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The Role of Relationship Quality Practices in Positive Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication: The Case of Organic Vegetable Buyers in Bangkok, Thailand

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Received: February 17, 2021 Revised: March 6, 2021 Accepted: April 2, 2021

Abstract

The demand for organic vegetable products in Thailand has been significantly increasing every year, and these products have been traditionally sold via a traditional market. However, the widespread use of the Internet represents a new way of selling these products and has generated many new channels for advertising and marketing engagement. Nevertheless, one of the primary challenges is to create positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Accordingly, this paper investigates the effect of relationship quality practices (customer satisfaction, customer trust, and customer commitment) on positive eWOM communication in terms of organic vegetable purchases in Bangkok, Thailand. Following previous studies, the (online) organic vegetable buyer was used as the unit of analysis for this study. In total, 400 usable responses were received. Utilizing multiple regression analysis, it was found that both customer satisfaction and customer trust were related positively to positive eWOM communication. However, the evidence did not support customer commitment to positive eWOM communication. Therefore, this means that a higher level of customer satisfaction and trust are instrumental in creating a higher level of positive eWOM communication. Accordingly, this paper provides insights related to the roles of relationship

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quality practices in positive eWOM communication that could be useful for entrepreneurs in the market. The findings from this study may also be applicable to other emerging economies (such as those in Asia). Finally, there are other challenges inherent with eWOM communication, which primarily uses digital media to attract, engage, and convert virtual visitors to customers. Therefore, further research may explore these challenges.

Keywords: relationship quality, electronic word-of-mouth, organic vegetables

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บทบาทของแนวปฏิบัติด้านคุณภาพความสัมพันธ์ ที่มีต่อการสื่อสารแบบปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์ เชิงบวก: กรณีของพัชชี่อแพ็กอินทรี ในกรุงเทพมหานคร ประเทศไทย

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วันรับบทความ: February 17, 2021 วันแก้ไขบทความ: March 6, 2021 วันตอบรับบทความ: April 2, 2021

บทคัดย่อ

ความต้องการผลิตภัณฑ์พัชชี่อินทรีในประเทศไทยเพิ่มขึ้นอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทุกปีและผลิตภัณฑ์เหล่านี้มักขายผ่านตลาดดั้งเดิม อย่างไรก็ตาม ในปัจจุบันการใช้อินเทอร์เน็ตอย่างแพร่หลายแสดงให้เห็นถึงวิถีใหม่ในการขายผลิตภัณฑ์เหล่านี้และได้สร้างช่องทางใหม่ ๆ สำหรับการโฆษณาและการมีส่วนร่วมทางการตลาด แม้กระนั้นความท้าทายหลักประการหนึ่ง คือ การสร้างการบอกปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์เชิงบวก ดังนั้น บทความนี้จึงศึกษาผลกระทบของแนวปฏิบัติด้านคุณภาพความสัมพันธ์ (ความพึงพอใจของลูกค้า ความไว้วางใจของลูกค้า และความมุ่งมั่นของลูกค้า) ต่อการสื่อสารแบบปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์เชิงบวกในแง่ของการซื้อพัชชี่อินทรีในกรุงเทพมหานคร ประเทศไทย สำหรับการศึกษาี้ ผู้ซื้อพัชชี่อินทรี (ออนไลน์) จึงเป็นหน่วยการวิเคราะห์ เช่นเดียวกับการศึกษาที่ผ่านมา โดยมีผู้ตอบแบบสอบถามทั้งสิ้น 400 คน ทั้งนี้จากการวิเคราะห์การถดถอยพหุคูณพบว่า ความพึงพอใจของลูกค้าและความไว้วางใจของลูกค้ามีความสัมพันธ์เชิงบวกต่อการสื่อสารแบบปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์เชิงบวก อย่างไรก็ตาม ผลการวิจัยไม่ได้สนับสนุนความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความมุ่งมั่นของลูกค้าและการสื่อสารแบบปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์เชิงบวก ดังนั้น จึงหมายความว่า ความพึงพอใจของลูกค้าและความไว้วางใจของลูกค้าในระดับที่สูงขึ้นจะส่งผลต่อการสื่อสารแบบปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์เชิงบวกในระดับที่สูงขึ้นเช่นกัน บทความนี้จึงให้ข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับบทบาทของแนวปฏิบัติด้านคุณภาพความสัมพันธ์ที่มีต่อการสื่อสาร

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แบบปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์เชิงบวก ซึ่งอาจเป็นประโยชน์สำหรับผู้ประกอบการในตลาด ผลการวิจัยนี้อาจนำไปประยุกต์ใช้ในเศรษฐกิจเกิดใหม่อื่น ๆ ในเอเชีย นอกจากนี้ ยังปรากฏความท้าทายอื่น ๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับ การสื่อสารแบบปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์ ซึ่งมักใช้สื่อดิจิทัลเพื่อสร้างความสนใจ ดึงดูด และเปลี่ยนผู้เยี่ยมชมเสมือนให้กลายเป็นลูกค้า ดังนั้น การวิจัยครั้งต่อไปอาจศึกษาความท้าทายดังกล่าว

คำสำคัญ: คุณภาพความสัมพันธ์ การบอกปากต่อปากอิเล็กทรอนิกส์ ผักอินทรีย์

Introduction

The demand for organic products has significantly increased every year. The market in 2016 increased 187% compared to its value in 2015. Furthermore, the market size has been increasing, with an estimated growth rate of 6.6% compound annual growth rate (CAGR) during 2017-2022 (Duangekanong, 2020). In 2019 organic products in Thailand represented a market size of US\$20.2 million (Organic Trade Association [OTA], 2020). In Thailand, the demand for organic products has been caused by increasing health consciousness (Duangekanong, 2020). For example, organic vegetables are well recognized for their benefits for healthy living. These vegetables also provide essential nutrients in one's diet and have become one of the household's primary foods.

Recently, the use of online marketing for organic products in Thailand has been discussed (Thai Organic Trade Association [TOTA], 2020). The primary objective of online marketing is to reach potential customers through online channels where they spend time reading, searching, shopping, or socializing online. Online marketing, therefore, differs from traditional marketing, which has historically included media such as print, billboards, television, and radio advertisements.

However, there are also challenges inherent with online marketing, which primarily uses digital media to attract, engage, and convert virtual visitors to customers. One of the primary challenges is to create electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in a positive way. Generally, using online media to express opinions about experiences with a company, product, or service and to share these opinions with others are examples of how to use eWOM (Davis & Khazanchi, 2008; Lin & Fang, 2006). According to past research, consumers tend to trust other consumers' experiences, comments, and recommendations more than advertisements put forth by an advertising agent (Sen & Lerman, 2007). Creating relationship quality with a potential customer is also a key source of eWOM (Khojastehpour & Johns, 2015).

Although the market size of organic products, including vegetables, has been increasing, the growth rate is still slower than the average of 13% growth rate in the Asia-Pacific region (Duangekanong, 2020). In 2019 organic products in Thailand represented 0.04% of global demand and a per capita expenditure of US\$0.29, indicating that organic products are a niche product and are supported by a small base of high-income consumers (OTA, 2020). One of the reasons may stem from an inappropriate way to create eWOM communication. Accordingly, this paper investigates the effect of relationship quality practices (customer satisfaction, customer trust,

and customer commitment) on positive eWOM communication in terms of organic vegetable purchase in Thailand. Accordingly, this paper provides insights related to the roles of customer satisfaction and customer trust in positive eWOM communication that would be useful for entrepreneurs in the market.

Literature Review, Conceptual Framework, and Hypotheses

Positive eWOM

Because of the advent of the Internet, word-of-mouth (WOM) via the Internet, so called eWOM, has gained popularity. eWOM can be defined as a process that allows consumers to share their views online and directs consumers to favor or go against specific products (Cheung & Lee, 2012). eWOM marketing has been well recognized as an effective marketing strategy in many industries; it is appealing because it overcomes consumer resistance, costs significantly little, and delivers products quickly—especially through technology such as social media and mobile technologies (Babić Rosario, de Valck & Sotgiu, 2020). Furthermore, eWOM communication represents a shorter distance between the source of information and the receivers of that information than marketer-induced communication (Hung & Li, 2007). eWOM includes informal communications from consumers concerning the characteristics and features of products or brands (Brian Lee & Li, 2018; Cheung & Lee, 2012). The information communicated consists of messages transferred via interpersonal relationships, compared to those transferred via mass-media channels that broadcast product/service information from companies to consumers.

However, WOM can be negative or positive. eWOM can spread rapidly and can have a huge effect on a firm's relationships with consumers and therefore on its financial performance (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Because customers trust other customers' opinions more than advertisements provided by the company itself, negative eWOM can affect a firm's reputation and attractiveness to customers to a considerable degree (Kim & Lee, 2015). Thus, promoting positive eWOM is a key to the success of any firm. Practitioners and academics have acknowledged that advanced communication tools, such as social media and mobile technology, have revolutionized the ways that many people share their experiences and engage in eWOM. For example, Starbucks built a virtual platform (MyStarbucksIdea.com) where customers can suggest, share, and vote on their thoughts about Starbucks, hence enhancing customer experience and engagement (Chua & Banerjee, 2013).

Relationship Quality Practices

Within the marketing perspective, relationship quality assists sellers in understanding relationships with customers and is considered as an indicator of the extent to which sellers are able to satisfy the needs of their customers (Khojastehpour & Johns, 2015; Ou, Shih, Chen & Wang, 2011). Therefore, building long-term relationships with customers is important for a company to survive and prosper (Khojastehpour & Johns, 2015).

While scholars commonly view relationship quality as a high-order construct, they differ as to what constitutes the sub-dimensions (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). This paper follows Tsao and Hsieh's (2012) position that relationship quality can be an indicator of the likelihood of future transactions between the consumer and the salesperson, and that relationship quality comprises three dimensions: satisfaction, trust, and commitment.

Customer satisfaction leads to significant economic benefits for companies. The customer's satisfaction is a mental state that occurs from a comparison between pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase perceived performance. Hence, customer satisfaction is a subjective and emotional judgment that the customer forms after using the products and services (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012).

According to Tsao and Hsieh (2012), trust refers to the anticipation by a party that the other party in the relationship will act in an expected manner. It can also be the confidence in the quality and reliability of a specific product. The customer's trust in relational sales contexts is definable as a customer's confident belief that he/she may rely on the salesperson to behave in such a manner that serves the long-term interest of the customer (Crosby, Evans & Cowles, 1990). Trust is, hence, viewed as the foundation of the relationship between customers and organizations.

Commitment is an exchange partner's belief that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on in order to ensure that it endures indefinitely (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). When there is trust between the seller and the buyer, the parties value this relationship, and they continue to make commitments to this relationship to sustain it over the long haul. Commitment is, hence, viewed as a belief held by customers and/or organizations that the relationship between the parties concerned is very important so that the parties concerned work in order to maintain the relationship.

The Relationship between Relationship Quality Practices and Positive eWOM Communication

The relationship between relationship quality practices and positive eWOM communication has been discussed in the literature. Customer satisfaction leads to a change in attitude because of the customers' experiences with a product (McCullough, Berry & Yadav, 2000). Customers who are more satisfied and more pleased with the seller are more likely to become loyal spreaders of positive WOM on behalf of and favoring the seller (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012)@lw. Customers become more willing to provide positive WOM on behalf of the seller when they perceive higher satisfaction with the quality of the product that they have received from their purchase. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Customer satisfaction is related positively to positive eWOM communication.

Trust is considered an important driver of WOM, as consumers offer emotionally strong commentary on the sellers that have provided them with products or services (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). Whilst trust raises the willingness of the purchaser to make repeated purchases and to make referrals, trust also lowers the possibility that the consumer may spread negative WOM (Goles, Lee, Rao & Warren, 2009). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Customer trust is related positively to positive eWOM communication.

Customer commitment enhances the customer's positive eWOM communication, such as increased intention to make referrals (Liljander & Strandvik, 1995). Customers with higher intention to make commitments are more likely to tell people about the positive aspects of a product (Bettencourt, 1997). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Customer commitment is related positively to positive eWOM communication.

Three hypotheses are used for the research framework as shown in Figure 1.

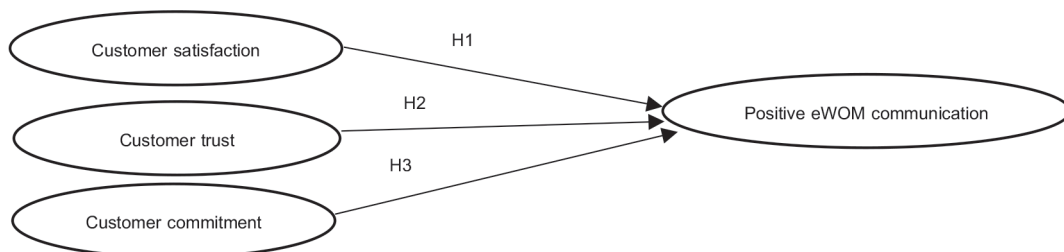


Figure 1 Research Framework and Hypotheses

Research Methods

Sample and Procedure

The context of this study is the organic vegetable industry in Bangkok, Thailand. Following previous studies, an online purchaser of organic vegetables was considered as the unit of analysis for this study. A cross-sectional survey was utilized. Furthermore, multi-stratified random sampling was used to collect the data from online purchasers that had had experience with online purchasing of organic vegetables. Stratified random sampling ensures that each subgroup of a given population is adequately represented within the whole sample population. By using the proportionate stratified method, the sample size of each stratum is proportionate to the population size of the stratum. First, the sample for each of the “big four” retailers selling organic products in Thailand (Big C, Tesco Lotus, Macro, and Foodland) based on their size (number of branches) compared to the others was calculated. Second, the geographical areas, where the branch of each retailer was located, were randomly selected. The sample size per branch based on proportional allocation was calculated. Finally, a questionnaire was proportionally selected for each consumer on-site (branch chosen) based on gender and educational level.

The primary ethical concerns of the study were the issues of anonymity and confidentiality. As such, it was asserted that the respondents were not required to disclose their name. Additionally, these issues were explicitly stated in the cover letter, where it was indicated that all of the information in the questionnaire would be kept strictly confidential and no findings would identify any individual participant because only the combined results were to be published.

The software G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang & Buchner, 2007) computed a sample size of 54 participants for detecting the relationship between three independent variables and one dependent variable with a large effect size (i.e., $f^2 = 0.35$) and α set to 0.05. In total, 400 usable responses were received. We checked the data for potential non-response bias by comparing the responses to educational background and salary level between the early and late respondents. The chi-squared tests for both categories indicated no statistically-significant differences between the two groups of respondents.

In the sample, the greatest number of samples were female (53.80%) and were 31-39 years of age (34.50%). Most of them held a bachelor’s degree (65.80%) and had an average monthly salary greater than 736 USD (33.30%).

Measures

Validated scales with acceptable reliability and validity for measuring relationship quality practices (customer satisfaction, customer trust, and customer commitment) and positive eWOM communication (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012) were used in this study. Five items were selected to cover customer satisfaction, four items to cover customer trust, four items to cover customer commitment, and five items to cover positive eWOM communication. These 18 items were rated on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The items used to operationalize the key constructs are presented in Table 1. Content validity was determined by experts and by reference to the literature (Flynn, Sakakibara, Schroeder, Bates & Flynn, 1990).

The development of the content of each construct has been discussed in detail, which consequently justified the content validity. In the present study, the analysis of criterion-related validity (Flynn, Schroeder & Sakakibara, 1994) primarily focused on the relationship between the three dimensions of relationship quality practices and positive eWOM communication.

Cronbach’s alpha coefficients demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability for the four measures (customer satisfaction, customer trust, customer commitment, and positive eWOM communication), with all coefficients exceeding 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 1 Scale Validity and Reliability for Customer Satisfaction, Customer Trust, Customer Commitment, and Positive eWOM Communication

Constructs	Indicators	Cronbach’s Alpha
Customer Satisfaction	CS1: I am willing to buy organic vegetables online.	0.80
	CS2: I feel good about organic vegetables sold through online channels.	
	CS3: My shopping experiences at this virtual store have always been pleasant.	
	CS4: I want to buy organic vegetables via online channels.	
	CS5: I like to buy organic vegetables through online channels rather than other channels.	

Table 1 Scale Validity and Reliability for Customer Satisfaction, Customer Trust, Customer Commitment, and Positive eWOM Communication (con't)

Constructs	Indicators	Cronbach's Alpha
Customer Trust	CT1: This organic vegetable satisfies my real needs.	0.81
	CT2: Organic vegetables sold through online channels are always quality and fresh.	
	CT3: The information presented in the online store that sells organic vegetables is straightforward, not a scam.	
	CT4: I believe that buying organic vegetables through online channels can meet my needs well.	
Customer Commitment	CC1: I will lose an opportunity if I do not buy organic vegetables through online channels.	0.83
	CC2: I am willing to follow online channels related to organic vegetables.	
	CC3: I want to buy organic vegetables rather than conventional vegetables from other online stores.	
	CC4: I intend to buy organic vegetables through online channels in the future.	
Positive eWOM communication	eWOM1: I am willing to tell others that I am buying organic vegetables from this website.	0.83
	eWOM2: I am happy to provide useful information to others that have a desire to buy organic vegetables through online channels.	
	eWOM3: I am willing to answer questions about buying organic vegetables through online channels.	
	eWOM4: I am willing to state my real purpose for buying organic vegetables, such as the need to help farmers reduce the use of chemicals/subsidize farmers.	
	eWOM5: I would like to explain/comment on the benefits of organic vegetables on the websites.	

Control Variables

A number of researchers have suggested that positive eWOM communication may be influenced by gender (Ahmat & Nurita, 2010). Therefore, gender was considered as a control variable in this study. Gender was classified as males (coded as 1) and females (coded as 2), respectively.

Research Findings

Assumptions for using multiple regression analysis were considered. Univariate outliers were checked using z-scores as recommended by Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black (2006). According to the normality test using the values of skewness and kurtosis and the graphical Q-Q plots, none of the variables presented a substantial problem with skewness or kurtosis. Homoscedasticity was tested, and it was concluded that the homoscedasticity criterion was adhered to in this study. Multicollinearity was accessed through bivariate correlations with correlation coefficients above 0.90 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007); as a result, multicollinearity was not found in this study.

By utilizing multiple regression analysis (MRA), the results showed that customer satisfaction (*H1*) and customer trust (*H2*) were related positively to positive eWOM communication. The standardized coefficients were $\beta = 0.401$ ($p < 0.001$) and $\beta = 0.337$ ($p < 0.001$), respectively. However, the evidence did not support the idea that customer commitment was related positively to positive eWOM communication (*H3*). The R^2 value (0.478) indicated that the model fit well. According to the tolerance and VIF values, multicollinearity was not found (see Table 2).

Table 2 Hypothesis Testing

Independent Variables	Coefficients ^a						
	S.E.	B	β	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	0.667	4.071	-	6.103	0.000	-	-
Gender	0.210	0.030	0.174	0.825	0.410	0.997	1.003
Customer Satisfaction (H1)	0.048	0.389	0.401	8.043	0.000**	0.528	1.894
Customer Trust (H2)	0.062	0.409	0.337	6.568	0.000**	0.499	2.004
Customer Commitment (H3)	0.053	0.041	0.039	0.778	0.437	0.531	1.003

^a Dependent Variable: positive eWOM communication

$R^2 = 0.478$ * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$

Discussion, Limitations, and Recommendations

It was found that customer satisfaction and customer trust have a positive influence on positive eWOM. This means that a customer is willing to share his or her positive message about organic vegetables on an online platform when he or she is satisfied with and trusts the products. Through web-based consumer opinion platforms, customers share their opinions on and experiences with products and with a multitude of other customers. eWOM offers interactivity and sympathetic communication for eWOM participants (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004). According to Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003), trust and satisfaction are equally important drivers of WOM. Trust lowers the desire of the consumer to spread negative WOM (Goles et al., 2009). Consumers with trust offer emotionally strong commentary on the sellers that have supplied them with quality products or services. Hence, a higher level of customer satisfaction and trust is instrumental in creating a higher level of positive referrals for online marketplaces and platforms.

The present study proposes useful implications as follows. First, it was mentioned that the growth rate of the Thai organic product market is still slower than the average 13% growth rate in the Asia-Pacific region (Duangekanong, 2020); one reason may come from an inappropriate way of creating eWOM communication. Accordingly, this paper provides insights related to the roles of customer satisfaction and customer trust in positive eWOM communication that could be useful for entrepreneurs in the market. Customers who are more satisfied with the product are more likely to become loyal spreaders of positive eWOM on behalf of the seller (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). According to previous studies (Sen & Lerman, 2007), consumers tend to trust other consumers' experiences, comments, and recommendations more than advertisements put forth by an advertising agent or a company. Customer trust is a key variable between pre-purchase and post-purchase, which can create long-term loyalty on the part of the customer and can lead the customer to form a tighter future relationship with the seller. The higher the customer trust, the more likely it is for customers to take the initiative and make referrals about their satisfactory experience with the seller's products, as well as engage in online activities to provide positive information about the organic product. The customer will also share positive opinions about the product and recommend the seller when he/she gets online.

Second, entrepreneurs who are able to achieve positive eWOM communication may maintain a high level of customer satisfaction and customer trust. By doing so, they may establish a customer relationship management system to manage and monitor the frequency and quality of customer-entrepreneur interactions, such as a system addressing customers' concerns and

complaints by promptly providing individualized information related to the product, as well as a standard operating procedure for handling customer complaints. Furthermore, entrepreneurs should continually improve their product quality and satisfy the customers' needs through mindful interactions with them during the purchasing process. An effective quality control system is also needed for minimizing product defects in order to lower the chance of customer complaints. Finally, they may offer appropriate financial or non-financial rewards to loyal customers in order to maintain a long-term relationship with them; these recommendations would increase customer satisfaction and trust. Consequently, satisfied customers would spread positive WOM and referrals to the entrepreneur through online platforms, such as social networks, blogs, and other virtual platforms.

Engaging in positive eWOM communication—for example, through positive referrals to a company—is one of the ways that a customer shows his or her loyalty to the seller. By maintaining a high level of customer loyalty, an organization is able to retain customers, and retaining customers is less expensive than acquiring new ones. Moreover, loyal customers reduce the costs associated with consumer education and marketing, especially when they become net promoters for the organization. Furthermore, loyal customers may ensure sales, and are more likely to purchase ancillary, high-margin supplemental products.

Though this study offers a number of implications as presented above, the following limitations should be considered. First, because the cross-sectional survey method was used, causal inferences must be made with caution (Nair & Swink, 2007). A longitudinal study on the relationship between relationship quality practices and positive eWOM is recommended in order to strengthen the causal inferences. Second, this study provides insights into the effects of the two aspects of relationship quality (customer satisfaction and customer trust) on positive eWOM in Bangkok, Thailand. The findings from this study may be applicable to other emerging economies (such as those in Asia). Hence, replicating and extending this work in other emerging economies may provide a basis for external validation of the findings of this study. Finally, there are other challenges inherent with eWOM communication, which primarily uses digital media to attract, engage, and convert virtual visitors to customers. Therefore, researchers may tackle these challenges.

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