



# **The Influence of Electronic-Word-of-Mouth on Travel Intention among Foreign Students in Malaysia: Does Gender Really Matter?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As an attractive educational hub within this region, Malaysia currently accommodates an enormous number of foreign students. These students are known for their inclination towards tour and travel activities during their spare time. In view of the potential contribution of foreign students' travel activities towards the nation, this study attempts to examine the tour behaviour among foreign students in Malaysia. This study specifically focuses on the foreign students' travel intention and possible influences of electronic-word-of-mouth (E-WOM) on their travel intention. In addition, this study intends to determine the influence of gender differences on the impact of the E-WOM towards students' travel intention. The foreign students pursuing their tertiary education in Limkokwing University located at Cyberjaya, Malaysia comprise the population of this study. Snowball sampling was used to draw 500 representative elements for the study's self-administrated survey. Structural equation modelling analysis was used to analyse the data collected. Findings revealed that E-WOM significantly influenced the foreign students' intention to travel in Malaysia. Nonetheless, an insignificant moderation effect of gender on the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention was found. Following a detailed discussion on the findings obtained, this study presented several managerial implications alongside recommendation for future researches.

**Keywords:** Travel Intention, Electronic Word of Mouth, Gender Differences

**JEL Classifications:** C30, M310

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia has been ranked as the 10<sup>th</sup> most visited county in the world by World Tourism Organization in year 2012 (Tourism Malaysia, 2016a). The number of foreign tourists is gradually increasing since early 1990s where Malaysia has recorded the arrival of 25.7 million tourists in 2015 (Tourism Malaysia, 2016b). Tourism sector is indeed a definite catalyst for nation's economic growth especially due to its foreign exchange earnings. In 2012, tourism sector had contributed about 12.5% towards Malaysia's gross domestic productivity and it was subsequently ranked the second largest of the foreign exchange earners (Prime Minister's Department, 2014).

On the other hand, Malaysia has been essentially good in attracting and accommodating foreign students. In 2015,

Malaysia was included in the list of top 10 countries for foreign students in choosing study destination where 135,000 foreign students from 160 countries were reported to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia ("Malaysia Ranked World's 9<sup>th</sup> for International Students," 2015). It was predicted that Malaysia would receive at least 200,000 foreign students by 2020 and the resultant earnings would be RM6 billion ("Malaysia has one of Highest Proportions of International Students Pursuing Higher Education," 2015).

Foreign students are known for their inclination on vacation during spare time in the host country (Heidari and Marzuki, 2013; Qiu, 2014). Being the frequent travellers in the host country, they contribute to the country's economy growth (Varasteh et al., 2015). Bojanic (2012) insisted that the spending of these students in the host country during the vacation could make an estimated value

of a billion dollar. In view of that, foreign students are deemed to have robust effects towards the future of tourism sector in the host country.

Recent empirical studies have reported that tourists habitually choose the travel destination which has the most favourable image (Palau-Saumell et al., 2016; Phau et al., 2010). The favourable destination image is usually developed based on the information disseminated over the various sources of word-of-mouth (WOM), WOM (Kim and Morrison, 2005; Phau et al., 2010). The effectiveness WOM sources on the travel decision have been reported to proliferate over the electronic platform (Chauhan et al., 2015; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). Liang et al. (2013) justified that the efficiency and ease in reaching more audiences besides maintaining anonymity in spreading the information are the key reasons for the proliferation of electronic-WOM (E-WOM).

Generic consumer behaviours studies typically underlined the noticeable differences between male and female consumers in each stage of the decision making process (Bakshi, 2012; Jin and Punpanich, 2011; Rudell, 1993). It is also interesting to learn that there have been inconsistent findings on the impact of genders difference towards tourism decision making process. Meng and Uysal (2008) found that there was significant difference between male and female tourists on the perceived importance and travel values related to their choice on tour destination. Their findings were reinforced by Marcevovala (2011) who further discovered that decision made with regards to the holidays tend to be dominated by females instead of males. Nonetheless, a recent empirical study by Lin et al. (2014) found no difference between male and female tourists in Taiwan on their tour hesitation and destination decision. Singleton (2013) stated that people of the same gender tend to behave in the similar way in their active travel activities.

Similarly, past empirical studies reported inconsistent gender differences on the information seeking and/or sharing behaviour. Even though there were past empirical findings (Ryan et al., 1998; Xie et al., 2007) which highlighted the significant gender differences on the tourists' information seeking and/or sharing behaviour, Chauhan et al. (2015), however, no difference was found between male and female tourists towards their inclination on the use of both traditional and E-WOM in seeking information related to the tour destination.

It is also worthwhile to stress that tourism researches within Malaysian context had considerably abandoned a thorough investigation on the impact of gender influences on the tourists' behaviour (Omar et al., 2014). Inconsistency in the findings of significant direct effect of gender difference on the tour behaviour and E-WOM in isolation alongside the dearth of tourism studies in Malaysia which focuses on the gender differences have been key drivers to embark this study. This study intends to examine the moderation impact of gender differences on the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention among foreign students in Malaysia.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Travel Intention

Theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is the most frequently used theory in examining the behaviour intention of individual within the field of social sciences. TPB is an extension of theory of reasoned action with the inclusion of perceived behaviour control in order to improve the ability of behavioural intention to predict the actual behaviour of an individual (Ajzen, 1985). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) had further elaborated that intention would result as behaviour when there is an opportunity to perform (Lam and Hsu, 2006). Therefore, behavioural intention is referring to the perceived likelihood that one would engage in certain form behaviour in the particular setting (Lu et al., 2016).

When applied this viewpoint to the tourism context, the travel intention is referred as the traveller's willingness or likelihood to visit a destination (Chen et al., 2014). Greater the intention of one to travel, the higher the possibility he or she will actually travel (Lu et al., 2016). It is also seen as the possibility, commitment and motivation to travel to a specific tour destination (Ahn et al., 2013; Baker and Crompton, 2000; Jang et al., 2009). Recent studies within the field of tourism which adopt TPB's viewpoint are as follows: Akkus and Erdem (2013), Al Ziadat (2015) and Hsu and Huang (2012).

Travel intention is habitually based on the tourists' attitude and preference toward a particular tour destination (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Chen et al., 2014). Rational and affective condition are seen as key measures of tourists' behaviour particularly their attitude and preference (Wu, 2015). In other words, functional and psychological variables often influence one's intention to travel which then leads to actual travel behaviour. It was noted that the psychological variables relate to the tourists' emotions which are characterized by episodes of intense feelings (Goossens, 2000; Hosany and Prayag, 2013) while functional variables centres on the destination's specific attributes and its environment (Orth et al., 2010; Trauer and Ryan, 2005).

### 2.2. E-WOM and Travel Intention

WOM is a kind of the communication messages which originate from the outside of an organization and the information generated is usually beyond the company's control (Pride et al., 2015; Wirtz et al., 2012). Any informal sharing of the purchase and consumption related information among customers is considered as WOM regardless of the content of the information, and hence, WOM can be in positive or negative manner (Bataineh, 2015; Ghorban and Tahernejad, 2012). For instance, satisfied and loyal customers shared the positive WOM which helped an organization to promote and attract new customers whereas dissatisfied customers tend to share their WOM in a negative way, which indirectly prevent the non-customer to buy from the organization (Ghorban and Tahernejad, 2012).

In general, customers tend to believe the information spread over WOM sources by outsiders are relatively reliable and unbiased as compared to information disseminated by the firms in the form of organized promotional programs (Wirtz, et al., 2012; Zeithaml et al.,

2013). Therefore, WOM is indeed a relatively influential factor in affecting one's decision to purchase or consume particular services or products (Litvin et al., 2008; Wirtz, et al., 2012). WOM is deemed to be vital in predicting or evaluating the services prior to the actual purchase and the resulting consumption (Zeithaml et al., 2013).

Pride et al. (2015) added that WOM would be a major influencer on the purchase decision of costlier and/or new products or services. Wirtz et al. (2012) asserted this fact as it is typical for individual to seek for WOM recommendation when the perceived risk of the actual purchase decision is greater. Likewise, tourists are known for their tendency in seeking adequate information prior to their trip as tour and travel activities are inherently ascribed to a greater extent of potential risks (Cantallops and Salvi, 2014) due to the experiential and intangible nature of the tourism products (Otto and Ritchie, 1996).

The advancement in the technologies and Internet has prolonged the effectiveness of WOM. The WOM messages which are made available over these platforms are fondly known as electronic WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin, et al., 2008). The influence of E-WOM is powerful due to the huge coverage and faster-spreading speed (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015) as compared to the traditional WOM.

Researches on E-WOM were commenced as early as in 1940s and it is still a buzzword among today's researchers due to the advancements in technologies especially the social media (Ishida, 2011; Yi et al., 2011). Social media, a major form of E-WOM, is an Internet-based platform which enables users for the multitude social interaction in the form of online reviews, social network and blogs (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015).

Online travel review is an influential source of information (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009) as it significantly influences the credibility and acceptance of message disseminated (Lee and Koo, 2012; Liu and Park, 2015). The inherent importance of Facebook is inevitable due to its ability to reduce the perceived risk; individuals are seen to rely more on the comments generated and information posted or shared within their social circles in this platform vice versa to the information generated from tourism firms (Jacobsen and Munar, 2012; Ladhari and Michaud, 2015). Obtaining travel information from personal blogs has become the trendsetting information search behaviour among tourists nowadays (Chen et al., 2014). Reliable, understandable and creative presentation of travel information in the personal blogs has been noted as a stimulus of travel intention (Chen et al., 2014).

Past empirical services-oriented studies had demonstrated the overarching role of E-WOM on the customers' purchase intention. For instance, Bataineh (2015) discovered a significant influence of E-WOM on the secondary students' enrolment intention in the universities in Jordan. On the other hand, E-WOM was also treated as key indicator of Taiwanese purchase intention over the website which sells beauty and fashion related products (Chih et al., 2013).

Besides, Ladhari and Michaud (2015) had found a positive relationship between E-WOM and students' intention to book a

hotel room. This study found that the university student's intention of hotel room's reservation was higher with positive comments of the hotel which were available over the Facebook. Similarly, Mauri and Minazzi (2013) revealed that young travellers' travel experiences were significantly influenced by the information shared or posted over the social media. In addition, the recent empirical study by Abubakar and Ilkan (2016) concluded that E-WOM had significant influence on the tourists' visit intention to Turkey for seeking medical treatment. In the same way, the study by Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) evidenced a significant influence of E-WOM on inbound tourists' travel intention to Iran.

On the whole, Ladhari and Michaud (2015) insisted that the independence, impartiality and trustworthy of the information spread over E-WOM sources would significantly affect the tourists' travel intention. Besides, it is apparent that youngsters nowadays have a greater level of travel inclination due to the reduced travelling costs with the advent of low-cost carriers (Cheah et al., 2015; Wu, 2015); they also actively use and/or share information over the electronic platform (Majláth, 2013). Therefore, the following hypothesis proposed:

H<sub>1</sub>: E-WOM has a significant effect on the travel intention of foreign students in Malaysia.

### 2.3. Gender Difference

Researches on the impact of gender differences towards consumer decision making process have begun as early as 1960s (Ye and Robertson, 2012). The differences are noticeable in each stage of the consumer decision making process (Bakshi, 2012; Rudell, 1993) starting from the initial stage of need recognition to the last stage of post purchase evaluation. There are varied school of thoughts which explains the underlying reason of gender differences. (Yi, et al., 2011) had creatively categorized the determinants of gender differences into four namely gender identity (one's self-perception on the gender), gender expression (ways in demonstrating one's gender), biological sex (anatomy of one's body) and sexual orientation (one's emotional, physical and/or spiritual attraction to his/her partner).

Gender identity has been frequently used in the past studies in distinguishing the specific consumer behaviour between male and female consumers (Caterall and Maclaran, 2001; Frieden, 2013; Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010; Palan, 2001; Patterson and Hogg, 2004; Reed et al., 2012). Gender identity has been attributed as the extent of self-identification based on the feminine or masculine personality traits. Essentially, female consumers are more expressive as compared their male counterparts who are more objective in achieving goals bypassing the interaction with others (Gill et al., 1987; Patterson and Hogg, 2004).

Besides, male and female inherently observes the environment, processes, evaluates and retrieves information, and makes judgments in different ways (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010; Karatepe, 2011). While women pay attention to both personally related information and information related to others besides being particular about the content of message in making purchase decision, men focus only on the personally related



information where their purchase decisions tend to be based on meagre details.

Likewise, in the context of tourism, Ryan et al. (1998) stressed the inclination of female tourists in seeking more tour information as compared to male tourists. Such difference is essentially due to their innate traits where males who are ascribed as assertive tend to be positive about their decision while females who are known for their attitude of “seeking approval from others” tend to obtain more information especially from others as a matter of self-assurance (Xie et al., 2007).

As a whole, past studies reported that there is indeed significant gender difference in the tourists’ behaviour. For instance, Meng and Uysal (2008) found that there was significant difference between male and female tourists in their perception towards nature-based resort. Their findings were reinforced by Marcevovala (2011) who further discovered that decision made with regards to the holidays tend to be dominated by females instead of males. Similarly, Remoaldo et al. (2014) found that the gender difference in their study on the visit to the heritage places at Portugal was significant where female tourists had greater preference towards these places as compared to male tourists. In addition, market study conducted by Tinder of Search, a fare search website, had discovered similar findings (Ekstein, 2015). Based on the analysis of data from 75,000 travellers, a significant gender influence was noted on the tourists’ destination choice and determinants of their choice.

As there have been evidences on the significant direct effect of gender differences on the travel intention and use of E-WOM, this study intends to examine the gender difference as the moderator on the overall relationship between the use of E-WOM and travel intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

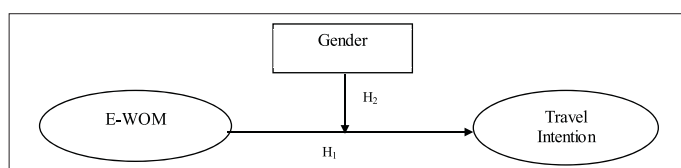
H<sub>2</sub>: Gender significantly moderates the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention of foreign students in Malaysia.

Figure 1 depicts the relationship among gender, E-WOM and travel intention of foreign students in Malaysia. In this study, gender refers to the foreign students’ self-identification on their inherent feminine and/or masculine traits (Frieden, 2013). Meanwhile, E-WOM refers to the travel and tour-related information shared or posted over the social media (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015). This study treats travel intention as the foreign students’ likelihood of visiting tour destinations within Malaysia (Wu, 2015).

### 3. THE METHODOLOGY

The target population of this study comprises of foreign students pursuing their tertiary education in Limkokwing University located

**Figure 1:** Gender difference as the moderator on the relationship between electronic-word-of-mouth and travel intention



at Cyberjaya, Malaysia. This university was chosen as it had the highest enrolment of international students in Malaysia. There were 30,000 international students from nearly 165 countries registered in Limkokwing University (“Limkokwing Malaysia,” 2016). Krejcie and Morgan (1970) suggested that a minimum sample of 379 is required for the population of 30,000 elements. It was then decided to carry out the on-site survey among a minimum of 380 foreign students from the Limkokwing University.

30 Limkokwing students had participated in person during the pilot study. Feedbacks from pilot study were then used to amend the instrument in order to enhance its quality. The actual fieldwork of this study involved 500 foreign students from Limkokwing who were selected via snowball sampling technique. The non-probability sampling technique was applied mainly due to the absence of accurate sampling frame. It is worthwhile to note that use of non-probability sampling is not rare within tourism researches (Jamal et al., 2011; Jani et al., 2014; Wu and Li, 2014). This study utilized both SPSS and AMOS software to analyse data from the 500 sets of usable returned questionnaires.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

### 4.1. Profile

The background profile was briefly reviewed in order to provide a brief idea on the respondents engaged in the survey (Table 1). 69.4% of the respondents were male (n=347), and 30.6% were female (n=153). Foreign students aged 25 and below made up the majority of the study’s respondents. Moreover, most of foreign students travelled either once or twice a year where the duration trips usually are no longer than 6 days.

### 4.2. The Measurement Model

The collected data was randomly divided into 2 groups. 120 responses were used to conduct exploratory factor analysis (EFA) while the remaining 380 responses were assigned to conduct structural equation modelling analysis.

In the EFA, the components were extracted via the technique of principal component analysis where the items in the generated

**Table 1: Respondent’s profile**

| Category  | Frequency (%) |
|---|---------------|
| Gender  |               |
| Male  | 347 (69.4)    |
| Female  | 153 (30.6)    |
| Age   |               |
| 18-21 years old                                 | 228 (45.6)    |
| 22-25 years old                                 | 204 (40.8)    |
| 26-30 years old                                 | 57 (11.4)     |
| 31 years old and above                          | 11 (2.2)      |
| Frequency of travelling in a year (In Malaysia) |               |
| Once  | 179 (35.8)    |
| Twice   | 181 (36.2)    |
| Thrice  | 83 (16.6)     |
| 4 times and above                               | 57 (11.4)     |
| Duration spent for each trip                    |               |
| 1-3 days  | 203 (40.6)    |
| 4-6 days  | 183 (36.6)    |
| 7 days and above                                | 114 (22.8)    |

components were rotated via the technique of Varimax Rotation. Of 14 items, 5 items were deleted due to poor factor loading value (factor loading value  $\geq 0.6$ ) and cross-loading issue. The remaining 9 items were successfully categorized into 3 components where the 3 components accounts 69.7% of variance. Briefly, items associated to the E-WOM were categorized into two and renamed as FB-WOM and OR-WOM, respectively. There was only one component which represents the items on travel intention.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was subsequently conducted based on the results of EFA. The CFA model depicted a good fit on the sample data ( $\chi^2 = 48.816$ ,  $df = 25$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.953$ ). The GFI was 0.973, AGFI = 0.951, CFI = 0.979, TLI = 0.969 and RMSEA = 0.050. The validity and reliability were then examined.

The composite reliability values exceeded 0.7 (Table 2) and the average of variance (AVE) value of all of the latent factors ranged from 0.540 to 0.609 exceeding the required minimum value of 0.5 (Table 2). In addition, the discriminant validity was also supported as the squared root AVE values were greater than the inter-correlation coefficients of the constructs (Table 3). This signals that the items tested had achieved the required level of composite reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

### 4.3. The Relationship between E-WOM and Travel Intention

The relationship between E-WOM and travel intention was examined using a structural model. E-WOM (a second-order factor with two first-order factors) was regressed to the travel intention (a first-order factor). The goodness-of-fit indices showed that this model had adequately fitted the data. The Chi-square/df was 1.824 ( $\chi^2 = 43.772$ ,  $df = 24$ ), GFI was 0.976, AGFI = 0.955, CFI = 0.982, TLI = 0.973 and RSMEA = 0.047. Besides, a positive significant relationship ( $\beta = 0.60$ ,  $CR = 2.77$ ) was found between E-WOM and travel intention, and hence,  $H_1$  was supported. 36% of the variance in travel intention can be explained by E-WOM (Table 4).

### 4.4. Gender as a Moderator

The typology of Hair et al. 2010 was used to test the moderation impact of gender on the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention. The data of this study were initially divided into two groups (i.e., 274 male respondents and 106 female respondents). The moderation effect was then tested on the groups of female

and male separately. For each group, 2 models were developed namely model 1 (constraint) and model 2 (unconstraint). The difference in the chi-squared value ( $\Delta\chi^2$ ) of these 2 models was used to infer the moderation effect of gender on the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention.

As illustrated in Table 5, both Male and Females groups were found to have insignificant moderation effect on the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention. The difference in chi-squared ( $\Delta\chi^2$ ) value was only 0.531 and 0.354 at  $\Delta df = 1$  for male and female group, respectively. On the whole, it signalled that there was no significant moderation impact of Gender on the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention and hence,  $H_2$  was not supported. This implies that the influence of E-WOM on travel intention tend to be similar between male and female tourists.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS ON FINDINGS

### 5.1. Overall Findings

Research findings indicated that E-WOM is a significant factor that influences the intention to travel among the tourists. The significant influence of E-WOM on travel intention was also noted in several past studies (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). This is justifiable with the perceived risk ascribed to the tour and travel activities where the words of comfort and confidence about the destination from others especially the strangers are expected to refine the perceived image of the destination and hence increase the intention to visit the destination.

Besides, this study had found an insignificant moderation impact of gender on the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention. Such discovery is indeed startling as previous studies had discovered significant direct effect of gender differences on the information seeking behaviour (Xie, et al., 2007) and travel decision (Remoaldo, et al., 2014) respectively. This is possibly attributable to the treatment of gender differences as the moderator in the present study. Inherently, inclusion of moderator is seen to change the original relationship between predictor and dependent variable where there would be a change in the strength and/or direction of original relationship (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Kim et al., 2001). In order to demonstrate the empirical evidence on the direct effect of gender differences towards the E-WOM and travel intention, independent sample t-test was further conducted (Table 6).

**Table 2: Convergent validity and composite reliability**

| Items   | FL   | CR   | AVE  |
|---|------|------|------|
| FB-WOM  |      |      |      |
| Ewoma: Information about vocation on the Facebook is certain.   | 0.72 | 0.82 | 0.61 |
| Ewomb: Information about vocation on the Facebook will reduce the perceived risk in travelling to the destination | 0.68 |      |      |
| Ewomc: Information about vocation on the Facebook generated by peers is perceived to be reliable                  | 0.92 |      |      |
| OR-WOM  |      |      |      |
| Ewomh: Tourists' online review is an influential source of information towards traveling destination              | 0.73 | 0.70 | 0.54 |
| Ewomi: Tourists' online travel review is an acceptable source of information                                      | 0.74 |      |      |
| Travel intention  |      |      |      |
| Tia: I am willing to travel and tour within Malaysia  | 0.73 | 0.83 | 0.54 |
| TIb: I am committed to travel and tour within Malaysia  | 0.71 |      |      |
| Tic: I am keen with the vocation within Malaysia  | 0.75 |      |      |
| TId: There is high possibility that I would travel and tour within Malaysia                                       | 0.76 |      |      |

Deleted Items: E-WOMd, E-WOMe, E-WOMf, E-WOMg, Tle

**Table 3: Discriminant validity**

|        | FB-WOM | OR-WOM | TI    |
|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| FB-WOM | 0.780  |        |       |
| OR-WOM | 0.160  | 0.735  |       |
| TI     | 0.280  | 0.260  | 0.738 |

The Bold values are the square root of AVE, WOM: Word-of-mouth, AVE: Average of variance

**Table 4: Result of hypothesis testing (H<sub>1</sub>)**

| Link in the model      | Standardised estimate (r) | rc <sup>2</sup> | CR   |
|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|------|
| E-WOM→travel intention | 0.60**                    | 0.36            | 2.72 |

\*\*P<0.05 (one-tailed test), E-WOM: Electronic-word-of-mouth

**Table 5: The moderation test results (H<sub>2</sub>)**

| Group              | Male, n=274   |              | Female, n=106 |              |
|--------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
|                    | Constraint    | Unconstraint | Constraint    | Unconstraint |
| χ <sup>2</sup>     | 37.534        | 37.003       | 31.601        | 31.247       |
| Df                 | 25            | 24           | 25            | 24           |
| χ <sup>2</sup> /df | 1.501         | 1.542        | 1.264         | 1.302        |
| GFI                | 0.971         | 0.972        | 0.938         | 0.939        |
| AGFI               | 0.948         | 0.947        | 0.889         | 0.885        |
| CFI                | 0.984         | 0.983        | 0.981         | 0.979        |
| TLI                | 0.976         | 0.975        | 0.973         | 0.969        |
| RMSEA              | 0.043         | 0.045        | 0.050         | 0.054        |
| P-value            | 0.051         | 0.044        | 0.170         | 0.147        |
| Δχ <sup>2</sup>    | 0.531         |              | 0.354         |              |
| Δdf                | 1             |              | 1             |              |
| Result             | Insignificant |              | Insignificant |              |

**Table 6: The independent sample t-test results**

| Variables        | Mean±SD     |               | t-test  |
|------------------|-------------|---------------|---------|
|                  | Male, n=274 | Female, n=106 |         |
| E-WOM            | 3.51±0.63   | 3.71±0.65     | -2.75** |
| Travel intention | 3.62±0.45   | 3.68±0.74     | -0.70   |

\*\*P<0.01 (two-tailed test), SD: Standard deviation, E-WOM: Electronic-word-of-mouth

### 5.2. Direct Effect of Gender Differences on Travel Intention

As tabulated in Table 6, there is no significant difference between male and female tourists in their intention to travel. Despite the inconsistency of this finding on the typical assumption that decision making process varies by gender of customers (Marcevovala, 2011; Meng and Uysal, 2008; Rudell, 1993), it is somehow sensible in line with the demographic composition of the study's respondents. The current study investigated foreign students in Malaysia who are within the age group of 18-30 years old (which represented 97.8% of the total respondents of this study).

It is worthwhile to note that the insignificant gender difference has been quite widely reported in the previous studies which investigated young travellers. For instance, Lin et al. (2014)'s study conducted in Taiwan reported both male and female young travellers (i.e., 21-30 years old) had similar hesitation level and justification on making overseas travel decisions and tendency to change their travel decisions and itinerary if necessary. Findings of Carr (1999) had further reinforced the concern with regards to the varying gender differences. They found inconsistent quantitative and qualitative

findings on the gender differences in leisure activities of young tourists in UK coastal resort, raised a concern on varying gender differences and subsequently hypothesized that the variances in tourists' behaviour could be possibly restricted to particular life-stages. Meaning that, gender is not a sole determinant of the tour related decision as the decision could be correspondingly affected by the tourists' age and their information seeking behaviour.

#### 5.2.1. Gender is not a sole determinant

Youngsters (despite the gender differences) are known for their inclination on the use of technologies and Nickson (2015) attributed this to their exposure from early age where youngsters nowadays tend to dominate the use of technologies as compared to older generation. The findings of the empirical study conducted by Manikandan et al. (2013) evidenced that the university students' information seeking and gathering behaviour was significantly affected by the information technologies which reinforced the findings of Carr (1999)'s work which claimed today's youngster decision making are to some extent vary due the greater exposure to information technologies. Wadell (2016) further supported the youngsters' fondness of the technologies by referring to the recent statistics on technologies' use among American. Older and mid-aged American are found to be lagging far behind in the use of advanced technological gadgets and Internet as compared to the young generation of 18-29 years old (Wadell, 2016).

Similarly, advancements in the technologies particularly the Internet deem to greatly affect the information search with regards to the travel and tour activities (Kambele et al., 2015; Li and Yang, 2013). Due to such advancements, today's tourists, despite the gender differences, undertake the same travel risks and receive equal amount of tour related information which subsequently result into similar level of uncertainty in their tour behaviour (Lin, et al., 2014).

### 5.3. Direct Effect of Gender Differences on the Inclination Towards E-WOM

However, though the advancement in the information technologies increased the exposure and access of information among youngsters (regardless gender difference), the gender difference can be somehow traced in their tour behaviour due to their individuals' inborn characteristics. Females who are more expressive and thus seeking for others' opinion tend to have higher reliance on the E-WOM in the process of seeking others' opinion and more information about their travel decision as compared to male tourists who are more autonomous in their decision making process (Patterson and Hogg, 2004; Xie et al., 2007).

Correspondingly, this study found a significant difference between female and male tourists in the aspect of E-WOM where female tourists were found to have a higher propensity towards E-WOM in comparison to their male counterparts (Table 6). Similarly, the statistical finding of the structural analyses revealed the comparable results. The impact of E-WOM on intention to travel is essentially higher among the female respondents (r = 0.64, rc<sup>2</sup> = 0.41) in comparison to male tourists (r = 0.54, rc<sup>2</sup> = 0.29) though gender differences do not appear as the significant moderator in the relationship between E-WOM and travel intention. This discovery



has reinforced the findings of past works which distinguished male and female based on their information seeking behaviour (Ryan, et al., 1998; Xie, et al., 2007).

## 6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Tour and travel activities are essentially conspicuous in nature where tour activities conducted are typically beyond fulfilling the basic needs (Williams and Lew, 2014, p. 242). Meanwhile, Thoumrungroje (2014) had empirically demonstrated that E-WOM spread over social media has significant influence on the consumption of conspicuous products or services. This is factual for students or young travellers who are known for their financial dependence with their parents.

As this study discovers a positive and significant influence of E-WOM on the travel intention of foreign students, social media should be wisely leverage in disseminating the E-WOM sources to attract the students-tourists. This move is considered a better option than investing heavily on the traditional promotional activities. Tourism firms (e.g., hotel operators, excursion operators, tour operators, and etc.) shall place online travel and tour reviews on their website, administer an online blog or forum in allowing tourists to contribute their thoughts on a tour related topic as well as managing their social networks (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) in an interesting manner to reach easily these foreign students' travellers. Collaboration with University in having their online presence on the University's website and social networks would certainly appeal to these groups of travellers.

This study has also turned down the stereotype of gender differences in the travel intention. Hence, tourism firms and relevant authorities are suggested to reduce the number of gender specific promotional activities. Alternatively, they may tailor their tour activities catering to different age group of tourists. Currently, there are many tour programs for senior citizens and family with young kids but very few which are specifically targeting at students. As the population of foreign students in Malaysia is growing, it is indeed a good opportunity for the tourism firms to tailor the tour programs for students in general and for foreign students in specific.

## 7. RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Researchers speculate the respondent's gender, life-stage and/or their exposure towards the information technologies could be the possible determinants for their inclination with the E-WOM which in turn affect their travel intention. Subsequently, potential researchers are suggested to review the relevant literatures on these determinants in carrying out similar researches.

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