Exploring the Impact of Electronic Word of Mouth and Property Characteristics on Customers' Online Booking Decision

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Abstract – **The proliferation of the internet has helped many businesses to attract potential customers from traditional to the online channel. The customers' decision making on the online channel is affected by various factors such as other customer reviews, website quality, and property characteristics as well as customers personal profile. In this context, this study investigates the role of online customer reviews and key elements of the reviews page, particularly the elements that are poorly investigated in previous, as well as property characteristics in customers' online hotel booking decision. A conceptual model has been proposed to measure the impact of these factors on customers decision making. The model is empirically tested with a data obtained from customers of booking.com having various backgrounds and nationalities. Structural Equation Modelling using SmartPLS 3.2 has been used to test the relationships in the suggested model. The results show a significant impact of online review factors such as filters, quality, quantity, recency, valence along with property characteristics on customers booking decision. The study also confirms the moderating effects of Gender and Travel Purpose on some of the proposed relationships in the conceptual model. The paper concludes by mentioning the limitations and recommendations for future work as well as implications for the academicians and managers.**

Keywords – Electronic word-of-mouth, online reviews, tourists' opinion.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the emerging information and communication technologies such as web 2.0 have made it relatively convenient for the customers to communicate and collaborate with other customers and seek their feedback. Therefore, customers' online decisions are not solely their personal decisions but rather a collective decisions influenced by other customers' reviews and feedback.

The automated service providing systems became very popular and are widely used due to their collaboration and communication capabilities. This is an opportunity as well as a challenge for the online businesses as these days customers are very well informed about various products and services, so they are not easily deceived by offering any product or service. In fact, customers use a variety of offline and online information sources to finalize their decisions, especially for various high-value products and services. In this context, this paper focusses on customers decision making for online hotel booking. Whether it is a leisure or business trip, hotel room booking is also an important decision because it can greatly affect one's overall experience of a pleasant/unpleasant stay.

These days, service providers are facing challenges in offering innovative ways to retain existing and attract new customers. This is especially true for the new entrants who are not having an established brand image. To overcome this weakness, most of the hotels rely on third party websites such as booking.com or tripadvisor.com. The online review systems of these intermediaries play a significant role in consumers decision making a hotel booking. However, it is not clear which of the factors of customer review are more or less relevant in this booking decision. Moreover, the characteristics of the property itself may also affect the consumers' final decision. So, through this we want to identify those customers review factors and property

characteristics which might significantly affect their booking decision.

Easy access to the internet and use of mobile devices have penetrated into everyday lives, and it has affected tourists as well. Tourists are also taking advantage of this trend and rely on online services to get their plans perfectly done. Booking the best-fit property is one crucial thing people used to hesitate about when it comes to travel to new places or places that they have not been at for a long time.

Having an automated service that categorizes the property at the desired destination based on customers' different needs was a dream came true. One example of online services is the online booking system that allows travelers to book their best-fit property. Such systems offer significant information to the potential customers as per their suitability and requirements. One way to gain their confidence about their choices is by looking for other reviews about the selected property. Online reviews are therefore especially significant in procurements of experiential properties, as a referencing opinion that can help customers limiting the information gap and decrease the doubts about their decisions [1]. Despite reviews' helpfulness, if the users are getting insufficient information that fulfills their confidence, the probability of letting them look for different service provider will increase.

Online reviews demonstrate the strategic significance of community networks in augmenting the competitiveness of tourism service. Online customer reviews are basically a type of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which is user-generated content on various online platforms such as retailer websites of social media networks [2,3]. Research on eWOM has mainly focused on online marketing and electronic commerce [4]. Although eWOM is quite relevant in online hotel booking, yet few studies have investigated the role of online review persuasiveness in customers hotel booking decisions [3,5,6]. Moreover, various property characteristics such as its brand, location, reputation, facilities, number of reviews etc., can also affect customers' behaviors towards booking decision [7,8]. In addition, channel related factors such as website features [9–11] may also affect customers' decision making. However, these issues are not systematically addressed in the literature. Therefore, this paper aimed to bridge the gap by studying the impact of online reviews and property characteristics on customers' online hotel booking decision.

There are a number of websites offering online booking services, but for this research, we have selected boking.com mainly due to its popularity and huge customer base. Besides the booking of properties with the best price, they are connecting thoughts of the travelers around the world using a systematic online review. Each property on Booking.com is linked with the online review system that allows its customers to share their feedback after their stay. In fact, Booking.com encourages its users to share their feedback after the checkout by sending reminders to write a review about their recent residency experience. Finally, the relationship between customers' online reviews and booking decision may vary depending on customers demographics such as gender and purpose of stay [12]. We have incorporated these factors as moderating variables.

This paper studies the factors influencing the booking decision making by measuring the impact of each element in the properties' reviews page. Additionally, it comes to examine the effectiveness of other affecting factors such as hotel characteristics. The paper comes to answer the following three central research questions:

RQ1. What are the main influential online review factors that help users to book the right property?

RQ2. How do property characteristics influence customers in their online decision?

RQ3. Does customer demographics moderate the relationship between customers' online reviews and their booking decision?

The structure of the remainder of this paper is organized as follows: the next section covers literature review and hypotheses, followed by research methodology. Results are discussed following the research methodology. Finally, the last section is dedicated to discussion on the results and the implications followed by limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. Review of Literature and Hypothesis

Literature has demonstrated the importance of electronic word of mouth (referred to lately with eWOM) in any customers e-commerce decision making [13–15]. eWOM has been seen as a trustworthy and unbiased informant for most services and especially in the hospitality sector. It is argued that eWOM forms consumer perceptions, impact their preferences and their post-stay feedback [16]. Studies mainly focus on feeding more extensive knowledge about marketing strategies, by analyzing consumer attitudes based on specific activities and situations. The concerns emphasized by these studies describe the decision-making activities, consumers' motivation, level of knowledge, useful reviews and booking intention [17]. However, few studies have examined the potential effects of online review and their impact on consumers decision making. As this paper is focusing on online reviews provided by Booking.com's users, it will put the review component on the spot and chunk it into parts where

each part acts as a critical factor that manipulates the booking decision-making.

Though literature has identified some online review characteristics [18–21] yet we find limited studies focusing on detailed characteristics such as review filters, review quality, review recency, etc. Some studies have examined the most popular online reviews websites such as Amazon and TripAdvisor and studied each component of their reviews pages separately [22]. To fulfill the objectives of this research, this paper has reviewed the importance of various online review elements and developed a conceptual model that is empirically tested with online booking users from various countries such as GCC, UK, and the USA. Along with the direct effects, this study also incorporates the moderating effects of various factors such as gender and purpose of stay on the relationship between eWOM characteristics and customers' online booking decision. Finally, we include various property characteristics such as hotel reputation, brand, location, price as control variables.

2.1. Reviews' Quantity

The quantity of online reviews is the number of related comments to a selected product or service (in our case it is a selected property). The more contributed reviews, the more constancy is attracted, and the more valuable information used for judging a given service [23]. To increase the level of reviews' efficacy, the online review system ought to acquire adequate amounts of reviews to give users a sufficient property evaluation [13]. Potential customers booking decision is influenced by the number of past customers' reviews (Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: Reviews quantity positively affects customers' online booking decision.

2.2. Reviews' Consistency

The consistency of online reviews refers to their reliability and stability. Reviews consistency reflects the level of heterogeneity of the posted reviews and feedback by the previous consumers. In other words, it measures the commonness of one opinion among reviewers. The argument of consistency reproduced the impact of reading the same single detail many times throughout reviews set. As a statistical perception, the reliability of the posted reviews can be seen in terms of their variety. It is a natural measure to emphasize the inconsistency in shared opinions. This perception of review consistency is generally related to the doubt about property suitability [22,24]. Consequently, reviews' consistency adjusts the emotional interaction during

experimental performance formation of users [25]. Literature shows that users show a positive attitude towards those properties where there is more consistency in the customer reviews [14]. Therefore, it is expected that the customer review consistency may lead to a favorable online booking decision. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2: Reviews' consistency positively affects customers' online booking decision.

2.3. Review Quality

The quality of information shared in any source has a significant effect on the customer decision making [26]. Referring to a review to decide means that users are seeking reliability of the posted review. On booking.com, potential customers can rate reviews of other customers if they are helpful or not. In this way, the quality of reviews is its high rating from potential customers. Thus, higher users' rating for a particular review will raise its quality. Moreover, potential customers can see two important points regarding each review including the number of helpful votes related to each review and the total number of helpful votes that a reviewer has collected from all of his/her reviews on a variant of properties within Booking.com. Potential customers prefer online reviews posted by a reviewer with many occurrences of past helpful votes [27]. Thus, the number of helpful votes for a review will increase its quality which will subsequently impact customers' online hotel booking decision. Hence, we hypothesize:

H3: Review quality positively affects customers' online booking decision.

2.4. Review's Recency

The age of posted reviews denotes the recency of shared information [22]. Accordingly, it appears rational to consider the time difference between the date when taking a booking decision and the date when a review was posted online. The closer the time from posting date and the booking decision date, the more truthful and dependable the review is considered [24]. Generically potential customers consider most recent reviews to be more relevant and helpful in their decision making. Relatively, the decision about a property that cares about its improvement and the posted comments can be noticed by comparing the reviews based on their dates and see the changes about the thoughts from older reviews to the most recent ones. Hence, we hypothesize:

H4: Review's recency positively affects customers' online booking decision.

2.5. Review Valence

Review valence refers to the positive or negative alignment of information about a property [1]. Positives–negatives valence is an essential principle of psychology [28]. The valence (positive or negative) of online reviews and ratings has a major impact on consumers and their booking decisions. Previous studies have shown a positive correlation between booking a hotel and the valence of the reviews about it [29,30]. The influence of eWOM valence depends on the situation. Other moderating factors may alter it. There is the asymmetric relationship between eWOM valence and the service type [31]. The seminal review is the one having a moderate level of valence because it weighted the review more objectively. Positive reviews will positively influence individuals' booking decision whereas negative review may negatively impact their intentions. Therefore, this paper hypothesized that the valence of posted reviews has a positive impact on the booking decision.

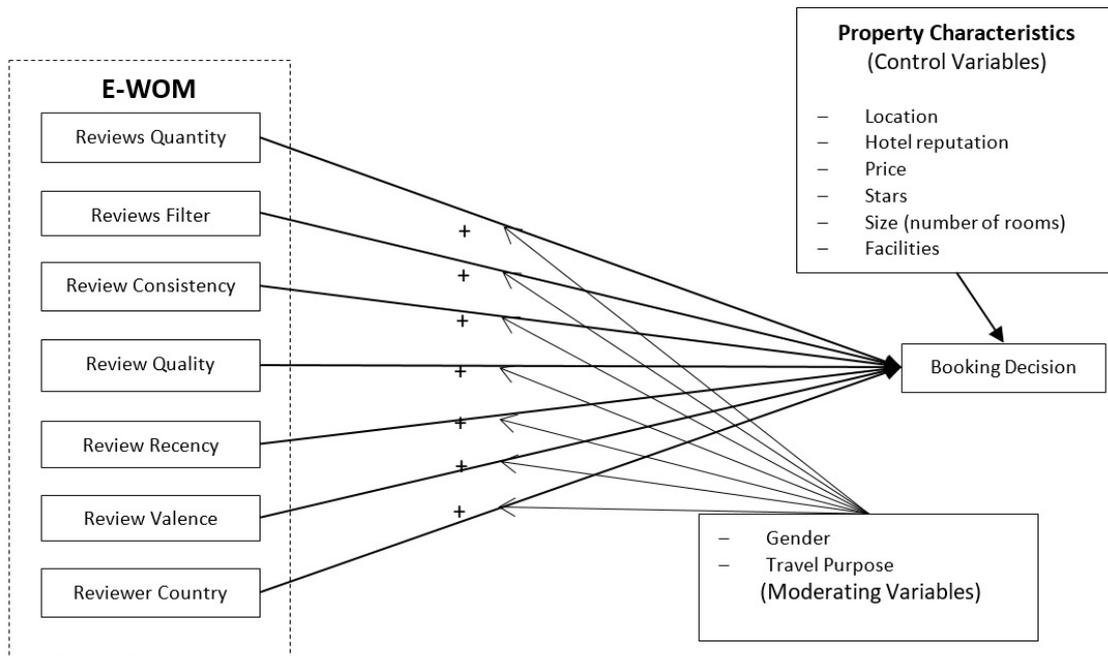*H5: Review valence positively affects customers' online booking decision.*

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2.6. Reviews' Filter

Filtering the related reviews of each property based on its features and common characteristics can expedite the scanning process of the reviews and help users to decide faster about their booking decision. The presentation of the filtered reviews enhances the attraction of users' curiosity about a property [32]. If users did not find a certain filter applied to properties, they could easily switch to another service provider, because going through hundreds of reviews to look for a specific feature may be too much time-consuming. Contrarily, finding well-stated filters of property's features attracts users' attention to the desired property. The impact of this construct has not been thoroughly investigated in the literature. We argue that the ability to filter property's reviews positively influence customers booking decision; thus, we hypothesize:

H6: Reviews' filter positively affects customers' online booking decision.

2.7. Reviewer's Country

The effect of country of origin (CoO) on consumers' opinions and purchasing intentions is a common topic in marketing studies [33,34]. The CoO effect refers to the impact on a shopper thinking of a product or service from another country due to the typecasting of that country and its productivities [35]. Knowing the CoO of a considered review or the reviewers means that the decision maker and the reviewer share the same interests and customs. Naturally, potential customers may develop a

favorable attitude towards those properties where they will find more reviews from the country where they belong. However, despite the significance of reviewers' country of origin in their decision making for online hotel booking, the influence of CoO has not been thoroughly investigated in the extant literature. We argue that reviewer's country of origin can have a significant effect on consumers' decision making in online hotel booking. Thus we hypothesize:

H7: Reviewers' country significantly affects customers' online booking decision.

2.8. Property Characteristics

Besides the above discussed independent variables, we have incorporated property characteristics in the proposed conceptual model to include any effect of these variables in customers' decision making. The characteristics of a property include hotel location, reputation, price, stars, size of the property measured by the number of rooms, facilities, and overall customer rating.

2.9. Moderating Effects

Literature shows that customers' personal profile such as their gender, education, financial status can play a significant role in the online buying decision [36]. Especially in case of online hotel booking, certain variables such as customers' purpose of stay and gender may affect various relationships proposed in the conceptual model. Therefore, we have incorporated these variables as moderators on the relationship between eWOM characteristics and customers' decision making for online hotel booking.

3. Methodology of Research

3.1. Research Design

The study follows a quantitative research design to answer the research questions. Then, we reviewed the literature and proposed a conceptual model reflecting the proposed relationships. A survey method has been used to collect data from booking.com users. The survey consisted of three sections including respondents' demographics, eWOM features, and property characteristics. In the demographics, we collected data about respondents' gender, age, nationality, annual income, travel budget, the purpose of travel, etc. The demographics questions were followed by questions related to the constructs of the conceptual model. Multiple questions were used to measure each of the independent variables. The last section of the survey asked the respondents about the importance of various property characteristics such as location, reputation, price, facilities, etc. Each factor is measured using Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5; where 1 indicates that the factor is not at all important and 5 indicates that the factor is very much important.

3.2. Sample

The data for this study has been collected from the booking.com users through an online survey. Following a snowball sampling technique, the survey was shared through social media, online communities, and instant messaging applications. We received about 600 filled questionnaires. After initial analysis of the collected data, we had to remove certain responses due to certain issues such as incomplete or contradictory responses and the sample decreased to 425. The final sample consisted of 60.2% respondents from the US, and 19.3% from the UK and 19.5% from GCC countries. The gender of respondents was divided into 54.1% males and 45.9% females. Table 1. below contains further details of the respondents' demographics.

4. Data and Results

The proposed approach by [37,38] is followed to analyze the data and the results in two steps. Firstly, measuring the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Secondly, the hypothesized relationships have been tested using structural regression model. We used SmartPLS 3.2 to test both the reliability and validity of the scale as well as the hypotheses testing.

Table 1: Sample demographics

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	230	54.1
Female	195	45.9
Age		
18 – 24 years	62	14.6
25 – 34 years	175	41.2
35 – 44 years	89	20.9
45 – 54 years	43	10.1
Above 55 years	56	13.2
Nationality		
GCC	83	19.5
UK	82	19.3
USA	260	61.2
Occupation		
Student	20	4.7
Employed for wages	246	57.9
Self-employed	70	16.5
Retired	24	5.6
Unemployed	65	15.3
Annual Income		
Less than 120000 SAR	122	28.7
120001 – 180000 SAR	98	23.1
180001 – 240000 SAR	145	34.1
More than 240000 SAR	60	14.1
Annual Travel Budget		

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Less than 50000	247	58.1
50000 – 90000 SAR	82	19.3
90001 – 120000 SA	57	13.4
More than 120000 SAR	39	9.2
Purpose of Travel		
Leisure	305	71.8
Work	120	28.2
No of Travelers		
Only me	74	17.4
2 – 4 travelers	286	67.3
5 – 9 travelers	65	15.3
Travel Frequency		
Twice annually	26	6.1
3 Times Annually	16	3.8
Every 2 years	153	36.0
Every 3 years	81	19.1
Depends	149	35.1

N= 425

4.1. Reliability and validity of the scale

SmartPLS 3.2 tool has been used to analyze the constructs' reliability and validity. Various measures such as Cronbach alpha ($\alpha > 0.7$) and composite reliability (rho>0.7) have been used to test the reliability of the scales. Furthermore, to determine the convergent validity we checked the average variance extracted (AVE) measures for each construct to be greater than 0.5. Table 2. indicates that all the constructs fulfill the required conditions for the reliability and validity of each construct.

Table 2: Construct reliability of the scales

Constructs	α	rho_A	CR	AVE
Quantity	0.83	0.84	0.92	0.86
Filter	0.81	0.81	0.89	0.72
Consistency	0.83	0.83	0.90	0.75
Quality	0.87	0.87	0.94	0.89
Recency	0.87	0.87	0.92	0.79
Valence	0.80	0.81	0.88	0.72
Country	0.85	0.87	0.91	0.77
Property Characteristics	0.88	0.88	0.90	0.54
Booking Decision	0.73	0.74	0.83	0.55

α = Cronbach's Alpha CR = Composite Reliability, AVE=Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Correspondingly, testing the convergent and discriminant validity of the scale has been done according to [39] criterion. To determine the discriminant validity, the AVE of each construct must be larger than the mutual variance. Table 3. shows the results of the Fornell and Larcker criterion assessment with the square root of the AVE on the diagonal and correlations on the off-diagonal. We can see that the diagonal values are greater than the off-diagonal. This provides evidence for the convergent and discriminant validity of the scale.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

After achieving the adequate reliability and validity of the scales, We used SmartPLS to test the relationships in the conceptual model. To test the significance of the hypothesized relationships in the conceptual model, we used Bootstrapping procedure of SmartPLS 3.2.in our conceptual model. The R^2 value of 0.70 shows a high exploratory power of the conceptual model.

4.2.1. Direct effects

There are seven independent variables including review quantity, review filter, review consistency, review quality, review recency, review valence and reviewers' country. Along with these seven independent variables we also included property characteristics to include their impact on the dependent variable, i.e., booking decision.

Table 4: Direct effects

Relationship	Estimates	T -Values	P-Values
Quantity -> BD	0.15	3.83	0.00
Filter -> BD	0.10	2.58	0.01
Consistency -> BD	0.09$^+$	1.84	0.06
Quality -> BD	0.12	2.69	0.01
Recency -> BD	0.18	3.85	0.00
Valence -> BD	0.18	3.02	0.00
Country -> BD	0.06$^+$	1.81	0.06
PC -> BD	0.17	4.50	0.00

BD= Booking Decision, PC= property characteristics, + significant at p<0.10

Table 4. shows the direct effects of each of the review characteristics as well as property characteristics on the dependent variable, i.e., booking decision. PLS-SEM results show that all of the independent variables are affecting the booking decision significantly except for the impact of review consistency and country of origin of the reviewer. However, these two variables are also having a positive effect on customers' booking decision, but it is significant at $p<0.05$ rather at $p<0.10$. Thus, we may conclude that though the impact of review consistency and country of origin are not too much strong, they may also play a role in customers' final booking decision. On the other hand, H2 has the most significant relationship among the other variables. Out of these seven variables, review valence and review recency are found to have the strongest positive effect on customers' final booking decision.

So far as the effect of the property characteristics is concerned, we also find a significant positive effect of this variable on the customers' booking decision. Therefore, various property characteristics such as its location, brand, reputation, facilities, etc. can play a considerable role in forming customers' likelihood to stay in the certain property.

4.2.2. Moderating effects

We used Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) feature of SmartPLS 3.2 to examine the role of various groups of gender (i.e., Male versus Female) and travel purpose (i.e., Business versus leisure) on different relationships in the conceptual model. We did not notice much variance in the two groups of male and female except for the impacts of review quantity, review valence and property characteristics on the booking decision. The relationship between review quantity and booking decision is stronger for males and weaker for females. The relationship between review valence and booking decision is stronger for females and weaker for males. Finally, the

relationship between property characteristics and booking decision is stronger for males and weaker for females. Thus, gender moderates the impacts of review quantity, review valence and property characteristics on the booking decision (see Table 5.).

Table 6. shows the results for the moderating effects of Travel Purpose on various relationships in the conceptual model. The results indicate that most of the relations are not affected by the travel purpose. Only significant change in the effect size was observed on the impact of review quality and review valence on booking decision. The relationship between review quality and booking decision is stronger for business travelers and weaker for leisure travelers. On the other hand, the relationship between review valence and booking decision is weaker for business travelers and stronger for leisure travelers. Thus, travel purpose moderates the relationship between review quality and booking decision as well as between review valence and booking decision.

Table 5: moderating effects Gender

Relationship	Path Coefficients		T-Values		PLS-MGA	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	PCD	T-Value
Quantity -> BD	0.05	0.22	0.89	3.80	0.17	2.14
Filter -> BD	0.07	0.12	1.45	2.39	0.05	0.69
Consistency -> BD	0.15	0.06	2.47	0.83	0.09	0.97
Quality -> BD	0.12	0.07	1.79	1.30	0.05	0.53
Recency -> BD	0.18	0.12	3.06	1.83	0.06	0.69
Valence -> BD	0.35	0.00	4.86	0.01	0.35	3.11
Country -> BD	0.06	0.05	1.25	1.30	0.01	0.16
PC -> BD	0.00	0.40	0.09	5.83	0.40	5.06

PCD= Path Coefficients-Difference, BD: Booking Decision

Table 6: moderating effects Travel Purpose

Relationship	Path Coefficients		T-Values		PLS-MGA	
	Business	Leisure	Business	Leisure	PCD	T-Values
Quantity -> BD	0.05	0.20	0.80	4.08	0.14	1.62
Filter -> BD	0.07	0.12	0.89	2.66	0.05	0.63
Consistency -> BD	0.09	0.06	1.04	1.04	0.03	0.32
Quality -> BD	0.29	0.05	3.91	0.85	0.24	2.53
Recency -> BD	0.28	0.13	3.37	2.56	0.15	1.63
Valence -> BD	-0.03	0.27	0.33	3.90	0.30	2.39
Country -> BD	0.10	0.05	1.87	1.25	0.06	0.81
PC -> BD	0.21	0.16	2.82	3.61	0.05	0.63

PCD= Path Coefficients-Difference, BD: Booking Decision

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In order to understand the role of online customer reviews in customers' decision making for the property of their choice on booking.com, this study identified various eWOM and property characteristics and proposed a conceptual model. This model has been empirically tested with data from booking.com users with various backgrounds and nationalities. For the process of online hotel booking, we need to understand customers' decision making in an online marketplace. The empirical results show the significant explanatory power of the proposed conceptual model.

Reading the reviews of the fellow customers and writing reviews about one's pleasant/unpleasant stay at a property is a source of satisfaction for the majority of the customers. Providing booking services gives beneficiaries the right to write their honest opinion and make it available for everyone that has become an integral part of any e-commerce website. The main reason for it is to build a good relationship based on trust. Reputable e-commerce websites help in building this relationship of trust between the service provider and the customers. Electronic word of mouth, especially online customer reviews, has become a significant determinant of customers' online hotel booking decision. Well-structured reviews that can be refined and filtered give users the courage to interact with the reviews and react immediately to make a decision.

This study has proven with empirical evidence that the most influencing component of various review characteristics significantly affects customers' decision making on Booking.com. Out of seven different eWOM characteristics, we find a significant effect of review relevance, valence, quality and quantity and recency on customers' online booking decision. We also find moderate positive effect review consistency and review's country of origin on the customers booking decision. Furthermore, the paper has found evidence for the significant positive effect of property characteristics on the online booking decision.

Finally, our results partially support the moderating role of gender and travel purpose in various relationships in the conceptual model. Our results are in line with [22] TripAdvisor and Amazon case studies which proved the positive effect of the reviews' quantity, recency, and quality on the decision making for hotel booking. Similarly, the positive effect of review's valence has been proved inconsistency with the results of the study on the effect of eWOM on hotel booking intentions, attitudes, trust, and website perceptions [16].

Correspondingly, the positive effect of reviews' filter variable matches the resulting findings in a study on the effect of online review chunking on product attitude [32].

5.1. Implications

The study provides some important insights for the managers on online service providing such as booking.com. The results can be used by the managers to develop their strategies for engaging potential customers and the existing customers. Managers might encourage their customers to emphasize the suggested review characteristics so that other potential customer may take advantage of these reviews in finalizing their decision. The manager of booking.com can pay more attention to the most encouraging factors that attract users to make booking decisions, and thus, increase the accuracy of predicting the booking actions based on users' behavior towards online reviews.

5.2. Limitations and Future Work

The limitation of this study is the segments been surveyed to get the result are not sufficiently varied on cultural basis compared to the huge number of Booking.com users with widely variant nationalities. Consequently, the results may not be generalized to the overall population of Booking.com users. This can be enhanced by using a crowdsourcing service to spread the questionnaire among different cultures and get more diversified data.

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