

Analyzing Hotel Practices Applied to Encourage and Manage Online Guest Reviews

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Abstract

As online reviews grow constantly and influence both consumers' purchase decisions and hospitality companies' possibilities. It seems important for hotel operators to know how to manage and deal with online guest reviews. However, there is a research gap concerning how to encourage and how to manage online guest reviews in the tourism industry in general and in the hotel industry in particular from hospitality companies' perspective. Using IPA method, this study investigates the practices used by hotel marketers to encourage and manage online guest reviews through assessing the importance level and usage level of practices, and testing the gap between these two levels. Self-administrated e-mail questionnaire were distributed to the marketing managers at the 5-star hotels in Egypt. The results indicated a statistically significant negative gap between the level of importance managers assigned to each practice and the usage level of that practice for both encouragement and management practices. Overall, the usage level of practices is lower than the importance level. This finding implied that the hotels and managers did not do a good job in matching practices' importance with practices' usage. Hence, there are opportunities for changes and improvement in the Egyptian 5-star hotels. This study provide hotels with valuable implications for improving and developing their online marketing strategies and practices.

Key Words: Online Review, Encouraging, Managing, Online Communities, IPA.

Introduction

Online reviews or recommendations—a form of e-WOM—have become increasingly important due to its strong influence on customers' final purchasing decisions. particularly in the hospitality and tourism domain whose its intangible offerings are difficult to evaluate prior to their consumption and thus greatly dependent on the perceived image and reputation. Online reviews provide customers a more independent and therefore more reliable and up-to-date source of information to decide where to go and what to buy. These reviews help customers to evaluate alternatives, reduce uncertainty in purchase situations, increase product awareness, provide ideas on travelling; help others to avoid places; help to imagine what a place will be like, and improve the probability of consumers to consider making a booking. Thus, online reviews have become an integral part of the decision making process and the major source of information for consumers.

Furthermore, online reviews also give tourism and hospitality companies the possibility to: shape customers' awareness, expectations and perceptions, reach out and gain more customers at low cost, predict and affect sales or revenues, effectively improve and develop new and current products or services, audit company's image and reputation on the internet, build relationships with customers and facilitate consumer centric marketing, follow up service failures and solve the problems of former visitors, define networking agents, keep profiles of customers, understand behavioral patterns and catch up with negative reviews before wide spread, improve customers' satisfaction from addressing customers' feedback, and provide staff feedback (congratulate and reward after positive review or train after negative review) (Kim *et al.*, 2015; Molinillo, *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, statistics showed a rapid increase in the use of online reviews in tourism and hotel sector (Molinillo, *et al.*, 2016). An industry survey pointed out that review websites are considered the most trusted and useful information sources when researching and planning trips, and the vast

majority of travellers (93%) indicated that other people's evaluations on travel review websites influence their travel plans. It also showed that 8 out of 10 consumers tend to trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. Indeed, nearly all businesses (96%) consider online travel reviews to be of utmost importance in generating bookings and about 80% of them are concerned about the potential impact of negative reviews (TripAdvisor, 2013).

As online reviews grow constantly, and influence consumers' purchase decisions and hospitality companies' possibilities, it seems important for hotel operators to know how to manage and deal with online guest reviews. However, there is a lack of research concerning how to encourage and how to manage online guest reviews in the tourism industry in general and in the hotel industry in particular (know-how) from companies' perspective (Kim *et al.*, 2015; Molinillo, *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, the aim of this study was to investigate practices used by hotel marketers in Egypt to encourage and manage online guest reviews in order to benefit from positive reviews and contain harmful negative comments. The results could be valuable for improving or developing online marketing strategies and practices.

Aim, Objectives and Questions

The aim of this study is to investigate marketing practices used to encourage the spread of positive online guest reviews as well as manage positive and negative online guest reviews at 5-star hotels. The study measures two related factors from hotel marketer's viewpoint: 1) The level of importance of practices to encourage and manage online reviews, 2) The level of performance (actual usage) of these practices. It evaluates if managers know what practices they have to use in encouraging and managing online reviews and if they act accordingly and use these practices. In particular, this study aims to:

- 1) Assess the importance and usage level of practices used by hotel marketers to encourage the spread of positive online guest reviews.
- 2) Assess the importance and usage level of practices used by hotel marketers to manage the positive and negative online guest reviews.
- 3) Gauge the Gap between importance and usage of practices employed to encourage and manage online guest reviews.

In relation to these objectives, the research questions are:

- 1) How hotel marketers in Egypt encourage the spread of positive online guest reviews?
- 2) How hotel marketers in Egypt manage positive and negative online guest reviews ?

Literature Review

Online Review

Online review or recommendation is one type of information channel which is described as a product or service evaluation posted on a website (Tuten and Solomon, 2015). Online review is often described as the most accessible and frequently used form of e-WOM and UGC (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2011). It encompasses the act of writing as well as the act of assimilating information provided by others (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). It consists of positive or negative statements made by consumers about a product or service (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2011). Online review could be considered peer-generated purchase experiences (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010). With regard to hotel and travel, statistics show that there has been a rapid increase in the use of online reviews. Thus, online reviews have become an integral part of the decision making process and the major source of information for consumers (Molinillo, *et al.*, 2016).

Online Communities

Online community—also known as a virtual community, is “a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. Like any other community, it is also a collection of people who adhere to a certain (loose) social contract, and who share certain (electric) interests” (Rheingold, 2008). Online communities enable customers to share and comment their previous experiences and give some advice and feedback to others. This information exchange among customers—traditionally called electronic-Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM)—also named User-generated Content (UGC) (Litvin, *et al.*, 2008).

There are several types of e-WOM media channels and each possesses different characteristics, as depicted below in Figure 1 (Litvin *et al.* 2008). In tourism and hospitality industry, there are various websites of online reviews where consumers can obtain and share information and reviews regarding products or services. These include: hotel review websites, hotel booking websites, travel and travel agencies websites, social networking websites, blogs, etc (Tuten & Solomon, 2015).

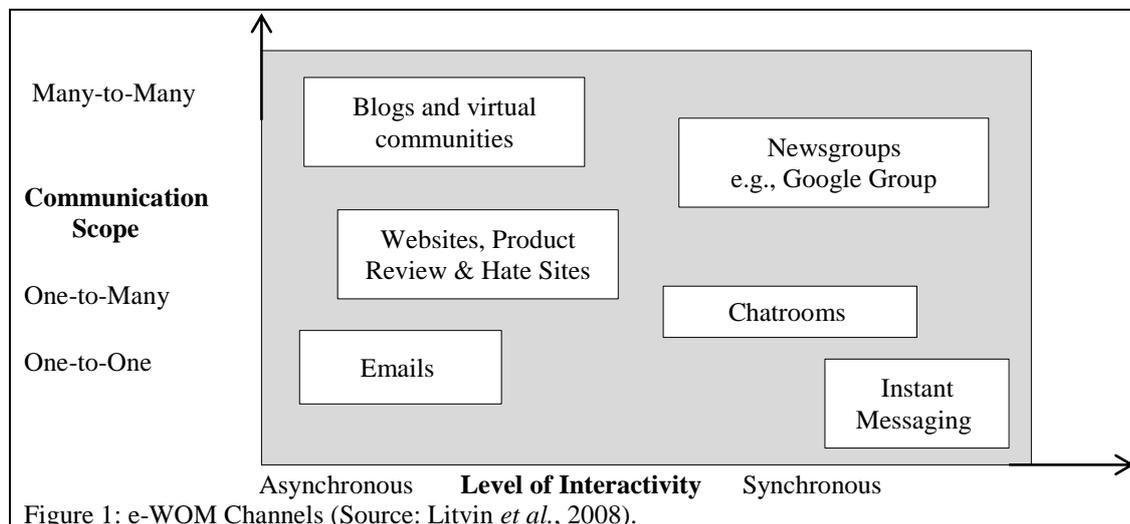


Figure 1: e-WOM Channels (Source: Litvin *et al.*, 2008).

The four main types of UGC sites that have been utilized by tourists can be categorized into the following types: social networking sites (i.e. Facebook), review sites (i.e. TripAdvisor), supplier sites (i.e. hotel websites, tourism organizations), and visual content sharing sites (i.e. Flickr, YouTube) (Wilson *et al.*, 2012). On guest review websites, customers can actively influence opinions by posting comments online, on the other hand, they may passively consume information posted by others in order to develop their own purchasing decisions (Molinillo, *et al.*, 2016). They also provides service providers with a feedback tool to monitor guests reactions and experiences, as well as needed improvements. Consequently, positive or negative online reviews have the power to benefit hotels or damage their image and reputation (Jeonga & Jang, 2011). These comments can help companies to understand the needs of their customers and to undertake actions accordingly (Molinillo, *et al.*, 2016).

Methodology

Theoretical Model and Hypotheses

Based on literature and in response to research questions, the following framework and hypotheses have been formed (Figure 2). The 10 dimensions and its 47 practices are assumed to be the most appropriate strategy to encourage and manage online guest reviews.

The hypothesis of this study is to test the gap between the importance level and usage level of practices used to encourage and manage online guest reviews, from hotel marketers' viewpoint. It tests whether the usage level of practices is falling, meeting, or exceeding the importance level of these practices. **Hence, the null and alternate of the Hypothesis are:**

- **H₀**—There is no significant difference between the importance level and the usage level assigned to each practice. (a necessity condition for rational and coherent management).
- **H₁**—There is a significant difference between the importance level and the usage level of assigned to each practice.
- This hypothesis is tested by Paired T-test Analysis: $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_0$ versus $H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_0$

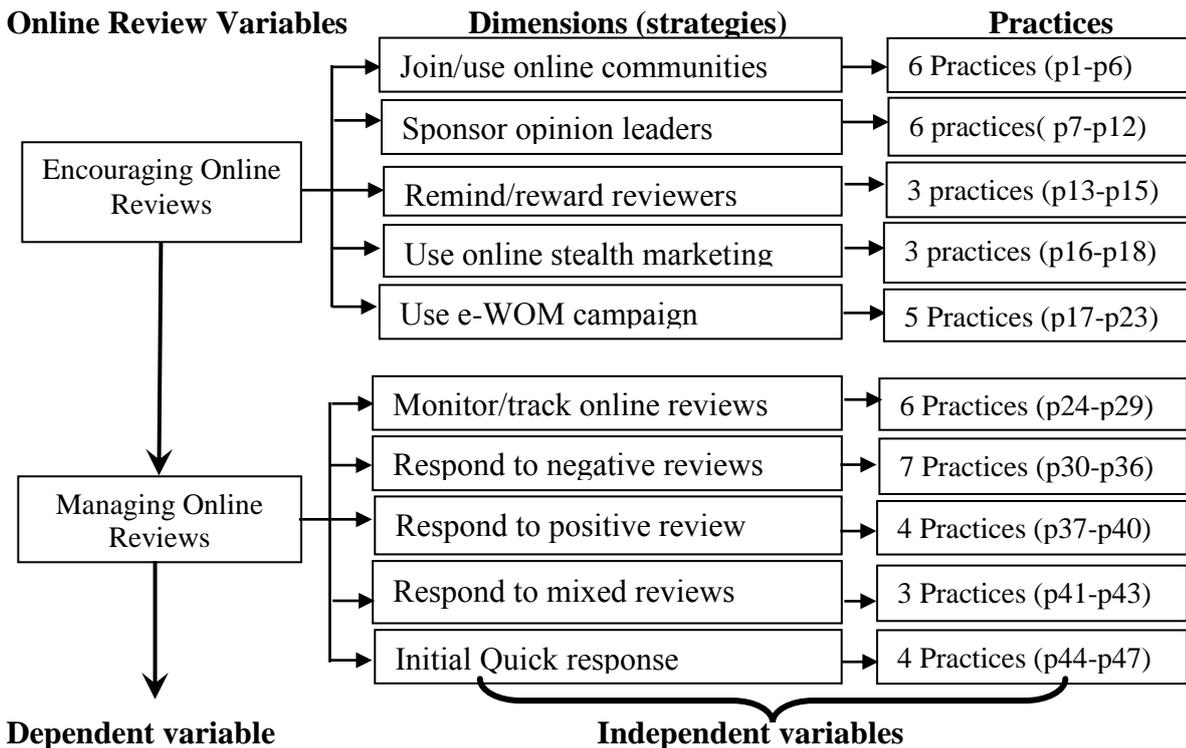


Figure 2: The Practices Model of Encouraging & Managing Online Guest Reviews Source: The Researcher

Definition of Key Terms

- **Online review** is the guest recommendation or evaluation of hotel services and products on online communities.
- **Encouraging** means encouraging hotel guests to largely and quickly spread their positive reviews and recommendations on online communities.
- **Managing** is responding and dealing with positive and negative reviews or comments on online communities
- **Online communities** – or virtual communities- are groups of individuals who share interests and interact with such other through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. They enable customers to share and comment their previous experiences and give some advice and feedback to others. The following categories can be distinguished:
 1. Social networks sites (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, etc.)
 2. Pictures/videos sharing platforms sites (Pinterest, Flickr, Instagram, YouTube, Dailymotion, etc.)
 3. Commercial review websites (TripAdvisor, eKomi, Yelp, etc...)

4. Supplier Websites (site of your hotel, a third-party company, competitors, an independent user, tourism organization, Blogs and discussion forums, etc.).

Research Type and Approach

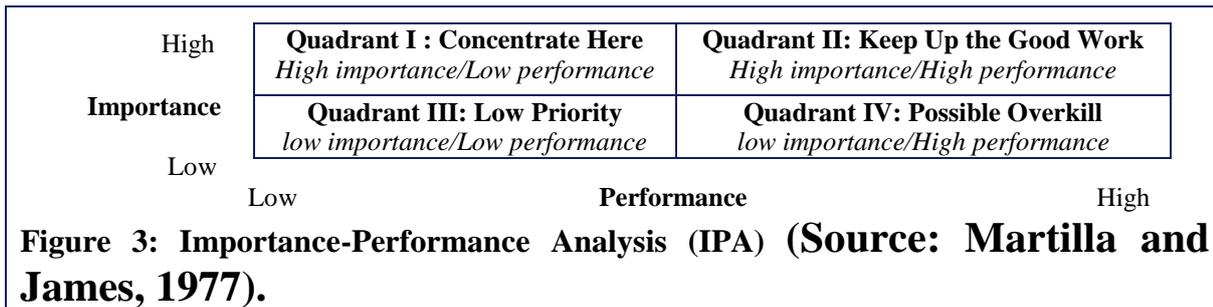
This study is primarily a descriptive-analytical study with qualitative and quantitative approaches. Furthermore, it used deductive approach, since it explains casual relationships, develops a theory and hypotheses and then designs a research strategy to test the validity of hypotheses against the data. If the data are consistent with the hypothesis then the hypothesis is accepted; if not it is rejected. It is moving works from the more general to the more specific (this call a top-down approach) (Saunders *et al.*, 2015).

This study used two main approaches to data collection namely; desk survey and field survey. The desk survey (literature review) forms an essential aspect of the research since it sets the foundation for the development of field survey instruments. The field survey is involved with the collection of primary empirical data. Using IPA methodology, this study adopted a self-administrated e-mail questionnaire to investigate hotel marketers' practices to encourage and manage online guest reviews through assessing the importance and usage level of practices. The reason for choosing e-mail questionnaire is mainly due to numerous benefits such as reducing geographical limitations and speeding getting answers. In addition, Email questionnaire do also allow the respondents to write down the answers themselves. The researcher has time to reflect on the answers and keep continuous contact when questions arise (Sekaran and Bougie , 2013; Saunders *et al.*, 2015). The mixed data collection methods provides a way to gain in depth insights and adequately reliable statistics.

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) Method

IPA was developed by Martilla and James, (1977) as a popular managerial tool to facilitate prioritization of improvements and resource allocation. IPA assesses the convergence between the importance of specific attributes and how well a service provider is supplying those identified attributes. The main argument of the IPA model is that matching importance and performance (usage) is the basis of effective management. It assumes that managers through their actions, pursue the practices that they perceive to be important. The decision to use the IPA structure and terminology was due to its powerful evaluation to find out attributes that are doing well and attributes that need to be improved. In particular, there are two explicit advantages for hotel managers in applying IPA to their management know-how. First, IPA displayed graphically on a two-dimensional grid that explicitly shows the strengths and weaknesses of the hotel practices being studied. Second, IPA provides useful recommendations for hotel managers or policy makers for developing strategies and practices in the future. This is a useful and effective way for management to identify what problems exist, and why. Typically, IPA involves a 3-step process:

1. *Identification of management-influenced attributes associated with a concept.* It is usually accomplished via consultation with experts, focus groups or other qualitative techniques.
2. *Analysis of attributes based on user data that rates attribute importance and performance.* Graphical presentation of the results on a two dimensional grid and four quadrants.



Data Collection Instrument

The questionnaire was built based on IPA method and the conceptual framework drawn from the extant literature. In particular, the final data-collection instrument consisted of 2-parts:

- The first part investigates encouragement practices. It measures **the importance level** hotel marketers assigned to each practice using a Likert scale of 1-least important to 5-most important. Moreover, this part measures **the usage level** for each of the same practice using a Likert scale ranging from 1-rarely used to 5-extensively used. It consists of 23 practices representing five dimensions.
- The second part investigates management practices. It measures **the importance level** hotel marketers assigned to each practice using a Likert scale of 1-least important to 5-most important. Moreover, this part measures **the usage level** for each of the same practice using a Likert scale ranging from 1-rarely used to 5-extensively used. It consists of 24 practices representing five dimensions.

Questionnaire Reliability, Validity and Objectivity

Validity, reliability and objectivity can be seen as three dimensions of a study’s credibility. Validity is the extent to which it actually measures what is intended to be measured from the beginning. Reliability is the degree of trust and if the result remains the same when being repeated. Objectivity is about the values of a researcher and how much it affects the results (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). The questionnaire were rationed before distribution to the study sample to ensure the validity and reliability of paragraphs:

1. **To Verify Content Validity (Believe arbitrators):** The first version of survey questionnaire was judged by a group of arbitrators. Interviews with 5 experts in the field of hotel marketing were done. Revisions to the questionnaire were made based on feedback from the arbitrators. The researcher responded to the views of the jury and performed the necessary deletion and modification. Factors or questions with 80% approval and higher were only considered.
2. **To Verify Construct Validity:** There are two types of analysis for determining construct validity: (1) Correlational analysis, and (2) Factor analysis (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). This study calculates the construct validity of the attributes of the questionnaire by surveying it to the initial sample size of 15 respondents of the total members of the study population, and it calculates the correlation coefficients between each attribute of the questionnaire, and the total score for the domain dimension that belongs to that attribute. The results showed that the value of the correlation coefficients of practices ranged between 0.65 and 0.55, and is statistically significant at the level of significance (0.05). Hence, the attributes of each dimension are considered honest and valid to measure its role in posting reviews.
3. **To Verify Reliability:** The most popular test of inter-item consistency reliability is Cronbach’s coefficient alpha. The higher the coefficient, the better the measuring instrument (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). The researcher conducted reliability steps on the same initial sample using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results illustrated that the high reliability coefficients for questionnaire attributes ranged from 0.61 to 0.69, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Analyzing Hotel Practices Employed to Encourage and Manage Online Guest Reviews

Thus, the questionnaire became valid and reliable in its final form for application to the basic study sample.

Sampling Procedures

The target population of this study was the marketing managers at five-star hotels in Egypt. A comprehensive sample was chosen as the most appropriate sampling technique to get a big sample and thus ensure that the results are significant and generalizable.

A total of 186 self-administrated e-mail questionnaires were distributed to 186 marketing managers in 186 five star hotels in Egypt, in December 2016. 138 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a 74 % response rate. Fifteen questionnaires were not included because of incompleteness. The valid number of questionnaires for analysis was 123 with a response rate of 66%.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the gathered data used the software SPSS 19.0 and Microsoft Excel 2010. The study used Paired T-test analysis to measure the gap between the importance and usage level of practices employed to encourage and manage online guest reviews. Objectives 1, and 2 were achieved by Mean Analysis and IPA matrix. Objective 3 and study hypothesis were achieved by Paired T-test Analysis. Finally, interpretation of the results was done at 5 %level of significance; where the value of $p \leq 0.05$ was considered as significant, and $p \leq 0.01$ was considered as highly significant.

1. Results and Discussion

2. Table 1 indicates the practices' importance and usage analysis as well as the gap analysis.

3. **Table (1): Practices' Importance and Usage Analysis**

| Online Review Encouragement Practices | | Importance (I) | | Usage (U) | | Gap (U-I) | | IPA |
|---|--|-------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| | | Mean ^a | Rank | Mean ^b | Rank | Gap ^c | Rank | IPA grid |
| 1. Join and Use Online Communities | | (4.04) | (4) | (3.74) | (1) | (-0.30**) | (4) | (Keep Up) |
| P1 | Join/use social networks (facebook, twitter, google +) | 4.10 | 10 | 3.79 | 2 | -0.31** | 17 | Keep Up |
| P2 | Join/use blogs and forums (corporate - independent) | 3.99 | 19 | 3.67 | 5 | -0.32** | 16 | Keep Up |
| P3 | Join/use video/picture sharing platforms (YouTub, Pinterest) | 4.02 | 17 | 3.72 | 3 | -0.30** | 18 | Keep Up |
| P4 | Joining and using the hotel website more actively. | 4.15 | 8 | 3.87 | 1 | -0.28** | 20 | Keep Up |
| P5 | Participate as members of third party online communities | 3.99 | 20 | 3.66 | 6 | -0.33** | 15 | Keep Up |
| P6 | Publish diverse/attractive contents on online communities | 4.01 | 18 | 3.71 | 4 | -0.30** | 19 | Keep Up |
| 2. Remind and Reward Reviewers | | (4.15) | (2) | (3.36) | (2) | (-0.79**) | (2) | (Concentrate) |
| P7 | Send out regular mass mailings, e-newsletters with links | 4.09 | 12 | 3.37 | 9 | -0.72** | 12 | Concentrate |
| P8 | Placed cards in rooms to remind sharing guests' views | 4.22 | 3 | 3.32 | 17 | -0.90** | 1 | Concentrate |
| P9 | Send online satisfaction surveys to prevent e-complaints | 4.06 | 15 | 3.39 | 7 | -0.67** | 14 | Concentrate |
| P10 | Build in WOM attributes-testimonials over hotel webpage | 4.10 | 11 | 3.38 | 8 | -0.72** | 13 | Concentrate |
| P11 | Offer rewards for guests spreading positive opinions | 4.22 | 1 | 3.34 | 10 | -0.88** | 4 | Concentrate |
| P12 | Arrange contests with benefits to diffuse positive views | 4.20 | 5 | 3.33 | 14 | -0.87** | 5 | Concentrate |
| 3. Sponsor Opinion Leaders | | (4.20) | (1) | (3.34) | (3) | (-0.86**) | (1) | (Concentrate) |
| P13 | Encourage loyal guests to become brand advocates | 4.22 | 2 | 3.34 | 13 | -0.89** | 2 | Concentrate |
| P14 | Sponsor opinion leaders who gain significant visibility | 4.19 | 7 | 3.34 | 12 | -0.86** | 6 | Concentrate |
| P15 | Use product seeding campaign (familiarization trip) | 4.20 | 6 | 3.33 | 15 | -0.85** | 7 | Concentrate |
| 4. Use Online Stealth marketing | | (3.41) | (5) | (3.30) | (5) | (-0.11**) | (5) | (Low Priority) |
| P16 | Use employees to pretend online as satisfied consumers | 3.40 | 23 | 3.29 | 23 | -0.11** | 22 | Low Priority |
| P17 | Using employees to post negative reviews to competitors | 3.42 | 21 | 3.31 | 19 | -0.11** | 21 | Low Priority |
| P18 | market by creating& spreading 'buzz' in an obtuse manner | 3.41 | 22 | 3.30 | 22 | -0.11** | 23 | Low Priority |
| 5. Use e-WOM Ccommunication Campaign | | (4.11) | (3) | (3.32) | (4) | (-0.79**) | (3) | (Concentrate) |
| P19 | Use e-WOM campaign for guiding guests to purchase, react | 4.20 | 4 | 3.31 | 20 | -0.89** | 3 | Concentrate |
| P20 | Approve the e-WOM campaign by senior management | 4.05 | 16 | 3.33 | 16 | -0.72** | 11 | Concentrate |
| P21 | Regularly review/update the e-WOM campaign (annually) | 4.09 | 13 | 3.31 | 21 | -0.78** | 9 | Concentrate |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|-------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| P22 | Set aside yearly budget for financing e-WOM campaign | 4.07 | 14 | 3.32 | 18 | -.75** | 10 | Concentrate |
| P23 | Well inform employees about e-WOM campaign resources | 4.15 | 9 | 3.34 | 11 | -.81** | 8 | Concentrate |
| Total | | (3.98) | - | (3.41) | - | (-0.57) | - | - |
| Online Review Management Practices | | Importance (I) | | Usage (U) | | Gap (U-I) | | IPA |
| | | Mean^a | Rank | Mean^b | Rank | Gap^c | Rank | IPA grid |
| 6. Monitor and Track Online Review | | (4.11) | (1) | (3.42) | (2) | (-0.69**) | (1) | (Concentrate) |
| P24 | Assign employees to continuously monitor online reviews | 4.21 | 2 | 3.43 | 9 | -0.78** | 2 | Concentrate |
| P25 | Regularly train employees to monitor (drills, workshops) | 4.15 | 4 | 3.42 | 10 | -0.73** | 3 | Concentrate |
| P26 | Monitor what is being related to hotel and the reviews tone | 4.00 | 9 | 3.44 | 8 | -0.56** | 6 | Concentrate |
| P27 | See/define patterns in complaints and also positive reviews | 4.00 | 8 | 3.42 | 11 | -0.58** | 5 | Concentrate |
| P28 | Use tracking programs/tools (twitter, google alerts, RSS) | 4.22 | 1 | 3.39 | 17 | -0.83** | 1 | Concentrate |
| P29 | Monitor competitors' reviews to know or inspired by them | 4.10 | 6 | 3.41 | 13 | -0.69** | 4 | Concentrate |
| 7. Respond to negative reviews | | (4.01) | (2) | (3.89) | (1) | (-0.12**) | (4) | (Keep Up) |
| P30 | Thank the guest by name and take the conversation offline | 4.10 | 7 | 3.88 | 4 | -0.22** | 13 | Keep Up |
| P31 | Accommodate by apologize & highlight any changes | 4.14 | 5 | 3.88 | 3 | -0.26** | 12 | Keep Up |
| P32 | Use accommodative attitude by compensation | 4.20 | 3 | 3.86 | 6 | -0.34** | 11 | Keep Up |
| P33 | Justify by considering problem & ask more explanations | 3.94 | 11 | 3.93 | 1 | -0.01** | 22 | Keep Up |
| P34 | Justify by reframing negatives& reminding positive records | 3.95 | 10 | 3.93 | 2 | -0.02** | 21 | Keep Up |
| P35 | Use defensive attitude by denying responsibility | 3.88 | 15 | 3.87 | 5 | -0.01** | 24 | Keep Up |
| P36 | Use negative comments to improve customer relationships | 3.86 | 16 | 3.85 | 7 | -0.01** | 23 | Keep Up |
| 8. Respond to positive reviews | | (3.89) | (3) | (3.41) | (3) | (-0.48**) | (2) | (Concentrate) |
| P37 | Appreciate by publicity thanking, liking, sharing, retweet | 3.93 | 12 | 3.42 | 12 | -0.51** | 8 | Concentrate |
| P38 | Publish positive review in guestbook on website, newsletters | 3.93 | 13 | 3.41 | 14 | -0.52** | 7 | Concentrate |
| P39 | Contact with customers provide or like positive comments | 3.90 | 14 | 3.40 | 16 | -0.50** | 9 | Concentrate |
| P40 | Turn positive reviewers into promoters to tell their friends | 3.81 | 17 | 3.40 | 15 | -0.41** | 10 | Concentrate |
| 9. Respond to mixed reviews | | (3.45) | (5) | (3.35) | (5) | (-0.10**) | (5) | (Low Priority) |
| P41 | Thank the guest by name and highlight positive comment | 3.45 | 23 | 3.35 | 22 | -0.1** | 19 | Low Priority |
| P42 | Apologize/highlight changes has made or intends to make | 3.47 | 22 | 3.36 | 21 | -0.11** | 18 | Low Priority |
| P43 | Surround negative comments with positive statements | 3.43 | 24 | 3.34 | 24 | -0.09** | 20 | Low Priority |
| 10. Quick initial response | | (3.56) | (4) | (3.37) | (4) | (-0.19**) | (3) | (Low Priority) |
| P44 | Provide quick initial response to tell story within 24 hours. | 3.57 | 18 | 3.36 | 20 | -0.21** | 15 | Low Priority |
| P45 | Respond with clear and visible hotel's identity | 3.56 | 20 | 3.38 | 18 | -0.18** | 16 | Low Priority |
| P46 | Provide accurate data by checking all facts of what happened | 3.55 | 21 | 3.38 | 19 | -0.17** | 17 | Low Priority |
| P47 | Invite reviewers to return to reminds you value your guests | 3.57 | 19 | 3.35 | 23 | -0.22** | 14 | Low Priority |
| Total | | (3.80) | - | (3.49) | - | (-0.31**) | - | - |

^a Mean scale: 1—least important to 5—most important. Significant Difference: *p ≤ 0.05; **p ≤ 0.01

^b Mean scale: 1—rarely used to 1—extensively used.

Practices' Importance and Usage Analysis

When evaluating the encouragement practices, the importance mean scores of the 23 practices varied from 4.22 (the highest) to 3.40 (the lowest). However, there was a distinction among the 23 practices and the priority of importance was evident. Overall, the average importance mean of practices was 3.98. It should be noted that twenty practices were perceived as important with a mean greater than or equal to 3.98 ($M \geq 3.98$). These practices are related to four dimensions; “sponsor opinion leaders, remind/reward reviewers, use e-WOM campaign, and join/use online communities”. This finding implied that marketing managers focus on these practices as number one of priority. Hotel marketers believed that these practices play a significant role in encouraging online guest reviews. Hence, hotel operators should put in more effort and attention to improve these practices when encouraging online guest reviews. Moreover, it should be noted that only three practices were perceived as moderately important with a mean less than 3.98 ($3.98 > M$). These practices are related to one dimension; “use online stealth marketing. This finding implied that hotel marketers focus on these practices as number two of priority. It should be noted, however, that these practices also deemed significant, but to a lesser extent and shouldn't be disregarded when encouraging online reviews.

Meanwhile, the usage mean scores of the 23 practices varied from 3.87 (the highest) to 3.29 (the lowest). However, there was a distinction among the 23 practices and the priority of usage was evident. Overall, the average usage mean of practices was 3.41. It should be noted that six practices were perceived as quite-used with a mean greater than or equal to 3.41 ($M \geq 3.41$). It should be noted that these practices are related to one dimension; “join/use online communities”. Hotel marketers perceived these practices as the widely used action in encouraging online reviews. It is the number one of usage priority. This finding implied that hotels’ performance in applying these particular practices is strong. Thus, hotel managers ought to take them into consideration and continue to maintain good standard and shouldn’t be ignored. Moreover, it should be noted that 17 practices were perceived as moderately used with a mean less than 3.41 ($3.41 > M$). These practices are related to four dimensions; “remind/reward reviewers, sponsor opinion leaders, use e-WOM campaign, and use stealth marketing”. Hotel marketers perceived these practices as number two of usage priority. This finding implied that hotels’ performance in applying these particular practices is moderate. Hence, hotel managers should concentrate on these practices and more resources, effort and attention should be spent on improving the performance of these practices.

Overall, the rankings in a descending order of the importance mean scores of encouragement dimensions were as follows: sponsor opinion leaders (4.20), remind/reward reviewers (4.15), use e-WOM campaign (4.11), join/use online communities (4.04), and use stealth marketing (3.41). Meanwhile, the rankings in a descending order of the usage mean of encouragement dimensions were as follows: join/use online communities (3.74), remind/reward reviewers (3.36), sponsor opinion leaders (3.34), use e-WOM campaign (3.32), and use stealth marketing (3.30).

When evaluating the management practices, the importance mean scores of the 24 practices varied from 4.22 (the highest) to 3.43 (the lowest). However, there was a distinction among the 24 practices and the priority of importance was evident. Overall, the average importance mean of practices was 3.80. It should be noted that seventeen practices were perceived as important with a mean greater than or equal to 3.80 ($M \geq 3.80$). These practices are related to three dimensions; “monitor/track online reviews, respond to negative reviews, and respond to positive reviews”. This finding implied that managers focus on these practices as number one of priority. Hotel marketers believed that these practices play a significant role in influencing their online review management. Hence, hotel operators should focus on these practices and put in more effort and attention to improve these practices when managing online reviews. Moreover, it should be noted that seven practices were perceived as moderately important with a mean less than 3.80 ($3.80 > M$). These practices are related to two dimensions; “initial quick response, and respond to mixed reviews”. This finding implied that hotel marketers focus on these practices as number two of priority. However, that these practices also deemed significant, but to a lesser extent and shouldn’t be disregarded when managing online reviews.

Meanwhile, the usage mean scores of the 24 practices varied from 3.93 (the highest) to 3.34 (the lowest). However, there was a distinction among the 24 practices and the priority of practices usage was evident. Overall, the average usage mean of practices was 3.49. It should be noted that seven practices were perceived as quite-used with a mean greater than or equal to 3.49 ($M \geq 3.49$). These practices are related to one dimension; “respond to negative reviews”. Hotel marketers perceived these practices as the widely used action in managing online reviews. It is perceived as number one of usage priority. This finding implied that hotels’ performance in applying these particular practices is strong. Thus, hotel managers ought to take them into consideration and continue to maintain good standard and shouldn’t be ignored. Moreover, it should be noted that 17 practices were perceived as moderately used with a mean less than 3.49 ($3.49 > M$). These practices are related to four dimensions; “monitor/track online reviews, respond to positive reviews, initial quick response, and respond to mixed reviews”. Hotel marketers perceived these practices as number two of usage priority. This finding implied that hotels’ performance in applying these

particular measures is moderate. Hence, hotel managers should concentrate on these practices and more resources, effort and attention should be spent on improving performance of these practices.

Overall, the rankings in a descending order of the importance mean of management dimensions were as follows: monitor/track online reviews (4.11), respond to negative reviews, (4.01), respond to positive reviews (3.89), initial quick response (3.56), and respond to mixed reviews (3.45). Meanwhile, the rankings in a descending order of the usage mean of management dimensions were as follows: respond to negative reviews (3.89), monitor/track online reviews (3.42), respond to positive reviews (3.41), initial quick response (3.37), and respond to mixed reviews (3.35).

The Gap Analysis between the Importance and Usage Level of Practices

When evaluating encouragement practices, the mean gap scores for the 23 encouragement practices varied from -0.90** (the highest gap) to 0.11** (the lowest gap). Nevertheless, each practice showed differences with respect to the size and direction of the gap score. The mean gap scores for the 23 practices are all statistically significant and negative (at $p < 0.01$). Overall, the average mean gap score was -0.57**. The average usage level of practices (3.41) is lower than the average importance level (3.98). It should be noted that fourteen practices were perceived as the highest gap with a difference greater than or equal to -0.57. These practices are related to three dimensions; “sponsor opinion leaders, remind/reward reviewers, use e-WOM campaign”. This finding implied that these practices are the highest shortfalls in online review encouragement. Hotel marketers should focus on these practices as number one of priority. Hence, hotel operators should concentrate on these practices and should put in more effort and attention to improve these practices when encouraging online reviews. Moreover, only nine practices were perceived as the smallest gap with a difference less than -0.57. These practices are related to two dimensions; “join/use online communities, and use stealth marketing”. This finding implied that these practices represent the lowest shortfalls in encouraging online reviews. Hence, hotel managers should also focus on these dimensions as number two of priority when managing online reviews.

Meanwhile, when evaluating management practices, the mean gap scores for the 24 management practices varied from -0.83** (the highest gap) to -0.01** (the lowest gap). Nevertheless, each practice showed differences with respect to the size and direction of the gap score. The mean gap scores for the 24 practices are all statistically significant and negative (at $p < 0.01$). Overall, the average mean gap score was -0.31**. The average usage level of practices (3.49) is lower than the average importance level (3.80). It should be noted that eleven practices were perceived as the highest gap with a difference greater than or equal to -0.31. Also these practices are related to two dimensions; “monitor/track online reviews, respond to positive reviews, as well as one practice from “respond to negative reviews” dimension. This finding implied that these practices are the highest shortfalls in online review management. Hotel marketers should focus on these practices as number one of priority. Hence, hotel operators should put in more effort and attention to improve these practices when managing online reviews. Moreover, it should be noted that thirteen practices were perceived as the smallest gap with a difference less than -0.31. These practices are related to three dimensions; “quick initial response, “respond to negative reviews (except one practice)”, and “respond to mixed reviews”. This finding implied that these practices represent the lowest shortfalls in managing online reviews. Hence hotel marketers should also focus on these dimensions as number two of priority when managing online reviews.

Overall, the rankings in a descending order of the gap mean scores of encouragement dimensions were as follows: sponsor opinion leaders (-0.86), remind/reward reviewers (-0.79), use e-WOM campaign (-0.79), join/use online communities (-0.30), and use stealth marketing (-0.11). Meanwhile, the rankings in a descending order of the gap mean of management dimensions were as follows: monitor/track online reviews (-0.69), respond to positive reviews (-0.48), initial quick

response (-0.19), respond to negative reviews (-0.12), and respond to mixed reviews (-0.10).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Using IPA method, this study measures online review encouragement and management practices from hotel marketers' viewpoint, through assessing the importance and usage level of practices, and testing the gap between the two levels. The results of the paired t-test indicated a statistically significant and negative difference (gap) ($p \leq 0.01$) between the level of importance managers assigned to each practice and the level of usage of that practice for both encouragement and management practices. The average usage level of practices is lower than the average importance level. Overall, the average mean gap score of encouragement practices was -0.57^{**} , and the average mean gap score of management practices was -0.31^{**} . Hence, the null hypothesis 1 which proposed absence of difference, was therefore rejected. Meanwhile, the alternate hypothesis 1 which proposed existence of difference, was therefore accepted. There are two observations. First, it should be noted that the gaps are all significant, suggesting that at a basic level, there is a considerable difference between the practices' importance and usage. This finding implied that the hotels and marketers do not do a good job in matching practices' importance with practices' usage. Hence, there are opportunities for changes and improvement in studied hotels. The existence of significant gaps clearly showed that there is a room for improvement in the studied hotels. These gaps were shortfalls and require the most attention by hotel marketers to make some improvement. By understanding and investigating these gaps, it is easier for management to control and make corrective action to reduce the difference between the importance and usage level of practices. Second, it should be noted that all gaps are negative, the usage level is lower than the importance level. A negative score indicates practices which should be given more attention and that need to be improved. This finding implied that further improvement resources and efforts should concentrate here. The main argument of the IPA model is that matching importance and usage is the basis of effective management.

As noted in Figures(3) and (4), the results of IPA matrix provide useful recommendations for hotel marketers or policy makers for improving and developing the strategies and practices of encouraging and managing online guest reviews. They provide insight for future management recommendations for each practice based on its position in one of the four quadrants. Each quadrant implies a different management strategy:

1. The studied hotels and marketers should pay more attention and improvement efforts to 14 encouragement-practices and 10 management-practices in the "concentrate here" quadrant (High Importance/Low Performance). These practices represent 3 encouragement dimensions (remind/reward reviewers, sponsor opinion leaders, and use e-WOM campaign) and two management dimensions (monitor/track online reviews, and respond to positive reviews). These dimensions and their practices are major weaknesses and require immediate attention for improvement. They represent key areas that need to be improved with top priority. The management scheme for this quadrant is "concentrate here".
2. The studied hotels and marketers should maintain efforts and resources to 6 encouragement-practices and 7 management-practices in the "keep up the good work" quadrant (High Importance/High Performance). These practices represent one encouragement dimension; join/use online communities and one management dimension; respond to negative reviews. These dimensions and their practices are major strengths and opportunities for achieving a competitive advantage. Thus, hotel managers should keep up the good work. The management scheme is "keep up the good work."
3. The studied hotels and marketers should not do remedial actions to 3 encouragement-practices and 7 management-practices in the "low priority" quadrant (Low Importance/Low Performance). These practices represent one encouragement dimension; use stealth marketing and two management dimensions; respond to mixed reviews and initial quick response. These practices are minor weaknesses and do not require additional effort. marketers should expend

robustness of the findings. Research is needed on the relationship between the levels of encouragement or management practices and hotel's size, star rating, branding or nationality.

- This study used the primary online quantitative questionnaire. It would be interesting in future studies to use qualitative approach (i.e., face-to-face interviews) to deeply investigate the participants about the practices used to encourage and manage online guest reviews.
- The practices of online review encouragement and management used in this study do not represent all possible practices that may be taken. The study practices are only suggestions that might be useful when working with online reviews. They just a guideline—hotel and marketers responses should be personalized to each review. Not all suggested practices will be relevant or applicable to any specific facility because of the wide variety in the types, sizes, and locations of hotels. The ideal number and structure of practices and dimensions could be different depending on the type of industry, the service firm, the type of online community, or the circumstances under which studies are rendered. To measure the variability among the items (practices) a factor analysis can be used to analyze the relationship among the items and to decide what items can measure the same latent factors.
- Further research can conclude how cultural differences play a role in encouraging and managing online reviews. Further studies may compare practices between different cultures.
- Research can be expanded to include broader application of IPA for a comparison of encouragement and management practices for independent versus chain hotels and 4-star versus 5-star hotels.
- Future research should identify and assess the primary motivators and barriers to encouraging and managing online reviews from hotels' perspective.
- Future studies focus on how to deal with fake or misleading reviews.

Additional research should focus on these limitations to assure the most precise results.

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