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**ELECTRONIC WOM TO EXPLORE THE TRANSPARENCY OF
TURKEY GOVERNANCE OF THEME PARKS**

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Abstract

Word-of-mouth (WOM) which is an important channel of non-marketer-driven communication tools has dramatically changed and transformed into electronic form known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) by adding more transparency into the effect of the digital technologies that changed the dynamics of the business world. The customers are expressing their opinions through social media channels for eWOM which has a much more widespread effect than the WOM. For tourism and hospitality industries, eWOM has an outstanding importance because of their experiential nature and transparent quality. The customer experience of theme parks in Turkey to judge transparency is studied for the first time by the eWOM data gathered from TripAdvisor for two most famous theme parks. For the 90 eWOM data received from TripAdvisor, qualitative analysis was conducted by Maxqda programme. The research results indicate that the both tangible and intangible components of transparency are important for Turkish theme park visitors.

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1. Introduction

“Most unhappy customers are the greatest source of learning” – Bill Gates

As Bill Gates noted above, customer complaints have an important role in a company's performance (Hwang & Mattila, 2020). Digitalization is one of the concepts that shapes today's business world by making businesses more transparent (Divrik & Baykal, 2022). Digitalization and, mainly, the internet dramatically changed the dynamics of business and changed consumer behavior by offering online and offline (multiple) channels to customers for searching for and buying products.

The digital platforms, mainly the internet and social media, have become the main platforms where consumers share information via their opinions and evaluate transparency (Li & Wang, 2011). According to Gupta and Kim (2004), WOM has moved to the internet, and websites are new "coffee shops" where people with similar interests can meet and contact each other in an electronic environment. Convincing consumers to buy a product or service is the main goal of marketing communication. Through marketing communication channels, companies aim to strengthen the brand's image and remembrance to stimulate purchase. It is clearly shown by studies that there is a correlation between marketing communication tools and sales figures. Word-of-mouth (WOM) is the most important and effective channel of non-marketer-driven communication tools (Keller, 2007). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) took the place of WOM as a result of the digital transformation occurring in marketing communication tools with a greater focus on transparency (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2023). eWOM can be defined as ‘any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet’ (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Online reviews and user evaluations of products and services based on their individual experiences are the main forms of eWOM (Kim & Hyun, 2021).

Research conducted by Nielsen (2018) showed that more than 55 percent of customers share their personal experiences on social media, using customer reviews to evaluate transparency (Zhao et al., 2020). Even though most customers do not prefer to state a face-to-face complaint, they engage in writing an online review on social media about their personal negative experiences (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011). Unhappy customers mainly declare their negative online communications either as a customer complaint or negative reviews in order to make consumers avoid and oppose those companies (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Online reviews are an important source for gathering data about the company's products and services for both current and potential customers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). As customer reviews and complaints on social media have a great influence on product or service performance, companies actively seek new ways to develop better relationships by adjusting their social media marketing strategies (Wang & Kim, 2017).

The aim of this research is to classify and understand customer satisfaction and transparency in the governance of two theme parks in Turkey. Those two theme parks were selected because they are the biggest and most popular theme parks in Turkey. In the research, the last 90 comments were selected retrospectively from March 12, 2023, on the website TripAdvisor, which is the most popular social media tool for eWOM comments. The data is analyzed by content analysis using the qualitative research program called Maxqda.

Given the intangible and experiential nature of the tourism industry, eWOM and online complaints are popular in the industry, making this industry more transparent. However, online complaints are not analyzed in the Turkish home textiles industry, and the determination and comparison of the subjects on which online complaints are accumulated will help to solve those problems and offer better products and services for their customers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Online WOM (eWOM)

Customer experiences are the main elements that generate satisfaction and loyalty for the brand, and they also stimulate WOM behaviors (Keiningham et al., 2007). According to Babić Rosario et al. (2020), "eWOM is consumer-generated, consumption-related communication that employs digital tools and is directed primarily to other consumers". The digital WOM (eWOM) is more transparent and is being discussed by academicians from different angles: eWOM and WOM comparison (Fulgoni & Lipsman, 2015), determinants of eWOM (Babić Rosario et al., 2020), and impacts of eWOM on brand perspectives (Park & Jeon, 2018).

Although eWOM is just considered as the electronic form of WOM; there are other differences between them. The first difference is the credibility of the information source, secondly message privacy and lastly diffusion speed of the message. The eWOM source is more credible, the eWOM message has more privacy and the eWOM message spreads faster than WOM (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). On the other hand, eWOM has disadvantages compared to WOM; the body language is lost in eWOM, it is one-to-many instead of one-to-one and eWOM has no time bound (Pihlaja et al., 2017).

For the tourism industry, eWOM has a special importance as it has been accepted as an important source for reaching the experiences of previous consumers (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010). One of the main characteristics of the eWOM is the trustworthiness of the websites that share reviews of products and services (Nuseir, 2019), and Tripadvisor is one of the websites that consumers trust for reviews all over the world. TripAdvisor is accepted as the world's biggest eWOM site, operating in 49 countries with an average of 390 million visitors monthly. On TripAdvisor, around 435 million reviews are made for approximately 6.8 million tourism units. TripAdvisor uses moderators for examining reviews and automated tools that review doubtful content (TripAdvisor, 2017). TripAdvisor is accepted as the preeminent website for consumer evaluations in the tourism and hospitality industries, and researchers have conducted research about TripAdvisor's social media role in those industries (Fong et al., 2017; Molinillo et al., 2016). By taking advantage of the online reviews on Tripadvisor, consumers can reduce the risk of uncertainty during the process of decision-making and their experiences.

2.2. Consumer experience in the theme park context

The importance of quality of experience in customer satisfaction in theme parks has been studied by several researchers (Jin et al., 2015). The research of Manthiou et al. (2016) stated that the experience of theme park visits creates long-lasting memories for the visitors. Studies show that drivers of satisfaction and loyalty have both tangible and intangible indicators indicating transparency. Service

components such as products, cleanliness, and attitudes of employees are included as tangible indicators, whereas visitors are quality of service received indicators such as reliability, responsibility, and the customer's feelings (Johns & Gyimóthy, 2002).

As Cheng et al. (2016) stated, the most important components of consumer satisfaction in theme parks are the services offered to the visitors, and support services have critical importance in addition to other main components. Milman et al. (2010) stated that prices, theme park staff attitudes, safety, and security are the most important components that affect theme park customer satisfaction. Geissler and Rucks (2011) found in their research that theme park visitors' satisfaction is mainly dependent on prices, types of rides, cleanliness, and food quality. In order to be competitive in the tourism industry, theme parks should focus on the changing needs of their current and potential customers by focusing on both tangible and intangible indicators of their consumers' satisfaction.

2.3. Customer delight and outrage for theme parks

Customer satisfaction is the most important topic in the service management literature, and many studies have been conducted to increase customer satisfaction. It has been a subject of debate that customer satisfaction is not enough to generate customer loyalty. In addition to customer satisfaction, customer delight should be obtained for customer loyalty (Torres et al., 2020). The first academicians who analyzed customer delight were Oliver (1997) and Keiningham et al. (2007). Early researchers of customer delight classified customer delight into three groups. Three different groups of customers show an attitudinal, affective, and motivational approach toward customer delight. In the first group, researchers such as Kumar et al. (2001) and Patterson (1997) define delight as an emotion. The second group states that delight occurs when the experience exceeds customers' expectations. Researchers in the third group define delight from a motivational perspective.

In contrast to customer delight, customers can have the opposite feeling of anger or outrage. Customer outrage, which is the opposite of customer delight, occurs when a customer feels insecure about his needs (Schneider & Bowen, 1999). Antonetti (2016) classified two types of outrage, which are anger with a focus on problems and vengeance. The first type occurs when a customer's outrage is not too intense and the focus is on problem solving. On the other hand, if the customer's outrage is too intense, the customer wants to damage the company's image, which most of the time results in customer deviance. It is important to state that outrage differs from anger, and it may end up with pro-social behaviors like boycotting. It is also important to differentiate outrage from dissatisfaction.

3. Methodology

In the last decade, there have been increasing numbers of studies to understand the impact of eWOM on consumer behavior and strategies developed by companies to manage their digital entities (Molinillo et al., 2016). To the author's knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted related to analyzing the role of eWOM on consumer satisfaction with an emphasis on theme parks in Turkey. The data for the research was obtained from TripAdvisor to understand the factors affecting the outrage and delight amongst the visitors of the two main theme parks in Turkey. A qualitative approach is used in the

research, and to gather feedback related to theme park customers' experiences, data is obtained from TripAdvisor. A similar method was applied by Magnini et al. (2011) in their research that analyzed the customer experience in the lodging sector.

The Maxqda 2022 program is used to analyze the qualitative data obtained from TripAdvisor. In the document analysis, which includes the analysis of written information about the subject to be examined, the documents in question are obtained from electronic platforms such as web pages, blogs, and newsgroups (Baş & Akturan, 2008). Content analysis, which is a systematic and objective numerical analysis aimed at measuring the variables in the documents, was used in the organization of the data obtained in the study and the determination of the classifications explained (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013).

The eWOM 90 comments of two most popular theme parks were obtained from TripAdvisor and coded in Maxqda. The theme parks are coded as TP1 and TP2. There are 5 main codes which are; satisfaction, payment, services, activities and staff. The sub-codes of satisfaction are “good advice”, “outrage” and “delight, payment” has “high prices” and “price inconsistencies”, services code has “too many foreigners”, “fastpay”, “long waiting times”, “cleanliness”, activities code has “good activities” and “few activities” subcodes and lastly staff code has “friendly staff” and “terrible staff” subcodes. The main code system and the number of repetitions are listed in Table 1 below;

Table 1. Codes and Frequency of Codes

		TP 1	TP 2
Satisfaction	Good Advice	15	4
	Outrage	10	38
	Delight	77	43
Payment	High Prices	11	28
	Price inconsistencies	0	10
	Too Many Foreigners	0	16
Services	Fastpay	3	6
	Long Waiting Times	4	26
	Cleanliness	1	8
Activities	Good Activities	22	10
	Few Activities	3	13
Staff	Friendly Staff	47	4
	Terrible Staff	0	11

In the research, the relationships between codes of both theme parks were examined. The relationship between the codes are shown with linear lines. Below figures Figure 1 and Figure 2 shows the relations between codes of TP1 and TP2 respectively.

In the TP1, there is a strong relation between “helpful staff” and “delight”, “high prices” and “outrage”, “fast-pay” and “few activities”, “good advice” and “cleanliness”, “delight” and “good advice”, “long waiting times” and “outrage”, “good activities” and “helpful staff”.

The staff’s attitude towards the customers is an important factor in making the customers be delighted from their theme park experience. On the other hand, high prices, long waiting times for the activities, high prices for entrance and food, few activities suitable for children and fast-pay are highly related with the outrage gathered from the theme park experience. In addition, the customers who think that the prices are high are complaining from long waiting lines in the rides. Surprisingly, even though some customers find the prices high, they are delighted with their experience from the theme parks. The correlation of codes of the TP1 is shown below in Figure 1.



Figure 1. TP1 Code Relation Map

In the TP2, there is a strong correlation between “high prices”, “outrage”, “long waiting times”, “a lot of foreigners” and “price inconsistencies”, “delight” and “good activities”, “delight” and “good advice”, “delight” and “helpful staff”.

The customers are delighted with the experience when they are satisfied with the activities. In addition, the staff’s attitude towards customers plays an important role in making the customers delighted with the theme park experience. Some of the customers who are delighted are giving eWOM advice to try the theme park experience. On the other hand, the customers who feel outraged are complaining about

high prices, price inconsistencies, long waiting lines for rides, few activities, and too many foreigners. The customers who are not satisfied with the staff's negative attitudes also complain about fast payment, long waiting times, high prices, and too many foreigners. The correlation of codes of the TP12 is shown below in Figure 2.

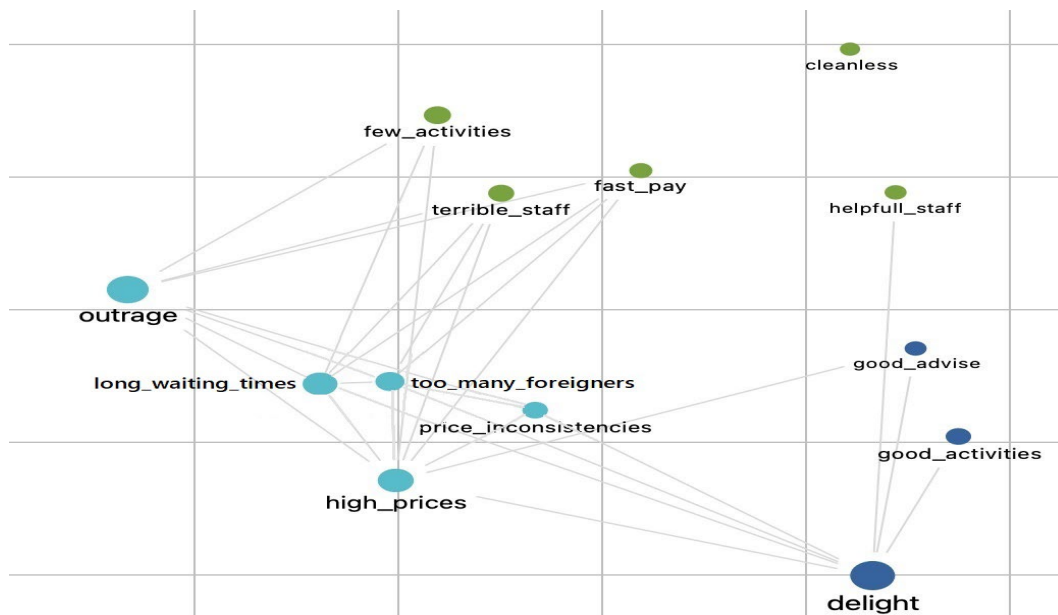


Figure 2. TP2 Code Relation Map

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings showed that the delighted customers' thoughts are aroused by the positive experiences of the activities in the theme parks governance and emotions related to the experiences and services offered by the theme parks. This is in accordance with the customer delight theory, which focuses on the importance of enthusiasm and pleasure in gathering customer delight (Kumar et al., 2001). Furthermore, Schmitt's (1999) generally accepted customer experience theory, which states that experience can arise from sense, feel, think, act, and relate (Schmitt, 1999). The findings of this research support the idea that theme park experiences fall mainly under the "sense", "feel," and "relate" categories. This result is particularly similar to the research focusing on hotel customer experience by Magnini et al. (2011) and Torres and Kline (2013), which emphasizes the importance of service, cleanliness, and professionalism. In addition to the hotel industry experience, fun, delight, and enjoyment are critically important to the customer experience during a theme park visit.

There is less research conducted in the customer outrage area. The customers are complaining about limited activities, and in addition, long queues and overcrowded areas are featured problems because the system was not transparent. The findings of research conducted by Budruk et al. (2002), and Ryan et al. (2010) have similar results related to crowds and long queues, indicating low quality of governance. Customers' perceptions of cost, service, value, and staff are important topics that generate

customer outrage. The increased ticket prices above inflation and disrespectful staff are the main reasons for theme park customers' outrage (Harwell, 2015).

5. Managerial implications

The result of this research will guide the theme park managers to the questions that they should include in their customer experience evaluations and make their system more transparent. By including questions that measure customer delight and outrage in their surveys, they will be able to generate more precise comments about their customers' experiences. Furthermore, this research shows that intangible indicators such as emotions are valuable for theme park customers' experiences in addition to tangible indicators, making them more transparent. Focusing more on the intangible indicators of customer experience will increase the evaluation of their theme park governance.

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