

ASERS

Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism

Biannually

Volume VIII

Issue 4(20)

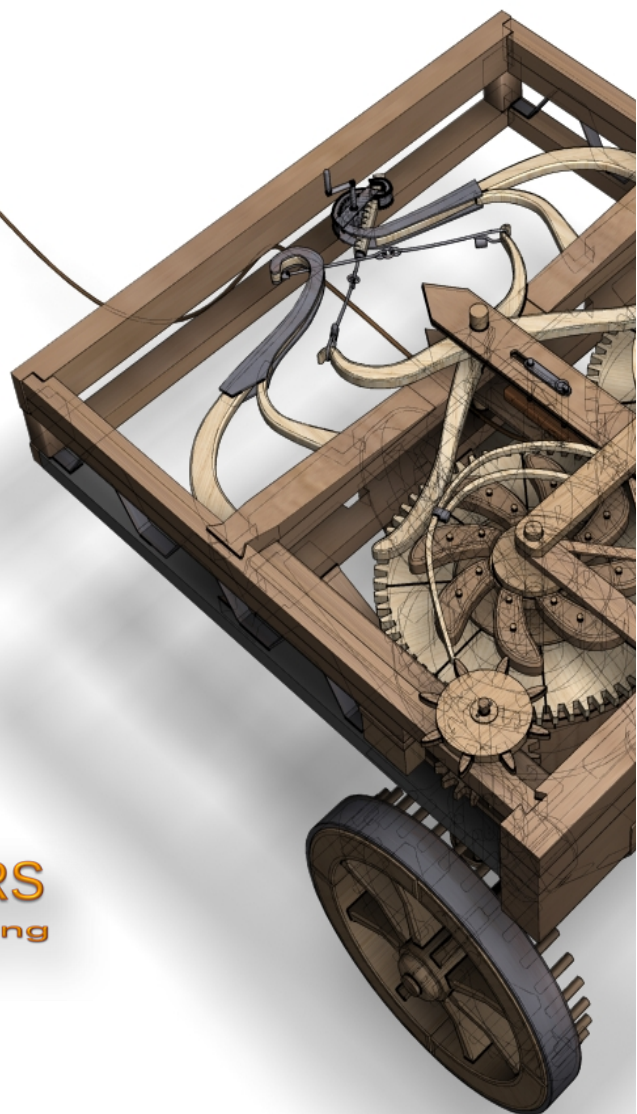
SUMMER 2017

ISSN 2068 – 7729

Journal DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14505/jemt>

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DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v8.4\(20\).13](http://dx.doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v8.4(20).13)

Analyzing the Effect of Electronic Word of Mouth towards Future Behavioral Intention of Tourists

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Suggested Citation:

Damayanti, A., Wibowo, L.A., and Humaira, A. (2017). Analyzing the effect of electronic word of mouth towards future behavioral intention of tourists. *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism*. Volume VIII, Summer, 4(20): 843-852. DOI:10.14505/jemt.v8.4(20).13

Article's History:

Received March, 2017; Revised April, 2017; Accepted July, 2017.
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Abstract:

This study aimed at identifying the effect of Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) towards tourists' interest (future behavioral intention) by analyzing the dominant factors which defined EWOM in the scope of social networking sites (SNS). The analysis technique used was partial Least Square (PLS) with samples of 100. Respondents of the study were tourists using the internet as an information source and excursion planning to Langkawi Island, Malaysia. The result of the study showed that there were dominant factors which defined EWOM and that they yielded a weak effect towards future behavioral intention. The push factors and the pull factors from future behavioral intention dimension obtained the highest response from the tourists. The study indicated that EWOM values as a source of information search for planning an excursion trip were very important, but yielded a weak effect towards future behavioral intention, on the grounds that there were still many factors outside EWOM which affected the tourists' interest which require future further studies.

Keywords: EWOM; tourists' interest; future behavioral intention; push factors; pull factors

JEL Classification: Z30; Z32; M12, L97; M10

Introduction

Tourism is an industry which is closely related to information, as stated by Sheldon (1997). It is proven now that information develops very rapidly supported by sophisticated technology called the Internet. Buhalis and Law (2008) stated that the present-time internet has underlain changes over how an information process spreads and how tourists conduct their planning on going on a vacation. Tourists now live in an era which is inseparable from freedom of information and freedom of speech by using technology to express their opinions when sharing information

(O'Connor 2008). Besides that, hospitality and tourism industries are highly competitive which, consequently, underlie the importance of the use of interpersonal information which can benefit the operators at tourist destinations. Word of Mouth (WOM) is a source of accurate information in determining the image of tourist destinations (Baloglu and McCleary 1999). EWOM, which is the digitization of WOM, will undoubtedly change the structure of travel information and will subsequently change the knowledge and perception of tourists towards the various tourism products (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan 2008).

There have been many interactive platforms available which can replace the role of traditional advertisements. This is due the fact that social media is an application that is built on users' ideas and, specifically, the exchange of information (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). However, EWOM also renders a significant impact when viewed from the level of trust of an online community (Awad and Ragowsky 2008) such that EWOM becomes an important resource for tourists and significantly affects tourists' behavior towards the destinations (Jalilvand and Samiei 2012). Tourists' behavior explains the psychological inclination that is expressed with either a positive or negative evaluation when bound to a particular behavior (Ajzen 1991). Information on destinations and features available from the tourism products are the most important components of travel-related decisions and tourists' behavior ((Schmoll 1977) in Minciú and Moisa (2009)) in which EWOM enables two-way interconnected communication when one exchanges the information needed (See-To and Ho 2013).

A number of previous studies were conducted to comprehend the reasons and factors affecting tourists' interest, among others being push factors and pull factors (Awaritefe 2004, Crompton 1979, Dann 1977, Prayag 2012). However, not many studies on the effects of EWOM towards the tourists' interest in visiting tourist destinations have been conducted. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to analyze the dominant factors defining EWOM and its effect towards future behavioral intention. The scope of EWOM which is investigated is directed towards tourism websites containing tourists' experiences during their visit.

1. Literature review

Electronic Word of Mouth

Electronic word of mouth (EWOM) is the communication among consumers about a product, service or company in which the source is free from influences of commercials where, in the process, the consumers are allowed to share information and opinions which are able to either direct consumers to or steer away consumers from certain a product, brand and service (Litvin 2007, Hawkins *et al.* 2004). EWOM takes place in a virtual space in which messages sent or received are all related to products or services. The experiences of the users of EWOM are conveyed through online chats and forums (See-To and Ho 2013). In the development of online social communication, EWOM has been an important topic discussed by marketing and business researchers (Zarrad and Debabi 2015). The most prominent difference between EWOM and WOM is media distribution. WOM is conveyed directly while EWOM takes place through electronic media which yields both opportunities and challenges in the marketing of tourism products, especially in terms of lower cost, wider scope (but less control), to ethics in communication (Dellarocas 2003). Tourists' motives in spreading EWOM can be those of social and economic benefits, concern for others, as well as self-development (Hennig-Thurau 2004).

As postulated by Buttle (1998), WOM is characterized by 1) valence; referring to being pure, meaning that WOM may either be negative or positive which corresponds to experiences regarding products or services perceived by consumers; 2) focus; meaning that WOM not only focuses on one party but also focuses on strengthening the relationships of various parties; 3) timing; meaning that WOM can be channeled either before or after the purchase; 4) solicitation; meaning that WOM is deliberately spread based on personal opinions through channeling media (eg. SNS); 5) intervention; meaning that WOM can be conducted not purely among consumers. WOM can be affected by other parties which can be in form of artists who are hired to boost the popularity of a brand.

There are several dimensions of EWOM studied previously (Chu and Kim 2011; Brown, Broderick and Lee 2007). EWOM in this study refers to EWOM taking place in the social media scope as proposed by Chu and Kim (2011). There are five dimensions which are tie strength, homophily, trust, normative influence and informational

influence. Tie strength is the tie or bond that prevails among members of a network. The bond can be weak or strong (Mittal (2008) in Chu and Kim (2011)). Homophily is the degree of how one interacts with others with respect to similarities in behavior and thoughts (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970) in Chu and Kim (2011)). Trust is the core factor in which virtual community members can rely on each other and have confidence in providing information. Normative influence refers to the tendency to adjust one's expectations to that of others' which means to follow the decisions made by others. Informational influence refers to influences rendered informatively which are related to goods and services.

EWOM can be expressed by anyone, anytime, and anywhere. The channeling and spreading processes of EWOM require media which can be received instantly and has a wide coverage. EWOM can take the form of media such as websites, blogs, virtual communities, online discussion space, twitter/microblogging, SNS, virtual/buzz marketing as well as closed/exclusive forums and communities (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan 2008, Kotler and Armstrong 2012). Media which significantly impacts the information search processes prior to excursions are social media (Xiang and Gretzel 2009). This is due to the fact that social media plays a role as a marketing tool which has the ability to bring a company closer to its consumers while giving them flexibility to communicate with other consumers without any coercion from the company (Mangold and Faulds 2009).

Several previous studies on EWOM obtained findings which mostly took place in the context of manufacturing and services. There have been few studies on EWOM in tourism sectors. EWOM can particularly be applied as a marketing strategy in hospitality sectors (Ye and Yushe 2009, Eldeen 2013, Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan 2008), as evaluation of EWOM messages (Doh and Hwang 2009), to weaken brand equity through negative EWOM (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold 2010), and to bind consumers through EWOM taking place in SNS (Chu and Kim 2011). Accordingly, this study aims at understanding EWOM and dominant factors which prevail in the scope of SNS in the context of online tourism marketing.

Future behavioral intention

Future Behavioral Intention (FBI) can be defined in either a positive or negative viewpoint. Sulaiman and Haron (2013), in their study in the scope of a restaurant, defines FBI as a desire to provide positive WOM, revisit, stay longer and spend more money than before. Behavioral intentions emerge from the service received by consumers in an organization or from experiences. A number of researchers define FBI as a process of decision making (Colgate and Lang 2001). FBI is the result of a mental process that leads to an action that changes motivation into future behavior (Jang *et al.* 2009). FBI is also defined as a planned individual behavior which is to be acted in the future in respect to behavior observed ((Swan 1981, Baloglu 2000) in Joynathsing (2010)). FBI plays a very important role because the higher tourists' satisfaction towards service quality, the higher the possibility of conducting FBI (such as giving recommendations, commenting positively and revisiting a destination) will be (Canny 2013). The most frequently used research framework for identifying tourists' motivation is the push factors and pull factors which define the influences of each factor, *i.e.*, the push factors arising from tourists' internal push and the pull factors arising from the destinations. The study conducted by Jang *et al.* (2009) explicitly states the relationship between motivation and FBI while other studies tend to use other constructs such as media such as image of the destinations and satisfaction (Beerli and Martin 2004, Yoon and Uysal 2005). The intensity of the indirect influence of push and pull factors towards tourists' loyalty has previously been studied (Yoon and Uysal 2005) which concluded that pull factors do not render a direct influence towards loyalty. On the other hand, Prayag (2012) used the pull factors and push factors to comprehend the motives of senior travelers and FBI in the city of Nice, France.

The framework of push factors and pull factors (Dann 1977, Crompton 1979, Jang and Wu 2006, Klenosky 2002, Prayag and Ryan 2011, You and O'Learly 1999) is categorized as tourists' motivation and has previously been used by researchers. The push factors are classified into several indicators related to the socio-psychological and cultural matters (Crompton 1979). From different viewpoints, the pull factors are the attributes of a destination that affect when, where and how tourists will travel (Mill and Morrison 1985). The indicators are, among others, natural attractions, cultural and historical sites, shopping facilities, sports, nightlife and other supporting facilities available in the destinations (Williams and Zelinsky 1970). The indicators correspond to the context of this study,

i.e., the tourists' push factors and pull factors for going on an excursion, therefore this study used the framework of push and pull factors adapted from Prayag (2012).

2. Methodology

The analysis unit in this study is Langkawi Island, Malaysia. This study uses two variables consisting of independent and dependent variables. The independent variable is Electronic Word of Mouth (X) consisting of tie strength, homophily, trust, normative influence, and informational influence. The dependent factor is Future Behavioral Intention (Y) consisting of push factors and pull factors. The target respondents of this study are individual tourists participating in particular internet forums. The time taken to complete this study is less than one year. The data collection techniques consist of interviews, observation, field questionnaire and online survey and literature study. The research method used is that of descriptive and verification studies. The analysis technique used is Partial Least Square (PLS) with samples consisting of 100 tourists based on Slovin's formula. The number of questions in the EWOM variables is 15 items (Chu and Kim 2011) while the number of questions in the FBI variables is 19 items (Prayag 2012). The analysis testing using PLS consists of several stages of measurement model evaluation, which are, inter alia, convergent validity and discriminant validity. Further, the structural model evaluation consists of, among others, path coefficient, r^2 evaluation, and Goodness of Fit (GoF).

3. Findings and discussion

Tourist profile

The profile of the tourists can be referred to in Table 1. Most of the tourists are female (56%). Further, most of the tourists are of undergraduate educational level and most of them have used social media (Facebook, Twitter, Path, LinkedIn, Instagram, Google+) for more than 3 years. The duration spent by the tourists to access social media is about 1 to 6 hours per day (42%) while the topic of interest and the most frequently accessed one on the internet is general events and activities (20%). Some of the tourists have visited Langkawi more than 4 times in the last 3 years (24%) while, predominantly, for the other group it is their first visit to Langkawi (59%) with the length of stay mostly about 3 days to 1 week.

Table 1. Tourist Profile (n=100)

Sex:	
Male	44
Female	56
Educational Background:	
Senior High School	14
Undergraduate (Bachelor's Degree)	54
Graduate (Master's Degree)	14
Post Graduate (Doctoral Degree)	9
Miscellaneous	6
Length of use of social media:	
Less than 1 year	6
1-3 years	19
More than 3 years	75
Duration of use of social media:	
Less than 1 hour	41
1-6 hours	42
More than 6 hours	17
Frequency of visits (in the last 3 years):	
First time	59
2-4 times	17
More than 4 times	24
The length of visit	

Less than 1 day	38
3 days - 1 week	46
More than 1 week	16
Topics interested in:	
Education and health	12
General events and activities	20
Entertainment	15
Technology and information	16
Food and fashion	19
News	1
Miscellaneous	16

The tourists' activities in the electronic media, such as social media and forums specially discussing traveling activities (eg. Tripadvisor.com, virtualtourist.com, etc.), are divided into four categories: reading the comments about the destinations, sharing photos and videos, making friends and finding networks, and sharing comments, reviews, ratings and recommendations

Table 2. The tourists' activities in the electronic media

Tourism Website:	
Agoda.com	27
Tripadvisor.com	57
Virtualtourist.com	3
Asiawebdirect.com	4
Lonelyplanet.com	2
Booking.com	2
Miscellaneous	5
Activities:	
Reading the comments about the destinations	64
Sharing photos and videos	14
Making friends and finding networks	6
Sharing comments, reviews, ratings and recommendations	14

Most of the tourists chose tripadvisor.com (57%) as the tourism website being the source of information search for their travel planning as it provides more detailed information in an interactive and practical manner. Tripadvisor.com provides an opportunity for tourists as readers and as writers to contribute with the activities they wish to do. As readers, tourists who read the comments and reviews will be able to process each piece of information obtained from the experiences of other tourists who have visited Langkawi previously. This is the activity that is often done by the tourists which yields 64%. Whereas, from the viewpoint as writers, the tourists writing their traveling experience will receive an award in the form of ratings obtained from readers in which the ratings are about the credibility of and benefits from the review and recommendations given by writers to the readers (14%). The fact is supported by the theory stating that past behavior periodically reflects habits that will lead to a future response (Ouellette and Wood 1998).

Electronic Word of Mouth

Indicator testing on variables defining EWOM was conducted through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The EWOM variables consist of Tie Strength, Homophily, Trust, Normative Influence and Informative Influence. Indicators defining EWOM variables used to find out the values of loading factor were obtained using XLSTAT-2015. In the following, Table 3 lists the dominant factors defining EWOM.

Table 3. Result of reliability item of Electronic Word of Mouth

No.	Dimension	Loading Factors Values	Conclusion
1.	Tie Strength	0,580	Valid
2.	Homophily	0,773	Valid
3.	Trust	0,757	Valid
4.	Normative Influence	0,789	Valid
5.	Informative Influence	0,624	Valid

Based on the correlation test results shown in Table 3, it is concluded that the dominant factors defining EWOM are contained in tie strength, homophily, trust, normative influence and informative influence because all indicators tested with reliability item are declared valid by the loading factor > 0.5 . The indicator with the highest loading factor is normative influence. This means that normative influence has the most contribution as a factor of EWOM on the grounds that normative influence concerning Langkawi widely spreads and can readily be found such that it becomes the topic defining EWOM concerning Langkawi. On the other hand, EWOM factor obtaining the lowest score is tie strength which refers to tie or bound created among the members of virtual communities. This study concluded that the tie among tourists as the users of electronic media is considered weak due their barely knowing one another. In addition, the EWOM factors obtaining the highest response were homophily and normative influences which means that the spread EWOM about Langkawi is defined by the similarities in behavior of tourists who have obtained the information and normatively influence other tourists who have visited Langkawi.

Push and Pull factors

Results of the reliability item of push factors and pull factors were each declared valid because they were above the values of 0.5, which were 0.923 and 0.859 respectively. All of the items were said to be valid because they were > 0.5 . The push factor indicator which obtained the most responses was escape and relaxation while the pull factor indicator which obtained the most responses was cultural attractions and accommodation. That said, the tourists had visited Langkawi because they needed recreational activities and because they needed to temporarily stay away from their daily routines. While indicator of cultural attractions and accommodation was the highest pull factor indicator because the tourist attractions available at the tourist destinations in Langkawi greatly attracted the tourists, so that they became the most powerful factor which lured the tourists to come. Composite reliability test indicated the Cronbach's alpha values of 0.755 and 0.746 which were above 0.7. It meant that it had good reliability or dependability as a measuring tool. While the test results convergent validity showed a value above 0.5 which indicated that FBI, using the push and pull factor indicators, was able to explain the high variance. Based on the discriminant validity test, all the indicators of travel-related decisions showed a very high correlation with the FBI variables.

Measurement model evaluation

Convergency validity

Convergent validity consists of three tests: reliability item (validity of each indicator), composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE). Convergent validity was used to measure how much the existing indicators could explain dimensions. It meant that the bigger the convergent validity, the greater the ability of these indicators was to apply their dimensions. The results of reliability item were obtained from the standardized loadings wherein each dimension and indicator of EWOM variables and Future Behavioral Intention was > 0.5 which could be declared to be valid. Statistics used in the construct composite reliability or reliability was Cronbach's alpha and DG rho (PCA). Cronbach alpha value and rho (PCA) above 0.7 indicated a high construct reliability as a measuring tool. The limit values of 0.7 and above meant that it was acceptable and above 0.8 and 0.9 mean it was very satisfactory (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). The result was the value of Cronbach's alpha and DG rho (PCA) from EWOM of 0.755 and 0.837. In addition, Future Behavioral Intention values were 0.746 and 0.887. That said, FBI variables could be declared to yield good reliability or dependability as a measuring tool. AVE value from EWOM

was 0,504 while from FBI was 0.794. That said, the constructs of EWOM and FBI yielded good convergent validity where the latent variables could explain an average of more than half the variance of their indicators.

Discriminant validity

The examination of discriminant validity of the reflective measurement model was assessed based on cross loading and was conducted by comparing the values of AVE with the inter-construct correlation quadrant. The size of the cross loading is a comparison between the value of AVE for each construct with other constructs in the model (Juliansyah Noor 2013, 158). The results showed that the value of discriminant validity or loading factor for homophily and normative influence indicators yielded a higher correlation to FBI with values of 0.773 and 0.789. This showed that homophily and normative influences indicators were able to explain the higher variance. Whereas, the values of loading factor of all FBI indicators yielded a very high correlation to FBI variables. This indicated that the variable FBI was able to explain the high variance with two indicators: the push factors and pull factors.

Structural model evaluation

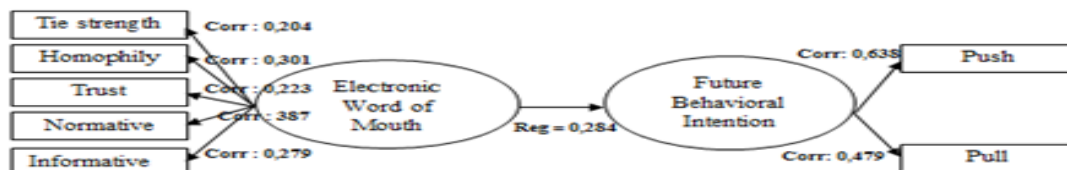
Path Coefficient

Path coefficient was used to determine the relationship significance. Symbols used in path coefficient must conform the hypothesized theories. Assessment of path coefficient significance, can be determined from t-test (critical ratio) obtained from bootstrapping (resampling method) process. The results indicated the t-statistic for EWOM variables with p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$ so that it could be declared that EWOM had a positive influence on FBI. The simultaneous testing between EWOM on FBI could be determined from statistic F with p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$. Simultaneously, the outcome of EWOM variables affected FBI. The equation model between EWOM towards FBI is as follows:

$$\text{Future Behavioral Intention} = 0.284140835708197 * \text{Electronic Word of Mouth}$$

The following is Figure 1 depicting PLS path coefficient.

Figure 1. PLS Coefficient Path Model



Evaluating R^2

Based on the value of R^2 it was found that EWOM variables were able to explain FBI variables. Chin's criteria (1998) states that the R^2 value of 0.67 can be declared as to yield strong effect, 0.33 medium effect and 0.19 weak effect. The outcome showed that EWOM yielded a weak effect towards tourist's FBI which was 0.081. Another evaluation was to determine the effect size f^2 of 0.008 which meant that EWOM yielded a weak effect in the structural level.

Goodness of Fit (GoF)

GoF index is a single measurement used to validate a joint performance between measurement model and structural model. GoF values were obtained from average communalities index multiplied by R^2 model values. GoF values ranged between 0-1 in which the values are interpreted as: 0.1 (small GoF), 0.25 (moderate GoF), dan 0.36 (big GoF). The outcome indicated that GoF values were almost mostly those of higher than 0.36, so that it could be categorized as big GoF which meant that it yielded a very high model (yielded a very ability in explaining empirical data).

Conclusion

Based on the outcome of the study which was conducted through descriptive and vericative analyses using Partial Least Square (PLS), the factor analysis on Electronic Word of Mouth which affected Future Behavioral Intention yielded the following conclusions:

Based on the tourists' responses on EWOM, it could be concluded that EWOM yielded quite a high evaluation. The dimensions that yielded the highest evaluation were Homophily and Normative Influence. Homophily was a factor that yielded the highest evaluation in defining EWOM because EWOM spread on Langkawi island was defined by the similarity between the behavior and the perception of the tourists who obtained information about the island of Langkawi. While the normative influence yielded a high assessment score due to the influence of the spread information on Langkawi Island in the electronic media came from the tourists who had visited Langkawi Island. While the factor that contributed lowest was tie strength. That was because the tourists who spread EWOM in social media assumed that social contact among social media users was less important so that the tie or bond among the tourists in social media was not that strong.

Tourists' responses towards Future Behavioral Intention comprising push factors and pull factors yielded quite high values. The highest contribution came from the push factor, escape and relaxation, on the grounds that the tourists needed relaxation away from daily routine. Whereas the highest contribution coming the pull factor was from the indicator of attractions and accommodation. This is due to the fact that Langkawi Island provides a variety of festivals and other large events related to cultural and natural tourism as well as the vast array of availability of accommodations which make it attractive for tourists to visit.

This study found that the EWOM factors yielded a low effect towards FBI. That is because there are many factors outside EWOM affecting the tourists' FBI, among others being viewing of online advertisements, use of email, creation of websites and the like. Thus, it is expected that the future studies on EWOM are to discuss EWOM by investigating more varied factors.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia's top administration for the support provided in the process of writing this manuscript. We also wish to extend our special thanks to Dr. Wamaungo Juma Abdu, M. Ed and Prof. Dr. Didi Sukyadi, M.A for their guidance and training provided in regard to writing for academic publication. Lastly, we thank colleagues from the same department who have kept encouraging us to write and publish.

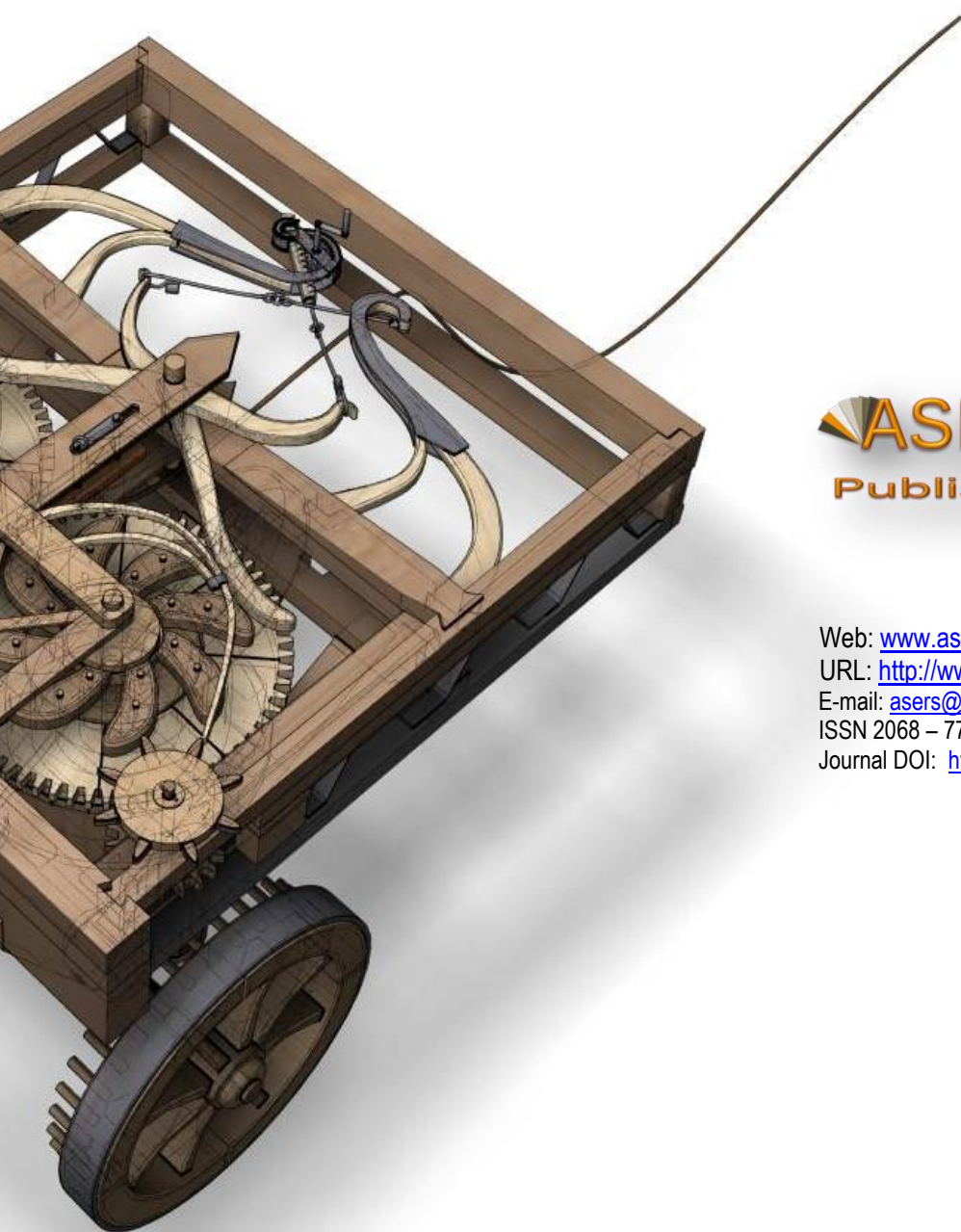
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ISSN 2068 – 7729

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14505/jemt>