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An Investigation into Management Response to Negative Online Reviews in Hotel Operations

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Abstract

The advent of web2 and the interactivity it allowed net surfers to communicate freely with the purpose of exchanging ideas and opinions regarding the products they have purchased has given rise to a new marketing tool identified in the literature as consumer-generated content. As travel and hospitality are amongst the highest purchased services on the World Wide Web, a multitude of sites are currently made available to travelers to express either their satisfaction or voice their complaints on hotel properties that they have stayed at for business or pleasure. In providing informational queues, these online reviews are strongly affecting traveler's pre-purchase decisions and their attitudes toward hotel choice. One factor that is considered of great effect on this decision-making process is identified as management response to reviews; regardless of their positive or negative nature. The purpose of this research is to provide an investigation into management's behavior in responding to negative online reviews and the manner in which this type of feedback is handled in a way to build customer trust as well as a venue to service recovery.

Keywords: Customer-generated Content, Online Reviews, Travel, Hospitality, Management Response, Bahrain

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1. Introduction

The interactivity characteristic of web2 has allowed travelers to increasingly resort to elicit online information about travel destinations, airlines, hotels and restaurants as well as other myriad services they plan to purchase on their travel adventure. This bi-directional nature of sharing electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has changed the marketing field of hospitality and opened up new frontiers not present a few years ago. Nowadays, travelers are increasingly depending on online reviews (OLRs) to make their accommodation purchase decisions (UNWTO, 2014) where more than 50% have chosen a hotel after consulting online review sites (ReviewPro, 2014). These OLRs

were identified as the most influential information source for travel planning (Kwok *et al.*, 2017) affecting traveler consumer behavior (Browning et al., 2013), company's financial performance (You *et al.*, 2015), hotel room sales (Phillips *et al.*, 2017), occupancy rate (Viglia and Buhalis, 2016), quality perceptions (Torres *et al.*, 2014), booking intentions (Casalo *et al.*, 2015), customer satisfaction (Gu and Ye, 2014), market share (Duverger, 2013) as well as employee stress (Bradley *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, in their attempt to assess the influence of OLRs, some researchers (Li *et al.*, 2015; Banerjee and Chua, 2016; Liu and Park 2015; Radojevic *et al.*, 2015) used web crawlers in order to quantitatively determine how third party platforms use algorithms to rate hotels as to service quality, value for money and customer satisfaction. Others (Kusumasondjaja *et al.*, 2012; Rose and Blodgett, 2016), created hypothetical settings where customers were asked to imagine planning a trip and then provided with several reviews in order to measure the effect these may have on their travel choice behavior. Witnessing such a growing need of information on part of potential travelers as well as increasing concern to hotel operators, the main aim of this research is to investigate the degree of attention management has assigned to monitor online consumer generated content and how this process is handled on its part. In doing so, and in order to avoid management biased response (Niu and Fan, 2018), the research does not directly approach management but observes its consequent response behavior toward their properties' OLRs posted on third party platforms. The 'guru' "TripAdvisor" was chosen as the ground of investigation as it is considered by many to be the leading platform for travelers to voice their appreciation and/or dismay (Filieri *et al.*, 2015; Casalo *et al.*, 2015).

2. Literature Review

The growth of 'eMediaries' (Buhalis and Licata 2002) is attributed in large to answering increasing travelers demand for unbiased information. Some of these sites have become important obligatory points of passage providing authoritative opinion over a particular domain (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). Posted OLRs, also known in the literature as consumer generated content, is considered a form of eWOM, which Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, (2004) refer to as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former consumers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet". The impact of OLRs is considered more salient when the product in question is of a service nature (Kwok and Yu, 2016)

allowing no trial prior to purchase and consumption thus rendering it difficult to judge beforehand.

In the area of travel and hospitality, consumers write OLRs as a post purchase behavioral engagement to indicate their level of satisfaction and inform others about their hotel experience. Many reviews are posted in real time at the moment of, or directly after, service delivery while the experience is still fresh in mind, not tarnished by the passage of time. These reviews may incorporate stories, photos, videos and "moments of truth" that these customers have encountered during their stay. This represents a challenge as reviews provide both positive and negative evaluations, remaining on sites for a considerable time period (Browning *et al.*, 2013), and augmented by the fact that such sites are considered to be trustworthy (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015) not only in the area of travel but in many areas of endeavor as well. O'Mahony and Smyth (2010) explain that while the interfaces of these platforms may look different, they present the same three common features of: evaluation (of the product), reputation (of reviewers) and social (among reviewers, managers and users). Ip *et al.*, (2012) report that almost 33% of respondents to their survey had resorted to travel websites for travel planning and that many of these have shared their travel experience online. Those percentages have increased as online travel sites gained more popularity where Xie *et al.*, (2014), report that 53% of travelers would not commit to a hotel reservation until they check its OLRs, and that 77% stated that they would usually or always refer to such reviews before their final choice of accommodation. What compounds the importance of OLRs lies in the research findings (Cantallops and Salvi, 2014; Karakaya and Barnes, 2010) that revealed that these are perceived as more trustworthy than official destination websites.

With regard to valence, OLRs that are in favor of hotel experience were found to increase hotel bookings (Torres *et al.*, 2015), and market share (Duverger, 2013), while unfavorable comments adversely affected sales and business performance (Sparks and Browling, 2011). Nevertheless, Park and Nicklau (2015) found that people perceive reviews of extreme ratings (positive or negative) as more useful and enjoyable than those with moderate ratings. Similarly, Lee et al., (2009) report that negative reviews are more useful and persuasive than either neutral or positive opinions with regard to their credibility and impact on attitude formation. Such view was expressed earlier by Chiou and Cheng (2003), who, on the basis that negative reviews are usually less in number, attributed their effect to the phenomenon of 'scarcity' which commands more attention and motivates consumers in resolving uncertainty.

Allied to the scarcity phenomenon, a considerable amount of research within the field of marketing suggests that because of the negativity effect (Tsang and Prendergast, 2009), negative reviews are stronger and more influential than positive reviews (Casalo *et al.*, 2015) and that their impact is more pronounced for hotel services when compared to tangible goods (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2012), hence influencing the decision making of potential guests to a greater extent.

3. Response to OLRs

Existing research has predominantly adopted a marketing perspective and extensively analyzed the impact of OLRs on consumer behavior and decisions, however, how management responds to such reviews didn't receive as much attention (Magno *et al.*, 2017; Abramova *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, although the literature on service recovery indicate that companies that respond effectively to customer complaints benefit from increased customer loyalty and greater profitability (Ogut and Tas, 2012); that the influence of management response is a factor that should never be underrated (Levy *et al.*, 2013); that such responses should be considered the first point of call for hotel managers (Xie *et al.*, 2016); not much research has addressed the issue of assessing the effectiveness of hotel marketers' response to OLRs (Rose and Blodgett, 2016). As a matter of fact, hoteliers have been criticized in not making enough investment in online reputation management (ReviewPro, 2014) despite the academic guidance that research has presented.

Lee *et al.,* (2012) explain that non-action strategies may allow negative reviews to stand unchallenged thereby potentially damaging reputation and image, resulting in poor satisfaction ratings and low loyalty (Sparks and Bradely*,* 2017) and putting a company in a disadvantageous position leading to customers loss. Lee and Carnage (2014) and Sparks and Bradely (2016) concur on the premise that the provision of a response will reduce the likelihood of readers drawing their own negative erroneous inferences. Other studies (Min *et al.*, 2015; Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2018) also confirmed the importance of responding to uploaded opinions and urged hotels to treat OLRs as a new addition to their marketing communication mix.

In addition, it is reported that management can increase the perceived helpfulness of OLRs with strategic responses (Liu and Park, 2015). Kwok *et al.*, (2015), provided evidence that managers' timely addressed response helps consumers identify the

reviews that deem helpful and thus reduces cognitive load in finding useful information. Levy *et al* (2013) highly recommend managers to provide immediate and authentic response to OLRs because effective responses were found to be positively related to customers' loyalty and perceived as more informative and reliable than those left unattended. Similarly, Rancourt (2013) expresses that the reaction to customer reviews can be more telling than the review itself and may turn the tide to a favorable outcome.

Similarly, Xie *et al.*, (2014) stated that responses by management to OLRs proves that management is listening, expressing appreciation and reinforcing the extent of care and human connection which helps building up goodwill. Gu and Ye (2014) added that addressing service failure prevents switching behavior and influences perception of justice and fairness, and improve customers' morale and attitude towards the company (Sahin *et al.*, 2017). Likewise, Pantelidis (2010), described several examples where an intervention from the company moderated and improved negative reviews and led to 'follow-up commentaries that are priceless'.

Furthermore, Zehrer *et al.*, (2011) found that negative postings were not necessarily bad if followed by a positive counter reaction, while Barsky and Frame (2009) explained that buffering complaints is a service recovery strategy that may turn tables and strengthen trust. Anderson, (2012) found that managerial response to negative reviews is more profitable than answering positive ones, while Sparks *et al.*, (2016) reported that provision of response enhanced inferences potential customers draw regarding business's trustworthiness and extent of care.

In response to this growing need, leading hotel review websites such as TripAdvisor and yelp feature dedicated management accounts where hotel managers can interact with reviewers by responding to their feedback. On both of these sites, managers may post one response to every comment thus providing a mean for engagement and interaction with customers who have been described by Litvin *et al.*, (2008) as "the opinion leaders in travel choice", "contributors to negative image projection" (Vermuelen and Seegers, 2009) and who represent a price increasing barrier to hotel operations (Ogut and Tas 2012).

4. Methodology

It has been argued that the ability of operators to respond to online reviews is under-studied in the little research focusing on this behavior (Lui *et al.,* 2018; Abramova *et al.,* 2015). Moreover, recent studies (Chevalier *et al.,* 2016) have indicated that managerial

response to negative reviews is more critical than answering positive ones and represent a manifestation of the operator's capability to utilize a system that projects a service oriented strategy. As such, and towards achieving the research objectives, this study aims to explore answers to the following pertaining questions:

1. What is the degree of attention that hotel management has directed toward their online response behavior.

2. Is the hotel's competitive stance affected by the weight of negative reviews in comparison to total online customer-generated content, in both categories of TripAdvisor's ranking and the conventional star rating system.

3. How does the tendency of managerial response to online reviews affect the hotel's competitive performance in terms of its attention, acknowledgement, speed and type of response to online reviewers.

The study collected data from TripAdvisor as it is the largest and most popular online review channel for travel accommodation (Filieri et al., 2015; Casalo et al., 2015). Data collection concentrated on the responses given by the top 99 hotels ranked by the online channel in the Kingdom of Bahrain. It need be noted that TripAdvisor demonstrates two different ranking systems. The first of these lists hotels according to 'travelers' ranking' where reviewers' feedback is the determining factor influencing the ranking procedure, while the second classification ranks the properties according to their 'best value'. The first category was chosen for the purpose of this study. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to investigate such an aspect in the growing hospitality industry of Bahrain. In this respect, registered reviewers on TripAdvisor rate hotel operations along a five point Likert type scale of excellent, very good, average, terrible and poor. As reported in other studies (Ho, 2017), a close reading of the reviews showed that only those belonging to the average, poor and terrible contained negative comments. In order to contain the research to negative feedback, this study limited its investigation to only the poor and terrible ratings, as average 'sitting on the fence' has shown to be of mixed content. The data on the top 99 hotels subject to the study were collected according to TripAdvisor's "travelers' ranking". These hotels were subdivided according to the rank they occupied into a three tier grouping of top, mid and low with each tier or group comprising 33 hotels. For comparison reasons, and in order to test for existent correlations, the analysis would, in certain cases resort to the most commonly used star rating system. All ninety nine hotels were listed on the Bahraini Tourism and Exhibition authority which is the main government body regulating the travel and hospitality businesses in the Kingdom of Bahrain. It need be noted that the

analysis only takes into consideration those reviews that were in English. As these constitute 89% of total reviews, one may not look upon this as a shortcoming but a minor limitation of the research.

5. Analysis of Results

Table 1 summarizes the frequencies of the hotels under study, showing that the top tier hotels accounted for the largest number of reviews (16824) averaging 509 reviews per hotel followed by the mid *(avg=80)* and low tiers *(avg=16)*. The table also shows the same variables distributed according to the star rating of the subject hotels.

TABLE 1: Frequencies.

TripAdvisor's Ranking	No. of Hotels	Total Reviews	English Reviews	Negative Reviews No.	Negative Reviews %	Answered Reviews No.	Answered Reviews %	Helpful Reviews
TOP	33	16824	15005	777	5%	601	77%	859
MID	33	2664	2331	419	18%	162	39%	1301
LOW	33	531	449	168	37%	9	5%	1438
Total	99	20019	17785	1364	8%	772	57%	3598
Stars Rating	No. of Hotels	Total Reviews	English Reviews	Negative Reviews No	Negative Reviews %	Answered Reviews No	Answered Reviews %	Helpful Reviews
5	16	11170	9890	539	5%	418	78%	392
4	54	8057	7207	685	10%	341	50%	1957
3	29	792	688	140	20%	13	9%	1249
Total	99	20019	17785	1364	8%	772	57%	3598

The aggregate results shown in table 1 shed light onto a primary question this research has presented. The first of these is represented in the relationship between the number of reviews and the position a hotel may occupy on TripAdvisor's ranking. Whether one considers the total number of reviews *(PC=.602, sig=.000)* or those that were posted in English *(PC=.593, sig=.000)*, there were significant correlations signifying that the higher the number of reviews, the higher was the rank the hotel has occupied. Top tiered hotels accounted for the highest percentage of total reviews (84%) followed by mid (13.3%) and low tiers (2.6%) respectively. This staggering difference may justify the fact that some hotel properties are increasingly being concerned with enhancing the number of reviews for their businesses, sometimes to the extent of solicitation (Gossling, 2016; Magno *et al.*, 2017).

6. TripAdvisor's Ranking vs Star Classification

At the outset, the analysis aimed to determine whether a correlation exist between the star rating of the subject hotels as bequeathed upon them by the Bahraini Tourism Authority and the rank assigned to them by TripAdvisor which the site bases on the score given to these properties by its registered reviewers. A significant negative correlation between hotels' star rating and its rank on the list *(-.686, sig.000)* indicates that TripAdvisor's' ranking does not wholly parallel the star rating system and that its ranking is not rigidly commensurate with the hierarchal star classification. That is to say that, regardless of the star categorization of any particular hotel, it is the guests' post experiential perception which determines how high the hotel is ranked on TripAdvisor. Table 2 shows a cross tabulation of the distribution of the hotels alongside their star ranking as well as their TripAdvisor's' position. It is noticeable that, for example, four star and three star properties were present in all three tiers of TripAdvisor's' ranks while five star properties had a concentration in the top rank with only minor representation elsewhere.

TABLE 2: Hotel Star Rating * Hotel TripAdvisor's Ranking.

		Rank			Total
		Top	Mid	Low	
Stars	Three	2	5	22	29
	Four	16	27	11	54
	Five	15	1	0	16
Total		33	33	33	99

(chi sq=57.8, df=4, sig=.000)

7. Valence of Negative Reviews

In computing number and percentages of negative reviews voicing customers' dissatisfaction, the top ranked tier had the lowest of these at 5% of total English reviews followed by 18% and 37% for mid and low tiers respectively. If the number and percentages of negative reviews signifies the level of customer satisfaction, then the correlation *(PC=.691, sig.=.000)* between the hotel rank and its percentage of negative reviews sustains TripAdvisor's' classification denoting that the lower the number of negative comments posted on a hotel, the higher it would rank on the travelers' site. The moderate coefficient, however, may be attributed to the fact that it is the valence of reviews which ultimately determines the hotel ranking in order to account for 'the

good, the bad and the ugly' feedback by registered reviewers. Similar results were congruent when results showed that there is a significant relationship *(-.541, sig=.000)* between the number of negative reviews and the star rating of the hotels where the higher the star classification the lower was the number of dissatisfied customers airing their distress. A paired sample correlation shown in table 3 implies that there exist significant differences between both star classification and TripAdvisor's ranking and the number of negative reviews posted, yet the difference in the strength of the correlation sustains TripAdvisor's less dependence on the star rating classification in compiling its ranking mechanism and its reliance on customers' post purchase behavior in determining the outcome.

TABLE 3: Percentage of Negative Reviews * Rank & Star Rating.

		N	Correlation	Sig.	t	df
Pair 1	Rank & Negative Responses %	99	.812	.000	15.743	98
Pair 2	Stars & Negative Responses %	99	-.541	.000	44.028	98

8. Response to Negative Reviews

As discussed in the literature review, service recovery may be achieved through answering guests' complaints (Sparks *et al.*, 2016). Towards analyzing this end, results indicated that a significant correlation *(PC=.908, sig=.000)* existed between the number of negative reviews and those to which management has acknowledged and answered. This supports the trending strategy of many hotel companies in dedicating their efforts into monitoring and managing online reviews whether posted on their sites or on third party platforms. Nevertheless, there was a significant difference between the hotels TripAdvisor's rank and their tendency towards the attention and effort given to respond to guests' complaints *(PC=-.808, sig=.000)* thus indicating that the higher the rank, the higher the reactive response of management to guests' voiced dismay.

Within this context, attention must be drawn to the lower ranked tier were 37% of its reviews were rated as either "poor" or "terrible". This implies a very low degree of meeting guest satisfaction which does not only place these properties at a disadvantaged rank on the travelers' site but which may affect potential travelers' perception of the subject hotels while flipping through the pages of the respectful site. Such

detrimental placing is compounded by the results which revealed that only a mere 5% of these negative reviews were responded to by the subjects' management.

In order to determine which of the ranks was more responsive to negative reviews, a cross tabulation showed a significant relation *(Chi sq=81.2, sig=.000)* between hotel rank and tendency to respond where the top ranked hotels responded to 77% of their negative comments followed by the mid group that responded to less than half (39%). A mere 5% was the feeble attempts by the third classification. This strong difference in proactive behavior was sustained and depicted in table 4 where differences between the three tiers were present.

TABLE 4: Response to Negative Reviews * Hotel TripAdvisor's Rank.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	11261.657	2	5630.828	8.262	.000
Within Groups	65423.697	96	681.497		
Total	76685.354	98			

In order to gain more understanding of the underlying differences in response behavior, running correlation between the number of responses to negative interviews using the 'stars' classification rather than TripAdvisor's' ranking, a significant correlation *(PC=.630, sig=.000)* indicated that the higher the star rating, the higher the attention management has given to its response behavior. The existence of this different behavior towards providing answers to negative customer complaints was supported by results shown in table 5. In this respect, cross tabulating the results *(chi sq=50.7, df=8, sig=.000)* showed the highest responses (78%) were attributed to the five star hotel properties followed by four and three stars respectively (50%, 9%). As such, one may determine that properties falling into the five star classification have exhibited more adherence to policies regarding customer relationship management where the customers' opinions matter even after these customers have checked out. Attention need be drawn to the fact that, generally, star rating of hotel properties is based on the tangible characteristics and features of their physical evidence rather than on their level of customer orientation. However, strategies and policies regarding customer care and, in particular, attending to customer comments, should not solely lend themselves to higher star classification as results have indicated.

TABLE 5: Response to Negative Reviews * Hotel Star Rating.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups Within Groups Total	7059.389	2	3529.695	43.152	.000
	7852.571	96	81.798		
	14911.960	98			

9. Helpfulness of Negative Online Reviews

This critical decline in management response may afflict harm on a hotel's online reputation, especially as results have revealed that, in total, 3598 TripAdvisor's' visitors have marked these negative comments as being helpful. This may lead us to believe that, in support of earlier literature (Phillips *et al.*, 2017; Torres *et al.*, 2015), there is no reason to doubt that these negative reviews have exerted a degree of influence on the site visitor' choice of accommodation. Running correlation between both variables, a moderate significant relationship *(PC=.441, sig=.000)* was found between negative reviews posted on TripAdvisor and the number of helpful 'thumbs up' votes these reviews have gathered. However, in order to investigate whether there existed a difference between how helpful these reviews were to different hotel rankings, results showed a significant correlation *(PC=.728, sig=.000)* between how helpful these reviews were and the ranking of the hotel; indicating that, to a degree, reviews on the lower tier hotels gained more helpful votes than their higher counterparts. Interestingly, when review helpfulness was correlated to the 'star' rating of the hotels, correlation showed a significant difference *(PC=-.597, sig=000)* indicating that a higher star classification attracted a lower number of helpful votes per review. Results depicted in table 6 reflect how negative reviews have been found helpful to site visitors in terms of both TripAdvisor's' ranking as well as to the hotels' star classification.

TABLE 6: Helpfulness of Negative Reviews.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Rank	Between Groups	46.967	31	1.515	5.333	.000
	Within Groups	19.033	67	.284		
	Total	66.000	98			
Stars	Between Groups	23.386	31	.754	2.539	.001
	Within Groups	19.907	67	.297		
	Total	43.293	98			

Finding a certain interest in these differences, a cross tabulation *(chi sq=100.4, df=62, sig=.002)* have shown that on average, each negative comment on a top tier hotel picked up 1.1 helpful votes while the average multiplied to 3.1 helpful votes for their mid-tier counterparts and rose much further to 8.5 for the hotels falling into the lowest tier. A proposed justification to this phenomenon may rest in the fact that as many of the hotels falling into the top ranked tier by TripAdvisor are members of international chains as opposed to independent properties, one may argue that these properties enjoy a well-established image in the readers' minds, and that selective distortion might have come into play. Nevertheless, the number of site visitors' who have flagged the negative reviews *(n=1364)* as being helpful *(n=3,598)* sustains the growing importance of eWOM (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015) in shaping consumer behavior in the hospitality industry.

10. Conclusion and Managerial Implications

This study is the first to investigate hotel guests' online reviews for hospitality companies operating in the Kingdom of Bahrain. It is a timely response to the fast growing popularity of travel related information sharing platforms and travelers' increasing reliance on information posted by their peers in an effort to sustain their travel decisions regarding choice of hotel accommodation.

The study uses data from actual consumer reviews as opposed to methods of experimentation. While the latter can provide good understanding in approximating online behavior, they do not capture real behavior of hotel management responses to voiced complaints. As such, the analyzed behavior based data enhances the empirical strength of this research findings.

Findings reveal that hotel operations operating within the same sector and in the same geographic location may behave differently and incongruently in approaching and monitoring their reaction to consumer generated content. Toward this end, the sample hotels have taken different approaches in addressing online reviews. Given this disparity, more research is needed to draw the attention and guide hospitality operators to the ever increasing impact online reviews may have on their guest satisfaction, brand loyalty and financial performance.

The importance of such activities stem from the fact that as complaints and responses are publicly available, readers of online reviews can form a similar perception of a hotel's customer orientation strategies without physically interacting with employees thus vicariously testing the service beforehand. Hence, by encouraging

response behavior to online reviews, hoteliers have the chance of offsetting the demonstrably damaging effects of negative reviews and enhance their score through diluting any excessive weight these reviews may result in.

Building upon this study, future research can focus on developing sampling rules based upon heuristics such as review length and reviewer characteristics that can be used to establish research validity in social media analytics in more efficient ways. Future research can also explore the effect of management response on reviewers' perception and their attitude and behavioral reactions with regard to service recovery and consideration of repatronage after responses being posted. Others aspects worth investigation could tackle issues such as speed of response to negative online reviews and the articulation of the response style.

Finally, eWOM is expected to continue to grow due to constant advancement in technology-driven communication channels. There is a growing belief that this concept is becoming more persuasive than other marketing instruments. As such, it is heeded that hoteliers seeking better overall success in their marketing endeavors to identify ways in which they can influence it to their advantage.

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