



DOES HIGHER CONTRIBUTION TO THE ONLINE TRAVEL COMMUNITY INFLUENCE THE DISCOURSE QUALITY? A CASE OF TOURISTS' POSTS WRITTEN ABOUT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Online Travel Communities (OTCs) have been recognized as an effective information dissemination tool among tourists worldwide. The information cues provided by friends and relatives can now easily be obtained from experienced travelers overseas through OTC. These communities are seen as an advanced mechanism for travel decision-making and facilitating travel plans. This study explores the discourse shared in the OTC through the members' involvement and posted replies. This paper investigates the effect of repliers and the posts on OTC content's Discourse Quality (DQ). A total of 235 threads from an online travel community were extracted, and discourse quality was measured based on five quality criteria representing nine quality dimensions derived from literature. Smart PLS-SEM was used to analyze the data. It was found that the number of posts had a direct and significant effect on DQ criteria, whereas the contextual quality of online discourse does not get influenced by the participation of more repliers. The study offers practical implications for community members for enhancing replying competition and to OTC managers for managing post-reply behavior & taking effective measures for discourse quality in OTCs.

KEYWORDS: Online Travel Community, Discourse Quality, Replier Competition, Decision Making, Tourism



INTRODUCTION

Tourists are more motivated to do information searches and plan their travel using online platforms due to the development of the Internet. User-generated content (UGC) is posted on social networking sites and smartphone applications (Capriello, Mason, Davis, & Crofts, 2013; Givil & Levy, 2016). Word of mouth (WOM) has been a traditional means of information sharing as tourists believe in their friends' and known' opinions for making purchase decisions, while eWOM generated by experienced tourists on various online sources stimulates the information user's behavior. eWOM is more imperative due to its richness and accessibility than WOM (Yang, Mai, & Ben-Ur, 2012). Social media and online communities help the tourists' travel decision-making, and they can evaluate their own experiences while sharing their observations online (Kim, Fesenmaier, & Johnson, 2013; Hajli, Wang, & Tajvidi, 2018). TripAdvisor is the third party site that offers online travel reviews and online discourse on the forum and is rated the most prominent social media platform for tourism information search (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016) and is used for research about travel reviews and forum postings (Banerjee & Chua, 2016). Tilly, Fischbach, and Schoder (2015) disclosed that around 20%-45% of travelers use social media for information search, evaluation of various alternatives, and planning their tours; however, significantly fewer users share their experiences and observations on these platforms. Besides the enormous number of social media users, the people contributing in UGC creation are not enough. Thus, it becomes crucial to investigate the quality of online information as the studies examining tourism-related social media content, have seldomly examined this question (Lu & Stepchenkova 2015). Information overload and the diversity of views provided in the content are significant issues for users (Albaham & Salim, 2012; Heydari, Tavakoli, Ismail, & Salim, 2016). When there is a variety of information, it becomes hard to sort the relevant information (Weimer, Gurevych, & Mühlhäuser, 2007). This study explores the discourse quality in an OTC by examining the threads posted by community members and evaluating the influence of the number of posts and repliers on the discourse quality. This study adds to the existing literature on discourse quality and the post replying behavior by investigating the original postings of the tourists in an OTC. It also offers practical implications for community members for enhancing replying competition and to OTC



managers for managing post-reply behavior & taking effective measures for discourse quality in OTCs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Travel Communities and Discourse Quality

In OTCs, information is generated and presumed by various types of members simultaneously (Oriade & Robinson, 2019). In OTCs, any member can start a thread by posting any travel query, known as an Original Poster (OP). Travel information and knowledge are exchanged in the online platform in the form of threads that unveil the content quality (Brand, 2016). OTCs and travel forums such as Thorn tree and TripAdvisor are used by tourists worldwide to seek solutions for travel-related queries and deliberate on the available options and choices. Due to Internet access, any query can be searched using search engines. A vast amount of information is generated from diverse sources. However, this vast information can hinder decision-making, and agreement on information usefulness and accuracy can be questionable. It also makes the information search and selection a time-consuming process on the Internet in the presence of several alternatives for an issue (Béliveau & Garwood, 2001).

The online information that is more credible and trustworthy influences its usefulness and information adoption positively (Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Cheung, 2014). Information quality positively depends on the extent to which information is perceived useful and depends on UGC completeness, trustworthiness, and how timely information is provided, which further influence users' purchase intentions (Cheung, 2014). Further, how easy the community members find the online information to understand defines the success or completeness of a thread. Further, in online/offline discourse, politeness is a significant determinant measured by the way people communicate with each other. The online discourse is influenced by how members express their views, ask questions, post replies, and attitudes toward others' opinions (Osman, Salim, & Saeed, 2019). Objectivity, insufficient knowledge, consistency, poor writing styles, lack of experience, lengthy process in information extraction, and involvement of multiple users have been significant hindrances that lead to low discourse quality (Le & Shah, 2016). Prior studies have measured the online information quality dimensions according to different criteria. Wang and Strong



(1996) evaluated "Believability, Accuracy, Reputation, Objectivity as Intrinsic IQ, Accessibility, Security as Accessibility IQ, Timeliness, Relevancy, Completeness, Amount of Info, Value-Added as Contextual IQ and Interpretability, Ease of Understanding, Concise Representation, Consistent Representation as Representational IQ." Katerattanakul and Siau (1999), Liu, Li, Zhang, and Huang (2017), and Ghasemaghahi and Hassanein (2019) also adopted the same criteria. Nandi, Hamilton, Chang, and Balbo (2012) investigated the "Facilitators' expectations, Content quality, and Interaction quality" of online forums. Fu and Oh (2019) and Kim and Oh (2009) focused on "Content class, Cognitive, Extrinsic, Information-source, Socio-emotional, and Utility class" to judge answer quality in social QA sites.

Information is generated by collaboration in online communities, whereas lack of professionalism and information sharing knowledge are critical factors for the smooth functioning of the online travel community (Le & Shah, 2016). The information must be reliable, complete, fit in the context, and has an appropriate presentational style for enhancing the understandability and usefulness to facilitate the potential tourists in travel decision-making. Satisfied users tend to contribute more to OTCs and help fellow members. Consequently, high-quality content help maintains existing users, motivate them to share more knowledge, and attracts new users to a site (Liu, Bian, & Agichtein, 2008).

Members' Contribution

The online travel communities function consistently because of members' continued participation, and their involvement is considered one of the significant factors determining the community's success (Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2014; Tsai & Pai, 2013). In OTCs, certain members communicate in the community frequently, and they are experienced persons in the field and help in information generation by showing high interest. However, the repliers must converse with the OP only in the particular thread to enhance the discourse quality, as the conversation with fellow members apart from the OP can lead to irrelevant content (Osman et al., 2019). The amount of data in an online community means the quantity of information various members provide on a particular topic, analyzed as words count measures in a thread (Osman et al., 2019). The number of posts in a thread can be used to determine the amount of data, as the more posts are in a



thread, the longer a thread will be. Sun, Rau, and Ma (2014) found that the majority of members in the online community do not engage in the discourse and they are known as "lurkers" and considered "silent group" as their participation in an online community is negligible. Research on users' participation in OTCs is notable, most of which focuses on the psychological factors with information sharing (Pai & Tsai, 2011; Jin, Li, Zhong, & Zhai, 2015). The members who, on the contrary, participate in the community regularly show interest in other members' issues and help in achieving community goals. Getting identification among community members (Lee, Reid, & Kim, 2014; Qu & Lee, 2011), forming reputation and recognition from peers (Jin et al., 2015; Nov, Naaman, & Ye, 2010) motivate user's participation in any online community. Quite the opposite, users who do not get any reply to their queries get demotivated to carry on the discourse in the thread and leave the community (Cheng et al., 2014).

When many users share information, all tend to offer something different that has not been addressed by the previous users, thus enhancing the discourse quality by offering broad and vivid information quality (Fang, Chen, Wang, & George, 2018). The experienced community members know how to communicate with fellow users, how to post a query in the community, and how to post a reply over a sensitive topic, and they are more inclined to contribute to the community and become more trustworthy by offering optimum information in OC (Jin et al., 2015). In the study to find the best answers in OCs, Burel, He, and Alani (2012) investigated OCs of three domains and conveyed that the average number of replies to each query ranged from 9 to 100. There is a need for critical investigation on how the number of repliers and the number of posts in a thread influence the discourse quality in an OTC.

The following hypothesizes are proposed:

H1- Number of repliers in a thread affects the discourse quality in the Online Travel Community (OTC)

H2- The number of posts in a thread affects the discourse quality in the Online Travel Community (OTC)



Research Methodology

In order to investigate the influence of the number of repliers and posts in a thread on the discourse quality, the secondary data available on TripAdvisor was used. For this study, the threads from the OTC were extracted and downloaded. Only those threads were collected in which the original poster had posted back in the thread and left at least a comment on the received replies. For this, 650 threads were checked, but only 235 threads fulfilled the criteria, and these were further analyzed based on the discourse quality criteria derived from literature. Quality dimensions from Wang and Strong (1996) have been adapted for this study. The intrinsic, contextual, and representational criteria are selected that have been evaluated by accuracy, believability, objectivity (intrinsic), ease of understanding, interpretability, and presentation (representational), and relevant, value-added, and amount of information (contextual) quality dimensions. Accessibility criteria were not investigated in this study as all the information is available to read in OTCs, and any member can write posts. Three coders evaluated all the threads based on nine quality dimensions, and the members' contribution was also measured from the repliers and posts for further analysis. For data analysis, Smart PLS-SEM 3.0 was used. First of all, the structural model included five constructs, and the measurement model included three formative constructs and two single-item constructs. After data collection and cleaning, the assessment of PLS-SEM results for measurement and structural model was carried out. The following section provides the results of all hypothesis tests.

RESULTS

The following sections provide the results from the PLS-SEM analysis regarding the measurement model and structural model, and then the results of the hypothesis testing are elaborated with tables and figures. Figure 1 shows the outer weights and the path coefficient values of the hypothesized model.

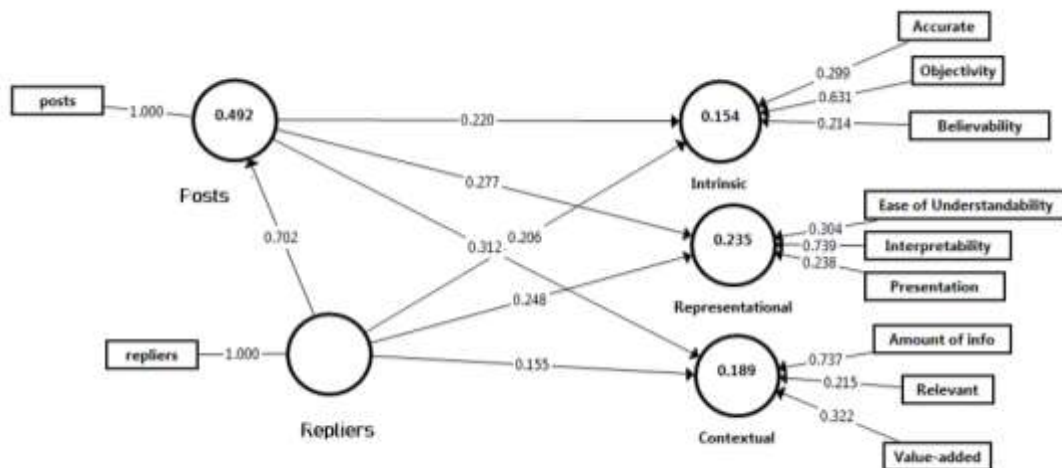


Figure 1: The Path Model and indicators' Loadings

Evacuation of Measurement Model

Construct	Indicator	Outer Weight	Standard Deviation	T Statistics (p-value)	Outer Loading	VIF
Intrinsic	Accurate	0.299	0.217	1.378	0.802***	1.795
	Believability	0.214	0.184	1.163	0.782***	1.868
	Objectivity	0.631	0.185	3.411**	0.94***	1.84
Representational	Ease of Understandability	0.304	0.117	2.603**	0.547***	1.137
	Interpretability	0.739	0.091	8.141***	0.912***	1.258
	Presentation	0.238	0.113	2.109*	0.671***	1.353
Contextual	Relevant	0.215	0.138	1.55	0.686***	1.539
	Value-added	0.322	0.137	2.355*	0.508***	1.052
	Amount of info	0.737	0.125	5.891***	0.935***	1.598

***p<0.001, **P<0.01, *P<0.05



Table 1: Results of Formative Measurement Model

There were three formative constructs in this model, and for each construct, a single item was taken as an alternative measure of the construct for redundancy analysis. Single-item is considered sufficient for measuring convergent reliability of formative construct (Houston, 2004). The convergent validity is acceptable at $p > .70$ (Hair et al., 2017) and for intrinsic, contextual, and representation constructs were .091, .093, and .090 at $p < .001$. As shown in Table 1, the outer weights are significant except for accurate information, believability, and relevant information from intrinsic and contextual constructs; however, due to the higher and more significant outer loadings values than 0.50, these quality items are retained in the constructs Hair et al., (2017). Further, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is calculated, and $VIF < 3$ is acceptable in formative measures (Becker, 2015). The results disclose that the VIF for all discourse quality indicators is less than 3. So, there is no issue of multi-collinearity of indicators (Table 1).

Assessment of the Structural Model

As the measurement model was good, validated, and had statistically significant measures, the structural model was analyzed, and direct and indirect effects of the independent variables on the dependent were revealed.

First of all, All the inner VIF values of the predictor constructs were checked and reported below the accepted value 3, showing no collinearity issue in the structural model. Next, R^2 values show the total explained variances in the outcome constructs in the model (Hair et al., 2018). In this present study, the R^2 is highest for the posts with .492, and the R^2 value of 0.228 is highest for the representational criteria of discourse quality (table 2). According to Cohen (1992), criteria of discourse quality constructs indicate medium effect size as the R^2 values are between .13 to 0.25.



Table 2: R Square values

	R ²	R ² Adjusted
Contextual	0.189	0.182
Intrinsic	0.154	0.147
Posts	0.492	0.49
Representational	0.235	0.228

The results of f^2 represent the effect size of the constructs. Table 3 shows that the number of posts has a small effect size on intrinsic, contextual, and representational criteria, while repliers have a large effect size on the number of posts. The Standardized root means square residual (SRMR) value was 0.074. This indicates the model's good fit as it is less than .08, which is the limit of good fit (Hair et al., 2018). Further, the NFI values of .09 are acceptable for a good model fit (Byrne, 2010).

Table 3: Effect Size f^2

f^2	Contextual	Intrinsic	Posts	Representational
Posts	0.061	0.029		0.051
Repliers	0.015	0.025	0.97	0.041

Structural model for Hypothesis testing

After assessing the measurement model, and the structural model, the results for the hypothesis were investigated using a bootstrapping procedure that used 2,000 random samples. The summary of the direct effects of the number of posts and repliers on various discourse quality criteria is illustrated in table 4. First, the direct effects of posts were found a positive and significant on all DQ criteria with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. With a path coefficient of .312, posts had the highest effect on the contextual criteria ($\beta=.312$, p value <0.001 , H1a supported), followed by representational quality $\beta=.277$, p value <0.001 , H1c supported). Also, the number of repliers was found to have the highest influence on the number of posts in all constructs of the model repliers ($\beta=.702$, p value <0.001 , H3 supported). However, the direct effect of the repliers' involvement was not



found to be significant on contextual DQ ($\beta=.155$, $p \text{ value} > 0.05$, H2a not supported) in the OTC.

Table 4: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results of Direct Effect

Hypothesis	Path-relations	Original Sample	Standard Deviation	T Statistics (p value)	Confidence Intervals	Hypothesis Decision
H1a	Posts -> Contextual	0.312	0.083	3.744***	0.152, 0.478	Supported
H1b	Posts-> Intrinsic	0.22	0.088	2.506*	0.043, 0.387	Supported
H1c	Posts-> Representational	0.277	0.079	3.516***	0.119, 0.436	Supported
H2a	Repliers -> Contextual	0.155	0.083	1.862	0.001, 0.322	Not Supported
H2b	Repliers-> Intrinsic	0.206	0.093	2.223*	0.028, 0.393	Supported
H2c	Repliers-> Representational	0.248	0.078	3.17**	0.098, 0.411	Supported
H3	Repliers-> Posts	0.702	0.045	15.453***	0.606, 0.784	Supported

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.5$

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study is the first attempt that investigates the effect of the number of community members participating in a thread and the posts generated by them to offer solutions to original posters on the discourse quality of the thread. The numbers of repliers who participate in the thread try their best to offer the most pertinent information to facilitate the decision-maker, and in this process, as many repliers engage in interaction, the number of posts they write enhances. However, when the original poster engages in the thread and posts comments on repliers' posts, the number of total posts is also enhanced. The results show that the number of posts positively influences the thread quality in an OTC. The number of posts highly influences the intrinsic representation and contextual discourse quality. It can be concluded that the number of posts affects the accuracy, believability, and biasness of information created, and also, the higher number of posts enhances the understanding, interpretability, and presentational styles of information significantly.



Threads with a higher number of posts compete to offer more diverse and context-specific information to cater to the needs of OP and offer him/her relevant and useful information to rely upon for decision making. It was found that the number of posts and repliers had a direct and significant effect on DQ criteria, whereas there was no significant difference between repliers and contextual information quality. The reason may be that the higher numbers of people involved in online discourse tend to talk about other issues than the one asked by the OP. They are more likely to discuss the issue more casually, and thus the discourse turns into a general discussion than a specific context.

Also, the number of repliers communicating in the thread attempts to offer OP more practical and meaningful information. In the OTC, where potential travelers seek information cues and solutions from experienced travelers, they receive support for decisions and minimize uncertainty. The more the repliers participate in OTC, the more will be answers to the question, and these empirical results also support this notion with a total variance of 49%. Further, results show that the repliers influence the discourse quality in OTC through the number of posts. The study found that both the number of replies and posts have a medium effect size on all the DQ criteria. The extensive content generated by many users in threads facilitates inquiries in travel decision-making by sharing their experiences, providing guidance, advice, and detailed information by minimizing uncertainty (Fang et al., 2018).

Offering high-quality discourse to its members is mandatory for travel planning and facilitating decision-making for a community. The community managers should maximize healthy discussion among the members and promote mutual understanding. The community members should also focus on diverse information and offer suggestions, recommendations, and past observations for the OP to get useful information from many posts. The repliers can do this by reviewing the previous answers and trying to offer specific information that can cater to all queries of OP. The OTC members need to focus on the usefulness of their posts and consider the information fitness. Also, to enhance the number of posts from diverse repliers, the OTC should motivate the OP to comment on the posts and must confirm his/her opinion on their views and information. It is seen that the OP's involvement in the thread influences other members' participation and motivates them to



post any replies in the thread. Tourism stakeholders can utilize social media platforms to connect to their consumers and provide reliable and useful information (Pabel&Prideaux, 2016). They can use these social networking sites to socially connect to potential tourists and maximize a positive image by providing professional information as per the requirements.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has investigated the online interactions about travel in India among the online travel community members. The online discourse quality was investigated using the intrinsic, contextual, and representational quality criteria. The influence of the number of posts and repliers participating in a thread was evaluated by PLS-SEM. The study has revealed a positive and significant influence of the posts on the DQ dimensions. Also, the repliers influence the intrinsic and representational qualities of OTC threads significantly and positively. The study has focused on only three DQ criteria; future studies can investigate other essential information quality dimensions. Further, the factors influencing the DQ and its consequences on tourists' behavior can be investigated in future research.

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