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Friends and fellow travelers: comparative influence of review sites and friends on hotel choice

Abstract

(Purpose) Sites such as TripAdvisor® offer millions of reviews, and travelers often reduce that to a manageable amount by focusing on reviews by writers who show homophily, i.e. are similar to them in terms of travel interests. These sites represent a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) recommendation; what is not clear is how much they replace or augment traditional word-of-mouth (WOM). This paper examines when travelers are more influenced by friends (WOM) with limited knowledge of hotels but an understanding of the traveler, and when by review sites (eWOM) which have immense experience of hotels but cannot know the individual traveler.

(Design method) Dual-method content analysis of semi-structured interviews with a heterogeneous purposive sample of regular users of TripAdvisor® ($N = 30$), integrated with a survey of users ($N = 237$).

(Findings) Friends were considered the most credible information source, although friends showing greater homophily were more valued than others. However, in some circumstances, subjects found eWOM more credible: when they wanted greater certainty in their hotel choice so complete information was important; when the hotel was for a special occasion or special people; and for feelings of empowerment. Most subjects compared all sources rather than relying on one.

(Originality/Value) This study reminds hotel managers that while eWOM is accessible and analyzable, it may not fully represent guests' opinions; hotels' marketing strategy should balance it with other recommendation networks. As guests compare sources, consistency in all forms of customer engagement is also essential.

(Keywords) eWOM, homophily, TripAdvisor®, hotel choice, trust

Travelers have exchanged information for as long as there has been travel. Once, they pinned messages to the thorn trees of Africa; today, web-based social-media allow them to share in new ways and, pleasingly, the Lonely Planet's website has a Thorn Tree travel forum. This study looks at TripAdvisor®, one of the largest travel social media sites (Ayeh *et al.*, 2013) where travelers share experiences of hotels, restaurants, activities and destinations, replicating and augmenting existing social information-sharing networks. This paper integrates qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey to examine the credibility of online user review sites in the perspective of an age-old recommender system: friends.

Before the Internet, when travelers wanted recommendations of where to stay they had three main options. First was to ask friends who had stayed at the destination. Second was to turn to a guidebook. The third way was through the mass media. Today, they have the extra option of engaging with other travelers on the interactive Web 2.0. Technology has introduced electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) recommendations alongside traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) advice. This has benefitted travelers who have more information, and businesses which have used social media analysis to better understand tourists' travel behaviors, to look for consumer trends, and to hear what customers are saying (Barreda and Bilgihan, 2013). What has been little discussed in scholarly studies is to what extent WOM and eWOM work in tandem, with the latter supplementing the former, or whether the new arrival has superseded the old in terms of credibility. This has relevance for the travel industry which is becoming reliant on and influenced by eWOM, and which may benefit from balancing engagement on the Web with engagement on more traditional platforms.

When searches first moved online, the need for information was fulfilled by marketers and advertisers, and the rise of social media in travel (see Leung *et al.*, 2012, for an overview) has done a great deal to overcome this information asymmetry (Schegg and Fux, 2010), giving greater power to the traveler rather than the tour operator or tourism board. The web is now the primary source of information for searching and booking in travel, contributing to the rise of e-tourism as a topic for academic research (Pantano and Di Pietro, 2013), as well as to the coffers of the industry with a global online travel market worth US\$256 billion in 2010 and growing (PhoCusWright, 2011).

For this paper, websites such as TripAdvisor.com, Booking.com, and IgoUgo.com will be referred to as OURS (online user review sites), as they are made by and for us, the general public. Research says people trust opinions from other consumers rather than from

marketing agencies (O'Connor, 2010; Dickinger, 2011), and OURS are valued because they offer authentic, credible opinions, rather than biased reports from a hotel's or a tourist board's website. But while studies have looked at relative credibility of OURS compared to marketer or expert information, few comparisons have been made between OURS and recommendations from friends.

2 Literature review and research questions

This section looks at four areas that lead to the two research questions. First it introduces TripAdvisor® and what it represents in the travel industry; second it looks at the effect of interactive Web 2.0 social media in travel and tourism; third it looks at the eWOM aspect of social media; and finally it considers homophily, the perceived social similarity that invites people to share both WOM and eWOM, and helps travelers assess whose opinions are most likely to be credible and salient to their own travel intentions.

2.1. TripAdvisor®

One of the world's largest travel websites, TripAdvisor® brings together people looking for advice on where to stay and what to do, with travelers who have had first-hand experience of a destination. Alongside chatrooms and forums, ratings and reviews, it gives details of each reviewer such as travel interests, number of reviews posted, and helpfulness rating. It carries 150 million consumer reviews of 3.7 million hotels and destinations (TripAdvisor®, 2014a). Many of these have added it to their customer relationship management social media outreach efforts, and respond on the site to complaints and compliments posted by guests.

It influences the traveling habits of 97.7 per cent of people who use it (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008) and for independent travelers TripAdvisor® and its like have become valued sites to research, confirm or check a destination (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). And yet, while they are valued for their authenticity, they can also create doubt because it is not always clear who has written the reviews. Hence this paper's title: TripAdvisor® is where likeminded fellow travelers offer mutual support, but the phrase also has overtones of the anti-communist purges in the 1950s USA, where to be a 'fellow traveler' was to be sympathetic to those who wished to change the old order and therefore were subject to suspicion. Indeed, suspicions that some reviews may be fraudulent have dogged

TripAdvisor® (Wu *et al.*, 2010), and the ‘old order’ of travel journalism can be critical of the website (Frommer, 2011).

2.2. Social media and travel

Sharing information has always been a key part of enjoying travel, as well as maintaining or building social relationships through postcards, souvenirs and sharing anecdotes to create social capital, or to keep a sense of identity as a certain kind of traveler (Munar and Jacobsen, 2013). Social media sites are another means to do this, allowing for new travel communities to emerge and expanding the reach of travel user-generated content. TripAdvisor® is considered social media in that it is a community of travelers interacting and sharing information. It joins other social media which has impacted on the travel industry with blogs, people posting photographs and videos on Flickr and YouTube, sharing adventures on Facebook, updating followers on Twitter, asking travel-related questions on forums and discussion boards, and collaborating on sites such as Wikitravel. In addition to travelers, commercial and state tourism enterprises have also grown their online presence by hosting pages or contributing to other sites. As a result, social media has become strategically essential for organizations to maintain a competitive edge, using it to gather data (Dellarocas, 2003), to engage with travelers (Leung *et al.*, 2013), and building social media into their own websites (Sanchez-Franco and Rondan-Cataluña, 2010).

2.3. WOM and eWOM

WOM is an interpersonal communication about a product or service which the receiver considers is not commercial (Buttle, 1998). As a result, it is more credible than advertising or a sales message, and is a critical element in purchase decisions (Bayus, 1985). Similarly, eWOM has primarily been associated with reviews which help consumers make a choice (Ba and Pavlou, 2002; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), and again its power lies in the belief that it is not commercial. It can be more effective than advertising because it is more trustworthy (Bickert and Schindler, 2001), and it affects both attitudes and behaviors (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2004). One common definition is that 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 or institutions via the Internet”

(Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004, p. 39), which highlights the main difference with WOM: the breadth of its reach. The credibility of WOM is based on homophily – the degree of perceived similarity between source and recipient (Wang *et al.*, 2008) – so that receivers are more likely to trust WOM given by people who are like them; the credibility of eWOM lies in a combination of homophily and the technology that aggregates many opinions into a number, ranking a hotel among its peers, for example (Author, 2013).

eWOM includes one-to-one communication, such as emails, and many-to-many communication on blogs, virtual communities, chat-rooms and OURS; and it can be used to build a brand and enhance business (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). It has been looked at in terms of persuasive effect (Zhang *et al.*, 2010a); impact on customer loyalty (Gruen *et al.*, 2006); information overload (Park and Lee, 2008); and recently trust (Xu, 2014); but rarely in terms of its relationship with more traditional WOM, hence this paper. Kozinets (1999) studied social change driven by the Internet and stated that eWOM was likelier to supplement than to replace WOM; as he was working before OURS had made a significant impact, this is taken as a call for research into this area.

OURS replicate and augment existing social networks. In an early study involving TripAdvisor[®], Rabanser and Ricci (2005) stated that OURS are like a social network that mimics a traditional social process of recommendation. Sidali *et al.* (2009) considered the role of OURS and found that they contributed a lot to decisions, but were not the only source of information used. Recommendations from friends were most important, followed by hotel rating systems, OURS, and travel agents' recommendations. However, OURS were the most used source of information. Their study did not consider the role of homophily in evaluating opinions on OURS, however, which may account for the discrepancy between sources considered *important* (homophilous friends) and sources *used* (OURS).

Indeed, credibility based on homophily has been a regular theme in studies on this subject. Lim *et al.* (2006) researched first-time visitors to a website and found that customer endorsement from similar peers increases consumers' trusting beliefs and likelihood to buy. Ayeh *et al.* (2013) surveyed 600 TripAdvisor[®] users and found that homophily was associated with source credibility. Kusumasondjaja *et al.* (2012) looked at the effect of reviewer identity on trust in positive and negative reviews, and found that when a reviewer's identity was not disclosed, there was no difference between the effects of reviews with different valence. Casaló *et al.* (2010) studied how OURS play a greater part in travel

decisions than other sources, and found that susceptibility to interpersonal influence moderates the influence of OURS' usability and levels of trust. Their research focused on informational influence, accepting others' opinions as evidence of reality, but did not look at what persuades users to pay more heed to some reviewers than others, which is the subject of this study: to identify the relative credibility of OURS and friends' recommendations in the decision to choose a hotel; and to consider how these operate in tandem.

2.4. Homophily and OURS

An OURS such as TripAdvisor[®] offers cues about the reviewer that a user can employ to establish whether they are credible and show homophily, and to look for congruence between reviewers' and users' travel interests (Park *et al.*, 2014) and assess who the writer is (Williams *et al.*, 2010). This is particularly relevant as risk is higher in experience goods such as travel which cannot be tested before purchase nor returned if they disappoint (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010; Willemsen *et al.*, 2011). Getting opinions from likeminded a person is the closest to trying it oneself, and scholars have shown that reports from satisfied and similar peers can increase buying intention (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Lim *et al.*, 2006).

People find more credible the opinions of those who demonstrate homophily with them, defined in this context as the way a website user identifies with a reviewer as having salient similarities which unite them in the shared attitudes, activities and intentions of a prototypical group of likeminded people (Cialdini, 2001; Wood, 2000). This has not gone unnoticed by TripAdvisor[®] (2014b), which says that it is “a friendly and relaxed community filled with unscripted conversations between travelers like you”; it presents itself as a place to hear from likeminded people.

Homophily is limited by the number of cues available, but Hogg (2000) found that in order to reduce uncertainty, and given limited time and information, individuals assigned to themselves a prototypical shared identity with a group as a heuristic for judging similarity. Prototypes are “context-specific fuzzy sets that define and prescribe attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that characterize one group and distinguish it from other groups” (Hogg, 2000, p. 226). For example, a TripAdvisor[®] user might mentally assign herself to the prototypical group of ‘Canadian businesswoman travelers’. The website aids such shared identities by allowing users to personalize searches, filtering reviews to see only those by families, couples, solo or business travelers; and subsequently by providing information on each

reviewer's age, gender, nationality, and travel experience. Taken together, these allow travelers to assess reviewers and judge how they fit with a prototypical identity.

Homophily must also be combined with relevant experience, which is a point of difference rather than similarity: "We may say that the peers are not simply peers, but peers exhibiting 'optimal heterophily': They are like us in terms of interests ... except for one important difference: They have experience with the specific target... while we do not" (Walther *et al.*, 2011, p. 26). Qu and Lee (2011, p. 1262) suggested that "an online travel community affects members' lives by acting as a reference group, akin to family and close friends". Next, including trust as a factor in deciding whose opinions to value followed studies of trust online (Bart *et al.*, 2005; Yoo *et al.*, 2009) and led to a research question: **RQ1** Do travelers trust TripAdvisor® as much as friends and guidebooks?

Previous studies have compared online sources in terms of credibility and homophily. One looked at trust in OURS reviewers (Willemsen *et al.*, 2012) and found that laypersons were more trustworthy than experts, and an expert online source becomes more credible when it incorporates peer ratings into its report. In another study, Wang *et al.* (2008) compared (expert) health information websites with (layman) discussion groups, to find that credibility was the main driver of information evaluation in the former, and homophily in the latter. Both studies influenced the inclusion of homophily and credibility in this study, but both restricted themselves to the online world rather comparing the credibility of eWOM and existing WOM. Thus while there is much evidence that homophily contributes to credibility, this has rarely been examined in OURS and hence led to a second research question: **RQ2** Do travelers trust TripAdvisor® reviewers more if they show homophily to them?

3. Data gathering and analytical approach

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that is becoming more common in the social sciences (Bryman, 2006). Qualitative interviews with regular TripAdvisor® users ($N = 30$) were integrated with a quantitative survey of users ($N = 237$), so that the survey would show what attitudes people held towards perceptual homophily, among other things, while the interviews would give a clearer idea of why they held those attitudes and what effect they had. This kind of data integration has been used in nursing studies where a combination of empirical fact and emotional understanding is key (Mitchell, 1986; Morse, 1991) and is

considered to give a richer understanding of the topic. While there are concerns about merging textual and numeric data sets, for example, or the relative weight to give to each, integration can achieve a more comprehensive approach to a research problem (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007). In this case, the study employed simultaneous integration in which “the findings complement one another at the end of the study” rather than results from the first method being used to inform the second (Morse, 1991, p. 120).

A qualitative approach was chosen to provide insight into human behavior (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), by uncovering information that is not easily accessible, including perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and illustrative anecdotes (Partington, 2001). Taking a constructionist approach which assumes “the data, text or talk is organized and created through social interaction” (Marvasti, 2004, p. 83), the interview was selected as it delivers information in the form that individuals use it, and is valuable for research on how people view the social world (Hannabuss, 1996). One risk is that a subject might give a socially desirable answer to avoid appearing ignorant; this is acknowledged, as a constructivist approach assumes that an interview is a co-construction of social reality by researcher and subject (Lee and Roth, 2004). However, as a counterweight to the risk of socially desirable responses, particularly concerning the credibility of friends’ reviews, an anonymous survey of users was also employed to compare credibility of sources.

Thirty TripAdvisor[®] users (female 16, ages 22-63 $M = 40$, Western 17, Asian 13) were interviewed face-to-face, for 20 minutes on topics that included source credibility and homophily with reviewers. To avoid single-researcher bias, the subjects were contacts of the author and a research assistant. To gain greater insight into TripAdvisor[®] by looking at it from different viewpoints, they were selected to be a heterogeneous purposive sample. As a result, they had a range of traveling behavior and site usage (in the previous year, 46.2% traveled once or twice, 34.9% traveled three or four times; while 33.3% used the site 1-3 times, 14.7% 4-6 times, 35.7% more than 10 times); occupations that included students, home-makers, designers, executives, administrators, academics, company directors, and retirees; and nationalities from the USA, Asia, Europe and Australia. The interviews took place in Singapore between January and March 2012, as the cosmopolitan nature of the country (Chua, 2003) lends itself to such maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002).

The interviews were semi-structured, starting with a list of questions, but allowing the interviewer to follow up on a point that warranted discussion (Roulston, 2006). This

approach ensures that interviews could be compared, while allowing freedom for new ideas to emerge (Babbie, 2011). Interviewing stopped at 30 following a study of interview-based PhD theses which showed that the mean sample size was 31 respondents (Mason, 2010). The number was in also keeping with the principle that qualitative methods involve deep detail about a small number of people (Labuschagne, 2003). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, giving 40,000 words of text which underwent content analysis. This has been used for media texts and TripAdvisor[®] reviews (Barreda and Bilgihan, 2013), and has recently been applied to interviews (Severinsson, 2003).

Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) suggested seven forms of content analysis of which this study used two: constant comparison and key-words in context. For the first, the initial step was establishing areas of interest; the next step was for two researchers to read the texts and suggest initial coding of themes, constantly comparing their interpretations to create a coding manual using theoretically sensitive categorization (Marvasti, 2004). Two rounds of analysis using four interviews achieved inter-coder agreement with an acceptable Cronbach's $\alpha > .80$ (Krippendorff, 2003), to finalize the manual for the remaining 26 interviews. For the second form of content analysis, key words are chosen based on synonyms for primary concepts identified by constant comparison, and then examined in relation to the words around them.

Based on these, the interview texts underwent content analysis on three levels. The first used a response from the subject as a unit of analysis, framed by two questions from the interviewer, chosen as it is a discrete syntactical unit. Each unit could be coded multiple times, and it was possible for a subject to express statements on more than one category. In the coding manual, two themes of 1) the comparative credibility of friends, guidebooks, and OURS; and 2) homophily with reviewers, were classified into three mutually exclusive categorical variables (Perreault and Leigh, 1989) and the text was analyzed for statements that corresponded to these six categories, reported below with frequencies and examples. Second, to place OURS credibility in a broader WOM context, the 26 interviews were analysed at a more granular level for credibility ascribed to TripAdvisor[®], guidebooks and friends (Table 1). In this case, the individual subject was the unit of analysis. Third, as Schilling (2006) suggested that descriptive measures offer insight best when used with other analyses, key-words in context analysis was also employed. To analyze credibility and

homophily the key words were ‘similar’, ‘recommend’ and ‘friend’, with texts analyzed by hand to ensure that word usage corresponded to its desired meaning (Babbie, 2011).

In addition, a questionnaire was distributed among travelers at the researcher’s university, and using an online social network snowball approach inviting people to fill in an online questionnaire. It captured the demographics and travel activities of regular TripAdvisor® users ($N = 237$), and included a five-point Likert scale of seven measurements of homophily adapted from Casaló *et al.*’s (2010) measurements of similarity, shared interests and goals ($\alpha > .80$). It also used a five-point Likert scale to assess the levels of credibility ascribed to guidebooks and friends, and the likelihood of comparing it with other sites. Respondents were mostly female (58.0%) and under 30 (52.1%) while only 9.7% were over 60. Around half had traveled overseas once or twice in the previous year (46.0%) and a third had gone three or four times (35.0%). One third had used TripAdvisor® a lot, consulting it over 10 times in the previous year (35.7%) and another third had consulted it only once or twice (33.2%). Such a self-selecting sample is open to bias (Bethlehem, 2008), and as a result the data was not intended as generalizable. A more representative sample would have been achieved had TripAdvisor® been willing to share data, which they were not. In addition, attempts at contacting people through its message boards were stopped by forum moderators, while attempts to contact reviewers directly were abandoned as the messages went to their junk e-mail boxes.

4. Findings and analysis

This section integrates the interview and the survey data so that each informs the other, dealing first with the levels of credibility of WOM and eWOM when choosing a hotel, and second with the effect of homophily on credibility.

4.1. Credibility of friends (WOM) compared with other sources (eWOM)

4.1.i. Constant comparison: Source credibility

RQ1 asked about the credibility of OURS, friends and guidebooks. The survey reported more agreement with the statement that TripAdvisor® is less credible than recommendation from a friend who knows you well ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .88$, where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree), than with the statement that the site was more credible than a guidebook ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .94$). Most often, each source was compared with information from other

sources rather than being trusted in its own right ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .73$). In the interviews, friends were more trusted than other sources, shown in 63.0% of 54 statements on this subject. Less often, they were treated with caution and a friend's credibility depended on level of homophily (18.5%); friends were similar and therefore trustworthy.

Friends more credible than other sources (34 statements): "They have to work together, and a friend's recommendation would be much more valued to me and sometimes that's how I do it also. I ask a friend and then I check against TripAdvisor." *Female, 44, Sweden.*

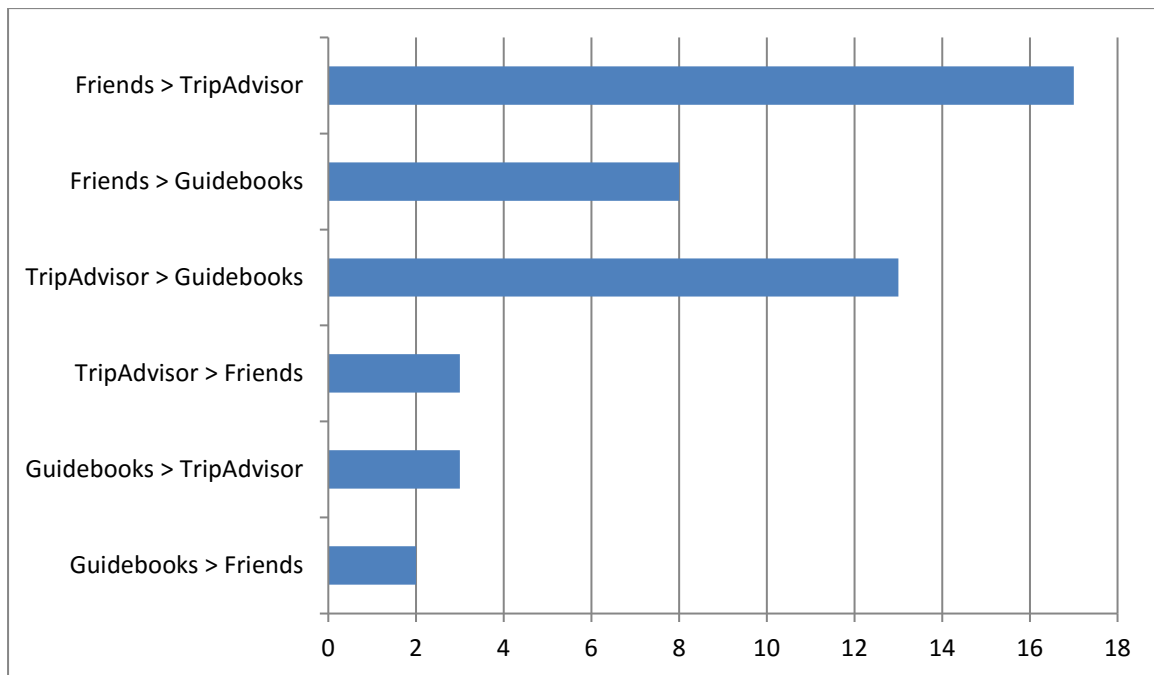
Some friends more credible than others (10 statements): "My cousin stayed with us recently, and she is single and 50 and the noise of children annoys her. So for her to say, the hotel was noisy and children were everywhere, it's probably that the hotel was quiet and kids were just normally playing... and it's perfect for us. So I think you need to know the preferences." *Male, 41, India.*

Other sources more credible than friends (10 statements): "Lonely Planet, because it's consistent... TripAdvisor is not consistent, and generally the quality is much lower." *Male, 24, Singapore.*

4.1.ii. Frequency of subjects' judgments of source credibility

Of the 26 subjects, most said that friends were a more credible source of hotel suggestions than TripAdvisor® (17 subjects, 65.4%); friends were more also credible than guidebooks (8 subjects, 30.8%); and TripAdvisor®, too, was more credible than guidebooks (13 subjects, 50%). Cumulatively, friends were most often considered to be more credible followed by TripAdvisor®, with guidebooks a distant third. In addition, 11 subjects (42.3%) specifically said that they consulted one source, and then corroborated, confirmed or compared the information against the site.

Table 1: Frequency of subjects' judgment of credibility of one source over another ($N = 26$)



4.1.iii. Key words in context: Source credibility

Friends, who were mentioned 90 times, are trusted because they understand the traveler's needs and interests: "My friend could say that they have an amazing wakeboarding thing, they have a bar on the water, they *know* me, while TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet don't know me" *Male, 30, Canada*. One trustworthy aspect of a friend's recommendation is the opportunity for clarification: "because friends, you can still ask them why it is bad, then they will tell you all the little details, which you will normally not find on TripAdvisor and professional magazines" *Female, 22, Indonesia*. Friends may be also considered as powerful recommenders because they have already researched on OURS: "I know friends who spend days just to search for the best hotel" *Female, 26, Singapore*, while one appeal of an OURS is that sometimes "you can see your friends who have contributed" *Female, 38, Singapore*. While friends mostly outweighed other sources, this was not always the case, however. Friends' recommendations were to be compared against OURS; some subjects started with friends' advice then checked it against other sources, while others worked the other way round: "I try to get from as many sources as possible, information about the same place and then I start comparing, and then I make my decision from there" *Female, 38, Singapore*. Occasionally the volume of opinions online outweighed the opinion of a friend, and one

subject preferred them: “You know you can ask the audience, or you can phone a friend? I’d rather ask the audience” *Male, 42, USA*.

4.1.iv. Credibility of WOM and eWOM

Some subjects said they thought of online travel communities as similar to family or friends, yet trusted friends more than OURS because there was a longer history of trustworthiness, provided that the friend’s travel interests and objectives were similar: “friends tend to be like you, or you know if a friend is not like you and he recommends you couldn’t possibly follow their recommendation because you know them quite well and you know what they like” *Female, 48, UK*. One unexpected theme was that subjects consistently compared sources rather than relying on any one. They also considered friends to be a more reliable, if limited, source than OURS: even if a friend did not have an encyclopaedic knowledge of hotels, they knew *them* and would recommend a suitable hotel if they knew of one. With this in mind, it is significant that TripAdvisor® now has a tie-in with Facebook, leveraging on the ‘friend effect’ to gain trust by association, labelled f-tourism (Pantano and Di Pietro, 2013) as more hotels engage with customers on the social platform of Facebook (Phelan *et al.*, 2013). Searching online, subjects commonly looked for markers of prototypical group identity (Hogg, 2000) such as age, nationality and reason for traveling as markers of credibility, answering RQ2. Subjects said that they find reviews more trustworthy if they are by homophilous people. Based on the site’s filters and information on the reviewers, and the details, attitudes and opinions in the reviews themselves, the subjects looked for homophily by judging on status, nationality, age, gender, socio-economic grounds, as well as interests.

4.2. Homophily between reviewer and subject

RQ2 asked if travelers using TripAdvisor® trusted reviewers more if they were similar to them. The survey showed that users agreed most that reviewers were credible when they had the same objectives as them ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .68$), and that the most relevant reviews are written by people who are similar to the user ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .86$). Respondents were also likely to agree that TripAdvisor® was *less* credible than a friend ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .88$). Interview subjects showed nearly equal likelihood of valuing a reviewer perceived as similar, with 43.7% of 96 statements on this topic, as of dismissing a reviewer’s opinion if they were perceived as dissimilar (46.9%). Subjects’ focus was often on homophily, as in

“For instance, the category is a family, I would think, ‘that’s me!’ It might not suit a couple, but it would suit a family” *Female, 44, Australia*. However, subjects also said they were put off by people who did not display homophily: “I would think maybe they are looking for something different from me” *Female, 48, UK*.

4.2.i. Constant comparison: Homophily between reviewer and subject

Homophily between reviewer and subject (42 statements): “I’ve gone to places where people have said it wasn’t particularly their sort of thing and try to read between the lines and try to see if these people are our sort of people or not.” *Female, 41, UK*

Lack of homophily between reviewer and subject (45 statements): “I guess it depends because certain people writing certain reviews are in different socio-economical standards from myself. For example, there might be families with eight kids, which doesn’t reflect on myself and my girlfriend.” *Male, 30, Canada*

Neutral about homophily (9 statements): “You’re going to get a breadth of people, what is good and what is bad. I would accept that, which probably means it’s going to even itself out over the course of 200-300 reviews.” *Male, 47, UK*

4.2.ii. Key words in context

Similarity, which occurred five times, is a first moment of non/identification that acts as a gatekeeper whether to proceed and value the information. When one subject, *Female, 44, Sweden*, “found this review written about a beach, and a resort on the beach, by a woman who was similar to myself and had a lot of kids, and she was saying, it was such a great place,” she booked it. Similarity involves a shared understanding, so even if a reviewer gives good information it may simply not be relevant, and a friend may be in a better position to advise: “People who wrote these reviews may have stayed there, but people are not necessarily 28, with a girlfriend, active. But my friends... they know me” *Male, 30, Canada*.

Recommendations, mentioned 42 times, also indicate homophily as users are more likely to accept recommendations from those with similar backgrounds, objectives and interests to them (Levin *et al.*, 2006). However, recommendations are to be tested, not trusted: “Friends might come up with a great recommendation but they can’t compare it to other places that might be even nicer,” said one subject, *Female, 46, UK*. This extends to other sources, too, and one guidebook’s recommendations were challenged because they

tend to be “kooky”; one travel review site was considered suspect because of a perception that it sells leftover accommodation; and one subject was wary of travel agents based on the belief that they recommend only places on which they get commission.

4.2.iii. Use of WOM versus eWOM

A subsidiary concern of this paper was to identify when eWOM superseded WOM recommendations from friends, and when it was used to augment it. The latter was more common, and 18 subjects (60%) said that they would check a friend’s recommendation against TripAdvisor® or vice versa: “I ask a friend and then I check against TripAdvisor,” *Female, 44, Sweden*; and “TripAdvisor is like my Level 2 check that I go through, and to get more authentic reviews and feedback” *Female, 38, Singapore*.

The bigger question is under what circumstances eWOM replaces WOM, which would explain the discrepancy observed by Sidali *et al.* (2009) between sources considered important (WOM) and sources used (eWOM). Friends were most credible, but at times TripAdvisor®’s credibility was specified, offering insight into the real value of OURS, based on the subject’s reasons for searching. Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2004) noted that eWOM’s relevance depended in the motivation of the user, and this study identifies some of those motivations. Six subjects (20%) wanted the best deal which only an OURS could provide: “sometimes it’s like can I find a great hotel that has everything ... it’s sort of like the holy grail, you are on a journey and you want to the best you can get” *Male, 56, Australia*. Five subjects (16.7%) saw its credibility in having recent information that neither friend nor guidebook could deliver: “the guide was written by a guy who visited it one year ago, while on TripAdvisor, 20 to 30 people might have passed through” *Female, 46, UK*.

Yet the most significant motive for trusting it more than friends was that it gave a sense of certainty, of control over hotel booking, which was expressed by 14 subjects (46.7%). The first form of certainty occurs because TripAdvisor® shows all the hotels in a destination, leaving less doubt that there may be a better one the subject does not know about: “even the smallest bed and breakfast and other specialty lodging. They seem to cover everything there” *Female, 46, UK*; and “When I arrive at the place and I know it’s the right one then, yes, I feel like it’s worth it, I spent all this time... picking the right place to stay” *Female, 32, Singapore*. Second, the sheer numbers of reviews of a hotel can outweigh the opinion of a friend, making it more trustworthy: “I guess by the law of averages it is more

credible because there are more people contributing to it, as opposed to one Lonely Planet reviewer” *Male, 44, UK*; while more data also leads to a more confident decision: “on a website you could get 30 or 40 reviews which I think would be more accurate than your one friend’s” *Male, 42, USA*. Third, some subjects liked the feeling of personal control the site gave them: “I think it’s quite refreshing... because it’s self-empowering” *Male, 44, UK*. Fourth, control and certainty is about getting it right, and when it is particularly important not to make the wrong choice of hotel, then the site becomes more trusted: “if you are going to a place which is expensive and it’s a special trip, you want to get as much information as you can about the place that you are going to stay at” *Female, 41, UK*.

On the other hand, WOM alone can be trustworthy when the effort and time involved in an OURS search is so great that it drives subjects towards a simpler solution. Eight subjects (26.7%) complained about how long a search took: “you’d have to wade through a huge amount of information which is a big downside when you’re planning a holiday” *Male, 63, USA*. Instead, three subjects (10%) expressed a preference for someone to bring them a solution, or at least to make their decision simpler: “It would be nice to put in some data, and it finds you the best hotel based on what you like” *Female, 44, Australia*; and this is where a friend’s recommendation is often the quick and easy option: “I would prefer to have someone serve me, someone who knows what I want ... I would like someone to hand me the solution” *Female, 44, Sweden*.

5. Conclusion

Before the Internet, traveler decisions were plagued by information asymmetry and information poverty – there was not enough of it to be certain. Now the problem is of information overload – there is too much to process. Both friends and OURS, WOM and eWOM, offer solutions to this, and perceptual homophily is key in each. As Rabanser and Ricci (2005) observed, they are different versions of the same social process. When eWOM supersedes WOM, it is based on the credibility of whether a greater number of homophilous travelers have liked a hotel. When WOM supersedes eWOM, it is because a friend’s recommendation is trustworthy as they are similar, and to take their advice reduces search time. However, it is rarely a case of one or the other and as Kozinets (1999) proposed, eWOM supplements rather than replaces WOM. Indeed, they work in tandem when travelers

compare and contrast each source against the other, relying on their own skills to integrate different, homophilous, credible sources to reach a conclusion over which they feel they have had control. Credibility is still central, and both are considered more trustworthy than commercial recommendations, as earlier studies found (O'Connor, 2010; Dickinger, 2011).

A methodological limitation for this study is that while efforts were made to achieve a heterogeneous purposive sample of ages, nationalities and traveling habits, the 30 subjects were not a representative sample of TripAdvisor® users. This was expected, and this study pursued a primarily subjective epistemology to offer insights rather than generalizations, and the results stand up to intersubjective scrutiny rather than offering objective reality (Babbie, 2011). Similarly, a more representative sample for the survey could have returned different results; although given the consistency with which perceptual homophily has been identified as a key factor in credibility (Wood, 2000; Wang et al, 2008; Qu and Lee, 2011; Park et al, 2014; Xu, 2014), the key findings of this study might still be consistent with a larger sample size. Further, conclusions drawn from any study of OURS users are not generalizable to all tourists, as the former are often independent travelers who want greater control. Finally, although care was taken to assure inter-coder reliability, there is a risk of researcher bias in this kind of study, as “a degree of evaluation and interpretation applies to all forms of cultural research” (Deacon *et al.*, 2007, p. 138).

This research has implications for hotel and tourism management. It suggests that travelers are swayed more by friends than by OURS or guidebooks, leading to the conclusion that even the most effective social media responses or digital campaigns are only part of the battle as hotels seek to manage their image (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). There is a temptation for hoteliers to base marketing activity on eWOM because it is available and can be harvested and analyzed. And yet it may not be a perfect proxy for WOM. To run any business based solely on information gathered online would be to ignore concerns about the validity of online information; subjects took TripAdvisor® reviews with a pinch of salt – the phrase was used 14 times – and hoteliers might usefully do the same. The Internet brings out the best and the worst in people, and Whitty and Joinson (2009) stated that people are both more honest and more dishonest online. On the one hand, the anonymity of the web allows people to express their true selves (McKenna, 2007, p. 206). On the other, scholars have voiced concerns over accurate representation of identity (Grabner-Kräuter and Kaluscha, 2006), and the absence of online identities behind OURS leading to untrustworthiness has

been highlighted (Zhang *et al.*, 2010b). This potential difference between WOM and eWOM offers an opportunity for further research

For travelers, too, this study suggests that writing a review for a specific and homophilous audience may have more impact. Another area for study would be into self-presentation on OURS, for which there has been scant research. MacCannell (1973) offered the idea of staged versus true authenticity in tourism which may give insights into OURS where authenticity is the watchword but it is inevitably staged as reviewers attempt to control their image. Will they present the true self (McKenna, 2007) or use the opportunity offered by the Internet to manage their identity (Whitty and Joinson, 2009)?

This could be extended into hotels' self-presentation on TripAdvisor[®], and this study has commercial implications: "Understanding how consumers are currently using UGC sites as part of their travel planning process along with the ways these sites are influencing travel behavior is an essential first step to developing a strategic approach towards UGC" (Cox *et al.*, 2009, p. 750). When hotel managers respond to a customer's praise or complaints, do they assume an identity of (expert) bureaucratic efficiency or (homophilous) amateur authenticity? And which has greater effect on travelers? Such a study would offer insights into when and how hotels can best engage with customers on OURS.

Finally, as travelers compare sources against each other to establish their credibility, a consistent marketing approach across all platforms, digital, traditional and social, is essential. Yet, given the temptation for hotels to flatter themselves on their own websites, and the fact that this is not trusted by customers who prefer the credibility of OURS, it may benefit hotels to move into the realm of authenticity as perceived by customers rather than by marketing managers. This would lead to a greater likelihood of under-promising and over-delivering, which has a positive effect on reviews, whether in person or via eWOM.

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