# CONSUMER INFORMATION ADOPTION ONLINE


## SUMMARY

The present research sought to analyze the factors that affect information adoption in online consumer communities focusing on tourism services, as well as how these factors (related to source credibility, argument quality and information usefulness) influence decisions to purchase tourism-related products and services. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze data from a 288 respondent sample acquired via a survey. The results indicate that information usefulness, primarily driven by relevance and reliability, is crucial for information adoption processes by consumers.



**Keywords**: electronic word-of-mouth, information adoption, virtual communities

## INTRODUCTION

The Internet's advent has greatly increased the opportunities for information access and interaction between consumers and between consumers and companies (Goldsmith, 2006). This communication takes place through online platforms, such as blogs, consumer community websites, discussion forums, social networks, and chatrooms (Goldsmith, 2006). In this context, interpersonal communication generates so-called 'electronic word-of-mouth' (eWOM) (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Ya, Vadakkepatt, & Joshi, 2015). Different from traditional WOM (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), which transmits messages through personal contact, eWOM appears in virtual and text formats, generally shared by strangers and geographically dispersed individuals (Park & Lee, 2009).

Among the most common formats of eWOM are online consumer communities. These are simple to join and do not require special knowledge, which allows any person with Internet access to publish or find information. In addition, online consumer communities focus on nearly all areas of consumption (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Among the many communities of this type in Brazil are TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Foursquare.

Given the growing importance of these communities, various studies have researched members' reasons for engaging in eWOM, examining not only information production (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Lee, Cheung, Lim, & Sia, 2006) but also information search (Goldsmith, 2006; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). The present research sought to analyze the factors that affect information adoption in online consumer communities focusing on tourism services, as well as how these factors influence decisions to purchase tourism-related products and services in Brazil.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Virtual communities*

A virtual community is any group of people that share common ties on the Internet without being dependent on physical interactions or shared geographical settings (Mcdonough, 1997), such as online consumer communities. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) assert that these communities are the most common platform generating eWOM, giving consumers the chance to read other consumers' opinions of their product consumption and service experiences, as well as allowing members to publish their own reports. To explain these communities' success, the cited authors highlight their simplicity of use, which does not require extensive knowledge of how to use the Internet.

### *eWOM*

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) can be defined as any positive or negative statements made by potential, current, or former clients about a product or company, made accessible to a great number of people and institutions on the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn (2008) describe eWOM as an extension of traditional interpersonal communication on the Internet. Given the exponential growth of online communities and social networks and the expansion of e-commerce, researchers have paid eWOM much attention in recent years (Ya et al., 2015). Various studies have sought to understand how eWOM affects consumer behavior. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Lee et al. (2006) examined the reasons why people engage in eWOM, publishing information about products and services, while Goldsmith (2006),

Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006), and Khammash and Griffiths (2011) researched motives for information searches.

Varadarajan and Yadav (2002) note five important changes in purchasing processes resulting from the appearance of eWOM. These are (1) a substantial increase in information about prices and product and service attributes; (2) much easier information searches; (3) better quality information; (4) organized and structured information; and (5) a greater ease to compare and evaluate possible alternatives for the consumer.

*Information adoption process*

Although eWOM is a way to exchange information, the true impact of messages, once received, can vary from person to person (Cheung et al., 2008). The same content can generate different responses in different recipients, depending on each individual's perceptions and experiences (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976). This variability has increased researchers' interest in searching for a greater understanding of how the information adoption process occurs in virtual environments, in order to understand how computers' expanded influence affects people (Cheung et al., 2008).

In the literature about information systems, various studies relied on dual process models to explain how people are influenced to adopt ideas and information. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) assert that, even though different theories of persuasion have adopted different terminologies, postulates, underlying motives, and distinct effects to explain changes in attitude, all researchers end by emphasizing one of the two routes proposed by the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) to explain changes in attitude. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), the ELM proposes that a message can influence people's attitudes and behaviors in two ways. The first or "central route" reflects how attitude change results from a rational and critical evaluation of arguments. Attitude changes induced by the central route are relatively long-lasting and predictable (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). The second or "peripheral route" leads to attitude change because the message is associated with positive or negative affective signals or because an oversimplified decision-making guideline is used to evaluate the message. In this case, rather than reflecting on the arguments offered, the individual may accept these simply because the information's source is an expert. Attitude changes induced via peripheral routes are generally temporary and unpredictable (Petty et al., 1983).

Sussman and Siegel (2003) proposed a theoretical model of information adoption in computerized communications, in order to explain individuals' information adoption process. The cited authors' model identifies two key factors: (1) the quality of the argument and (2) source credibility. The model considers the quality of arguments as the central route for information adoption and the source's credibility as the peripheral route. Sussman and Siegal (2003) also argue that the ELM overlooks the role of the usefulness of information in the influence process, even though usefulness is already considered a key concept in adoption of behaviors. Thus, the cited authors ensured their model shows that the usefulness of information is more strongly associated with information adoption than are other factors included in the ELM's propositions. These authors, therefore, argue that the perceived usefulness of information can be explained by theories of informational influence and believe that the perceived usefulness of information acts as a mediator between the results of influence (e.g., purchase intention) and ideas about argument quality or source credibility.

*Argument quality*

Doll and Torkzadeh (1988) assert that computer users' satisfaction is essentially connected to information quality, based on content, format, accuracy, and the opportunities generated. Specifically focusing on e-commerce, Cheung et al. (2008) studied the influence of information quality on individuals' decisions to use information. Since practically all Internet users can publish information on the Internet, low quality messages inevitably appear. In this context, according to the cited authors, the force of the argument, the source's credibility, and the confirmation of previous beliefs have a positive influence on perceived information quality. McKinney, Yoon, and Zahedi (2002) had previously proposed an online consumer satisfaction model that takes into account three key factors when analyzing information quality: comprehensibility, reliability, and usefulness.

Internet users, however, hardly ever read web pages carefully. Instead, they scan websites to find the information that interests them (Madu & Madu, 2002). Users want to find the needed information quickly and easily (Nah & Davis, 2002). Therefore, online consumer communities must offer *relevant* information to their users. Dunk (2004) emphasizes this aspect as well, pointing out that relevance is an important factor in readers' decision making and suggesting that the more relevant a message is, the more readers perceive the information as useful.

When a website is not constantly updated, the content provided fails to meet users' expectations, and they stop giving value to the content (Madu & Madu, 2002). Users, thus, may regard past reviews as out-of-date, which reduces their usefulness. Therefore, the more users perceive a message as *up-to-date*, the more users perceive the message's information as useful.

A message's *accuracy* is connected to its reliability. Accuracy is the users' perception that the information given is correct (Wixom & Todd, 2005). One of consumers' motivations for seeking out eWOM is their desire to reduce the risks involved in decisions to purchase (Khammash & Griffiths, 2011). Inaccurate messages can have the opposite effect of what is desired, creating even more doubts about the product or service being researched. One can infer that the more accurate the message, the more likely users are to perceive the message's information as useful.

A message's *comprehensiveness* is connected to its completeness. Sullivan (1999) suggests that more detailed messages reach a wider range of users, resulting in a greater probability of users' conversion and retention. Hence, the more *comprehensive* a message is, the more users will perceive the message's information to be useful. Taking into consideration the four above-mentioned dimensions of information quality—relevance, up-to-dateness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness—the present study's first four hypotheses were formulated as follows:

**H1**: The perception that a message is highly relevant will have a direct and positive effect on the perceived usefulness of that message's information.
**H2**: The perception that a message is up-to-date will have a direct and positive effect on the perceived usefulness of that message's information.
**H3**: The perception that a message is accurate will have a direct and positive effect on the perceived usefulness of that message's information.
**H4**: The perception that a message is comprehensive will have a direct and positive effect on the perceived usefulness of that message's information.

*Source credibility*

Chaiken (1980) defines source credibility as the message receiver's perception of the author's credibility, without any consideration of the message itself. Source credibility can also be defined as the extent to which a recipient perceives a message's source as credible, competent, and reliable (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Messages attributed to prestigious sources generally are more widely accepted than those attributed to less prestigious sources (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

Cheung et al. (2008) assert that information adoption takes into consideration a source's credibility via two dimensions: expertise and reliability. In addition, according to Cheung et al. (2008), credibility flows along the ELM's peripheral route, through which the recipient can be influenced not only by source credibility but also by the source's attractiveness and appeal.

Since the Internet gives consumer community users almost unlimited liberty to publish and express their feelings without having to reveal their identity, review readers have to determine the contributors' degree of expertise and reliability, in order to decide whether to accept or reject the information. If users understand that the posted reviews come from highly credible people (i.e., high levels of expertise and reliability), readers will perceive the reviews as more useful (Cheung et al., 2008).

One way to evaluate a user's reputation involves the number of reviews that person posts. Another technique is to ask readers if a specific review was useful. The number of readers who note that the user's reviews are useful (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen 2009) thus measures the credibility of the user in question. Based on these findings about source credibility, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H5**: The perception that a message's source is an expert on the topic will have a direct and positive effect on the perceived usefulness of that message's information.
**H6**: The perception that a message's source is reliable will have a direct and positive effect on the perceived usefulness of that message's information.

*Perception of usefulness and information adoption*

The usefulness of an information refers to the perception that those who utilize it can obtain benefits, which makes it an important antecedent of information adoption (Davis, 1989). This expectation of obtaining benefits is what most often causes users to search for information in consumer communities (Cheung et al., 2008). Information adoption, on the other hand, refers to the process by which individuals decide to use (or not) the information received.

Online consumer communities offer diverse opinions and information related to products, services, and companies. By analyzing these reviews, users develop their own perceptions of how useful this information could be. Hence, the more information is perceived as useful, the stronger the users' intention to make use of this information (Cheung et al., 2008). Thus, the follow hypothesis was developed:

**H7**: The perception that a message contains very useful information will have a direct and positive effect on consumers' adoption of this information.

Based on Cheung et al. (2008) and Sussman and Siegal (2003)'s proposed constructs (see Figure 1), the model adopted for this study shows that the argument's quality takes into account

the four dimensions laid out by Cheung et al. (2008): relevance, up-to-dateness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness. On the other hand, source credibility take into consideration the source's expertise and reliability. These constructs affect the information's usefulness as perceived by the message's recipient and, consequently, the adoption, or not, of the information.

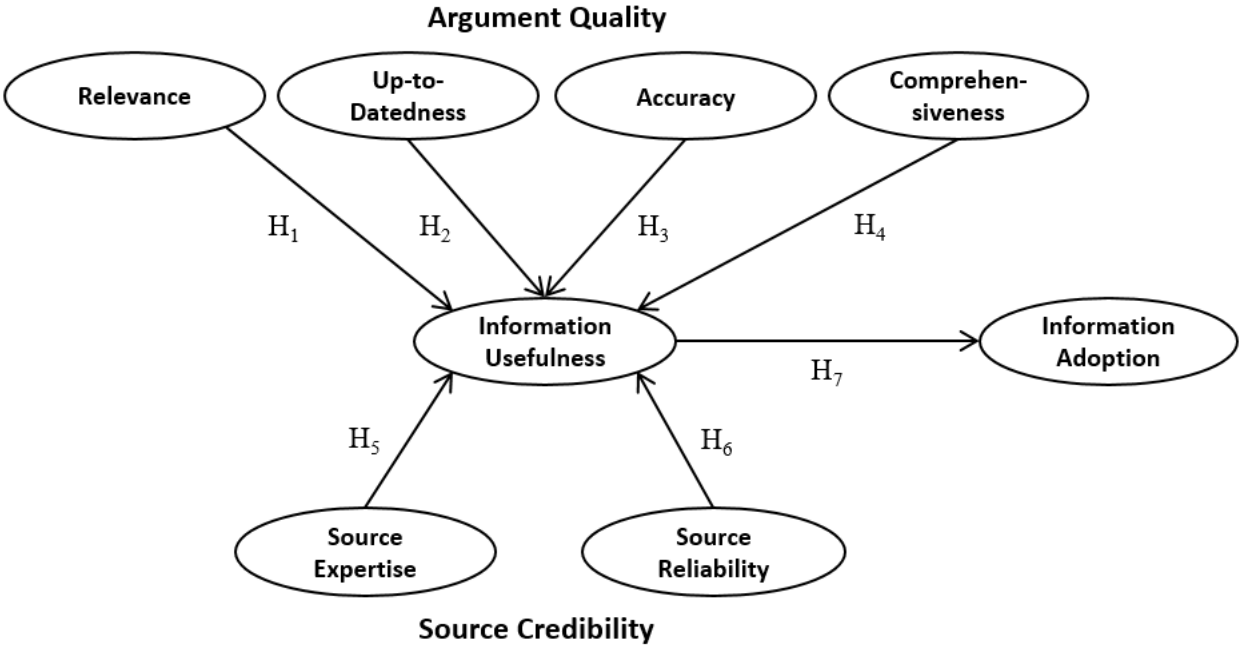


**Figure 1: Research model**
Source: Adapted from Cheung et al. (2008) and Sussman and Siegal (2003).

## METHODOLOGY

To test the hypotheses, the present study used a cross-sectional survey of the relevant population (adults that travel at least once an year and have used the TripAdvisor online community to search for tourism-related information), using structured and self-administered questionnaires. The consumers surveyed had access to the questionnaires through a research website (i.e. Qualtrics), the link to which was distributed via e-mail and social networks.

As the present study sought to investigate the factors that affect information adoption in online consumer communities, the model was tested based on respondents' perceptions about an existing online community, TripAdvisor. This is the largest travel website in the world, offering more than 150 million user reviews of hotels, restaurants, and many tourist attractions.

*Operationalization of variables*

The questionnaire used scales already developed and tested in the literature to measure all the employed constructs. The research instrument included 26 items measured on a five-point Likert-type scale, with options ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree". Two pretests were carried out in order to refine the wording of items and the layout of the survey. The employed scales and their sources are detailed below:

- **Relevance -** 3 items, adapted from Citrin, 2001.
- **Up-to-Datedness -** 3 items, adapted from Wixom & Todd, 2005.
- **Accuracy -** 3 items, adapted from Wixom & Todd, 2005.

- **Comprehensiveness -** 4 items, adapted from Wixom & Todd, 2005.
- **Source Expertise -** 3 items adapted from Wu & Shaffer, 1987.
- **Source Reliability -** 4 items, Wu & Shaffer, 1987.
- **Information Usefulness -** 3 items, adapted from Bailey & Pearson, 1983.
- **Information Adoption -** 3 items adapted from Wu & Shaffer, 1987.

*Sample and data collection procedures*

The present research used non-probabilistic convenience sampling (Aaker et al., 2001), which resulted in 328 completed questionnaires, of which 40 were eliminated because of missing or inconsistent data. The final sample included 288 valid questionnaires answered by travelers that have already used TripAdvisor, with 146 of the respondents identified as female (50.7%) and 142 as male (49.3%). The majority (77.1%) were between 18 and 24 years old, with only 35 respondents 30 years old or older (12.2%). In regards to TripAdvisor use, 75.7% reported they already used TripAdvisor to get information on hotels, restaurants, or tourist attractions, while 24.3% answered that they used this review platform to share experiences.

## RESULTS

*Measurement model*

This study utilized confirmatory factor analysis to test the validity, unidimensionality, and reliability of the scales used in the measurement model. The final measurement model, with all the 26 indicators present on the research instrument, resulted in satisfactory adjusted indices (Hu & Bentler, 1999) with a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0,059 (with a confidence interval ranging from 0,051 to 0,066), a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0,93, an incremental fit index (IFI) of 0,94, a Tucker Lewis index (TLI) of 0,91, and a significant value for the chi-square index ($\chi^2$ = 538,93; d.f. = 271; p < 0,001; $\chi^2$/d.f. = 1,989).

The face validity of all the scales was guaranteed during the development of the research instrument. To verify the nomological validity, the matrix of correlation between constructs was analyzed, revealing that all correlations were significant and in the expected direction. With respect to convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) was calculated for each construct. All the AVE values fall between 0,50 and 0,70, providing evidence for the scales' convergent validity (Table 3). Regarding the scales' internal consistency and reliability, all met the minimum required levels of reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) with values between 0,70 and 0,85 not only for the alpha coefficient but also for composite reliability. Finally, all the shared variances proved to be less than the extracted variance for the items measuring the constructs, which indicates adequate discriminant validity.

*Structural model*

The present study applied structural equation modeling to test the proposed model and hypotheses (via the software AMOS 20). All the indices confirm the model's goodness of fit to the data. The chi-square index obtained is statistically significant ($\chi^2$ = 853,86; d.f. = 292; p < 0,001), with a $\chi^2$/d.f. of 2,92, below 3 — the value suggested by Byrne (2010). The incremental fit indices include a CFI of 0,91, IFI of 0,92, and TLI of 0,90. The RMSEA is 0,075 (with a CI from 0,070 to 0,080), showing that the indices are in accordance to the values suggested in the literature (Byrne, 2010) and indicating that the model's goodness of fit is satisfactory.

After the confirmation that measurement and structural models' goodness of fit indices were adequate, the coefficients estimated for the causal relationships between constructs were evaluated (see Table 1). Each of the hypotheses was verified with an analysis of magnitude, direction, and significance of the weighted coefficients estimated based on the structural model (Byrne, 2010).

**Table 1: Estimated standardized coefficients, hypotheses, and significance**

| Proposed Relationship | Standardized Coefficient | p-value | Hypothesis Verified |
|---|---|---|---|
| $H_1$: Relevance → Information Usefulness | 0,49 | <0,001 | Yes |
| $H_2$: Up-to-Datedness → Information Usefulness | 0,18 | 0,007 | Yes |
| $H_3$: Accuracy → Information Usefulness | -0,04 | 0,075 | No |
| $H_4$: Comprehensiveness → Information Usefulness | 0,16 | 0,007 | Yes |
| $H_5$: Source Expertise → Information Usefulness | -0,06 | 0,292 | No |
| $H_6$: Source Reliability → Information Usefulness | 0,38 | <0,001 | Yes |
| $H_7$: Information Usefulness → Information Adoption | 0,72 | <0,001 | Yes |

Source: Authors

## DISCUSSION

The results in table 1 indicate that usefulness of information strongly influences (0,72, p-value < 0,001) consumers' decisions to accept information found in online tourism communities (i.e., H7). This confirms Cheung et al.'s (2008) results, now tested in the tourism industry. Relevance, up-to-datedness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness are the constructs used to test the influence of information quality, while source expertise and reliability were used to test the influence of source credibility. Relevance was the factor with the strongest impact on the perceived usefulness of information (i.e., H1), reinforcing Dunk's (2004) finding that relevant information is an important factor in decision-making.

Up-to-dateness also has a direct and positive impact on the usefulness of information (i.e., H2). These results, contradict Cheung et al.'s (2008) findings that up-to-dateness does not have any influence on usefulness of information. One explanation for the present confirmation of this relationship for Brazilian consumers could be the type of community studied. Cheung et al. (2008) studied a community that evaluates food, while the present study evaluated experiences related to tourism. Tourism is strongly connected to services and seasonality, which requires that the relevant information be constantly updated. Therefore, old information appears to have a negative impact on the perceived usefulness of information, which suggests that users are not willing to accept information they perceive as being outdated.

Regarding the impact of accuracy on usefulness of information (i.e., H3), the present findings did not confirm this hypothesis. Users may find it difficult to evaluate the accuracy of messages about destinations, hotels or services that they never had contact with before, which could be an explanation for why they do not consider accuracy in their evaluation of messages regarding tourism consumption. Furthermore, the present results show that messages' comprehensiveness has a positive influence on the usefulness of information (i.e., H4). In terms of the tourism industry, this means that messages that talk about many distinct aspects of a hotel or destination experience, providing in-depth evaluations of previous travelers that already experienced a certain tourism product or service, will have a positive effect on a consumer's assessment of a message's usefulness.

Within the constructs that tested source credibility, the level of expertise did not present a significant impact on information usefulness (i.e., H5), which confirms Cheung et al.'s (2008) results. The present results indicate that TripAdvisor users are not looking for expert opinions, but rather the opinions of ordinary people like themselves, who might have the same views or needs that they have regarding tourism products and services.

The present study confirmed that source reliability has a positive influence on usefulness of information (i.e., H6), which contradicts Cheung et al.'s (2008) results. The present findings suggest that users trust opinions posted in online consumer communities, even though readers do not know the source of this information. The reason for this may be that eWOM users perceive other users as being similar to themselves. This result also corroborates the rejection of H5, as previously explained. Tourism-related reviews, although often weak on a technical level, communicate consumers' authentic experiences with hotels, destinations, flights and other services. Thus, a higher level of source reliability increases the chances recipients will perceive messages as useful.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main contribution of the present research is to broaden the understanding of eWOM use in the tourism industry and in Brazil, in particular. Based on Cheung et al. (2008) and Sussman and Siegal's (2003) proposed approach, the present study sought to fill a gap in the literature on this phenomenon in Brazil. Only after examining Brazilian consumer behavior can researchers identify these users' specific behaviors and detect differences from users in other countries, which this research proved to be the case.

Three hypotheses refuted in Cheung et al.'s (2008) study were confirmed by the present results: H2 (i.e., up-to-dateness → usefulness of information), H4 (comprehensiveness → usefulness of information), and H6 (source reliability → usefulness of information). These differences suggest that Brazilian consumers evaluate messages related to tourism differently than Chinese consumers evaluate messages related to restaurants and food services (Cheung et al., 2008). This opens up room for discussion about differences in what consumers in different online communities perceive as truly important in information adoption processes, as well as differences in consumer behavior in different countries.

In this context, the present study verified the strong impact of relevance on usefulness of information. Based on this result, online tourism platforms need to make an effort to highlight relevant information in reviews, in order to retain users' attention. For example, platforms can include a keywords field for each review. Thus, users who look for reviews of hotel or entertainment services, for example, could more easily filter the available reviews in order to read only those that are relevant.

Comprehensiveness also proved to have an impact on usefulness of information. Users want to obtain the largest possible quantity of information available on the product or service in which they are interested. Presenting a user-friendly summary of the main aspects evaluated in reviews of destinations, services or establishments could be a way to highlight comprehensiveness in tourism-related messages.

Businesses evaluated on eWOM platforms can, and should, constantly monitor their pages on these platforms to make sure that basic information such as address, telephone number, menu, and pricelist are always up-to-date. In addition, eWOM is an excellent way to obtain client feedback on products and services offered, which can produce better results than customer

satisfaction surveys carried out directly with consumers. Furthermore, interacting with customers on these online communities can also benefit tourism-related enterprises: by directly participating on conversations with online reviewers, answering doubts, solving problems or highlighting key aspects of their business, hotels, airlines, restaurants and other services can emphasize their commitment to providing better experiences for travelers and enhance consumer trust.

Finally, the results indicate that TripAdvisor users are not looking for experts' opinions, but rather the opinions of ordinary people like themselves. This leads to the conclusion that, in an eWOM environment, the source's expertise does not necessarily have a positive influence on perceived usefulness of messages, and, if reviews are perceived as commercially motivated, expertise can have a negative impact. Reviews, although often weak on a technical level, communicate authentic consumer experiences of particular products or services. Readers of these reviews believe they could have similar experiences, whether these are positive or negative, should they purchase the product or service in question.

The present study only surveyed one online consumer community in the tourism sector—TripAdvisor. Thus, other communities may not prove to have the same habits. As a suggestion for future lines of research, the proposed model could be tested in eWOM platforms focused on other areas of consumption. Other studies could verify if the relationships between the constructs examined in this study are specific or not to tourism. Further research also could verify differences in results for users who travel for business or pleasure.

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