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A systematic literature review on eWOM in the hotel industry: Current trends and suggestions for future research

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Abstract:

This study is a systematic review of the literature on eWOM in hotels. Previous reviews of eWOM specific to the hotel and hospitality context have documented the state of research in the field but can be considered outdated with the literature almost doubling since 2011. Emergent themes in the literature therefore need to be considered for us to identify gaps in knowledge and provide researchers opportunities for future study. Using systematic searches of articles published between 2000 and 2015, 45 journal articles were selected for the review beginning in 2008. Our findings indicate 8 research themes: 1) Motivations for contributing eWOM, 2) Motivations for reading eWOM, 3) Platforms used to facilitate eWOM, 4) 'Big data' analytics of eWOM, 5) Impact of eWOM on consumer behaviour, 6) Impact on hotel performance, 7) Hotel responses to eWOM, 8) Consumer cultural differences. We culminate these findings to provide a thematic framework of eWOM research in the hotel and hospitality industry, mapping the research relationships that have been established. We then provide areas for future researchers to develop.

KEYWORDS: eWOM, systematic review, hospitality, hotels

Introduction

With the spread of internet communications and the emergence of Web 2.0, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has attracted significant attention as an important influencer of consumer behaviour. New and diverse communications platforms enable consumers to access and search the opinions of many others when making purchasing decisions (Purnawirawan et al., 2012; You et al., 2015; Yang, 2013; Leung et al., 2015). eWOM represents another facet of the increasing virtual presence of hospitality, which has seen developments in areas such as network hospitality (Molz, 2012) and virtual tourism (Tavakoli & Mura, 2015). Henning et al. (2004: 39) define eWOM as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet'. The differences between WOM and eWOM relate to the 'reach of the reviewer's impact (number of people who can be influenced) and the speed of interaction' (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014: 41) as well as synchronicity, anonymity, ease of accessibility and traceability (You et al., 2015; Tsao et al., 2015). This change in how consumers share information, acquire knowledge and finally, make a decision, has presented practitioners with significant opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of their communication, reaching a broader target market than ever before. However, in this new online interactive world where the opinions of individuals can reach a global audience, it is the 'consumer turned reviewer' and not the hoteliers who are rapidly becoming the travel opinion leaders (Litvin et al., 2007). This dictates that hoteliers reconsider their strategies for acquiring and retaining consumers (Litvin et al., 2007; Fang, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; Filieri, 2015).

There have been several reviews of eWOM literature in the last decade (Litvin et al., 2007; Wen, 2009; Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Cantalops & Salvi, 2014; Yang, 2013; Berezan et al., 2015; Leung et al., 2015); each with a different focus, together they provide an overview of the development of eWOM research across product and service sectors up to 2012. Specific to eWOM in hospitality, Cantalops and Salvi (2014) provide a review of articles published between 2008 and 2011. Their synthesis of the literature presents two main lines of study, namely review-generating factors and the impact of eWOM from consumer and company perspectives. However, our research indicates the literature on the subject of eWOM in reference to hotels and hospitality sector alone has more than doubled since 2011, with new themes potentially emerging to extend the research field. While it is true that there have been more recent reviews since then, these have taken either a broad scope analysis of eWOM literature or have taken a contextual focus that is not in hotels. Hotels represent unique spaces within hospitality, affording a wide range of analyses including as places for luxurious consumption (Chen & Peng, 2014), as sites for

transgressive behaviour and sexual adventure (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006) and even as places to die (Hay, 2015). Because of this uniqueness, hotels must be afforded their own focus.

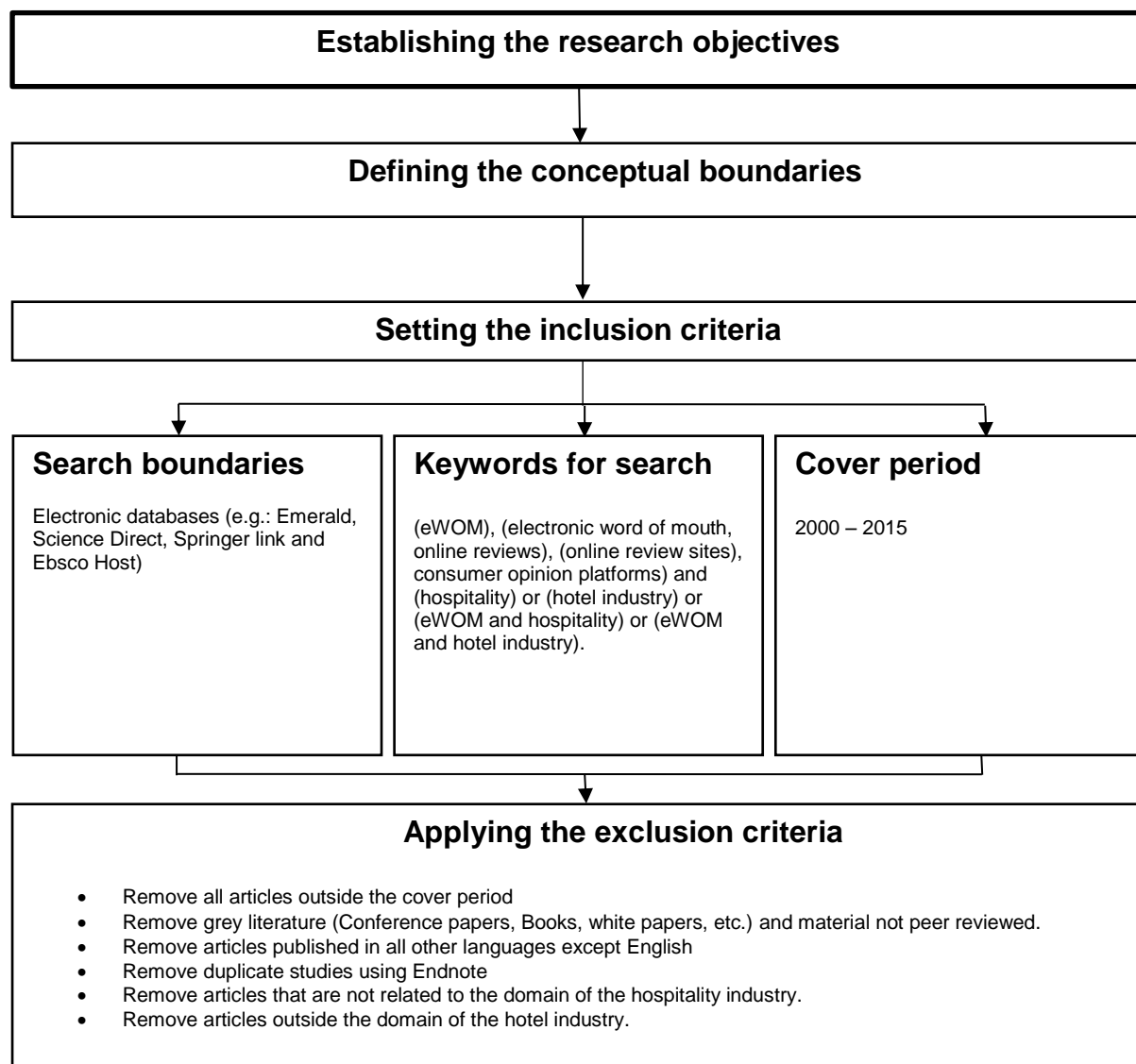
In a rapidly evolving field such as internet communications and electronic marketing it is important for academics and practitioners to keep track of what we know and what we still need to know in this respect in hospitality; as such, the purpose of this paper is to map the current state of research in the field, identifying the emerging fields in eWOM relevant to the hotel industry, serving as a guide for future research. To address this need, a systematic literature review approach was applied.

Methodology

In order to provide a comprehensive update on the research state of eWOM in the Hotel industry, this study employs the systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to identify, categorise and synthesis the literature. Okoli and Schabram (2010) define the SLR as 'a systematic, explicit, comprehensive and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners' (2010: 4). The systematic review is a method of literature review adopting a series of steps to ensure that appropriate rigour and transparency is brought to the process (Albliwi et al., 2015). A key advantage of this 'fundamental scientific activity' (Tranfield et al., 2003: 208) is that the researcher becomes aware of the breadth of research and the theoretical background (Albliwi et al., 2015), ensuring a thorough and unbiased understanding in a specific field. Even though SLRs are most common in the medical sciences, some researchers argue the need for a systematic approach in all fields of research (Tranfield et al., 2003; Okoli & Schabram, 2010) to ensure a thorough understanding of the level of previous research undertaken and to identify weaknesses and areas that need further research.

There are nine steps involved in a SLR, starting with identifying the purpose and goals of the review; followed by the development of a research protocol including the scope of the study, criteria, quality assessment and data extraction (Okoli & Schabram, 2010; Tranfield et al., 2003). Research relevance criteria need to be established to include only the most necessary papers, followed by the search for and retrieval of literature. The selection of studies is conducted by screening for inclusion, followed by a quality assessment for relevant studies. The relevant data to be included in the review must be extracted from each study and synthesised. Finally, the review must be reported in detail. These processes together form four phases as shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Summary of research phases and processes.



Search strings were constructed using the following terms: (eWOM) or (electronic word of mouth) or (online reviews) or (online review sites) or (consumer opinion platforms) and (hospitality) or (hotel industry) or (eWOM and hospitality) or (eWOM and hotel industry) or (hotel popularity). The search for peer-reviewed literature was conducted in 2015 by an academic group using well-known databases including Emerald, Sage, Science Direct and Ebsco Host. To ensure the validity and avoid missing any relevant articles in this study, the academic group conducted the search independently and the final findings were combined. All the selected articles were computer managed using Microsoft Excel database. In the Excel table, each row contained all reference information including year of publication, journal, title, abstract, author(s) and country of publication. The number of articles initially identified as potentially relevant for the current study was 456 articles.

These articles comprised a broad range of topics, some of which were outside the scope of this paper. Hence, the academic group applied more precise criteria to select the final list of articles for analysis. Following Albiwi et al. (2015), inclusion and exclusion criteria are outlined and stated to clarify the reasoning behind why some papers are included and others are not. Firstly, removal of duplicates, non-academic papers and articles not written in English reduced the number to 395. Furthermore, research notes, commentaries, book review and reprinted articles were excluded. Guillet and Mohammed (2015:531) suggests that only full-length articles should be included in SLR studies “due to general belief that they [e.g., research notes, commentaries, book review] do not make original or significant contributions to knowledge”.

Secondly, to provide sufficient information regarding eWOM in the hotels, publications on eWOM in the hospitality industry were included in the review. Okoli and Schabram (2010) argue that simplifying research by criteria by first reviewing the title, and then the abstract when needed, helps the researcher to save time and effort. Adopting this approach, the academic group have gone through papers by title and then abstract where required, and by this means have included all papers that meet the inclusion criteria; nevertheless, use of this method means that not all unrelated papers could be excluded. When conducting a systematic literature review, large bodies of literature have been retrieved; therefore, the inclusion and exclusion criteria are crucial to save time when deciding which articles should be included in the review, and which should not.

Thirdly, the academic team further reduced the number of articles to 154 by eliminating all articles published in journals not rated 3* or 4* in the academic journal guide the Association of Business Schools (ABS) 2015 (ABS, 2015). The ABS ranking has been used at universities and business schools in the UK and other part of Europe as a reference for journal quality across areas, such as hospitality and tourism and marketing. In compiling the 2015 version of ABS guide, a quality rating system was used along with a four rating categories. 3* or 4* categories were selected based on justification of meaning of quality rating on the ABS 2015 guide including: exemplars of excellence, most original and best-executed research, highly-regarded. One may argue that including articles published in the ABS list would miss out on some good quality journals and studies, but the academic team have decided to be consist in their decision as otherwise many other studies such as conference and working papers could have also arguably included (see also Johnsen et al., 2016; Masrani et al., 2011; Hall, 2011). These articles were sorted into ‘information management’ (e.g., *Information System Research, MIS Quarterly*), ‘marketing’ (e.g., *Europe Journal of Marketing*) and ‘sector studies’ (i.e., all hospitality and tourism related journals such as *Tourism Management*) with regards to the ABS categorisation. Further, after title and abstract scanning, the number reduced to 56 papers and finally down to 45 papers after full

article screening and the application of the remaining exclusion criteria (see **Appendix 1** for the full list of papers used).

The journals from which articles were collected for analysis are presented in **Table 1**, together with their respective ABS star rating, number of articles selected per journal and the journal's country of origin. *Tourism Management* was found to be the journal with most relevant articles for this research.

Table 1: Journals from which relevant papers were sourced.

Journal	ABS(2015) Rating	No. Relevant articles	Country of publication
Tourism Management (TM)	4	18	United Kingdom
International Journal of Hospitality Management (IJHM)	3	16	United States
Journal of Travel Research (JTR)	4	7	United Kingdom
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management (IJCHM)	3	2	Netherlands
International Journal of Electronic Commerce (IJEC)	3	1	United States
European Journal of Marketing (EJM)	3	1	United Kingdom

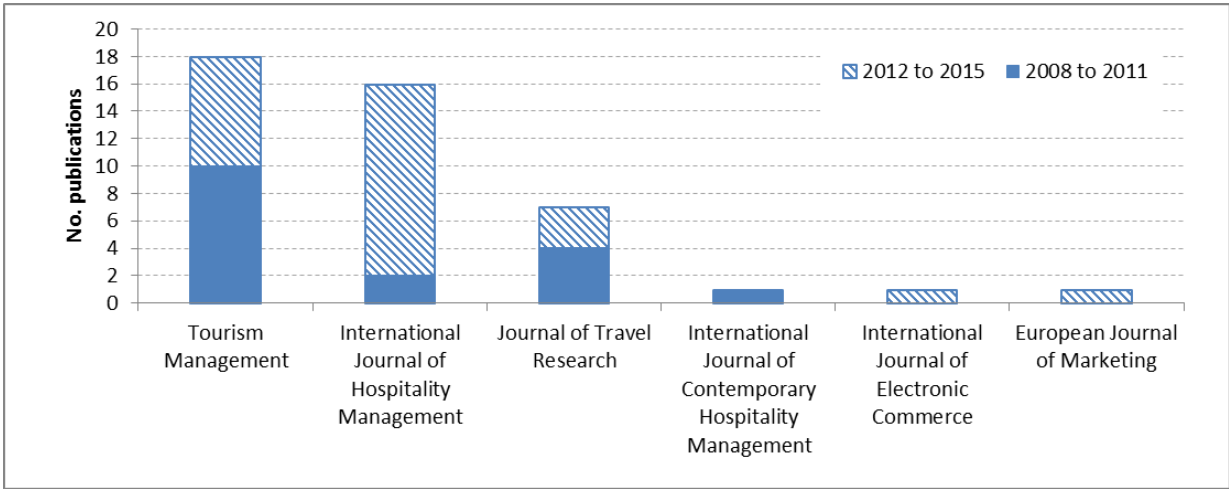
Descriptive findings

The following descriptive findings are based on the final 45 articles identified for detailed synthesis. Our aim in presenting descriptive findings is to map the development of the research area in terms of publication frequency and output, journals and geographic dispersion. The literature search revealed no 3* or 4* empirical research on eWOM and hotels before 2008. However, there has been a reasonably rapid increase in output since 2008 with one paper, rising to seven in 2011 and twelve papers in 2015. The increase in research intensity in recent years follows a clear positive trend in the overall number of publications and indicates an increasing awareness and interest in the subject. We identified 17 papers rated 3* and 4* from the ABS list published in the first period before 2012 and a further 28 between 2012 and 2015, indicating that the body of research on eWOM and hotels has grown significantly since Cantallops and Salvi's review. Our results show how the focus of research has tended toward online communication and new interaction focus in the last four years as new researchers have taken up an interest in the importance of eWOM in hotels.

eWOM is a relatively new phenomenon and although there has been a significant increase in eWOM research across different product and service sectors, the number of publications focused on hotels is relatively low. The gradual increase in publications in the last eight years does, however, indicate an increasing awareness and interest in the subject.

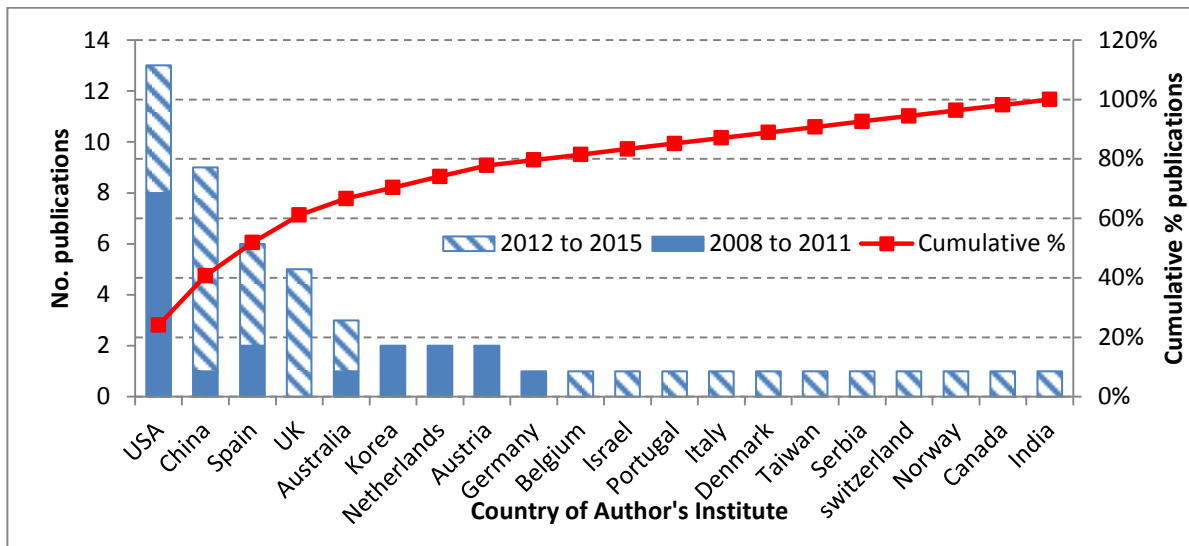
The interest might be growing, but the limited number of publications suggests that there may be a clear need for more research into eWOM, specifically in hotels, especially as it is fast becoming the tool of choice for consumers seeking travel information (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). **Figure 2** presents the dispersion of publications across 3 and 4 star journals split by period to reflect the research state between 2008 and 2011 and the research published post-2011. We identified 17 papers rated 3* and 4* from the ABS list published in the first period before 2012 and a further 28 between 2012 and 2015, indicating that the body of research on eWOM and hotels has more than doubled since Cantalops and Salvi's review.

Figure 2: Number of eWOM-hotel publications per journal.



The rate of publications in *Tourism Management* has remained steady in the last 8 years at an average of two papers per year; however, almost 90% of the articles published in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management* have appeared in the last four years suggesting this journal is becoming the focus of eWOM research for the hospitality industry. Analysis of the geographic spread in research reveals the USA as the most prolific source of publications. 'Figure 3' is a Pareto distribution showing the number of publications by country as determined by the locations of the authors' institutions. Four countries including the USA, China, Spain and UK account for over 60% of the articles selected on eWOM in hotels.

Figure 3: Geographic distribution of research on eWOM and hotels.

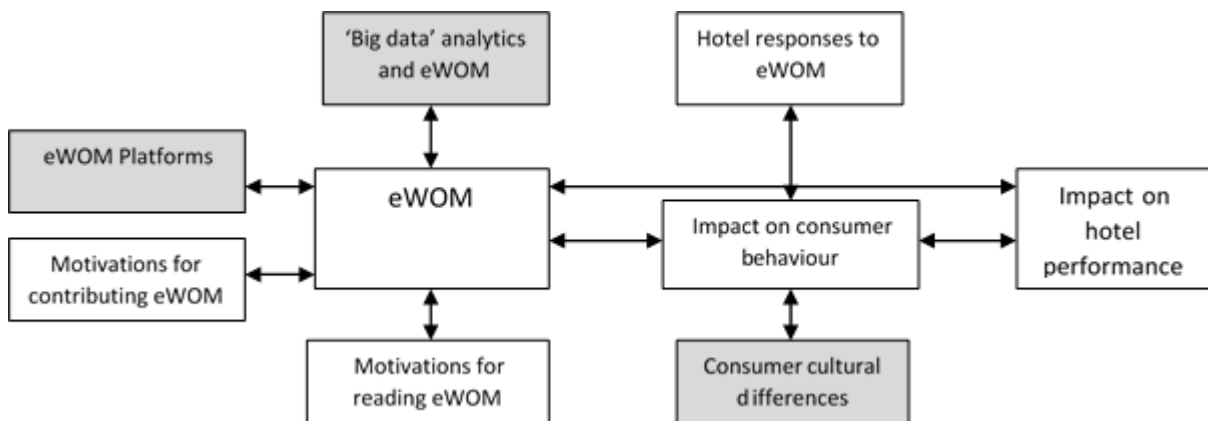


The results show an increase in the geographic dispersion of output as interest in the subject has attracted new researchers in recent years. Considering that China was projected to become the world's leading tourism destination by 2015—and has now achieved this position—it is not surprising to see a significant uplift in research output from China in the last four years.

Thematic findings and discussion

Analysis of the literature reveals 8 themes of research relating to eWOM and hotels & hospitality. 1) Motivations for contributing eWOM, 2) Motivations for reading eWOM, 3) Platforms used to facilitate eWOM, 4) 'Big data' analytics of eWOM, 5) Impact of eWOM on consumer behaviour, 6) Impact on hotel performance, 7) Hotel responses to eWOM, 8) Consumer cultural differences.

Figure 4: eWOM thematic framework in the hotels and hospitality industry



In framing our analysis, we recognised the need to map the key relationships between the identified themes as indicated in **Figure 4**. This framework reflects the current state of research and acknowledges that much of the published work is focussed on the influence or impact of different identified themes on others (Chen and Xie, 2008; Filieri, 2015). For example, authors have researched the impact of eWOM on consumer behaviour or hotel performance, while others have explored the impact of hotel management responses to eWOM on consumer behaviour. By mapping these relationships we can see where researchers have linked themes and areas where researchers have yet to establish links.

Motivations for writing and reading eWOM

While travel-related review sites have a low level of social cues, they are often perceived as highly useful because of the large volume of content available, their global reach, and the numerous contributions based on non-commercial motivations. One of the main reasons as to why travellers engage with review services in the hospitality industry is found to be the opportunity to acquire first-hand information from travellers who have already experienced the destination, a tactic to reduce purchase risk and found to be the most influential in the pre-trip stage of hotel decision-making (Arsal et al., 2010). Other motivations for engaging in eWOM are found to be the possibility of venting negative feelings, seeking advice, economic incentives and self-enhancement (Zhou et al., 2014).

Aside from these motivators, several studies in the travel sector explore the potential social benefits of an online travel community (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Qu and Lee (2011) found that members' active participation strengthens their sense of belonging to the online travel community; this makes them support the community and show several positive member behaviours including knowledge sharing, community promotion, and behavioural changes. From a sociological perspective, consumers may count their personal losses and achievements based on the strength of social connections with others (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). Consumers are therefore part of a personal exchange (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

Research into motivators is important for organisations in the hospitality industry as to gain insight and knowledge regarding consumers' intention to engage in eWOM; becoming aware of the factors motivating consumers to post reviews can contribute to handling reviews in the best possible manner. Motivators have had significant attention from eWOM scholars resulting in an array established motivators, including social benefits, self-enhancement, extraversion, dissonance reduction, altruism, economic incentives, and platform assistance (Yen and Tang, 2015). Although we know of the motivators, there is scope for further research on their individual significance and interplay.

Social media and other eWOM platforms

The analysis of published articles reveals a growing interest in the influence and interplay of various social media platforms that host eWOM information (Dickinger, 2011), underlining the growing importance of social media in online travel marketing (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The emergence of new forms of online communication platforms that can be accessed linked and searched, further empower both reviewers and consumers to share information and opinions (Litvin et al., 2007). Litvin et al. (2007) suggest that the low cost, broader scope and increased anonymity of eWOM afforded by the internet will attract consumers in increasing numbers to social media sites for travel-related information, a prediction that has proved accurate so far. Social media platforms which host 'consumer-generated content (CGC) such as blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks, collaborative tagging, and media files shared on sites like YouTube and Flickr', have gained substantial popularity with travel consumers (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010, p. 179). Many of these websites are 'non-transactional' (Mauri & Minazzi, 2013) serving different consumer needs, for example, Skyscanner and Trivago are 'metasearch' sites that compare the hotel offerings of different on-line travel agents (OTAs), whereas Tripadvisor and Lonelyplanet provide planning functionality and the opportunity to review different travel-related destinations and services. Several studies focus their eWOM research on the third party website Tripadvisor (Crotts et al., 2009; Xie et al., 2014), the largest and most popular online user-generated content site for hospitality with more than 200 million reviews and opinions from consumers and 915,000 hotels and speciality lodging profiles available to review (TripAdvisor, 2015).

Others research the influence of eWOM posted on specific online travel agent (OTA) sites such as Booking.com; however, few studies have explored platform related influences on eWOM. For example, Bronner and de Hoog (2011) and Munar and Jacobsen (2014) agree there is diversity of motivational actors associated with different platform types. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) found that consumers sharing visual content on social networks identified with community-related motivations whilst those who shared content publicly on the internet were motivated to a higher extent by self-interest. Bronner and de Hoog (2011) establish that self-directed (personal) reviewers tend to use marketer-generated sites such as OTAs, whereas 'other directed' reviewers (including those motivated to: help other travellers, help the company, gain social benefits, gain consumer empowerment) choose consumer-generated sites such as travel forums, that are more widely accessible to other vacationers.

Lo et al. (2011) focused on the use of social networking sites in terms of traveller characteristics and found that most people sharing travel photographs are young and well-educated, have good incomes, rich travel experiences, and a willingness be involved in the destination. As smart mobile devices proliferate, young professionals in particular are quick

to share travel experiences, opinions and travel photographs on social networking sites while traveling (Luo & Zhong, 2015). Using Google, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) found that search engines direct travellers to different social media sites. It therefore makes good sense for hotels to offer a direct link to various social media platforms where consumers are able to interact. This is considered a central driver of loyalty (Kim et al., 2009). Recognising that several types of electronic media have an impact upon interpersonal relationships, Litvin et al. (2007) offer a typology that differentiates media based on two defining characteristics: level of interactivity and communication scope.

eWOM platforms have had much interest from researchers this trend is set to continue as platforms change and new ones are introduced. To the best of our knowledge no research has been published in the years up to 2015 that consider the complexity and interconnectivity of social media platforms and how this influences eWOM creation and consumer behaviour. We know that search engines will direct consumers to a myriad platform types (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and that customers should be encouraged to post links to hospitality sites on their personal websites (Litvin et al., 2007) yet there seems little empirical research to explain how the interplay of different social media platforms impacts consumer behaviour in the context of online travel marketing.

'Big data' analytics and eWOM

There has been interest in using 'Big Data' analytics in the analysis of eWOM. Crotts et al. (2009) apply stance shift analysis (SSA) to data composed of TripAdvisor narratives to measure guest satisfaction. They argue that SSA simplifies the process of data mining of both good and bad reviews and recommend that the output becomes the basis of a quantitative scorecard that can also be used to benchmark the competition. Liu, et al. (2013) analyse comments collated from TripAdvisor.com and changes in hotel customers' expectations according to travel mode, using the association rule mining technique. There is a rapid development of big data analytics which presents significant opportunity for hoteliers and researchers who seek to stay in tune with changing consumer preferences. However as yet, these represent the few studies that adopt this approach, leaving much room for further development.

The impact of eWOM on consumer behaviour and hotel performance

There are many factors that may moderate the impact of eWOM on consumer behaviour and ultimately, hotel performance. In terms of consumers, eWOM is considered to be the most influential source of information when consumers are making a purchase decision in the hospitality industry. Because of the vital influence eWOM holds, it is argued to alter the structure of travel information and traveller's perceptions of the offerings within the

hospitality industry (Litvin et al., 2007). Approximately 90% of international travellers use the internet to plan trips, and over 60% of those individuals read online reviews before purchasing a hotel stay. Consumers use eWOM and online review sites as a reference group in order to reduce uncertainty in their purchasing decisions. It is argued that exposure to a review increases the likelihood of a purchase decision (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). The literature describes four key features of consumer reviews including review valence, review extremity, review volume and review quality (Tsao et al., 2015; Filieri, 2015). Consumers are influenced by these features, the most considered being review valence. Further, review valence of a set of reviews having more impact than that of an individual review, although the valence of an individual review is still considered by consumers (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

Liang et al. (2013) claim that online reviews can be considered a signal that determines the success or failure of a service, depending on whether the reviews are positive or negative. Nevertheless, it is also found that online reviews generally have a positive effect; the reviews make consumers aware of the existence of the hotel, and the enhanced awareness compensates for possible negative reviews posted. However, if negative reviews dominate, consumer intention to purchase can be damaged, although negative comments can give credence to the entirety of the reviews (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). However, eWOM reviews themselves are not the entirety of purchase decision, the platform of eWOM (Xie et al., 2014) and how hoteliers manage and respond to eWOM (Liu et al., 2013) are also of influence.

Although it is recognised that the internet as a tool has powerful potential influences on firm performance (Litvin et al., 2007) and organisations have started investing more in social media to drive customer behaviour and brand awareness, hotel executives still question the effectiveness of eWOM in driving bookings. Hoteliers, therefore, seek evidence to justify the increasing cost of social media marketing and guidance on how to manage and respond to eWOM. With the exception of Ye et al. (2009), Nieto et al. (2014) and Kim et al. (2015) there is limited research on the impact of online reviews on firm performance in the hotel sector. Most studies, as discussed above, explore the impact of eWOM on consumer behaviour and purchase intention, but rarely the impact on hotel performance. As we might expect, Ye et al. (2009) found that positive online reviews increase the number of hotel rooms booked, thereby increasing hotel revenue. Nieto et al. (2014) take a more in-depth look and explore first the effects of marketing decisions by rural lodging establishment owners on eWOM, and then the effects of eWOM on business performance (profit, market perception and satisfaction).

Not surprisingly, they found that more positively valenced reviews positively affect performance and more negative reviews had an adverse effect performance. They also

discovered that the more reviews an establishment receives online (whether positive or negative), the better the performance, and when a lodge paid more for its position on a travel website, the website attracts more reviews, which ultimately should increase profitability. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2015) investigated how managing eWOM affects hotel performance. Their research uses ADR and RevPAR, which are the most popular hotel performance metrics and show that the better the overall ratings and the higher the response rate to negative comments, the higher the hotel performance. Nieto et al. (2014) also found that rural lodgings with higher prices attract more customer reviews, but warn that high prices must be paired with high quality. If quality is below the market average, then hoteliers should expect more negative reviews. To encourage customers to write reviews, Nieto et al (2014) suggest that hotel owners might emphasise the importance of customer participation. The authors also recommend that owners monitor the presence of negative reviews, and respond by resolving service failures and communicating service improvements.

Hotel responses to eWOM

Review sites cannot be controlled, making the handling of reviews crucial. The literature is at odds when it comes to the effects of hotel responses to negative eWOM. Xie et al. (2014) and Mauri & Minazzi (2013) both find that hotel replies to negative comments have a negative impact on the consumers' purchase intention, and in the case of the latter, have a negative impact on consumer expectations. Studies by Ye et al. (2009), Kim et al. (2015) and Nieto et al. (2014) however, suggest that hotel replies to negative comments online have a positive effect on purchase intention. Wei et al. (2013) offers a potential explanation for this conflict suggesting that responses to negative reviews that directly address the reviewer's specific issue are perceived more favourably by potential customers than generic responses. Specific responses are also argued to instil a degree of trust. Ultimately hoteliers need to be better informed about when, how and where they should respond to negative online reviews. Wei et al. (2013) stress the importance of developing a culture of 'interactive' customer engagement and recommend that managers frequently track and respond to on-line comments directly addressing specific issues raised in customer reviews.

The research to date clearly indicates that eWOM does influence customers' purchase behaviour and hotel performance but, despite the progress made by the above studies, a complete understanding of the specific impact of eWOM is still limited; academics and hotel executives would benefit from more in-depth research on the topic. Indeed researches need to establish exactly how critical the management of negative eWOM to hotel marketing actually is. Further to this, research on hotel responses to eWOM is mainly

confined to online responses from hoteliers rather than any operational or strategic responses or impacts.

Consumer cultural differences

With the exception of Christodoulides et al. (2012) and Zhou et al. (2014) and despite the cultural diversity of customers visiting destinations around the world, all the studies included in this review employ datasets collected from a single nationality or simply exclude national differences in their experimental design. Research by Christodoulides et al. (2012) is the first to explore the impact of eWOM on different nationalities by comparing the purchase intentions of Chinese and UK consumers following exposure to successive positive and negative eWOM reviews. They found that Chinese consumers are more susceptible to recent eWOM comments regardless of their valence, while UK consumers anchor on negative information regardless of the order in which it is acquired. A more recent study by Zhou et al. (2014), primarily concerned with how to assess hotel customer satisfaction, revealed that significantly different levels of satisfaction exist between travellers from Oceania, South East Asia, North America and Western Europe.

Oceania and North American customers are generally more positive than Western Europeans and Southeast Asians. This finding tends to support the negative bias of UK consumers observed by Christodoulides et al. (2012). Nevertheless, Zhou et al. (2014) postulate that the level of international travel experience and the perceived prices of hotels compared to living expenses in the customer's home country may be more influential factors for satisfaction ratings than a customer's cultural background. Given that the internet and eWOM enables the hotel sector to reach a culturally diverse customer base—and the studies above do suggest that cultural differences translate into different eWOM related behaviours—it seems that hoteliers would benefit from a deeper understanding of 1) how eWOM is influenced by the culture or nationality of the reviewer and 2) how the culture of the consumer moderates purchase intention and expectation. A better understanding of how specific cultural beliefs and behaviours affect eWOM generating factors and the impact of eWOM on customer behaviour and hotel performance is needed to help hoteliers tailor their management of eWOM so they can choose to target particular nationalities or indeed attract a wider customer base.

The research into consumer cultural differences and its effects on eWOM suggests that the research on eWOM, including motivators and platforms is not as broadly applicable as some research practice would appear to propose. Further focus on consumer cultural differences and other consumer differences (including gender, sexuality and age, for example) in the context of eWOM in hotels and hospitality would aid in our understanding of eWOM.

Conclusions, limitations and recommendations for further studies

The conclusions are based on the systematic review of 45 articles concerning eWOM implications in the hospitality and tourism industry, in particular focussing on hotels, published from 2008 to 2015. All papers were subjected to standard exclusion and inclusion criteria. The aim of this paper was to map the current state of research of eWOM in hotels, ultimately serving as a guide for future research and illustrated above in **Figure 4**. Further, we adopt an approach similar to that taken by Blackburn and Kovalainen (2009) and Thomas et al. (2011) in providing an indicative summary of areas for future research in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Areas for future research in eWOM and Hotels

Areas for new research	Emerging areas	Established areas in need of development	Other approaches to research
-Interplay of themes that have yet to be explored. -Consumer differences	-eWOM platforms -'Big Data' analytics -Consumer cultural differences	-Motivations of engaging with eWOM -Responses to eWOM -Impact of eWOM on performance -Maximisation and mitigation of eWOM	-Untapped data sources -Longitudinal Analysis -Development and use of practical tools

Figure 4 shows that in the hotel and hospitality context there are several avenues for research enquiry for eWOM scholars. Each theme represents a clear focus researchers can take. The framework also illustrates that much research focuses on the impact or influence of themes on one another, which aside from mapping found research relationships between the identified themes, also displays research relationships that have yet to be explored or established in any significance, e.g., the motivations for contributing to eWOM and consumer cultural difference. Researchers are encouraged to explore new research relationships to further develop our understanding of eWOM. Another area of research we found lacking is on consumer differences including gender, sexuality and age in the context of eWOM in hotels and hospitality. Research in this area would contribute to our understanding of how broadly applicable eWOM research is in its impact on consumers.

We also draw attention to three emerging themes (highlighted in grey in **Figure 4** and in **Table 2**) which have seen a significant increase in the literature in the last three years. These include the 'analysis of eWOM using big data analytics' (Liu et al., 2013). Recently, researchers have set out to demonstrate the application of data mining tools such as text mining and sentiment mining to identify emerging patterns in the rapidly growing eWOM data pool. This in itself holds possibilities in identifying key eWOM themes but is in its research infancy. There has also been interest in 'Consumer cultural differences' that influence how consumers interpret and respond to different eWOM features (Zhou et al., 2014;

Christodoulides et al., 2012). This reflects interest in the influence of culture and market origin on consumer interpretation and response to the different features of eWOM (Tsao et al., 2015; Purnawirawan et al., 2012). We found little research linking these consumer cultural differences to motivations to engage with eWOM.

Finally, research on 'eWOM platforms' looking at motivational diversity and the interplay of different social media platforms has seen significant interest from researchers in recent years. Several authors have explored platform related influences and the diversity of motivational actors associated with different platform types (Qu & Lee, 2011; Nieto et al., 2014). Our research indicates that the complexity and interconnectivity of social media platforms and its influence on eWOM creation and consumer behaviour is under researched. Further to this there appears to be little empirical research to explain how the interplay of different social media platforms impacts consumer behaviour in the context of online travel marketing.

Highlighted in **Table 2** are themes that are well established in the literature. We do however point towards specific areas of these themes that are in need of development. Research on the motivators for the contribution and reading of eWOM has held a good level of interest from scholars, resulting in an array of identified motivators including social and economic incentives. However, the significance and interplay of factors still holds scope for development. In terms of impact of eWOM on hotel performance, aside from Ye et al. (2009), Nieto et al. (2014) and Kim et al. (2015), there is limited focus on the impact of online reviews on firm performance in the hotel sector. Responses to eWOM from have been largely limited to the dealing with negative eWOM. However, little has been established on how critical the management of negative eWOM to the hotel and hospitality sector is. Hotel responses to eWOM research has also neglected operational or strategic responses. The majority of research has been done on the subject of eWOM and its influence on consumer purchase decisions and the decision-making process. Less focus has been given to maximising the benefits of good eWOM and mitigating bad eWOM by organisations. More research in this area can provide practical knowledge for hoteliers.

There are approaches to research that have yet to be employed in regards to eWOM and hotels with any significance. Researchers have for the most part, pursued understanding of eWOM from the relevant online material. However, hotel leaders and other players in hospitality organisations remain a relatively untapped data resource. This avenue can be explored through the use of interviews, observations, and questionnaires put to hoteliers, which could particularly impact our knowledge of how hoteliers deal with eWOM responses. Although we give the example of hotel leaders as sources of data, we encourage researchers to be innovative in their approaches; for example Cleave (2014) investigates postcards as a source of data in hospitality research.

More work on using or developing eWOM measurement systems could help in better determining the impact of eWOM in service settings such as the hotel industry. Further, future research could include the creation of practical tools used to monitor the major changes in the role of social media and online review sites in order to provide online hospitality marketers with useful and timely insights. Finally, the number of publications in eWOM in general, and eWOM in hospitality in particular, are growing rapidly; therefore, it would be beneficial to carry out a longitudinal study to observe whether the findings differ over a period of time and, if so, what the nature of the differences are.

Although the findings of this study are valuable, and perhaps provocative, they need to be viewed in light of limitations. First, as it is with all general review and systematic review papers, this research has its own limitations regarding use of personal judgment and articles selection process bias. Stros and Lee (2015) suggest some potential biases of systematic reviews. In our study, we adopted strategies to mitigate the potential biases of systematic reviews. First, the review includes 456 publications in order to reduce source of funding biases. Second, Stros and Lee (2015: 331) suggest that in order to maximise reliability and validity of the SLR results researchers can select literature which 'have a higher number of citations'. Thus, the literature included 456 papers to minimise this bias. However, we have only used English-language journals based on the ABS list; future studies can focus on international sources. In addition, we only used 3* and 4* journals on the ABS list for creating our database resulting in a manageable number of reputable articles, but to the exclusion of some quality research outside of this bracket.

Stros and Lee (2015: 331) also highlight that 'studies with statistically significant results will more likely get published than those with non-significant results...Studies with significant results might lead more likely to multiple publications'. Third, different keyword searches while undertaking the database searches might have influenced the findings. But, it is reasonable to assume that the journal papers used in the current study illustrate the main research efforts in eWOM in hospitality. These three points are also limitations of our study. Finally, the literature analysed here frames hotels and hospitality from a business perspective, which allows for a focused review of the literature. However, hospitality can be framed from various perspectives (Lynch et al., 2011), meaning there is potential ignorance of key literature from the broader facets of the social sciences. Future researchers are encouraged to analyse the literature from other perspectives. The academic team also would like to highlight that many rigorous contributions have been made in non-ABS listed journals or lower ranked journals according to ABS list, thus the academic team would like to invite their peers to investigate use of eWOM in future studies. Future studies may also duplicate this study by focusing on 'restaurants' content.

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