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A Retrospective View Of Electronic Word-of-mouth In Hospitality And Tourism Management

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ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH IN HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM MANAGEMENT REVISITED

Structured Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review the impact electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has had on the hospitality and tourism industry and to discuss changes that will affect its future. The paper’s touchpoint is our earlier paper (Litvin *et al.*, 2008), which proposed that eWOM was to become a major influence as a conduit of travelers’ views and opinions.

Design/methodology/approach – The article summarizes arguments in our earlier paper, describing ways in which eWOM has evolved into the influential system it has become, with special emphasis on the growth of mobile media as a platform for eWOM dissemination.

Findings – We conclude that eWOM has fulfilled its promise to become a major influence on the hospitality and tourism industry and will continue to play an essential role in hospitality marketing for the foreseeable future.

Practical implications – We provide examples of successful media campaigns and propose strategies for hospitality and tourism businesses under the categories.

Originality/value – eWOM has emerged to become a highly influential element of modern marketing strategy. This look back at an early eWOM article, with reflection on changes that

have occurred and a view to the future, is of value as validation of an often cited article that set the stage for much subsequent hospitality research.

Keywords: electronic word-of-mouth, user generated content, CGM, social media, interpersonal influence

Paper type: Conceptual paper

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INTRODUCTION

In 2008, we prophesied in our paper “Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Hospitality and Tourism Management” that electronic word-of-mouth [eWOM] would become a major source of information for and influence upon hospitality and tourism industry consumers (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). First, it was noted that interpersonal or social communication is the most important and influential source of information for consumers, both for hospitality and in general. Second, we reiterated how the intangible nature of hospitality and tourism products, as credence goods, provides WOM disproportionate influence. Third, the spread of digital communications was, a decade ago, enabling increasing numbers of people to both transmit and consume socially generated information of multiple then emerging types. Consequently, we saw a dramatic potential for growth of eWOM for hospitality consumers, predicting that eWOM platforms would become major influencers of travel behaviors and a significant medium to be understood and harnessed by travel marketers. Since its publication, our article has garnered over fifteen hundred citations (per Google Scholar), many incorporating the eWOM definition we provided:

[A]ll informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers.

This includes communication between producers and consumers as well as those between consumers themselves (Litvin *et al.*, 2008, p. 461).

Our work, it would thus seem, has had an influence upon the hospitality and tourism academic community. And, while many of our predictions have come true, the dramatic changes that have transformed online interpersonal communication and the world of technology since our paper appeared – when the word “tweet” referred to the chirping sound of a young bird – suggest the need to revisit of our initial paper. We are grateful the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* has provided a platform for this update.

BACKGROUND

In our 2008 paper, it was noted that TripAdvisor members had posted just shy of two million reviews. Today, TripAdvisor, per the company “the world’s largest travel site”, boasts 120 million members and 435 million posted reviews (TripAdvisor.com, 2016). Add the additional millions of reviews on websites such as Yelp, Urbanspoon, CruiseCritic.com, Expedia, and Hotels.com., each of which relies upon consumer generated media [CGM] for content, and the current significance of eWOM is apparent, certainly validating the notion in our 2008 article that widespread adoption of the internet would provide consumers unprecedented opportunities to share their opinions of hospitality service products and brands with other consumers.

In our original paper, we used the term *electronic word-of-mouth* as a catch-all phrase to encompass the variety of ways ordinary people interacted online, through blogs, virtual communities, websites, product review and hate sites, email, newsgroups, chat rooms, and through instant messaging. Each of these ways of communicating provides marketers with strategic opportunities to manage eWOM. We described some of these and made several

suggestions for how hospitality management could participate in these discussions. Omitted from our paper, however, was any detailed discussion of social and mobile media, which were only then beginning to appear. Hoffman *et al.* (2013, p. 29) today define social media as “web-based and mobile tools and applications that allow people to create (consume) content that can be consumed (created) by others and which enables and facilitates connections”. Our earlier view was far more narrow. Thus, the discussion that follows.

Social media, Web 2.0, and mobile

Since our paper, as well as another heavily cited seminal hospitality eWOM paper by Gretzel and Yoo (2008) appeared, numerous authors have commented on the importance for managers to monitor online travel reviews to communicate with tourists and to promote their destinations. Among these: O'Connor (2010), following a review of TripAdvisor reviews of 100 London hotels, suggested that managers should make use of these to manage their reputations by identifying common causes of traveler satisfaction and dissatisfaction and work with travelers to co-create their brand image; Litvin and Hoffman (2012) evaluated the importance to management of responding to negative reviews of their hotel properties, finding positive rebuttals from management, and even more so from other travelers, improve the image with future users; Ladhari and Michaud (2015) suggested that hotel companies employ social media specialists who should monitor on-line postings and discussion boards to manage the company's brand image and counter negative information conveyed by users – something undoubtedly every major firm in our industry is currently doing. Additional recent examples of authors

discussing and suggesting eWOM strategies in this journal alone include: Kim *et al.* (2015), Kuo *et al.* (2015), and Oz (2015).

Expanding the above, which relate to the reactive use of technology, it is becoming even more important to focus upon proactive applications. Increasingly, these tools are becoming mobile. Joachimsthaler (2014, p. 2) notes that consumers have become, or are at least are becoming, “hyper-digital”, an “always-on consumer . . . that uses three connected devices every day, goes online multiple times a day and does so from at least three different locations”. Moreover, we have seen in the time since we wrote our first article evidence of “mobile only” users who “access the internet exclusively . . . via mobile phone or tablet” as well as a larger “selective mobile-only” segment who go online almost exclusively using their mobile devices, which they use for social media, videos, music, gaming, or search (Hudson, 2013). In 2008, as we wrote our initial paper, a bold prediction by Mary Meeker of Morgan Stanley foresaw mobile usage overtaking fixed internet access by the year 2014 (O’Toole, 2014). Not only was her view of the trend accurate, but the projected year was as predicted. The 400 million mobile internet users of 2008 grew to 2,000 million in 2015, significantly outstripping the growth of desktop users, whose numbers increased from 1,200 million users in 2008 to 1,600 during that timeframe (Chaffey, 2016). Firms face unique problems marketing to these groups. They are more difficult to identify than are desktop users and require digital strategies that are adaptable to the technological limitations of mobile media.

The need to address these changes has radically transformed many aspects of hospitality marketing. Many, perhaps most, of these mobile device users access hospitality apps to read

online reviews, book travel, check in with customer service, and even to unlock their hotel room doors. These tools thus replace human contact with technological interactions, from the research stage through booking and the normal front-desk arrival, denying marketers the opportunity to develop meaningful interpersonal connections and to up-sell the visitor in person (*Fast Company*, 2014). Organizations have responded to this transformation in the consumer environment by rushing to become part of the visitor's social world through "digital marketing", using social media and mobile advertising (Schultz and Peltier, 2013; *The Economist*, 2013; Vranica, 2013). In doing so, they take advantage of some unique benefits provided by social and mobile media marketing. These include customized and personalized marketing messages, always-available two-way communication with customers, real time data collection, and the co-creation of customer experience.

The company Dunkin' Donuts provides a good example of the successful use of social media to enhance their brand equity, establish and reinforce relationships with customers, and improve the efficiency of their marketing budget (Soat, 2014). Structured into a national level team with local partners and franchise owners, the company connects with customers using Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Vine. The goal is to create content that is "hyper-local" to keep customers informed about local product availability, promotions, and news. These efforts make the social media strategy personalized, involving, and relevant to Dunkin' Donuts' customers.

Several other interesting hospitality examples:

- Hamilton Island (Australia) Resorts employed social networking in a promotion entitled “Pilgramers Descend upon Hamilton Island – The Ultimate Instameet” that produced more than 600 images of visitors enjoying the resort and reached more than eight million people through digital marketing (Shankman, 2013).

- Loews Hotel, in a program entitled #TravelForReal, used guests’ Instagram photos rather than professional shots in their online marketing materials. Per the company (Keliher, 2015), “Rather than focus on amenities, these photos showcase genuine experiences. Research shows that Millennials, in particular, value experience over products. The Loews Instagram campaign puts real-life moments above any other details”. The company’s program was a clever harnessing and disseminating of eWOM to customers, in an environment that allowed for guest sharing, with an element of company content control.

- Red Roof Inn won an *Adweek* award for a creative use of mobile advertising with which most readers can relate. The company noted that an estimated 90,000 travelers are stranded daily as a result of cancelled airline flights. The company’s response was a mobile search campaign targeting these folks, many scrambling to find last-minute unexpected lodging, with a text message asking “stranded at the airport?” and pointing recipients to available Red Roof Inn rooms in the vicinity. The result, a 60 percent increase in last-minute bookings (Johnson, 2015).

It is noteworthy, when considering the above applications, how intrusive hospitality mobile social marketing has become. Per Shankar and Balasubramanian (2009, p. 125), the new technologies allow “geotargeting” of consumers; “a marketer’s dream of reaching the right customer at the right time with the right message”. These authors insightfully warned, however, that such precision targeting could be accompanied by privacy concerns, and that the extensive consumer information gleaned through mobile apps could lead to a consumer backlash. A recent Pew Research Center study (Anderson, 2015) determined that consumers have shown signs of becoming uncomfortable sharing too much personal information, finding that six in ten smartphone users have opted not to install an app when they discovered the extent of personal information required to be shared, and 43% have uninstalled an app for the same reason. But just look at anyone’s smartphone and note the number of icons displayed. Again, per the Pew study (Anderson, 2015), 82% of these are free to consumers, with 83% of the free apps requiring “full network permission”. It will be interesting to follow the issue over time, to see how willing the next wave of “hyper-digital” and “always-on consumers” are to surrender their privacy in exchange for access to the cornucopia of apps that beckon their attention.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT

Strategies – social media and eWOM are part of an overall marketing strategy

Given the above, we would like now to take a more macro-view, reinforcing today, as was the case in 2008, the importance of incorporating social media and eWOM into an overall marketing strategy. Below are three aspects of such an approach, which we have summarized under the

headings “segmentation and positioning”, “customer relationship management and brand engagement”, and “research”.

Segmentation and Positioning

Market segmentation is a cornerstone of marketing strategy. Rather than trying to appeal to the broader market (mass marketing), segmentation involves dividing (segmenting) the potential market into relatively homogeneous sub-segments, each with its unique characteristics and needs, and targeting one or more of these with tailored marketing strategies . . . a strategy familiar to those in the hospitality and tourism marketplace where segmentation into lifestyle segments, benefit segments, and geographic and demographic segments is quite common.

The advent of social media and their accompanying social networks provides managers with additional means to segment the tourism market (Tsotsou *et al.*, 2012). Reference groups that share travel preferences and interests (e.g. ecological tourism, backpacking tourism, dark tourism, etc.) are prime examples of how social networks can form the basis of segmentation strategies. Firms can develop computer models that create groupings of travelers, linking this information to systems that enable “sellers to recommend products/services based on consumers’ purchasing history and satisfaction with these products or services” (Tsotsou *et al.*, 2012, p. 41). Owyang (2010) specifically proposed the concept of “socialgraphics”. He argues that a business should segment customers and potential customers based upon the social media platforms they are using, the types of social information they rely upon, their degree of social influence, and their level of engagement with social media. The levels of engagement include curating, producing, commenting, sharing, and watching. Hospitality marketers, to be successful in this

digital age, need to facilitate their online social behavior according to these different levels of social engagement.

Customer relationship marketing and brand engagement

Academic marketers have urged managers to make customer satisfaction the chief goal of their marketing strategy ever since the “marketing concept” was initially formulated and adopted as the key to profitability (Armstrong and Kotler, 2015). At its heart, the marketing concept calls for companies to be outward-oriented, always listening first to the customer to understand his/her needs. As a host of technological changes have provided marketers the ability to collect data both from and about their consumers, and the ability to combine into databases the different data sources they avail, companies have created (computer-implemented) products designed to let managers interact with individual consumers in a variety of ways. As the idea emerged that profit results less from one-off sales and more from long-term relationships with customers, building such relationships with customers has become a central goal of marketing management (Reichheld and Teal, 1996). Combining the ideas of personalized relationships with customers enabled by technology and focused on long-term profitability of customer relationships provides the modern concept of customer relationship management, or CRM, “the overall process of building and maintaining profitable customer relationships by delivering superior customer value and satisfaction” (Armstrong and Kotler, 2015, p. 13). Moreover, as the technologies and philosophy of customer relationship management have evolved, it has become clear that an integrated marketing plan and program should contain the systematic application of CRM across the lifetime of the relationship between the firm and its customers. Goldsmith (2010) argues that this application results in a coordinated model of the goals of CRM: customer acquisition,

customer retention, customer development, customer consultation, and customer conversion. His model suggests that the effective use of social and mobile provides a means to create an “ecosystem of value”; connecting with customers in ways they increasingly want to connect. For example, when a customer wants to assemble a business trip, she might use sites or apps from Expedia, TripAdvisor, Hipmunk, several airlines, several hotel chains and a rental car company, plus Uber to go back and forth to the airport and OpenTable to make a restaurant reservation. She flips back and forth between all of these companies, sites and connections, and never gives it a second thought because they all live side-by-side on her tablet (Bernoff, 2014). If a hospitality company fails to become an active actor in this family of online mobile apps, it is destined to fail to satisfy guests, and ultimately to keep up with the competition.

Market research on big data of social media

The dynamic ecosystem that social, mobile, and big data have created for the hospitality industry affect not only management practice and the traveler’s experience, but the type and amount of market research needed by hospitality managers. Social and mobile media have assumed a prominent place in current discussions of market research, where much of the emphasis is on data science; that is, analyzing the big data that computers automatically collect by monitoring all forms of Internet use, searches, click streams, purchase, and social/mobile media use (Harriott, 2013; Terhanian, 2013). Because social media provide a trove of consumer conversations, opinions, and user generated content, market researchers have embraced techniques to collect and analyze this information for what it can reveal about many aspects of consumer behavior (Breuer *et al.*, 2013). The field of Social Media Analytics uses sophisticated computer algorithms to mine the content of social media in order to discover real-time trends, to

interact with consumers and engage them with brands, to learn from them, and to make predictions about future behavior in the social web. The resources provided by big data need to be understood and embraced. Further, it is important to note that this resource is no longer strictly an asset to be employed by mega-companies with the resources to collect and embrace the technology. Today, third party vendors that collect information can share and analyze information, making this resource available at an affordable cost.

FURTHER DISCUSSION OF ISSUES FROM 2008

As alluded to above and as noted in our original paper, the emergence of eWOM has resulted in the exponential expansion of the consumers' voice. Prior to the development of review sites, feedback from guests came to the service provider in the form of face-to-face communication or guest comment cards. Whether views were positive or negative, the breadth of these conversations was limited to the sender and the receiver. Beyond these direct communications, guests who wanted to share their experiences did so through traditional word-of-mouth, with the delighted, satisfied or disgruntled guest able to tell a small circle of friends/family/co-workers/etc. about their experience. As we know from the traditional WOM literature, the power of such shared commentary was great, but the range of influence was highly limited. With TripAdvisor, Yelp, etc., the vast majority of feedback and commentary now reaches the provider through third-party channels, simultaneous with its dissemination to the masses. This broad and unfiltered sharing of customer feedback has recently been referred to as the "democratization of opinions" (Law *et al.*, 2014, p. 735). We noted, in 2008, that such unfiltered commentary was a major concern of hospitality managers. Our recommendation at the time: the hospitality industry

should view the emerging e-WOM phenomenon as an opportunity rather than a threat. A return to the literature would seem to suggest this recommendation was sound.

Hospitality managers were and are, of course, concerned with the impact of bad, particularly unfair, online reviews. Research subsequent to our initial paper, however, should temper this concern. For while Chen *et al.*'s (2015) macro-review concluded that negative eWOM has more influence upon potential hospitality consumers than do positive reviews, our review of the literature clearly points to the fact that authors consistently find the vast majority of postings on review sites to be positive. For example, Mellinas *et al.* (2016) determined that Spanish hotels had an average Priceline rating of 7.52/10 and an even more generous 7.99/10 on Bookings.com. Mayzlin *et al.*'s (2014) review of a half million postings found average TripAdvisor rating of 3.52/5. In the same study, the authors calculated Expedia ratings, confirmed to be from those who actually stayed at the property, averaged 3.95/5. Melián-González *et al.*'s (2013) review of the ratings of approximately 17,000 individual hotels revealed that over 70% of the properties' reviews were either "very good" or "excellent". Finally, an extreme case noted by and criticized by Zervas *et al.* (2015), was the 94% of Airbnb reviews with ratings of 4.5/5 stars or above. The point being, bad WOM can be detrimental, but eWOM does not deliver an abundance of bad reviews. While review sites have become a place for the disgruntled to share their views with a broad audience, the literature suggests that most folks feel quite positive about their experience, and their reviews reflect this reaction. And, while the vindictive guest can post a scathing remark one would rather not be shared, per Chen *et al.* (2015), extreme postings tend to be ignored by most readers. It would thus seem that our 2008 concern that e-WOM sites would create bad imagery for hotels was, at least for properties that deliver a quality product,

unnecessary. Rather than fearing reviews, the literature suggests, hotels with confidence in their product should be encouraging reviews as these are likely to be generally positive. Further, as discussed below, additional recent literature has provided the simple equation: the more reviews the better.

The plethora of websites serving as eWOM depositories has resulted, for many hotels, in thousands, often many thousands, of posted reviews. While it is logical that the greater the number of reviews the less the impact of individual reviews, the literature provides consensus that the greater the number of reviews posted, the more influence collectively these have upon readers (Molinillo *et al.*, 2016). Further, research by Melián-González *et al.* (2013) as well as Blal and Sturman (2014, p. 371) has determined that as the number of reviews a hotel receives increases, the ratings in these reviews become more positive. Per Blal and Sturman (2014), for all segments other than luxury brands, where the relationship was found to be less sensitive, a path to improved sales performance is to increase the number of reviews posted. Similarly, Tsao *et al.*'s (2015, p. 103) experimental study found “review density” to be important, adding “eWOM quantity management is crucial”. Restaurant research by (Kim *et al.*, 2015) similarly found a positive relationship between review quantity and restaurant performance. As such, these authors recommend restaurants, rather than fearing negative reviews, implement a customer incentive system that encourages customers to share feelings and dining experiences on social media sites.

Pulling the above together, the hospitality marketers' initial concern about the new social medium has been unfounded. Yes, the hotel or restaurant still has to be concerned with

delivering quality. But for those properties that have embraced the new medium, encouraging their guests to participate by posting their commentaries, whether by “traditional” computers or mobile devices, the expected results should be more favorable reviews and a public image enhanced and not threatened by eWOM.

An additional issue of concern discussed in our 2008 paper related to review integrity. At the time, we wrote: “It is important to note how easy the new technologies make [the posing of fake reviews] and how virtually undetectable such subterfuge would be to net habitués...[I]t does not take much imagination to...consider the damage that could be done by spreading negative eWOM through these readily accessible media” (Litvin *et al.*, 2008, p. 465). With the growth of CGM in the years that followed, how significant has the problem become? Cordato (2014, p. 258) has estimated that twenty percent of TripAdvisor hotel reviews are fraudulent; posted either by travelers “who have an axe to grind” with the hotel or, as discussed in our earlier paper, by companies, either to promote their product or denigrate a competitor. Mukherjee *et al.* (2013) testing for fake restaurant reviews on Yelp, found better results, estimating the company’s policing provides to be 90% accurate, albeit at the cost of having a share of valid reviews being pulled due to unfounded suspicion. Yoo and Gretzel (2015) provide a good overview of the issue. An interesting question that arises is why travel consumers continue to use eWOM media, knowing intuitively that a share of the reviews they encounter are fraudulent? Ayeh *et al.* (2013) and Filieri *et al.* (2015) both explored this question, applying the theory of source credibility coupled with the concept of homophily. The authors’ parallel conclusion – consumers feel confident in their ability to determine the underlying truthfulness of the postings they read, believing they can ferret out the dishonest reviews from those by brethren posters upon whose

personal experiences they have learned to rely so heavily. It thus seems that the concern we expressed in the infancy of the media regarding posting integrity was legitimate, but in hindsight, this simply has not become an issue that has impeded in any significant way the exponential growth of eWOM media. In fact, 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 travellers thought about the property”, an estimate far eclipsed by NYU research (Ady and Quadri-Feelitti 2015) that found 95% of respondents report visiting at least one travel review site before consummating their plans.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The challenges social, mobile, and big data present to hospitality management are paralleled by the opportunities these phenomena present to researchers. While there are an unlimited number of future research tracks for future researchers to pursue, we feel the general directions suggested by Colleoni (2013) represent a good framework. Colleoni (2013) describes three uses of data mining of the social web for academic and applied research. The first use is to study the relational networks of the digital consumer, as the social relations consumers maintain on the Web are the avenues through which they exchange word-of-mouth. Studying these can show marketers the patterns of influence spread, who the most influential voices are, and how collaborative filtering and social recommender systems work. Second, is the use of computer programs to automatically text mine the huge volume of online social communication created each minute to track the occurrence of keywords, to determine topics of current interest, to detect emerging memes, and to predict future behavior. Third, the social ecosystem can be mined to

reveal “affective networks”, or what consumers think and feel. These subjective perceptions are particularly important to providers in our industry, as the product we are providing is but an experience and a memory; and it is the affective response to these that triggers future purchase.

In addition, given the broad nature of our industry, when pursuing such future research, it is recommended that similarities and differences between sectors be made a focus. Is eWOM the same critical issue for event/convention management as it seems to be for restaurants and hotels?

As the use of interpersonal technology continues to mature, understanding the range of impact upon the various sectors will be important to both academics and the practitioners who employ our research.

We recommend that readers interested in expanding research on this important area of study, or simply wishing a broader understanding of the issues, begin their exploration with the recent compilation of eWOM for hospitality and tourism research penned by Chen and Law (2016).

This extensive meta-review of the relevant academic literature published between 2008 and 2013 is a valuable tool for researchers interested in the topic. However, given the rapid changes that continue to influence the underlying technology and consumers’ views towards CGM, there is already need for an update to their work.

Some cautions

Social and mobile media have become a large part of many ordinary people’s lives. Moreover, this lifestyle change will inevitably spread even further as more of us become “always-on”. It is inevitable that hospitality marketers and managers will follow the trend, making greater use of social and mobile media to encourage all aspect of consumer engagement. Some cautions,

however, need to be mentioned. First, obvious ethical issues are associated with hospitality marketing's use of social and mobile media. Managers should keep in mind travelers' privacy concerns, both from an ethical perspective, but also legally as legislators consider enactment of rules expanding protection of consumers' digital data. Operationally, Mancuso and Stuth (2014) recommend that marketers become sensitive to the timing and context of their use of social media to contact consumers, warning that inappropriate or overuse of the digital tools that now help to understand and communicate with consumers have the potential to backfire and to alienate those potential guests necessary for future success.

Second, Schultz and Peltier (2013) make the obvious point that managers using social and mobile strategies to encourage customer engagement with their brands need to consider the ROI, lest they wind up spending more on these strategies than they earn back in repeat business, positive word-of-mouth, larger databases, or other monetary benefit. Schultz and Peltier (2013) argue that much current social media efforts are directed at customers already highly engaged with the brand, resulting in efforts that perhaps increase engagement, but does not generate new business. Moreover, as reported by Kolsarici and Vakratsas (2011), when marketers integrate their marketing communications across a variety of media, they need to assess the effectiveness of each medium in isolation as well as the combined effects of the media. Their research with durables and consumer packaged goods suggests that there are optimal levels of spend for each medium and that the combined effects are not always synergistic. After a point, they note, additional spending produces no impact on consumers and might even yield negative effects. Although these authors did not include hospitality products in their analyses, their findings do

suggest that industry managers should not make over simplistic or non-synergistic assumptions when evaluating their social media strategies.

CONCLUSIONS: PEERING INTO THE FUTURE

Migrating into and through the new digital social media and mobile technology driven ecosystem has often proven difficult and expensive, requiring the adoption of new technologies as well as management philosophies and cultural change (Bernoff, 2014). Moreover, the morphing of social into mobile has provided consumers additional control over how they learn about brands and interact and influence brand management through their input and shared social interactions. Consequently, managers must realize that much of the power over their brands they are accustomed to wielding has passed to the consumer (Dunne, 2012), now in many ways a co-creator of the hospitality product. Further, as *Millennial generation* (those born between the early 1980s and early 2000s) travelers become the largest travel market, we must recognize that these consumers are the most digitally perceptive and socially oriented of all demographic consumer segments. Social media, in all aspects of their lives, is second nature. It is all they have ever known.

As a final, concluding comment, our 2008 research predicted that eWOM would gain importance and that hospitality management and marketers would be wise to learn about and embrace the then nascent technology. In the decade since, not only has eWOM, and indeed all aspects of social media, become ubiquitous, it has become an overarching component of everyday life. Many, perhaps most, consumers are rarely untethered from their computer, tablet or phone, with

the messages of friends, family, commercial entities, and a virtual army of folks whom we know by their screen-name only, all providing a steady stream of advice, warnings, and their personal views. We feel there is no question . . . the promise of e-WOM has been delivered. Looking forward, it will be of much interest to continue to follow its progression. Will social media in general and eWOM specifically grow in importance? Or, will people turn away from the technology, returning to a time of face-to-face conversations with people and trusted advisors? We hope this paper is as well received as our initial overview and discussion, and that we are invited, another decade hence, to revisit these questions and once again share our views on the role of e-WOM for hospitality and tourism.

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