Purpose – Taking into account a number of benefits and advantages of using e-WOM, the purpose of this paper is to determine the role and importance of e-WOM in the travel decision making process.

Methodology – The paper is based on theoretical and empirical research. The theoretical part of the paper describes the key concepts. In order to achieve the research purpose, empirical research was conducted on a convenience sample of 129 Croatian citizens. The survey instrument was adapted from previous research (Jalilvand et al. 2011; Bronner and de Hoog 2011; Gruen et al. 2006; Lopez and Sicilia 2014; Xu 2014). The survey was conducted in May 2015 using a 22-item structured written questionnaire completed by the respondents. Descriptive and cluster analyses were used to obtain the goals of the research.

Findings – Results of the study showed that the effects of e-WOM are the only real indicator of the value of products or services, taking into account their independence and objectivity, and the fact that they are not paid or purchased, fabricated or falsified.

Contribution – This paper contributes to both theory and practice. The contribution of this paper is visible in proving the importance of the concept of e-WOM in the travel decision making process. Although it is conducted on a convenience sample, this study can provide good insight into attitudes of the respondents related to e-WOM. At the same time, for a tourist company, e-WOM means an objective presentation of products and services at minimum cost, often with a bigger effect on the sales and competitiveness in comparison to other forms of advertising.

Keywords: e-WOM, e-marketing, marketing communication, tourist market

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of the internet, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has become an important factor affecting consumers' product evaluation, especially in a multidisciplinary field such as tourism. While making decisions regarding travel and vacation planning, potential tourists search for information of tourism products and services in order to reduce uncertainty and perceived risks. Except reading information from the internet during their choice process, prospective tourists also post information

on the internet. Bronner and de Hoog (2011, 16) describe this posted information as e-WOM.

Generally speaking, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (Jalilvand, Esfahani and Samiei 2011, 42). Recent studies (Henning-Thurau et al. 2004; Chen, Wang and Xie 2011; Jalilvand and Samiei 2012; Jimenez and Mendoza 2013) have shown that e-WOM influences consumer behavior and is considered to be more effective than traditional advertising media (Lopez and Sicilia 2013, 29). Therefore, the possibilities of e-WOM could be widely utilized in the tourism market as well.

Marketing literature has widely studied the determinants of traditional WOM influence (Brown and Reingen 1987; Bansal and Voyer 2000). However, as e-WOM develops online, its determinants may differ from those of traditional WOM. Few researchers have examined which factors determine e-WOM influence (Lim and Chung 2011), and most of them have focused on objective data including sales levels, number of posted reviews, or posted ratings (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Dellarocas 2007; Zhu and Zhang 2010; Pai et al. 2013). A very limited number of studies provide an overview of research into the influence of e-WOM in the field of tourism (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan 2008; Brooner and de Hoog 2011; Filieri and McLeay 2013; Chen, Shang and Li 2014). Based on these considerations, this study deals with the phenomenon of e-WOM in the context of tourist activities in the tourism market. The objectives of this study were to investigate the habits of tourists using the Internet in the decision making process when planning tourist vacations and to determine their attitudes regarding the application of e-WOM. This framework leads to three more specific research questions:

- 1) What are the tendencies of Croatian citizens of gathering information via Internet when planning tourist activities?
- 2) What are the attitudes about the usefulness of information published on websites?
- 3) What are the tendencies of tourists to share their own experiences on the Internet?

In terms of its design, following the introduction this paper provides a description of the fundamental concepts based on previously carried out research. This is followed by a description of the methodological design and the results of the empirical research. After discussion, a conclusion is presented along with the limitations of this research and recommendations for future research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Competition has intensified during recent years in almost every sector of the tourism industry, which has resulted in the fact that tourism service providers are now finding it difficult to acquire and keep customers (Ho 2007). Therefore, methods of attracting tourists to a destination are receiving great attention from researchers. Before choosing a destination, tourists are likely to spend a significant amount of time searching for information to support their decision-making. Expansion of the Internet has extended

tourist options for gathering information about the destination and its products by including comments of other tourists posted on the Internet. This has provided tourists with opportunities to offer their own experience about the destination by engaging in electronic-word-of mouth (e-WOM).

1.1. Difference between WOM and e-WOM

Prior to the expansion of the Internet, consumers shared each other's product-related experiences through traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) which was originally defined as "an oral form of interpersonal non-commercial communication among acquaintances" (Arndt, 1967, 3). Nowadays WOM has evolved into a new form of communication, namely electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) communication. According to Henning-Thurau et al., (2004), e-WOM refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual and former customers about a product or a company via the Internet. The web has created both challenges and opportunities for e-WOM communication. E-WOM allows consumers to not only obtain information related to goods and services from the few people they know, but also from a vast, geographically dispersed group of people who have experience with relevant products or services (Jalilvand, Esfahani and Samiei 2011). The big difference between WOM and e-WOM is that in e-WOM recommendations are typically from unknown individuals with whom strong ties are lacking, so "online consumers have difficulty in using source similarity to determine the credibility of information" (Park and Lee 2009, 61). Cheung and Thadaini (2010, 330-331) emphasized several dimensions of difference between WOM and e-WOM, which attribute to the uniqueness of e-WOM communication. Unlike traditional WOM, e-WOM communications possess unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion and its communications are more persistent and accessible. Most of the text-based information presented on the Internet is archived and thus would be made available for an indefinite period of time. Further, they found that e-WOM communications are more measurable than traditional WOM. Traditional WOM emanates from a sender who is known to the receiver of the information, thereby the credibility of the communicator and the message is known to the receiver. On the contrary, the electronic nature of e-WOM in most applications eliminates the receiver's ability to judge the credibility of the sender and his or her message.

To sum up, an advantage of e-WOM is that this channel offers more self-disclosure opportunities because of the greater anonymity offered by the internet. According to Sun et al. (2006, 1105), e-WOM is more influential than traditional WOM due to its speed, convenience, one-to-many reach, and its absence of face-to-face human pressure.

From tourism perspective, in the past, travelers mainly found tourism information from commercial sources in order to form a destination image (Beerli and Martin 2004). As Buhalis and Law state, "the Internet has changed tourism consumer behavior dramatically". Prospective travelers have direct access to a much greater wealth of information provided by tourism organizations, private enterprises and increasingly by other consumers (Buhalis and Law 2008, 611). Blogs, online reviews and social networking websites enable customers to interact virtually and to share information,

opinions and knowledge about all kinds of goods, services and brands (Filieri and McLeay 2014, 44). Scott (2001), Singh et al. (2008), Chen, Shang and Li (2014) indicate weblog (blog) as one of the latest and most quickly expanding forms of media for Internet communication and publication. Prospective tourists can search blogs for subjective travel experiences, or respond to others' experiences. In this regard, a blog can be seen as a medium that carries user-generated content for WOM distribution (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010) while blog posts may represent a type of written WOM (Henning-Thurau et al. 2004). According to Litvin et al. (2008), a blog can be viewed as a many-to-many and asynchronous platform that provides a personal, interactive process for communication and e-WOM exchange.

1.2. e-WOM information quality

Due to reach valuable outcomes, information search can be viewed as a goal-oriented activity (Vogt and Fesenmaier 1998). Consumers gain value from processing retrieved information in order to reach a better decision (Grant et al. 2008). Consumer value comes primarily from the information medium's characteristics such as availability of information (Frias et al. 2008). According to Chen et al. (2014, 789), information source characteristics include: type and amount of external stimuli (information sources), such as movies, guidebooks, magazines and the Internet; quality and quantity of the information and the content and format of the information.

Information quality and quantity are two information attributes that influence information processing strategies deployed by consumers (Grant et al. 2008) and may impact the relationship between information source and destination image (Frias et al., 2008). Travel product selection requires more abundant, higher quality information since the tourism product is complex and difficult to evaluate (Grant et al. 2008; Zafiroopoulos, 2012). Watts et al. (2009) argued that there are dimension of quality that cannot be objectively measured. They referred to this as contextual quality, since its evaluation is subject to contextual factors, such as personal preferences or decision characteristics. Further, they proposed that relevance is one of the most salient contextual qualities. Chen et al. (2014, 789) concluded that from a user's point of view, perceptions of information quality in the context of experience consumption should be interpreted differently than in the context of search goods.

In a travel decision situation, information quality can be defined as the usefulness of available information about travel product attributes in helping tourists evaluate the product (Chen et al. 2014, 789). Chen et al. emphasized that individuals determine information quality based on the perceived value (2014, 789). Thus, measures of information quality, such as accuracy, currency, completeness, credibility, timeliness, relevance, richness and consistency are always perceptual (Chen 2010; Ho 2007). However, imperfect information may harm decision outcomes. As a result of social media content produced by strangers, some researches argue that information quality has become an issue in decision-making. This can be exemplified by the difficulty encountered in the evaluation of information source credibility (McKnight and Kacmar 2006; Armstrong and McAdams 2009; Chesney et al. 2010).

1.3. Information source credibility

Source credibility has been considered a crucial determinant of persuasion (Park and Lee 2009). By Chaiken (1980, 753), it is defined as “a message recipient’s perception of the credibility of a message source”, reflecting nothing about the message itself. It is obvious that source credibility is a complex concept and researchers do not completely agree on its multidimensional nature. As Cheung et al. pointed out, in computer-mediated communication, where textual messages are exchanged, some source attributes are difficult to assess because a virtual discussion may not permit the conveyance of such cues (Cheung et al. 2009).

Lopez and Sicilia (2014) have studied source credibility from a unidimensional (trustworthiness) perspective. In accordance with the prior research, they (2014, 32) emphasized that expertise and trustworthiness have been most often used to examine source credibility. However, these dimensions are difficult to analyze in e-WOM (Qiu et al. 2012). Not all websites offer information about the source, which helps the receiver to deliberate about the source’s level of expertise. However, an increasing number of websites are offering tools through which the receiver is able to determine the level of trust placed in the source by others (Lopez and Sicilia 2014, 32). A good example of these tools is the reputation system used by a large number of websites, by which receivers can determine the level of trust others have placed in different sources. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) described this idea as letting parties rate one another, which can assist them in deciding whether or not to transact with that party in the future. Lopez and Sicilia (2014) pointed out that this system can be easily translated to e-WOM. Thus, when seeking product opinions online, receivers can actively deliberate on source credibility by drawing on these reputation systems.

It is important to highlight the study of Doh and Hwang (2009) who investigated how consumers evaluate e-WOM messages. According to their research results (Doh and Hwang 2009, 197), a few negative messages can be helpful in promoting a positive attitude towards a Web site and credibility of e-WOM messages. This might be fairly reasonable, because some consumers may suspect the credibility of the Web site or the set of multiple e-WOM messages if they find hardly any negative messages.

1.4. Participation in e-WOM communication

Previous studies have shown that consumers are likely to participate in e-WOM communication because consumers have concerns for others’ consumption behavior in an altruistic manner (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993; Lee et al. 2011).

Engel et al. (1993) pointed out that consumers passed along information to others because they had a genuine desire to help others make a better purchase decision and save others from negative experiences. Lee et al. (2011) investigated consumers’ attribution style in online brand communities and found that consumers’ attribution to the communities’ intrinsic motivations of altruism increased their intention to engage in brand community behaviors including e-WOM communication.

Lee et al. (2012, 1055) have emphasized that consumer perceptions of online social ties, social trust and similarity with others have been found to be the important antecedents affecting e-WOM behaviors. This is in accordance with Sun et al. (2006) who found that online social ties with others were positively related to e-WOM behavior because social ties played an important role in the flow of information from consumer to consumer.

The relationships between communication routes and customer involvement have been explored by Tang, et al. (2012). Bronner and de Hoog (2011) have analyzed travelers' motivations to post reviews. According to their research results, vacationers who post reviews are more frequently from the age group younger than 55, usually from high and lower-middle income groups, more frequently from couples. The authors have established 5 main categories in which the motivations for contributing can be set down: self-directed, helping other vacationers, social benefits, consumer empowerment, and helping companies. Further, they pointed out that the main discriminating motivational factor appears to be the one that sets vacationers with a primarily self-directed motivation apart from those with more of an other-directed (helping other vacationers) motivation.

Motivation does indeed influence the type of site chosen by vacationers and the way in which they express themselves on review sites. Vacationers who post and have a largely other-directed motivation prefer consumer-generated sites, comment on more aspects of a vacation, post mainly positive reviews, are more inclined to express themselves by combined use of text and ratings, and contribute more to sites accessible to other vacationers (Bronner and de Hoog 2011, 10). Vacationers who post and have a largely self-directed motivation, prefer marketer-generated sites, comment mainly on a limited number of aspects of a vacation, post more negative reviews and contribute more to sites not accessible to other vacationers.

E-WOM has undoubtedly been a powerful marketing means. In recent years, emerging literature focusing on the effectiveness of e-WOM communication has appeared. However, there is a need for more research that explores the implications of e-WOM in the tourism market.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to respond to the research questions from the beginning of this paper, empirical research was carried out on a convenience sample of 129 citizens of the Republic of Croatia who have, in the course of their life, at least once traveled as tourists. Data were gathered in May 2015 using the *Google Docs* survey method. With regard to the topic of the research, the use of this data collection instrument is considered to be justified.

The data collection form was a 22-point questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions which were formulated based on previous research. The respondents were asked questions about their attitudes about e-WOM in tourism (Jalilvand et al. 2011), their motives and reasons for participating in e-WOM (Bronner and de Hoog, 2011),

the importance of informal information sources and the influence they have on purchasing and customer loyalty (Gruen et al. 2006), the influence of factors such as source message credibility, volume of available information and validity of information regarding e-WOM perception (Lopez and Sicilia 2014), as well as about the elements that influence the level of trust in the online information source (Xu 2014).

Data analysis was performed with the help of the IBM SPSS Statistics 23 package. Descriptive statistics methods were used, as well as cluster analysis as a multivariate method.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Descriptive analysis

The socio-demographic structure of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of respondents (N=129)

Description	Respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	43	33.3
Female	86	66.7
<i>Age</i>		
Up to 18	3	2
19 – 25	87	68
26 – 35	24	19
36 – 45	8	6
46 – 55	7	5
56 and more	0	0
<i>Occupation</i>		
Employed	47	36.5
Unemployed	7	5.4
Student	68	52.7
Retired	1	0.8
Others	3	4.6
<i>Level of education</i>		
Primary school	1	1
Secondary school	43	33
Higher education	78	60
PhD	7	5

Source: research results

The analysis of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents leads to the conclusion that the majority of respondents consists of highly educated individuals under the age of 35 who reside in the Republic of Croatia.

The empirical research examined the respondents' habits with regard to Internet use, especially in terms of gathering information about tourism products and services. It was found that 47% of respondents daily spend more than 3 hours online, 35% use the Internet between 1 and 3 hours a day, and 19% use the Internet 1 hour a day or less.

With regard to using the Internet in order to gather information when planning travel and tourist activities, 58% of the respondents stated that they always used the Internet, 24% used it occasionally and only 6% of the respondents did not use the Internet for organizing and planning their travel. Out of the total 94% of respondents who use the Internet when planning travels, 41% always use informal Internet sources, i.e. they read the comments and recommendations made by others about tourist products and services. Another 41% do this occasionally and 18% do it rarely.

A total of 51.1% of the respondents state that they read the experiences and comments of other Internet users regarding travel and tourist facilities, for the purpose of gathering information needed to make a purchase or travel decision. On the other hand, 22.3% do this because they want to hear first-hand experience, 14.9% read content generated by other travelers after they have made a purchase decision in order to know what to expect from the tourist product or service. It is interesting to note that 9.1% of respondents read comments related to travel and travel services purely out of curiosity, even though they have no intention of traveling, or are not able to travel in the near future to actually make use of these products or services. Finally, 10.8% of respondents state that they have no interest in the comments and experiences of others. Those respondents who do not use the Internet to plan their travel state that the main reason for this is mistrust in the source and the veracity of the information.

The majority of the respondents (34%) reads up to 5 comments, evaluations and recommendations when gathering information from informal communication sources. Moreover, 52% analyzes between 6 and 20 comments, while 14% of respondents invest their time in reading more than 20 comments and references from informal sources.

Table 2: **Information sources on the Internet (N=129)**

SOURCE	%
Official Web site of the destination	47.9
Official Web site of the hotel and other tourism products	43.8
Pinterest	3.3
Online fora	38
Google+	12.4
Facebook	58.7
Twitter	0
Instagram	1.7
LinkedIn	0
Blog	7.4
TripAdvisor, Booking.com, etc.	41.3
YouTube	14.9
News Web sites	20.7

Source: research results

Table 2 displays information sources found on the Internet that are used by respondents when collecting information about tourist destinations or products.

With regard to the popularity of Web sites with user generated content, the research result show that the social networking site Facebook is predominant and was named as a source of information by 58.7% of respondents. This information is not surprising considering that Facebook is the most popular and most widely used social networking site in Croatia.¹ It is followed by the official Web sites of the destinations, the official Web sites of the providers of tourism services, the Web sites for evaluating travel experiences and online fora. Although blogs are globally very popular for sharing travel experiences and advice (Filiari and McLeay 2014), it can be observed that this particular form of informal communication is not very popular in Croatia, and neither are the social networking sites Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn.

A special set of questions was directed towards determining the respondents' attitudes regarding user-generated information on the Internet (Table 3). The respondents largely have a positive attitude towards user-generated content and trust the recommendations and information of other Internet users more than the official information published by the service provider ($M=3.63$, $SD=0.92$).

Table 3: **Respondents' attitudes regarding user-generated online content related to tourism products and services (N=129)**

Item	Mean	SD*
It is important to me how others rate the destination and the tourism offer of the destination	3.57	0.92
I trust the references and comments of other Internet users more than the official information published by the provider	3.63	0.92
The comments and experiences of other Internet users influence my decision	3.54	1.08

*SD – standard deviation

Source: research results

Literature indicates that the credibility of the information source plays an important role in gaining the readers' trust (Park and Lee 2009; Lopez and Sicilia 2014). A fact which has been confirmed by this research (Table 4). The respondents agree that not all Web sites with user comments are equally reliable ($M=4.08$, $SD=0.96$), and that they trust comments where the authors' identity is known more ($M=3.95$, $SD=1.08$).

¹ This is also proven by the fact that in 2015 almost 1.8 million Croatian citizens used Facebook (information taken from: Internet World Stats: usage and population statistics; <http://www.internetworldstats.com>, 14/02/2016)

Table 4: Respondents' attitudes regarding elements that influence the level of trust in the online information source (N=129)

Item	Mean	SD*
I trust those comments that have a known source identity more (visible name and surname, country of origin, profile, etc.)	3.95	1.08
I trust comments that are accompanied by the photo of the user who posted the comment more.	3.55	1.08
Not all Web sites with comment sections are equally reliable.	4.08	0.96

*SD – standard deviation

Source: research results

The respondents place the most trust in comments published on Web sites intended for evaluating tourism products and services such as Booking.com or TripAdvisor (M=3.84, SD=0.89). This is followed by online fora (M=3.39, SD=1.02), user comments on official tourism company pages (M=3.37, SD=1.01), social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest (M=3.32, SD=0.88), YouTube (M=3.26, SD=0.89), blogs (M=3.25, SD=0.97) and news Web sites (M=3.09, SD=1.05).

Respondents most frequently ignore information gathered from informal online sources when the user identity is unknown and the medium is unreliable (33%), and if an insufficient number of comments is available (29%). Up to 27% of respondents generally consider the Internet to be an insufficiently reliable source and 11% will doubt the reliability of the source if the comments contradict their previous knowledge about the subject.

When information from informal sources contradict the individual's previous knowledge and is different from the perception this person has of the tourism product or service, up to 80% of respondents will seek further information in other places such as the travel agency in order to check the validity of the information. Almost 12% of respondents would even decide not to visit the destination or buy the product or service for the abovementioned reason, while 7% would ignore what they read and rely on their previous knowledge about the product, service or destination. This information shows how strong the influence of user-generated online content is on the purchase decision.

One of the objectives of the research was to determine to what extent respondents were inclined to share their own experiences on the Internet. More than 69% of respondents confirmed that they sometimes share their own opinions as well as read other people's comments, more than 27% never post their own opinions via the Internet, but they read other people's, 3% sometimes post their own opinion, but they do not read other people's comments, and 15% never post nor read other people's comments.

It has been determined that 59% of respondents share their own opinions and comments on the Internet only when they are extremely satisfied or extremely dissatisfied. Almost 26% of respondents do not want to waste time on sharing their experiences via the Internet, 9% do not see any point in doing so, 4% always have to

share their experiences via the Internet, and 2.5% pointed out that they do not share their opinions online, but that they see a point in doing that.

The respondents were asked why they share their opinions, comments and recommendations regarding tourism products and services via the Internet. In accordance with previous research (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993; Lee et al. 2011), 53% of respondents name altruistic motives, i.e. the desire to help other Internet users make the right decision, 31% feel the need to publicly express their opinion, and 28% are motivated by the possibility of influencing positive changes. Furthermore, 24% feel that posting on the Internet has greater impact than directly addressing the provider, which is why they decide to participate in e-WOM, i.e. expressing their opinions on the Internet. Also, 16% of respondents state that the main reason for posting comments online is to help the destination or service/product provider, whereas 14% use this method of communication to deal with frustrations that were caused by dissatisfaction with the tourist product or service. The least represented motives are financial benefit and creating a positive image for oneself.

3.2. Cluster analysis

After the descriptive analysis of the research results, a cluster analysis was conducted with the purpose of profiling market segments in terms of their tendencies and habits with regard to e-WOM. The TwoStep Cluster method was applied. Five variables were used in order to segment the respondents: reading the experiences, comments and recommendations by others regarding travel, using the internet as a source of information when planning travel, number of read comments, importance of e-WOM and tendency to share one's own experiences.

The conducted cluster analysis yielded two clusters. Out of the total number of respondents 59% belonged to the "moderate e-WOM users" cluster. Although they consider e-WOM to be important, the majority of them (67%) only occasionally reads other people's comments and recommendations online and they sometimes use the Internet as a source of travel information. On average they read up to 5 comments and recommendations by other people, yet they are not inclined towards sharing their own opinions (48% only comment when they are extremely dissatisfied or extremely satisfied). The second cluster, "passionate e-WOM users", takes up 41% of the respondents. In this cluster, 96% always use the Internet to gather travel information, and 94% almost always read other people's comments and recommendations, of which a large group (35%) reads between 10 and 20 comments. Although a smaller portion of these respondents (6%) always shares their experiences with others, the majority (75%) does this only when they are extremely dissatisfied or extremely satisfied.

4. DISCUSSION

The advantages of using e-WOM, especially while planning vacation activities, have been recognized among the respondents. This was confirmed by the results of the empirical research which show that respondents participate in e-WOM communication to a solid extent while planning tourism activities. That is to say, 58% of respondents

always use the Internet when gathering travel information, of which the majority use informal Internet sources, i.e. they read other people's comments and recommendations regarding tourist products and services, as well as tourist experiences regarding travel and tourist facilities.

The respondents mainly hold a positive attitude towards user-generated Internet content, and they rely more on their comments and recommendations than on information published by the provider. It is therefore not surprising that the research determined that the Web site that is most used by respondents as a source of information is the social networking site Facebook. However, the respondents agree that not all Web sites are equally reliable, and they emphasize that they trust the comments more when the source of the information is known. Moreover, if the information from informal sources contradicts their previous knowledge, 12% of respondents state that they would decide not to visit the destination, or buy the product/service. This finding points to the strong influence that e-WOM has over acting on tourist intentions, and it also confirms the importance of information credibility, which is consistent with previous research results (Park and Lee 2009; Lopez and Sicilia 2014). 69% of the respondents confirmed that they sometimes publish, as well as read other people's comments, which points to the respondents' tendency to share their experiences via the Internet. Achieved level of satisfaction by consuming tourist product or service proved to be a significant factor influencing the sharing of impressions. Namely, 59% of respondents share their own opinions and comments on the Internet only when they are extremely satisfied or extremely dissatisfied. The research has also confirmed that altruistic motives are the most significant when it comes to participation in e-WOM communication, which had been previously found in research by Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1993), as well as Lee et al. (2011).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the habits of Croatian citizens in e-WOM communication in the context of the decision making process while planning tourist vacations. The usefulness of the information published on the Internet was also tested, together with the popularity of specific information sources. The research has also provided an answer to the question regarding the tourists' tendency of sharing information of their tourist experience.

Finding according to which 58% of respondents use the Internet when planning tourist activities, provides the answer to the first research question. When collecting data from informal sources, 34% of respondents read up to 5 comments, evaluations and recommendations, 52% of them invest their time reading between 6 and 20 reviews, while 14% of respondents analyzed over 20 comments from informal sources. Although the official Web sites of destinations, hotels and other facilities have proven to be popular base of informative content, according to research results, social network Facebook has a dominant role as a source of information.

The respondents expressed a positive attitude towards user-generated content, which gave the answer to the second research question. However, the respondents closely link the usefulness of information to the reliability of information sources, and more trust comments where the author's identity is known more. They also place more trust in the comment published on Web sites intended for evaluating tourism products and services such as Booking.com or TripAdvisor.

The third research question was to determine the tendencies of tourists to share their own experiences on the Internet. More than 69% of the respondents conformed that they sometimes share their experiences, mainly guided by altruistic motives (53%).

The recognition of the advantages of e-WOM communication was confirmed by the results of the conducted cluster analysis, according to which 59% of respondents belong to the "moderate e-WOM users" cluster, whereas the remaining 41% belong to the "passionate e-WOM communication users". Taking into account the specifics of each cluster segment, it is necessary to determine a special form of communication, in accordance with the user's preferences. With the users, who are less inclined to use e-WOM, it is recommended to communicate using classic means of communication, such as advertising and web sites). In the case of passionate e-WOM users, intensive use of social networks is recommended. Acknowledging the distinct tendency to sharing and reading comments about tourist experiences can be an extremely significant indicator for marketing managers, who have to be aware of the importance that this type of gathering information holds in the modern world of Internet networks.

From a tourism perspective, e-WOM communication provides numerous possibilities for tourism companies by making it possible to objectively present tourism products and services with minimum expenses, and often with greater impact on sales and competitiveness when compared to other forms of advertising. The precondition is to establish a reliable communication channel that will enable the exchange of opinions and experiences. In fact, gaining insight into tourist satisfaction is one of the fundamental factors for evaluating and improving tourism products and services.

The limitations of this research should be considered because of scientific objectivity when interpreting research results. Due to restrictions regarding time and financial means the research was conducted on a relatively small convenience sample. Since the research was carried out with the help of *Google Docs* tools via the Internet, one of the limitations is also that only respondents with Internet access were included in the research. Furthermore, the research did not include foreign tourists, but only citizens of the Republic of Croatia. The research encompassed numerous issues within this area, but has because of that lost a certain depth of study. This research can, therefore, serve to gain an insight into the attitudes of Croatian citizens regarding e-WOM communication as well as a basis for further research on this topic.

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Dina Lončarić, PhD, Assistant Professor
University of Rijeka
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Opatija
Primorska 42, P.O.Box 97, 51410 Opatija, Croatia
Phone: +385 51 294 187
E-mail: dina.loncaric@fthm.hr

Ivana Ribarić, MA, Assistant
University of Rijeka
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Opatija
Primorska 42, P.O.Box 97, 51410 Opatija
Phone: +385 51 294 757
E-mail: ivana.ribaric@fthm.hr

Vlatka Farkaš, MA
University of Rijeka
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Opatija
Primorska 42, P.O.Box 97, 51410 Opatija
Phone: +385 98 9265 310
E-mail: farkas.vlatka@gmail.com