

Summer 5-26-2017

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Recommended Citation

Wang, Ping, "The Role of Ewom In Customer Engagement In Travel Service Organizations: An Affordance Perspective" (2017). *WHICEB 2017 Proceedings*. 4.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/whiceb2017/4>

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The Role of Ewom In Customer Engagement In Travel Service

Organizations: An Affordance Perspective

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Abstract: The popularity of new media channels in recent decade has offered fertile ground for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. By enabling interaction between organizations and customers, eWOM communication may increase organizations' capability of customer engagement (CE). Despite the acknowledged importance of eWOM as an important new channel for customer engagement in tourism industry, our understanding remains limited, especially the unique features of eWOM in the interaction. This research utilizes affordance theory to explain how eWOM help to realize customer engagement in the context of travel organizations, considering the symbiotic relationship between human activities and technological capabilities. Interpretive case study was conducted among three travel service providers. Six affordances of eWOM were identified to support customer engagement, i.e. interactive, reach, sharing, visibility, monitorability, and co-creation. Our study contributes practically to customer engagement and eWOM application in organizations, and also theoretically to technology affordances literature in IS field.

Keywords: electronic word-of-mouth, eWOM, customer engagement, affordance theory, tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen the evolution of a new generation of computer-mediated communication with social media. The popularity of new media channels in recent decade has offered fertile ground for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. EWOM has transformed consumer decision-making in travel industry of 'experience goods' [1-3]. More consumers share their opinions and exchange product/service information via social media platforms, e.g., online review website, social network websites [4], and a large amount of eWOM was generated online for others' use. In the past years we have witnessed the dramatic transformation of travel industry caused by the popularity of eWOM. In the literature, extensive research has also validated that eWOM shape consumers' attitude and affect their purchase decisions[3].

By enabling interaction between organizations and customers, eWOM communication may increase organizations' capability to engage with customers. EWOM has been identified as a motivational driver for customer engagement (CE) [5]. Customer engagement refers to 'a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in a focal service relationships'[6, p. 260]. Meanwhile, eWOM is also identified as a key engagement consequence [7]. Specifically, eWOM as recommendations can occur virtually via social media platforms rapidly, and positively-valenced engagement were observed to be conducive to generating focal positive eWOM, and vice versa [7]. Prior research has also indicated stronger customer engagement can make something both more positive or negative [8].

Using customers' eWOM in the co-creation of service experience remains an attractive goal in practice. Organizations are increasingly employing eWOM communication in practice in order to enhance their engagement and interaction with customers. Despite the acknowledged importance of eWOM as an important new channel for customer engagement in tourism industry, our understanding remains limited, especially the unique features of eWOM in the interaction. Research has well explained eWOM as a motivational driver for

customer engagement[9], and eWOM is also a consequence of customer engagement[10], but the interplay between eWOM and customer engagement remains obscure. Thus, the research question in this study is: *What eWOM affords for customer engagement in travel organizations?*

This research utilizes affordance theory to examine the role of eWOM in customer engagement in the context of tourism organizations, considering the symbiotic relationship between human activities and technological capabilities in tourism context. By treating the interplay of humans and technology as a unit of analysis, rather than examining each separately, the affordance perspective provides a language with which to examine the broader impact of eWOM in engaging consumers successfully in tourism. Prior research has identified numerous barriers towards successfully engaging consumers [11]. We identified six affordances of eWOM that enhance customer engagement in tourism domain from interpretive multiple case studies: interactive affordance, reach affordance, sharing affordance, visibility affordance, monitorability affordance, and co-creation affordance. We also discussed how each affordance helps to overcome the barriers in customer engagement in travel service interactions.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 EWOM and customer engagement

The increasing prevalent of eWOM in tourism and hospitality industry makes it relevant to look into what the new computer-mediated communication affords in the context of networked tourism. Within the interactive, dynamic business environments, customer engagement represents a strategic imperative for generating enhanced corporate performance [6]. The conceptual root of customer engagement is drawn on theories addressing interactive experience, S-D (service-dominant) logic and value co-creation within marketing relationships[6, 12]. Bijmolt, Leeflang [13] provide a general definition of customer engagement as ‘a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships’ (p.260). They distinguish customer engagement with relational concepts of ‘involvement’ and ‘participation’ by addressing the existence of customers’ interactive, co-creative experiences with a specific engagement object (e.g., a brand).

Customer engagement behavior is resulted from motivational drivers including word-of-mouth (WOM) activity, customer-to-customer interactions [5]. Van Doorn, Lemon [5] define customer engagement behaviors from a customer-firm relationship focus, and posit that customer engagement behaviors go beyond transactions, resulting from motivational drivers. Meanwhile, the propagation of customers’ (e)WOM behavior has been identified as an indispensable consequence of customer engagement [7]. The behavioral manifestations can be positive and negative, which may result in positive or negative-valenced eWOM.

This reciprocal relationship between eWOM and customer engagement discussed above indicated a continuum of customer engagement states. In Brodie, Hollebeek [6] definition of customer engagement (CE), it indicates that ‘It (CE) occurs under a specific set of context-dependent conditions generating differing CE levels; and exists as a dynamic, iterative process within service relationships that co-create value’ (p. 260).

2.2 Theory of affordance

The notion of affordance originates from ideas about ecological psychology that were developed by perceptual psychologist Gibson [14], who defined affordance as “opportunities for action” as perceived by an organism in its environment. Affordance focuses on the intersection of two entities given their respective characteristics, and simultaneously considers the properties of an object (e.g. eWOM) and the perceiving entity (e.g. tourism service provider) [15].

Affordances have recently been applied as a theoretical lens in IS research [16]. Following the concept of affordance, IS researchers define technology affordance as “an action potential,” in other words, “what an

individual or organization with a particular purpose can do with a technology or information system” [17]. When taking the affordance lens in studies, the symbiotic relationship between the action should be considered in the context and the capability of the technology [18, 19]. By treating the entanglement between the human action and the technological capability as a unit of analysis, the affordance theory provides a language for beginning to examine eWOM and its role in affecting customer engagement. Researchers have increasingly referred to the technology affordance approach to explore the role of information technology at organizational level, such as social media adoption in organizations, and social media in external communications [20-22].

Affordances are just potentials for action, several prior studies recognize that affordances need to be triggered [23], or actualized [24] by a goal-oriented actor to achieve an outcome. Thus, in this study, we explore the affordances of eWOM for customer engagement, providing the advantage of identifying the patterns of the symbiotic relationships that avoid privileging any single component of a sociotechnical system (i.e. technical aspects of eWOM communication) over any other component (i.e. social aspects of customer or organization) in explaining behavior. Thus, in this study, the affordance theory is selected as the theoretical foundation.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

3.1 Research design

This study aims to understand how eWOM communication via social media channels can be implicated in travel service providers for the aim of customer engagement. Considering the interpretive nature of this study, we conducted in-depth interviews with social media workers from three tourism service providers who are active social media and eWOM users. As Yin [25] argues that case studies are the preferred strategy when a phenomenon is broad and complex, and when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed. In this research, we aim to explore the affordances of eWOM in practice and how these affordances help enhance a company’s capability for customer engagement. The research question touches upon activity within any business field or customer group, which is complicated and needs in-depth investigation within its own context. Thus, case study research is a preferred research method for solving the current research question.

This research focused on the online travel industry. Social media has been widely used in the travel industry, and influence the behavior of both tourists and online travel service providers heavily, especially eWOM [26, 27].

3.2 Data collection

The data were collected through three different data sources: open public information about the selected e-service providers, organizational archives, and interviews.

The public information about all the three case tourism service providers were referred to so as to gain a better understanding of the three different case organizations: Company A, Visit Finland, Visit Turku. The official documents of the case Company A, such as organization structure documentation, were collected. All three case organizations’ official social media accounts on different social media channels were reviewed. The online shops via social media platform is also reviewed to investigate Company A’s social media applications in business.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire, based on the current research objective, was designed. The interviewees were selected based on their involvement in social media, and eWOM, such as they were responsible for social media strategy development or eWOM or customer interaction via social media.

The first case study was conducted in an online travel service company (Company A) in June 2015. Four individual interviews and one group interview were conducted in Company A. Company A targets the domestic tourists travelling to or planning to travel to Sanya in China. It offers various online travel services to tourists, such as travel consulting, travel planning, travel photographing, car rental, hotel booking, tourist attraction ticket

booking, and restaurant booking. The interviewees were the Vice Chief Executive Officer, the Resource Manager, Customer Service Manager, and a social media consultant. The group interview was conducted with the Resource Manager, the Customer Service Manager, a social media consultant and two customer service staff responsible for interaction with customers via social media. The scheduled interview time was 90 minutes per interviewee, which is flexible for practical interview conditions regarding time.

The second case study was conducted in Visit Turku, the Southwest Finland Tourist & Congress Bureau, from June to December 2016. Visit Turku is an organization that provides travel information about the Southwest Finland for both the inhabitants of and visitors to this region. In order to promote Turku to travelers, Visit Turku has been taking advantage of social media channels and trying to inspire and attract tourists. In our observation from June, 2016, we found they highlighted the value of social media and eWOM generated on various social media channels. In this study, we selected Visit Turku as one case as Visit Turku, as a travel service provider, is seeking to optimize the potential of eWOM for customer engagement. A face-to-face interview was conducted with their social media manager. E-mail interviews were conducted with two of the travel advisors who are responsible for both customer review interaction and travel information reception. Email interview was conducted due to their limited flexibility of work time at reception desk as well as the convenience to them.

The third case study was conducted in Visit Finland in November, 2016. The premier aim for Visit Finland is to promote Finland as an attractive tourist destination to a world-wide audience. VisitFinland works closely with travel service providers, transport companies, and Finnish regions, such as research, product development, and marketing of leisure tourism to Finland from abroad. VisitFinland has employed various social media channels in different target market to interact with tourists from all over the world, such as distributing information and interacting with customers on different social media channels in different language, for instance Chinese, Japanese, and Russian etc. They have realized the power of social media and eWOM, and they pay for an independent freelancer to admin their social media channels in different market destination. E-mail interview was conducted due to the interviewee's tight work schedule.

All interviews were recorded. The interviewees and interview details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewees

Organization	Interviewee	Responsibility	Interview time
Company A	Vice CEO	Strategic decision-making and operational control	▪ 60 minutes (individual interview)
	Resource manager	Manage all travel products resources and price negotiations	▪ 120 minutes (individual interview) ▪ 40 minutes (group interview)
	Customer service manager	Customer service management, accident management, internal coordination	▪ 40 minutes (group interview)
	Social media consultant	Social media content writing and publishing	▪ 90 minutes (individual interview) ▪ 40 minutes (group interview) ▪ E-mail interview in Aug. 2015
	Customer service staff A and B	Customer service, travel consulting, review reply.	▪ 40 minutes (group interview)
Finnish tourist board (VisitFinland)	Social media manager	In charge of all social media channels, and work with native social media admins (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Russian language) on a daily basis	▪ Email interview
Visit Turku	Social media manager	Content distribution on multi social media channels Social media strategy	▪ 60 minutes (individual interview)
	Two travel advisors (Advisor 1 and Advisor 2)	Customer review interaction online, Tourist information reception	▪ Email interview

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Content analysis was used to analyze the transcript. The first case study was conducted in Chinese, as such all transcripts were first coded in Chinese – based on the eWOM affordances for customer engagement. The coded transcript was translated into English, and independently back translated into Chinese. The two versions of the coded Chinese transcripts were compared, and the translated English transcripts were jointly revised. The other two case studies were conducted in English. The transcripts of the interview records and emails were coded to identify the eWOM affordances for customer engagement. According to Yin [25], the most important use of the documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources. Thus, all the coded English transcripts from three travel service providers are analyzed in conjunction with all the above mentioned available information sources.

The data analysis was conducted in three steps. First, the eWOM channels the three organizations have been in active use were summarized (see Table 2). Then, based on the content analysis, the six affordances of eWOM for customer engagement were identified. Thirdly, all the six eWOM affordances were discussed in order to illustrate how eWOM communication can help enhance customer engagement for tourism organizations.

Table 2: eWOM channels in active use for the three cases

eWOM channels	Company A	Visit Finland	Visit Turku
Online shop reviews	x		
Facebook		x	x
Sina Weibo	x	x	x
Twitter		x	x
WeChat	x	x	
Instagram		x	x

4.1 Interactive affordance

Interaction affordance refers to the ability of eWOM as a way for consumers to interact with peers and also with service providers. The person-to-person interaction is also referred to as social tie. When asked about the benefits the case organizations have achieved from customers' eWOM, several interviewees alluded that eWOM happens in all travel phases. The enhanced customer-interaction can help overcome the barriers existed in customer engagement. As Chathoth, Ungson [11] noted, interaction with consumers before services should also be emphasized. Via eWOM communication, potential consumers can easily interact indirectly or directly with firms, for instance they can easily refer to other consumers' opinions and also the interaction and response from firm, and they can also consult via social media directly to service providers, as the case alluded by interviewees from Visit Turku.

"...We are trying to set up an image when people ask us something we will answer. So, we are encouraging people to ask us if they have any doubts, or something related to their visit to Turku, such as 'what should I do in Turku'. When they notice we discuss a lot with customers, they will ask more questions (interactions) to us..."

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

"...there have been some cases that someone asked something from their friends about Turku, and their friends tagged us, and assumed that Visit Turku can answer their questions..."

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

"...it's more reliable when your friend tells you that it's a wonderful place than Visit Turku tells you. So that's why pictures and comments produced by tourists are important."

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

Tourism organizations are also trying to use eWOM communication to show their interaction and care for customers as indicated in the interviews.

“We try to answer questions as soon as possible from all the contacts raised in Facebook and twitter. We also try to communicate with people on these channels as much as possible, just to let them know that we are always support them. We try to encourage people to share ideas and photos with us by likening, commenting and sharing their content.”

[Travel advisor 1 and 2 from Visit Turku]

“[Customer A] posted on a Twitter (#turku) that she was on holiday and would like to see and eat something special today in Turku. We noticed this, because we are following the traffic also on #turku. We offered her the current event on that particular day in Turku, ... She went to see the event and made posts about the event later and commented that it was successful, food was excellent, she also recommended it for others. We shared her recommendation also with our followers.” (Figure 1.)

[Travel advisor 1 and 2 from Visit Turku]



Figure 1: interaction with customers on Twitter (resource provided by Visit Turku)

4.2 Reach affordance

Reach affordance refers to the ability of eWOM to reach a wide range of individuals. eWOM is defined 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”[28]. EWOM takes place in various computer-mediated context, rather than traditional face-to-face WOM. For instance, Visit Turku has nearly 40,000 followers on Facebook (including Finland, international, and Russia accounts), more than 6,000 followers on Twitter account (Finland and international accounts). This user base makes it possible for any eWOM posted on it to reach a broad audience. The reach affordance is also essential for organizations to engage customers and promote brand.

“It (customers’ eWOM on social media channels) is the easiest and fastest way to reach crowds and provide information.”

“The information, tips and answers we give, reach more and more crowd very easily. So, the same information is easily and immediately shared for other users with same interest.”

[Travel advisor 1 and 2 from Visit Turku]

“ [O]ur WeChat subscription account is used for our brand promotion as WeChat is so popular in China. In addition, the most important benefit we reap from social media usage is the promotion of our corporate brand.

We appear on most of the popular social media platforms to ensure that we can make our brand recognized and known by as many potential customers as possible.”

[Resource manager from Company A]

“(positive) eWOM from our customers is more important than awarded a golden medal. Lots of (positive) eWOM from customers make our company more competitive than our fellow companies and competitors.”

[Vice CEO from Company A]

4.3 Sharing affordance

Sharing affordance of eWOM refers to the feature which enables joint use of eWOM content, and also the process of distributing and disseminating eWOM. As indicated in prior research, lack of information sharing is identified as a barrier related to customer engagement [11]. As noted in the research of Chathoth, Ungson [11], the initiative of sharing information and the customer-interaction process needed to be defined by the customer. In eWOM communication, customers can share any information related to their experience, or consulting before their travel.

“[...] On social media, it’s easier for them to ask or search the information by themselves. When we give the answers and tips, these information easily reach more and more crowd. So, the same information is easily shared with others with same interest.”

[Travel advisor 1 and 2 from Visit Turku]

“We sometimes ask people to share they experience with us on twitter if they visit Turku and visited the attractive sites we recommend.”

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

4.4 Visibility affordance

The forth affordance of eWOM is the visibility affordance. Interviewees suggested that eWOM by customers afford them to make their services visible compared to the invisible (or less visible) in traditional face-to-face communication or WOM. eWOM senders understand that his/her statement will be online forever and reach a number of receivers whom the senders may or may not know [29]. The visible eWOM communication with the travel service providers on social media can even accumulate as knowledge for later use by others. The eWOM are visible to all others who have access to the social media where eWOM was published. All this visible information offered by eWOM can be used for their own travel decision making. The visibility affordance of eWOM was alluded several times by our interviewees:

“With the comments, we are visible, so maybe the person with whom we are having a conversation, her/his friends will notice us, maybe they haven’t heard of us, so it also making us more visible.”

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

“[...] it is an open platform for all people, such as for those people who would not visit our office for the request the information they are looking for.”

[Travel advisor 1 and 2 from Visit Turku]

“Customers’ positive eWOM will increase the click flow of our online shop. The more positive eWOM we obtained, the more trust we will get from customers. Our online shop gets quite high rating scores from customers, 4.9/5.0, and all this eWOM are visual to the potential customers in the future.”

[Resource manager from Company A]

The visibility affordance of eWOM also makes brand visual for the organizations. As the interaction on eWOM via social media is visual to all the followers, and even the friends of the followers, organization can also benefit from the visibility affordance to get their brand/organization visual. As alluded by the social media manager from Visit Turku:

“[...] and sometimes, they (tourist) don't realize that city of Turku has its own Facebook pages, and Twitter account, so they are thinking that we are the 'city of Turku', so that's why they are giving us this kind of comments.”.

4.5 Monitorability affordance

Monitorability is the capability to observe customers' reaction to firm's services/products by the valence of the eWOM generated by customers on social media. With social media, firms collect and aggregate user responses directly and efficiently so that organizations can gain deeper understanding of their services and customers' reflections[30]. The collected information from customers' eWOM can turn into valuable resource for performance assessment as firm can quickly detect problems from customers' reactions on eWOM [22]. It is always possible to receive negative reviews from customers, and will be visible for all other audiences with similar interest as mentioned by our interviewees. The form of eWOM makes firms able to take immediate action whenever negative eWOM happens, helping customers to solve the question or improve their product/service experience.

“We try to lead the conversation to the positive matters. We try to do this as soon as possible to avoid long conversations on negative basis. ... What comes to the negative review from a tourist or blog writer, it's of course opinion that we should respect, so we have to be honest and we can't try to hide all the negative opinions.”

[Travel advisor 1 and 2 from Visit Turku]

“We try to list everything, at least the topics, and for social media, it is easy, because you can just copy/paste, but when it is about phone, you just write something, e.g. 'it's about Christmas market', so we get some idea from which channels, the questions come from, and what kind of questions are they.”

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

“Sometimes, we get very good conversations, ... for example, one person, who is angry about our website when it is not working, 'I don't like the website'. I talked with this customer, I asked him to send the comments via email, they are very useful. After this, he was very happy, because, his advice was taken into consideration, and we noticed him.”

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

Specifically, two cases of our study are travel organizations whose aim is to provide information and cooperate with domestic/local travel businesses, they both indicated they review customers' eWOM and inform the relevant business if they found helpful reviews, even though sometimes negative eWOM from customers.

“[...] we take notes and take to action if we see the comments as something we should act upon. If the comment is about a certain service provider or field, we will forward it to that respective organization as they are the ones who need to review it.”

[Social media manager from Visit Finland]

“[...] if there is really some point (from customer eWOM on Visit Turku page) and really need them to know, we will notice them (related business), we have access to all our cooperators here in this area.”

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

4.6 Co-creation affordance

Co-creation affordance is the capacity to bring different parties together, for instance the travel service providers and tourists, in order to jointly produce a mutually valued outcome. eWOM communication on social media can be used as an efficient and effective firm-customer interaction for co-creation in the virtual environment [31]. Co-creation affordance is also based on the abovementioned five eWOM affordances. Reaching customer, interaction and sharing with customers help and support the co-creation interactions. By

monitorability affordance, service providers are more able to observe and monitor the reactions and feedback of customers regarding their services and products provided.

EWOM interaction benefits both customers and firms. Customers can get effective decision support from peers, and firms can get access to customers' feedback easily and have a better knowledge on how to cater for customers' preferences.

EWOM circulated in social media is a two-way firm-consumer communication, which can improve the understanding between the two parties. The comments from consumer can help the service/product providers' product design, business development, and customer service, etc.[9]. As mentioned in our interviews:

“Last week we asked on FB, ‘which is your favorite restaurant in Turku?’ so I think most of the people who answered are locals. We asked this, because we want to promote the local restaurants to tourists by local people other than us.”

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

“They help us to share to relevant information (by post eWOM), to achieve our goals when we have a campaign. They are more and more important for use in creating and producing new and interesting content, ... that's why we need help from our followers, local users and other content producers.”

[Travel advisor 1 and 2 from Visit Turku]

“[...] if I see some comments that has a valuable point for us. Of course, we will think and develop our work based on the point...”

[Social media manager from Visit Turku]

“[...] we take notes and take to action if we see the comments as something we should act upon. If the comment is a about a certain service provider or field, we will forward it to that respective organization as they are the ones who need to review it.”

[Social media manager from Visit Finland]

“[...] we initiated some programs by providing customer incentives, such as inviting customers to vote for our products, and comment on them. After the votes have been conducted, we select the most valuable opinions and offer some sort of financial reward that can be used for shopping in our online shop. That's how we thank those customers who made valuable comments.”

[Resource Manager from Company A]

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study is to explain the interplay between eWOM and customer engagement, and highlight how eWOM can afford customer engagement from affordance perspective. Six affordances were identified; they are interactive affordance, reach affordance, sharing affordance, visibility affordance, and monitorability affordance. The analysis of the affordances demonstrates that eWOM provide unique capacities to support customer engagement in tourism context. The six affordances of eWOM also expand the previously known knowledge of eWOM in customer engagement. Among the six affordances, we also find the internal relationship among them. *Co-creation affordance* is facilitated by the other five affordances of eWOM. EWOM possesses the reach visibility affordances, which provide the fundamental affordance for sharing and monitorability. Reach affordance, sharing affordance, visibility affordance, and monitorability affordance together with the social feature of eWOM communication endows the interaction affordance of eWOM, which contributes to co-creation affordances. All the six affordances of eWOM contribute to customer engagement, as illustrated in Figure 2.

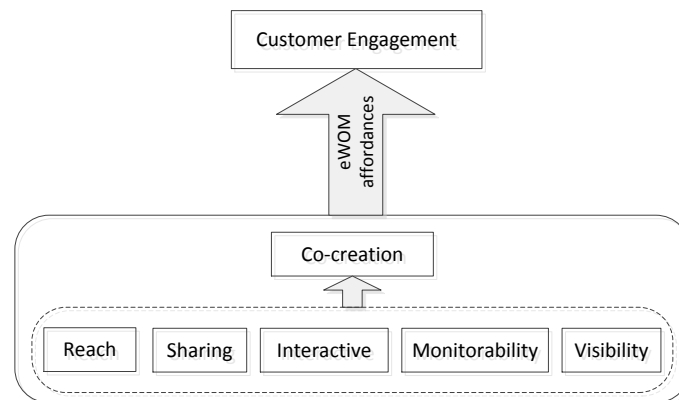


Figure 2: eWOM affordances for customer engagement

In this study, we demonstrate that eWOM have distinctive properties that can afford organizations to engage customers. Previous research revealed that organizations would be better off moving towards higher order customer engagement platforms, as one of the fundamental propositions defining the conceptual domain of customer engagement: ‘CE occurs within a specific set of situational conditions generating differing CE levels’ [6].

Secondly, this study advances the knowledge of previous study on social media affordance [15, 22]. EWOM has become the vital for social media, though the possibility of eWOM for developing customer engagement has been recognized, little study reviewed the essential properties of eWOM.

Thirdly, this study contribute theoretically to affordance theory in IS discipline. The theory of affordances has received increasingly attention in the IS literature, and the affordance concept offers a good approach to study the effect of the implementation and usage of IS [15, 32]. This study enriched the technology affordance research by investigating the application of eWOM in organizations for customer engagement in the context of travel industry.

However, these contributions could not exempt it form limitations. There are several limitations in this study. The research is contextualized in tourism industry, and the data collection is based on three case organizations. To further foster the understanding of eWOM affordances, future research could refine or expand upon our findings of six affordances of eWOM in other contexts. The studies in different industry settings could potentially increase the applicability of the theoretical findings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by the Project of Scientific and Technical Supporting Programs of Hubei (NO. 2014BAA156).

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