

Electronic word-of-mouth associated with customer loyalty in the Peruvian tourism sector

Boca a boca electrónico asociado a la lealtad de los clientes en el sector turístico peruano

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ABSTRACT

This research proposes to determine the relationship between electronic word of mouth and customer loyalty in a company in the Peruvian tourism sector. A basic, quantitative, correlational, non-experimental and cross-sectional study was carried out; the sample corresponded to 384 tourists. Spearman's rho correlation was applied for categorical data. Among the results, the existence of a positive and significant correlation of credibility ($\rho=0.722$), information quality ($\rho=0.744$), trust ($\rho=0.727$) and perceived usefulness ($\rho=0.723$) with the loyalty of the clients stands out. It is concluded that electronic word of mouth is moderately associated with loyalty, making it an efficient alternative to increase the intention and loyalty of visitors to tourist sites.

Keywords: eWOM, tourism, loyalty, digital media, information.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación propone determinar la relación entre el boca a boca electrónico y la lealtad de los clientes en una empresa del sector turístico peruano. Se realizó un estudio básico, cuantitativo, correlacional, no experimental y transversal; la muestra correspondió a 384 turistas. Se aplicó la correlación de rho de Spearman para datos categóricos. Entre los resultados se destaca la existencia de correlación positiva y significativa de la credibilidad ($\rho=0,722$), calidad de información ($\rho=0,744$), confianza ($\rho=0,727$) y utilidad percibida ($\rho=0,723$), con la lealtad de los clientes. Se concluye que el boca a boca electrónico se asocia moderadamente a la lealtad, por lo que es una alternativa eficiente para incrementar la intención y lealtad de visitantes a sitios turísticos.

Palabras clave: eWOM, turismo, fidelización, medios digitales; información.

INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Organization estimates that between June and July 2022, 207 million international trips were registered, favoring the post-pandemic recovery of the tourism sector (World Tourism Organization [WTO], 2022). This panorama reflects that tourism is an important and vital source of revenue for different countries, being considered a significant factor in the growth and diversification of the local economy (Caldevilla-Domínguez et al., 2021; Momani et al., 2022). With the digital era, this sector has taken greater momentum in the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as a key element of competitiveness, generating advantages in the management and commercialization of tourism services (Gössling, 2017, 2021).

Thus, among the various digital components incorporated in the tourism industry, electronic marketing and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) are widely discussed topics worldwide (Cunha et al., 2022; Kerdpitak, 2022; Khalayleh and Al-Hawary, 2022; Mohanty et al., 2022), because they play an active role in attracting the attention of tourists through the use of the internet or social networks, and create a bidirectional communication that can influence consumer behavior (Fuaddah et al., 2022; Verma and Yadav, 2021).

In this context, the tourism market faces the need to incorporate, use and adequately leverage technological tools, given the demands of online consumers who request to acquire or compare tourism packages, products or services in real time (Zambrano Paladines et al., 2019). This impact of ICT is also an influential factor in tourist loyalty, as it determines satisfaction and positive disposition and future willingness to re-require a service or recommend it (Santos Roldán et al., 2021).

Villarroel Puma and Berenguer Contri (2020) confirm the positive impact of eWOM on brand trust and capital, generated in virtual social networks, sustaining that its diffusion about positive experiences contributes to the good perception and trust of new consumers. Meanwhile, Moliner-Velázquez et al. (2019) state that the adoption of ICT positively affects customer loyalty, and especially, eWOM behavior; the latter also promotes satisfaction and loyalty, a reality that Kanwel et al. (2019) also report regarding the positive relationship between destination image, tourist loyalty, intention to visit, eWOM, and tourist satisfaction. In Peru, there is scarce research and almost no publication

of scientific articles on eWOM in the tourism sector, creating an information gap. This reality led to scientific intervention through the study of eWOM and loyalty variables in the Taytamaki tourism company, located in the district of Tarapoto, San Martín region, Peru. Among the services provided, bird watching and extreme sports stand out, being highly visited by locals and international tourists. Taytamaki uses Facebook as the main social means of tourism promotion, and given the literature (Hatta et al., 2022; Hoskins and Watts, 2022; Khoa, 2022; Lee et al., 2022), it is proposed that eWOM has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

This research proposes as the main objective to determine the relationship between eWOM and customer loyalty in Taytamaki, and the specific objectives of establishing the relationship of the dimensions of quantity of information, credibility, quality of information, trust, attitude towards the seller, intention to repurchase, and perceived utility with loyalty.

eWOM

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) point out that eWOM is "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions through the internet" (p. 39). For their part, Forman et al. (2008) indicate that eWOM is "positive or negative information about a product obtained from other consumers" (p.291). Litvin et al. (2008), on the other hand, define eWOM as "all informative communications directed to X consumers through internet-based technologies related to the use or characteristics of goods and services, or their sellers" (p. 461).

Babić Rosario et al. (2020) identified, based on the analysis of 1050 articles published between 1996 and 2019 in 86 different media, differences in diffusion. 59% of publications on eWOM are focused on market and consumer research, 23% on information systems and informatics, 11.5% on economics and management, and 6.5% on tourism. The authors affirm that the wide literature on eWOM has led to definitions and theorizations that differ in scope and reference to the particular elements of eWOM: message, source, receiver, and channel. Therefore, they offer the following revised definition: "eWOM is consumption-related communication generated by the consumer that employs digital tools and is primarily directed at other consumers" (p. 6).

eWOM is not simply a way of sharing general information;

on the contrary, it should be conceptualized as useful for transmitting content, with or without commercial implications, even if the content generated by the online consumer is not a recommendation about a product or service for other consumers (Babić Rosario et al., 2020).

Customer loyalty

Historically, the concept of customer loyalty was defined as frequent purchases, but the literature has since evolved to consider multiple dimensions, including behavioral, attitudinal, and composite. The attitudinal component has been defined as a deeply ingrained commitment to repurchase a specific product, service, or brand (Oli-ver, 1999), and has been linked to a sense of emotional, psychological, and attachment-based commitment (Aksoy et al., 2015).

Customer loyalty is a constant concern. In the current competitive environment, where switching costs are low and customers can compare offers and price levels more transparently (Grewal et al., 2017), customer loyalty seems increasingly difficult to achieve. However, customer loyalty is often considered one of the key outcomes of a successful customer relationship management program. In the retail context, where customers make repeated purchases, understanding customer loyalty and how to influence it is essential.

Customer loyalty, as a theoretical construct, has also been recurrent in marketing literature (Audrain-Pontevia and Vanhuele, 2016). Loyalty according to Watson et al. (2015), based on a meta-review of previous research, is a collection of attitudes aligned with a series of purchasing behaviors that systematically favor an entity over competing entities. Nevertheless, loyalty has been defined from the perspective of the company, and has been discussed as a dependent variable (i.e., as an outcome) rather than examining the construct at a deeper level from the customer's perspective (Närvänen et al., 2020).

Based on the conceptualizations outlined, the general hypothesis was formulated: The relationship between eWOM and customer loyalty in Taytamaky is positive and significant; and the specific hypotheses are:

- H1: There is a positive and significant relationship between the amount of information and customer loyalty.
- H2: There is a positive and significant relationship between credibility and customer loyalty.
- H3: There is a positive and significant relationship between

the quality of information and customer loyalty.

- H4: There is a positive and significant relationship between trust and customer loyalty.
- H5: There is a positive and significant relationship between attitude towards the seller and customer loyalty.
- H6: There is a positive and significant relationship between intention to repurchase and customer loyalty.
- H7: There is a positive and significant relationship between perceived usefulness and customer loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

The research was of a basic nature, with a quantitative approach, correlational level, and non-experimental - cross-sectional design, based on Hernández Sampieri et al. (2014). Since it aimed to expand and deepen existing theories on eWOM and customer loyalty in the tourism sector, it relied on data collection and processing, and sought to correlate variables and dimensions without manipulation at a specific moment.

The sample population consisted of 384 local and international tourists selected through intentional non-probabilistic sampling, who responded to the instruments in the field during January and February 2023. Tourists over 18 years of age participated, of whom 68% were male, and the average age was 27 years.

The survey was used as a data collection technique, and two questionnaires were employed as instruments. For the eWOM variable, 29 items were defined, distributed across seven dimensions (information quantity, credibility, information quality, trust, attitude towards the seller, repurchase intention, and perceived usefulness), adapted from the study by Matute Vallejo et al. (2015). Regarding the customer loyalty variable, 19 items were defined, distributed across four dimensions (cognitive loyalty, affective loyalty, conative loyalty, and action loyalty), adapted from the study by Hinson et al. (2016).

The instruments were validated by the judgment of five experts using the Delphi method, obtaining an average score of 4.7 on a scale from 1 to 5 (Likert scale). The reliability test of Cronbach's Alpha was also applied through a pilot test with 50 individuals sharing the characteristics of the sample unit, resulting in 0.989 and 0.991 for eWOM and customer loyalty, respectively. Both questionnaires had an ordinal Likert-type rating scale with the following

options: 1) Always, 2) Almost always, 3) Sometimes, 4) Almost never, and 5) Never. The instruments can be requested from the corresponding author.

The collected data were coded and categorized in Microsoft Excel 2016 and then transferred to the statistical software SPSS v. 26. In SPSS, the correlation between variables was determined using the Spearman's rho test for categorical-ordinal data (Reguant-Álvarez et al., 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSION

Correlation between eWOM dimensions and customer loyalty

Table 1 summarizes the correlations found between the eWOM dimensions and customer loyalty at Taytamaki tourism company. The results confirm the existence of moderate to strong relationships (Martínez Ortega et al., 2009) between the quantity of information, credibility, information quality, trust, attitude towards the seller, intention to repurchase, and perceived usefulness with customer loyalty. The correlation coefficients were positive ($\rho > 0$) and significant ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$), thus supporting all the specific hypotheses proposed.

Table 1: Correlation of eWOM dimensions with customer loyalty

Dimensions of eWOM	Customer loyalty	
Amount of information	Spearman's rho	0.697**
	p-value	0.000
	N	384
Credibility	Spearman's rho	0.722**
	p-value	0.000
	N	384
Information quality	Spearman's rho	0.744**
	p-value	0.000
	N	384
Trust	Spearman's rho	0.727**
	p-value	0.000
	N	384
Attitude towards the seller	Spearman's rho	0.658**
	p-value	0.000
	N	384
Intention to repurchase	Spearman's rho	0.690**
	p-value	0.000
	N	384
Perceived usefulness	Spearman's rho	0.723**
	p-value	0.000
	N	384

** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

The amount of information and customer loyalty showed a positive correlation coefficient of 0.697; a result that is related to the research of Otero Gómez and Giraldo Pérez (2020), who showed that there is a relationship between eWOM communications that young people hold and their intention to repurchase ($\beta=0.593$; $\beta=0.497$). According to Sharma and Aggarwal (2019), eWOM is an electronic means of disseminating information about a product or service among potential customers by customers who have used the same products or services. In this sense, the findings of Otero Gómez and Giraldo Pérez (2020) coincide in demonstrating that communication is fundamental within eWOM, since it affects user behavior, both in terms of repurchase intention and loyalty, and that it is a key element in promoting places of interest and creating loyalty bonds. Therefore, the more information, the greater the loyalty that can be obtained.

Regarding customer credibility and loyalty, a positive correlation coefficient of 0.722 was obtained; a finding that coincides with that reported by García Pascual et al. (2019), who identified that eWOM is a significant predictor of satisfaction ($\beta=0.28$), price value ($\beta=0.23$), and emotional value ($\beta=0.46$). Since credibility is a factor of eWOM evaluated by the user to determine their satisfaction and therefore obtain their loyalty, these elements converge in the same environment that determines both user satisfaction and loyalty. In agreement, for the user to be able to accept a new place through eWOM, they must have credibility obtained through the usefulness and ease of use that they perceived, which could generate satisfaction and, consequently, loyalty because their needs are met.

Regarding the quality of information and customer loyalty, a positive correlation coefficient of 0.744 was evident. Carpio Maraza et al. (2019) affirm that connectivity is the main marketing strategy that contributes to brand positioning on the Internet; however, 43.75% disseminate relevant topics, 18.75% attractive promotions, and only 12.50% respond to opinions and suggestions from users or customers, which contributes to moderate brand positioning of tourist restaurants by 50.0%. Theoretically, this can be explained because eWOM plays a role as a communicator of a particular product or service, which drives sharing messages about a brand to a wider audience. Under these ideas, the results show that the quality of information that users receive through eWOM is a crucial element to condition their loyalty.

Regarding the correlation coefficient between trust and customer loyalty, a positive relationship of 0.727 was found; a finding that coincides with the study by El-Baz et al. (2022), who showed that eWOM is a conditioning element of brand credibility ($p < 0.01$) and, for this to be possible, the user must have confidence in the organization and the provision of services, which leads to their loyalty. In this sense, trust is a predictor factor of user loyalty, but it is pertinent to consider elements such as quality, quantity, usefulness, and credibility of the data they perceive.

On the other hand, the attitude towards the seller and customer loyalty showed a positive correlation coefficient of 0.658; results that are related to the research by Rojas León and Calderón Fernández (2021), who demonstrated that phrases such as "The customer is always right," "Tell me what you need and we'll find it for you," "You order and I obey," among others, used to please the consumer, demonstrate that they are effective verbal strategies in the proper handling of customer service, producing success in satisfaction and loyalty with the service or product provider. This is explained in the study by Serra-Cantallops et al. (2018), who showed that positive emotional experiences have a positive effect on satisfaction, eWOM generation, and company reputation.

Regarding the intention to repurchase and customer loyalty, a positive correlation coefficient of 0.690 was identified. This reality is argued by Anaya-Sánchez et al. (2020), who indicate that the intention to repurchase is influenced by the credibility, quality, and quantity of eWOM, these being benefits from someone who depends on the transmitted message. The evidence from García Pascual et al. (2019) coincides with the reported finding, since the intention to repurchase is influenced by satisfaction, and the more purchases the user makes, the more likely they are to be loyal to the organization. Accordingly, the user's intention to repurchase is influenced by a number of factors that must be considered when offering a product or service, since it affects the loyalty that the customer may present.

The perceived usefulness dimension of eWOM also showed a positive correlation coefficient of 0.723 with customer loyalty, coinciding with the research of Kuo and Nakhata (2019) and Yen and Tang (2015), who demonstrate that while the experience through eWOM is positive, users perceive better usefulness and a higher degree of satisfaction, and this element conditions loyalty. From this, it is explained that the perceptions that the user has

about the usefulness of the product or service are essential in determining customer loyalty.

Correlation between eWOM and customer loyalty

Table 2 shows that it is possible to reject the null hypothesis (H0) and conclude that the eWOM variable is positively and significantly related to loyalty. The strength of the relationship is rated as a considerable positive correlation equal to 0.746, with a significance level of 0.000 and a 95% confidence level.

Table 2: Correlation between eWOM and customer loyalty

	Customer loyalty	
eWOM	Spearman's rho	0.746**
	p-value	0.000
	N	384

This finding is related to the research of Viera and Moreno (2020) who demonstrate that the influence of IAM on word-of-mouth communication is positive, as the shared information about a product or service is reflected in the consumer's response. Similarly, it agrees with the findings of García Pascual et al. (2019) who demonstrated that WoM is significantly predicted by satisfaction ($\beta=0.28$), as well as with the evidence of Fernández Bedoya et al. (2019), who showed that there is a relationship between both variables ($X^2=28.424$).

According to Black and Veloutsou (2017), customer loyalty is seen as the value of the co-creation experience outcome. From this, it can be inferred that loyalty is not only predicted by situations or factors, but it is a process of creation between the user and third parties that generate positive comments towards the place, product, or service of interest.

Limitations

This research identifies three limitations to consider for future studies: 1) The results obtained in the specific context of Taytamaki company may not be generalizable to other industries or tourism contexts, as different countries, cultures, and economic conditions can have variable influences on eWOM and customer loyalty; 2) The tourism sector is dynamic and subject to economic, political, and social changes, which can influence customer behavior and the effect of eWOM on their loyalty; and 3) It is essen-

tial to collect sociodemographic data and explore possible associations in tourist behavior, such as how gender, age range, or economic status influence eWOM and loyalty.

CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates the existence of a positive and significant relationship between eWOM via Facebook and customer loyalty in a Peruvian tourism sector company. This means that the greater the positive presence of eWOM, the greater the loyalty of tourists towards a product or service. For this, it is important that customer communication online satisfies other consumers through the amount of information, credibility, quality of information, trust, attitude towards the seller, intention to re-purchase and/or perceived usefulness.

The findings confirm the usefulness and effectiveness of eWOM as a digital mechanism to guide and retain customers in the acquisition of tourism products or services based on positive comments disseminated through social networks. Its strategic integration in the tourism sector, using platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc., could generate great competitive advantages, by making available information on positive experiences and satisfaction that impact the decision-making of new customers.

Future research is recommended in the tourism sector involving the design and implementation of eWOM plans or strategies to increase customer loyalty, brand positioning, destination image, or other dependent variables. Likewise, the combination of consumer experiences through eWOM and influencers as digital marketing tools could improve brand management.

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