Social identity, electronic word-of-mouth and referrals in social network services

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Abstract

Purpose – The main aim of this work is to explore the mechanisms that promote the transmission and reception of online opinions (electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and referrals) by travel services buyers in the context of social networks services (SNS).

Design/methodology/approach – The research examines two areas of study: social identification theory and word-of-mouth communication in the virtual environment (eWOM). Based on these theories an explicative model has been proposed applying structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis to a sample of SNS users buying travel services. Partial least squares was chosen as a method to conduct an SEM analysis.

Findings – First, the results support the central role of social identification in SNS communication. Second, the results show that SNS users give greater importance to the transmission of communication than to its reception. This fact supports the idea that SNS is used more as a tool for highlighting and maintaining social status than as a channel for information.

Originality/value – The study highlights the role of social identification as the core element which drives SNS. It then analyses the development of eWOM communication in the new context provided by SNS. In addition eWOM communication is studied from two perspectives: from the standpoint of the communicator, but also the receiver. Finally, it seems appropriate to differentiate between virtual communities discussing tourism (e.g. www.TripAdvisor.com) and the SNS (e.g. www.facebook.com, www.twitter.com). While the former seems to be a growing source of information, the latter acts rather more in a social context.

Keywords Online social networks, Tourism, Information technology, Communications technologies, Management information systems, Social identification, e-WOM, Referrals

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

If during the last decade, the internet has been the cornerstone of marketing relationships, Web 2.0 and social networks services (SNS) now also form an essential part of the picture. In 2012, more than 1,035 million international tourists were recorded, according to statistics gathered from the United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2013, with 2013 figures having been predicted to be even better. On the other hand, in 2012, the number of internet users worldwide was in excess of 2.7 billion people, according to the United Nations agency for information and communication technologies (ITU, 2013). If we focus purely on the SNS Facebook, the world’s leading social network had more than a billion monthly active users by the end of December 2012 (Facebook, 2013). These figures indicate that both of these worldwide trends are quite significant in our society.
In their own way, new technologies have revived an old marketing subject, i.e. word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. The development of the internet and SNS means that users can share tips, reviews and recommendations in a new virtual environment, leading to an emerging type of communication called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM; Hsueh and Chen, 2010). Previously tourism and marketing literature had proven WOM to be one of the most effective ways of advertising, being more successful than either radio or television. Moreover, “eWOM” could overcome the traditional limitations of WOM, such as the fact that WOM often involves private conversations which can be difficult to track (Hsueh and Chen, 2010). Therefore, it is interesting to analyse the relationship between SNS use with eWOM communication sent or received by tourist service buyers.

We believe that given the social component that defines SNS, an explanation based on individual aspects provides a partial view of the phenomenon. In particular, the decision to use online social networking technologies represents a social phenomenon that depends to a great extent on interactions among users and the use of social technologies. In addition, this is only possible when a group of individuals are willing to use the technology repeatedly together (Cheung and Lee, 2010). The inclusion of social identification theory provides an explanation: people develop a sense of themselves from the groups to which they belong (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Li, 2011) along with a collective identity which contrasts with other conditions in which the individual is unique and separate.

In this study, several research lines converge in the context of the purchase of travel services. The first includes the study of Web 2.0, as a developing and essential marketing channel in the tourism industry, which remains an area less studied due to its novelty. This subject is approached using the theory of social identification, and is supported by others such as Casaló et al. (2010), Kwon and Wen (2010), Li (2011), Zhou (2011), or Nusair et al. (2011). The second line of research, addressed in this paper is WOW communication in the online context provided by SNS. The topic of eWOM among travel service buyers is also discussed. The majority of work on this subject focuses on post-purchase behaviour (Hui et al., 2007; Chi and Qu, 2008; Hutchinson et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2010; Chang and Wang, 2011). The academic literature so far has tended to focus more on the outcomes and potential of marketing strategies, and in this regard, a systematic empirical investigation into the motivations behind customer decisions to engage in WOW communication, has been highly recommended in some recent studies (Shen et al., 2013). This work addresses the phenomenon of eWOM communication more from the perspective of technology and individual social behaviour. Some authors (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Libai et al., 2010; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012) have highlighted the necessity of undertaking research about eWOM and SNS in a service marketing context.

There are strong relationships between the service industry and new information technologies. Service is doubtless one of the economic sectors where the repercussion of advances in information and communications technology — especially the development and increasing penetration and use of the internet — has been extensive. The internet and its most recent evolution in terms of interactivity or the Web 2.0, has had an innovative impact on all aspects of services. Such a change in the overall operating environment has resulted in a complete transformation of the conventional customer acquisition model. The traditional attention, interest, desire and action (AIDA) marketing model according to which consumers’ acquisition went through the phases of AIDA (prior to purchase)
has been substituted by a new model which recognizes the role of the internet in all the phases of the acquisition process: attention, interest, search, action and sharing (AISAS). When applied to the service sector, especially tourism, the last step has become particularly important (Carvão, 2010). Sharing holiday comments, diaries, tips or photos has become a frequent practice for a growing number of travellers. Though the percentage of people that share their experiences at a global level may be relatively small (many will do the same online but with their circle of friends only in social networks such as Facebook or Twitter), a much higher percentage of users do read such comments and take them into account when making purchase decisions (Johnson et al., 2012).

The main objective of this work is to explain the influence of eWOM on referred purchases in an SNS context based on social identification theory. This general aim can be divided into two more specific objectives or sub-goals. For the first sub-goal, we analysed the social component involved in participation in SNS, so we have adopted the theory of social identification in this context. Second, we addressed eWOM communication. For this task, we distinguished between two separate points of view. On the one hand, we studied the willingness of users to transmit eWOM communication and on the other hand we analysed the relative importance of eWOM as received communication.

To achieve the above objectives, this paper has been structured as follows: the study begins with a review of the literature underpinning the main theoretical contributions related to these topics. This review then provides a basis for developing a set of hypotheses that result in the research model proposed. To test the proposed model, partial least squares (PLS) technique is used, this is a methodology for estimating structural equation modeling (SEM). The results section shows the appropriateness of the scales of measurement used and the support given to each hypothesis. The work concludes by addressing the main findings, followed by a discussion of the implications of the results; outlining the main limitations of the study and proposing future research.

Literature review
In this section, we present the theoretical bases that support the research undertaken. First, this work is based on a thorough review of the literature about WOM, and its application to the electronic environment and more recently to SNS. We will complete this theoretical framework with contributions extracted from social identity (SI) theory.

Word-of-mouth and referrals
Social network sites (SNSs) have become one of the most popular social communication channels, contacting millions of consumers around the world, and the effect of eWOM communication using Web 2.0 is an increasing phenomenon. SNS have transformed the way users interact with each other, obtain products and service information and make purchasing decisions (Chu and Choi, 2011). The social network setting offers an appealing context in which to study eWOM. The sites provide easy-to-use tools for current users to invite others to join the network. The electronic recording of these outbound referrals (REF) opens a new window into the effects of eWOM (Trusov et al., 2009). As a result, SNS provide users with an unbiased tool for searching product and service information which also allows them to offer their own consumer-related advice.

In marketing literature, WOM communication is a widely studied topic, but these days it has become particularly important because of its Web 2.0 and online social network application (Trusov et al., 2009). “eWOM” can overcome the traditional
limitations of WOM, such as the fact that WOM often involves private conversations which can be difficult to track (Hsueh and Chen, 2010).

WOM has a significant influence on consumers’ decision to change the attitudes and behaviours of friends and relatives (Opermann, 2000). Therefore, WOM has been described as one of the important post-purchase behaviours (Harrison-Walker, 2001). It is even more important and influential in the services context because of their intangibility and, therefore, greater perceived risk (Casaló et al., 2008). Furthermore, Garnefeld et al. (2011) argues that recommending a service provider improves the current customers’ loyalty to the provider and that positive WOM is not only effective for gaining but also for keeping customers. WOM recommendations are especially critical in tourism marketing because they are considered to be the most reliable, and thus they are one of the most sought-after information sources for potential tourists (Nusair et al., 2011; Leung et al., 2011).

In relation to WOM, communication is addressed from the communicator’s perspective. A referral or a recommendation represents one form of favourable WOM that is passed on by a customer about a certain product or service (Wheiler, 1987). In other words, the point of view of the receiver is adopted. The “desirability” of REF is related to the benefits to the referrer (the party that takes the initiative) and the receiver of the referral (Rigopoulou et al., 2008). With regard to this, Chatterjee (2011) examines the credibility of recommendations received through this new virtual environment. Another question is the importance given by the receiver to the message received. In this sense, Arsal et al. (2010) analysed its relevance using content analysis on some virtual communities focused on tourism.

The social network setting offers an appealing context in which to study eWOM and REF. The sites provide easy-to-use tools for current users to invite others to join the network. The electronic recording of these outbound REF opens a new window into the effects of eWOM (Trusov et al., 2009). Though still a relatively new phenomenon, online social networking sites have begun to attract the attention of marketing scholars. For example, Ansari et al. (2008) have developed an approach for modelling multiple relationships of different types among users of a social networking site. Dholakia et al. (2004) studied two key group-level determinants of virtual community participation: group norms and SI. Trusov et al. (2010) proposed a model that enables managers to determine which users are likely to be influential and therefore, important to the business in their role of attracting others to the site. There is an article by Bronner and de Hoog (2011) which is especially relevant, although it does not focus purely on SNS. They focused on tourists and studied their eWOM in various ways. In addition, they analysed how tourists decide to make recommendations about their holidays, what motivates them, and what recommendations they were making. This study seeks to complement the vision provided by these authors.

Very few studies, so far, have included eWOM and REF among their constructs or latent variables (Chatterjee, 2011; Huang et al., 2011). This however, is one of the main contributions of this research. SNS therefore provides a particularly appropriate context for study given its strong dynamic features (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). Consumer behaviour within SNS, such as Facebook, represents a complex, multi-layered, iterative process which includes learning, alternative evaluation, and feedback posting, all of which focus on sharing diverse sets of information (Jane et al., 2007). These virtual communities have very easy access to direct communication allowing consumers to post their experiences of
products and services (Park and Feinberg, 2010). Therefore, it is easy to argue that SNS use is an antecedent to providing information about products and services, eWOM, and to receiving recommendations (REF) about products and services. Furthermore, although there are many types of user, we understand that those who are more involved and participatory and who make important contributions in the form of eWOM, are also more attentive to the recommendations and comments that others post. Comments and support from other users to their eWOM communication may act as a social reward. Based on the arguments outlined above, the following hypothesis is developed:

H1. Use of SNS (USE) is positively related to transmitted eWOM.

H2. USE is positively related to received REF.

H3. Transmitted eWOM by SNS is positively related to received REF.

SI theory
SI theory has been used in studies in the fields of tourism and technology (Casaló et al., 2010; Ku, 2012). Prior research has used SI theory to explain how a person identifies with others (Akkinen, 2005). Broadly speaking, this theory proposes that people develop a sense of the self from the groups to which they belong (Hogg and Terry, 2000) and a collective identity which contrasts with other identities in which the individual is unique and separate (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). A SI thus implies that the person believes that he or she belongs to a certain social group and that this membership has a significant value (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Tajfel et al., 1971). As a result, a sense of unity among group members is developed. Different from personal identity, SI relates to the individual’s perceived position in a social group (Viktor et al., 1973). Strong SI is known as an important variable in self-goal setting. SI helps those with low self-esteem to establish a self-concept and also helps to avoid low goal-setting (Baumeister, 1993; Brockner et al., 1998; Festinger, 1954). This implies that SI may influence the actual use of social network services (Kwon and Wen, 2010). For example, a friend plans to use an instant messenger for group projects. However, the use of an instant messenger for group projects depends on whether other friends are willing to use it also. In addition, their experiences in using it will create a norm for them to continuously use it for other group projects. Thus, it would be more appropriate to examine the decision to use online social networks from an intentional social action perspective (Cheung and Lee, 2010).

The main assumption of SI theory is that people are motivated to maintain and improve self-image as a member of the group (Ely, 1994). Clément et al. (2001) found that communication support is necessary for those with a SI who collaborate with each other. This implies that a SNS would be perceived as a useful tool for them, if the tool is usable. Previous research has found that SI has a significant impact on attitude (Terry et al., 1997), and that it affects organizational behaviour in knowledge sharing (Ho et al., 2012). Boyd and Ellison (2007) indicated that SNS provide an opportunity for users to articulate and make their social connections visible. Moreover, Song and Kim (2006) proposed SI as a crucial determinant affecting the intention to use SNS. Recently, Zhou (2011) found a strong relationship between SI and SNS participation. Hence, we suggest that SI in a social network service will positively influence the USE. According to these theories, the following hypothesis is developed:

H4. SI is positively related to USE in SNS.
SI brings about individual behaviours for the benefit of the group members with the expectation of self-enhancement through a boost in self-esteem that is both personal and collective (Bagozzi and Lee, 2002). SI is an important indirect determinant of group behaviour (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). It has been proven that customer communities organized in small groups around a brand, engender greater social identification, when compared to similar customer communities organized more generally around the product category. In the case of virtual communities, WOM has two main functions related to SI. First, consumers may use WOM as a way to manage other users’ impressions of them. Second, WOM can be a means of expressing concern about others and helping virtual community members to make better choices (Ryu and Feick, 2007). Okazaki (2009) showed that, among other elements, SI is an important antecedent affecting desire (individual-level driver) and social intention (group-level driver) to engage in eWOM. According to these ideas, we propose the following hypothesis:

\[ H5. \] SI is positively related to transmitted eWOM in SNS.

\[ H6. \] SI is positively related to received REF in SNS.

Figure 1 shows our conceptual model and graphically presents our research hypotheses.

**Research methodology**

*Sample and data collection*

The empirical research is based on a non-probabilistic and self-selection sampling method, therefore it is a convenience sample. A questionnaire was published on the internet and links to this questionnaire were sent by e-mail and SNS to the researchers’ group of contacts, asking these contacts to complete the survey and redirect it to other contacts. Specifically, the data was collected in Chile and Spain from a sample of on-line questionnaires between January 14 and March 15, 2011. The exclusion of invalid questionnaires due to duplications or empty fields provided a final sample size of 603 respondents, who had bought tourist services in the previous year and used SNS. The fact that 81.1 per cent of this sample bought tourist services through the
internet is notable. In addition, 61.9 per cent of the sample were women. The majority of respondents were Spanish and Chilean and marginally from other countries, such as Germany, Brazil, Argentina, USA, etc. Statistically, significant differences in responses by nationality were not found. The age of the participants in the sample was close to the SNS user-average, ranging from 18 to 62 years old, but was made up predominantly of young people under 30. In relation to SNS, 82 per cent of respondents used Facebook, 54.7 per cent Tuenti (a Spanish SNS), and 20.1 per cent Twitter.

**Measurement scales**

The measurement scales applied have been widely tested in other investigations. Specifically, to measure the USE, the scales proposed by Kwon and Wen (2010) were adapted. Measurements for SI were adopted from Song and Kim’s (2006) study. To measure WOM the scales proposed by Walsh and Beatty (2007) were adapted. Referrals (REF) were quantified by asking the respondents whether: “Recommendations I received from my social network contacts were important when I bought the trip”. All items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale with anchors from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Table II shows the measurement scales used.

A pilot study of a sample size of 50 was conducted to ensure the reliability and user-friendliness of the questionnaire design. All travel buyers and SNS users responding to the questionnaire commented on its clarity, readability and ease of understanding. As a result, no amendments were made in terms of the rewording of items.

**Statistical tools**

PLS was chosen to conduct data analyses in this study. Unlike LISREL-type SEM, which is based on the covariance structure of the latent variables, PLS is a component-based approach. PLS aims to examine the significance of the relationships between research constructs and the predictive power of the dependent variable (Chin, 1998). Thus, PLS is suitable for predictive applications and theory building. Referral is measured via a single objective indicator, therefore, the validity and reliability of this measurement scale is guaranteed. PLS has three major advantages over other SEM techniques that make it well suited to this study. First, in PLS, constructs may be measured by a single item whereas in covariance-based approaches, at least four questions per construct are required. Second, in most social studies, data tend to be distributed non-normally, and PLS does not require any normality assumptions and handles non-normal distributions relatively well. Third, PLS accounts for measurement error and should provide more accurate estimates of interaction effects such as mediation (Chin, 1998; Gefen and Straub, 2000) and has the ability to handle a relatively small sample size (Barclay et al., 1995; Chin, 1998). Because PLS considers all path coefficients simultaneously, it allows analysis of direct, indirect, and spurious relationships. PLS estimates multiple individual item loadings in the context of a theoretically specified model rather than in isolation, so it also enables researchers to avoid biased and inconsistent parameter estimates for equations (White et al., 2003). Therefore, PLS is an appropriate choice for testing a research model. SmartPLS 2.0 M3 was specifically used in this study.

**Results**

The SEM analysis was conducted by constructing a measurement model and a structural model. The measurement model analysed relationships among a set of
observed variables and a predetermined number of latent variables. Reliability was tested using construct reliability and item reliability. Having ensured that the scale was reliable, the next step was to check the construct validity. Then the measurement model was evaluated and finalized before the structural model was evaluated.

**Measurement model**

To assess the constructs, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using PLS. Based on the CFA results, we analysed convergent validity, discriminant validity, and the reliability of all the multiple-item scales, following the guidelines from previous literature (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Gefen and Straub, 2000). The measurement properties are reported in Table I.

Reliability was assessed in terms of composite reliability and Cronbach’s α, which measures the degree to which items are free from random error and therefore yield consistent results. Composite reliabilities in our measurement model ranged from 0.897 to 0.926 (Table I), Cronbach’s α ranged from 0.830 to 0.880, in both cases the scores are above the recommended cut-off of 0.70 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Convergent validity was assessed in terms of factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). Convergent validity requires a factor loading greater than 0.70 and an AVE of no less than 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table I, all items had factor loadings over 0.70 (p < 0.01). AVE ranged from 0.745 to 0.807, suggesting adequate convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the AVE of each individual construct with shared variances between this individual construct and all the other constructs. Higher AVE of the individual construct than shared variances suggests discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table II shows the inter-construct correlations off the diagonal of the matrix. Comparing all the correlations and square roots of AVE shown on the diagonal, the results indicated adequate discriminant validity (Table III).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNS</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuenti</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>24.56 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 20</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>63.5%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; 40</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Demographic profile
The structural model

Assessment of the structural model involved estimating the path loadings and the $R^2$ values. Path loadings indicate the strengths of the relationships between the independent variables and dependent variable, while $R^2$ values measure the predictive power of the structural models. Interpreted as multiple regression results, the $R^2$ indicates the amount of variance explained by the exogenous variables. Using a bootstrapping technique, we calculated path loadings and $t$-statistics for hypothesized relationships. The results are shown in Figure 2.

As indicated by path loadings and the associated significance levels, the influence of SI on REF (0.002) is not significant, but the influence of SNS use on REF (0.104) is significant at 90 per cent of confidence level. These results point out the rejection of $H6$, and the partial support of $H2$.

On the other hand, SI significantly affects both WOW and SNS use. These results confirm $H5$ and $H4$. In addition, a significant relationship between SNS use and eWOM communication is found, this fact supports $H1$. Finally, eWOM communication shows a strong relationship to the importance of Referrals obtained via SNS, this result confirms $H3$.

## Reliability and Validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Reliability and validity</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>AVE: 0.807</td>
<td>SI1: as a member of the community, my position is very important to me 0.881</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Composite reliability: 0.926</td>
<td>SI2: as a member of the community, I am the type of person who likes to engage in my community 0.920</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cronbach’s $\alpha$: 0.880</td>
<td>SI3: activities in my community are the important part in my life 0.894</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE</td>
<td>AVE: 0.745</td>
<td>USE1: I tend to use the SNS frequently 0.808</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Composite reliability: 0.897</td>
<td>USE2: I spend a lot of time on SNS 0.898</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cronbach’s $\alpha$: 0.830</td>
<td>USE3: I exerted myself to SNS 0.883</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOM</td>
<td>AVE: 0.804</td>
<td>WOM1: I’m likely to say good things about this company 0.888</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Composite reliability: 0.925</td>
<td>WOM2: I would recommend this company to my friends and relatives 0.919</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cronbach’s $\alpha$: 0.878</td>
<td>WOM3: If my friends were looking for a new company of this type, I would tell them to try this place 0.884</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referrals (REF)</td>
<td>AVE: n.a.</td>
<td>REF: I buy trips taking into account recommendations of my friends in social network sites n.a.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Referrals</th>
<th>USE</th>
<th>WOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>0.807</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referrals</td>
<td>0.176205</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE</td>
<td>0.490470</td>
<td>0.222636</td>
<td>0.863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOW</td>
<td>0.372599</td>
<td>0.367508</td>
<td>0.355938</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table II.** Reliability and validity

**Table III.** Discriminant validity

_The structural model_
Assessment of the structural model involved estimating the path loadings and the $R^2$ values. Path loadings indicate the strengths of the relationships between the independent variables and dependent variable, while $R^2$ values measure the predictive power of the structural models. Interpreted as multiple regression results, the $R^2$ indicates the amount of variance explained by the exogenous variables. Using a bootstrapping technique, we calculated path loadings and $t$-statistics for hypothesized relationships. The results are shown in Figure 2.

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On the other hand, SI significantly affects both WOW and SNS use. These results confirm $H5$ and $H4$. In addition, a significant relationship between SNS use and eWOM communication is found, this fact supports $H1$. Finally, eWOM communication shows a strong relationship to the importance of Referrals obtained via SNS, this result confirms $H3$. 

_Social identity in SNS_
As shown in Figure 2, the model has a relatively appropriate goodness of fit. SI explained 24 per cent of variance in USE. For communication variables, the model explained 17.8 per cent of variance in WOW and 14.4 per cent of variance in referrals.

Discussion
This work endeavors to explain eWOM communication in the context of the SNS users who are travel service buyers. This aim is achieved through two more specific objectives, which we call sub-goals.

In the first sub-goal, the social component implicit in SNS based on the theory of social identification is examined. SI explains SNS use adequately, and there is a strong relationship between both constructs. This relationship is incorporated in $H_4$. The same occurs with $H_5$, which reflects the relationship between social identification and eWOM communication. However, $H_6$ has not been accepted, therefore, SI is not related to the importance given to REF in SNS users who buy tourist services. This finding is unexpected and the explanation could be the following. It is likely that SNS users showing a high SI were not very interested in the recommendations posted by their friends in SNS, because the formers may think that the opinions of the latters are not well-founded. In addition, SNS users presenting a low SI may not pay much attention to SNS, and therefore, their friends and family recommendations are ignored.

In general, these results indicate the key role played by social identification in the context of SNS. This idea is consistent with Cheung and Lee (2010), Li (2011) and Zhou (2011). Cheung and Lee (2010) noted that the USE is basically a social phenomenon that largely depends on the interaction among users. In addition the use of social technologies only makes sense when a group of individuals are willing to use and continue to use the technology together. Li (2011) found that status has an important role in the intention to use SNS, from the point of view of social influence. Zhou (2011) found a strong relationship between SI and SNS participation. Concretely, this author
highlighted the relevance of the cognitive and the evaluative elements. In the same way, these results are supported by those obtained by Hsu et al. (2006). They affirm that reference groups have a big influence on the behaviour of individual tourists. Furthermore, tourist service buyers confirm eWOM as a type of social activity: it is a way of offering advice and getting noticed among their group of contacts.

The second and last sub-goal relates to eWOM communication. We have identified two separate views in this area. On the one hand, we have collected data on users’ willingness to publish eWOM communication. On the other hand, we have analysed the relative importance of received REF. H1 deals with the relationship between the USE by travel service buyers and the eWOM communication transmitted by them. H2 brings together the relationship between USE and the importance given to REF received by respondents. The results support both hypotheses, but H2 is only partially confirmed. In addition, H3 proposes that transmitting eWOM communication is an antecedent of REF, and in this case the hypothesis is sustained. If we add these results to the above sub-goal, we find that SI indirectly affects REF in two ways, significantly via eWOM communication, and less so in SNS use. This means that respondents are more interested in publishing messages for their group of contacts about services bought and experiences lived than in taking into account information from others that helps them to decide about future purchases. However, these individuals are interested in comments made by their social network group on their previous posts, which is consistent with the social vision of using SNS. SI makes people use SNS, but this fact does not always mean that the recommendations offered by their acquaintances are adopted, if they have not asked for them. These results are consistent with the motivations found by Bronner and de Hoog (2011) in the section on tourists. Furthermore, these results are consistent with those obtained by Muñoz-Leiva et al. (2012) who found behaviour differences between virtual communities specializing in tourism (www.tripadvisor.com) and SNS (www.facebook.com).

In short, respondents use SNS as a means of displaying their social position to their group of contacts, and especially as a way of providing advice and information to their contacts, about tourism services bought and experiences lived. Our results do not support SNS as a means of gathering information, people seem less interested in collecting recommendations on tourist services, than in communicating about activities that reinforce the position individuals occupy in their social network. It is possible that REF have more relevance in virtual communities specializing in tourism (Arsal et al., 2010), but their influence is limited in SNS.

Theoretical contribution
From a theoretical viewpoint, this work makes several significant contributions. First, we highlight the role of social identification as the soul, the heart, which drives SNS. SI is a strong antecedent of eWOM and USE, presenting a positive and significant relationship with both variables. Previous studies found a direct relationship between SI and USE (Zhou, 2011), but the link between SI and eWOM is novel and original. Second, the study analyses the development of eWOM communication in the new context provided by SNS. The contribution is that SNS promote a greater use of eWOM. In spite of the fact that WOM is a traditional marketing tool, the new context of SNS provides a markedly social development of eWOM as a way of communication. Third, eWOM communication is studied from two perspectives, i.e. from the standpoint of the communicator, but also from that of the receiver. To include eWOM
and REF as two different communication tools is the major contribution of this study. The positive relationships between USE and REF, and eWOM and REF have not been simultaneously studied in previous studies. Fourth, a distinguishing feature of this work is that the sample is composed essentially of SNS users and travel buyers from Spain and Chile. Two Latin countries that share important similarities and also some differences (Arenas et al., 2011), but differ from other typical studies in these topics that analyse Asian and Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Managerial implications
With regard to its practical implications, this work provides several elements that must be considered. It seems appropriate to differentiate between virtual communities based on tourism (e.g. www.TripAdvisor.com) and the SNS (e.g. www.facebook.com, www.twitter.com). While the former seem to be a growing source of information, the latter acts more in a social capacity. Focusing on the latter, the results of this study explained the central role that social position plays in individual behaviour on social networks. The USE and generated eWOM communication are closely related to the importance that social position plays for individuals. From the point of view of management, travel industry leaders should promote actions that reaffirm the social position of individuals. This is vital to provide travel buyers with the opportunity to share their participation in tourist activities and other services with their social networks. For example, a holiday-oriented hotel can take pictures of parties and celebrations (such as sports tournaments), and invite their customers to be tagged in these photos, which in turn allows its customers to show their participation in the events to their contacts. Holiday adventure companies can do something similar (diving, rafting, cannoning, etc.), showing pictures of their customers at key moments, and inviting them to be tagged. In this way, companies will achieve positive eWOM communication from their clients, who can show their experiences to their net contacts, reaffirming their status. In addition, those who have had good service experiences, and who engage in publishing their opinions and feelings in SNS, are very likely to lead positive eWOM communication. Consequently, this important group of influencers can be identified and supported by companies.

Moreover, companies should develop mechanisms for obtaining this valuable information on what social network users say about them. The development of “community managers” is essential in building a communication strategy which taps into the huge amount of information users publish on social networks about the company, in order to reaffirm positive feedback and to promote the overall image of the company.

Conclusions and limitations
In conclusion, we have studied WOW communication in the context of SNS. Given the novelty and dynamism of this environment this is quite an attractive and relevant subject area to explore. To do this we have relied on the idea that user behaviour in SNS is strongly influenced by their social environment. On the other hand, WOW communication in SNS is more dynamic than in other environments. We considered both types of eWOM communication, i.e. as transmitted and as received REF. In summary, our work indicates that tourism service consumers use eWOM communication as a tool to assert their social group, rather than as a tool for gathering information.

Finally, this work has some limitations. For example, we have used a non-random sampling method and it would be necessary to validate and generalize the results using
random sampling methods in future investigations. Furthermore, we must point out that the majority of individuals who participated in the study were living in a Latin culture. The sample size did not enable us to make generalizations, and the results may not apply to different nationalities. Developing cross-cultural studies in this area would be an important line for future research.

References


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