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The impact of positive and negative e-comments on business travelers' intention to purchase a hotel room

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to find out the impact of business travelers' behavioral belief on positive and negative e-comments, which consequently lead to intention to purchase a hotel room. To explore the relationships among attitude toward positive and negative e-comments with intention to purchase, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) was used.

Design/methodology/approach – Business travelers in the USA who read e-comments and made a hotel choice based on those e-comments within the past six months were targeted for this study. The TRA, as well as a wide-ranging review of literature, were used to develop the survey instrument. The survey was distributed through Qualtrics, which is an online questionnaire service platform. To measure the business travelers' behavioral beliefs toward e-comments, a number of measures were developed for this research. The theories of Fishbein and Ajzen were used to examine business travelers' behavioral beliefs toward positive and negative e-comments. All of the questions on this survey about the intention to purchase were extracted from Liao *et al.* Other questions about attitude toward positive and negative comments were adopted from Chu and Choi, Sparks and Browning, Gundersen *et al.* and Lee and Sparks. The last section of the survey included questions about business travelers' sociodemographic statistics, such as ethnicity, level of income, age, gender and education. The first question separated respondents to recognize those who made a reservation at a business hotel in the past six months after reading comments about the hotel. Those who responded positively were asked to participate in the study. Participants of this research presented their degree of agreement on each item by using a seven-point Likert scale, rating from (1) "Strongly disagree" to (7) "Strongly agree". To verify the reliability of the questionnaire and to ensure it reflected the TRA, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of business travelers who had booked a hotel room in the past six months and finalized their purchases based on reading e-comments. No major changes were made to the survey as a result of the pilot study and all factors indicated an adequate level of internal consistency. The proposed model examined the effects of both positive and negative e-comments toward business travelers' intention to purchase. This research aimed to determine the impact of behavioral belief on positive e-comments and negative e-comments, which consequently lead to intention to purchase.

Findings – The results of the proposed model revealed that behavioral belief positively affects both positive and negative e-comments. This means that business travelers want to be informed about both



complaints and compliments in e-comments. However, this does not mean they intend to purchase a hotel room based on both opinions; rather business travelers would be inclined to purchase a hotel room based on positive e-comments. Using gender as a moderating effect indicated that females neither believe of the helpfulness of negative e-comments nor intend to purchase based on these e-comments. However, males tend to find both positive and negative e-comments helpful.

Originality/value – The findings of this research will help hoteliers, as well as online website review operators, to obtain a clearer understanding of guests' or users' needs and wants in order to offer a more desirable service. Since business travelers are considered an important target market in the hotel industry, hoteliers need to put more emphasize on these factors to attract more business travelers. By recognizing business travelers' requirements and their expectations, hoteliers should prioritize their responsibilities for meeting these guests' expectations; therefore, they can assign their resources accordingly. In other words, once a guest's needs are understood clearly, hoteliers will be in safe position to provide the desired service.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Intention, Theory of reasoned action, Business travelers, E-comments, Hotel room

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Travel online comments are used by hoteliers and travelers to measure the level of customer fulfillment with the amenities. According to [Zheng et al. \(2009\)](#), the effectiveness of services is dependent on consumer satisfaction; therefore, hotel managers have to be conscious of comments because the internet has enabled guests by offering easily accessible information ([Kotler et al., 1999](#)).

[Holloway and Beatty \(2003\)](#) discussed the importance of addressing customer comments to preserve customer satisfaction and maintain loyal customers. [Au et al. \(2010\)](#) argued the importance of comments in assisting hoteliers to understand strengths and weaknesses of the offered services. On the other hand, from the customers' point of view, word-of-mouth (WOM) can also affect their purchasing judgments ([Brown et al., 2007](#)), and a majority of customers therefore trust WOM as an objective source of information ([Litvin et al., 2008](#)).

The goal of this research was to examine the influence of positive and negative e-comments on business travelers who read e-comments when selecting a hotel room for business travel. In this research, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) was used to examine the influence of e-comments on business travelers' intentions to purchase hotel rooms. The results of this study indicated a positive relationship between business travelers' belief toward both positive and negative e-comments. In addition, the effect of positive e-comments on intention to purchase was supported. However, any support for the relationship of negative e-comments and intention to purchase was not found in this current study. Using the moderating effect of gender showed that females do not believe in the helpfulness of negative e-comments, thus they do not intend to purchase based on these e-comments. However, males believe that both positive and negative e-comments are helpful.

Literature review

Theoretical framework (TRA)

To understand, explain and predict human behavior, [Fishbein and Ajzen \(1975\)](#) established a hypothetical structure. According to this theory, people generate realistic decisions on existing information. [Fishbein and Ajzen \(1975\)](#) called this the TRA because people are thoughtful about the consequences of their action before getting

involved in the action. TRA is designed to enhance the estimation of a person's intentions because it is considered as an influential predictor of the judgment of their practice patterns in the future (Han and Kim, 2010) (Figure 1).

The theory of planned behavior is an extension of the TRA which adds perceived behavioral control to the original theory (Ajzen, 1991). According to this theory, behavior is a combination of intentions and perceived behavioral control which are used to anticipate people's intentions to get involved in a specific action (Ajzen, 1991).

Relying on research conducted by Oliver (1980), the TRA was found as an appropriate theory to address current research questions. Oliver (1980) found that a customer's post-purchase satisfaction is related to pre-purchase expectation, and in contrast, satisfaction impacts post-purchase attitude and customers' intentions to use the same service in the future. In addition, Cheng *et al.* (2005) determined that important factors that lead to an intention to voice dissatisfaction arise from the opinions held by an individual's reference group.

One of the important concepts of the TRA is belief (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). One remarkable characteristic of belief is that it can be restructured over time, and people use their most recent beliefs when making decisions. According to the study of Fishbein and Ajzen (2011), direct impacts of behavioral beliefs toward attitude have been confirmed.

According to Albarracin *et al.* (2001), past behavior has been linked to attitude based on the TRA. The findings of Cheng *et al.* (2005) demonstrate that attitude toward a behavior explains an individual's general positive or negative beliefs and assessments of that behavior. For instance, past behavior has a substantial influence on complaining behavior and negative WOM communication intentions. Thus, the following hypotheses were developed:

- H1. There is a positive relationship between attitude toward positive e-comments and business travelers' behavioral belief.
- H2. There is a positive relationship between attitude toward negative e-comments and business travelers' behavioral belief.

As the best interpreter of intention is the frequency of a past behavior (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993), past behavior could have a direct effect on the creation of intention (Bentler and Speckart, 1979). This indicates the reliability between earlier and coming behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, the following hypotheses were developed accordingly:

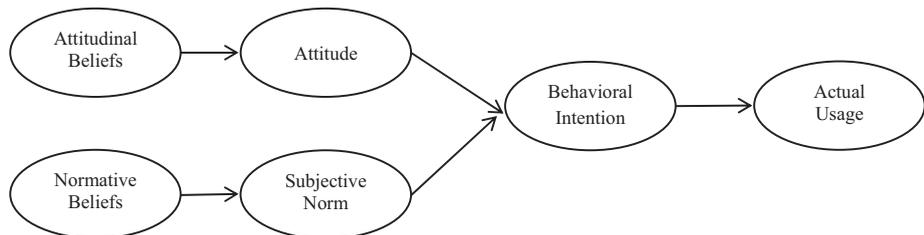


Figure 1.
Theory of Reasoned
Action model

Source: Fishbein and Ajzen (1975)

- H3. There is a positive relationship between attitude toward positive e-comments and business travelers' intention to purchase.
- H4. There is a positive relationship between attitude toward negative e-comments and business travelers' intention to purchase.

Internet comments; the voice of customer

Increasingly customers are using the internet to voice their experiences to organizations (Dickinger and Bauernfeind, 2009), resulting in the creation of a number of online comment forums (Au *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, customers' comments, according to Tantawy and Losekoot (2000), are valuable opportunities to explore important factors which concern customers. WOM is defined as informal communication which is specifically focused on consumers' behaviors about the usage or characteristics of either services or service providers (Litvin *et al.*, 2008).

The significant role of online word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has considerably altered the tourism destination selection process by travelers (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2012). Di Pietro *et al.* claim there are two important reasons why travelers have restructured their selection strategies: first, rapid development of the internet technologies, and second, increasing popularity of online social networking.

According to Goldenberg *et al.* (2001), WOM has significant impact on individuals' future plan management. The internet provided everyone with opportunity to communicate his or her experiences to an online audience (Tyrrell and Woods, 2005). As transferring information happens rapidly, people get encouraged to reveal their experiences on the internet (Dickinger and Bauernfeind, 2009). Although e-WOM is used to specify customers' final decisions (Racherla *et al.*, 2011), previous studies indicated two important findings. First, WOM for a group of products which received higher customer contributions will be more reliable. Second, relying on WOM brings higher self-confidence when the comment provider presents more details of his/her general evaluation (Racherla *et al.*, 2011).

Business travelers' characteristics

One substantial aspect of business travelers is their demographic characteristics. According to McCleary *et al.* (1994), in the past few years, the ratio of female business travelers has increased considerably. According to the finding of McCleary *et al.* (1994), female business travelers are more concerned about the security aspects of a hotel. In addition, room service and low prices were two other important factors stated by females. Male business travelers in McCleary's study, however, were more worried about business amenities and separate business space in the room. Consequently, hoteliers should appreciate this segment's preferences and present their services accordingly to meet business traveler's needs (McCleary *et al.*, 1994).

Methodology

Business travelers in the USA who read e-comments and made a hotel choice based on those e-comments within the past six months were targeted for this study. The TRA, as well as a wide-ranging review of literature, were used to develop the survey instrument. The survey was prepared using Qualtrics, an online questionnaire service platform, and it was distributed to Qualtrics Panel. Therefore the study sample consisted of US business travelers who chose a hotel based on reading e-comments.

To measure the business travelers' behavioral beliefs toward e-comments, a number of measures were developed for this research. The theories of Fishbein and Ajzen (2011) were used to examine business travelers' behavioral beliefs toward positive and negative e-comments. All of the questions on this survey about the intention to purchase were extracted from Liao *et al.* (2007). Other questions about attitude toward positive and negative comments were adopted from Chu and Choi (2000), Sparks and Browning (2010), Gundersen *et al.* (1996) and Lee and Sparks (2007). The last section of the survey included questions about business travelers' sociodemographic statistics, such as ethnicity, level of income, age, gender and education.

The first question separated respondents to recognize those who made a reservation at a business hotel in the past six months after reading comments about the hotel. Those who responded positively were asked to participate in the study. Participants of this research presented their degree of agreement on each item by using a seven-point Likert scale, rating from (1) "Strongly disagree" to (7) "Strongly agree".

To verify the reliability of the questionnaire and to ensure it reflected the TRA (Fishbein and Ajzen, 2011), a pilot study was conducted with a small group of business travelers who had booked a hotel room in the past six months and finalized their purchases based on reading e-comments. No major changes were made to the survey as a result of the pilot study and all factors indicated an adequate level of internal consistency.

The proposed model examined the effects of both positive and negative e-comments toward business travelers' intention to purchase. This research aimed to determine the impact of behavioral belief on positive e-comments and negative e-comments, which consequently lead to intention to purchase.

Results

The data were structured for use with SPSS 19.0 and the Mplus 7.2 software. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to inspect the degree to which each variable was connected with the hypotheses (Cudeck, 2000). Afterwards, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was utilized to examine if the measured hypotheses were consistent with the researchers' opinions of the nature of that hypothesis (Hoyle, 2000).

To confirm that all of the values were at the acceptable level of internal reliability (higher than 0.6), Cronbach's alpha was tested (Santos, 1999). The hypothesized correlation among variables was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM is a statistical model that measures the relationship between independent variables and dependent variables (Chin, 1998).

Demographic characteristics

The target population for this study was business travelers in the USA who read e-comments and made hotel choices based on those e-comments. Out of 300 online distributed questionnaires, 275 responses were kept for further analysis. Table I presents the demographic profile of the respondents, which includes gender, age, race, highest level of education and annual income.

Measurement model

In this research, an EFA was run for behavioral belief, attitude toward positive e-comments, attitude toward negative e-comments and intention to purchase. To extract for EFA, principal axis factoring was used, and rotation was conducted by using the varimax method with Kaiser normalization.

Variable	Item	<i>n</i>	(%)
Gender	Male	144	52.4
	Female	131	47.6
Age	20 years old or younger	16	5.8
	21-30 years old	86	30.9
	31-40 years old	90	32.4
	41-50 years old	42	14.9
	51-60 years old	34	12.0
	61-70 years old	8	2.5
Ethnicity	71 years old and older	5	1.5
	White/Caucasian	171	62.2
	Asian	36	13.1
	African American	32	11.6
	Hispanic	28	10.2
	Native American	5	1.8
Level of education	Other	3	1.1
	Less than high school	2	0.7
	High school/GED	19	6.9
	Some college	52	18.9
	2-years college degree	23	8.4
	4-year degree	131	47.6
Annual income	Master's degree or higher	48	17.5
	Less than \$40,000	55	20.0
	\$40,000-\$80,000	85	30.9
	\$80,001-\$100,000	72	26.2
	\$100,001-\$120,000	21	7.6
	\$121,001-\$140,000	15	5.5
	\$140,001 or more	27	9.8

Table I.
Demographic profile
(*n* = 275)

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure, which was used to find the adequacy of the sample size, was 0.890. According to Malhotra (2004), a value higher than 0.5 is defined as desirable. Moreover, the Bartlett's test of sphericity was found significant, which means that factor analysis is adequate for analyzing the correlation matrix.

The suitability of the overall fit of measurement items in the conceptual model was exposed by CFA. The final statistics of model fit were $\chi^2 = 168.115$ ($df = 50, p < 0.001$), CFI = 0.922, TLI = 0.897, SRMR = 0.082 and RMSEA = 0.093.

Correlation

Table II indicates the correlation coefficients of the principal constructs. The range fluctuates from perfect positive correlation to perfect negative correlation, according to Fisher (1915) classification. In current study, correlation coefficient fluctuated from 0.114 to 0.608, which is in the acceptable range of -1 to $+1$.

Reliability

According to Devitt *et al.* (1998), reliability is defined as a measure of accuracy or the ability of an analysis to return the same result under different conditions, which can be determined by Cronbach's alpha. Lunneborg (1979) defines an acceptable level as 0.70, and the Cronbach's alpha estimates in this study ranged from 0.701 to 0.895, which are higher than

the suggested cutoff value. This indicates that for this study, the data represented an acceptable level of internal consistency (Table III).

Validity

Validity discovers if an experiment measures the intended hypothesis, as Kline (2011) argued. In his research, two types of validity were introduced: discriminant validity and convergent validity.

Discriminant validity happens if correlation coefficients of hypotheses are low ($r_{xy} < |.90|$) (Kline, 2011). If the projected correlations between the factors are not very high (e.g. $< |.90|$), then the outcomes show discriminant validity.

Table II.
Correlation coefficient of constructs

Item	BLF	INT	ATPOS	ATNEG
Behavioral belief (BLF)	1			
Intention to purchase (INT)	0.608**	1		
Attitude to positive e-comments (ATPOS)	0.372**	0.481**	1	
Attitude to negative e-comments (ATNEG)	0.198**	0.147*	0.114	1

Notes: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); *correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table III.
Confirmatory factor analysis and measurement model results

Items and codes	β	Standard error	<i>t</i> value	α
It allows me to make my booking decision faster (BLF_4)	0.69	0.05	14.22	0.70
I will experience less dissatisfaction with the hotel (BLF_2)	0.64	0.05	12.67	
Reading e-comments is a good use of my time (BLF_5)	0.65	0.05	13.02	
I valued the positive e-comments more than the negative ones (ATPOS_1)	0.76	0.04	17.54	0.78
When I read e-comments, I like to start with the positive ones (ATPOS_2)	0.76	0.04	17.55	
I valued the negative e-comments more than the positive ones (ATNEG_1)	0.90	0.09	10.19	0.84
When I read e-comments, I like to start with the negative ones (ATNEG_2)	0.81	0.08	9.99	
I intend to continue booking business hotels based on e-comments (INT_1)	0.80	0.03	29.95	0.90
My intentions are to continue using e-comments more than alternative methods of collecting information (INT_2)	0.79	0.03	29.52	
The probability that I will read e-comments again is very high (INT_3)	0.76	0.03	25.59	
The likelihood that I would recommend a friend to read e-comments is very high (INT_4)	0.84	0.02	33.95	
If I had to book a hotel for my business trip again, I would make the same choice of reading e-comments beforehand (INT_5)	0.80	0.03	30.22	

Notes: $\chi^2 = 168.115$ (df = 50, $p < 0.0000$); CFI = 0.922, TLI = 0.897, SRMR = 0.082, RMSEA = 0.093

Convergent validity, however, is defined as the degree to which unlike methods that are planned to measure the same construct correlate with each other (Cunningham *et al.*, 2001). High standardized factor loading (e.g. > 0.70), according to Kline (2011), indicates convergent validity. This study met the standards for discriminant and convergent validities (Table III).

Structural model

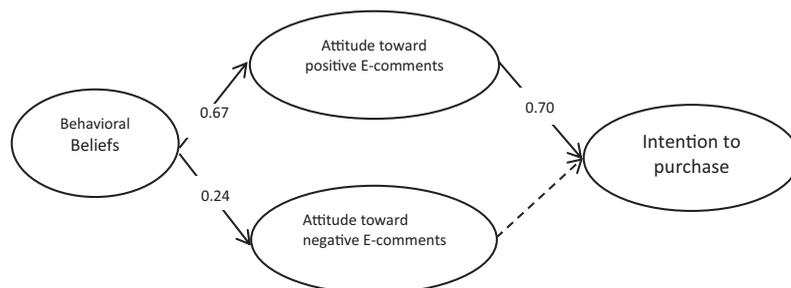
Figure 2 indicates the relationships between behavioral belief (BLF), attitude toward positive e-comments (ATPOS), attitude toward negative e-comments (ATNEG) and intention to purchase (INT), meaning that *H1*, *H2* and *H3* were supported. As this figure shows, the proposed model has one non-significant path between ATNEG and INT. Which means that negative e-comments do not have an impact on business travelers' hotel purchasing decisions, thus *H4* was not supported (Figure 2).

To get the best model fit, the projected model was revised by selecting significant paths. Based on the model fit results of the reviewed structural model, the final model fit was also acceptable: $\chi^2 = 169.892$ (df = 50, $p < 0.001$), CFI = 0.920, TLI = 0.895, SRMR = 0.081 and RMSEA = 0.093 (Table IV).

Test of moderating effects

The moderating effects were assessed through multiple group analysis. In the theoretical model, the moderating effects of gender, age and level of income on the paths between ATPOS, ATNEG and INT were studied. Multiple group analyses were run using Mplus 7.2 to explore the moderating effect of gender on the paths between BLF, ATPOS, ATNEG and INT. Although moderating effect usually studies a situation where an independent variable strongly impacts a dependent variable, it also can be utilized when a weak relationship exists among independent variables and dependent variables (Holmbeck, 1997).

According to the structural modeling results, in addition to the positive relationships of belief and attitude toward positive e-comments, belief and attitude toward negative e-comments and attitude toward positive e-comments and intention to purchase, the positive relationship between attitude toward negative e-comments and intention to purchase was explored for males, which shows the moderating effect of males on intention to purchase through negative e-comments. Meaning that, the moderating effect of male on the proposed model was supported. Structural modeling results



Notes: $\chi^2(50) = 169.892$; $p < 0.0000$, CFI = 0.920, TLI = 0.895 SRMR= 0.081, and RMSEA = 0.093; $p < 0.01$

Figure 2.
Structural model

indicated good model fit for the male moderating effect: $\chi^2 = 145.830$ (df = 61, $p < 0.001$), CFI = 0.905, TLI = 0.879, SRMR = 0.089 and RMSEA = 0.098.

The moderating effect of females, on the other hand, supported both relationships between belief and positive e-comments, as well as positive e-comments toward intention to purchase. Besides the non-significant relationship between attitude toward negative e-comments and intention to purchase, the relationship between belief and attitude toward negative e-comments was not supported as well. The results show good model fit for the female moderating effect: $\chi^2 = 136.489$ (df = 61, $p < 0.001$), CFI = 0.910, TLI = 0.884, SRMR = 0.090 and RMSEA = 0.097.

In addition to using gender as a moderator, the moderating effects of age and level of income were examined as well. The results of structural modeling revealed a moderating effect of age on attitude toward positive and negative e-comments. The level of income did not have moderating effects on the relationship. The model showed good model fit for these control variables: $\chi^2 = 192.796$ (df = 68, $p < 0.001$), CFI = 0.918, TLI = 0.892, SRMR = 0.072 and RMSEA = 0.082.

Conclusion and implication

Although previous studies have shown that negative WOM has a stronger influence on purchase decisions than positive WOM (Nejad *et al.*, 2014), the results of this study revealed that business travelers want to be informed about both complaints and compliments in e-comments. However, this does not mean they intend to purchase a hotel room based on both opinions; rather, business travelers would be inclined to purchase a hotel room based on positive e-comments. Therefore, negative e-comments would not change their intention to purchase.

Using gender as a moderating effect indicated different outcomes for males and females. Females neither believe in the helpfulness of negative e-comments nor intend to purchase based on these e-comments (because of the non-significant relationship between attitude toward negative e-comments and intention to purchase, as well as the non-significant relationship of belief and attitude toward negative e-comments). However, males tend to find both positive and negative e-comments helpful based on the positive relationships of attitude toward positive/negative e-comments and intention to purchase. This means that their intention to purchase could be affected not only by positive e-comments, but also by negative e-comments as well.

This study examined the factors effecting business travelers' intention to purchase. The TRA was used to examine the relationships between attitude toward positive and negative e-comments and business travelers' intention to purchase. Intention in this research is defined as a role of an individual's attitude toward performing the specific

Hypothesis: direct effect path	β	<i>B</i>	Standard error	<i>t</i> value	Results
<i>H1.</i> Belief → Positive e-comments	0.67	0.84	0.08	8.91	Supported
<i>H2.</i> Belief → Negative e-comments	0.24	0.43	0.08	3.09	Supported
<i>H3.</i> Positive e-comments → Intention	0.70	0.65	0.06	11.47	Supported
<i>H4.</i> Negative e-comments → Intention	0.08	–	0.06	1.357	N.S.

Table IV.
Results of hypothesis testing

Note: N.S. = Not supported

behavior, which arises from his or her subjective norm. On the other hand, attitude is the reputation of intention, as defined by [Ajzen and Fishbein \(1977\)](#).

The results of this research benefit hotel operators, to obtain a better understanding of guests' requirements. By recognizing business travelers' desires, hoteliers should prioritize their responsibilities for meeting these guests' expectations; therefore, they can assign their resources accordingly. In other words, once a guest's needs are understood clearly, hoteliers will be in a safer position to provide the desired services.

Although previous studies indicate that potential hotel guests consider both positive and negative reviews to make hotel room choices, the findings of this research indicated that business travelers read both positive and negative e-comments, but they make decisions based on positive e-comments. This means that hoteliers should address negative reviews to defend their reputation because a good reputation can create a feeling of trust with guests. At the same time, they might take advantage of positive reviews and highlight the hotel's capabilities to attract more guests, specifically female travelers whose intentions are highly affected by positive e-comments. Additional support for these findings can be found in a study conducted by [Thompson et al. \(1994\)](#). In that study, [Thompson et al. \(1994\)](#) discovered a strong correlation between attitude, evaluation and intention, which additionally supports the current study's indirect effect of belief on intention through positive e-comments.

Limitations

There are several limitations associated with the current study. The first limitation of this study arises from the sample. The survey was distributed only to an online panel provided by Qualtrics. This means that this survey was available for those who are only Qualtrics panel members and have online access to this survey; thus, the results could not be generalized to all business travelers. The results may have been different if the survey was available to a different sample of business travelers.

Second, the majority of respondents in this research reported as White/Caucasian (62.2 per cent). As this is close to the national average, differences among other races were not investigated. If this study had a more diverse sample, the moderating effect of race could have been studied.

Last, this study specifically focused on the effects of attitude toward positive and negative e-comments on intention to purchase. Several qualifications of intention to purchase can be defined; however, this research limited in just two aspects. If this research studied other factors, such as nature of the business and duration of the trip, the outcomes may have been diverse.

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