

# Impact of e-WOM adoption on online customers' behavior through customers' positive attitude towards online travel agencies

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## ABSTRACT

Online consumer reviews provide a large amount of information for consumers to evaluate services before making a purchase. This study investigated the effect of electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) on online travel agencies (OTA), online accommodation booking behavior and the mediating role of customers' attitudes to OTA in predicting customer booking behavior. The survey data of 412 customers, who booked their accommodation on online travel agencies, is analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results show that e-WOM adoption has a positive influence on booking behavior, and customer attitude toward OTA has a mediating role in the relationship between e-WOM adoption and booking behavior. These results thereby emphasize the role of the OTA channel in online marketing services.

**KEYWORDS:** e-WOM adoption; customer attitude; online booking behavior; OTA

## 1. Introduction

Online customers' reviews have become extremely influential in persuading customers' decisions (Verma and Yadav, 2021). For example, 86% of consumers read reviews about local service businesses (BrightLocal, 2018). The exponential growth of Online customer review platforms (Online customer reviews – OCR) has stimulated a great deal of scholarly research. This research has provided evidence of the effect of OCR on consumer behavior, including information adoption, product preferences, and purchase intention (Fileri et al., 2015). Kozbe (2018) suggests that eWOM in the form of Online Consumer Review (OCR) has the advantage to distribute information more easily and quickly than conventional WOM, which is limited to a group of family and friends. There are diverse platforms for contributing OCR, including websites, blogs, discussion groups, and online forums, that are called user-generated content sites (UGCS). Thanks to the development of UGCSs, online travel agencies (OTAs) have greater influences on online travel behavior (Talwar et al., 2020). An online travel agency (OTA) is a website or an online application that sells travel services to customers. These services include hotel bookings, air tickets, tour booking, car rental services, currency exchange services, etc. An OTA is a third party that sells products to customers on behalf of traditional travel agencies and hotels (Lv et al., 2020). Pan et al. (2007) argued that online review channels such as OTA have become an important source of information for potential customers in the fields of hospitality and tourism.

This study mainly focused on understanding the impact of electronic word of mouth adoption (e-WOM adoption - EA) on online booking behavior (OB) on a special form of OCR, which are online travel agencies (OTA) and mediating role of customers' attitude toward OTA (CA). Most of the previous research efforts in the context of online services refer to

customers' attitude, almost all about attitudes towards e-WOM (Zainal et al., 2017) or attitudes towards the brand of the product/service (Ray et al., 2021). Our study analyzed the mediating role of customers' attitudes toward OTA. As suggested by the Extended Dual Mediation Hypothesis model, this study believes that customers' attitude towards OTA is an important mediator in online customer decision-making (Karson and Fisher, 2005). On the other hand, we argue that the effect of EA on online booking behavior, not behavioral intention as in some previous studies (Ismagilova et al., 2020, Lee and Hong, 2019, Leong et al., 2019) should be considered.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

### 2.1 Stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory

SOR theory, proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), draws from environmental psychology to present a theoretical explanation for consumer behavior. It posits that multiple environmental variables act as a stimulus (S), which influences the internal state of consumers (O), which, in turn, influences their behavioral response (R) (Kumar et al., 2021). Stimuli refer to the environmental changes that can influence consumers' physical and psychological well-being. Organism, meanwhile, refers to the internal processes and structures of individuals as expressed through thinking, perception, and feelings (Kumar et al., 2021). Finally, the response is the outcome of the stimulus and the organism (Jacoby, 2002). According to the SOR theory, individuals react to stimulus from environments in one of two general ways: approach behaviors include all positive actions, such as the desire to explore, stay, affiliate, or work, whereas averting behaviors include the opposite, such as the desire not to act positively (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). SOR theory extended by Jacoby (2002) describes more fully and flexibly consumer behavior, improving on some of the shortcomings and rigidity of previous SOR descriptions. This model assumes

that the perception and processing of input determine the response, not objective reality, and that emphasizes the role of information processing in SOR.

The SOR model has been widely used to examine the relationship between inputs (stimulus), processes (organism), and outputs (response). Some studies have been conducted on tourist behavior using the SOR model (Kumar et al., 2021). The SOR framework is suitable for elucidating tourist behavior and helps explore the factors related to the effect of e-WOM on those seeking them (Verma et al., 2021). The present study adopts this theory extended by Jacoby (2002) to understand better e-WOM adoption and booking behavior. The two main reasons behind our choice of theory were: first, SOR theory utilizes external stimuli that influence individuals' internal processes and structures, which then determine the desired behavioral response. This is crucial as the study reflects the perceived positive benefits of e-WOM adoption. Second, SOR delineates the unidirectional associations among its components, leading to the development of a framework to explain customers' online booking behavior. Furthermore, since SOR lends theoretical support to modelling the dynamic nature of consumer decision-making and captures the varying contours of consumer thought processes, spanning from environmental inputs to the internal state and, finally, an overt response, we contend that it is especially suitable for examining consumer behavior in online service context on OTA. Corresponding in SOR theory, e-WOM adoption, customers' attitudes and online booking behavior can be considered as the stimulus, organism, and response.

## 2.2 E-WOM and e-WOM adoption

E-WOM has been defined as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet' (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). E-WOM in the form of online reviews/comments (OCR) has attracted considerable attention from researchers over the past decade (Ismagilova et al., 2019).

A typical OCR platform in the travel industry is online travel agencies – OTA (e.g., Booking.com). They are a third party on behalf of the service provider to sell and allow their customers to write and publish reviews and ratings about the accommodation services that customers have purchased and experienced. The results of previous studies have concluded that OCR affects consumers' attitudes and behavior, including information adoption (Zhang and Watts, 2008), consideration and choose products (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009), brand awareness as well as product attitudes (Lee et al., 2008) and services (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009), and buying intention (Filieri et al., 2015). In this study, e-WOM is the post-purchase reviews of travelers who have experienced accommodation services on OTA.

An important concept in this study is e-WOM adoption (EA). Customers' adoption of e-WOM as online reviews can be defined as the level of awareness that consumers accept online reviews after knowingly evaluating the validity of reviews and using these reviews to make next purchasing decisions (Zhang and Watts, 2008). There is very little research on consumers' EA on third-party platforms like OTA in Vietnam. Besides, previous studies mainly considered EA as a final consequence in the concept model (Filieri and McLeay, 2014). In this study, we consider EA as the model's main antecedent and consider this factor's effect on OB on OTA.

## 2.3 Other research concepts

**Online booking behavior.** According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), behavior is an action that manifests reality, an observable action of the subject. Accordingly, the customer's online booking behavior is the outward behavior that can be observed through online ordering. In this study, online accommodation booking behavior on OTA (OB) is customers' behavior to book accommodation by visible action (in the past) on the OTA. Unlike many current studies that explore user intention, this paper aims to explain the actual behavioral outcomes. This is one of the new points that the study hopes to contribute to the flow of research on e-WOM.

**Positive customer attitude towards OTA.** Attitude is a psychological disposition accumulated by gathering information and continually evaluating objects (Petty et al., 2002). This shows that attitudes are continuous and consistent. Forming and changing a customer's attitude is a critical process in the organism stage of the SOR model (Jacoby, 2002). Therefore, this study chose to analyze the mediating role of positive customer attitudes towards OTA (CA) in the relationship between EA and OB.

## 2.4 Hypotheses and research models

**E-WOM adoption and Online booking behavior.** According to the extended SOR model (Jacoby, 2002), the response involves psychological results as well as behaviorally oriented responses. Thus, OB is a type of response to the stimuli from the EA on the OTA in the subsequent complex needed to change. This is the kind of beneficial response that every business manager wants. Most research on customer response in the service industry is often oriented towards psychological outcomes, while behavioral responses are more significant in marketing practice. This is evident in the famous AKLRCP model in measuring the effectiveness of marketing communications, all steps lead to the most important final response, which is the customer's buying behavior (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961). In the same opinion, a few reputable studies have confirmed that EA has a significant positive influence on online purchasing behavior (Tapanainen et al., 2021). On that basis, this study hypothesized:

*H<sub>1</sub>: E-WOM adoption has a positive effect on online booking behavior on OTA.*

**The mediating role of the customer's positive attitude toward OTA.** In the context of online communication through websites selling products/services, studies based on the extended dual mediation hypothesis - EDMH (Karson and Fisher, 2005) confirm the mediating role of customers' attitude toward websites in the impact of customer's perception of advertising information to their purchase intention (Lee et al., 2009). However, EDMH application studies are often focused on the field of marketing communications, not yet in the context of online services. Previous studies on online services have considered the role of the customer's attitude, but almost all about attitudes towards e-WOM (Zainal et al., 2017) or attitudes towards the brand of the product/service (Ray et al., 2021)... not the attitude towards the platform. Thus, the mediating role of attitudes towards platforms such as OTAs has not been given much attention in the context of online services. This study argues that customer attitudes toward OTA is mediating the relationship between EA and OB because OTA is similar to a website selling services. E-WOM on OTA is also considered a form of marketing communication. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Customers' attitude to OTA mediates the*

relationship between e-WOM adoption and online booking behavior.

The research hypotheses are modeled in Figure 1. It shows the independent, dependent, and mediating variables as hypothesized in this study.

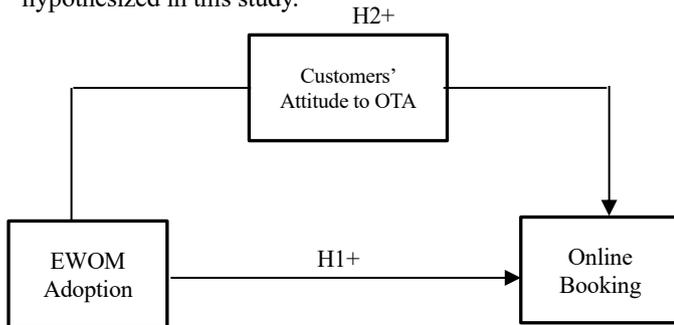


Figure 1. Proposed research model

### 3. Research setting

#### 3.1 Research Methods

This study mainly uses a quantitative method with SEM. Besides, the group discussion technique adjusted the scale to suit the research context in Vietnam. The scale and indicators used to measure constructs in this study have been shown to have high reliability in previous studies: EA indicators are adjusted from the scale of Cheung et al. (2009), CA scale was adapted from customer attitude scale to information channel (website) in Karson and Fisher (2005), OB scale was used based on DeLone and McLean (2016) and Bearden and Netemeyer (1999). The indicators in the scales are presented in the following Table 1:

Table 1. Indicators in scales

Indicators	Sources
<b>E-WOM adoption</b>	
E-WOM enriches my knowledge about service	Cheung et al. (2009)
E-WOM makes it easier for me to make decisions	
E-WOM helps me increase the effectiveness of my decisions	
E-WOM drives me to make decisions	
<b>Online booking behavior</b>	
I booked the service on this OTA	DeLone and McLean (2016) and Bearden and Netemeyer (1999)
I often book services on this OTA	
The experience of booking services on this OTA has a good impression	
I use this OTA to book services many times in 1 year	
<b>Positive customer attitude towards OTA</b>	
This OTA is very good	Karson and Fisher (2005)
This OTA is very interesting	
This OTA is full of information	
This OTA is trustworthy	

#### 3.2 Data collection

The questionnaire for this study, created on a Google form and attached to an email sent to the respondents, consisted mainly of closed-ended questions measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents need to satisfy two conditions: (1) customers who have booked service via the OTA channel in the

last 24 months and (2) have reference to e-WOM as online comments on OTA before making a decision. At first, the study approached the respondents by the method of judgment; that is, the respondents were filtered with some personal information before sending the questionnaire to ensure that the respondents met the conditions of the sample. Then, the snowball sampling method was used to expand the sample: based on the relationship of the respondents (who responded to the questionnaire) in the network of OTA users, we asked them to recommend us the next candidates that meet the criteria of the sample. In the official survey, 500 questionnaires were sent, and 457 were collected. Of which 45 responses were rejected for various reasons such as exceptions or lack of information, 412 responses were usable. The usefulness rate is 82.4%.

#### 3.3 Data processing

PLS-SEM was chosen as the quantitative analysis technique in this study because of its advantages, such as efficient analysis in complex cases and a limited amount of information obtained due to sample conditions (Joreskog, 1982), more effectiveness in behavioral and marketing research because it does not require normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2017).

### 4. Research results

Quantitative data collected above is the basis for analyzing and testing research models and hypotheses using Smart-PLS software. Specifically, the quantitative analysis steps are based on Hair et al.'s criteria and analytical procedures. This process includes (1) Assessing the reliability and validity of the scale by Cronbach's Alpha and outer loading coefficient, heterotrait-monotrait correlation ratio (HTMT) (2) Evaluation of multicollinearity by variance impact factor (VIF), (3) Analysis of partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM), and (4) Evaluation of R<sup>2</sup>, f<sup>2</sup>, Q<sup>2</sup> for the fit of the research model.

#### 4.1 Sample characteristics

Sample characteristics are suitable for sample screening conditions. The study shows that they are a young and dynamic customer group, with 93.9% of respondents aged 18–35. This age structure is similar to the study in the tourism field of Filieri and McLeay (2014) with 94.4% of respondents under 35 years old. Regarding gender, 68% of respondents are female. There are 50.7% with income below 5 million, 23.4% from 5 million to 10 million, and 25.9% with income over 10 million. Regarding education, 75% of respondents have university and college degrees, and 25% have graduate degrees. The research sample's characteristics are similar to the survey on tourism consumption behavior in Vietnam by the market research company Q&Me (2021), which shows that the majority of online travel booking customers are young and more than 50% are female. Therefore, the research sample highly represents the overall customer ordering online services on OTAs in Vietnam.

#### 4.2 Evaluation of scale's reliability and validity

The steps to verify the reliability and validity of the scale in this study include testing the reliability, convergence validity, and discriminant validity. The results in Table 2 show that the scales achieve reliability. Cronbach's alpha values are significant when greater than 0.7, and the scale's composite reliability (CR) is more than 0.7. At the same time, the outer loading of all items is above 0.708 and the Average Variance

Extracted (AVE) is significant when greater than 0.5. Thus, the convergent value of all structures is obtained.

**Table 2.** Reliability and internal validity of the scales

	CA	EA	OB	CrA	CR	AVE
CA – Customer Attitude						
CA1	0.919					
CA2	0.930					
CA3	0.842			0.928	0.949	0.824
CA4	0.937					
EA – EWOM Adoption						
EA1		0.905				
EA2		0.940				
EA3		0.914		0.933	0.952	0.832
EA4		0.888				
OB – Online Booking behavior						
OB1			0.819			
OB2			0.851			
OB3			0.822	0.859	0.904	0.702
OB4			0.858			

Note: CrA = Cronbach’s Alpha; CR Composite Reliability

Hair et al. (2017) suggested that HTMT could be used to assess discriminant validity. The HTMT describes the relationship between the two constructs in the study. Table 3 shows that the maximum value of HTMT is 0.594, which is lower than 0.85. Therefore, all constructs have a good discriminant.

**Table 3.** HTMT test results

	CA	EA
CA		
EA	0.584	
OB	0.594	0.474

Note: CA: Customer Attitude; EA: EWOM Adoption; OB: Online Booking behavior

**4.3 Multi-collinear evaluation**

The independent variables must not have an exact linear relationship with each other. If this assumption is violated, multi-collinearity will occur, the phenomenon where endogenous variables in the model depend on each other linearly. The VIF coefficient of the highest conceptual structures is 1.423, less than 3, showing that multi-collinearity among endogenous variables does not affect the testing of research hypotheses.

**4.4 Test the effect of EWOM adoption on Online booking behavior**

Research using Bootstrapping procedure by Hair et al. (2017) proposed, with a subsample of 1000 elements. The path coefficient representing the effect of EA on OB is 0.191, with 99% confidence (as shown in Table 4). Therefore, it can be concluded that hypothesis H1 is accepted.

**Table 4.** The effect of EA on OB

	Original Sample	Standard Deviation	P Values	H1 Result
EA -> OB	0.191	0.065	0.003	Accepted

Note: EA: EWOM Adoption; OB: Online Booking behavior

**4.5 Test the mediating role of customers' attitude toward OTA**

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a variable is determined to play a mediating role if it satisfies the following three conditions at the same time:

- o Condition 1: The independent variable impacts the mediating variable (a ≠ 0).

- o Condition 2: The mediating variable has an impact on the dependent variable (b ≠ 0).

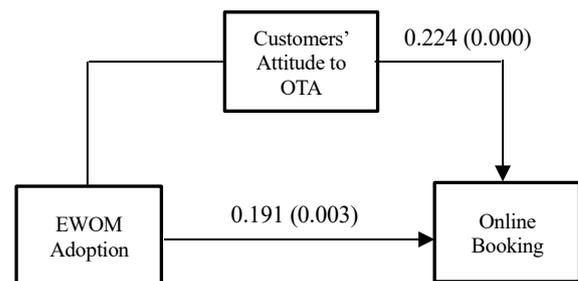
- o Condition 3: The presence of a mediating variable will reduce the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable (c' < c), where c' is the regression coefficient from the independent variable X on the dependent variable Y in the presence of the mediating variable M.

The techniques to test the mediation relationship were implemented as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). According to the analysis results in Table 5, the mediating effect of CA in the relationship between EA and OB was confirmed at the 1% statistical significance (p-value=0.000 < 0.01) with the regression coefficient normalize 0.224. Thus, hypothesis H2 is supported.

**Table 5.** The mediating role of customers' attitude toward OTA

Indirect Effect		Total indirect Effect		Total Effect		Result
Beta	P-value	Beta	P-value	Beta	P-value	
EA -> CA -> OB						
0.224	0.000					Accepted
EA -> OB						
		0.260	0.000	0.426	0.000	

Thus, after the tests, the hypotheses in the proposed research model are supported: E-WOM adoption has a positive effect on online booking behavior on OTA, and customers' attitude to OTA mediates the relationship between e-WOM adoption and online booking behavior, as shown in Figure 2:



**Figure 2.** Result of research model

#### 4.6 Evaluation of $R^2$ , $f^2$ , $Q^2$

According to Hair et al. (2017), PLS-SEM does not have a fit measure for the entire model. Instead, the quality of the model is evaluated through  $R^2$ ,  $f^2$ , and  $Q^2$  values. These calculations evaluate the explanatory and predictive level of endogenous structure. The results  $R^2$ ,  $f^2$ , and  $Q^2$  show that the structural model is suitable. First, the study examines the  $R^2$  value of the endogenous latent variables. In behavioral research, an  $R^2$  value of 0.2 is considered high. The  $R^2$  value in this study explaining the OB equal to 0.313 is relatively high. Second,  $Q^2$  indicates the endogenous latent variable's explanatory power and predictive power. The value of  $Q^2$  measuring EA explaining OB is 0.211 greater than 0, meaning that the model has a predictive fit. Finally,  $f^2$  measures the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The  $f^2$  values are 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, representing small, moderate, and significant levels. If the  $f^2$  value is less than 0.02, the independent variables have no effect on the dependent variable. The  $f^2$  value that measures the effect of EA and CA on the independent variable OB is 0.138 and 0.194, both higher than 0.02. Thus, the model is fit with market data.

#### 5. Discussion and managerial implications

Research results have confirmed a positive effect of e-WOM adoption on online booking behavior with impact coefficient  $P=0.191$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0.003$  ( $H_1$  is accepted with 99% confidence). Additionally, the research results also support the mediating role of customers' attitudes towards OTA in the relationship between e-WOM adoption and online booking behavior with an indirect effect of  $P=0.224$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0.000$  ( $H_2$  is accepted with 99% confidence).

In the context of this research, e-WOM adoption, customer's attitude, and online booking behavior can be considered as a stimulus, subject evaluation, and response, respectively, in SOR. If customers adopt e-WOM and consider it an important reference source, it will affect their positive attitude towards OTA, which will promote booking behavior. Therefore, the research results are consistent with the theoretical background of SOR, EDMH, and previous studies in the online context.

This research implicates for the accommodation managers about allocating resources to the e-WOM communication channel on the OTA as a preferred channel for the customers as well as learning more about the customer's e-WOM adoption motivations, thereby driving their online booking behavior. The discovery of the mediating effect of positive customer attitude is a new point in this study and suggests to the accommodation managers that: The business performance of the services on OTA is highly dependent on customers' impression of this platform. Therefore, accommodation managers need to choose to cooperate with reputable OTAs with good service quality, high reliability. They also need to choose OTAs that have effective policies in encouraging online comments. That makes it easy for customers to adopt e-WOM, appreciate and have a good impression of the OTA, thereby promoting their booking behavior.

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