

Customer engagement and eWOM in tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to examine the role of customer engagement (CE) on electronic word of mouth (eWOM) behavior among vacationers in Tanzania. The article disaggregates CE into cognitive process, affection and behavior and integrates eWOM passing into the eWOM concept.

Design/methodology/approach – A sample of 278 vacationers who had used social media before and/or during their trip in Tanzania was used. They were drawn at three major airports in Tanzania when exiting the destination. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the proposed relationships.

Findings – It is revealed that both the affective CE and behavioral CE positively relate to vacationers' eWOM seeking, giving and passing behaviors in tourism-related sites. On the other hand the cognitive CE relates positively only with eWOM passing behaviors.

Research limitations/implications – The varied relationship of the three CE dimensions (cognitive, affective and behavioral) with eWOM behaviors further confirms the multi-dimensionality of CE and the enduring psychological connection of individuals beyond participation in activities.

Practical implications – CE is multifaceted and enduring and thus managers should take a long-term, enduring and multidimensional perspective in facilitating CE development. Different content appeals are needed in facilitating CE in online platforms as CE dimensions relate variedly with eWOM behaviors

Originality/value – The study links CE and eWOM in a novel way by disaggregating CE and integrating the eWOM passing component into the eWOM concept in tourism-related social media sites.

Keywords Customer engagement, Tourism-related social media sites, Electronic word of mouth

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The increasing emphasis in recent years on gaining an understanding of customer engagement (CE) is seen as essential in regard of relationship marketing. This has been driven by what is increasingly being acknowledged, in both the practitioner and academic literature, that the post-purchase relationship and non-transactional outcomes, such as eWOM, can be predicted better by CE than traditional marketing constructs like satisfaction, trust and quality (Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b; Patterson *et al.*, 2006). CE has emerged as an effective tool capable of providing a favorable experience (Marbach *et al.*, 2016) thereby influencing relationships with brands (Dwivedi, 2015). According to Casalo *et al.* (2007), Stokburger-Nauer (2010) and Hollebeek (2011a, b), CE sums up all the ways in which a customer interacts with a brand, the firm and with other customers, which in turn strengthens their relationship with the same objects that surpasses merely buying it (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012). Correspondingly, there is an increasing tendency in firms encouraging their customers to participate in this kind of beyond-purchase interaction among customers (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010) with the intention of enticing eWOM behaviors which are known to impact on firm performance (Vivek *et al.*, 2012).

Research reveals that the interactive features present in social media provide a conducive environment for CE to take place (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010) where customers can make proactive contributions to brand interactions, rather than merely acting as passive recipients of brand-related cues (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a). Engaged with brands in social media, consumers are



increasingly taking part in information exchange through product-related conversations, discussions and sharing knowledge with other consumers (Berthon *et al.*, 2008). These interactions not only reinforce relationships (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012) but also result in favorable eWOM behaviors (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). This is because, when a person is engaged it is likely that he/she acquires a more positive attitude toward the company and its range of products which in turn leads to a positive behavioral response (Vivek *et al.*, 2012). Thus, scholars propose that eWOM behavior which is an indispensable marketing tool is an outcome of engaged customers (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Vivek *et al.*, 2012).

eWOM as a useful marketing communication tool (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) is construed 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” (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004: p. 37). eWOM is claimed to be elicited by people perceived to be with product experience or have heard of it before and do not have special concern which may make them biased when recommending the product to others (Yen and Tang, 2015). It is thus far considered organic and more credible than marketer-generated marketing communications (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). eWOM offers a disproportionately strong influence on products with credence qualities like tourism services as they lack search qualities which makes them perceived with a higher risk among customers (Lewis and Chambers, 2000). Consequently, eWOM serves a dual role in tourism marketing; as the source of destination information and a recommendation for a particular destination (Park *et al.*, 2007). Vacationers normally solicit destination and recommend information at the same time with the purpose to learn about particular destinations and reduce uncertainty. Thus, by playing its dual role, eWOM sufficiently meets vacationers’ information needs (Reza and Samiei, 2012) that is why it is considered as a means of expression of vacationers’ views and opinions (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). For instance, PhoCusWright (Hotelmarketing.com 2014) determined that “half of global respondents do not want to make a booking commitment until they read reviews and find out what other travelers thought about the property”, an estimate far eclipsed by NYU research (Ady and Quadri-Feelitti, 2015) that found 95 percent of respondents reported visiting at least one travel review site before consummating their plans.

eWOM can be a rewarding marketing communication tool in the developing countries like Tanzania, with immense tourism potentials and limited marketing communication budgets, due to its ability to reach potential vacationers worldwide and influence their destination choice. However, to benefit from the potential of eWOM, there is a need to ensure that experienced vacationers provide favorable eWOM on tourism-related social media sites for uptake by prospective vacationers. Considering this important role of eWOM in both travelers’ decision making as well as in tourism operations and management, this study becomes indispensable as it provides the industry with theoretical principles to guide practitioners’ decisions. The remarkable prospects for growth of eWOM created by the exponential spread of digital communication through social media and the increasing influence on travel behavior makes eWOM an important concept to be appreciated and integrated into marketing tools by travel marketers.

Although both eWOM’s influence on a destination’s competitiveness and the potential contribution of CE on eWOM formation are acknowledged in the marketing literature (Dessart *et al.*, 2015), the disaggregation of CE and its varied influence on vacationers’ eWOM behavior on tourism-related social media sites is yet to be established empirically (Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b; Patterson *et al.*, 2006). The nature of CE influence on outcome behaviors depends on whether cognitive, affective and/or physical resources are expended by the customer (Ray *et al.*, 2014). It is thus, suggested that CE should be analyzed from the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions (Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Cheung *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011a, b, 2013) in order to capture a full scope of its relationship outcomes. Researchers propose for a broader view of eWOM due to possible interactions in social media

(Godes *et al.*, 2005; Libai *et al.*, 2010), however, studies which have integrated the concept in its full scope are lacking (Munzel and Kunz, 2014). Similarly, while social networking site users can engage in personal conversations and networking; in brand-related site users can perform different types of interactions ranging from creation and contribution to consuming brand-related content (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Libai *et al.*, 2010). Also, brand-related social media sites differ from the general social networking sites in terms of levels of interaction, involvement and feeling more of a member than a participant (Cheung *et al.*, 2008). Such differences may suggest different engagement levels among users and the consequent eWOM behavioral outcomes (Dessart *et al.*, 2015).

This article addresses this gap and elevates the existing knowledge in three different ways. First, it sheds light on the ways in which the CE dimensions vary with corresponding eWOM behaviors by disaggregating CE and empirically examining the corresponding relationship of the three CE dimensions and the three possible eWOM behaviors on tourism-related sites. Second, this article integrates the eWOM concept by including opinion passing on component together with seeking and giving opinion common in the brick and mortar word of mouth (WOM) concept. This reveals different possible ways in which eWOM can be passed on by vacationers in tourism-related sites beyond creating and consuming content. It provides empirical evidence of the broadened eWOM concept in the context of social media in response to the call of Chu and Kim (2011) and Libai *et al.* (2010).

Third, unlike previous studies which delved into general social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram (Mark, 2014; Dholakia *et al.*, 2004), where social interactions and networking are the main reasons for engaging in eWOM; this article extends the existing knowledge by examining CE and eWOM behaviors in tourism-related social media sites, such as TripAdvisor and Hotels.com. Those using these sites have a “feeling of membership” and their conversations and interactions revolve around their opinions and experience of a holiday destination (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). According to scholars, users’ behavior between general social networking sites and brand-related sites like tourism sites might differ.

The subsequent section presents a literature review on the theoretical underpinnings of CE and eWOM in social media and the asserted relationships. Finally, a theoretical model and propositions are presented.

Literature review

CE recently emerged in the marketing literature as an important concept in relationship marketing (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010). According to Hollebeek (2011a, b), CE is conceptualized as, “the level of a customer’s motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in brand interactions.” There are two ways, CE in the marketing literature is classified; uni-dimensional conceptualizations with behavioral aspect as the main focus (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Kumar *et al.*, 2010), and multidimensional conceptualizations in which cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions stand out (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011b; Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Vivek *et al.*, 2012; So *et al.*, 2014). Gvili and Levy (2018) on the other hand, show that behavioral eWOM engagement is a two-dimensional concept with intention to receive and send eWOM as the key dimensions. Following a prevalence of multidimensional conceptualizations of CE compared to other conceptualizations (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Hollebeek, 2011b, van Doorn *et al.*, 2010, So *et al.*, 2012), a significant conceptual foundation for CE is established in the marketing literature as a multidimensional concept.

Similarly, research on CE in tourism and hospitality has mainly focused on multidimensional conceptualization (So *et al.*, 2014; Hollebeek and Brodie, 2009) and scale development for tourism brands (So *et al.*, 2014). Several other studies have been done on the CE outcome behaviors like loyalty (So *et al.*, 2016; Rather and Sharma, 2016) and customer

retention (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). Most of these researches take a more company-centric outlook by examining the outcomes of CE from the organization point of view. Apparently, there is limited research underlying the specific CE dimensions in relation to outcome behaviors like eWOM in the hospitality sector. This is because, an engaged person is considered to have an enduring psychological connection with the engagement object beyond behavioral participation (So *et al.*, 2014). Thus, disaggregation of CE into its dimensional components reveals a full complexity of CE in relation to its outcome behaviors. In spite of the mounting attention in developing CE, empirical research is comparatively inadequate (Bolton, 2011; Gummerus *et al.*, 2012; Hollebeek, 2011a), and the knowledge about the role of CE in enhancing eWOM behaviors is dearth.

Customer engagement and eWOM

The literature posits that there is an association between CE and eWOM behaviors. The rise of the Internet has added a new perspective to WOM that is conceptualized as electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004, p. 39) construe 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.” Islam and Rahman (2015) for instance argue that, engaged customers are likely to share their experiences, provide feedback and recommend the product to other prospective customers. eWOM manifests itself in three possible ways of sharing opinions by giving, receiving or passing opinion obtained from others (Chu and Kim, 2011). “Opinion giving”, which is also termed as “opinion leadership” in the WOM literature, involves a person with product knowledge and experience making it available to others either face-to-face or via a medium; “opinion-seeking” involves an individuals’ quest for product-related information and opinions from those with knowledge and experience about the product; and “opinion passing on” is the process of forwarding opinions obtained from others with related experience. In this article, content creation and making comments in terms of reviews, ratings, uploading pictures and videos, as well as liking, stand for opinion giving, while downloading and reading existing content amounts to opinion searching. The act of forwarding existing content to one’s own networks amounts to opinion passing on.

The literature suggests that eWOM is related to how customers using social media sites behave (Vivek *et al.*, 2014; Islam and Rahman, 2015; Kumar 2015). The Internet, particularly social media, contains features that facilitate site users to make interactions among themselves. Social media sites allow communication in multiple ways thereby enabling users to join, develop content and share with other users in the platform (Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014). According to Chu and Kim (2011), social media sites have extended eWOM beyond opinion giving and opinion searching, as was the case of traditional WOM. Users can now create and share content, which is eWOM opinion giving; can read, view and download existing content, which is eWOM opinion searching; and can pass on/forward existing content to others in one’s network, which is eWOM opinion passing on (Chu and Kim, 2011). Chu and Kim (2011) suggest that opinion passing on, adds to the concept of eWOM on social media sites which needs to be aggregated in a study about eWOM behaviors.

Seemingly, CE has come into sight as an important construct these days and is more and more gaining consideration among practitioners and academicians, mainly due to its possible influences to consumer buying behavior (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010) and specifically relationship outcomes such as eWOM behavior (Islam and Rahman, 2015; Zhao *et al.*, 2016). However, the differential relationship of the CE dimensions on eWOM is yet to be empirically examined (Dessart *et al.*, 2015) as recent CE and eWOM research in tourism and hospitality has treated the two concepts in their composite form (So *et al.*, 2012; Rather and Sharma, 2016). Therefore, this research advances the current understanding of beyond-purchase psychological and behavioral connections with CE and the influences of these

connections (cognitive, affective and behavioral) on the development of eWOM behaviors in the hospitality industry by disaggregating CE and integrating eWOM whereby the opinion passing on component is treated as part of the eWOM concept. Thus, given the enduring and multidimensional nature of CE, its understanding from a multidimensional perspective provides guiding principles for CE development and application (So *et al.*, 2016).

Hypothesis and model development

Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) define cognitive process as one of the dimensions of CE as “a consumer’s level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in a specific consumer–brand interaction”. What is central to cognitive processing is the kind of knowledge possessed and the way such knowledge has been acquired and used (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982). Borrowing from the organizational behavior literature, scholars suggest the presence of a relationship between cognition and behavior. For instance, Williams and Anderson (1991) and Moorman (1993) found that cognitions/knowledge about the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of a job predict organization citizenship behavior (OCB) more than affect related cues. Similarly, Kemery *et al.* (1996) suggest that cognitive and affective employee engagement differ in their prediction of OCB in the workplace. In the student engagement literature, it is suggested that active students are those who are cognitively engaged (Corno and Madinach, 1983). Similarly, Vivek *et al.* (2012) suggest that cognitive CE is characterized by a strong level of customer–brand connection and evaluation which in turn influences the attitude of customers toward the brand or company and the subsequent behavior. It is on this ground that, cognitive CE is seen as a reason behind customer eWOM behaviors on social media sites. Vacationers using tourism-related sites are driven by different information motives related to their trip. While on social media sites, vacationers may search for, use or provide related information. It is thus proposed that,

H1. Cognitive processing is positively related to the eWOM behavior of (Hypothesis 1a) seeking, (Hypothesis 1b) giving and (Hypothesis 1c) passing on content.

The affective dimension of CE refers to “a consumer’s degree of positive brand-related affect in a particular consumer/brand interaction” (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). In this context, the affective dimension of CE infers having positive feelings about the brand and making an emotional response to it (Tsiotsou, 2011). Similarly, Horlick-Jones *et al.* (2007), suggest that positive WOM results in an emotional response to a brand that leads to purchasing it, which has a positive influence on WOM behavior (Ladhari, 2007). Sashi (2012) suggests that sustained customer interactions on social media sites result in the development of trust and an emotional bond with other users as well as the brand. Sashi (2012) further suggests that consumers, who get emotionally connected to a brand, have high likelihood of advocating, recommending or defending it. Similarly, Allen *et al.* (1992) suggest that during product evaluations, emotions are a better predictor of behavior than cognition. Based on these arguments, it is likely that vacationers who are affectively engaged in tourism-related social media sites may exhibit eWOM behaviors. Thus, it is proposed that:

H2. Affective CE positively influences (Hypothesis 2a) eWOM seeking behavior (Hypothesis 2b) eWOM giving behavior (Hypothesis 2c) eWOM passing on behavior.

The behavioral dimension of CE is construed as “level of energy, effort and/or time spent on a brand, in particular interactions” (Hollebeek, 2011a, b). Hollebeek (2011a, b) suggests that CE fosters more proactive behavior (as opposed to that which is merely reactive/responsive). Halaszovich and Nel (2017) argue that, much as activation stands for favorable brand-related behavioral actions, WOM behavior results from activation in CE perspective. There are other scholars who conceptualize behavioral CE as showing preferences for a company or brand

(Kumar *et al.*, 2010; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). They further suggest that behavioral CE is the main distinguishing element of CE on the ground and that taking action differentiates highly engaged from no or less engaged customers. Thus, behavioral CE is demonstrated by highly engaged customers whose likelihood of eliciting eWOM behaviors in social media sites is high as well. In the context of vacationers visiting tourism-related social media sites, we argue that when they are highly engaged behaviorally, they are likely to exhibit eWOM behaviors. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

- H3. Behavioral CE is positively related to (Hypothesis 3a) eWOM seeking behavior (Hypothesis 3b) eWOM giving behavior and (Hypothesis 3c) eWOM passing on behavior.

Methodology

The focus of this study was Tanzania, in which the population comprised international vacationers who had used tourism-related social media sites before and/or during their trip. This population was chosen on the ground that, vacationers involve themselves in search for information on where to go and where to stay more than business travelers and those visiting friends or relatives (Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Simpson and Siguaw, 2008). Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed using validated scales from the existing literature where scales for CE were adopted from Hollebeek and Chen (2014) and those for eWOM were picked from Chu and Kim (2011) as indicated in Table I. We picked a sample of 278 exiting vacationers at three international airports; Abeid Amani Karume International Airport, Julius Nyerere International Airport and Kilimanjaro International Airport between November 2017 and February 2018. These airports are the only ones handling international airlines and according to Tanzania tourist exit survey, 80.2 percent of tourists exit the country via these airports (Tourist exit survey, 2017). To ensure the discriminant validity of the instrument, the vacationers were given a description and examples of what tourism-related social media sites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Hotels.com, Airbnb and individual tourism firms' social media accounts) refer to in order to distinguish them from the general social media sites (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter).

As there were no differences in the characteristics of the vacationers leaving on different days of the week and times of the day, the cluster sampling method was used to obtain cases for the study. First, the researcher randomly selected two days from the seven days of the week on which data collection took place. Second, based on the peak hours of the day for major international departures, data were collected twice a day by the researcher assisted by two research assistants from noon to 16:00 h and from 20:00 h to midnight. Third, the questionnaire was piloted among postgraduate students where the question which reads; "have you shared any of your trip experience in tourism-related social media sites?" was added as a qualifying question for the respondents to move to the subsequent parts of the instrument. Prior effective data collection was done; entry permission was sought and obtained from Tanzania Airports Authority. Data collection was done at the waiting lounges for international departures, where the researcher approached all passengers and screened them through two questions (one for using tourism-related social media sites during the trip and the other for the purpose of travel). The sample consisted of 48.2 percent of males and 51.8 percent of females, with 60.8 percent of the respondents being over 40 years of age.

Measurements

A total of 10 measurement items were adopted from Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) to measure the three underlying dimensions of CE, namely the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. All the items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly

Scale items	Source
<i>Cognitive engagement (CCPCE)</i> CCPCE 1: When I came across a tourism-related social media site I gave it my full attention CCPCE 2: I thought about tourist destinations and attractions whenever I visited a tourism-related social media site CCPCE3: Using a tourism-related social media site made me learn more about destinations and their associated tourist attractions	Hollebeek <i>et al.</i> (2014)
<i>Affective engagement (AAPCE)</i> AAPCE 1: I felt very positive when I used tourism-related social media sites AAPCE 2: Using tourism-related social media sites made me feel happy AAPCE 3: I felt good when I used tourism-related social media sites AAPCE 4: I was proud of using tourism-related social media sites	Hollebeek <i>et al.</i> (2014)
<i>Behavioral engagement (BBPCE)</i> BBPCE 1: I spent a lot more time using tourism-related social media sites than other social media sites BBPCE 2: Whenever I wanted to visit a social media site, I usually chose to visit a tourism-related site BBPCE3: I usually visited tourism social media sites when I wanted to make this trip	Hollebeek <i>et al.</i> (2014)
<i>eWOM seeking (OSEWOM)</i> OSEWOM 1: Before making this tourism trip, I asked my contacts on the social media site for advice. OSEWOM 2: I got my contacts' opinions on the social media site before I chose this destination. OSEWOM 3: I felt more comfortable choosing this destination when I got my contacts' opinions on the social media site	Chu and Kim (2011)
<i>eWOM giving (OGEWOM)</i> OGEWOM 1: I wrote a review and/or posted pictures on social media sites about my trip to share with my contacts OGEWOM 2: I wrote a review and rated my experience on social media sites that can be used by others for their trip OGEWOM 3: I wrote a review and rated my experience on social media sites to influence others concerning their choice of destination	Chu and Kim (2011)
<i>eWOM passing on (OPEWOM)</i> OPEWOM 1: I passed on information or my opinion on destinations to the contacts on my "friends" list on the social media site OPEWOM 2: I passed on my contacts' comments containing information or opinions on the destinations I like OPEWOM 3: When I received destination-related information or the opinion of a friend, I passed it on to my other contacts on the social networking site	Chu and Kim (2011)

Table I.
Instrument
measurement

disagree to 7 = strongly agree). eWOM was measured by 9 items all adopted from [Chu and Kim \(2011\)](#) for the three dimensions of eWOM, namely, passing on, giving and seeking opinion. Each sub-set of eWOM was measured by three items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). [Table I](#) shows the statements used for the two constructs of the study.

Results and analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test empirically the hypotheses developed from the literature review. A model was built in three stages, as recommended by [Anderson and Gerbing \(1988\)](#). Using the sample ($N = 278$ cases) ([Hair *et al.*, 2010](#)), CFA was used to test the measurement model. Thus, CFA with 19 items representing 6 constructs (CCPCE, AAPCE, BBPCE, OSEWOM, OGEWOM and OPEWOM) was performed to verify

the underlying structure. The result of the CFA showed a good fit ($\chi^2 = 236.967$, $df = 137$, $\chi^2/df = 1.730$, $GFI = 0.919$, $CFI = 0.982$, $TLI = 0.986$ and $RMSEA = 0.051$). The measurement's reliability was assessed by Cronbach's alpha. As shown in Table II, the alpha values for the six constructs ranged from 0.8 to 0.94, all exceeding the minimum requirement of 0.7, denoting acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). Convergent validity was examined through composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). Each construct had acceptable construct reliability, with the CR values ranging from 0.94 to 0.98, higher than the 0.7 threshold as denoted in Tables II and III.

The results of the validity test ensured convergent validity, as all the AVE values ranged from 0.79 to 0.93, exceeding the 0.5 minimum requirement (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). In addition, all the measurement items had standardized factor loadings of 0.5 or above at a significance level of <0.001 , which ensured convergent validity. Finally, discriminant validity was tested by comparing the squared correlations between constructs with either of their individual AVE (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table IV, the AVE for each construct was greater than the squared correlations between it and other constructs, suggesting discriminant validity.

Table II.
Reliability assessment

Construct	# of items	Reliability in the previous study		Current Study's reliability	
			Cronbach's alpha	# of items	Cronbach's alpha
Cognitive CE	3	Hollebeek et al. (2014)	0.75	3	0.83
Affective CE	4	Hollebeek et al. (2014)	0.84	4	0.94
Behavioral CE	3	Hollebeek et al. (2014)	0.78	3	0.8
eWOM seeking	3	Chu and Kim (2011)	0.83	3	0.88
eWOM giving	3	Chu and Kim (2011)	0.87	3	0.88
eWOM passing	3	Chu and Kim (2011)	0.93	3	0.84

Table III.
The results of the overall measurement model

	M	SD	SL	TV	CR	AVE
AAPCE 4	5.03	1.111	0.989			
AAPCE 3	4.91	1.257	0.622	13.03		
AAPCE 2	4.81	0.964	0.941	41.349		
AAPCE 1	5.06	0.959	0.961	48.957	0.94	0.79
CCPCE 3	5.01	1.177	0.798			
CCPCE 2	4.90	0.765	0.954	19.962		
CCPCE 1	5.01	0.954	0.978	20.431	0.94	0.83
BBPCE 3	4.37	1.717	0.98			
BBPCE 2	4.43	1.508	0.981	55.669		
BBPCE 1	4.39	1.520	0.935	37.986	0.98	0.93
OSEWOM 3	5.39	1.317	0.957			
OSEWOM 2	5.35	1.403	0.963	38.731		
OSEWOM 1	4.53	1.468	0.999	52.28	0.97	0.93
OGEWOM 3	6.12	0.921	1.015			
OGEWOM 2	5.22	1.102	0.875	14.307		
OGEWOM 1	5.14	1.001	0.796	13.673	0.93	0.81
OPEWOM 3	5.19	1.028	0.916			
OPEWOM 2	5.14	0.908	0.991	34.355		
OPEWOM 1	6.06	0.809	0.938	28.816	0.96	0.9

Note(s): $X^2/df = 1.736$; $GFI = 0.919$; $TLI = 0.982$; $CFI = 0.986$ & $RMSEA = 0.051$; SL = standardized loadings; M = Factor mean; SD = standard deviation; TV = t-values; CR = composite reliability and AVE = average variance extracted.

The overall structural model involved 9 relationship paths from the three CE dimensions (CCPCE, AAPCE, and BBPCE) to the three eWOM dimensions (OSEWOM, OGEWOM and OPEWOM). It was hypothesized that these CE dimensions positively influence eWOM dimensions as indicated in the conceptual model (Figure 1).

Results of the structural analysis

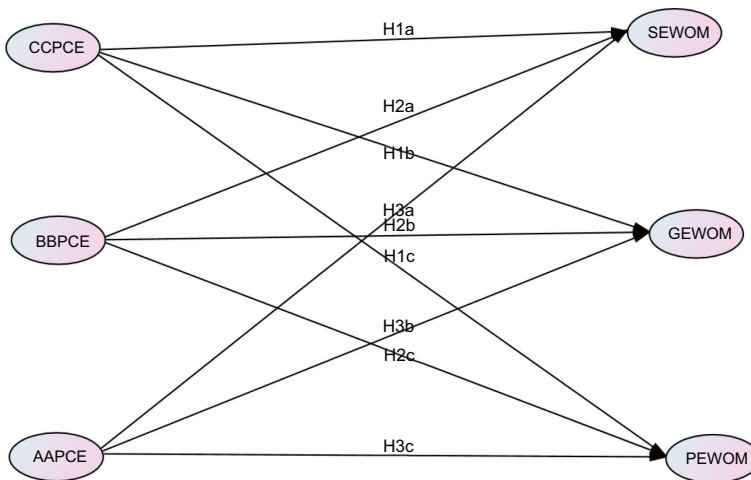
The structural analysis results' path coefficients and the *t* values for the hypothesized relationships are shown in Table V. The overall model presents a good fit on all indices ($\chi^2 = 275.137$; *df* = 140; $\chi^2/df = 1.965$, GFI = 0.905 TLI = 0.976, CFI = 0.980, and RMSEA = 0.059).

The research hypotheses were tested using path coefficients, critical ratios (*t* values) and *p*-values. An examination of the structural path coefficients revealed that hypothesis one and two were partially supported, while hypothesis three was fully supported, as seen in Table V.

	CCPCE	AAPCE	BBPCE	OSEWOM	OGEWOM	OPEWOM
CCPCE	<i>0.79</i>					
AAPCE	0.662**	<i>0.82</i>				
BBPCE	0.459**	0.546**	<i>0.86</i>			
OSEWOM	0.184**	0.322**	0.357**	<i>0.86</i>		
OGEWOM	0.237**	0.335**	0.384**	0.323**	<i>0.66</i>	
OPEWOM	0.449**	0.547**	0.472**	0.300**	0.409**	<i>0.81</i>

Note(s): **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). The italic diagonal figures are the square root of the variance extracted shared between the constructs and their measures. Off-diagonal figures are the correlations between constructs

Table IV. Test results of discriminant validity



Note(s): AAPCE= affective customer engagement; CCPCE=Cognitive customer engagement; BBPCE=behavioral customer engagement; OSEWOM=opinion seeking; OGEWOM= opinion giving and OPEWOM=opinion passing

Figure 1. The hypothesized relationship model of the dimensions of CE and eWOM

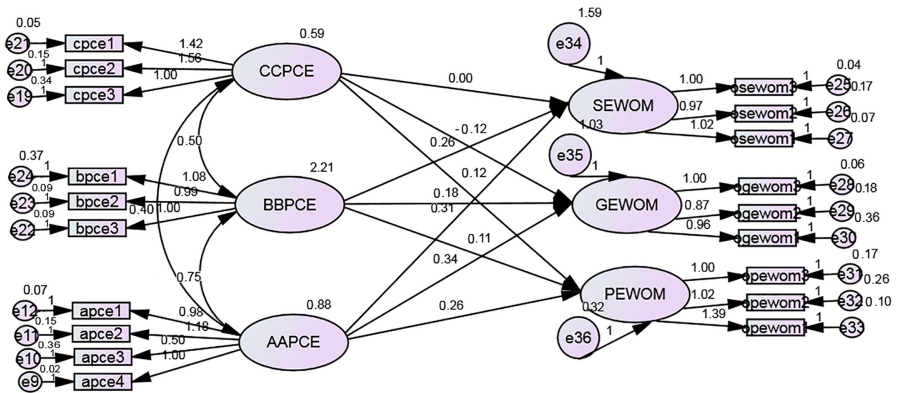


Figure 2.
The Structural Model of the Relationship between CE and eWOM behaviours

Dependent variable	Independent variable		Beta weight	p-value	Results	R ²
eWOM (opinion seeking)	Cognitive CE	H1(a)	-0.088		Not Supported	0.23
	Affective CE	H1(b)	0.181	<0.05	Supported	
	Behavioral CE	H1(c)	0.261	<0.001	Supported	
eWOM (opinion giving)	Cognitive CE	H2(a)	-0.057		Not Supported	0.26
	Affective CE	H2(b)	0.164	<0.05	Supported	
	Behavioral CE	H2(c)	0.311	<0.001	Supported	
eWOM (opinion passing on)	Cognitive CE	H3(a)	0.147	<0.05	Supported	0.41
	Affective CE	H3(b)	0.308	<0.001	Supported	
	Behavioral CE	H3(c)	0.253	<0.001	Supported	

Table V.
The overall structural model hypothesis testing results

Note(s): *Fit Statistics: $\chi^2 = 288.011$; $df = 140$; $\chi^2/df = 2.057$; GFI = 0.902; TLI = 0.917; CFI = 0.979 and RMSEA = 0.62, p value = Significance level; R² = Squared Regression Weights; eWOM = electronic word of mouth behavior and CE = customer engagement

In as far as vacationers' eWOM behaviors in relation to the role of CE are concerned; the findings indicate that eWOM seeking behavior is influenced by affective and behavioral CE, while cognitive CE was not a significant predictor. The path coefficient values show that behavioral CE was the strongest significant predictor of eWOM seeking behavior ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$) followed by affective CE ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, eWOM giving behavior is significantly influenced by affective and behavioral CE, while cognitive CE was found not to be a significant predictor. From the path coefficient values, behavioral CE is the strongest predictor of eWOM giving behavior ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), followed by affective CE ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$). Consistent with theoretical expectations, eWOM passing on behavior is influenced by cognitive, affective and behavioral CE. More specifically, given the paths' coefficient values, the affective dimension of CE is the strongest predictor of eWOM passing on behavior ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), followed by the behavioral ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$) and cognitive dimension ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$).

Conclusion

This article was driven by the need to investigate the influence of CE on vacationers' eWOM behaviors in tourism brand-related sites. The relationship between three CE dimensions

(Cognitive, affective and behavioral) and the eWOM behaviors of seeking, giving and passing formed the three specific objectives as aforementioned.

Findings indicate that behavioral and affective dimensions of CE positively relate to all vacationers' eWOM behaviors of seeking, passing on and giving opinions. Conversely, the cognitive CE dimension positively relates to only the eWOM behavior of passing on opinions in tourism-related sites.

Cognitive customer engagement

Contrary to theoretical expectations, the relationship between cognitive CE and eWOM behaviors was not supported for those seeking and giving opinions. Results reveal that, it's only the eWOM passing behavior among vacationers which relates positively with cognitive CE. This is in line with the work of [Chrysochou and Malciute \(2013\)](#), who found no support for cognitive CE in relation to eWOM behavior. The support for the positive relationship between cognitive CE and eWOM passing on behavior implies that, when vacationers are engrossed with tourism-related sites, they can evaluate the content's worth, its usefulness and impression created by sharing it, which leads to the decision on whether to pass it on to others or not. This phenomenon is related to [Kumar *et al.* \(2010\)](#)'s argument that there are different CE levels and activation is the highest level. For that matter, the highest behavioral manifestation like all facets of eWOM behaviors would be expected from the highest CE levels. It seems therefore that, users' low level of CE is cognitively manifested which is the reason for not eliciting all facets of eWOM behaviors. While cognitive CE is low in engagement levels, behavioral CE is the highest level. Thus, it is suggested that cognitive CE relates positively with eWOM passing on behavior on tourism-related social media sites.

Affective customer engagement

The finding that affective CE positively relates to vacationers' eWOM behaviors of giving, seeking and passing on opinion on tourism-related social media sites is not a surprise. It is consistent with previous findings, whereby, for instance, [Liu and Zhao \(2015\)](#) suggest that affective CE (absorption) is positively associated with the giving, seeking and passing on of opinions. Thus, perceived emotional attachment leads to active CE, such as creating content, contributing to conversations and even sharing the existing content with other networks. As users participate in conversations on the platform, their level of engagement is likely to rise, thereby strengthening their emotional bond, which in turn causes them to share more on the platform. [Sashi \(2012\)](#) suggests that when customers engage in sustained interactions, it creates an emotional bond, which causes them to trust the brand and be committed to it, leading to eWOM behaviors. [Allen *et al.* \(1992\)](#) demonstrated that emotions act as a better predictor of behavior than cognitive evaluation. Thus, affective CE positively relates to the eWOM behaviors of giving, seeking and passing on opinion on tourism-related sites. Impliedly, when vacationers get engaged affectively, their level of interaction with other users increases thereby making them elicit a full range of eWOM behaviors such as content creation, consuming or sharing beyond the platform.

Behavioral customer engagement

The finding that behavioral CE positively relates to all the three eWOM behaviors of giving, seeking and passing on opinion on tourism-related social media sites is similar to previous findings. This is in line with what [Juhee \(2018\)](#) suggests that vigorous interactions among users elevates their engagement levels which increases chances of promoting firm's social media site to like-minded others. Similarly, scholars who conceptualize behavioral CE as indicative of one's preference for a firm or product ([Kumar *et al.*, 2010](#); [Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010](#)) suggest that the behavioral CE is often thought out as an aspect marking a difference between engaged and non-engaged customers. It can be argued that, since behavioral CE is

shown by fully engaged customers (Kumar *et al.*, 2010) the fact that they manifest all three eWOM behaviors is not a surprise. Fully engaged customers who participate in conversations taking place on the platform interact with others there, which increases the chances of customers uploading content, participating in the existing conversation and sharing it by forwarding it to other networks. Thus, the higher one ascends in the level of CE the more likely it is to elicit eWOM behaviors.

Theoretical implications

Our article responds to the call of disaggregating CE and integration of opinion passing on into the eWOM concept (Chu and Kim, 2011; Libai *et al.*, 2010) to reflect possible ways of interaction in social media settings. Based on our findings, we extend the understanding of the beyond-purchase eWOM behaviors resulting from CE by showing that the three dimensions of CE have a varying influence on the three eWOM behaviors on social media sites. The varied relationship of the three CE dimensions (cognitive, affective and behavioral) with eWOM behaviors further confirms the multidimensionality of CE and the enduring psychological connection of individuals beyond participation in activities (So *et al.*, 2014). This affirms engaged customers can elicit some sort of eWOM behaviors even before they reach the level of activation. Correspondingly, owing to their level of engagement attained during their interaction with the brand, customers may dedicate different levels of cognitive, emotional and/or physical efforts in support for the brand (Higgins and Scholer, 2009). This gives greater insight into the relationship between CE beyond its composite form and its outcome variables.

Our article empirically tested and confirmed the broadened eWOM concept by integrating all three possible behaviors of giving, seeking and passing on information on social media sites. This sheds light on the work of Munzel and Kunz and Munzel (2013) on the retransmission activities made possible by the interactive features of social media which amplifies the reach of eWOM through forwarding/passing on existing content. This shows possible WOM activities in the online environment beyond giving and seeking content in the brick and mortar setting. It is thus revealed that the eWOM passing on behavior is elicited by all CE dimensions, and more so, it is the only eWOM behavior performed by cognitively engaged persons.

Similarly, contrary to other studies which delved into general social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram (Mark, 2014; Dholakia *et al.*, 2004), where social interactions and networking are the main reasons for engaging in eWOM, this article extends the existing knowledge by examining CE and eWOM behaviors on tourism-related social media sites, such as TripAdvisor and Hotels.com. On these sites, users are said to have a “feeling of membership” (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004) and their conversations and interactions are dominated by getting people’s opinions and hearing about their product-related experiences as opposed to social networking and the personal conversations that prevail on the general social media sites. The findings of this study are relevant to marketers who are interested in brand-related interactions and conversations other than personal networking common in the general social media sites like Facebook. In these particular brand-related sites, users get engaged with a specific brand-related purpose which is why many demonstrate a relatively different behavioral pattern (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004).

Practical implications

Practically speaking, these findings have far-reaching implications in this digital era, which has dramatically changed marketer-customer communication. While vacationers visiting social media platforms can generate both positive and negative WOM, marketing managers’ interest lies in the former. Through the insights provided by this study, marketing managers are made aware that CE is a prerequisite for favorable eWOM behaviors among vacationers

in tourism-related social media sites. This is to say that, marketers should facilitate cognitive, affective and behavioral CE in order to encourage eWOM giving, seeking and passing behaviors which are vital as a source of information and recommendation about destinations, and specific tourism brands like hotels, events, restaurants and culinary aspects among vacationers. Thus, marketers can facilitate CE in its various dimensions to elicit eWOM behaviors as stipulated hereunder:

First, CE is multifaceted and enduring and thus managers should take a lasting and multi-dimensional viewpoint in facilitating CE development. This means that engaging customers is psychological and physical through affecting thinking and feelings for the former and influencing participation in brand activities for the latter. Thus, to influence cognitive and affective CE, marketers can do it by recurrently keeping posted the developments about the brand and the industry. This information serves to draw attention and attract regular visiting and staying on the site by users which results in cognitive CE.

Research indicates emotional appeals as drivers for users to engage with social media (Ashely and Tuten, 2015). Online marketers should employ content that animates the brand to create consumers' enjoyment and excitement about the brand. They can also use online fan pages to encourage users to join with and participate in experience sharing (Yan, 2011). This will encourage vacationers using the particular sites to participate in interactions with other users which will enhance their bond with the brand and each other. Likewise, behavioral CE can be evoked by presence of intriguing visual content and a demand for action like teasers and contests (Malhotra *et al.*, 2012). By this study finding, online marketers are further informed of the use of different appeals like fantasy, slice of life and musical to facilitate continuing interaction with the brand by consumers, as proposed by Ashley and Tuten (2015) which in turn promote eWOM behaviors among vacationers.

The implication of the finding that, CE is a multidimensional concept amplifies that other than merely considering members' actions and activities (e.g. Gummerus *et al.*, 2012); CE encompasses also emotions and cognitive processing which are time and effort consuming to nurture their development. Thus, managing tourism brands should be thought of from a long-term perspective which in turn affects online media management in terms of design, content and measurement of impact. All these should focus on affecting cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of users.

Limitations and future research

The study is limited by the fact that, although the hypothesized relationships appear causal, data collection was cross-sectional, which implies association other than causal relationships. Therefore, the findings are indicative of the role of CE in vacationers' eWOM behavior on tourism sites.

This study is also limited to tourism-related sites only. Future research can examine whether engagement varies between brand-related sites and social networking sites. This may be insightful especially to marketers deciding to feature either in brand-related sites or in the general social networking sites. It is further recommended that this study's model is extended by using country of origin or cultural background of the vacationer as a moderating variable so as to make the model and the findings more generalizable.

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Further reading

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