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Dandison C. Ukpabi

University of Jyväskylä, dandison.c.ukpabi@jyu.fi

Ukamaka D. Onyenucheya

University of Plymouth, ukamaka.onyenucheya@plymouth.ac.uk

Heikki Karjaluo

University of Jyväskylä, heikki.karjaluo@jyu.fi

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Do Online Travel Communities Matter? A Literature Review

DANDISON C. UKPABI, UKAMAKA D. ONYENUCHEYA & HEIKKI KARJALUOTO

Abstract The emergence of social media has migrated consumers from peripheral stakeholders to strategic partners whose inputs are critical for successful product and service innovation. Online communities provide a platform for aggregation of consumers from diverse backgrounds; online travel communities (OTCs) have recently attracted growing interest in the information systems and tourism literature because their unofficial boundary spanning role influences consumer interest in destinations. Importantly, this literature remains largely fragmented because of conflicting findings. The present study seeks to integrate prior OTC research in order to understand the motivations and consequences (negative and positive) of OTCs, as well as interaction platforms. Among the 63 reviewed studies, psychological, social, and utilitarian motivations were identified, with both positive and negative consequences for firms and individuals. Additionally, the studies were found to employ different methodological approaches, based on distinct and heterogeneous theories. The paper concludes with some implications and directions for further research.

Keywords: • social media • OTC • psychological • social • utilitarian •

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS: Dandison C. Ukpabi, University of Jyväskylä, Seminaarinkatu 15, 40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto, Finland, e-mail: dandison.c.ukpabi@jyu.fi. Ukamaka D. Onyenucheya, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, United Kingdom, e-mail: ukamaka.onyenucheya@plymouth.ac.uk. Heikki Karjaluo, University of Jyväskylä, Seminaarinkatu 15, 40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto, Finland, e-mail: heikki.karjaluo@jyu.fi.

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1 Introduction

The impact of social media on various economic sectors has been widely noted in the literature (Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2017). To remain relevant in the competitive landscape of contemporary business, marketers must remain active on different social media platforms (Lee & Hyun, 2015). Consumers see the emergence of social media as an emancipatory platform, migrating them from their previous perceived status as peripheral stakeholders to strategic partners whose inputs are critical for successful product and service innovation (Jung, Ineson, & Green, 2013; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2016). Consequently, the agglomeration into online communities of consumers sharing similar interests and values has witnessed phenomenal recent growth. Interestingly, for about 80% of consumers who participate in online communities (Leader Networks, 2016), 74% of those communities are owned by large corporations (Demand Metric, 2016), and 77% of those corporations report that online communities have significantly improved their brand exposure, awareness, and credibility (MTA, 2016). According to Kang, Tang, and Fiore (2014), consumers participate in online communities for social, psychological, hedonic, and monetary benefits; the need to meet new people, share one's feelings and access better product and service options are fundamental motivations for that participation. For instance, researchers have found that participation by professionals in online peer communities enhances research collaboration (Jamali et al., 2014). As a consequence, both firm-hosted and independently owned communities are increasing rapidly in number (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010a). However, online communities have also affected firms and individuals negatively through counter- and alter-brand communities, deceptive posting, lurking, and invasion of members' privacy (Cova & White, 2010; Dickinson et al. 2017).

Online travel communities (OTCs) have recently become a hot topic in the tourism literature because they unofficially occupy a boundary spanning role, so influencing consumer interest in destinations (Cova & White, 2010). As tourism is a hedonic experience that cannot be comprehended prior to consumption, consumers rely on the advice and experiences of others concerning the best travel decisions. A thorough search of the wider literature identified only one review study of online communities (Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003), with none in the OTC research. On that basis, the present systematic literature review has a number of objectives: first, to understand travelers' motivations for participation in OTC; second, to understand the consequences, at both firm and individual level, of OTC participation; third, to understand the contexts and platforms through which OTC interactivity is fostered; and finally, to provide a conceptual framework that will schematically encapsulate the activities of OTCs. Against this backdrop, the study contributes to the literature by providing a solid platform that integrates the fragmented studies in this research stream. This represents a useful tool for subsequent studies (Okoli & Schabram, 2010), as managers in tourism and destination marketing organizations will also find the concepts and arguments adduced here useful as levers to optimize the value of OTCs for their firms. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the background to OTCs; section 3 describes the research

methodology, and section 4 discusses the results. In conclusion, section 5 discusses the implications of the findings and the study's wider contribution.

2 Background: Online Travel Communities

OTCs can be defined as “groups of people trying to achieve goals, with similar interests, and interested in building relationships, making transactions, and engaging in fantasy, governed by rules and using new information technology as the means” (Wu, Xiao & Wu, 2016, p.2). Development and acceptance of IT means that tourism has undergone continuous transformation, and OTCs attract travelers through reviews and recommendations on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Fodor, Qunar, virtual tourist and Lonely Planet (Wang et al., 2016). Although better understanding is needed, it is known that people join online communities for several reasons: to share views on products; to obtain valuable information; and to create, enhance and sustain social ties between online members (Lee & Hyun, 2016a).

In short, consumers join OTCs for psychological, social, and utilitarian reasons (Kang, Tang & Fiore, 2014). OTCs offer travelers an opportunity to share their travel experiences and opinions by posting reviews. These then serve as information references for other travelers, providing valuable information about points of interest (POIs) (e.g., environmental or landscape attractions), gastronomy, weather forecasts, news and safety bulletins. However, there is also a negative side to this increased information sharing within online communities; as reported by Wang et al. (2016), biased, non-credible, or deceptive information can be very challenging for travelers seeking reliable advice. A further problem is that a member of an OTC may be a lurker: someone who does not participate or contribute to any discussion but only reads and reaps the community's ideas by becoming a part of that community (Seraj, 2012). Additionally, in their evaluation of technological modus operandi and social motivations for membership in 11 OTCs, Dippelreiter et al. (2008) found that although most of the communities are integrating new technologies, some still lack integrative emerging technologies such as SSL encryption and hashed user-id security features. OTCs also need to improve personalized on-trip services to members.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Literature Search and Selection

To conduct the literature search, we first defined key terms for the study, which included online tourism community, virtual community in tourism, tourist online community, Web 2.0 enabled community in tourism, virtual space in tourism, and social media community in tourism. Given the uniqueness of the present study and the need to capture as many relevant articles as possible, we followed Shaikh and Karjaluoto's (2015) method of combining horizontal search on Google Scholar and vertical search using databases such as Science Direct, SAGE, Wiley, Springer, Emerald, JSTOR, IEEE, Taylor & Francis,

and Inderscience. We further extended our search to ACM, ABI/INFORM, SCOPUS, and Palgrave, yielding a large initial number of studies. To reduce the number of studies to a manageable size, the inclusion criteria were confined to journal articles, conference papers, and relevant PhD dissertations published between 2005 and 2016. In total, 63 studies were finally selected, comprising 58 journal articles, 2 conference papers, 2 PhD dissertations, and 1 research-in-progress.

4 Results

4.1 Statistics of Findings

Geographically, the highest number of publications came from the USA, followed by countries in the European bloc (among which Spain contributed most), and then the East Asian bloc (China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong). Most of the studies were published in 2016 while 2005, 2008 and 2009 each returned the same number of publications (4), with none in 2006 (Figure 1). The most frequently used theory was the technology acceptance model (TAM). However, in spite of the extensions to TAM2 (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000) and TAM3 (Venkatesh and Bala, 2008), all but one study utilized the original TAM. Other theories included social identity theory, flow theory, expectation-confirmation theory, situational strength theory, and interpersonal relationship theory, and some studies used a combination of theories (e.g., Ku, 2014), see Table 1. A majority of studies adopted a hybrid model to characterize use of OTCs, integrating different variables to create a model. (The table containing the analysed studies can be forwarded on request).

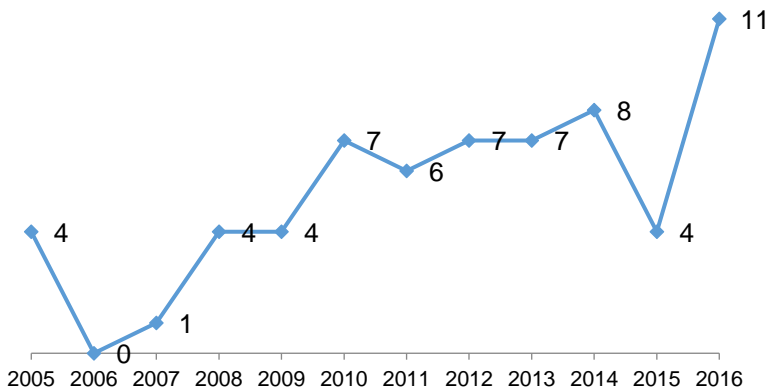


Figure 1: Year-wise distribution of studies

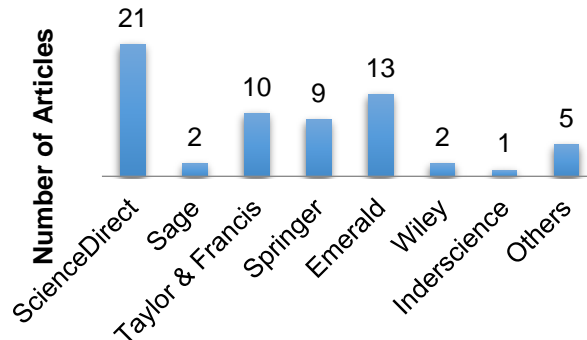


Figure 2: Articles by database

Table 1: Theoretical foundations of prior OTC studies

Theory	Studies
Technology acceptance model 1 (TAM1)	Casaló, Flavián & Guinalíu, (2010a); Munoz-Leiva et al. (2012); Ku (2011); Lin (2007); Casaló, Flavián & Guinalíu (2011)
Technology acceptance model 2 (TAM2)	Ting, Ting & Hsiao (2014)
Social identity theory (SIT)	Ku (2011); Lee (2005)
Flow theory (FT)	Wu & Chang (2005);
Source credibility	Lee, Law & Murphy (2011); Wang et al. (2016);
Expectation-disconfirmation theory (EDT)	Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu (2011); Stepchenkova, Mills, & Jiang (2005)
Affordance	Cabiddu, Carlo, & Piccoli (2014)
Relationship marketing/Trust/Customer loyalty	Jung, Ineson, & Green (2013); Kim, Chung & Lee (2011)
Beliefs/Attitude	Elliot, Li & Choi (2013); Sparks, Perkins & Buckley (2013)
Situational strength theory (SST)	Hsu & Yen (2016)
Stimulus organism response model	Jeon, Jang & Barrett (2016)

Figure 3 shows the percentage frequency of the various methodological approaches. Among the quantitative studies, survey administration and retrieval were performed primarily through the different online communities and used structural equation modeling as the main analytical tool. However, some of these studies (e.g., Wang et al., 2016) adopted a big data approach, analyzing the credibility of reviews in TripAdvisor and Qunar. While a few of the qualitative studies used face-to-face structured interviews, a majority adopted a netnographic approach; netnography is a qualitative, exploratory,

online version of ethnographic research that explores cyberculture and behavior (Seraj, 2012; Rokka & Moisander, 2009).

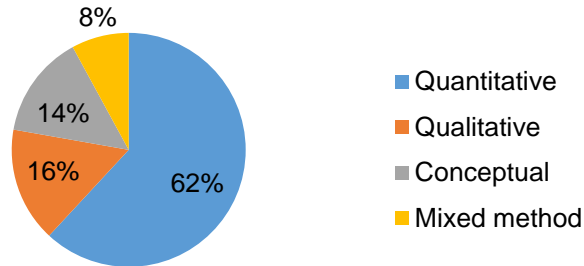


Figure 3: Methodologies used in the selected studies

4.2 Motivations for Joining Online Travel Communities

4.2.1 Psychological motivations

User involvement—that is, the degree of interest in a piece of technology—has been studied across many information systems. In OTC, Wu, Xiao, and Wu (2016) examined the relationship between breadth and depth of involvement and members' loyalty. They argued that depth of involvement exposes the individual to other activities in the OTC that increase flow experiences, pleasure, satisfaction, and fun. According to Elliot, Li, and Choi (2013), members' satisfaction increases site stickiness, which also influences transaction intention. However, in evaluating customer purchase involvement and OTC website design, Sanchez-Franco and Rondan-Cataluña (2010) suggested that while OTC website aesthetics and usability increase satisfaction, these effects are moderated by purchase involvement, and level of involvement influences members' perceptions of the usefulness of OTC websites. Another important psychological factor for OTC membership is escapism. As argued by Lee and Hyun (2015, p. 435), social, family, or romantic loneliness drives peer identification in OTCs; in other words, involvement in OTC activities is primarily a means of overcoming loneliness. Members experience a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction when OTC managers create additional platforms to enhance peer interaction through services like meeting a new companion through a certain travel product, forming a virtual family based on a particular travel view, and talking with a romantic partner about a certain travel product. The conceptual framework in Figure 4 summarizes motivations for participation, the range of OTC contexts, interaction platforms, and consequences (including dark side).

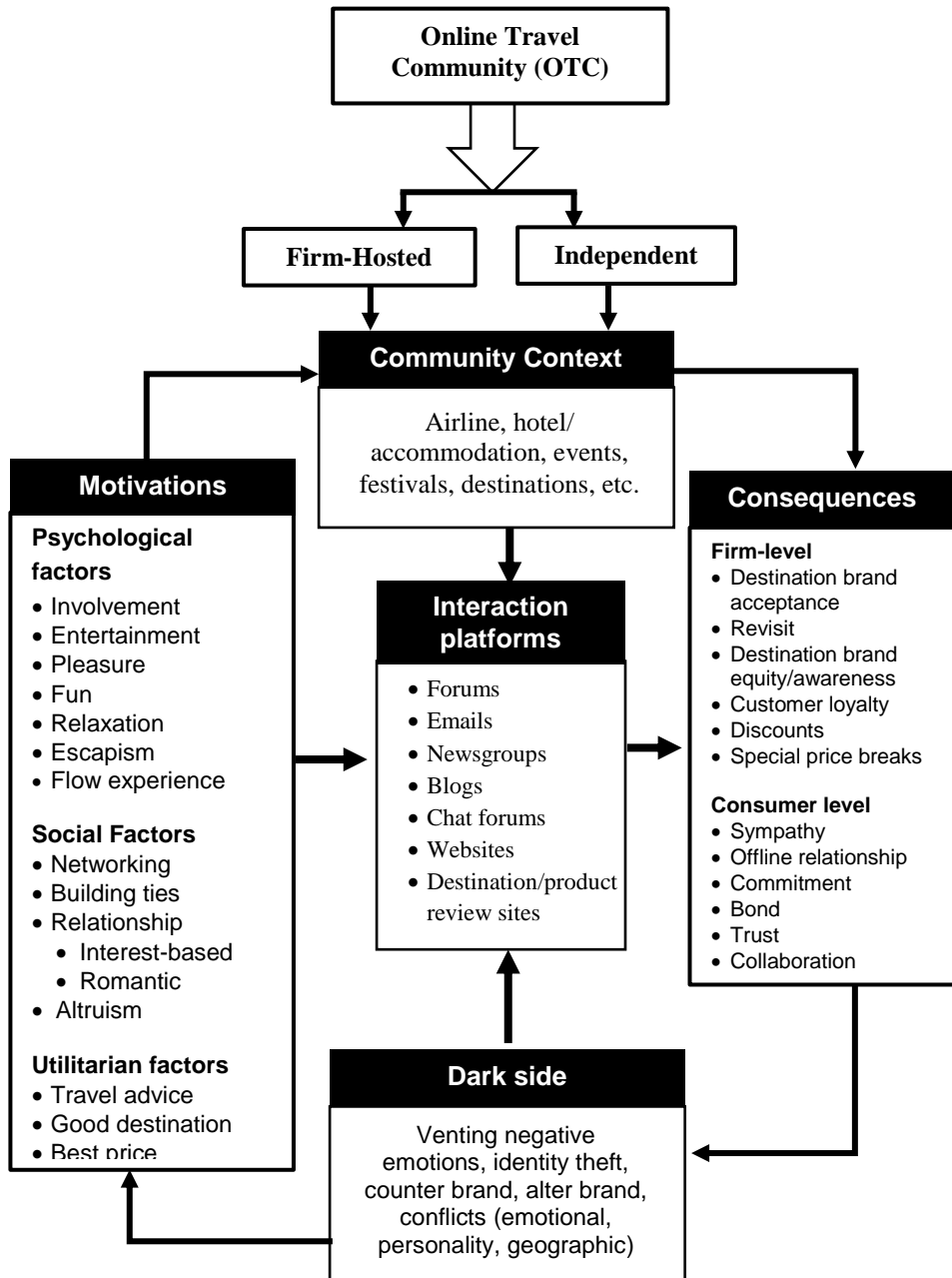


Figure 4: Motivations and consequences of online travel community participation

4.2.2 Social Motivations

Self-expression is an innate human attribute, and participation in OTCs is driven by the individual's desire for self-expression (Wang, 2016). For this reason, members assign greater importance to the transmission of information than to its reception. Investigating the antecedents and moderators of members' social satisfaction in OTCs, Yang, Zhang, and Gallagher (2016) identified entertainment, social interaction, and reciprocity as predictors of satisfaction. To enhance members' interactivity, then, OTC managers should incorporate entertaining features and activities that will maintain and strengthen members' social ties, whether online or offline. Luo and Huang (2016) proposed that OTC participation is driven by functional, social, psychological, and recreational motives, and that most people join online communities because of the social desire to make more friends. These findings challenge Vogt and Fesenmaier's (1998) argument that functional needs are seen to be the most important influence on information search. Finally, member reputation, built through exotic profiles shared on members' pages, influences evaluations of similarity and community that often lead to bonding, offline interaction, and enduring relationships (Kunz & Seshadri, 2015).

4.2.3 Utilitarian motivations

The utilitarian approach asserts that a morally correct action is one that provides the greatest benefits over harms for every individual (Santa Clara University, 2017). Chung and Buhalis (2008) argued that, of the three motivations for OTC participation, information acquisition most strongly influences participation and attitude toward the OTC. For this reason, information such as best price, service quality, best destination, and safety are the most common search criteria among travelers. In some cases, OTCs offer specific utilitarian services that increase subscription to its membership. For instance, Luo and Huang (2016) reported that, aside from socio-psychological motivations, participation in couch-surfing OTCs is driven by the utilitarian drive for recreation; those who subscribe for couch-surfing believe that the community has specialists with the requisite skills to ensure that their recreational needs are met. Jeon, Jang, and Barrett (2016) suggested that utilitarian value and online trust mediate the relationship between website interactivity and repurchase intention. Conversely, the importance of utilitarian motivation for OTC participation was challenged by Kang, Tang, and Fiore (2014), who contended that OTC participation on Facebook fan pages was largely driven by hedonic and socio-psychological benefits while functional and monetary benefits had no impact on participation.

4.3 Contexts and Interaction Platforms

Our systematic review also revealed different platforms of interaction among community members (Table 2). These include chatrooms, forums, newsgroups, blogs, websites, and review sites. However, the choice of platform depends on one's motive (psychological, social, utilitarian) for participation. For instance, Facebook fan page members are likely

to visit Facebook fan pages of restaurants when they gain socio-psychological and hedonic benefits from such visits (Kang, Tang, & Fiore, 2014). To increase visit to their fan pages, then, restaurants should constantly upload content that appeals to the hedonic instincts, such as games or live streaming videos of music and current events that will facilitate real-time interactions among members. Additionally, members who use blogs and websites to share their experiences are motivated by communal feelings, unlike the sense of self-recognition that motivates the sharing of experiences on Twitter (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

Table 2: Contexts and interaction platforms

Interaction platform	Context	Author
Facebook	Hedonic instincts: games, live streaming videos	Kang, Tang, & Fiore, 2014
Blogs	Communal feelings	Munar & Jacobsen, 2014
Websites	Communal feelings	Munar & Jacobsen, 2014
E-mail	Togetherness, romantic bonding	Lee & Hyun, 2015
Chatroom/forums	Travel experiences	Lee & Hyun, 2016 ^b

It is also argued that the use of e-mail as an interaction platform is fundamental for OTC managers seeking to foster social, friendly, and romantic togetherness among community members (Lee & Hyun, 2015). E-mail facilitates close-knit interactions, where members can communicate freely about private issues in a way that may be more difficult on open platforms. However, to sustain OTCs, forums and chatrooms are also necessary, where members freely share travel experiences that will assist others in making travel decisions (Lee & Hyun, 2016b). In summary, members see the OTC as an attraction where they can learn from the experiences of other members, reducing the time taken to search other sources for information about a destination.

4.4 Consequences of Online Travel Communities

4.4.1 Negative effects

Studies of online social relationships report negative effects such as extreme verbal inhibition and aggression, bullying, denigration, privacy issues, and lurking (Kim & Raja, 1991; Weber, 2011). The present systematic review revealed both firm- and individual-related negative effects of OTCs. For instance, Cova and White (2010, p. 264), suggested that firm-related negative effects of OTCs have led to the emergence of counter-brand communities—“a phenomenon of aggregation against a company that manages the brand and which leads to the creation of competing brands by members of the community”—and alter-brand communities—“a phenomenon of aggregation around not-for-profit projects that nevertheless creates a brand that can compete with the brands of certain companies.” Members of these alien communities are former adherents of a brand who have moved away because of their frustration with the firm and float activities and

programs parallel to the brand, aimed at damaging its reputation. In terms of individual-related negative effects, we also identified socio-psychological deviant behaviors that engender repulsive reactions from other members of the OTC. For instance, complaints of bullying and posting of irrelevant topics (Stepchenkova, Mills, & Jiang, 2005) and lurking (Dickinson et al. 2017) are common in OTCs. As argued by Ruiz-Mafe, Tronch, and Sanz-Blas (2016), these negative emotions constitute psychological, social, and privacy risks, and OTC managers should incorporate technologies to curb any such deviant behaviors.

4.4.2 Positive effects

Similarly, positive effects of OTC membership are observed at both firm and individual level, including increased brand awareness, functional brand image, brand use, and visit intention (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalú, 2010b). Lee and Hyun (2016b) argued that trust is a fundamental driver of membership stickiness, leading eventually to loyalty. To promote loyalty, managers should ensure navigation functionality, security, and privacy protection (Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2011). Trust in the community also fosters a sense of belonging and sharing of emotions and experiences; in most cases, such relationships transfer to the offline world (Luo & Zhang, 2016), ending in some cases in strong bonds such as romantic affairs (Lee & Hyun, 2015).

5 Discussion

The aim of the present study was to elucidate the motivations and consequences of OTC participation through a systematic review of existing studies. A thorough and rigorous literature search yielded 63 studies, comprising journal articles, conference papers, and PhD dissertations. Through OTCs, tourists assume the status of destination evangelists, whose gospels about destinations are believed and trusted more than marketers' messages. Both firm-hosted and independent OTCs promote a range of activities that engender agglomeration of membership to a critical mass, which is seen as an antecedent of success for OTCs (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). Interestingly, the threat of OTCs emanates from the question of brand ownership, as the emergence of brand communities has shifted brands from private control to publicly socialized phenomena (Cova & White, 2010). By taking an interest in and promoting the activities of OTCs, tourism firms serve a boundary spanning role, with concomitant favorable effects on destination image and visit intention (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010b).

Our review revealed three main motivations for participation in OTCs: psychological, social, and utilitarian. Psychologically, participation in OTCs is motivated by escapism; those seeking travel advice from OTCs do so as an escape from social, family, or romantic loneliness (Lee & Hyun, 2015). Additionally, as an individual stays longer in the OTC, they are more likely to continue (Zhao, Stylianou, & Zheng, 2013), increasing flow experience, enjoyment, and involvement (Wu, Xiao & Wu, 2016). As the social desire to forge ties and bond with others also influences OTC participation, interactivity is a key

factor in members' flow experiences and sense of belonging through knowledge sharing, community promotion, and offline activities (Wu & Chang, 2005; Qu & Lee, 2011). Additionally, Arenas-Gaitan, Rondan-Cataluna, and Ramirez-Correa (2013) argued that members assign greater importance to the transmission of information than to its reception, as a platform for highlighting and maintaining social status. Finally, information acquisition for best travel decisions, product purchase, and service quality evaluation represent utilitarian motives for participation in OTCs (Chung & Buhalis, 2008), as website interactivity is the cornerstone of members' functional satisfaction.

5.1 Contributions of the Study

Our study contributes to existing knowledge in a number of ways. First, no previous literature review has focused on OTCs. Studies of OTCs have followed different trajectories, with no coherent integration, resulting in disparate and in most cases conflicting findings that resist meaningful interpretation by scholars and managers. This systematic review provides a solid platform that integrates and aggregates these fragmented and disparate studies, offering a useful tool for subsequent studies in this area. Second, by identifying motivations for OTC participation and its positive and negative consequences, both at firm level and for individuals, our study extends prior research on online communities (Cova & White, 2010). Additionally, by explicating the interaction platforms and contexts of OTCs and the arguments adduced herein, this study offers destination managers levers for optimizing the value of OTCs to their firm. Finally, from our synthesis of prior studies and findings, we conclude that online travel communities do indeed matter, and that tourism and destination marketing organizations neglect their strategic importance at their own peril.

5.2 Limitations of the Study and Future Research Direction

One of the present study's limitations is that the data obtained were restricted by date (2005–2016). Future research might usefully increase the sample size by including relevant articles published before 2005. It is also acknowledged that additional factors beyond those investigated here also influence participation in online communities, and further study should more fully investigate these other factors. Finally, extraction and analysis was conducted manually here, which may exclude relevant studies, and automated extraction and analysis should be utilized in future research of this kind.

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