Tourist involvement in vacation planning and booking: impact on word of mouth and loyalty

Cecilie Andersen, Marit Gundersen Engeset and Ellen Katrine Nyhus

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore how different levels of involvement in the prevacation phase affect vacationers’ subsequent satisfaction, word of mouth (WOM) recommendations and loyal behavior with regard to the planning/booking process.

Design/methodology/approach – Data from a field study (N = 5,158) in a travel planning context are used to investigate the differences in WOM recommendations and loyalty between self-packagers (higher involvement) and package buyers (lower involvement).

Findings – Tourists who are less involved in the prevacation phase are more likely to recommend the planning/booking process, while more involved tourists are more likely to repeat the same planning/booking process than package buyers.

Practical implications – The findings have implications for tourist agencies, tour operators, tourism suppliers and tourism marketers in terms of customer retention and WOM communication. These findings also have theoretical implications for the WOM and loyalty literature.

Originality/value – This paper reveals how involvement in travel planning may affect satisfaction, WOM recommendation and loyalty behavior. These relationships have not been investigated before.

Keywords: Word of mouth, Loyalty, Involvement, Satisfaction, Vacation buyers, Package buyers, Self-packagers

This paper aims to explore how different levels of involvement in the prevacation phase affect vacationers’ subsequent satisfaction, word of mouth (WOM) recommendations and loyal behavior with regard to the planning/booking process. Data from a field study (N = 5,158) in a travel planning context are used to investigate the differences in WOM recommendations and loyalty between self-packagers (higher involvement) and package buyers (lower involvement). Tourists who are less involved in the prevacation phase are more likely to recommend the planning/booking process, while more involved tourists are more likely to repeat the same planning/booking process than package buyers. The findings have implications for tourist agencies, tour operators, tourism suppliers and tourism marketers in terms of customer retention and WOM communication. These findings also have theoretical implications for the WOM and loyalty literature. This paper reveals how involvement in travel planning may affect satisfaction, WOM recommendation and loyalty behavior. These relationships have not been investigated before.

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La participación del turista en la planificación y reserva de vacaciones: impacto en el boca a boca y la lealtad

Resumen

Propósito: Este artículo explora si la elección de la planificación de vacaciones y la modalidad de reserva (independiente vs compra de paquetes) afecta la satisfacción posterior de los turistas, las recomendaciones boca a boca (WOM) y la fidelización relacionada con el proceso de planificación y reserva.

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Declaration of interest: None
Diseño/metodología: Se utilizaron datos de un estudio de campo (N = 5158) en un contexto de planificación de viajes para investigar las diferencias en las recomendaciones WOM y la fidelización entre viajeros independientes (mayor participación) y compradores de paquetes (menor participación).

Hallazgos: Es más probable que los compradores de paquetes recomienden el proceso de planificación/reserva que los viajeros independientes, mientras que estos últimos tienen más probabilidades de repetir el mismo proceso de planificación que los compradores de paquetes.

Originalidad: El documento proporciona información sobre la manera como la participación en la planificación de viajes puede afectar la satisfacción, recomendaciones WOM y fidelización. Estas correlaciones no han sido investigadas anteriormente.

Implicaciones: Estos hallazgos tienen implicaciones para las agencias, operadores, proveedores y comercializadores turísticos en términos de retención de clientes y comunicación WOM con el cliente. Los hallazgos también tienen implicaciones teóricas para el WOM y la literatura sobre fidelización.

Palabras clave Boca a boca, Fidelización, Satisfacción, Participación, Compradores vacacionales, Compradores de paquetes, Viajeros independientes

1. Introduction

When booking a vacation, consumers can choose to buy a complete package tour from a tour operator or travel agency (package buyers), i.e. they can purchase ready-made or personalized travel packages or can be self-packagers who search for, combine and purchase individual travel items themselves. The latter alternative will likely result in a higher level of involvement than the former because consumers must make many individual decisions regarding the details of their vacation (Eletxigerra et al., 2021; Öz, 2015). Vacation planning involvement can manifest in varying degrees and manners, from basic information sorting to advanced levels of cocreation involving multiple stakeholders (Cao et al., 2023). The degree of vacation planning involvement is of interest, as a high level of involvement is believed to impact satisfaction level (Cao et al., 2023), which in turn is thought to impact word of mouth (WOM) recommendations and loyalty (Han and Hyun, 2018; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022).

Both WOM recommendations and loyalty are considered major factors in the marketing literature, and the research on WOM and loyalty is comprehensive (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Rahimi et al., 2017). However, this research has primarily focused on the general antecedents and outcomes. Less attention has been given to the impact of involvement on WOM and loyalty. Furthermore, scholarly attention has centered on the vacation itself, with scant attention toward vacation planning (Eletxigerra et al., 2021). This is surprising, as prior research has indicated that all phases of a vacation experience are critical for shaping the overall experience thereof (Neal and Gursoy, 2008; Zhang, 2020). Consequently, more studies are needed to examine the impact of involvement during the vacation planning phase on WOM and loyalty. This research therefore addresses this gap in the literature via an analysis of the influence of involvement, indexed by the different behaviors of self-packagers and package buyers, on the WOM and loyalty behaviors related to the planning process. Thus, this article investigates whether their degree of involvement, in the form of self-packaging vs package buying, affects respondents’ subsequent satisfaction, WOM recommendations and loyalty behavior related to future vacation planning. The research question is as follows:

RQ1. To what extent does involvement in the form of self-packaging vs package buying influence prevacation WOM and loyalty?

Theoretically, the study contributes to Dichter’s (1966) involvement-WOM, satisfaction and self-perception theories. Additionally, the increased knowledge on the different impacts between self-packagers and package buyers on WOM and loyalty has positive implications for tour operators, travel agents and independent service providers in terms of customer retention and positive customer WOM.
2. Background and hypothesis development

2.1 Planning and booking a vacation toward customer involvement and satisfaction

A vacation experience is divided into different phases (Cao et al., 2023; Eletxigerra et al., 2021; Pop et al., 2022; Zhang, 2020). The pretrip phase, which involves planning and booking the vacation, is the first stage in this experience (Cao et al., 2023; Eletxigerra et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020). Two alternative booking forms determine the level of complexity in the pretrip phase. Vacationing consumers can choose to purchase a vacation package from a tour operator/travel agency, either as a fixed or personalized travel package (package buyers), or select individual vacation elements themselves (self-packagers) (Zhang, 2020).

Recently, an increasing number of travelers have been organizing their vacations independently because of increased access to information on the internet and social media (Eletxigerra et al., 2021). Vacations can be booked through tour operators or travel agency offices, their websites, individual travel suppliers’ websites (Öz, 2015), or travel applications (Lim et al., 2022). Compared to package buyers, self-packagers face many possibilities of failure, including transport delays, accommodation service failures, unfamiliar customs and other potential risks. In contrast, a package tour is expected to be quality-checked by an agency. Package buyers thus save time and reduce risk, as their agency/operator is responsible for all arrangements (Eletxigerra et al., 2021; Liao and Chuang, 2020). Therefore, buying a vacation package is considered less risky and less time consuming than self-packaging. Consequently, a self-packager is typically more involved in vacation planning and booking than a package buyer to minimize risk and costs.

Because vacations are relatively expensive and intangible products, they are considered financially risky purchases (Chen and Law, 2016; Confente, 2015). When addressing such significant financially risky purchases, consumers usually become highly involved in their purchase process (Candi et al., 2017; Öz, 2015). Involvement in the pretrip phase can occur in various degrees and forms, ranging from sorting basic information to advanced cocreation (Cao et al., 2023). Several studies on the importance of involvement in the tourism experience have shown that high involvement in vacation activities increases satisfaction with the vacation experience (Cao et al., 2023; Chua et al., 2017). An optimal vacation experience is often the result of high satisfaction with most of the vacation elements (Neal and Gursoy, 2008; Räikkönen and Honkanen, 2013). Consumers who are highly involved in vacation planning and booking increase their chances of making better choices and thus their chances of a high level of vacation satisfaction (Frias-Jamilena et al., 2012).

Although the literature on tourism and hospitality has used a variety of theoretical frameworks to measure customer satisfaction, expectation disconfirmation theory (EDT) remains the most frequently applied (Choo et al., 2022; Qiu et al., 2018). Nevertheless, EDT has been highly debated. For example, when examining the degree of confirmation or disconfirmation, Kim et al. (2020) discuss the difficulties in measuring expectations and the gap between expectancy and actual performance. Furthermore, Engeset and Elvekrokk (2015) highlight how the expectation level of an experience might vary or change over time as the experience unfolds. Consequently, it is nearly impossible to estimate the expectation of an experience once it is complete. Albayrak and Caber (2015) thus conclude that a direct measure of satisfaction is a better measurement thereof than the expectancy–satisfaction relationship. Consequently, several researchers have used a direct measure of satisfaction (Choo et al., 2022; Qiu et al., 2018). We follow this trend and apply a direct measure of satisfaction in the study.

2.2 Outcome of involvement and satisfaction: word of mouth and loyalty

Studies suggest that involvement impacts satisfaction, which in turn affects vacationers’ subsequent WOM recommendations and loyalty (Carreira et al., 2014; Han and Hyun, 2018;
The next sections develop the hypotheses on this phenomenon in the context of vacation planning.

2.2.1 Word of mouth. An essential result of customer satisfaction and involvement is WOM recommendation (Carreira et al., 2014; Han and Hyun, 2018; Phillips et al., 2013). WOM is a powerful information source that shapes consumers’ perceptions of a product (Buhalis and Snarta, 2019; Mehraliyev et al., 2019), making it one of the most essential marketing tools (Pourlakhimi et al., 2020). Recipients consider WOM more dependable, trustworthy and credible than other information sources because WOM providers act on personal experience and expertise (Burnham and Leary, 2018; Kim et al., 2020; Rihova et al., 2018). Hence, WOM is more effective in minimizing risk during the prepurchase stage (Hussain et al., 2018; Öz, 2015) and consequently in improving decision quality (Chen and Law, 2016). Risk minimization is critical when planning and booking vacations.

Traditionally, WOM involves offline conversations among consumers. However, the internet and social media platforms have transformed WOM behavior, whereby most consumers now use electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) when planning vacations (Xiang et al., 2015; Öz, 2015). Although WOM may occur both offline and online and consumers find e-WOM useful, conventional WOM is still considered more reliable and trustworthy (Castano and Escandon-Barbosa, 2022; Siqueira et al., 2019); nearly 16% of travelers gain information from friends and relatives when planning a vacation (Duman et al., 2020). Thus, conventional WOM is the focus of this study.

Previous WOM studies have focused on either the sender’s or recipient’s perspective (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; King et al., 2014). The antecedents and consequences of WOM have been researched from both perspectives. Studies on antecedents mainly focus on WOM senders’ personal factors; or situational factors (King et al., 2014). One of the most important situational antecedents of WOM is satisfaction, and several studies have confirmed this relationship (Phillips et al., 2013; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Thakur, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). However, concerns have been expressed about the modest effect sizes identified between satisfaction and WOM (de Matos and Rossi, 2008), implying that satisfaction does not always convert into WOM. Serra-Cantallops et al. (2018) have also reported this lack of a relationship between satisfaction and WOM. Furthermore, according to Parthasarathy and Forlani (2010), even satisfied consumers may report negative WOM after using a product. Hence, the debate over whether customer satisfaction leads to WOM continues.

Another important situational antecedent to WOM is involvement (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Carreira et al., 2014; de Oña et al., 2013; King et al., 2014). Dichter (1966) has reported on the relationship between involvement and WOM, suggesting that it is positively impacted by product involvement. A consumer who is highly involved in the purchase process is more likely to engage in WOM communication than a less involved consumer (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Carreira et al., 2014; de Oña et al., 2013; King et al., 2014). Although the relationship between involvement and WOM has received significant attention in tourism studies, the literature has failed to address this relationship in the context of travel planning.

Based on previous research on involvement and vacation planning, even if all forms of vacation purchase involve some risk, buying a package tour guarantees a certain quality of vacation elements. In contrast, self-packagers have no such guarantee; thus, their purchases involve a higher degree of risk. Self-packagers are more involved in the planning/booking process than package buyers to minimize such risk. Consequently, following the literature on the impact of satisfaction and involvement on WOM, self-packagers have a higher probability of recommending their planning/booking process than consumers who buy a vacation package:

**H1.** The effect of satisfaction with the planning/booking process on WOM intentions is more positive for self-packagers than package buyers.
2.2.2 Loyalty. A well-discussed outcome of involvement and satisfaction is loyal customers (Han and Hyun, 2018; Menidjel et al., 2020). Loyalty takes many forms, and with the development of the internet, this concept has been extended. Currently, loyalty includes customers, the brand, employees, destination loyalty, loyalty toward products and service providers, platform loyalty, loyalty to processes and more. One major antecedent to loyalty is satisfaction, and several studies confirm that destination/product/service satisfaction increases loyalty (Choo et al., 2022; Han and Hyun, 2018; Lu et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2013). Nevertheless, Choo et al. (2022) propose that this relationship is not as strong as previously suggested, and Schirmer et al. (2018) assert that it might be influenced by diverse mediating variables. Involvement is an example of such a mediating variable. Leckie et al. (2016), Choo et al. (2022), Chua et al. (2017), Rasoolimanesh et al. (2022) and Han and Hyun (2018) suggest that involvement should be considered when investigating the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty, as high involvement may result in a high level of satisfaction. All these reports confirm the relationship between involvement and loyalty. Nevertheless, despite the importance of involvement as an antecedent to loyalty, Menidjel et al. (2020) note that few studies have explored this relationship and that more are needed. The study assumes that increased satisfaction with the planning/booking process may result in greater loyalty, expressed via repeated behavior. Additionally, Leckie et al. (2016), Choo et al. (2022), Chua et al. (2017), Rasoolimanesh et al. (2022) and Han and Hyun (2018) note that involvement should be considered when investigating the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty; thus, this approach consists of studying these relationships by comparing package buyers and self-packagers. We expect self-packagers to be more likely to adopt the same planning/booking process the next time they go on a vacation than package buyers. Thus:

H2. The effect of satisfaction with the planning/booking process on repeat behavior intentions is more positive for self-packagers than package buyers.

The last hypothesis expresses the focus on the WOM and loyalty relationship. Previously, this relationship has been investigated using several approaches, mainly by considering how loyalty affects WOM. One example of this approach is presented in Buhalis et al. (2020). However, few studies have investigated how WOM affects loyalty (Serra-Cantallops et al., 2018), and none have assessed this in relation to tourism planning/booking. Garnefeld et al. (2010), Serra-Cantallops et al. (2018) and Parihar and Dawra (2020) investigated whether WOM leads to greater loyalty behavior in different contexts, confirming the link between WOM and loyalty. They found that consumers who speak positively about a product or service are usually more loyal to it than those who speak less positively about it. This relationship has also been confirmed by Breitsohl and Garrod (2016), who demonstrated that negative destination WOM has a negative effect on destination loyalty. Therefore, adopting self-perception theory suggests that satisfaction leads to WOM, which in turn results in greater loyalty. Self-perception theory proposes that individuals infer their own attitudes to a certain extent by observing their own behavior and the possible triggers thereof (Bem, 1967). If one talks positively about a product/brand, it is assumed that one behaves accordingly and stays more loyal to it. In this case, a traveler who exhibits planning/booking WOM is thus more likely to choose the same planning/booking process for their next vacation than one who exhibits less planning/booking WOM. Additionally, involvement is included, as previous research suggests that it might impact satisfaction level and, in turn, WOM and loyalty (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Han and Hyun, 2018; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022). Self-packagers who recommend their planning/booking process to others are more likely to adopt the same planning/booking process the next time they go on vacation. Thus:

H3. The effect of WOM intentions on repeat behavior intentions is more positive for self-packagers than package buyers.

Figure 1 summarizes these proposed relationships.
Previous studies have indicated that younger travelers are more likely than older travelers to spread WOM recommendations (Chen and Law, 2016; Rong et al., 2012). Age also impacts tourism loyalty (Correia et al., 2015). Hence, in accordance with this demonstrated impact of age on WOM and loyalty, we controlled for age in the study.

3. Methods

3.1 Data collection

To test the hypotheses, data was used from a large field study on consumers’ vacation planning behaviors. The data, through a Web survey by GfK SE, included responses from people in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, three of the most important foreign markets for Norwegian tourism. These three countries account for a large share of European travelers. Both package purchases and self-packaging are popular purchasing methods for booking vacations in these three countries. The participants were instructed to “think back to a leisure/holiday trip you have been on that you planned, booked, and paid for yourself and (if applicable) for fellow travelers” and to respond to questions concerning this holiday. The questionnaire was written in English and professionally translated into Dutch and German. The final questionnaire had a total of 6,010 responses. The participants were asked to rate how much detail they recalled from the planning process on a five-point scale (1 = remember very little detail, 5 = remember very much detail) to verify that they had a good recollection thereof. On this scale, those who answered 1 or 2 (n = 538) were...
eliminated from further analysis. After data elimination and cleaning, 5,158 respondents were left for analysis, including 2,412 self-packagers and 1,897 package buyers.

The adopted measures were inspired by those applied in previous studies on satisfaction, WOM and loyalty (Gallarza et al., 2013; Kuo et al., 2013). These measures were modified to fit the purpose of the current study. All responses were on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “1 = completely disagree” to “7 = completely agree” (Appendix). The partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM), using SMART PLS 3.3.2, was the preferred method for evaluating the hypotheses for the following reasons: first, the model has formative items, and PLS-SEM is the recommended analysis tool for formative constructs. Second, PLS-SEM allows for nonnormal distributions (Hair et al., 2019). A nonnormal distribution was present in the study, as some of the items had kurtosis values that exceeded the suggested values of −1 and +1. PLS multigroup analysis (PLS-MGA) was performed to identify the differences in WOM and loyalty between self-packagers and package buyers and age after completing steps 1 and 2 of the measurement invariances in composite models test (Hair et al., 2017).

4. Results
4.1 Sociodemographic characteristics

Demographic concerns were addressed in data collection to obtain a representative sample. The sample included 2,412 self-packagers (47%) and 1,897 package buyers (37%) from Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. In total, 32% of the self-packagers were under 44 years old, and 30% of the package buyers were under 44 years old. The demographic data are presented in Table 1.

4.2 Model assessment

The model consists of formative constructs. The measurement model was assessed according to Hair et al. (2019). Initially, the model had two indicators for booking and planning satisfaction. However, as the first multicollinearity check showed that the two indicators for booking satisfaction had VIFs above the recommended threshold of 5, we subsequently followed Hair et al. (2017), treating multicollinearity by using the average of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1,773</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>1,662</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>1,723</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2,359</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2,799</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>≤44</td>
<td>1,692</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;44</td>
<td>3,466</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>2,448</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2,153</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Missing value</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income group</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>2,298</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1,441</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>877</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups of vacation buyers</td>
<td>Self-packagers</td>
<td>2,412</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Package buyers</td>
<td>1,897</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>849</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Table by authors*
these two indicators. This resulted in VIF values below the recommended threshold of 5 (Table 2), which, according to Hair et al. (2017), is acceptable. Second, the outer weights for their relevance and contribution to the model using bootstrapping were assessed. As Table 3 shows, all weights were significant at the <0.001 level. The confidence interval excluded zero. The weight relevance of all indicators was strong, except for one, which was weak but significant. We therefore proceeded to analyze the structural model (Hair et al., 2019).

To test the hypotheses, we estimated a structural model. Ten thousand subsamples were analyzed through bootstrapping.

Figure 2 summarizes the path coefficients and p-values for the hypotheses, while Table 4 shows the PLS-MGA. Self-packagers who were satisfied with their planning/booking process were less likely to recommend it than package buyers ($\beta = 0.615$ vs $\beta = 0.692$, $p < 0.001$). Consequently, $H1$ is not supported. Further examining the effect of “planning/booking satisfaction” on “planning/booking loyalty” illustrated that self-packagers were more loyal to their planning/booking process than package buyers ($\beta = 0.594$ vs $\beta = 0.494$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, $H2$ is supported. Finally, package buyers who recommended their planning/booking process were more likely to adopt the same process than self-packagers ($\beta = 0.326$ vs $\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$). Consequently, $H3$ is not supported.

Age was used as a control variable to explain the variance in WOM and loyalty. The PLS-MGA results revealed that travelers under the age of 44 were more inclined to provide WOM than those older than 44 years. Age had no effect on loyalty (Table 5). However, the analysis, which considered age and packaging modes, revealed that package buyers over the age of 44 were more likely to engage in WOM than self-packagers (Table 6).

The study model’s predictive power was assessed using the explained variance $R^2$ of the endogenous components (Table 7) and PLSpredict (Table 8). The $R^2$ for self-packagers varied from 0.379 to 0.558, whereas the $R^2$ for package buyers varied from

### Table 2 VIF values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>VIF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning satisfaction 1</td>
<td>3.195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning satisfaction 2</td>
<td>3.211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booking satisfaction – average</td>
<td>1.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booking WOM</td>
<td>3.945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning WOM</td>
<td>3.945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning loyalty</td>
<td>4.264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booking loyalty</td>
<td>4.264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table by authors

### Table 3 Outer weights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Original sample (O)</th>
<th>T statistics (O/STDEV)</th>
<th>p-values</th>
<th>Outer loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Booking satisfaction – average → planning/booking satisfaction</td>
<td>-0.053</td>
<td>3.875</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning satisfaction_1 → planning/booking satisfaction</td>
<td>0.361</td>
<td>12.128</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning satisfaction_2 → planning/booking satisfaction</td>
<td>0.673</td>
<td>24.217</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommend booking → planning/booking WOM</td>
<td>0.625</td>
<td>13.569</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommend planning → planning/booking WOM</td>
<td>0.410</td>
<td>8.595</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning loyalty → planning/booking loyalty</td>
<td>0.620</td>
<td>13.287</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booking loyalty → planning/booking loyalty</td>
<td>0.412</td>
<td>8.694</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.954</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table by authors
**Figure 2** The structural model

**Table 4** PLS-MGA self-packagers vs package buyers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Path coefficients-diff (self-packagers - package buyers)</th>
<th>p-value original one-tailed (self-packagers - package buyers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning/booking satisfaction → planning/booking loyalty</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.019**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning/booking satisfaction → planning/booking WOM</td>
<td>−0.076</td>
<td>0.996***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOM planning/booking → planning/booking loyalty</td>
<td>−0.109</td>
<td>0.988**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** *Significant at the 10% level; **significant at the 5% level; ***significant at the 1% level

**Source:** Table by authors

**Table 5** PLS-MGA: comparison by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Path coefficients-diff (&lt;44 vs &gt;44)</th>
<th>p-value original one-tailed (&lt;44 vs &gt;44)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning/booking satisfaction → planning/booking loyalty</td>
<td>−0.019</td>
<td>0.662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning/booking satisfaction → planning/booking WOM</td>
<td>0.145</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning/booking WOM → planning/booking loyalty</td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td>0.126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** ***Significant at the 1% level

**Source:** Table by authors
When evaluating predictive significance, the Stone–Geisser $Q^2$ should also be investigated via blindfolding (Hair et al., 2019). The results of 5,000 bootstrap samples indicated that the Stone–Geisser $Q^2$ values were all above zero, ranging from 0.350 to 0.533. Finally, PLSpredict showed that the model had moderate predictive power, as half of the PLS-SEM values had lower root mean square error (RMSE) values than those of the linear regression model (Hair et al., 2019) (Table 8). Hence, the model may be used to predict “planning/booking process WOM” and “planning/booking process loyalty.”

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study has compared the relationship among “planning/booking satisfaction,” “planning/booking WOM” and “planning/booking loyalty” between self-packagers and package buyers.
buyers. We expected that self-packagers, assumed to be more involved in the planning/booking process, would be more likely to create positive WOM and to be more loyal to their planning/booking mode in subsequent vacation planning than package buyers.

First, the study demonstrated positive relationships between “planning/booking satisfaction” and “planning/booking WOM,” “planning/booking WOM” and “planning/booking loyalty” and “planning/booking satisfaction” and “planning/booking loyalty.” A better experience with the planning/booking process will increase consumers’ likelihood of recommending it and repeating it the next time they go on a vacation. This finding supports previous reports describing positive relationships between satisfaction and WOM, satisfaction and loyalty and WOM and loyalty (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Choo et al., 2022; Parihar and Dawra, 2020).

Following studies on the relationships among involvement, satisfaction and loyalty (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Choo et al., 2022), we expected that self-packagers would be more involved in the planning/booking process and thus more loyal to it than package buyers. This hypothesis was confirmed. There is a stronger positive relationship between “planning/booking satisfaction” and “planning/booking loyalty” among self-packagers than package buyers. This is likely because of self-packagers’ higher level of involvement in the planning/booking process.

Consistent with the literature on the relationships of involvement, satisfaction and WOM (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022), this study proposed that as self-packagers are more involved in the planning/booking process, they are more likely to create positive WOM than package buyers. In contrast to expectations, there was no support for this stronger positive relationship between “planning/booking satisfaction” and “planning/booking WOM” among self-packagers than package buyers. Indeed, package buyers were more likely to recommend their planning/booking process than self-packagers. The reason why package buyers tended to create positive WOM more frequently than self-packagers remains to be explored. Nevertheless, there are several possible reasons:

- Package buyers purchase a vacation package that has been tested by professionals before purchase. The product is likely to be of high quality, with minimal risk. Consequently, package buyers are so satisfied with this planning/booking process that they are more likely to create positive WOM than self-packagers.

- Tour operators and travel agencies offer a range of destinations, resorts, hotels, services and daily activities to consumers for consideration in booking. The internet, social media platforms and travel applications have improved the available information on destinations. Hence, many decisions must be made when planning/booking a vacation package, which may increase package buyers’ involvement in the planning/booking phase. Consequently, package buyers create more positive WOM than self-packagers.

- Package buyers might be more likely to create WOM because of their altruism toward their vacation provider. The relationships between these consumers and travel agencies/tour operators might be stronger than those between self-packagers and individual tourism providers. Altruism is a well-recognized antecedent to WOM (Nam et al., 2020).

- Self-packagers are typically more independent and self-confident and therefore might create less WOM because they do not believe that their planning/booking process is of interest to others.

Based on previous self-perception theory research, it was assumed that travelers who create positive planning/booking WOM are more likely to repeat the same planning/booking process the next time they plan/book a vacation. The findings indicate that package buyers, who are more likely to create WOM, are more loyal to their planning/booking process than self-packagers. Hence, if consumers create positive planning/booking WOM, they are more
likely to repeat the same planning/booking process the next time they plan/book a vacation. This finding aligns with self-perception theory but contrasts with involvement WOM theory. The reason for the higher loyalty among package buyers than self-packagers remains to be explored. In the previous section, several potential reasons were proposed for this result concerning the relationship between satisfaction and WOM. These same reasons may also be relevant in the WOM and loyalty relationship.

Finally, age affects WOM. Travelers under the age of 44 are more likely to participate in planning/booking WOM than travelers over the age of 44. These findings are consistent with Chen and Law (2016) and Rong et al. (2012). However, age does not affect planning/booking loyalty. The article investigated the impact of involvement on vacationers’ satisfaction, WOM and loyal behavior with regard to the planning/booking process. Specifically, we examined how the choice of vacation planning/booking mode, namely, self-packaging or package buying, influences involvement and its subsequent effects. There was a positive relationship between the following:

- planning/booking satisfaction and planning/booking WOM;
- planning/booking satisfaction and planning/booking loyalty; and
- planning/booking WOM and planning/booking loyalty.

The key findings, accounting for involvement and age, are as follows:

- Planning/booking involvement does not necessarily lead to higher planning/booking WOM.
- Planning/booking loyalty is positively influenced by involvement in the planning/booking phase.
- Travelers under the age of 44 are more likely to exhibit planning/booking WOM than travelers over the age of 44.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

This study has analyzed how involvement influences WOM and loyalty in the prevacation phase. A multiplicity of theories and theoretical approaches have been applied in the WOM and loyalty literature (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Choo et al., 2022). This study contributes to three of these theories: Dichter’s (1966) involvement – WOM theory, satisfaction theory and self-perception theory.

First, this study has found that involvement might lead to loyalty, as self-packagers are more loyal to their planning/booking process than package buyers. Respondents who are highly involved in vacation planning and booking are thus more satisfied than those who are less involved. Consequently, they are more loyal in terms of choosing the same planning/booking process for future vacations. This result supports satisfaction theory and Dichter’s (1966) involvement theory and aligns with previous studies on this relationship (Choo et al., 2022; Chua et al., 2017; Han and Hyun, 2018). Accordingly, the degree of involvement should be considered when measuring the impacts of satisfaction and loyalty.

Second, Babić Rosario et al. (2020) refer to Dichter’s (1966) involvement–WOM theory as a major WOM theory. According to this theory, product involvement affects satisfaction level, which in turn affects WOM. However, the study revealed that higher involvement does not necessarily lead to pretrip WOM. This result conflicts with Dichter’s (1966) theory and previous studies on this relationship (Babić Rosario et al., 2020). Consequently, future studies should consider that the effect of involvement on WOM might not be as powerful as previously assumed. Other factors may have a greater impact.
Finally, the study has confirmed the WOM and loyalty relationship for both focal groups of travelers, which is stronger for package buyers. The findings indicate that package buyers, who are more likely to create WOM, are more loyal to their planning/booking process than self-packagers. If consumers create positive planning/booking WOM, they are more likely to repeat the same planning/booking process the next time they plan/book a vacation. This finding supports self-perception theory and previous studies on this relationship (Garnefeld et al., 2010; Parihar and Dawra, 2020) but conflicts with Dichter’s (1966) theory. One reason for this finding might be that self-perception theory explains how people form attitudes by observing their behaviors. As self-packagers who are already highly involved in their booking process have well-defined positive attitudes, they are likely less inclined to consider their behavior to gain information about their attitudes.

5.2 Managerial contribution

Findings have implications for vacation suppliers such as tour operators, travel agencies and individual travel service providers. Involvement impacts the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty, whereby tour operators and travel agencies should encourage customers to be more involved in their vacation planning process through cocreation. To achieve more loyal customers, tour operators and travel agencies can consider advantages for repeat buyers, including vouchers, discounts or special offers for returning customers. Tour operators and travel agencies can also market packages modified to fit former customers’ interests and needs.

For actors selling separate vacation elements, the results indicate less positive WOM activities among their customers. Self-packagers are less likely to create positive WOM than package buyers. Thus, individual suppliers should highlight the positive aspects of separate vacation elements to encourage more pretrip WOM among consumers. Although WOM is an important information source for travelers in the prevacation phase, marketers have not exploited this opportunity to its full potential. Suppliers should encourage customers to create positive WOM, which has become especially important in recent years, as the internet and social media platforms have increased WOM opportunities (Babić Rosario et al., 2020). Although the characteristics of WOM and e-WOM are different, their motivations for creating positive WOM exhibit similarities. Tour operators, travel agencies and individual travel suppliers should include WOM as an important part of their marketing strategy to reduce traditional marketing costs. To increase WOM/e-WOM opportunities, marketers can perform the following:

- Invest in an effective planning/booking system that increases customer satisfaction, potentially leading to more WOM and loyalty and, consequently, a reduced need for traditional marketing.
- Include WOM as part of a communication strategy, systematically encouraging customers to create traditional WOM and e-WOM by, for example, inspiring customers to post reviews on travel community sites and social media platforms.
- Develop digital platforms where customers can share travel experiences and post reviews.

5.3 Limitations and future research areas

Despite its various implications, this study has some limitations. First, although only the respondents who stated that they remembered how they planned and booked their last vacation were included in the analyses, they may still have forgotten central aspects of their planning/booking process. Furthermore, redundancy analysis, as recommended by Hair et al. (2019) for formative measures, was not applied, as the data were collected before the analysis method was chosen.
The current study has also revealed two future research areas. First, the findings suggest that higher involvement does not necessarily lead to higher WOM intentions. This finding contrasts with involvement-WOM theory and thus provides new perceptions regarding the relationship between WOM and involvement. More studies in different contexts are needed to gain sufficient insights concerning involvement as an antecedent to WOM. Second, we speculate that involvement reduces the tendency to react, in accordance with self-perception theory. This should be investigated in future research.

References


Appendix

Table A1  Constructs and items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning/booking satisfaction</td>
<td>Sat_plan1</td>
<td>Overall, planning this trip was a positive experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sat_plan2</td>
<td>Overall, I was very satisfied with my experiences while planning this holiday trip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sat_Book1</td>
<td>Overall, booking this trip was a positive experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sat_Book2</td>
<td>Overall, I was very satisfied with my experiences while booking this holiday trip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning/booking WOM</td>
<td>Rec_plan</td>
<td>I recommend to my friends that they plan their trips in the way I did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rec_book</td>
<td>I recommend to my friends that they book their trips in the way I did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning/booking loyalty</td>
<td>Plan_loy</td>
<td>The next time I plan a holiday trip, I will do it in the same way again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Book_loy</td>
<td>The next time I book a holiday trip, I will do it in the same way again</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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