

Determinants of Electronic word of mouth (EWOM) influence on hotel customers' purchasing decision

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Abstract

Research has widely demonstrated that personal sources of information like EWOM are more influential than traditional advertising. The potential impact of others' opinions has dramatically increased with the development of the internet. Since the hospitality and tourism products and services contain more interpersonal interaction that needs to be experienced by consumers, the influence of EWOM in hospitality industry is more significant than in other industries. However, very little is known about what makes certain opinions more influential than other. The purpose of this paper is to examine the determinants of electronic word of mouth influence on hotel customer purchasing decision. To achieve this goal, the study used a questionnaire to collect data from 500 hotel customers in Sharm-elshikh as one of the touristic destinations in Egypt. It has employed linear regression to measure the influence of EWOM determinants on hotel customer purchasing decision.

The study results show that the influence of EWOM depends on source credibility, valence, and volume of information obtained from EWOM. Also we find that there is a relationship between receiver characteristics like receiver expertise and EWOM influence. The results further indicate that the type of website and type of the product which EWOM are about has a significant impact on EWOM influence. The findings of the paper provide information to managers and marketers from hotels as to why there is a necessity to pay close attention to what being said about them via EWOM and also how to effectively manage their online presence.

Keywords: electronic word of mouth, determinants of influence, purchasing decision, hospitality industry.

Introduction

Over the past years, the marketing environment has been facing significant changes. Every feature of the New Economy, from globalization to digitization, from new retailing techniques to internet shopping, from fierce competition to market saturation has dramatically altered not only how consumers buy but also what they buy and why (Lewis and Bridger, 2011), Also the internet has changed the way in which consumers search for goods and services. Many people now will simply type what they are looking for into the search engine and

what they find will have an influence on their purchase decision (Cantallops and Salvi, 2014). At the center of these changes in marketing environment, word-of-mouth has emerged as a significant factor and been one of the mostly debated topics in marketing literature (López and Sicilia, 2014). Several studies proved evidence to its high impact on consumer behavior, and marketers agreed upon its power to change the future of marketing communication (Sirma et al., 2009; Sweeney, 2014).

By the advent of the internet the concept of EWOM has emerged. Since, EWOM spread faster and wider it has more powerful impact on consumers' decision making process (Pourabedin and Migin, 2015). As with the traditional WOM, EWOM has shown to have more impact compared to firm-generated sources of information on the internet. It is also more effective than traditional advertising media, which appears to be losing its effectiveness (López and Sicilia, 2014).

In the tourism and hospitality industry, it is undeniable that its products' special intangible characteristics make the consumer behavior patterns quite complicated and thus, increase the power of WOM and EWOM (Sirma et al., 2009). Also since the hospitality and tourism products and services contain more interpersonal interaction that needs to be experienced by consumers, the influence of EWOM in the hospitality industry is more significant than in other industries (Litvin et al., 2008; Wu, 2013).

In light of EWOM's reach and influence, it is interesting to study how EWOM works in tourism and hospitality industry and what makes certain opinions more influential than others. In addition, hoteliers are becoming increasingly interested in extending their understanding of EWOM in order to use it as a new marketing tool. This paper analyzes the determinants of eWOM influence on hotel customers' purchasing decision. This analysis will allow us to generate suggestions about how hotels can take advantage of eWOM. It is critical that as the method of word of mouth communication continues to grow that managers and marketers in hospitality react to the reviews posted on these open forums.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Word of mouth

Word of mouth has been recognized as one of the most influential resources of information transmission since the beginning of human society (Yaylı and Bayram, 2012). It is also often mentioned to be the most important information source when consumer is making a purchase decision and one of the oldest forms of marketing (Sirma et al., 2009). Literature about WOM dates to the 1960s (Arndt, 1967; Dichter, 1966), although even in fifties Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) published "personal influence" in order to understand how consumers can influence each other.

Over the time WOM definitions have introduced. In the early years Arndt (1967) defined WOM as "*face-to-face communication about product or companies between those people who were not commercial entities*". Later Westbrook (1987) defined WOM more broadly, to include "*all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers*". While Westbrook did not specifically define what constitute 'all informal communications ', his writing clearly explained that these are the communications of interpersonal relationships, as opposed to those through mass-media channels that pass product knowledge from producers\ providers to consumers (Litvin et al., 2008). The word of mouth marketing association (WOMMA) has defined WOM as "*the act of a consumer creating and or\or distributing marketing-relevant information to another consumer*" (WOMMA, 2008). In this study we accept the broadest and one of the most recent of definitions: *WOM is the communication between consumers about a product, service, or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence* (Litvin et al., 2008).

Electronic word of mouth

The advances of information technology and the emergence of online network sites have profoundly changed the way information is exchanged and have transcended the traditional limitations of WOM (Shin, 2007; Heyne, 2009; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Magalhaes and Musallam, 2014). Nowadays consumer can share their product-related experiences on the internet through e-mail, bulletin boards, chat rooms, forums, fan clubs, brand and user groups (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Wu, 2013).

Internet has led word of mouth to be simultaneously ubiquitous and removed necessity of physically present anywhere (Heyne, 2009; Torlak et al., 2014). This new trend is named electronic word of mouth, The studies demonstrated that EWOM has a critical role on consumer' preferences and behavioral intentions (Pedersen et al., 2014; Severi et al., 2014; Torlak et al., 2014). Lin et al. (2013) shows that EWOM may have higher credibility, empathy, and relevance than marketer-created sources of information. In tourism and hospitality industry, the advancements of internet technologies increased the number of travelers are using the internet to seek destination information and to conduct transactions online (Basarani, 2011; Wu, 2013; Le, 2014). According to the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), 67 percent of US travelers have used the internet to seek information about destinations, hotels, or check prices. Even more impressively, 41 percent of US travelers have used the internet to book at least some aspects of their trips (TIA, 2005).

Among the definitions introduced to describe EWOM, Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004) defined EWOM as *"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 via the internet"*. also Litvin et al., (2008) defined EWOM as *"all informal communications directed at consumers through internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers"* this includes communication between producers and consumers as well as those between consumers themselves, both integral parts of the WOM flow and both distinctly differentiated from communications through mass media (Litvin et al., 2008; Magalhaes and Musallam, 2014).

Determinants of E-WOM influence

While EWOM has a powerful influence on customers, several factors enhance its influence (Sweeney et al., 2008; López and Sicilia, 2011; Lin et al., 2013). Marketing literature has widely studied the determinants of traditional WOM influence (Bansal and Voyer, 2000) which may differ from those of online WOM. The first to be considered is information source. Traditional WOM research has established the importance of the information source in this communication process (Sweeney et al., 2008). Unlike traditional WOM, the information source in eWOM is anonymous, which further enhances the role of source credibility in this communication process. Therefore, the impact of source credibility cannot be ignored in this context. Another important determinant relates to receiver expertise. While some previous studies supported that receiver expertise has negative impact in EWOM effectiveness (Fan and Miao, 2012; Zhu and Zhang, 2010), some others state that receiver expertise has a positive impact on EWOM influence (Yang, n.d.), which needs for further investigation. The ability of WOM to operate within a consumer network appears to be influenced by the tie strength, or the intensity of the social relationship between consumers (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Sweeney et al., 2008), and by how similar (homophily) or dissimilar such consumers are in terms of their backgrounds, opinions, likes and dislikes.

The study also consider the characteristics that are related to the communication process as determinants of e-WOM influence. Hence, two of the most important WOM attributes that have been examined in the literature: valence and volume will be examined. Valence captures the nature of the information, i.e. whether it is positive or negative, and volume refers to the number of posted messages. These variables have usually been studied using objective data, thereby providing inconclusive results. Several studies have shown that positive EWOM valence impacts on product sales , while other

studies have found no evidence for this relationship (López and Sicilia, 2014). Therefore, this paper tries to clarify the inconsistent results found in the literature by studying valence and volume as perceived by consumers.

Based on previous studies, online consumer opinions can be found on two types of websites: firm-sponsored websites, where the product or service is sponsored or commercialized (e.g. Amazon.com); and third parties websites, where the product or service is not sponsored or commercialized (Adjei et al., 2010; Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Thus we think that type of website has impact on EWOM influence. Finally, Previous researcher has shown that the influence of EWOM is more important in hospitality and tourism industry due to the nature of the product in hospitality industry (Litvin et al., 2008; Sweeney, 2014). Also literatures classify goods and products into tangible/intangible, high risk/less risk, and very complex/less complex products (Senecal and Nantel, 2004; Adjei et al., 2010; Karimi, 2013). So it's important to investigate the role of this classification into EWOM impact.

These determinants are described below in details.

Perceived source credibility

Literatures stated that source credibility is the most frequently investigated determinant associated with the information source (Cheung and Thadani, 2010, 2012). Some literatures also have shown that source credibility determines communication effectiveness (Akyüz, 2013; Park et al., 2011). Therefore, source credibility has been considered a crucial determinant of EWOM influence (Menkveld, 2013; Sweeney et al., 2008). Source credibility is defined as " *a message recipient's perception of the credibility of a message source reflecting nothing about the message itself*" (Chaiken, 1980). Ayeh et al., (2013) stated that credibility can simply be defined as believability of some information and or its source. The literatures show that the concept has been implied in different contexts to different entities including human, media, technology and information (Ayeh et al., 2013; López and Sicilia, 2014). A review of extant literature shows that there is several terms and dimensions which have been established and used in the literatures to describe source credibility such as source expertise (Ruiterkamp, 2013; Yang, n.d.), source trustworthiness (Chu and Kim, 2011; Fan and Miao, 2012), reviewer quality, reviewer reputation (Hu et al., 2008), and type of recommendation source (Litvin et al., 2008).

In tourism and hospitality context, EWOM presents some challenges related to credibility (Ayeh et al., 2013). On one hand, tourists may believe EWOM to be credible because it originates from other tourists who are considered as having no commercial interest (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). On the other hand, and in contrast of traditional WOM, EWOM is not obtained from strong tie groups as

family or friends (Cheung and Thadani, 2010). Any consumer can reach and exchange product or service related information with a vast and geographically dispersed group of strangers which calls for the problem of manipulation and abuse by some service providers (Litvin et al., 2008). From the dimensions used to describe source credibility, two major dimensions (source expertise and source trustworthiness) are usually used as critical components of credibility (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004; Cheung and Thadani, 2010; Shabsogh et al., 2012; Ayeh et al., 2013; Akyüz, 2013; Wu, 2013; López and Sicilia, 2014). So we will discuss them in some details.

Source expertise

Expertise refers to "*the perceived ability of the source to make valid assertion*" (Ruiterkamp, 2013). Which is mean, the extent to which a reader perceives the communicator to provide valid information about a certain topic. (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004) also defined expertise as "*the ability to perform product related tasks successfully*". Literatures suggested that expertise of the source would affect the consumers' attitudes (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Sweeney et al., 2008; Wu, 2013; Yang, n.d.).

It seems obvious that information obtained from an expert should be more reliable (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004; Wu, 2013). They argued that the reviewer who is an expert in a particular product category should dispose of more product related information in this field and therefore his/her opinion will be more trusted than the opinion of other. Furthermore, the greater knowledge base of experts should enable them to convince others more effectively of their opinion on product and brands. (Ruiterkamp, 2013) stated that, if we have no knowledge about a particular product or service but someone else does, we will probably rely on his opinion and say his as an expert. (Sparks and Browning, 2011; Wu, 2013) stated that, when a product or service is complex -as hospitality services-, when its benefits are not immediately observable, or when the benefits are ambiguous or intangible, recipients of the EWOM communication may rely on the expert opinion of the source as a cue for whether to show product or service interest, and for evaluating and potentially purchasing the product or service.

Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H1: *perceived source expertise has a positive impact on customer purchasing decision.*

Source trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the second accepted dimension for credibility, which is defined as "*message source's perceived motivation to provide accurate and truthful information*" (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Moorman et al., (1993) also

defined trustworthiness as "*a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence*". Within the context of the online environment, trust has significant impact on consumer behavior (Tseng and Hsu, 2010). Also trust determine what people expect from situation. Because trust reduces uncertainty in both social and business interactions (Fan and Miao, 2012; Menkveld, 2013). However, in virtual communities, customers cannot touch products or meet EWOM senders to develop trust (Chu and Kim, 2011). So consumers must depend upon their own expertise and involvement to determine EWOM credibility.

Numerous studies have suggested that trust plays a vital role in information exchange and knowledge integration (Tseng and Hsu, 2010; Fu et al., 2011; Fan and Miao, 2012; Yang, n.d., p. 20) (. As it allows individual also to justify and evaluate their decision to provide or attain more useful information (Chu and Kim, 2011). In sum, in the online environment, trust has been found to be essential to virtual community members' intention to exchange information with other members.

Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H2: *perceived source trustworthiness has a positive impact on customer purchasing decision.*

Tie strength

All WOM communication takes place within a social relationship that may be categorized according to the closeness of the relationship between information seeker and the source (Brown et al., 2007), represented by the construct that tie strength. Social tie is defined as "*the level of intensity of a social relationship between two individual*"(Steffes and Burgee, 2009). Mittal et al., (2008) also defined tie strength as "*the potency of the bond between members of a network*". The strength of the tie may range from strong to weak depending on the number and types of resources they exchange, the frequency of exchanges, and the intimacy of the exchanges between them (Brown et al., 2007; Gfrerer and Pokrywka, 2012). In relation to that,(Chu and Kim, 2011) stated that social tie can be classified as strong ties such as family and friends, constitute stronger and closer relationships that are within an individual's personal network and are able to provide substantive and emotional support. Weak ties, on the other hand, are often among weaker and less personal social relationships that are composed of a wide of acquaintances and colleagues.

In the traditional WOM context, if you are going to buy a mobile phone, you will be more likely to follow the advice of your best friend than the advice of stranger person (López and Sicilia, 2014).Sweeney et al., (2008) stated that the relationship between the parties influenced WOM acceptance. And that backs to

the closeness of a sender and receiver. In line with that, Brown et al., (2007) suggested that tie strength affects information flows. Strong ties bear greater influence on the receiver's behavior than weaker ties due to the frequency and perceived importance of social contact among strong tie individuals (Chu and Kim, 2011; Fan and Miao, 2012; Pedersen et al., 2014; Yang, n.d.). On the contrast, thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H3: *tie strength between the reviewer and the receiver of EWOM has a positive impact on customer purchasing decision.*

Perceived source similarity/ homophily

Source similarity or homophily refers to "*the degree to which individuals are similar in terms of certain attributes*" (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004). It is also defined as "*the similarities between two people's values, likes, dislikes, and experience*" (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). Prior studies have concluded that interpersonal communications are more likely to occur between peoples who have similar interests, because individuals tend to communicate with those who have similar characteristics (Gfrerer and Pokrywka, 2012; Lim and Chung, 2011). Brown et al., (2007) and Wu, (2013) stated that the similarities between individuals encourage them toward a greater level of interpersonal interaction, trust, and understanding than would be expected to be between dissimilar people. Wangenheim and Bayón, (2004) also mentioned that theory of social comparison suggest that individuals tend to compare their attitudes and capabilities with those of other. They also suggest that the tendency to compare oneself with another one increases as this person is consider to be similar to oneself, because people often assume that similar people have similar needs and prefer similar choices (Cheng, 2011).

Despite the diversity and anonymous of internet users to some extent, consumers online are able to select their communities and what they read and share in social media and online communities (Chu and Kim, 2011). In Wang et al., (2008) study, they suggest that similar demographic characteristics such as age and education play a significant role in determining credibility perceptions and influencing the persuasive process on both websites and online discussion groups. In line with that, Fan and Miao, (2012) suggest that homophily increases EWOM trust and influence (Cheung et al., 2007). Also state that the level of confirmation/ disconfirmation between the received EWOM and consumer's prior belief of the service or product increase/decrease the level of confidence and credibility of EWOM. Thus, the researcher hypothesizes that:

H4: *similarities between the reviewer and the receiver of EWOM have a positive impact on customer purchasing decision.*

Receiver expertise

In internet world, there are a lot of websites dedicated to provide online reviews especially in tourism and hospitality industry (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). As the volume of information about hotels and their services is too great for consumers to read and process. Consumers, who search about opinions of others when making purchasing decisions, do not have much time to spend in the internet seeking this information (López and Sicilia, 2014). However, it is clear that not all individuals have the same experience in using and searching for information on the internet. Perceived personal expertise refers to *"the extent to which an individual perceives him/herself to be knowledgeable, competent, trained, and experienced in a particular domain"* (Adjei et al., 2010).

Since inexperienced users have less knowledge of the medium and they may face some difficulties in managing the information flow. Therefore, it will be more difficult for them to choose among alternatives, and it is more likely to consider online consumers reviews as a credible (Yang, n.d.). On the other hand, consumers with greater internet experience can easily get many reviews about the service or the product from more than one source. They also have the ability to assess the validity of these information and their writers (Zhu and Zhang, 2010).so, literatures suggest that consumers with little experiences are more likely to be influenced by EWOM compared to those who have some experiences (Cheung et al., 2007; Adjei et al., 2010; Zhu and Zhang, 2010; Fan and Miao, 2012).

Studies suggest that the receiver's level of expertise is one of the main determinants of the receiver that is expected to determine EWOM influence (Tseng and Hsu, 2010). The degree of expertness of the receiver influences not only their purchasing decision, but also their attitude of searching for EWOM (Ayeh et al., 2013). On the other hand,(Yang, n.d.) States that as the consumers with higher level of expertise have higher ability to select information that is related to their needs and also they can know where, exactly, good information can be obtained, so the information obtained will have a higher effect on their decision making. In line with that,(Zhu and Zhang, 2010) state that as consumers with more internet experience are more likely to use the internet as their primary information source and are more likely to have a greater trust in the internet; they are more likely to be influenced by online reviews. Thus, the researcher hypothesizes that:

H5: perceived receiver expertise has a positive impact on customer purchasing decision.

Perceived volume of EWOM

The volume of review refers to *"the number of posted messages that consumers declare to have found about a product"* (López and Sicilia, 2014). Previous

studies suggest that the volume of information on EWOM correlates significantly with its impact on consumer behavior (López and Sicilia, 2011; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Filieri and McLeay, 2014; Blal and Sturman, 2014). (Ruiterkamp, 2013) state that the amount of publicly available user generated content such as popularity and volume is one of the most important factors of the quality of EWOM And consequently its impact on purchasing decision. The volume of EWOM enhances product or service awareness. Thus, the greater the volume of EWOM available online about the product or the service, the more likely a consumer will be to hear about it (Litvin et al., 2008; Cheung and Thadani, 2012). (Riegner, 2007) explored the value of online product reviews in forecasting motion pictures sales, and they suggest that the volume of online reviews could serve as a proxy of sales. Also, Oncioiu, (2014) mentions that the influence of tourism consumer feedback number on the purchasing intention could help tourism companies to determine the effect regarding the brand attitude.

Consumers are often influenced by others popular opinions. The impact of these popular opinions may affect not only consumer's positive changes in brand choice, but also purchasing intention and overall evaluation of the brand (Ruiterkamp, 2013). Since the volume of online opinions may represent the number of interested consumers with prior purchasing experience. Also a high volume may give the consumer a more reliable indicator of the real consequences of using a product or service, because they conclude that this high volume means that more people have self-reportedly experienced it (López and Sicilia, 2014). Thus, the researcher hypothesizes that:

***H6:** overall EWOM volume has a positive impact on customer purchasing decision.*

Perceived valence of EWOM

According to information integration theory, when a consumer is exposed to several opinions, he combines them into an overall evaluation by integrating them. The result of this process is known as perceived valence of EWOM (López and Sicilia, 2014). Valence refers to "*the extent to which the information exchanged reflects positively or negatively on the product in question*" (Adjei et al., 2010). According to this, when the number of positive opinions is higher than the number of negative ones; the objective valence will be positive.

Many studies showed that perceived valence of EWOM is a considerable dimension of EWOM activities (Duan et al., 2008). Prior research has shown asymmetric effects of the perceived valence of EWOM on consumer evaluations (Adjei et al., 2010; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Yaylı and Bayram, 2012; Zangeneh et al., 2014). However, traditional literature on interpersonal

influences has shown that negative information often have a stronger effect than positive information since negative information remains more in memory (Adjei et al., 2010; Cheng, 2011; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Yaylı and Bayram, 2012). While some other studies suggest that positive EWOM is far more common than negative EWOM (López and Sicilia, 2014). for instance; a study by Google (Google, 2011) showed that 80% of online opinions are positive.

In terms of information integration theory (Anderson, 2014), before integrating information consumers assign value to each piece of information according to its credibility and reliability. Thus, the most credible information should have more weight in the final average. However, a few negative opinions mixed in with positive ones may increase the potential impact of EWOM because they add credibility to the overall reviews. So it is important to consider the role of perceived valence of EWOM on its impact on purchasing decision in hospitality industry. Thus, the researcher hypothesizes that:

H7: overall EWOM valence has a positive impact on customer purchasing decision.

Type of website on which EWOM are found

The nature of the website can also influence the impact of a given recommendation (Adjei et al., 2010). Based on previous studies, online consumer opinions can be found on two types of websites: firm-sponsored websites, where the product or service is sponsored or commercialized (e.g. Amazon.com); and third parties websites, where the product or service is not sponsored or commercialized (e.g. Tripadvisor.com in tourism and hospitality domain) (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). More independent websites such as third parties websites that facilitate consumers' external search effort by decreasing search costs are assumed to be preferred and more trusted by consumers (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; López and Sicilia, 2014). Although EWOM is non-commercial in nature, its influence could depend on where the opinions are found (Bart et al., 2005; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Senecal and Nantel, 2004) suggest that the type of website on which opinions are found affects consumers' judgment on product recommendations. When opinions are posted on firm sponsored websites, receiver may perceive that the firm has a role in impacting the source of the recommendation. Where marketers can filter consumer's opinions and offer a specific review format in order to direct the consumers purchasing decisions to what they want (Magnini, 2011). (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015; Lynch Jr and Ariely, 2000) state that independent websites should be perceived as more useful and credible by consumers, as it provides more alternatives to choose from and more objective information. Generally, EWOM from other customers is perceived to be more credible and trustworthy than that

obtained from the producing or sponsoring company (Adjei et al., 2010). Therefore, it likely that EWOM obtained from independently owned and managed websites will have more impact on consumer purchasing decisions than that obtained from firm sponsored websites.

Thus, the researcher hypothesizes that:

H8: the type of website has a significant impact on customer purchasing decision.

The nature of the product/service recommended

Prior research has shown that the type of product affects consumers' use of EWOM and it influence on their choices (Karimi, 2013; Sweeney et al., 2008). Previous studies suggest that goods can be classified into search or tangible products and experience or intangible products (Karimi, 2013; Senecal and Nantel, 2004). Tangible products are products that the consumer can evaluate before purchasing, and experience products are those that it is difficult to evaluate prior to purchase (Litvin et al., 2008). As hospitality and tourism products and services is considered as intangible products, the impact of its product related EWOM is assumed to be higher than in other tangible product (Jalilvand et al., 2011). Since it's difficult or even impossible to evaluate tourism and hospitality products before purchase, consumer should rely more on product recommendations for those product than others (Litvin et al., 2008). In support of this view, (Sweeney et al., 2008) found that WOM is seen as more valuable to the receiver in service contexts than others.

(Adjei et al., 2010) studied the role of product complexity on consumer purchase behavior and found that product complexity has a positive effect on communication quality and uncertainty reduction. They also state that customers are likely to engage in more searches when buying more complex products and that this is because complex product create greater perceived risk. When dealing with complex or experience product, consumers require greater effort to evaluate the product or service. So they are more likely to rely on others recommendation when making decisions and vice versa when dealing with tangible or less complex product (Verhagen et al., 2013). Thus, the researcher hypothesizes that:

H9: the nature of the product has a significant impact on customer purchasing decision.

Methodology

Questionnaire Form and sample size

The study used a questionnaire form to collect data from customers. Questionnaires were distributed and collected by researcher from July 10, 2015 to September 10, 2015 in Sharm-elshikh city as one of the touristic destinations in

Egypt. The research targeted 500 consumers randomly in Sharm-elshikh hotels. A total of 368 usable replies were obtained after eliminated invalid and incomplete responses, representing an effective response rate of 73.6 percent which is found sufficient. The survey was translated and revised accurately to three languages (Arabic, English, and Russian) to facilitate the reaching to all consumers and to ensure the full understanding of all statements by the respondents.

The questionnaire comprised a series of Likert scale (1-5 disagree /agree) statements adopted from extant studies as shown in table (1). The final form includes 36 items used to measure the ten constructs of the developed model. The ten constructs are ‘source expertise’ (5 items); ‘source trustworthiness’ (2 items); ‘tie strength’(3 items); ‘homophily’ (4 items); ‘receiver expertise’ (3 items); ‘EWOM volume’ (4 items); ‘EWOM valence’ (3 items); ‘type of website’ (5 items); ‘nature of the product’(3 items); ‘purchasing decision’ (4 items). The form included a number of questions to collect information on respondents' gender, age, education, and country.

Table 1: EWOM determinants influencing customer purchasing decision

Source expertise	
I rely more on the reviews written by persons I think they are experienced.	(Lin et al., 2013)
I think they have abundant knowledge toward the hotel.	
I think they have the ability on judgment.	
Those persons provided some different ideas than other sources.	
Those persons mentioned some things I had not considered.	
Source trustworthiness	
I believe the same situation mentioned by different reviewers verifies the actual service level of the hotel.	(Wu, 2013)
I believe the length of content in a review demonstrates the degree of a reviewer’s effort.	
Tie strength	
I rely more on the reviews by persons I know them personally.	Original scale
I rely more on the reviews by persons I talked to them before.	
I rely more on the reviews by persons persons are in my friend list.	
Homophily	
I rely more on the reviews by people who are in my age group.	(Wu, 2013)
I rely more on the reviews by people who have my same gender.	
I rely more on the reviews by people who have the same interests of mine.	
I rely more on the reviews by people who travel in the same way that I travel.	
Receiver expertise	
I am familiar with all internet channels such as (social media, blogs, forums, review sites...etc).	(El-desouky, 2011)
I always use previous customers’ reviews of the hotel for selecting a hotel for my upcoming trip.	(Jalilvand et al., 2013)

I always write down online review about the hotel I stayed in.	Original scale
EWOM volume	
The number of online review/comment is large, inferring that the hotel is popular.	(Lin et al., 2013)
Highly ranking and recommendation, inferring that the hotel has good reputations.	
The more the hotel is mentioned in front of me the more am aware of it.	(El-desouky, 2011)
The more the hotel is discussed in front of me the more it influences my purchasing decision.	
EWOM valence	
I rely on the reviews with very high or very low ratings for the hotel.	(Yaylı and Bayram, 2012)
I rely on the consistent reviews even positively or negatively.	
(Overall product/service) rankings help me to quickly select the best accommodation among several alternatives.	
Type of website	
I rely more in reviews introduced in independent websites than firm sponsored websites.	Original scale
I trust in the reviews written in the hotel's website	(Yaylı and Bayram, 2012)
Reliability of the website that present the reviews affect my purchase decision.	
Internationality of the website that present the reviews affect my purchase decision.	
Popularity of the website that present the reviews affect my purchase decision.	
Nature of the product	
I rely more on the reviews about intangible or experience product which I have no prior information before using it.	Original scale
I rely more on the reviews about high risk product (ex. Product with very expensive prices).	
I rely more on the reviews about very complex product (ex. Travel and tourism product).	
Customer purchasing decision	
Previous reviews on the hotel affect my willingness to make a reservation.	(Wu, 2013)
When I believe the hotel offers the same good (bad) service as the reviews described, I am (not) willing to make a reservation.	
I choose my hotel accommodation upon reviews which I read.	Original scale
information I receive online influence my purchase decision of hotel services.	(Yaylı and Bayram, 2012)

Validity and Reliability

This study adopted items from the different studies and modified questions to fit the purpose of the study. So for validity concerns, the survey was piloted on a sample of 40 customers to check its face and content validity. The comments of respondents related to language and design of questionnaire were considered in

the final form. For reliability of constructs, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated and exceeded 0.70 for all constructs meaning that the questionnaire results are reliable (Hair et al., 2010).

Analysis Technique

General Linear regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses and to investigate the causal relationships between determinants of EWOM influence and customers purchasing decision. Also Frequencies and means were calculated for all variables. SPSS (version 22) software was used in analysis.

Research findings

Descriptive Statistics

The following table showed information about respondents such as gender, age, education level, and country.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the profile

		Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Male	157	44.7
	Female	194	55.3
Age	18-30	106	29
	31-40	107	29.2
	41-50	78	21.3
	51-60	59	16.1
	More than 60 years	16	4.4
Level of education	High school or less	93	26.5
	Associate degree	73	20.8
	Bachelor's degree	98	27.9
	Master's degree	66	18.8
	Ph. D. degree	21	6
Nationality	British	132	35.9
	Russian	111	30.2
	Egyptian	21	5.7
	Canadian	8	2.2
	Danish	7	1.9
	French	7	1.9
	Saudi	7	1.9
	Others	20	20.3

Table (2) shows the results of the respondents' demographic profile. Out of the 368 respondents, 44.7 % are male. 29% of respondents were between 18 to 30 years old, and 29.2% of the respondents were between 31 to 40 years old, which shows

that the majority of the participants were young. Regarding the education, 26.5% of the respondents had High school or less, 20.8% had associate degree, 27.9% had bachelor's degree, 18.8% had master's degree, and 6% had ph. D. degree, which are in line with the ages of respondents. In terms of nationality, the majority of respondents were from Britain which accounts for 35.9% of total respondents and from Russia which accounts for 30.2% of total respondents.

The Regression Model

To test the regression model, Table 3 outlines the construct Corrected Item-Total Correlation, Tolerance, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), and Cronbach’s alpha. Looking at Corrected Item-Total Correlation statistics, the revealed values of all constructs are between, 0.30 and 0.80 which is evident of construct validity. In total and from Table 3, considering Cronbach’s alpha, all values of Cronbach’s alpha are greater than 0.70. For normality, Skewness values for all items are less than (1), Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are less than 10, and the findings are reliable.

Table 3: Statistics of study’s constructs

Dependent Constructs		Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Tolerance	VIF	Cronbach’s alpha
Source expertise	SOE1	.576	.424	2.360	0.823
	SOE2	.621	.455	2.196	
	SOE3	.679	.447	2.239	
	SOE4	.624	.435	2.299	
	SOE5	.588	.438	2.285	
Source trustworthiness	STT1	0.543	.438	2.284	0.702
	STT2	0.543	.522	1.914	
Tie strength	TS1	.693	.392	2.549	0.856
	TS2	.793	.295	3.390	
	TS3	.707	.411	2.432	
Homophily	HOM1	.701	.404	2.475	0.828
	HOM2	.658	.418	2.392	
	HOM4	.669	.438	2.281	
	HOM4	.591	.500	1.999	
Receiver expertise	RE1	.565	.534	1.874	0.730
	RE2	.622	.440	2.273	
	RE3	.484	.561	1.782	
EWOM volume	EWOMV1	.584	.473	2.116	0.817
	EWOMV2	.669	.408	2.450	
	EWOMV3	.641	.422	2.369	
	EWOMV4	.658	.462	2.163	
EWOM valence	EVA1	.612	.414	2.415	0.785

	EVA2	.653	.424	2.360	
	EVA3	.609	.479	2.088	
Type of website	TOW1	.450	.605	1.652	0.807
	TOW2	.438	.561	1.781	
	TOW3	.700	.396	2.527	
	TOW4	.749	.338	2.958	
	TOW5	.687	.382	2.618	
Nature of the product/ service	NPS1	.584	.515	1.943	0.789
	NPS2	.705	.406	2.461	
	NPS3	.605	.468	2.139	
Purchasing decision	PD1	.711	.372	2.692	0.852
	PD2	.671	.415	2.408	
	PD3	.694	.397	2.516	
	PD4	.694	.393	2.547	

The regression model is used to measure the casual relationships among the constructs. It is found that the model components have a significant effect on hotel customers' purchasing decision. The findings revealed that eight form nine hypotheses measured in the study are supported and the factors involved in this study are significantly affecting EWOM influence on purchasing decision. However, almost factors were found positively affecting customer purchasing decision, only one factor found to have a negative impact on customer purchasing decision. Figure 1 reflects regression model of the study.

Figure1: the regression model of the independent determinants affecting hotel customers' purchasing decision

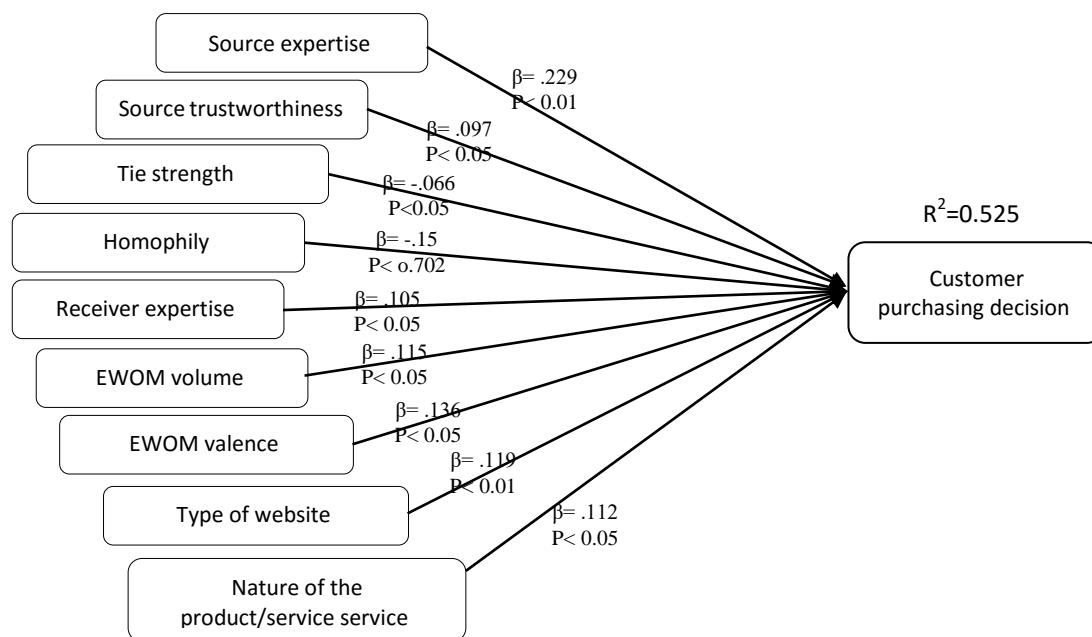


Figure 1 presents the regression analysis of the relationship among determinants of EWOM impact and consumer purchasing decision. Source expertise is positively affecting customer purchasing decision ($\beta=0.229$ and $p<0.01$). This determinant depicts the importance role of source expertise and to what extent he/she are familiar with internet channels and social media. Also it reflects the degree of source awareness of hotels services and his ability to provide abundant knowledge in his/her reviews. Also, source trustworthiness is found positively affecting customer purchasing decision ($\beta=0.097$ and $p<0.05$). This factor is related to the credibility of EWOM source and to what extent the receiver of EWOM see the source as a credible and trusted person. Furthermore, the results indicate that tie strength between EWOM receiver and sender has a negative impact on customer purchasing decision. Tie strength in this context refers to the relationship between EWOM sender and receiver and to what extent they know each other personally. This factor also related to the previous communication between the sender and receiver of EWOM. As unexpected the results indicate that perceived similarities between EWOM receiver and sender has no significant impact on customer purchasing decision ($\beta= -0.015$ and $p>0.05$). These similarities are related to the demographic characteristics. Also they are related to the interests and way of travel.

As source expertise, receiver expertise was found to have a positive impact on customer purchasing decision ($\beta= 0.105$ and $p<0.05$). This construct reflects the degree of receiver expertise and to what extent he/she use previous customers' reviews to select the hotel for his/her upcoming trip. This factor also related to receiver awareness about different internet channels such as social media, blogs, and review sites. About determinants related to EWOM itself, EWOM volume was found to have a significant positive impact on customer purchasing decision ($\beta=0.115$ and $p<0.05$). This variable reflects the number of online reviews seen by the receiver and related to certain hotel. Since the number of reviews may represent the number of interested consumers with prior purchasing or usage experience. Also, a high volume may give the consumer a more reliable impression of the real consequences of using a product or service, because more people have self-reportedly experienced it. Also as expected, there is a significant relationship between EWOM valence and customer purchasing decision ($\beta=0.136$ and $p<0.05$). This construct reflect the average of overall reviews seen by the receiver. When the number of positive opinions is higher than the negative ones, the objective valence will be positive. This construct also relates to the consistency of the reviews and to what extent they are positive or negative.

In relation to type of website, the regression analysis indicates that the type of website in which EWOM positively affects customer purchasing decision ($\beta=0.199$ and $p<0.01$). This variable reflects the affiliation of the website whether it is

independent websites of firm-sponsored websites. Although EWOM is non-commercial in nature, its influence may depend on where the options are found. This variable also relates to the reliability, internationality, and popularity of the website which the reviews are introduced in. based on the above discussion. The last determinant relates to the type of product/service, which found to have a significant positive impact on customer purchasing decision ($\beta=0.112$ and $p<0.05$). This variable deals with the nature of the product or service which the reviews are about. Previous studies suggest that products can be classified into search or tangible products and experience or intangible products. They also classify products to high risk and low risk products. Also they classify products to less and very complex products. So it's assumed that the nature of the product effect EWOM influence on purchasing decision.

Discussion of findings

The present study intends to clarify researchers' doubts about EWOM influence on hotel consumer purchasing decision. Previous studies has shown that EWOM is more influential than firm-generated information (Litvin et al., 2008; López and Sicilia, 2014). So an increasing number of companies are actively making efforts to manage and use EWOM activity. These influences are especially important in the hospitality and tourism product, whose intangible products are difficult to evaluate prior to their consumption (Litvin et al., 2008). Therefore, it is extremely important that both academics and practitioners understand how EWOM works in tourism and hospitality industry.

In this study, we investigate the relationship between EWOM determinants and customer purchasing decision. As with offline wom, source credibility affects EWOM influence. When perceived source credibility is high, EWOM is more influential on purchasing decision. In line with previous studies (Sweeney et al., 2008; Yang, n.d.; Zangeneh et al., 2014), this study found that the expertise of the reviewer - as the first dimension of credibility- has a significant influence on person's purchasing decision. (Yang, n.d.) States that if we have no knowledge about particular field but someone else does, we easily see him as an expert. If he says to do it one way or another, we will probably do so, if it is not the best way. The results of our study did not support (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008) study, who found that source expertise has no significant impact on EWOM influence.

About source trustworthiness -as the second dimension of credibility-, we found that source trustworthiness has a significant impact on purchasing decision. This result is in line with (Wu, 2013). In his study, he found that there is a strong linkage between the recommender level of trust and his trust in EWOM. He also found that source credibility influence consumer purchasing intention. The internet does not have exclusiveness. Everyone can announce their opinions. Hence, compared to the

traditional media, there are not interests or pressure from others, which instead possesses authenticity. On the internet, every one can say anything they like, it often produces irresponsible remarks, and this why source credibility is an important factor that influence the relationship between EWOM and purchasing decision.

About tie strength factor, there was a significant relationship in the opposite direction between tie strength and EWOM influence which was not expected, as previous studies (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Chu and Kim, 2011; Sweeney et al., 2008) found that tie strength has a positive significant impact on EWOM influence. While (Yang, n.d.) Found that tie strength does not have a strong relevance on the acceptance level of EWOM. we think that this result reflect the fact that tie strength in online wom don't have the same importance as in offline wom, as in the internet interaction with others can even be asynchronous at different time and space between people who do not know each other personally and do not have prior relationship. Previous studies (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Fan and Miao, 2012; Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004) have found homophily and similarities between source and receiver of EWOM to be important for explaining the occurrence and influence of EWOM communications, and it is usually measured along several dimensions such as age, gender, occupation, or level of education. This assertion is not in line with our study results. In this study, in examining the relationship between source similarities and EWOM influence, source similarities appeared to have no significant impact on purchasing decision. This result indicates that, in online communities, customers sometimes trust EWOM regardless the perceived level of similarity between EWOM readers and senders.

As source expertise, receiver expertise perceived to have significant impact on customer purchasing decision, which means that experienced internet users are more influenced by EWOM than consumers with moderate and low experience in this medium. (López and Sicilia, 2014) state that expert users will know how to check information in order to distinguish fake opinions from honest ones, and will also know where to search for EWOM, thus having more desire to follow the recommendations they find. This study, in line with previous research which has shown that receiver experience correlates with consumer behavior (López and Sicilia, 2014; Tseng and Hsu, 2010; Yang, n.d.). On the other hand, other researchers have found opposite results. (Adjei et al., 2010; Fan and Miao, 2012; Zhu and Zhang, 2010) state that, as consumer with greater internet experience can easily get many reviews about the service or the product, they also have the ability to assess the credibility of these reviews. So consumers with high level of experience are less likely to be influenced by EWOM compared to those who have little experience.

About the determinants related to EWOM itself, this study results found that EWOM volume and valence has significant impact on consumer purchasing decision. This result is in line with a considerable number of studies which have found that the volume and valence of reviews is significantly associated with purchasing decision (Adjei et al., 2010; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; López and Sicilia, 2011; Oncioiu, 2014). (López and Sicilia, 2014) state that the more opinions the consumer has accessed about a product or service, the more influence EWOM has on decision making. Also the data supports studies that have found a positive relationship between the valence of EWOM and purchasing decision. These results indicate that positive valence of EWOM reflects the strengths of a product/service and encourage people to purchase a product/service. While negatively framed EWOM emphasizes the weaknesses/problems of a product/service and thus discourages people to purchase them.

This study also measured the role of website type on EWOM influence. The results indicate that consumer purchasing decision can also be influenced by website on which comments are formulated. (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015) state that comments posted on the websites of companies and organizations are perceived as less credible than those published on independent sites like Tripadvisor and Virtual tourist. In line with previous studies (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Ladhari and Michaud, 2015), this study found that the reviews written in independent websites have more impact on purchasing decision than those written in company/hotel websites. On the other hand, some research found that there is no relationship between the type of website and EWOM influence (López and Sicilia, 2014; Senecal and Nantel, 2004). (López and Sicilia, 2014) state that some individuals may not yet have been able to distinguish between different types of websites; some sites may be seen as independent when in fact they are related with the marketers. Similarly, others may be independent from marketers, but because of the presence of advertising may be seen as being sponsored.

About the last factor in this study, the nature of the product/service was found to have a significant impact on purchasing decision. (Karimi, 2013) state that products have been long been classified based on their characteristics such as tangible/intangible, search/experience, very complex/less complex, and high risk/low risk products, also he mentions that product class differences are found to affect consumer behavior during purchasing process. (Jalilvand et al., 2011; Sweeney et al., 2008) all state that as hospitality and tourism products and service seen as intangible products, which cannot be evaluated before their consumption, so EWOM has more impact in hotels' customers than other customers. In line with that, (Litvin et al., 2008) state that EWOM has a critical importance in hospitality and tourism industries, as many hospitality and tourism products seen as high risk purchases which will increasingly affect consumer purchasing decision.

Managerial Implications

The present study has important implications to hospitality industry practitioners on the impact of EWOM and previous customer's reviews on future consumers' behavior. Since reading online reviews become a popular way for travelers to obtain the accommodation information before booking a place to stay, it would be an efficient way for hotels to increase their brand awareness and build good reputations, especially for independent hotels. Consumer opinions are also essential to hotels in their efforts to understand the responses of customers to their products, and to improve their marketing campaigns or products accordingly.

Hotels should bear in mind that EWOM has a great impact on consumer behavior, so they should try to stimulate and manage EWOM activity. Also special attention needs to be devoted to customer satisfaction and complaints. Also encouraging customers to write reviews and share their experiences in travel forums or hotel review sites after their stay by offering discounts for next visits might be a good strategy for hotels to attract new customers as well as retain returning guests. These actions will enhance customer satisfaction so as to generate positive EWOM with a positive perceived valence. Additionally, we have demonstrated that perceived source credibility has a very important role on EWOM influence, so webmasters should provide consumers with tools by which they can evaluate the source credibility of the website. For instance, information could be provided about the reviewer, thereby increasing his/her credibility, and could also present reviewer's nickname, duration of membership, and number or quality of opinions he/she has written, as well as a profile of the different sources. Also marketers can enhance EWOM activity on the internet by encouraging new product trials or providing unique information to customers or opinion leaders in order to spread the word via the internet. In this way, the volume of EWOM will increase and its impact will be higher. Hotel website should not only share information, but also create a desire to learn more about the product or destination and ideally induce desire to visit. To accomplish this, positive products reviews and the posting of customer comments should be highlighted on the hotel' web pages. Further, guests should find links to company sponsored bulletin boards, where they will be invited to take on the role of opinion leader by expressing their own views and sharing their personal experiences about the destination, hotel, restaurant, etc. finally, hospitality practitioners should pay attention to build the credibility of their own websites. They have to work frequently to build their website's reliability, popularity, and intentionality.

The managerial implications suggested above could be especially interesting for hospitality industry, given that hospitality product seen as experience, high risk, and very complex product which have a significant impact on EWOM influence.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations which consider avenues for future research. One limitation of the present study is that the participants are mainly from one specific sampling pool which is Sharm-elsheikh city. Thus, we think doing this research in other destinations in Egypt may give different results. Another important limitation is related to factors influencing EWOM effect. Based on the literature review e.x (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Gfrerer and Pokrywka, 2012; López and Sicilia, 2011, 2014; Yang, n.d.), there are lots of other variables which influence EWOM impact. For instance perceived risk of the receiver may influence the relationship between EWOM and purchasing decision. Another variable is EWOM credibility which is claimed to have a significant impact on EWOM influence (Akyüz, 2013). In this study, for considerations of time and efforts, we selected some variables to be tested in our study based on the previous studies. So we suggest that an integrated studies with different variable need to be done as a further research. In the hospitality industry, it would also be valuable to both branded operators and hotel owners to know whether the effect of EWOM affects the hotel which the review are related to only or affects the whole chain. Some literature stated that negative EWOM has more impact than positive one. Thus we suggest doing a comparative study about the impact of positive and negative EWOM in consumer purchasing decision.

In recent years, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace has become an important channel for people to share and transfer news and information. The environment of social media differs from other types of EWOM that information providers and receivers may have some link to each other. Thus, consumers' behavior toward EWOM information from social media may differ from other review sites. Thus, studies should conduct to discover the determinants that impacts EWOM influence on social media and how hoteliers can use it as a channel to efficiently communicate with their potential customers. Finally, future research can further explore the influence of moderators such as trust and customers' perceived risk on the relation between EWOM and purchasing decision.

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الملخص العربي

محددات تأثير الكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة على قرار الشراء لدى عملاء الفنادق

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أظهرت العديد من الدراسات أن مصادر المعلومات الشخصية كاللغة الإلكترونية المنقولة تعد أكثر تأثيراً على العملاء من وسائل التسويق التقليدية. ومع التطور السريع فى الأنترنت ووسائل التواصل الأخرى زاد التأثير المحتمل للكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة. ونظراً لطبيعة الخدمات الفندقية التى تعتبر معظمها خدمات غير ملموسة لا يستطيع العميل الحكم عليها قبل إستخدامها. لذا يصبح للكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة تأثيراً أكبر فى صناعاتى السياحة والضيافة مقارنة بالصناعات الأخرى. وعلى الرغم من ذلك، هناك قصور فى الأدبيات وخاصة العربية منها حول المحددات التى تجعل من الكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة مؤثرة فى بعض الأحيان أكثر من أحيان أخرى. لذا يهدف هذا البحث إلى التعرف على المتغيرات التى تحدد تأثير الكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة على قرار الشراء لدى عملاء الفنادق. تم استخدام الإستقصاء كأداة لجمع البيانات، حيث تم توزيع 500 إستمارة على عملاء الفنادق بمدينة شرم الشيخ بإعتبارها أحد أهم المقاصد السياحية المصرية. كما تم إستخدام الانحدار المتعدد لقياس العلاقة بين محددات تأثير الكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة وقرار الشراء لدى عملاء الفنادق. وقد توصلت الدراسة الى مجموعة من النتائج الهامة حول المحددات التى تحكم العلاقة بين الكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة وقرار الشراء فى بيئة الفنادق المصرية، كما تقدم الدراسة مجموعة من التوصيات لمديرى ومسئولى التسويق بالفنادق حول أهمية الكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة وكيفية إدارتها وإستغلالها بشكل أمثل فى جذب المزيد من العملاء.

الكلمات الدالة: الكلمة الإلكترونية المنقولة، محددات التأثير، قرار الشراء، الفنادق المصرية.