

Online Reputation Management in Destination and Hospitality

What We Know, What We Need to Know

Edited by

Riccardo Rialti
Zuzana Kvítková
Tomáš Makovník

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EDITED BY

RICCARDO RIALTI

University of Milan, Italy

ZUZANA KVÍTKOVÁ

Prague University of Economics and Business, Czech Republic

And

TOMÁŠ MAKOVNÍK

Matej Bel University, Slovakia



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2023

Editorial matter and selection © 2023 Riccardo Rialti, Zuzana Kvítková and Tomáš Makovník.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80382-376-8 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80382-375-1 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80382-377-5 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Elena,

*The one who taught me how to appreciate everything about this job even amid the
worst hardships.*

You will be infinitely missed by all of us.

Riccardo

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About the Editors

Riccardo Rialti, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Management at the Department of Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods at the University of Milan (IT). Previously, he has been a Research Fellow and Adjunct Professor of Management. He obtained a PhD in Business Administration and Management from the University of Pisa (IT) in 2019. He has been a visiting faculty at the University of Lincoln (UK), Middlesex University London (UK), Sophia University (JAP), and ESCP Europe (FR). His main research interests are related to digital technologies for management and marketing. In detail, over the years his research focused on big data, organizational dynamic capabilities, knowledge management, and ambidexterity. His papers have been published in international journals such as JBR, IEEE-TEM, TFSC, MD, BPMJ, CIT, BFJ, JGM, and WREMSD. In recent times, Riccardo has also started to work as a strategic consultant for SMEs wishing to digitalize and to expand their business.

Zuzana Kvítková, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Tourism at the Prague University of Economics and Business (CZ). Her main focus is marketing with application on tourism – hospitality, travel agencies, and destinations. Her main interests are marketing plans, online marketing, social media, online reputation management, and modern marketing approaches including content marketing, storytelling, and influencer marketing. She has also been invited as a guest speaker to several universities in Europe (Budapest, HU, Lille, Quimper, FR, Banská Bystrica, SK, Florence, IT). Zuzana gained her work experience as a Secretary of the Association of Tour Operators and Agencies, and at the position of Marketing Manager in a four-star conference hotel. In the last few years, she has been cooperating with several tourism businesses on marketing projects. She has also been a manager of the Erasmus+ and Visegrad projects.

Tomáš Makovník, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Tourism, Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia). His major specialization is hotel management with a special focus on dispositional solution, material and technical equipment and technological processes, communication with guests, and guest relations and reputation. Tomáš teaches Hospitality Management, Tourism Infrastructure, Animation in Tourism, Congress Services in Tourism, Culture of Communication, and Social Protocol.

He participates in providing the professional praxis (internship) in tourism companies, especially in accommodation and hospitality facilities. His main research interests so far have been related to strategy for the development of tourism in Slovakia in the conditions of the united European market, formation of organizational culture, and management system of companies with international representation in an intercultural environment and the platform economy as an opportunity for sustainable and competitive development of tourism in destinations in Slovakia.

I

Introduction

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Chapter 1

Online Reputation Management in Tourism: Emerging Themes, Theories, Problems, and Solutions

Riccardo Rialti, Zuzana Kvítková and Tomáš Makovník

Abstract

Online reputation manager has become increasingly important in tourism industry. Managers, regardless of working for a hospitality structure or a tourism destination, are paying more and more attention in respect of the importance of reputational levels. Online reputation, in fact, originates in visitor's user-generated contents (UGCs) but reverberates on the whole web, on successive visitors' attitude and behavior, and on managed organization performances. How to manage online reputation in tourism and destination management anyway mostly stayed an anecdotal topic for many years. While best practices exist, indeed, literature has frequently neglected their systematization. Building on this need, this book will try to improve and organize the existing body of knowledge on this topic to help future hotel and destination managers to better deal with the mounting environmental complexity.

Keywords: Online reputation; user-generated contents; tourism management; tourism marketing; marketing strategy; visitors behavior

Getting information off the internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant.

—Mitchell Kapor

1.1 Introduction to (Online) Reputation Issues – The Essence and Basic Context

Traveling nowadays is an important part of our lives. It belongs to the standard of living, became a social norm, and is also an important part of restoration of energy for work and our daily tasks and routines. When traveling, people want to get relaxed and not stressed. The smooth process of traveling, enjoying the time, scenery and architecture, and companionship is highly desired. The task of the hotels and service providers is to supply quality services and make the guest satisfied. Taking the whole customer journey into account, the process begins with delivering the right information to the potential guest about the quality and managing through this his expectations. Unfortunately for the hotels and service providers, the inspiration and informative stage is not completely under control. The stage of consuming the service is, on the other hand, fully under control and this is the moment when the customer experience and future reputation arises. The guests share their experience with friends and colleagues in the form of word-of-mouth (WOM), or with their social media followers or even with unknown readers (electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)). The stage of evaluation and sharing is again not under control and is influenced by many factors, including the initial expectations. And, closing the loop, this sharing (pictures, reviews, blogs, etc.) creates the reputation and image of the hotels and service providers and influences other potential guests in their decision and consumption. In this regard, it is necessary to admit that not all the customers have the same voice. The role of social media, influencers, and public relations in this process is nowadays undisputable.

This short paragraph brings many words and terms that are related to this topic and must be explained:

- (1) reputation, online reputation,
- (2) WOM, eWOM,
- (3) public relations,
- (4) corporate identity, image,
- (5) social media, influencers,
- (6) quality,
- (7) satisfaction,
- (8) customer journey.

There are several approaches to the reputation definition in the literature. The authors Pires and Trez made a comprehensive analysis of approaches and definitions of corporate reputation and supported the following definition: “reputation as the collective judgment of an organization by observers, based on financial, social and environmental assessments made over time” (Pires & Trez, 2018). This broader definition complies also with the purpose of this publication. Reputation is related to several topics (Veh, Göbel, & Vogel, 2019); the authors created eight clusters. Cluster six is devoted to tourism and hospitality. Reputation in this field of services is mostly connected to reviews and ratings, as an

important driver of purchase intention. The identified research directions are hotel reputation, reviewer reputation, impact on financial results, and response management. The report also identified the related topics like trustworthiness (cluster 4), identity, image, antecedents and consequences of reputation, corporate social responsibility, and customer satisfaction. The topics omitted are the off-line sources of reputation, fake reviews, social media and networks, or destinations. When talking specifically about online reputation, we must also consider the concepts of online presence and online visibility because online reputation is not developed only with the reviews and ratings, although it is very tempting to reduce the topic to those. The online reputation is highly relevant in tourism sector (Cioppi, Curina, Forlani, & Pencarelli, 2019).

WOM is where it all begins. Informal face-to-face communication about usage of particular goods or services or about the sellers that is between noncommercial entities (Arndt, 1967; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008) is perceived as more credible and reliable than commercial communication. The conceptual model of WOM was created by Litvin et al. (2008) and is presented in the Fig. 1.1.

The concept presents the process and factors influencing the originator (message sender) and the factors influencing the listener (receiver of the message). The technology of Web 2.0 allowed the peer-to-peer online communication, and the transfer of the WOM to online platforms was inevitable. The new form – the eWOM – has originated. The technology and reach of the message changed; however, most of the factors from Litvin’s concept stayed relevant. Online customer reviews are a form of eWOM. They act as mechanisms that enable digital platforms through which users rate (usually with varying numbers of stars) and express their written judgment and ratings about previously purchased items in order to support others during their purchasing process. Online review contributors are often previous users who want to remain anonymous, while the sources of traditional WOM are well-known people. Online evaluations are considered one of the most significant innovations in tourism over the last decade

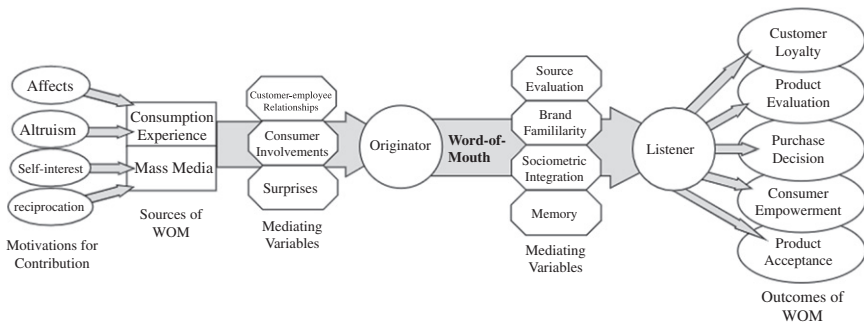


Fig. 1.1. A Conceptual Model of Word-of-Mouth. Source: Litvin et al. (2008).

(Gretzel, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010). Compared to traditional marketing tools, they are considered more successful in influencing customer behavior (Phillips, Barnes, Zigan, & Schegg, 2017). They are usually independent of marketers' sales efforts, so they look more credible and trustworthy in the eyes of customers (Nieto, Hernández-Maestro, & Muñoz-Gallego, 2014).

From the Litvin's concept results the importance of mass media. Usually, when talking about reputation, the peer reviews come automatically to our mind. But considering the possible sources of WOM, the mass media and their communication play a role. Media relations and public relations (PR) must be considered as a relevant tool for reputation management. There are several definitions in the literature, mostly mentioning public opinion, good and positive relations with internal and external public (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, & Hansen, 2019; Lesly & Jurnečka, 1995; Svoboda, 2009). Probably, the most inclusive definition is the one of Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR). PR is defined as "...discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behavior. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics." (About PR, b.r.) This definition directly connects PR and reputation.

The authors mention PR and reputation very often together with creating, promoting, and protecting company's image (Kotler et al., 2019). Some authors understand image and reputation as synonyms. However, some authors define the difference (Feldman, Bahamonde, & Velasquez Bellido, 2014; Pelsmacker, Geuens, & Van den Bergh, 2007; Walker, 2010) and also in respect of this book, it will be perceived as two terms. Walker analyses the differences between identity, image, and reputation. Whereas identity is decided and created inside the company, relates to the organization's culture (current practices, history, values, and behavior), image is created by the external perception of this identity. It is a combination of experiences, beliefs, emotions, information, and impressions in relation to an organization or company (Pelsmacker et al., 2007). According to some authors, it describes the situation in a certain moment (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006). Reputation, on the other hand, is a result of a cumulative perception and image in a longer time period (Brodie & Hollebeek, 2011; Mahon, 2002). Therefore, a positive reputation is a result of a long-term effort. On the other hand, it can be harmed and destroyed very quickly.

Social media are Web 2.0 internet-based applications publishing mainly user-generated content (UGC). Individuals and groups create user-specific profiles on social media and the technology enabled development of social networks as one type of social media (Obar & Wildman, 2015). With the rise of social media not only mass media are influential in terms of reputation. Thanks to the UGC, customers can make their opinions, ideas, and stories easily available to a global community of internet users (Dellarocas, 2003), and a growing number of users actively take advantage of this opportunity. Shao (2009) suggests that individuals handle UGC in three ways: by consumption, participation, and production. Consumption concerns individuals who only read or watch but never participate. Participation includes user-user interaction and user-content interaction, such as

rating content, adding to playlists, sharing with others, posting comments, etc. Production involves creating and publishing personal content, such as text, images, audio, and video. Pan and Crofts (2012) state that social media sites have long recognized that many more people consume information than they create it.

As aforementioned, social media users don't have the same audience reach. Influential users (influencers) with large audience and significant reach are commercially interesting for the companies, and influencer marketing became a standard component of the communication mix and marketing budget. Effect of social media, especially social networks, on reputation must be seriously considered. To get the feedback specialized application for "social listening" is developed to give the answers about the reputation, brand context, discussion topics, satisfaction of the customers, and the sentiment.

Good reputation is conditioned by delivery of a good quality product. Definition of quality is very variable and can be approached from five perspectives (Ghobadian, Speller, & Jones, 1994). From the service provider's perspective, quality is meeting the requirements (specifications, standards) (Crosby, 1980). From the customer's perspective quality is meeting their expectations. Service quality has two main components – (1) the technical quality (outcome, what), and (2) functional quality (process, how) (Grönroos, 1984). When talking about tourism and hotels, the production requirements can be size of the room, height of the mattress, number of types of products offered for breakfast. Perceived quality is the customer's subjective evaluation of the product, usually in comparison to alternatives (Pelsmacker et al., 2007). Companies delivering services with high perceived quality are more successful (higher market share, higher return on investment) (Lewis, 1989).

The hotel or service provider can influence and control the service production requirements. To maintain and manage the quality, it is necessary to get feedback about the customer's perception and satisfaction. The satisfaction models involve mostly four components: (1) expectations, (2) performance, (3) disconfirmation, and (4) satisfaction, saying that satisfaction results from the comparison of expectation and performance called disconfirmation (Caruana, Money, & Berthon, 2000). On the other hand, the research of relationship between quality, satisfaction, and intention to repurchase suggests that there are more factors influencing the satisfaction and product quality is only one of them (Cronin & Taylor, 1992).

1.2 Importance of Online Reputation in Tourism

Tourism as a sector has been deeply harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The decline in international tourists was enormous (74% in 2020 over the previous year 2019) ("UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex, January 2021", 2021). The tourism and health crisis had a potential to harm the reputation (Youngblood, 2010). The tourist suddenly considered different factors in their decisions, or the factors got different weights – safety, familiarity of the environment, health care availability, current travel restriction to the country, and in

the country, current restrictions in the hotels, reputation, transportation flexibility, etc. The trends toward last minute bookings, shorter distances, or popularity of campers were logical consequences. The domestic tourism was supposed to be the source of survival and recovery in many countries, although not all the countries had the same chance and potential (Kvitkova, Petru, & Zíková, 2021). All this led to a significant change in tourism demand, and the tourists focused on another types of destinations and accommodations than usual. The reputation suddenly played even bigger role because for many tourists the good reputation was a clue and sign of responsibility and safety. Many hotels reacted to that in their managerial and communication strategies (Nakai, 2021). This new normal must have brought changes into the perspective of reputation from both sides – hotels, destinations and other service providers, and tourists.

It is known that intangible products are produced and consumed at the same time, so it is difficult to evaluate them before consuming them (Litvin et al., 2008; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). Without real experience with them, customers have a limited opportunity to assess their quality and whether they meet their expectations. Customers are therefore increasingly relying on WOM provided by their peers to reduce risk and uncertainty during the decision-making and purchasing process (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Murphy, Mascard, & Benckendorff, 2007). They perceive them as more credible and therefore more influential than those provided by marketing professionals (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; O'Connor, 2010). This is why they are used by customers for faster and more efficient decision-making (Browning, So, & Sparks, 2013), but also by hotels and destinations for visibility (Nieto-Garcia, Resce, Ishizaka, Occhiocupo, & Viglia, 2019). Research has shown that potential customers tend to trust written comments posted online by other customers more than recommendations on official destination or hotel marketing websites (Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013).

The effect of reputation and reviews on decision-making process has clear consequences for the hotels' financial performance. The research found a positive relationship between hotel star category, online rating, and service provider's room pricing (Agusaj, Bazdan, & Lujak, 2017). However, the consistency is very important. A 10% increase in rating can raise sales by 4.4% and a 10% increase in review variance can decrease sales by 2.8% (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). It is also important to encourage the customers to write reviews as even the number of reviews can have a positive effect on occupancy (De Pelsmacker, van Tilburg, & Holthof, 2018).

The research revealed that rating of specific aspects of the hotels can be more important than the overall evaluation. High rank in search listings, a high number of recommendations and location rating have a significant and positive impact on conversion rates (Cezar & Ögüt, 2016). In this case hotels' location ratings are more important than star and service ratings for the conversion of visitors into customers. The positive comments have a high impact on customer demand, whereas the quality of rooms, internet, and buildings show the highest impact on performance represented by RevPAR and occupancy (Phillips, Barnes, Zigan, & Schegg, 2016). In some cases, the effect of individual factors on performance is