



The electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) trustworthiness, brand image and other determinants of purchase intention of the middle class to luxury hotel services

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Abstract

This study aimed at examining influencing factors on purchase intention of consumers in the context of the middle class (3 star) to luxury (5 star) hotels' social media in Bangkok. The determinants that were used in this study included; electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) trustworthiness, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, subjective norm, brand image, and brand awareness. The findings indicated that hotel brand awareness, subjective norms, eWOM trustworthiness and hotel brand image had a positive effect on purchase intention. The findings also indicated that hotel brand awareness had stronger level influencing purchase intention than other variables. The strong level of brand awareness directly impacted the level of purchase intention. Research implications and direction for future were provided.

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Introduction

The hospitality industry represents the entities offering food, beverage, accommodation, and other related services to customers who travel from their residence (Akhundzada, 2016; Doolin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002; Erdoğan & Cicek, 2012; Shuai & Wu, 2011). Thailand's hospitality industry is one of the fast-growing industries in Asia, according to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2019). This expansion has encompassed both hotels owned by Thai investors and international hotel chains. The occupancy rate of Bangkok hotels was 76.33 in 2015 and 72.9 in 2016 respectively (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2019), with more than 1,952 rooms added to the hotel market in recent years, especially in Bangkok area.

Social media influences many aspects of our everyday life. It can also be a key influencer that can change people's behavior (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008; Quach & Thaichon, 2017; Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). Social media are another marketing channel to create brand awareness, relationship building, and drive more conversion to brand (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). To be specific, digital consumers are even more active on social media since people rely more on what message brand is delivered through social media and reviews from online consumers (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Fuller, 2013). The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Quach & Thaichon (2017) also state that Facebook has the most daily active users of 800–1,227 million. Social Media Marketing (SMM) refers to one of the marketing methods like word-of-mouth marketing (WOM), where brands execute their marketing plans and strategies to interact with or attract the interest of current or potential customers by using different social media platform (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplowski, 2006; Lituchy & Rail, 2000; Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). The research questions are as follows; firstly, in the context of 3 (middle class)–5 (luxury)

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star hotels, which factors have the most influence on customer attitudes toward intention to purchase. Secondly, which factors have the most influence on customer purchase intention toward hotel social media. The research objectives are to identify factors affecting the purchase intention of hotel services and to identify the most influential factors affecting purchase intention.

Literature Review

Technology Acceptance Model [TAM]

Venkatesh and Davis (2000) explain that, “TAM theorizes that an individual’s behavioral intention to use a system is determined by two beliefs: perceived usefulness, defined as the extent to which a person believes that using the system will enhance his or her job performance, and perceived ease of use, defined as the extent to which a person believes that using the system will be free of effort.” TAM model was developed to examine the reason why users adopted or rejected certain technology based on PU and PEOU (Elkaseh, Wong, & Fung, 2016). The technology acceptance model is well-known for explaining users’ attitude, behavioral intentions, and behaviors of an information system (Wang, 2016). Hu, Chau, Sheng & Tam (1999) further explain that TAM was developed to measure and explain the behavior that leads to the intention to use technology.

Brand Image

Previous studies defined the brand image as consumer ideas, feeling, understanding, mental constructs, and the expectation that will influence brand image (Cretu & Brodie, 2007; Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). Brand image also refers to how customer connects to certain products or service of the brand and plays a crucial role in marketing (Cheng, Blankson, Wang & Chen, 2009; Cretu & Brodie, 2007; Zhang, 2015). Martínez, Pérez, & Del Bosque, (2014) state that brand image impacts customer perceptions of the communication and operations of the business. Mabkhot, Shaari, and Salleh (2017) explain that brand image is a key component that helps enhance the relationship between brand and customer. Erdoğmuş and Cicek (2012) explain that social media marketing differs from traditional marketing in which brand is only trying to sell, whereas social media marketing is all about making a connection, providing relevant content, up-to-date content and real-time engagement with consumers to build brand image. Social media marketing allows customers to interact with brands online, which will enhance their experience online and allows brands to build their reputation online (Sajid, 2016; Shareef, Mukerji, Dwivedi, Rana, & Islam, 2019). Consumers’ perspective on social media activities will affect how they perceive the brand image.

Brand Awareness

Hoyer and Brown (1990) define the term brand awareness as a basic level of brand acknowledgement and where consumers can recognize the name of the brand. Brand

awareness is the perception of how customers think of a brand and the strength of brand presence to the customers (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013). Brand awareness is one of the important factors that influences the consumers’ decision-making process when selecting the brand (Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). Sasmita and Suki (2015) define brand awareness as a certain awareness that customers have for the brand. From previous studies, brand awareness is defined as a basic knowledge of the brand involving the name identification of the brand. Moreover, brand awareness comprises brand recognition and brand recall; meaning the level of identification and recall of a brand (Chi, Yeh, & Yang, 2009).

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is the attitude of customers’ interest and the possibility of purchasing towards certain products or brands (Kim & Ko, 2012). According to Chi, Yeh, and Yang, (2009), “Consumer purchase intention is considered as a subjective inclination towards a product and can be an important index to predict consumer behavior.” Chi et al. (2009) also explain that purchase intention involves customer unplanned buying, partially planned buying, and fully planned buying. Yoo, Gretzel, and Fesenmaier (2009) found that travelers who search content on social media not only look into their social network but also read or review comments and photos taken by other travelers; this is considered a strong influential factor of consumer purchasing decision. While searching destination and accommodation websites, another customer’s experience also influences behavior and decision making in regard to the length of stay and the number of attractions visited.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth [eWOM] Trustworthiness

eWOM is defined as the informal communications delivered to the intended group of potential customers with the use of Internet-based technology or social media tools offering information about products and services (Leung, Bai, & Stahura, 2015; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). eWOM is how customers have shared brand experience among other online customers, and can be referred to as consumer-to-consumer (Godey et al., 2016; Zhao, Wu, Hua, & Fang, 2019). Mishra and Satish (2016) define eWOM as a communication in which both positive and negative messages are shared on the internet. Trust in eWOM is based on the quality of comments and platform where comments are formulated. Comments on a third-party website such as Tripadvisor are gaining more credibility than comments posted on a hotel’s website (Wu & Lin, 2017).

Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)

Perceived ease of use (PEOU) refers to “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort” (Davis, 1989). Venkatesh and Davis (2000) explain PEOU as the effort in processing while using the system. Previous studies find that a majority of consumers’ perspective towards the use of communication technologies is

based on convenience, efficiency, and richer information offered (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). Perceived ease of use can be referred to as free of effort while using the technologies application (Bhatiaisevi & Yoopetch, 2015; Lee, 2009).

Perceived Usefulness (PU)

According to Davis (1989), perceived usefulness is the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance. Venkatesh and Davis (2000) define perceived usefulness as the perception that using the system can lead to job performance improvement. Lee (2009) states that perceived usefulness of technologies is affected by consumers' perception of ease of use. Perceived usefulness is also influenced by the information quality and the system quality (Wang, 2016). In addition, numerous studies emphasize that perceived usefulness is the key factor for user intention to use technology. Perceived usefulness influences consumers' behavior intention in purchasing online products (Wang, 2016).

Subjective Norm

Abraham and Sheeran (2003) describe subjective norm as a social pressure. According to Venkatesh and Davis (2000), subjective norm refers to the perception of an individual towards people's influence and how important their approval or disapproval of his/her actions or behavior is. Subjective norm is an individual perception of how behavior to perform or not to perform is influenced by social pressure (Schepers & Wetzels, 2007). Lee, Kozar, and Larsen (2003) define subjective norm as the perception of people who are important to him/her and believe he/she should perform or not perform the behavior. According to Schepers and Wetzels (2007), subjective norm is created by word-of-mouth and significantly influences consumers' perceived usefulness and intention to use a particular technology.

From the above discussion, the research hypotheses can be presented as shown below;

H₁: eWOM Trustworthiness positively influences customers' purchase intention.

H₂: Perceived ease of use has a positive effect on eWOM trustworthiness.

H₃: Perceived ease of use has a positive effect on customers' purchase intention.

H₄: Perceived usefulness has a positive effect on eWOM trustworthiness.

H₅: Perceived ease of use positively influences customer perceived usefulness.

H₆: Perceived usefulness has a positive effect on customers' purchase intention.

H₇: Subjective norm has a positive effect on customers' purchase intention.

H₈: Brand image has a positive effect on customers' purchase intention

H₉: Brand awareness has a positive effect on customers' purchase intention.

H₁₀: Brand awareness positively affects brand image.

H₁₁: eWOM trustworthiness positively affects brand image.

H₁₂: eWOM trustworthiness positively affects brand awareness.

Methodology

The objective of this study is to examine social media's most influencing factors on the purchase intention of consumers' perception towards 3–5 star hotels. Therefore, this study utilizes the quantitative approach. This approach is suitable for measuring attitude and behavior. Moreover, quantitative approach is suitable to find the relationship among variables in terms of questions or hypotheses (Creswell, 2013). The quantitative approach is used to identify the relationship in each variable by developing the questionnaire to measure the determinants of purchase intentions. Also, it often involves random sampling with equal probability being selected and is suitable for a larger population (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

The study was intended to examine the determinants of purchase intention of the 3–5 star hotel in Bangkok. The target population is a group of hotel customers, who are active on social media especially with LINE application, Facebook and Instagram. The respondents must have at least one-year experience using social media to be included in the study. In addition, the focus area is in Bangkok because the majority of middle class to luxury hotels (762 hotels) are located in Bangkok (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2019). The questionnaires were developed based on the previous research studies of Ladhari and Michaud (2015); Lien, Wen, Huang, and Wu (2015); Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011); and Wang (2016). Data were collected from a total of 403 respondents.

Data Analysis

This research is quantitative research and therefore descriptive statistics were provided. The data were tested for reliability, using Cronbach's alpha. Furthermore, structural equation modeling was used to test the model. In addition, convergent and discriminant validities were conducted to ensure the quality of data before testing the relationships among all the constructs and testing the proposed hypotheses.

Results

The descriptive statistics analysis in Table 1 explains the distribution of participants' basic attributes. There were 403 total respondents. A total of 232 respondents (57.6%) were female and the remaining 171 (42.4%) were male. Respondents aged between 31–40 had the highest frequency with total of 167. This was followed by respondents aged between 20–30 with total of 163 frequency. Regarding the monthly income level of respondents, the highest income range was THB 35,001–THB 55,000 with 167 respondents (41.4%). Most of the respondents (75.9%) were employees in the private sector. For educational level, 70 percent of respondents were educated up to bachelor's degree level.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the respondents

Respondent characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	171	42.4
Female	232	57.6
Age		
20–30	163	40.4
31–40	167	41.4
41–50	62	15.4
51 or more	11	2.7
Salary		
less than THB 15,000	9	2.2
THB 15,000 – THB 35,000	152	37.7
THB 35,001 – THB 55,000	167	41.4
more than THB 55,000	75	18.6
Occupation		
government official	72	17.9
Employee	306	75.9
Unemployed	5	1.2
Other	20	5
Education		
High school diploma	18	4.5
Bachelor's degree	282	70
Master's degree	103	25.6

From Table 2, the coefficient of reliability was test by Cronbach’s alpha (Cronbach, 1951). The minimum recommended value is 0.70. According to Tavakol and Dennick (2011), the acceptable value of reliability coefficient should range from 0.70–0.95. All factors significant at Cronbach’s alpha exceed 0.8, indicating a good reliability. The fit indices NFI, NNFI, CFI, and IFI are greater than 0.90 indicating that the model provided a good fit (Md Husin, Ismail, & Ab Rahman, 2016). As shown in Table 4, NFI = 0.939, NNFI = 0.952, CFI = 0.956, IFI = 0.956 and RMSEA = 0.79 (<0.8), representing good fit of the model (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). To measure convergent validity, all AVEs are above 0.5, and factor loadings were higher at 0.6 for each construct, showing the acceptable convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Hair et al., 2006). For the discriminant validity (Table 3), the square roots of AVE were higher than squared correlation of each pair (in italic and bold) of the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), indicating sufficient discriminant validity.

For hypothesis testing, as shown in Table 5, eWOM trustworthiness, hotel brand image, hotel brand awareness, and perceived ease of use have positive influence towards purchase intention. Perceived ease of use has a significant, positive effect on eWOM trustworthiness and also positively

Table 2 Item loadings on related factors

Factor	Item	Factor loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alpha
eWOM	eWOM1	0.805	0.694	0.731	0.918
	eWOM2	0.827			
	eWOM3	0.882			
	eWOM4	0.859			
	eWOM5	0.789			
PU	PU1	0.791	0.655	0.701	0.917
	PU2	0.766			
	PU3	0.857			
	PU4	0.816			
	PU5	0.814			
	PU6	0.810			
PEOU	PEOU1	0.804	0.61	0.667	0.915
	PEOU2	0.845			
	PEOU3	0.809			
	PEOU4	0.719			
	PEOU5	0.824			
	PEOU6	0.749			
	PEOU8	0.706			
SB	SB1	0.892	0.781	0.801	0.920
	SB2	0.955			
	SB3	0.890			
	SB5	0.789			
HB	HB1	0.844	0.697	0.734	0.898
	HB2	0.897			
	HB3	0.817			
	HB5	0.778			
HBA	HBA2	0.798	0.616	0.671	0.890
	HBA3	0.831			
	HBA4	0.814			
	HBA5	0.732			
	HBA6	0.744			
PI	PI1	0.754	0.639	0.688	0.856
	PI2	0.871			
	PI3	0.768			

Notes: eWOM = eWOM trustworthiness; PU = perceived usefulness; PEOU = perceived ease of use, SB = subjective norm; HB = hotel brand image; HBA = hotel brand awareness; PI = purchase intention

influences perceived usefulness. Perceived usefulness positively influences eWOM trustworthiness. Brand awareness was also found to have a positive effect on brand image.

Finally, eWOM trustworthiness positively affects brand image and brand awareness. All hypotheses except H6 and H7 were supported by the findings.

Table 3 Correlation coefficient matrix and the square root of AVEs

Factors	Number of Items	eWOM	PU	PEOU	SB	HB	HBA	PI
eWOM	5	0.833	0.518	0.522	0.183	0.347	0.413	0.415
PU	6		0.809	0.702	0.286	0.524	0.349	0.367
PEOU	8			0.781	0.328	0.569	0.574	0.472
SB	4				0.884	0.373	0.268	0.325
HB	4					0.835	0.675	0.619
HBA	5						0.785	0.607
PI	3							0.799

Table 4 Fit indices

Fit index	Model value
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.939
Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI)	0.952
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.956
Fit Index (IFI)	0.956
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.79

Table 5 Summary of hypotheses tests

Hypothesis	Relationship	Support
H1	eWOM → PI	YES
H2	PEOU → eWOM	YES
H3	PEOU → PI	YES
H4	PU → eWOM	YES
H5	PEOU → PU	YES
H6	PU → PI	NO
H7	SB → PI	NO
H8	HB → PI	YES
H9	HBA → PI	YES
H10	HBA → HB	YES
H11	eWOM → HB	YES
H12	eWOM → HBA	YES

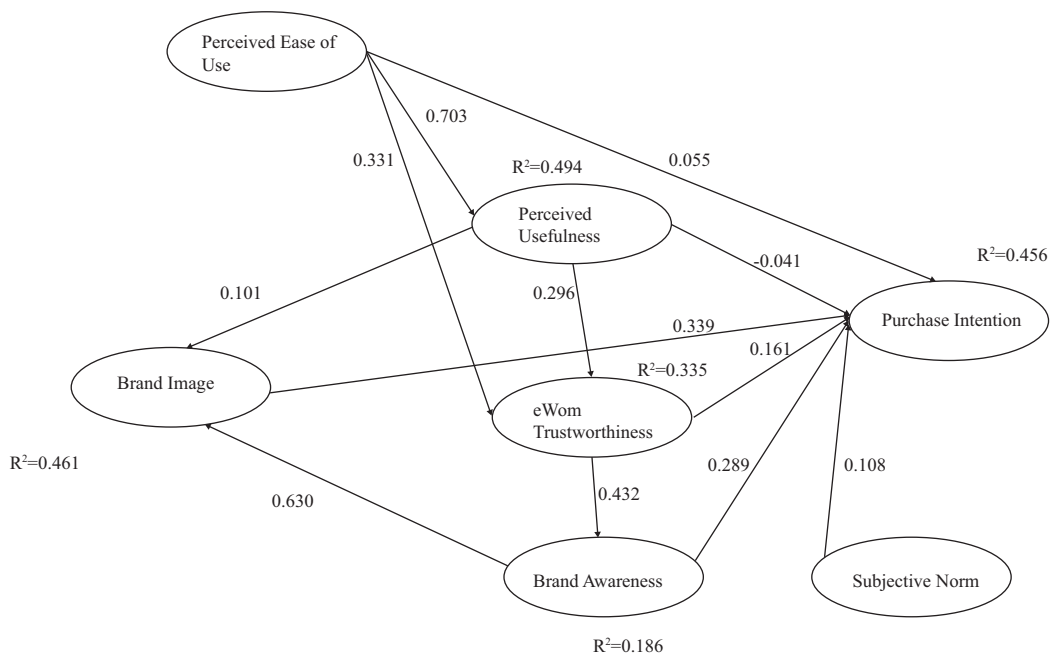


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses testing results

Discussion

Based on the findings, eWOM Trustworthiness positively influences purchase intention. H1 is supported and the finding is consistent with Leung et al., (2015) and Ladhari and Michaud (2015), which can indicate that eWOM is an effective factor in influencing customer decision to purchase certain product or service. Perceived ease of use positively influencing purchase intentions (H3 is supported). The outcome is consistent with Ramayah and Ignatius (2005). The impact of brand image on purchase intention is significant (H8 is supported). This result is consistent with the studies of Aghekyan-Simonian, Forsythe, Kwon, and Chattaraman (2012); Grewal, Krishnan, Baker, and Borin (1998) and Wu et al. (2011). Brand awareness positively influences purchase intention (H9 is supported). The finding is consistent with Hutter et al. (2013) and Chi et al. (2009). However, perceived usefulness is not significant with customers' purchase intention (H6 is not supported). The finding is inconsistent with Wang (2016) where perceived usefulness motivated online shopper to make a purchase. The impact of subjective norm on customers' purchase intention is also not significant (H7 is not supported). The outcome is different from Md Husin et al. (2016) that subjective norm highly influences customer purchase intention.

From the results, it is shown that hotel brand awareness is a key factor influencing purchase attention. The result is also consistent with Chi et al. (2009) and Hutter et al. (2013). Product familiarization and brand awareness positively impact purchase intention. Chi et al. (2009) also explain that the strong brand awareness can show the success of the brand because it is a key driver to purchase intention and brand loyalty. Hotel brand image also has a positive influence on purchase intention (Grewal et al., 1998; Wu et al., 2011). As brand image is how customer will perceive the quality of brand, Wu et al. (2011) found that brand image can directly increase the sales volume of the product. A good brand image has higher influence on customers' purchase intention. Ladhari and Michaud (2015) reported that positive online reviews of hotel helps to increase hotel reservation rate.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The current research achieved its proposed objectives. This study aimed to find the relationship of independent variables including eWOM's trustworthiness, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, subjective norm, hotel brand image, and hotel brand awareness, towards purchase intention. The results of the coefficients show that all five independent variables (i.e. hotel brand awareness, eWOM trustworthiness, subjective norm, and hotel brand image) have significant effects on the purchase intention. However, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness have no significant influence on purchase intention.

Social media is not just a networking appreciation, but it has become a tool for people to do everything from connecting with friends, shopping, gaming, finding jobs, even booking hotel services. Based on the results, hoteliers can benefit by prioritizing their marketing communications through this

platform. Social media is a great place for brands to grow awareness online and to deliver their communication messages and easily reach their desired target customer or most relevant target audience with cost effective approach. Offline customers in all generations now experience brand through social media platforms. With the growth in social media activities, online platforms nowadays are overflowing with brand sponsor messages of what they offer and branded content with influencers. This also impacts customer's behavior online in that the customers do not only search for brand in order to use their service/product, but also interact with brands that deliver appealing or relevant content. Therefore, hoteliers should focus in building ongoing awareness activities in both the social media paid advertisement campaign and the partnership with online influencers in order to grow the interest and consideration of their existing customers and new potential customers. Without the awareness, a hotel brand may lose its brand recall from their customer. Moreover, hoteliers should encourage their offline customers to start creating digital footprints on hotel social media for the purpose of creating the followers in order to target most relevant people when using social media advertisements. Lastly, it is essential for hotels to highlight every positive review on hotel social media platforms in order to build a positive brand image and also to influence other online customers to make a quick decision.

For further research projects, it is recommended to expand the scope to include all hotel categories. Further research can also categorize hotels into categories i.e. non-chain hotel and international chain hotel.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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