

## Assessing the Performance of Managing and Following-up Online Hotels' Guests Reviews

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### ARTICLE INFO Abstract

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**Purpose** –Word of mouth (WOM) is considered among the most powerful source of information that affect consumers' purchasing decisions in the hotel industry. The importance of this effect growing because of the hospitality nature, those services are difficult to evaluate before consumption. The digitization of WOM and its spread on a large scale make it easier to track opinions about the services offered, which is more likely to have more credibility among consumers. Handling and responding to guest comments and reviews especially negative one is a very important in affecting the purchasing decision of the potential consumers. The purpose of this study is to investigate how managing customers' online reviews affect hotel performance and customers retention of some four stars hotels in Red Sea, Egypt.

**Design/methodology/approach**– the data was collected through a semi-structured interview addressed to Director of Sales and Marketing and another questionnaire addressed to a sample of customers who lately visited the Red Sea.

**Research limitations/implications**– The research focused on a sample of the four stars resort hotel's in Red Sea, Egypt.

### 1. Introduction

One of the most significant current discussions is the role of technological revolution in increasing the use of internet in hospitality purchasing process. Hospitality organizations proofed to have a growing benefits of internet services through using of websites to communicate with its client (Cetin & Istanbulu Dincerii, 2014; Hemsley & Dann 2015; Tatar & Erdoğmuş, 2016).

Customers increasingly use the internet to share their experiences whether its positive or negative. At the same time, they use it while taking decisions regarding of hospitality services and shopping other travel related products and services, which is often based on other customers' opinions and information or data acquired online (Elsayed & Abed, 2018). Therefore, it becomes an important source to get opinions from other customers about their experiences and evaluation to hospitality services before taking the purchasing decision (Cetin & Istanbulu Dincerii, 2014; Velázquez et al., 2015).

Several researchers have reported the power of customers' electronic word of mouth gained more and more reliability as it deals with a very large scale through electronic online communities and created by people without commercial interests (Tatar & Erdoğan, 2016).

Hotel competition is being shifted from unit profit margin to number of sales and higher occupancy rate by the power of the growing effect of customers' online reviews and its' interpersonal influence on potential market purchasing decision. Customers' electronic reviews related directly to hotels image, customers' satisfaction, retention and market share acquisition (Cetin & Istanbulu Dincerii, 2014; Molinillo et al., 2016; Ragab & Meis, 2016; Xie et al., 2015).

Based on these considerations, this study examines the awareness and the attention that hospitality managers and owners give to dealing with and managing customers' reviews.

## **2. Literature Review**

Xie et al. (2015) defined e-WOM as all informal communications target consumers through Internet-based technologies, which are related to the use or characteristics of specific goods and services. This includes communication between producers and consumers and between consumers themselves.

Recent years have seen the growth of the importance of customer reviews that appears on social media and its influence on shaping the competition between hospitality organizations and on customers purchase patterns in the hospitality industry. Through the websites, customers highlighted their experiences, opinions, feelings, and concerns (He et al., 2017). It also, can provide an efficient way for business to interact and communicate with their customers. That is why; e-WOM became very influential and recommendation from others on hospitality services is listed as the most credible source of information and those reviews have a substantial effect on potential consumers' purchase decision (Chiappa et al., 2017; Ghansah et al., 2016; He et al., 2017; Nasiruddin et al., 2016; Tatar & Erdoğan, 2016).

However, these rapid changes are having a serious effect on the commercial success of the hospitality properties, yet large number of hospitality managers and owners as well, do not give it adequate attention to the power of e-WOM and online customers comments (He et al., 2017; Nasiruddin et al., 2016).

In today's fiercely competitive between hospitality firms, web pages, mobile applications and social media provide hotel managers with an effective, unconventional way to communicate and interact with their guests and potential customers. This provides a solid bonding and continuous customer relationship (Elsayed & Abed, 2018; Grieve et al., 2014; Tatar & Erdoğan, 2016).

As a matter of fact, Social networking sites, creativity work sharing sites, search engines and news sites and website (such as TripAdvisor, Expedia, Trivago, Hotel.com and Booking.com) gained an increasing popularity as an influential blogger that could change customers' behaviors, purchasing attitude and shaping competition among hospitality organizations (Paolo et al., 2016; Tatar and Erdoğan, 2016). They have

added progressive features to their platforms, where customers can compare prices and customer reviews for hotels and destinations and search for information about hotels before taking the purchasing decision (Katherine, 2014; Paolo et al., 2016; Silva, 2015; Yen & Tang, 2015).

Grieve et al. (2014) mentioned that setting an interacting marketing strategy by using of social media platforms has a positive impact on the image of the branding and strength the relationship between customers and the hotel. This could be accomplished by using of transparency on social media in addition to its important role in solving problems by responding to customers comment with complimentary words.

Hotels need to follow social media to get the latest comments or online discussions about themselves and writing down quick response. Users will be waiting to see a satisfactory response and caring messages to complaints. Negative or unwise response will reach a large scale of customers and which is very harmful to the hospitality business (Grieve et al., 2014; Marion et al., 2017).

Social media could be used as a platform to demonstrate the latest hotel promotion, activities and special offers and events (Grieve et al., 2014). Searching engines and platforms could analyze users' behaviors and what they are looking for to create offers and services match their interest (Elsayed & Abed, 2018). YouTube is another platform upload media film about their experiences, which can attract new customers. (Grieve et al., 2014; Heiden, 2015).

### **2.1. Managing electronic word of mouth**

Researchers in the hospitality field discussed the importance of a wise strategic management to handle e-WOM due to its serious effect on hospitality properties image and success (Bronner & Hoog, 2010). These can be divided into two main categories: one of them is information and the other is generating revenue. For the information perspective, it should serve hospitality marketers in gathering opinions and feedback created online (Hoffman & Chung, 2016; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017).

This could be used in increasing customers satisfaction through using their opinions and suggestions in improving service, resolving guests' problems; discover guests' good and bad evaluations of their experiences; analyze hotels' own competitive situation; and monitor the hotels' reputation. It is also important to manage e-WOM for the purpose of generating revenue. These efforts may be aimed at disseminating a positive e-WOM about the hotel helping potential customers find information (Burgess et al., 2015; Litvin et al., 2008; Nasiruddin et al., 2016).

Loyal customers should also be encouraged to publish their personal posts on their personal pages using the link of the hotels official websites to redirect visitors to it. The main idea is to cultivate an interesting community of visitors and potential visitors to talk about hotels product and services as part of their common interest in hospitality field. Making it easier for guests to post their own vacation photos on both the hotels' website, pages and their own pages spreading the positive e-WOM. Travelers and hotel residents are happy to share their experiences with others. The website of a hotel and tourist organization should allow do that (Dieck et al., 2016; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017)

Numerous new accommodations possess some great advantages in the marketplace from the beginning. Those advantages may consist of providing plentiful facilities (such as gym, swimming pool, lounge bar etc.), a great price–quality value, a beautiful building, or located in a great location. However, the most important task is to make the consumers routinely share guest experiences online that keeps them expecting to come back again and telling others what a fabulous hotel/resort it is. In the hospitality industry, e-WOM has undeniably been a powerful marketing strength (Ozturk et al., 2016).

However, not all the time those reviews are positive or serve the hotel marketing goals. Yet it is not clear enough how hotels' managements deal with those reviews and how they appreciate the economic value generated by their sustainable visibility on the different network platforms (Dieck et al., 2016; Paolo et al., 2016; Ozturk et al., 2016).

Due to the role of the Internet and social media, the power of digital marketing has shifted from producers to consumers. They become co-producers of content through interaction on social media and other Internet-based platforms. Together the hotel and the consumer- stimulate a dialogue and participate in building relationships and creating content and value together. (Bennett, 2017; Fox & Longart, 2016; Answer et al., 2020)

Yet, hotels operators' ability to deal with those online reviews and their awareness to the influence of those review on their business volume needed to be studied.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Data and variables**

The study aims at measuring how managers in hotels deal with customers online-reviews; to create an environment that recover the effect of guests' bad reviews.

According to Bryman (2012), research methods are just a technique for collecting data. It may involve specific tools, such as questionnaire surveys, structured or semi-structured interviews, or participant observation. This part of the article describes the measures taken for research. In addition, the techniques used to collect and analyze data will be introduced and demonstrated. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is called mixed methods research (Colomo et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2017). For the purposes of this study, the two methods complementing each other will be used.

In order to collect primary data, the field study was conducted in four-star hotels in Red Sea region. In order to accomplish its objectives, 30 Hotel General Managers, Hotels Marketing Managers, Rooms Division Managers, Guest Relation Managers, and Digital Media Specialist were interviewed by using a semi structured questionnaire. The main objective was to define the steps that operations set for dealing with e-WOM especially negative ones.

Also, 330 samples of guests' questionnaire were distributed by using online questionnaire about their readiness to share reviews about hotels they have already visited and how they evaluate the way the hotels dealing with their reviews. From a total of 330 hotel guests participated in the study, only 315 forms were valid.

The questionnaire was mainly distributed among adults who stayed in a four-star hotel located in Red sea region during a previous period.

Number of samples of questionnaire were distributed in hotels during their accommodation, meanwhile the rest of samples were distributed online by sending invitations to number of hotel customers who already had written reviews on some of reservation websites such as TripAdvisor and Hotels.com. The questionnaire was conducted between August–November 2019.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first one, comprising of demographic data while, the second one including willingness to express their feelings and their satisfaction level about their hospitality experience and their evaluations to the way the hotel deals with their negative reviews. Except for demographic questions, all questions based on the five-point Likert scale. After the field study is completed, the data is analyzed by using SPSS (version 19).

### 3.2. Results and analysis or discussion

#### - Analysis of guests' questionnaire

##### a. First part of the questionnaire (Demographic factors)

**Table 1**

Analysis of participants demographic data

		Freq.	%
Gender	a) Male	116	37
	b) Female	199	63
Age	a) Under 25 years	100	32
	b) From 25 to less than 35 years	116	37
	c) From 35 to less than 45 years	88	28
	d) Above 45 years	11	3
Education level	a) High school	22	7
	b) University degree/high education level	285	90
	c) Master/ PhD	8	3
Nationality	a) German	75	23.8
	b) Italian	68	21.6
	c) Czech	52	16.5
	d) British	40	12.7
	e) Ukrainian	30	9.5
	f) Dutch	26	8.2
	g) Others	24	7.6
Number of hotels visits annually	a) Once/yearly	72	23
	b) Twice/ yearly	175	56
	c) More than twice /yearly	68	21
Purpose of the visit	a) Recreation/ leisure	288	91
	b) Business	4	1.3
	c) Therapeutic	23	7.3
	d) Others	0	0

From the previous table it can be noticed that; 315 participants completed the questionnaire. 63% of participants were female, 37% of participants aged from 35 to less than 35 also, 32% of them were under 25 years old. Most of participants (90%) having a university degree or a high education level.

About participants' nationalities, results showed that the higher percentage came from Germany with (23.8%), followed by Italy with (21.6%), and Czech with (16.5%). British with (12.7%), Ukrainian with (9.5), Dutch (8.2%) and different nationalities with (7.6%). Participants might also be considered as hotels experienced customers as; (56%) 175 of them have twice visits to hotels annually while 23% visit hotels once yearly. Most of the participants were leisure travelers (91%).

**Table 2**

Second part of the questionnaire (Guests' preferences)

		Freq. (N=315)	%	Mean	St. D.
If he/she a frequent guest to a hotel	a) Yes	174	55	1.4476	0.49804
	b) No	141	45		
Using online reservation engine to book a hotel room	a) Yes	274	87	1.1302	0.33701
	b) No	41	13		
Reviewing guests' comments before booking	a) Yes	258	82	1.1810	0.38559
	b) No	57	18		
Caring to follow how hotels deal with negative comments	a) Yes	221	70	1.2984	0.45829
	b) No	94	30		
Caring to leave a review or comment about the hotel experience	a) Satisfied	140	44	1.5556	0.49769
	b) Unsatisfied	175	56		

Considering the second part of the questionnaire; most of participants are frequent customers to their hotels. The results showed that, participants had a strong attitude towards being accommodated at the same hotel; as mean analyses scored (1.4476) also, standard deviation showed (0.49804) no dispersion.

About using reservation engine to book hotels, most customers (87%) admit that they use online reservation engine to book their hotels' rooms. The results showed a moderate direction towards using reservation engine to book hotels rooms; as mean analyses scored (1.1302) also, standard deviation (0.33701) showed no dispersion.

Most respondents (82%) stated that they review guests' comments before booking in hotels. Mean analyses (1.1810) showed a moderate direction and standard deviation showed no dispersion (0.38559). 70% of participants caring to follow how the hotels deal with customers' reviews especially negative reviews. Mean analyses (1.2984) showed strong direction and standard deviation (0.45829) showed no dispersion among participants answers.

More than half of participants (56%) agreed that they are keen to write a review if they were unsatisfied with the hotel experience, while (44%) write a review only if they got a satisfied hotel experience. Mean analysis showed a very strong direction (1.5556) and standard deviation (0.49769) showed no dispersion among participants answers.

According to the results, it could be noticed, that more attention should be given to the online reviews, as most of the visitors went through the online reviews before taking their decisions, also a special attention should be given to the online propaganda which is the most influential platform during the recent era.

### **Analysis of semi structured interviews**

Thirteen separate in-depth semi structured interviews with hospitality experts were conducted. Hotel General managers, Hotels Marketing Managers and Rooms Division Managers, Guest Relation Managers and Digital Media Specialists were targeted to conduct the interview. Around 20-30 minutes was needed to complete the discussion with the interviewees and concentrate on some main points as; the steps that operations set for dealing with e-WOM especially negative e-WOM.

Some important questions were used during the interviews, as follows:

- Evaluating customers hospitality knowledge and experience and how they are affected by e-WOM especially negative e-WOM.
- Steps that should be taken while handling customers reviews.
- The adequate time to respond to bad reviews.
- How to deal with bluffing guests.
- Who is responsible to deal and answer customers' reviews?
- How to deal with customers advices and neutral comments.
- The importance of managing hotel reputation.

Interviewees stated that customers have become more experienced and knowledgeable in appreciation and evaluation of the online reviews by using filter while browsing reviews about hospitality services.

They also confirmed that rapid response and reaction is highly needed, and it is preferred to respond quickly and following the steps of handling normal guests' complaints. Many interviewees determined that there are some specific procedures they will go through while handling guests' complaints as; listen and reading and recognize the problem, apologize, promise to solve the problem, delegate, empowerment, follow-up and this step is divided into two actions; 1) ensure that the required action has been taken, 2) to ensure the guest satisfaction with the action taken.

It is important that the hotel management promise its customers that their unsatisfied experience will not be repeated. Interviewees stated that it is the most correct possible response to negative reviews because online customers will appreciate and value actions and positive changes in behavior.

A response with apology for negative comments that based on details is a must with promising that this feedback will help in improving the hotel's future guest experience. This is more touchable than a response that turn it to a customer service team.

Positive reviews also need a respond in order to create a strong bond with frequent guests, also allocate areas where the hotel management tend to improve. Remain as

neutral and professional as possible when dealing with bluffing guests, it is recommended to study the situation carefully, and not to give him/her more than it deserves. In some cases, it is recommended to cut hotels loses which means, if the guest is not appreciated in the property and he is too much demanding, properties must know when to cut the property losses. No one in particular is responsible for the guest feedback; that is a way most of the general managers are reviewing the feedback regardless the scope of the job they are covering.

In most cases, it will be a good opportunity to turn the negative into positive, but according that there is no one responsible to answer the feedback as soon as possible. Most of the general managers are obliged to answer the feedback by themselves. Hotel experts emphasized on the importance of giving a value and being grateful for guests' feedback and asking for more recommendations to improve level of service.

Reputation management is often critical. Yet the results of research into the importance of reputation management are unarguable; the value of reputation management is substantial and growing. Understanding how to respond to feedback is not just a competitive advantage, but potentially a means of ensuring that the hotel stays in business. Most of hotel managers stated that reputation is a very critical issue and how the hotel manage it, is very sensitive. That is why responding to guests' comments and their feedback is considered one of the main tasks that hotels' General Managers prefer to handle by themselves to ensure keeping on track and increase the hotel market share. They also added that it could be done by using service recovery techniques and resolving problems. Also, encouraging guests to leave their opinion and good comments so, readers will read good and bad comments.

From the previous discussion, it was noticed that, the more quick the property will answer the guest feedback, the more likely this property might retain their clientele, and meanwhile, this will also encourage other guests to leave their comments, either Positive or Negative ones. A quick check of the guest profile should be done, along with the guest complaints logbook in order to recognize how the complaint started, who handled, and when the correct action was taken. It is also, noticed to adopt an empowerment policy, especially for the front line employee, to take whatever needed to handle the complaint before the guest check-out, as they will still have the opportunity to compensate the guest in a timely manner. And finally, ensure that the guest is satisfied, as this is the main objective.

### **Findings**

Only gender has a significant effect on e-WOM as; analyzing results revealed that women are more willing to leave a comment especially when they are unsatisfied about the service.

A positive clear correlation tied willingness to share experiences and unsatisfactory experiences appeared in analyzing guest's questionnaire. Also, experts and managers answers about the semi structured interview emphasized on the importance of setting a clear mechanism to trace and respond to the e-WOM within the strategy of the hotel in order to encourage positive e-WOM, while negative e-WOM will receive a timely, caring and guaranteed response. Hotel experts and hotel managers stated that inviting

opinion leaders from travel blogs to experience the service of the hotel could facilitate creating positive e-WOM.

Finally, hotels should also have a section to deal with electronic complaints that customers could easily reach. This would be the most appropriate way for a hotel to handle the complaints of unsatisfied customers before they disseminate information to other media. If the complaint was not solved effectively and in a timely manner, it will be spread elsewhere.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations that should be considered when dealing with the results of this study as it depends on measuring if customers use others comments and reviews before purchasing hospitality services and their evaluation to hotels behavior when answering questions and dealing with bad comments and reviews.

And to increase the credibility of the study, hotel managers awareness about the right way to deal with bad comments and how to highlight the good one was evaluated was measured.

A future study could examine whether using some statements and words could help in recovering the dissatisfaction feelings that may lead to bad comments. Also, further research should compare between customers nationalities or their ages and its relation to take other customers reviews as a reference before booking or experience hospitality services.

### **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Managers are unsure about the strategy of how to respond to negative reviews. Also, there is a need to develop the awareness about the effect of negative review and how it could damage their hotel's reputation and affect its performance.

Steps and the strategy of responding to negative reviews are controversial between hotel managers as; it is a very critical issue that could harm the reputation of the hotel. That is why, some booking sites as TripAdvisor recommend different type of responses.

Defensive strategy is considered the worst strategy that hotel could adopt to handle negative reviews. This could lead to a serious failure, regarding the effect on the potential customers' booking intentions. And according to this, it is recommended to answer in an accommodative manner.

### **Recommendations**

- The study suggests that hotel companies should keep in touch with customers to gain a feedback.
- It would be a very good opportunity for the hotel properties, that someone should be allocated to handle the guests' feedback and reviews, especially those negative reviews in order to clarify what are the properties responsibilities against any guests' complaints.
- It would be recommended that the guest relation managers (in case of any) will be responsible for any guests' feedback specially they are acquainted with the same

culture and their guest's nationalities which will allow them the best possibilities to handle these complaints professionally.

- The study suggests that every property should better know their customers; to professionally interact with guests as often as possible.
- Compensatory strategies considered to be the suitable and effective service recovery that could adopted. When the compensation is not immediate, it leads to low retention rate. Such as the case in distributing compensation coupons for the next stay.
- Apologies alone are insufficient; it should be combined with the right and suitable action that meet the expectations of customers.
- It is strongly recommended to develop a recovery plan as customers evaluated no response as an ineffective and uncaring strategy.
- The study suggests that hotels should direct training efforts, about issues and points that could cause customer dissatisfaction and service failure, but also to discuss acceptable and expected service recovery steps and efforts. This will reduce relaying complaints to management.
- The study recommends to adopt an empowerment strategy, specially for the front line employees, as this will allow them to take the required action, sometimes before the guest departure, which will be appreciated by the guests, and will leave them with sweet memories about the property.
- The study emphasize that a customer complaint can be a vehicle for customer retention. If the hotel handles the customer appropriately and apologize effectively it can turn the negative into positive.

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### تقييم أداء إدارة ومتابعة آراء نزلاء الفنادق على مواقع الإنترنت

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#### المخلص

تُصنف الكلمة الشفهية (WOM) كواحدة من أهم مصادر المعلومات التي تؤثر على قرار شراء المستهلك في صناعة الضيافة والسياحة. ظهرت أهمية هذا التأثير بسبب طبيعة هذه الصناعة بمنتجاتها غير الملموسة التي يصعب تقييمها قبل استهلاك النزلاء لخدمات الفندق. عندما تصبح WOM رقمية، فإن الطبيعة الواسعة النطاق، المجهولة، سريعة الزوال للإنترنت تحفز طرقًا جديدة لالتقاط وتحليل وتفسير وإدارة آراء العملاء عبر الإنترنت. الغرض من هذه الورقة هو التحقيق في كيفية تأثير إدارة مراجعات العملاء عبر الإنترنت على أداء الفنادق والاحتفاظ بالعملاء لبعض فنادق الأربعة نجوم في البحر الأحمر بمصر. جمعت البيانات من خلال استبيان شبه موجه إلى بعض مديري المبيعات والتسويق، كذلك بعض مديري إدارات تكنولوجيا المعلومات. كما تم استخدام استبيان موجه إلى عينة من النزلاء الذين زاروا فنادق أربعة نجوم بمنطقة البحر الأحمر مؤخرًا. ومن أهم النتائج التي توصلت إليها الدراسة: أن الاعتذار وحده غير كاف في معظم الحالات، بل يجب أن يقترن بسياسة مرنة حتي يتسنى للمنشأة أن تلبي احتياجات النزلاء. كما توصي الدراسة بتصميم وتطوير برنامج خاص للتعامل مع الشكاوى، حيث إن آراء معظم النزلاء "بأن عدم/التأخير في الرد" يُعد أكثر ردود الفعل التي تُعتبر غير فعالة.

#### معلومات المقالة

##### الكلمات المفتاحية

مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي؛ آراء العملاء علي الإنترنت؛ الآراء السلبية؛ أداء الفنادق؛ ولاء العملاء.

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