

A THEORETICAL MODEL ON INFLUENCE OF EWOM ON TRAVELERS' INTENTION TO CHOOSE DOMESTIC DESTINATION

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Abstract

In the recent years, various studies on roles of electronic word of mouth in the information researching process of online clients have been a topic of great interest for researchers. However, the majority of the researches center on the impact of online evaluations on customers' buying decisions of common goods. Even fewer studies pay attention to tourism sector, especially to travelers' intents in selecting tourist destinations. This paper, therefore, attempts to evaluate the impact of electronic word of mouth (EWOM) on travelers' intention to choose domestic destination through the combination of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and the self-congruity theory. This particular approach provides interesting implications in development of destinations, promotion of travelers' interests.

Key words: *Electronic word of mouth (EWOM), Self-congruity theory, Theory of planned behavior (TPB), Travelers' intention.*

1. Introduction

The tourism industry has been playing an increasingly important role in economic development of Viet Nam. Often viewed as an attractive and safe destination for domestic and foreign tourists, Vietnam's tourism industry has experienced a strong and fairly solid growth in recent years. Specifically, Vietnam's tourism has grown continuously over the years with an average growth rate of over 10% per year and Vietnam is among the top 10 fastest growing tourist destinations in the world. In 2019, the number of foreign visitors reached over 18,008 million, the highest ever so far, with an increase of 16.2% compared to 2018 (General Department of Statistics, 2018, 2019). In 2020, the tourism industry is heavily affected by the Covid-19 epidemic, losing US\$ 23 billion, reducing 80% of international visitors, 50% of domestic tourists (Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism Nguyen Ngoc Thien told the National Assembly). Vietnam National Administration foresees the tourism industry will still have to face with further difficulties. Thus, to develop domestic tourism, one of the more viable solutions is to attract more Vietnamese people by helping them form

interest on selecting domestic destinations.

One of the method to improve domestic interest as by travel reviews. Travel reviews are useful for travel decision-making as they provide travelers with indirect experiences. Previous studies have shown that a large number of travelers consult different sources of information before making a decision to buy a product or choose a travel destination for their trip (Fodness, 1997, Lim, 2016, Lizbeth Marie J Lim, 2016). Here we can see that information plays an increasingly important role in influencing the behavioral intent of visitors, especially “word of mouth” from people with travel experience through internet communication channels. So we can come to an early conclusion, EWOM has a significant impact on tourism (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012).

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) developed in 1991 focused on customer intent instead of their actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to Hale, intent is the best predictor and central to the behavior, and is an individual's willingness to perform specific behaviors (Hale et al., 2002). TPB has been applied in many studies of social behavior, especially in the field of tourism (Lam and Hsu, 2006, Phosikham et al., 2015, B. Sparks and Pan, 2009). As such, the adoption of TPB model is suitable in the tourism context to predict visitors' behavior and intentions in selecting destinations. Additionally, Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a theory of expected value which assumes that people are rational and have a plan when they engage in behavior and try to maximize satisfaction through communication. In other words, buying is also a way for consumers to express themselves through the product (Dittmar and Drury, 2000). Yeon Ho Shin also confirmed that the self-congruity theory is related to the intention of behavior in TPB (Shin, 2014). In contrast, Ibrahim stated that self-congruity has a significant effect on attitude, but did not find a direct link between self-congruity and planned behavior (Ibrahim and Najjar, 2008). In this study, self-congruity is considered to be the premise of TPB variables, and has indirect effects on planned behavior.

With regard to studies on destinations in Vietnam, recent studies are more about assessing the satisfaction and loyalty of travelers to a specific destination such as Danang (Ki Minh Ho, 2010, Minh Duc Phan and Tan Buu Le, 2016) or assessing the ability of a destination in attracting tourists like Hue (Thi Tam Bui and Le Quyen Mai, 2012); analysis of tourism motives of domestic tourists (Thanh Huong Bui and Jolliffe, 2011); factors affecting the typical choice of Hanoi residents: studying Hue and Da Nang (Thi Phuong Thao Hoang and Trong Tam Nguyen, 2017). Based on that, strategies are proposed to attract tourists as well as destination branding.

It is clear that so far no domestic and foreign studies have investigated the impact of electronic worth of mouth (EWOM) on the intention to select destinations in Vietnam, in conjunction with theory of planned behavior and self-congruity theory in order attract tourists. So far no research has been conducted to examine the causality relationship of EWOM and the intention to select destinations, as well as the relationship between EWOM with the variables of the theory of planned behavior and self-congruity theory. To fill in the

gaps, based on the theory of planned behavior and self-congruity theory, this research aims to explore the answer for the following questions

- Could EWOM directly influence on travelers' intention to choose domestic destination?
- Could EWOM influence on travelers' intention to choose domestic destination via the mediating role of TPB's variables (attitudes, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control)?
- Could self-congruity play the mediating role in the relationship between EWOM and travelers' intention to choose domestic destination?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM)

In recent years, consumers prefer to make purchasing decisions that can be independent from information provided by businesses. It is a trend signifying power shifting from company to consumers. Prior to making a decision to buy a product, consumers look at the image of the product or brand through experiences, recommendations, reviews and analysis of other consumers. According to Chevalier, words of mouth was gradually considered as an important source of information affecting consumer behavior (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). Opinions, comments from users are referred to as more updated, interesting, and reliable information than marketing information from businesses. A study by Bickart and Schindler, as well as by Kumar et al. showed that the development of the Internet today provides a good approach for people to collect product information and advice from other consumers through electronic word of mouth (Bickart and Schindler, 2001, Kumar and Benbasat, 2006).

According to Hennig-Thurau et al., EWOM is 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. EWOM platform is the technological means through which customers communicate with each other and communicate with sellers. EWOM makes data more relevant and reliable by expanding the engagement of past customers. EWOM is also characterized by indirect and public communication that often has little relationship between the message sender and the message recipient. An EWOM proposal is described as a positive, unbiased or negative information about the supplier published on website by a consumer (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

The Internet provides a platform for customers to discuss their views, therefore words of mouth can spread information at an incomparable speed and is much cheaper than regular forms of word of mouth. Stephen W. Litvin argued that online reviews provided a reliable source of information. Litvin defined EWOM 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. This includes communication between producers and consumers as well as those between consumers themselves (Litvin et al., 2008). EWOM is not simply a means to facilitate the communication of marketing information, but it is a central position in e-commerce.

According to Park and Allen, online reviews became an important source of information and has impact on consumers' decisions, especially through EWOM. Consumers give and seek opinions online, which greatly affects the choice of goods and services (S.-Y. Park and Allen, 2013). Jalilvand stated that EWOM has a direct impact on purchasing intent (Jalilvand et al., 2013). Customers when choosing goods may be influenced by online reviews, so companies need to be clearly aware of the negative or positive information. A high-end brand can be weakened by a multitude of negative online reviews. Whereas positive reviews can increase customers' buying intent, create a good image of the company and its brand. The research of Hamouda and Tabban also confirmed that EWOM has a significant impact on purchasing intent. This impact is crucial, especially when the attitude towards the proposed product is positive, thus creating a higher consumer buying intent. The role of EWOM has been increasing in all steps of the buying decision process of consumers (Hamouda and Tabbane, 2013).

Electronic Word of Mouth in Tourism Industry

Travel products are intangible, and cannot be measured, touched or felt in different ways before tourists experience them. To avoid potential purchasing risks and uncertainty when choosing a destination, tourists depend on EWOM (Mohammed Abubakar, 2016). Google and Ispos MediaCT proved that the internet is the number one source of information in travel planning (Google and Ispos MediaCT and Study, 2014). Research by Lizbeth Marie Lim (2016) has shown that EWOM has a significant and positive impact on tourism intention (Lim, 2016).

Study by Park et al. indicates that traveler reviews are helpful for making travel decisions and provide indirect experiences for visitors. Online reviews have a dual role: it provides information on products and services, and it also serves as a recommendation. These two roles can completely meet the information needs of visitors (D.-H. Park and Kim, 2008). Gretzel and Yoo (2008) note that finding travel-related information is one of the most popular activities conducted online. EWOM plays an important role in the travel planning and decision-making process. Social media helps tourists make informed decisions basing on other people's past travel experiences, be it online reviews or blog posts, additionally EWOM increases travelers' confidence in their decision making, reduces risk, and helps with trip planning. Gretzel and Yoo also suggested that those comments are more updated, more interesting and more reliable than information (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008).

The tourism and hospitality industry is increasingly dependent on EWOM via the media. Visitors rely much on online referrals to determine travel plans such as destinations, accommodation and activities as of their budgets and desires (Litvin et al., 2008, Yoo

and Gretzel, 2011, Zhang et al., 2009). The report shows that hundreds of millions of potential travelers use online reviews as a source of pre-holiday reference. 84% of travelers use online reviews as a source of reference upon booking a trip (travelindustrywire.com, 2007).

2.2. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The theory of planned behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen in 1991, aims at describing how behavior is formed. According to TPB, attitudes along with subjective norm and perceived behavioral control influence the intention to perform a certain behavior. As of now TPB has been applied in many researches on social behavior, especially in the field of tourism.

Sparks et al. (2009) tested a TPB model to show that a theoretical approach is useful for investigating visitor behavior. Subjective norm, basing on the social influence, closely relates to the behavioral intention and perceived control also correlates with the behavioral intention. Nonetheless, the attitude towards vacationing at the destination has no meaning in predicting the Chinese intention to vacation in Australia. The conclusion of this study supported that of Lam and Hsu (2006), whereby attitudes seem to have little effect on tourism intent. Therefore, it is possible that for tourism behavior, potential tourists place greater importance on subjective norm and perceived control than attitude. Chinese tourists are more likely to choose a destination when friends, family, colleagues or travel agents make positive comments. The collectivism of Chinese culture can explain the power of social influence in the stated intention of behavior (B. Sparks and Pan, 2009). Chinese people's behavioral intention is more influenced by social norms and less influenced by attitudes than Americans. In another research Phosikham et al. (2015) states that visitors' attitudes in choosing destinations is very important because positive attitudes can bring satisfaction to visitors. According to the study by Albarq, tourists' attitudes and perceptions can change behaviors, and behaviors influence decision-making processes because attitudes have a strong impact on tourist intentions in their choice of destinations (Albarq, 2014).

As such, it is highly appropriate to adopt the TPB model in the tourism context to predict visitors' behavior and intentions in selecting destinations.

2.3. Self-congruity Theory

The Self-congruity theory was developed to explain the self-concept in consumer behavior. According to this theory, individuals use brands or products to express themselves or improve awareness of their personal image. As such, people tend to choose products that have similarities with their personality traits. The greater the suitability, the higher the probability of purchase (Sirgy, 1985). This theory has been extensively studied in the literature on consumer behavior in many different fields but there are a few studies on tourism sector (Luna-Cortés et al., 2019, Usakli and Baloglu, 2011). From a marketing perspective, Moore et al. (1995) and Waitt (1996) have similar viewpoints that personal

image is considered to be a variable influencing tourist destination selection processes (Moore et al., 1995, Waite, 1996). Applying the basic concept of self-congruity theory in the tourism context can be proposed that when there is a fit between the destination and the concept of the visitor himself, it is likely that visitors will have a positive attitude to destinations (Sirgy and Su, 2000). This attitude can lead to a visit or word of mouth. Therefore, understanding the relevance between the destination personality and the visitor's self-concept is very important to further understand the complex nature of tourism behavior.

Matzler et al. argues that when there is a match between the national identity and visitors' personal identity, there will have a significant impact on the intention to visit a destination (Matzler et al., 2016). This hypothesis is grounded on Sirgy's self-concept in 1982 and suggests that tourists seeing the fit between destination perception and their own image will have more incentive to visit the destination. Matzler's and Stokburger-Sauer conclude that brand identity as a driving force of visit intention (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Similarly, Research by Usakli and Baloglu (2011) showed that self-congruity has significant impact on the behavioral intention and therefore supports the self-congruity theory. In contrast to the above studies, other researchers argue that there is insufficient evidence on the effect of self-congruity theory on tourists' intention in choosing destinations (Boksberger et al., 2011, Litvin and Goh, 2002).

It is apparent that tourist decisions are a complex process. To date, there have been no unified consumer behavior theory or model that has been largely accepted. The effect of self-congruity on the decision-making process of tourists up on visiting a destination is a topic of research which has not been paid sufficient attention to in literature (Chon, 1992, Litvin and Goh, 2002, Sirgy and Su, 2000). It is necessary to develop and test an integrated self-congruity model to measure visitor intentions in destination selection.

3. Propositions

3.1. Electronic word of mouth and theory of planned behavior in the tourist context

Jalilvand et al. (2012) explained the impact of EWOM in the destination selection process. TPB provides an interesting concept of a decision-making process about a tourist destination. The conclusion has shown that EWOM in the tourism sector has a significant, positive and direct impact on attitudes, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. It also has a huge impact on travel intent. Attitude towards a destination, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control are all considered important determinants of travel intent to a defined destination. Similarly, Yulin Miao conducted the study on "The influence of Electronic-WOM on Tourists' Behavioral Intention to Choose a Destination: A case of Chinese Tourists Visiting Thailand". The TPB has been used to examine the effect of EWOM on tourist behavioral intentions in selecting specific tourism destinations. Results showed that EWOM has a significant effect on the behavioral intention of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand. EWOM, though TPB, has also been proved to have impact on attitudes, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control (Miao, 2015).

Kwong Goh (2015) indicates that the effect of electronic word of mouth on intention to book accommodation via online peer-to-peer platform through EWOM is significant, positive and direct to the attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control of visitors. In addition, attitudes, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control have significant effect on the intention to use peer-to-peer online applications or websites (Goh, 2015). Study by Ngo Thi Hien Trang looked at whether the EWOM information impact travelers' intention to choose a tourist destination when they come to Danang and its magnitude of impact. The results showed that EWOM has effect not only on the intention to choose tourist destinations, but also on the perception of usefulness, feeling of enjoyment, attitudes, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control (Thi Hien Trang Ngo, 2017).

From the above arguments, the following propositions are presented:

P1: EWOM has positive influence on travelers' intention to choose domestic destination

P2: EWOM has positive influence on attitude toward domestic destination

P3: EWOM has positive influence on subjective norm toward domestic destination

P4: EWOM has positive influence on perceived behavioral control toward domestic destination

P5: Attitude has positive influence on travelers' intention to choose domestic destination

P6: Subjective norm has positive influence on travelers' intention to choose domestic destination

P7: Perceived behavioral control has positive influence on travelers' intention to choose domestic destination

3.2. Electronic word of mouth and the self-congruity theory in the tourism context

Tourists are able to develop strong emotional relationships with certain destinations and even assign human personality to these destinations. Destination personality refers to the brand personality in the tourism context. Ekinci and Hosany (2006) define destination personality as 'The set of personality traits associated with a destination' (p. 127), adapted from the brand personality terminology of Aaker (Aaker, 1997). Similar to brand personality, a unique destination personality can make a difference from other destinations, create a competitive advantage, and will therefore influence visitors' decision-making behavior (Murphy et al., 2007).

A study by Feli et al. examines the importance of word of mouth as an important source of information and its influence on the formation of destination personality. The study asserted that word of mouth has a positive impact and a significant effect on destination personality and visitor loyalty. Typically, people who have traveled to a certain place will

tell others about their travel experiences. Trip experiences and accounts may be more acceptable than other sources of information (Feli and Azizi, 2016). As such, EWOM is an important tool in creating and developing destination personalities. From there, the proposition is given as follows:

P8: EWOM has positive influence on destination personality.

Currently, where tourism is concerned there are only a few researches on the influence of brand personality on self-congruity. Empirical research by Usakli and Baloglu (2011) is among those few studies. Researchers have demonstrated that destination personality influences the response of individuals through self-congruity, suggesting that the more a destination personality is in line with the self-concept, the more positive attitude tourists have toward that destination, and the higher ratio of choice they make. Research by Chua et al. (2019) shows that brand personality has positive effects on self-congruity. This study takes a closer look at the influence of brand personality and the appropriateness of the self-concept in predicting the behavioral intent of air travelers (Chua et al., 2019). The special and attractive destination personality is able to convey individual images, as a way to shape and reinforce the self-concept of visitors.

From the above studies, it is possible to form this proposition:

P9: Destination personality has positive influence on self-congruity.

3.3. Correlation between the theory of planned behavior and self-congruity theory

Self-congruity has proved to be a theoretical framework for many studies across different areas of behavioral research. Sparks and Shepherd examined the role of Self-identity in relationship with the theory of planned behavior and the intent of green consumerism (P. Sparks and Shepherd, 1992). While Sparks and Guthrie (1998) conducted their research in the United Kingdom to prove the predictive effectiveness of self-identity to the consumption intent of a diet low in animal fats. This study has incorporated TPB variables but the self-identity structure has been proven to be independent from the effect of consuming low-fat diets (P. Sparks and Guthrie, 1998).

According to Yeon Ho Shin (2014), the self-congruity theory is associated with the behavioral intent in TPB. The overall significance of the TPB model will increase with the participation of the self-congruity theory. Results indicated:

- Self-congruity has positive effect on attitude. This correlation is supported by many empirical studies such as Ibrahim and Najjar, and Kang et al. (Ibrahim and Najjar, 2008, Kang et al., 2012). Individuals who think that their personality is suitable for local food users will have a positive attitude towards buying local food. In the tourism context, when a tourist thinks that her own personality fits the destination personality, they will have a positive attitude towards the destination (Sirgy and Su, 2000). Thus, the next proposition is given:

P10: Self-congruity has positive influence on attitude toward domestic destination

- The correlation between self-congruity and subjective norm is positive. Those who think that their personality is suitable for local food consumers, they will feel more pressure to buy the product and think the reference group will support them in the food purchase process (Shin, 2014). In the tourism context: the visitor's personality in line with the destination personality will affect the reference group such as his parents, colleagues or friends. The author formulates the proposition:

P11: Self-congruity has positive influence on subjective norm toward domestic destination

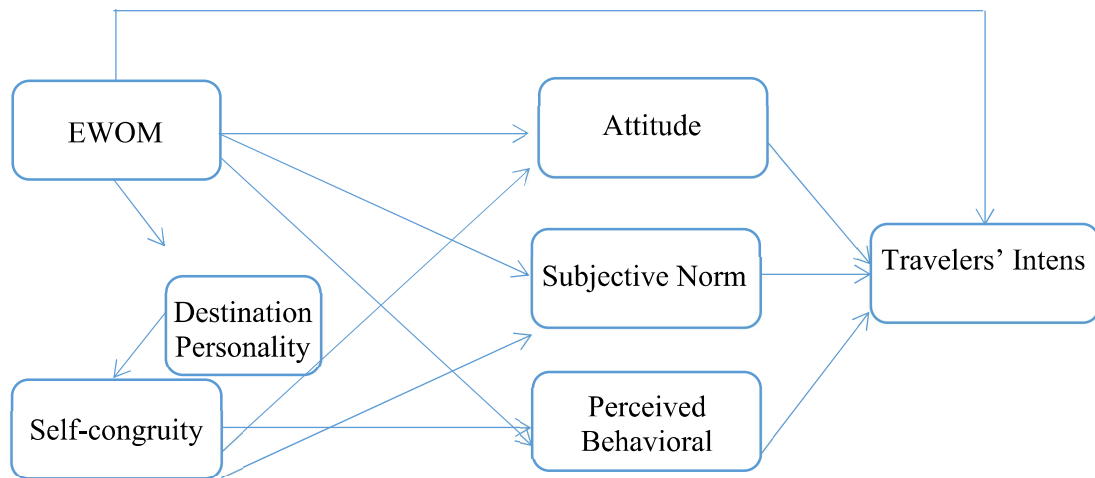
- Self-congruity has also positive effect on perceived behavioral control. People who think their personality are similar to local food consumers will feel more in control of their behaviors (Shin, 2014). The next proposition is that, when visitors' personality matches the destination personality, they will have a better sense of control over their destination selection behavior.

P12: Self-congruity has positive influence on perceived behavioral control toward domestic destination

A number of studies have shown that personal values such as the self-concept are considered as the premise of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control (Arvola et al., 2008, Hagger et al., 2007, Kang et al., 2012). Therefore, the self-congruity variables have indirect effect on the intention through the TPB model.

4. Research model

From the given propositions, the author proposes the following research model:



Source: Authors

5. Conclusions

Theoretically, this is the first study to examine the correlation of EWOM with the intent of choosing destinations, and the correlation of the components of the planned

behavior theory and the self-congruity theory in the context of tourism. The model was built to show the psychological movement of visitors. From words of mouth, visitors search for information through internet sources, evaluate options. Then attitude, subjective norm and awareness of perceived behavioral control are formed. From words of mouth, they can express themselves, and from which their behavioral intentions are formed.

From the practical perspective, managers will first of all be able to, basing on this research, encourage visitors to engage in discussions in online communities. This can be a useful strategy to increase words of mouth about a certain destination via cyberspace. The higher the number of guest reviews are, the more information about a given destination there will be. This will have impact on potential travelers and as a result, the ability to choose a destination will increase. Secondly, destination managers can build an online travel community and through community tourism websites, tourists will exchange information online, and they are encouraged to share their travel feelings, previous travel experiences, restaurant services, and hotel, etc. Also managers can monitor EWOM's volume exchange to assess destination images and traveler perceptions through online reviews. Last but not least, tourism planners should attempt to provide tangible products suitable to visitors, and create beautiful memories for them. An interesting experience will create a suitable mental image in the minds of tourists, they can develop strong emotional relationships with certain destinations.

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