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IMPROVING TRAVELLERS' TRUST IN RESTAURANT REVIEW SITES

Rafael Anaya-Sánchez^a, Sebastian Molinillo^{b*}, Rocío Aguilar-Illescas^c, Francisco Liébana-Cabanillas^d

^aDepartment of Business Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Malaga, Campus El Ejido, 29016 Malaga, Spain, rafael.anaya@uma.es, [+34952131293](tel:+34952131293).

^bDepartment of Business Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Malaga, Campus El Ejido, 29016 Malaga, Spain, smolinillo@uma.es, [+34952131265](tel:+34952131265).

^cDepartment of Business Management, Faculty of Commerce and Management, University of Malaga, Campus de Teatinos, 29071, Malaga, Spain, rocio.aguilar@uma.es, [+34952131293](tel:+34952131293).

^dDepartment of Marketing and Market Research, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Granada, Campus La Cartuja, 18071 Granada, Spain, franlieb@ugr.es, [+958242380](tel:+958242380).

*Corresponding author: Sebastian Molinillo, smolinillo@uma.es

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Abstract

Purpose: This research focuses on understanding how restaurant review sites generate trust among travellers and the effect of trust on the intention to visit and recommend restaurants while travelling.

Design / methodology: The research model was assessed with data from a sample of 439 Spanish tourists using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

Findings: Information quality and source credibility are key for generating website trust. Website quality does not influence trust. Website trust is a key variable for explaining both intention to visit and recommend a restaurant, offline and online. Age is a significant moderator.

Research implications: This study expands the literature by assessing the antecedents and consequences of travellers' trust in restaurant review sites during their trips.

Practical implications: Strategies are suggested for review sites, restaurants and destination managers.

Originality / value: This research enhances the knowledge of how consumers perceive restaurant review sites, and their behavioural intention while travelling.

Keywords: *WOM, website trust, intention to visit, restaurant industry.*

Research paper

1. Introduction

Social media strongly influence the tourism industry, impact on consumers, businesses, and destinations (Leung *et al.*, 2019) and have revolutionised how businesses and destinations approach, and interact with, consumers (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Law *et al.*, 2014). Social media encourage customer engagement (Fotis *et al.*, 2011; Tiago *et al.*, 2018) and experience co-creation (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2015), which facilitates real-time, personalised service (Buhalis and Conarta, 2019). Consumers look for travel information on social media (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010) and read online reviews before making their purchase decisions (Ha and Lee, 2018; Molinillo *et al.*, 2018) and use them to share their post-consumption opinions (Buhalis and Foerste, 2015).

Social media have increased the importance of word of mouth (WOM), making it more efficient and visible (Viglia *et al.*, 2016). Consumers increasingly turn to user-generated content (UGC), such as reviews, to organize their travel (Chan *et al.*, 2017). Reviews are sometimes motivated by commercial goals, which can affect consumer trust (Filieri *et al.*, 2015; Filieri, 2016). Trust has been shown to be one of the most important of the variables that make e-business successful in the travel industry, as it affects the choice and evaluation of a service (Ponte *et al.*, 2015; Ha and Lee, 2018; Law *et al.*, 2010). Among the antecedents of trust, web-based factors are of special interest, as they are under direct organizational control (e.g. quality) (Beldad *et al.*, 2010).

The availability of appropriate (quality, variety, price, etc.) restaurants is one of the main factors in the decision to choose a destination (Rahman *et al.*, 2018). Although social media and review sites are useful and entertaining sources of information (Li *et al.*, 2018), with important influence on consumer decision-making processes (Ha and Lee, 2018; Yang *et al.*, 2017), few studies have analysed how restaurant review sites generate trust among travellers and how website trust impacts on consumer behaviour. While some tourism studies

analyse website trust and tourist intentions, few consider the tourist's behaviour while (s)he is actually travelling (e.g. Jeong and Jang, 2011). In this specific context, consumers have greater uncertainty and less time for decision-making (Buhalis and Sinarta, 2019).

This study raises two research questions: 1. How do website-based factors affect tourist trust in review sites when they are in a destination? 2. Does trust in review sites affect tourist intention to visit and engage in word-of-mouth while they are in a destination?

This study draws on Filieri *et al.* (2015)'s model to measure the antecedents and consequences of trust in review sites. Unlike these authors, this research focuses on website-based factors as antecedents, word-of-mouth (i.e. WOM and eWOM) and intention to visit as response variables.

2. Background and hypotheses development

Perceived quality has been found to be an important variable for trust generation (Filieri *et al.*, 2015). It can be assumed that website quality is evaluated based on the functionality and general support it provides (e.g. ease of navigation, interactive communication, privacy) (Elliot *et al.*, 2013). "Source trustworthiness refers to the consumer perception that a source of communication is reliable, sincere and honest" (Filieri, 2016, p. 48). Filieri *et al.* (2015) found that if a consumer-generated website is perceived as safe, facilitates consumer navigation, provides information and features forums where customers can exchange information, it will be perceived as trustworthy. The literature establishes that website quality positively influences website trust (e.g. Bock *et al.*, 2012), particularly in websites that provide UGC (Filieri *et al.*, 2015).

H1. Website quality positively influences the tourist's trust in a review site.

Information quality influences the consumer's adoption of the information on review sites (Filieri and Mcleay, 2014). Restaurant reviews sites that are content rich (i.e. number of words and images) positively influence perceived usefulness (Hlee et al., 2019) and trust (Filieri, 2016). Consumers tend to trust reviews where the information is easy to process (Sparks and Browning, 2011). Tourists seek complete, relevant and up-to-date information about particular products that might meet their needs (Filieri *et al.*, 2015). Several studies have shown that information quality is essential for a website to gain consumer trust (Escobar-Rodríguez and Carvajal-Trujillo, 2014), especially for those sites that provide UGC in the tourism field (e.g. Elliot *et al.*, 2013; Filieri *et al.*, 2015).

H2. Information quality positively influences the tourist's trust in a review site.

In review sites, source credibility affects the consumer's perception of the usefulness (Filieri et al., 2018) and trustworthiness of its information (Sparks *et al.*, 2013). The trustworthiness of UGC is related to the platform and the characteristics of the posters (Yu Leung *et al.*, 2019). It has been shown that information provided by a highly credible source is perceived as useful and reliable (Hlee *et al.*, 2019). eWOM sources have more difficulty in being perceived as credible than traditional media, due to the anonymity of the posters (Filieri *et al.*, 2015). In tourism, credibility is important in the determination of whether or not information is accepted (Filieri, 2016) or trusted (Viglia et al., 2016). Restaurant reviews posted by other consumers have more credibility than information provided by restaurants, and have a positive influence on consumer trust (Ha and Lee, 2018).

H3. Source credibility has a positive effect on the tourist's trust in a review site.

It has been demonstrated that trust in UGC websites can influence the consumer's final decisions if they provide recommendations that reduce risk (Filieri *et al.*, 2015). Trust in

the website positively influences tourist attitude, commitment and intention to book services online (Agag and El-Masry, 2016). Trust in a particular review site is a key factor in determining the tourist's intention to follow a recommendation about, for example, which restaurant to choose (Casaló *et al.*, 2015). If a website features many reviews on a restaurant, this makes the source more credible, which positively influences behavioural intention (Zhang *et al.*, 2010). According to Sreejesh and Anusree (2016), website trust mediates the influence of the consumer's interaction with the website and his/her booking intention.

H4. Website trust positively influences the tourist's intention to visit a restaurant.

WOM and eWOM are two ways of talking about a product or a brand. Understanding the attributes that motivate consumers to exchange positive information about products and brands (WOM and eWOM) is essential for organizations (Jeong and Jang, 2011). Satisfied tourists demonstrate positive attitudes through greater intention to make favourable WOM recommendations (Wang *et al.*, 2017). Website trust can cause the tourist to develop a positive attitude towards a company and influences the establishment and maintenance of long-term relationships (Agag and El-Masry, 2016). The online evaluation a customer makes of a service is influenced by previous reviews he/she has read (Hudson and Thal, 2013). It has been shown that trust in a review site positively influences the user's intention to share the information obtained with friends and acquaintances (Filiari *et al.*, 2015).

H5. Website trust positively influences the tourist's intention to recommend a restaurant offline (WOM).

H6. Website trust positively influences the tourist's intention to recommend a restaurant online (eWOM).

Some studies have shown that the influence of the antecedents of the consumer's use of review sites and their impact on consumer behaviour may be moderated by personal characteristics, such as age and gender. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) reported that women have a greater propensity than men to accept that the information on travel review sites is explanatory, which helps make decisions easier to make; while people under the age of 35 are more likely than older people to use review sites and take their reviews into account in their decision-making. Dedeoglu (2019) also observed gender-based differences; the perceived quality of information published on review sites positively influences women more than it influences men. Escobar-Rodríguez et al. (2017) found that the degree of influence that trust in eWOM posted on social media exerts on intention to buy a tourism product is higher for female and younger customers. The literature, therefore, suggests that age and gender can influence consumer behaviour in relation to review sites. However, their moderating effects on the relationships in the research model have not been sufficiently examined, so the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7. Gender moderates all the relationships among the variables in the research model.

H8. Age moderates all the relationships among the variables in the research model.

3. Methodology

To assess the research model, data was collected from a sample of 450 Spanish tourists, frequent users of restaurant review sites, through a face-to-face survey using convenience sampling. The survey was conducted by researchers and a final year business degree student, between July and September 2016, at varying times on different days in five cities on the Costa del Sol, Spain. Eleven questionnaires were eventually discarded due to missing values and inconsistent responses. In total, 439 valid questionnaires were obtained. Of the participants, 78.8% were men, 39.3% were between 18 and 25 years old, 27.4%

between 26 and 35, 20.2% between 36 and 45, and 13.1% were older than 45; 40.8% were university graduates. The restaurant review sites most frequently used by the participants were TripAdvisor (31%), Booking.com (27.1%) and Trivago (23.8%).

The measures were taken from previous studies. The items were presented to the participants on seven-point Likert-type scales, where 1 means absolutely disagree and 7 means absolutely agree. The website quality, information quality, source credibility, website trust, and WOM and eWOM items were adapted from Filieri *et al.* (2015). The intention to visit items were adapted from Bock *et al.* (2012). A pre-test was conducted in which the scales were presented to 20 Spanish tourists. As a result of the pre-test, the questionnaire was redesigned to improve its comprehension.

4. Results

Partial least squares-structural equations modelling (PLS-SEM) was used, with SmartPls 3.2.7 software (Ringle *et al.*, 2015), to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model and to assess the structural model. This technique is suitable for small samples and/or where data normality cannot be guaranteed; it is appropriate for predictive analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2016). The sample size is higher than a minimum of ten times the number of major routes of the internal model directed towards the same variable, as recommended by Barclay *et al.*, 1995. Due to the reflective nature of the constructs, the SmartPLS consistent (PLSc) approach was used, together with the bootstrapping technique to assess the significance of the coefficients, and blindfolding for the predictive power.

4.1 Assessment of the measurement model

To evaluate the reliability of the items their factor loads were analysed. They are all higher than, or very close to, the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Barclay *et al.*, 1995), except

for SC4 (“The reviewers were reliable”) and eWOM3 (“I spoke positively online to others about restaurants which have positive reviews on this review website”), which were removed from the model. Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) were assessed to confirm the reliability of the scales, and average variance extracted (AVE) to confirm convergent validity (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). The CA and CR values were far higher than the recommended minimum value of 0.7, and the AVE values were higher than the recommended minimum of 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), confirming convergent validity (Table 1).

[Please, insert Table 1 about here]

Discriminant validity was examined through three methods: (i) analysis of the cross-loadings of the indicators: the loading of each indicator on its construct should be higher than the cross-loadings on the other constructs (Barclay *et al.*, 1995) (Table 1); (ii) Fornell-Larcker criterion: the correlations between the variables must be lower than the square root of their AVE (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) (Table 1); and (iii) HTMT ratio (heterotrait-monotrait): the inter-construct correlations should be lower than 0.9 (Henseler *et al.*, 2016) (Table 1). The results confirm the reliability and discriminant and convergent validity of the measurement model.

4.2 Assessment of the structural model

The variance inflation factor (VIF) values of the structural model were examined to check for multicollinearity. The values were all less than the maximum recommended value of 0.5. The R^2 values, which indicate the explained variance of each of the analysed

constructs, were above the minimum recommendation of 0.1 (Falk and Miller, 1992), ranging from 0.188 to 0.445 (Table 2).

The effects of information quality ($\beta = 0.408$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$) and source credibility ($\beta = 0.304$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$) on website trust are positive and significant. The effect of website quality on website trust ($p\text{-value} = 0.508 > 0.05$) is not significant. The effect of website trust on its three consequent variables is positive (intention to visit, $\beta = 0.578$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$; WOM intention, $\beta = 0.433$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$; eWOM intention, $\beta = 0.488$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$).

[Please, insert Table 2 about here]

The effect size (f^2) value of each variable on its consequent variables was significant for all relationships, with path weights: weak (> 0.02), moderate (> 0.15) and strong (> 0.35) (Henseler *et al.*, 2016), except for website quality and website trust, which were null (Table 2). The values of the standardized regression coefficients, and the f^2 values, support the hypothesized relationships, except H1.

The Stone-Geisser (Q^2) test (Geisser, 1975) showed that the model has acceptable predictive power ($Q^2 > 0$) (Table 2). The model has good fit, with a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value of 0.063, lower than the maximum recommended limit of 0.8 (Henseler *et al.*, 2016).

The moderating effects of gender and age were tested using multi-group analysis (MGA) (Hair *et al.*, 2016). The dataset was divided into two groups based on gender (male and female) and two groups based on the average age of the sample (up to and over 31). The results indicated that there are no significant differences based on gender, but there are based on age. Participants over the age of 31 paid more attention to the relationships between

information quality and website trust ($p < 0.10$) and website trust and eWOM ($p < 0.05$) than those under 31.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study increases the understanding of the website-based drivers of trust and their consequences for travellers' behavioural intentions. The findings make several theoretical contributions to the existing literature.

First, this research extends the Filieri *et al.* (2015) model in two ways: (1) by including three consequences of review website trust related to restaurants: intention to visit, WOM and eWOM; (2) by using a sample from a country culturally distinct from that used in their study (Hofstede Insights, 2019).

Second, the influence of information quality on trust has been shown in previous studies (e.g. Elliot *et al.*, 2013; Filieri, 2016). This study confirms that information quality is the most important antecedent of website trust, which is in line with other studies (e.g. Ponte *et al.*, 2015; Filieri *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the main reason that users trust the web is that the information they receive is relevant to their needs and is useful and complete.

Third, this research confirms that source credibility is an important variable for increasing website trust. Studies into review sites have, hitherto, analysed the influence of source credibility on information usefulness and intention to use (e.g. Filieri, 2015; Filieri *et al.*, 2018; Hlee *et al.*, 2019), but very few have analysed the credibility-trust relationship. This contribution extends Filieri *et al.* (2015)'s findings, as they did not identify a positive relationship between credibility and trust. This outcome may be due to efforts made by review sites in recent years to increase the veracity of reviews, with measures such as indicating the number of reviews previously posted by a reviewer and how useful other users have found these reviews. Therefore, the higher is the traveller's perception of information quality and source credibility, the greater is his/her trust in a review site.

Fourth, contrary to expectations, website quality seems to have no effect on website trust. Previous studies have shown that website quality is important in gaining consumer trust (e.g. Bock *et al.*, 2012; Filieri *et al.*, 2015). This different result may be because, in a context where decisions have to be made quickly, consumers attach more importance to information quality and source credibility. In addition, other social media studies (e.g. Elliot *et al.*, 2013) have found no relationship between website quality and trust; thus, this research contributes by questioning whether this relationship exists while users are actually traveling.

Fifth, this study showed that tourists with a greater level of website trust have both higher visit and recommendation intentions (WOM and eWOM). These results are consistent with previous studies (e.g. Agag and El-Masry, 2016; Casaló *et al.*, 2015; Hudson and Thal, 2013; Sreejesh and Anusree, 2016) and emphasise the influence of website trust on the reputation and on the financial results of restaurants that receive reviews. This study makes an important contribution through its joint analysis, in a single model, of the effect of website trust on consumer behavioural intention in relation to three outcomes. It has been identified that website trust has the greatest effect on intention to visit, eWOM has an intermediate effect, and that WOM has the least effect.

Sixth, this research uses a sample from Spain, which is culturally distinct from the Republic of Ireland and England sample used by Filieri *et al.* (2015), in measures such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence (Hofstede Insights, 2019). In addition, while the present study sought tourists' opinions while they were still at the destinations, Filieri *et al.* sought them after the tourists had gone home. However, both studies showed that information quality is the main predictor of website trust, which increases the importance of this variable. On the other hand, there is a difference between the influence of website quality and source credibility as antecedents of website trust, which invites more in-depth study. In addition, the two studies are complementary in their evaluations of the influence of website

trust on consumer behavioural intention, as Filieri et al. (2015) focused on the review site itself while the present study focuses on the businesses that receive the reviews.

Finally, this study shows that there are no significant differences in the model relationships based on gender, but there are based on age. The relationships between information quality and website trust and between eWOM and website trust are stronger for consumers over 31 years; that is, for this age segment, information quality has greater influence on trust, which, in turn, has a greater impact on intention to engage in eWOM, than is the case for consumers up to 31 years. Several studies have noted that gender differences are reducing in many aspects of consumer behaviour, especially in relation to technologies and the internet. With regard to age, some studies have noted that older and more experienced people often demand broader and fuller information before making a purchase decision. However, previous studies have not shown a clear pattern of the moderating effect of these variables (e.g. Chan et al., 2017; Dedeoglu, 2019; Escobar-Rodríguez et al., 2017), so the results of this study contribute to the debate.

This study has several practical implications for review sites, restaurants and destinations. First, review sites should provide credible, quality information, and easy and accessible interfaces and responsive web designs, as the consumer seeks to make decisions quickly and, frequently, using a smartphone. They should develop review systems with several indicators (e.g. text, punctuation, images), which show how users have evaluated the usefulness of reviews, which give details of the experience and profile of the reviewers, that confirm that the reviewer's identity has been verified, and which display the establishment's response to the review. Information displayed should be tailored to the consumer's profile; for example, reviews with more complete information should be displayed first if the consumer is over 31 years old. They should implement mechanisms that enable value co-creation and the real-time personalisation of services, for example by means of geolocation (Buhalis and

Sinarta, 2019). Review sites must be managed without altering or removing negative reviews, or giving false information, and they should establish, and publicise, systems to unmask fake reviews (Filieri, 2016). These steps will help to strengthen website trust and, indirectly, increase positive behaviours towards companies.

Second, restaurant managers should provide accurate and updated information on their services and prices and monitor the establishment's reputation on review sites (Perez-Aranda et al., 2019). They should have a positive interaction with reviewers to address incomplete information, obtain more details, or just to apologise or say thank you. They should encourage customers to share their experiences, because the majority of those who do not post reviews usually have positive opinions (Molinillo et al., 2016). This can contribute to improving information quality, perceived credibility, WOM/eWOM and intention to visit; it will also help identify strengths and weaknesses, which will facilitate the development of appropriate measures.

Third, destination managers should promote strategies (e.g. training) and adopt tools (e.g. ReviewTrackers, Google Alerts) to help their local restaurants to manage their reputations on the most appropriate review sites. In addition, they should analyse the information on review sites to gain a better understanding of both their visitors and the local restaurants, which would facilitate the implementation of strategies to improve visitor services and destination image.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. First, the results are based on data from a convenience sample of Spanish travellers. The study could be replicated using probabilistic sampling with other nationalities. Second, the antecedents examined in the model are web-based only, but future research could also include traveller and restaurant factors, which would improve the findings. Finally, future studies might include moderating factors, such as travel frequency and reviewer experience.

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Table 1. Assessment of the measurement model and convergent validity: Cronbach's alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larckert criterion (above the diagonal in bold) and HTMT ratio (below the diagonal in bold).

Construct	CA	CR	AV E	Cross- loadin gs	WQ	IQ	SC	WT	IV	WO M	eWO M
Website Quality (WQ)	0.869	0.897	0.521	0.698-0.759	0.818	0.717	0.587	0.537	0.635	0.449	0.497
Information Quality (IQ)	0.899	0.923	0.667	0.720-0.869	0.724	0.817	0.672	0.674	0.703	0.567	0.590
Source Credibility (SC)	0.818	0.890	0.730	0.818-0.880	0.506	0.593	0.854	0.641	0.641	0.492	0.593
Website Trust (WT)	0.908	0.942	0.845	0.874-0.972	0.491	0.618	0.567	0.919	0.657	0.478	0.546
Intention to Visit (IV)	0.842	0.905	0.761	0.846-0.913	0.550	0.616	0.542	0.578	0.872	0.532	0.648
WOM Intention (WOM)	0.847	0.896	0.685	0.721-0.915	0.396	0.505	0.429	0.433	0.456	0.828	0.714
eWOM Intention (eWOM)	0.733	0.840	0.638	0.717-0.865	0.442	0.527	0.495	0.488	0.537	0.582	0.799

Note. Square root of the AVE in bold.

Table 2. Evaluation of the structural model and multi-group analysis (MGA)

Hypotheses-constructs	Path (p-value)	f ²	Q ²	R ²	MGA for gender			MGA for age		
					Path diff.	t value	p-value	Path diff.	t value	p-value
H1. WQ → WT	n.s.	0.001			0.024	0.157	0.876	0.153	1.236	0.217
H2. IQ → WT	0.408*	0.122			0.017	0.098	0.922	0.212	1.616	0.100
H3. SC → WT	0.304*	0.106			0.024	0.173	0.863	0.099	0.908	0.364

H4. WT → IV	0.578*	0.501		0.008	0.082	0.935	0.049	0.589	0.556
H5. WT → WOM	0.433*	0.231		0.053	0.519	0.604	0.103	1.227	0.221
H6. WT → EWOM	0.488*	0.312		0.030	0.335	0.738	0.156	2.140	0.033
WT			0.349	0.445					
IV			0.240	0.334					
WOM			0.117	0.188					
EWOM			0.132	0.236					

Note. WQ: website quality; IQ: information quality; SC: source credibility; WT: website trust; IV: intention to visit; WOM: word-of-mouth; eWOM: electronic WOM. Bootstrapping=5000; blindfolding=omission distance 7; n.s. not significant; * $p < 0.001$

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