Volume 19 Issue 36
Originally issued as E5



Global Journal of Management and Business Research: E Marketing
Volume 19 Issue 5 Version 1.0 Year 2019
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-4588 & Print ISSN: 0975-5853

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GJMBR-E Classification: JEL Code: M37, M39



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Aristeidis Gkoumas

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I. Introduction

The advancements in the Web 2.0 online technology have dramatically increased the interactivity and interdependence among Internet users, content providers, and enterprises. From a marketing perspective, the pervasive network connectivity and the enhanced communication channels of the Web allowed to the users to share experiences, disseminate information and exchange opinions about products and services (O'Connor, 2010). One of the key elements of Web 2.0 is the user-generated-content (UGC), which refers to the ability of consumers to freely upload comments, videos, photos, influencing the decision-making process of the others (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; O'Connor, 2010). Part of the UGC is the electronic-word-of-mouth (e-WOM) including online positive and negative evaluations of products, services, and experiences posted on social media platforms, forums or blogs. The e-WOM has empowered the ability of consumers to access up-to-date information, affecting the purchasing decision and consumer behavior both online and offline (Cheung et al., 2009).

The e-WOM has become a fundamental component for travel decision-making and one of the most influential sources for vacation planning, destination selection and service appraisal (Ayeh et al. 2013; Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides 2011). The intangible nature of tourism experience increases consumers' perceived risk, making peer-to-peer online remarks a relatively reliable, easily accessible and cost-free source of information. The explosive growth of tourism and travel social media platforms over the last ten years has transformed e-WOM to a crucial modality for shaping pre-visit choices, affecting purchases and building expectations. Travel intermediaries and tourism social media permit users to post comments, share recommendations, write reviews and give feedback on tourism destinations based on personal travel experiences (Stringam & Gerdes, 2010). Online communities provide to travelers the opportunity to acquire relevant information, share experiences, opinions, and evaluations for hotels, resorts, destinations, tour packages, vacation deals, travel guides and transportation options across the globe, by reducing significantly pre-purchase risks and saving time and money (O'Connor, 2010).

Additionally, e-WOM has served as a measurement tool for enhancing brand awareness and strengthen the level of familiarity the visitors form for various tourism businesses (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009). Online brand communities create a viral bond and a sense of belongingness among the users of the social platform, affecting directly or indirectly purchase decisions and behaviors (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; Jansen et al, 2009). The volume of comments is a critical indicator for building brand awareness of the tourism business. The more positive peer-to-peer evaluations for tourism business the stronger their brand awareness gets. By contrast, negative reviews for destinations, attractions, and particular establishments hamper brand name and reputation usually leading to low visitation, restricted trust, and limited customer engagement.

The objective of this study is to explore the impact of tourism social media platforms on brand awareness for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand. The concept of *sunset restaurants* refers to various by-the-sea dining establishments that offer a premium view of the sunset. The findings of my previous research indicate that there is an emerging market of *sunset restaurants* in Thailand, with visitors to perceive sunset as the central vision, an aesthetic and emotional stimulus for ambiance quality and experiential valence (Gkoumas, 2017b).

Based on the analysis of the user-generated-content (UGC) I have examined the online comments, reviews, and testimonies posted by travelers on TripAdvisor in the last three years, regarding various

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dining establishments in the coastal destinations of Krabi, Phuket, Pattaya, and Koh Samui. The study proposes a conceptual framework for the interpretation of the contextual characteristics and content features of online messages, providing a meta-commentary analysis of the effect of e-WOM to recognizability and empathy of TripAdvisor users for dining establishments.

The current research investigates the role of e-WOM as an agent for branding *sunset restaurants* in Thailand by analyzing the personal experiences of travelers posted online. The objectives of my research are:

- To collect textual and pictorial cues about *sunset restaurants* in Thailand uploaded on TripAdvisor last three years.
- To analyze the content and the context of online comments, testimonies, and reviews for *sunset restaurants* in Krabi, Phuket, Pattaya, and Koh Samui.
- To examine the effect of e-WOM on traveler responses and evaluations for particular dining establishments.
- To evaluate the meta-commentary impact of e-WOM on brand awareness for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand.

II. Literature Review

The theoretical perspectives of this paper drawn on four different aspects:

1) The importance of e-WOM communication as a source of information for tourism and travel experiences,
2) The contribution of Trip Advisor as one of the most popular social media platform for travel and tourism,
3) The views of contemporary marketing literature regarding the relationships between e-WOM and the process of creating a brand image, awareness, and identity for tourism products, services, and destinations, and
4) The characteristics of *sunset restaurants* as an emerging niche market for mature coastal destinations in Thailand.

a) The e-WOM in Travel and Tourism

The e-WOM referred to '*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). The explosion of the Internet, the advancements of Web 2.0 and the expansion of mobile technologies have given to people the opportunity to make suggestions, discuss ideas and share experiences with others regarding products and services (Lerrthaitrakul & Panjakajornsak, 2014). Thus, e-WOM has increasingly become an influential source of communication, offering multi- faceted means of exchange information, most of the time in an asynchronous manner. However, the rapid emergence of social media networks and platforms, online communities, blogs, and viral groups provide real-time communication in asynchronous mode. Marketing literature suggests that e-WOM communication channels generate a massive spillover effect on the buying behavior, expectations and post-purchase evaluations for several products and services (Gensler, Verhoef, & Böhm, 2012).

Searching and sharing information about tourism products, services and destinations have become one of the most popular online activities, making e-WOM a rather powerful source for travel decision-making (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013). The experiential nature of tourism and travel requires in-situ consumption, making the pre- purchase selection of destinations, products or services rather arduous. Online communities play a decisive role to buying intention since most of the people seem to trust more the personal evaluations and opinions of fellow travelers than the messages of tourism companies or the promises of tour operators (Buhalis & Law, 2008). It appears that frequent travelers identify the online comments, testimonies, and recommendations as up-to-date, enjoyable, credible and useful input, superior to other sources of information. The volume of the online travel content posted on various social media platforms and forums indicate that e-WOM could serve as a continuous source of data mining for tourism research, providing valuable insights, evaluations, and interpretations for travel experiences and tourism products, services and destinations across the globe.

b) The Trip Advisor

TripAdvisor is probably the biggest site within the travel sector worldwide, with more than 311 million members and over 500 million reviews, comments, and testimonies of hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions and destinations (O'Connor, 2010; Wikipedia, 2018). Previous studies claimed that nearly 98% of TripAdvisor users influenced by the posted comments and recommendations of others (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Vasquez, 2012). The impact of the online reviews on the decision-making process of prospective travelers was so immense that it has changed the purchasing patterns for tourism products and services and the consumer attitudes towards travel planning (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; O'Connor, 2010).

Although the popularity of TripAdvisor is undeniable, still the credibility of the site went down the last 4-5 years due to several reported fraudulent reviews for hotels and restaurants in Mexico, U.S.A, U.K, Sri Lanka, and the Netherlands. Despite the controversy regarding several suspicious comments or unsubstantiated reviews, TripAdvisor remains a highly influential source for travel and tourism information worldwide.

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c) Brand Awareness and the e-WOM

Social networking influence directly the consumer decisions and brand perceptions (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; Jansen et al., 2009) with the online content to function as a regulatory agency for the construction of relationships between consumers and tourism brands (Jansen et al., 2009). The e-WOM determines the level of brand satisfaction, serving as the building block for building brand awareness and shaping image (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; Jansen et al., 2009). Following the hierarchy of effects several studies of the past have developed models to evaluate the impact of e-WOM on the cognitive and affective state of consumers focusing on the impact of the online comments and remarks on brand awareness, loyalty and brand evangelism (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt & Füller, 2013; Shaari & Ahmad, 2016).

Communication literature has investigated numerous factors of e-WOM that affect directly or indirectly the phycological state of the consumer mainly regarding purchase intention, behavior, information search and trustworthiness (Cheung and Thadani, 2010). Considering the outcome variables of the previous studies Li, Xue, Yang, and Li (2017) have developed an integrated framework to evaluate the impact of e-WOM on customer decision and sales performance. The researchers suggested that e-WOM has been influenced by characteristics like the source, the volume and the valence of the comments, the type of communicators and other indicators such as the consistency and dispersion of the message, persistence, observability, anonymity of the sender and level of community engagement (Li et al., 2017, pp.346-352). Regardless the valuable contribution od that studies on individual-level elements of e-WOM yet, the proposed framework hasn't been tested on tourism, leisure, and hospitality environments while provides no meta-commentary interpretation of the response of other users regarding products or services.

Although the current paper was inspired by the framework of Li, J., Xue, Yang & Li, Y. (2017) it uses only those indicators that are relative and supportive by the online comments on TripAdvisor. Additionally, this research provides a meta-narrative analysis of e-WOM over time by investigating the response rate of online reviews, ratings and personal testimonies about *sunset restaurants* in Krabi, Phuket, Pattaya, and Koh Samui and their impact on brand awareness of specific establishments.

d) Sunset Restaurants as an Emerging Niche Market

I define *sunset restaurants* as the dining establishments located in coastal destinations providing a premium view of the sunset. Sunset operates as the emotional, aesthetic and visual stimulus for tourism experience, constituting not only a dynamic, intangible element of the services cape but also a vital determinant for building robust brand equity and brand identity for several small/medium tourism businesses in coastal destinations (Gkoumas, 2017b). In Thailand the last ten years there is an increasing number of sunset restaurants particularly in the major tourist destinations of Krabi, Phuket, Pattaya, and Koh Samui (see Figure 1). There are several indications that that *dining in the sunset* is considered as a new emerging tourism trend for Thailand's coastal destinations based on the analysis of UGC on major tourism social media (Gkoumas, 2017b). The demand for this new trend has generated the expansion of *sunset restaurants,* creating a new niche market for tourism in Thailand.

Kotler (2003) describes five characteristics of a niche market: a) distinct set of customers' needs, b) willingness of the members of the target group to pay premium price to satisfy their needs, c) competitive edge of the segment over the competitors, d) capability of the segment to create certain economies through specialization and e) capacity of the segment to maintain a sufficient size in order to generate profits. He also suggested that niche refers to a portion of the market segment that seeks a unique mix of benefits (Kotler (2003, p. 280). Using location as their strong competitive edge s*unset restaurants* meet most of Kotler's criteria, attracting visitors with specific demographic factors and psychographic profile, mainly international visitors of middle-class, traveling with their partners, looking for qualitative and sanitary options for their dining in Thailand (Gkoumas, 2017a).

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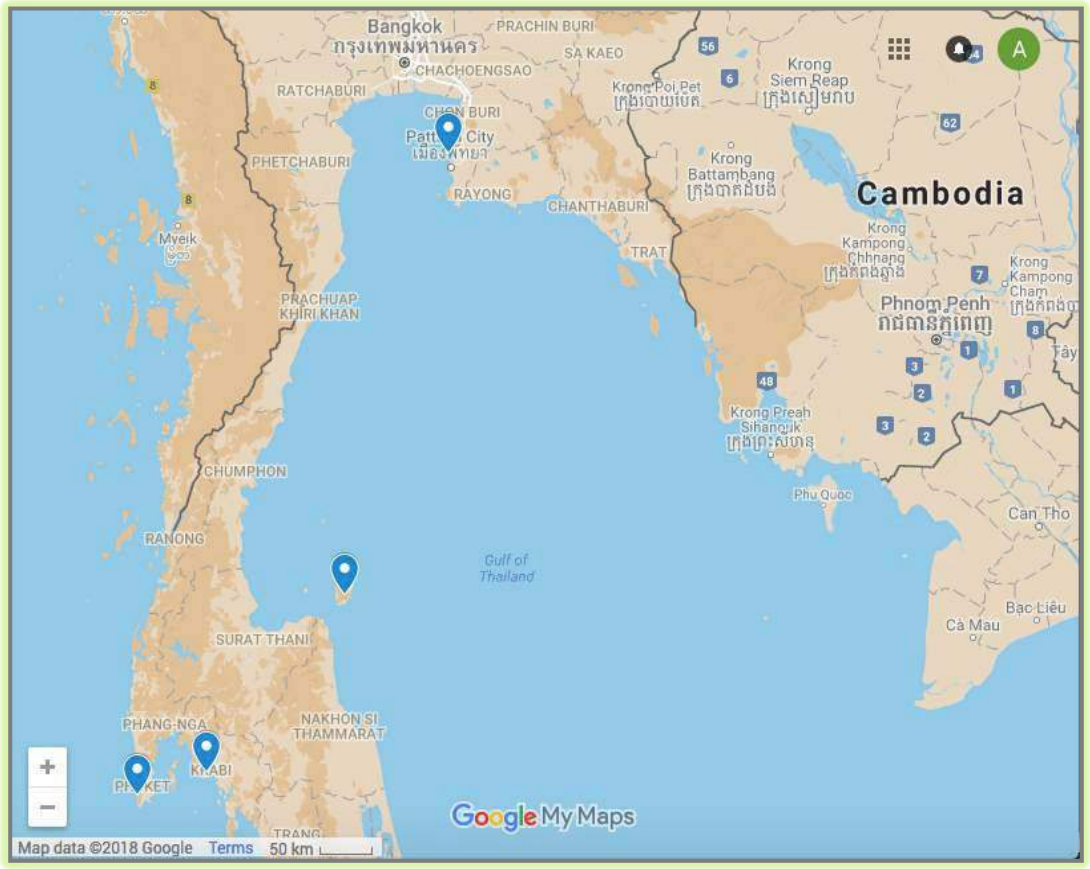

Note: From Google maps. Copyright Google 2019

Figure 1: The geographical location of *sunset restaurants* in Thailand

III. Conceptual Framework

Using the proposed framework of Li et al., (2017) I have measured the performance of selected variables that could be associated with the available data of my research. My conceptual framework has specifically designed to examine how e-WOM affects the branding of *sunset restaurants* in Thailand by emphasizing on the contextual characteristics and content features of the reviews shared experiences and online opinions of tourists who had visited certain tourism establishments in Krabi, Pattaya, Koh Samui, and Phuket. Graph (1) displays analytically how designated elements of the UGC affect the tourist decision to choose particular *sunset restaurants* in major coastal destinations in Thailand.

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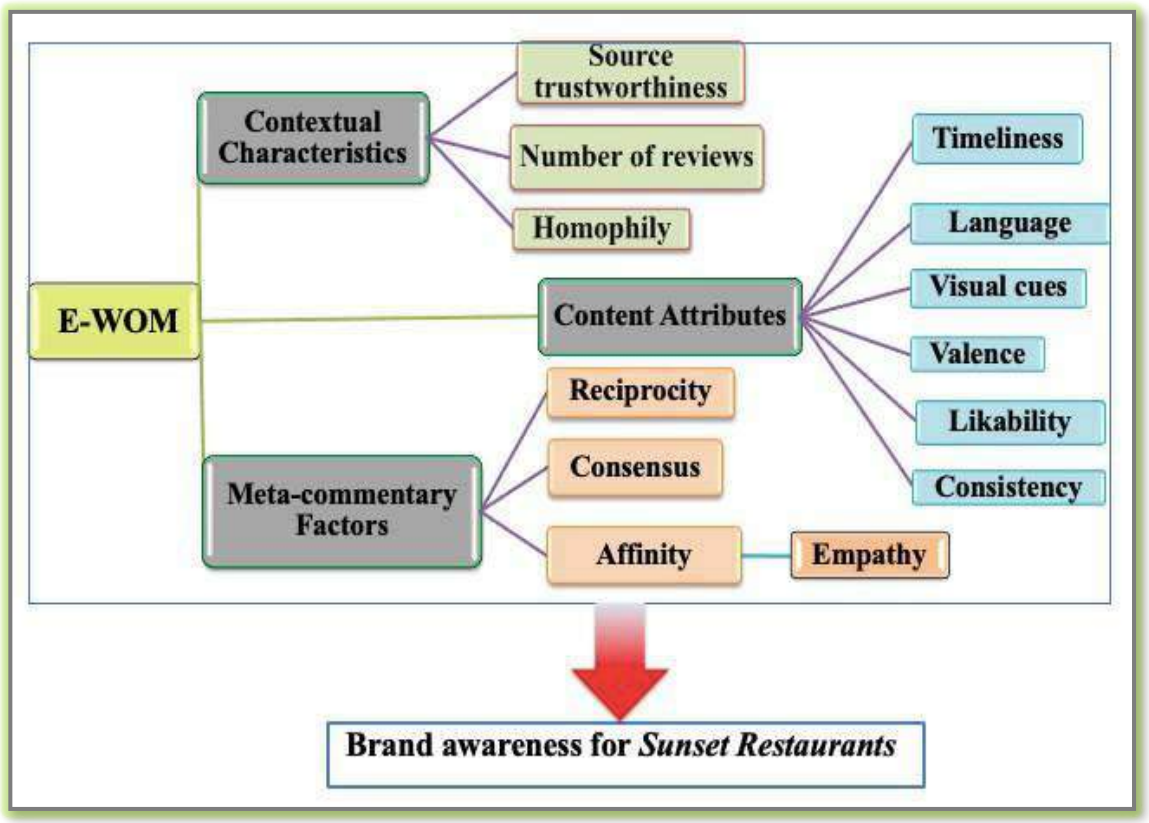

Graph 1: The conceptual framework of the study

IV. Materials and Methods

a) Research Identity and Design

The current study employs qualitative and quantitative methods by combining the interpretive and inductive approach of ground theory with the methodological tool of UGC analysis. Grounded theory functions as the analytical tool for better understanding the inductive nature of texts and images and the meta-commentary impact of UGC on the responses and ratings of other users, providing a concept indicator model that could identify relationships naturally derived during the process of the data interpretation (Venkatesh, Crockett, Cross & Chen, 2017). The fundamental stages of the grounded theory include the collection of qualitative data, review of repeated concepts, tagged with codes and then group them to categories. It was decided that grounded theory could successfully fit the purposes of this study due to its unique capacity to provide a fruitful examination of subjective testimonies, evaluations, and opinions and also its ability to analyze interactions and relationships among the members of online communities, enabling an adaptive, in-depth inquiry of verbal and non-verbal elements of social media.

I have identified *sunset restaurants* in Thailand as the anchors for substantive coding procedure of the textual data. During the process of UGC analysis, the codes were examined and evaluated for each individual comment or review to investigate the causal conditions, attitudinal relationships and conceptual similarities (Venkatesh et al., 2017). The last stage of selective coding included the establishment of three major groups of comparable elements with further subcategories tightly linked to the data. The textual groups for this study are:

- The contextual characteristics of the e-WOM.
- The content and the essence of the messages, comments, and reviews.
- The meta-commentary influence of e-WOM on users affinity and empathy for *sunset restaurants*.

I have also employed UGC analysis as a core methodological tool for my research since it has become a rather insightful technique for evaluating text-sourced data regarding the perceptions, trust, choices, and ratings of tourism products and services (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Stringam & Gerdes, 2010). UGC refers to the systematic study of the language of the texts as a means of communication and interpretation of the narratives addressed or associated with a specific theme, emphasizing on the contextual meaning and the content in which they appear. It could further focus on the descriptive narrations of the verbal, written and audio-visual cues accompanied or attached to a theme, event or occasion by examining their significance and symbolic value.

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b) Data Collection and Analysis

The study involved the selection and analysis of comments and reviews on TripAdvisor about the dining experience of travelers in several *sunset restaurants* in Thailand. Each traveler rated his/her individual experience using a scale from (1) – Terrible to (5) Excellent. Online comments have been served as primary data for this research, portraying diverse critiques regarding *sunset restaurants* in major coastal destinations of Phuket, Koh Samui, Pattaya, and Krabi.

Between January 2015 and January 2018, the search on TripAdvisor came up with 996 *sunset restaurants* in Thailand and 8.602 relative reviews. Most of the comments addressed to the dining experiences of international tourists who had visited *sunset restaurants* of Phuket and Koh Samui with 4.225 and 2.719 entries respectively. Subsequently, 831 comments referred to *sunset restaurants* in Pattaya and 827 in Krabi. Following the designated rating system of TripAdvisor, (*Excellent, Very Good, Average, Poor* and *Terrible*) the data were divided into two groups namely, (1) positive or relatively positive ($n = 5.853$) and (2) negative or relative negative ($n = 2.749$). The software of NVivo 11 for Mac was used as a complementary tool for collecting and analyzing the UGC on TripAdvisor. NVivo is considered to be an effective instrument for qualitative studies (Schönfelder, 2011).

To ensure the plausibility and credibility of the research I have employed the techniques of triangulation, and peer debriefing (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Two independent faculty members one from the department of social sciences and another from the school of business with no interest or involvement in the study have offered a thorough analytical probing, uncovering possible biases and reconsidering several theoretical of methodological pre-assumptions (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985).

V. Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that the e-WOM operates as a building block for brand awareness of *sunset restaurants* in Thailand. Specifically, the context and the content of the online comments have a major impact on the meta-commentary response of other users for specific establishments. The contextual features refer to the attributes of the volume of reviews and ratio between positive electronic-word-of-mouth (Pe-WOM) and negative electronic-word-of-mouth (Ne-WOM), homophily and country of origin, as well as trustworthiness of the source. The content includes the features of timeliness, valence, and language of the online comments, visual cues, and also rating, likability, and consistency of posted recommendations.

a) Contextual Characteristics of e-WOM

Marketing literature has demonstrated that e-WOM has a major impact on consumer preferences, attitudes and purchase behavior (Cheung & Thadani, 2010; Huang, Lurie & Mitra, 2009). From the analysis of data derived that the contextual characteristics of online comments combined with the credibility of TripAdvisor, as a source of information have raised the brand awareness of travelers for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand.

The source credibility is considered to be one of the most determining factors associated with the communication channel and the accuracy of the transmitted information (Hu, Liu, & Zhang, 2008). The ability of travelers to share their own experiences, stories and reviews with others online not only has increased the popularity of several social platforms such as TripAdvisor but also has enhanced their credibility. The UGC analysis of the online reviews indicates that there is a strong correlation between the volume of comments and the trustworthiness of TripAdvisor as a communication source. In fact, in 2017 the number of reviews for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand has increased 795% in comparison to that of 2015, accounting for more than 8.600 entries.

Several studies have suggested that the e-WOM is a crucial determinant for branding, while the online content on social communication platforms largely influences the relationships between prospective consumers and the brands (Jansen et al., 2009). Furthermore, e-WOM trustworthiness is interconnected with the brand awareness of several sunset restaurants. The volume of positive reviews for several *sunset restaurants* in Krabi, Phuket. Pattaya and Koh Samui have dramatically augmented during the period 2016-2017, reaching the astonishing number of 6.352 posts. This finding indicates that the Pe-WOM of TripAdvisor has strengthened the brand image for many businesses by increasing their competitiveness in the international tourism market.

Although several studies have underlined the significance of credibility and reliability of UGC in shaping online tourist behavior (Akehurst, 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), still measuring perceived trustworthiness of online information becomes a rather ambiguous issue (Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2011; Leung, Law, Van Hoof & Buhalis, 2013). Some recent e-WOM-related studies have used the total number of posted reviews and comments as an indicator for the valence and the accuracy of online consumer reviews (Duan, Gu & Whinston, 2008; Gauri, Bhatnaga & Rao, 2008; Lee, Park & Han, 2008; Park & Kim 2008; Sher & Lee 2009). The UGC analysis reveals that the perceived trustworthiness of the e-WOM for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand determined by the following factors:

- The trip collective level of contributor
- The number of helpful votes
- The volume of total posts on TripAdvisor
- The seniority of the member

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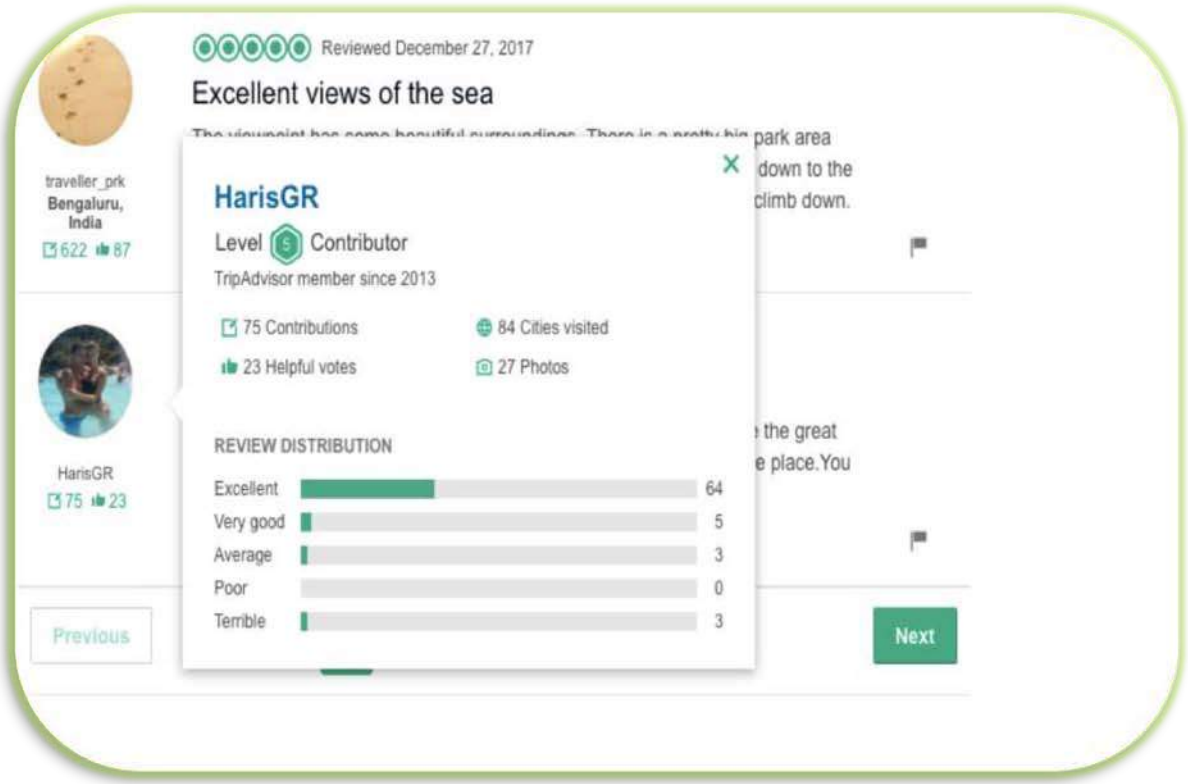
TripAdvisor has created a Trip-collective program for users who wish to display their knowledge and expertise to help other members of the travel community to decide about destinations, restaurants or accommodations.

Each contributor collects points to reach a better Trip-collective level (6th is the highest). The results of my study reveal that the level of the contributor, the number of helpful votes and the volume of total posts on TripAdvisor are crucial factors for the perceived trustworthiness of UGC. Nearly 67% of the positive reviews for *sunset restaurants i*n coastal destinations in Thailand identified as 'helpful' for other travelers.

It appears that 57% of the restaurants in Phuket and 64% in Koh Samui with positive reviews have also received favorable comments by other TripAdvisor members with high trip-collective level 4, 5 or 6 (see figure 2). Conversely, the low rating of 153 restaurants from all areas accompanied by testimonials of members with low or no trip-collective level.



Note: From TripAdvisor website. Copyright TripAdvisor 2019

Figure 2: An indicative example of Trip-collective review for a *sunset restaurant* in Phuket

Another decisive characteristic of the e-WOM is the valence, which refers to the number of positive and negative comments posted by the consumers (Li et al., 2017). The results of previous studies on the effect of valence on consumer behavior and the purchase probability are rather ambivalent with both positive and negative connotations (Cui, Lui & Guo, 2012; Li et al., 2017). My findings suggest that the valence of the online testimonies for *sunset restaurants* influenced by the *homophily* and the *seniority* of the members. Steffes and Burgee (2009) define *homophily* as the level of similarity that pairs of individuals share in terms of age, education, gender, and social status. TripAdvisor gives the option for each member to provide information about his/her age, gender, country or place of origin and travel preferences or styles.

However, reviewing the profiles of the members who have posted comments on *sunset restaurants,* it is evident that only those with a large number of reviews, positive ratings, helpful votes, and high seniority displayed substantial data on their age, gender, preferences, and place of living. This finding suggests that the homophilic status of the members of TripAdvisor related with the level of seniority and the degree of their contribution to the online community in terms of reviews for other restaurants, accommodations or destinations in Thailand. Most of Pe-WOM derived from experienced travelers with over three years of membership and with a minimum of 50 previous posts on TripAdvisor. Analytically, 73% of positive reviews for restaurants in Phuket, 68% in Krabi, 65% in Koh Samui and 62% in Pattaya submitted by trip-collective members

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with a substantial number of online evaluations and travel experiences in other destinations of Thailand.

The interactive nature of social media gives the consumers the power to influence the brand perceptions and brand decisions of other members of online communities (Hutter et al., 2013; Füller, 2012). Contemporary marketing research analyzes brands as complex social phenomena and co-created modalities with social media to operate as a channel for networking, information sharing and personal interacting (Mertz et al., 2009; Schau et al., 2009). The increasing role of online platforms to purchasing decision has transformed consumers to co-creators of the brand value and image (Hutter et al., 2013; Füller, 2012). From the analysis of UGC, it can be inferred that the senior members of the community of TripAdvisor served as viral brokers of certain *sunset restaurants* in Thailand. Their reviews affect the choices of prospective travelers by generating personal opinions regarding the value-in-use of the dining experience in specific tourism establishments.

b) Content Attributes of e-WOM

The subject matter of the online messages and the essence of the e-WOM have an impact on the consumer decision-making, purchase intention and the level of information adaptation in viral-mediated communication channels (Cheung & Thadani, 2010; Li et al., 2017). Timeliness, valence, and language of the UGC are crucial factors for enhancing brand awareness and generating positive reviews for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand.

The timeliness of e-WOM refers to up-to-date, timely and current information regarding products and services (Cheung & Thadani, 2010; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). The timeliness of the online reviews on TripAdvisor was a rather important factor for the credibility and the relevance of the messages. The UGC analysis indicates that the travelers found more 'helpful' the most recently uploaded reviews for *sunset restaurants* than the older ones (see figure 3).



Note: From TripAdvisor website. Copyright TripAdvisor 2019

Figure 3: Online review for a *sunset restaurant* in Phuket

The volume of up-to-date contributions in combination with the seniority of the members affected the valence of messages. The Pe-WOM of older members for 32 *sunset restaurants* in Pattaya, 142 in Koh Samui, 256 in Phuket and 154 in Krabi have received a large number of votes from the other travelers. The rating scores and timeliness of the e-WOM have strengthened brand awareness regarding certain *sunset restaurants*. More than 67% of the dining establishments in Krabi and Phuket and about 54% in Pattaya and Koh Samui have almost doubled the number of 'helpful votes' they received in 2017, increasing the likability of their brands. This finding is in line with previous research, suggesting the fundamental role of online environments in creating strong psychological bonds between the users of a platform and the social media

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activities of the brand (Kim et al., 2008; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010).

The language was another important indicator for the valence and the usefulness of the e-WOM for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand. The travelers have posted reviews and comments in 28 different languages with the vast majority of them to be written in English, accounting around 70% of the total number of online messages. This result demonstrates that English was the most popular language among the users of TripAdvisor. Significantly less were the comments of the second most common language of Chinese, accounting nearly 12% of the total e-WOM. Subsequently, 7%, 6% and 3% of the UGC were written in Russian, French, and German respectively. A notable finding of the study was that only *sunset restaurants* in Pattaya and Krabi received reviews in Thai, nearly 4%. The number of online comments suggests that international tourists are using more social media for sharing their dining experiences than domestic visitors.

The pictorial presentation of the content features of brand posts increases their popularity (De Vries, Gensler &Leeflang, 2012). Using photos also enhances the vividness and the salience of the brand, while stimulates the senses and boosts interactivity (Fortin & Dholakia 2005). My study supports the findings of previous studies regarding the impact of photos on the popularity of the brand. However, it highlights that the visual cues attached to the testimonials for the *sunset restaurants* improve the credibility and the trustworthiness of the online reviews. The reviews with photos were very common for the *sunset restaurants* in Krabi and Phuket, accounting 53% and 47% of the total posts. However, most of the reviews with photos were positively or relatively positively. In particular, over 90% of the Pe-WOM for *sunset restaurants* in Koh Samui and Phuket and around 84% of those in Pattaya and Krabi have displayed photos. The analysis of UGC demonstrates that the online comments with pictorial material attached were considered as very 'helpful', receiving significantly more votes.

The overall rating, the likability, and consistency of the online recommendations are characteristics that affect valence and credibility (Li et al., 2017; Zhang & Watts, 2008). There is a clear connection between the positive rating, the volume of messages and the likability level. The *sunset restaurants* with the highest overview rating on TripAdvisor received more likes. The higher the overall score of the restaurant the higher the level of likeability. From a total of 5.853 positive reviews 4.201 rated over 4,5 (5 was the highest score), receiving more than 50 likes each, from other users.

On online communities, the cognitive consistency of the e-WOM entails a process of measuring the level of congruency of the information content of each message with the opinions and beliefs of other users (Zhang & Watts, 2008). The UGC analysis of TripAdvisor revealed that over 73% of the Pe-WOM encountered messages of consistent evaluations and similar points of view. The overall ratings indicate that consistency was also related to the timeliness of the online comments. Nearly 50% of the reviews with similar positive evaluations for *sunset restaurants* in Koh Samui and Phuket and almost 43% of those in Krabi and Pattaya were uploaded the last 6 months of 2017. Finally, the consistency of the messages affected the valence of e-WOM and the likability of the online comments, enhancing the brand awareness of several *sunset restaurants.* Almost 63% of the reviews with favorable information content for specific dining settings were also the most popular, receiving a large number of likes and votes.

c) *Meta-commentary Effect of e-WOM to Brand Awareness for sunset restaurants*

The post evaluation of the online comments points out certain types of relationships among the members of TripAdvisor. The structure and the services of the social platform increase the level of interactivity and inter-connectedness by allowing the users to share information and exchange opinions positive and negative about their travel experiences. Previous studies claimed that negative comments on online consumer review websites were more influential for the purchasing decision than positive messages (Lee & Koo, 2012; Lerrthaitrakul & Panjakajornsak, 2014).

On the contrary, the findings of this research indicate that the positive reviews for *sunset restaurants* generated significantly more responses than the negative comments. The key indicator for measuring comment trustworthiness was the ratio between Pe-WOM and Ne-WOM. The UGC analysis shows that nearly than 74% of the Pe-WOM have been identified as 'helpful' from other TripAdvisor users, receiving at least 56 votes each. By contrast, only 16% of users found negative or relatively negative reviews useful.

Consensus, as the tendency of the consumers to consider favorable views of others before the purchase decision (Solomon, 2013) and reciprocity, which applies to the general propensity of the consumers to exchange opinions or share recommendations for a product/ service after they receive assistance, rewards or gifts are determining factors for the effectiveness of the communication and the persuasion capacity of reviews (Solomon, 2013; Webster & Hume, 2016). The e-WOM analysis revealed that recommendation reciprocity and review consensus not only were decisive factors for the meta-commentary interpretation but also have built a certain degree of affinity among the users of TripAdvisor. The sense of affinity has further generated a feeling of empathy through posting positive reviews or giving a high rating for specific dining establishments. However, the level of empathy was more evident on the online recommendations for *sunset restaurants* in Koh Samui and Phuket.

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The demographic cues of age and income, combined with psychographic elements of personal preferences regarding destinations and type of food have determined the affinity and the consensus of comments, recommendations, and tips. More than 70% of the online comments for the *sunset restaurants* in Phuket, nearly 65% in Krabi, over 62% in Pattaya and 59% in Koh Samui had been marked as 'helpful' from other members of TripAdvisor, including similar reviews. Furthermore, around 74% of the Pe-WOM posted by experienced travelers who have visited other coastal destinations in Thailand, 65% of them were traveling with their partners, and 23% claimed to be vegetarians or vegans.

This paper suggests that the level of reciprocity for the members of TripAdvisor who posted Pe-WOM for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand was considerably high. The positive comments of senior members marked as 'helpful' by other users. As a token of appreciation for the useful insights and tips, the fellow travelers rewarded the reviews of the senior members with more than 5.800 favorable votes. As a result, the level of persuasiveness for the Pe-WOM has increased while the brand awareness for *sunset restaurants* in coastal destinations of Thailand has strengthened significantly.

VI. Conclusion

By applying the method of UGC analysis and the principles of ground theory the current research investigates the impact of e-WOM of social media platforms on the creation of brand awareness for *sunset restaurants* in Thailand. In particular, it examines to what extent the online comments, reviews, and recommendations posted on TripAdvisor can influence the responses of other members or determine the visitation probability for dining establishments in coastal destinations of Krabi, Phuket, Koh Samui, and Pattaya. Prior scholars have studied specific contextual characteristics and content attributes of e- WOM. However, this study advances the theoretical approach of online peer-to-peer communication by providing a meta-commentary analysis of the effect of online comments on the response rate and the degree of likability regarding *sunset restaurants* in Thailand.

Firstly, regarding the contextual components of the e-WOM, the findings indicate that the higher the number of posts, the seniority of the members and the degree of homophily of the users of TripAdvisor the more credible the e-WOM is considered to be. Prospective travelers found more useful the positive reviews of senior members, whereas the valence of online information (negative vs. positive) was directly associated with homophily, namely the degree to which users of TripAdvisor share attributes such as age, lifestyle, personal preferences and country of origin.

Secondly, the analysis of data suggests that the content characteristics of timeliness, visual cues, and positive rating are key indicators for the trustworthiness and the likability of e-WOM. Timeliness affects directly the consistency, relevance, and valence of online comments, with most of the positive reviews about *sunset restaurants* to be uploaded after the second half of 2017. The reviews with pictorial cues have enhanced the likability and consistency of e-WOM while the online reviews in English dominated the information about dining establishments in Thailand, affected rating and valence of comments posted by users from around the globe.

Finally, the meta-commentary interpretation suggests that the reciprocity of favorable rating among the members of TripAdvisor and the consensus of recommendations have developed a high degree of online affinity. A combination of demographic and psychographic characteristics such as age and country of origin, similar travel, and gastronomic preferences created a sense of homophily among users. The findings indicate that the number of Pe-WOM and the seniority of users increased the credibility and the valence of online messages, strengthening the brand awareness for several *sunset restaurants* in Krabi, Phuket, Pattaya, and Koh Samui.

However, the insufficient secondary analysis of the effect of Ne-POW on the brand equity of *sunset restaurants* and the lack of data from other social media platforms, like Wongnai, or booking.com are the limitations of my study. Future research should include a comparative examination of e-WOM about *sunset restaurants* in other popular coastal destinations in Asia and in Europe so that to provide a holistic outlook about possible similarities or differences for this emerging tourism segment.

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