

Exploring the Relationship Between Past and Present Reviews: The Influence of User Generated Content on Future Hotel Guest Experience Perceptions

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Abstract : In the tourism industry, hoteliers spend millions annually on marketing and positioning efforts for their respective hotels, all in an effort to create a specific image in the minds of the consumer. Yet despite extensive efforts to seduce potential hotel guests with sophisticated advertising messages generated by hotel entities, consumers continue to mistrust corporate branding, preferring instead to place their trust in the reviews of their consumer peers. In today's complex and cluttered marketplace, online reviews can serve as a mediator for consumers who do not have actual knowledge and experiences with the brand, but are in the process of deciding whether or not to engage in a consumption exercise. Traditionally, consumers have used online reviews as a source of comfort and confirmation of a product/service's positioning. But today, very few customers make any purchase decisions without first researching existing user reviews, making reviews more of a necessity, rather than a luxury in the purchase decision process. The influence of user generated content (UGC) is amplified in the tourism industry; as more than a third of potential hotel guests will not book a room without first reading a review. As corporate branding becomes less relevant and online reviews become more important, how much of the consumer's stay expectations are being dictated by existing UGC? Moreover, as hotel guest experience a hotel through the lens of an existing review, how much of their stay and in turn their review, would have been influenced by those reviews that they read? Ultimately, there is the potential for UGC to dictate what potential guests will be most critical about, and or most focused on during their stay. If UGC is a stronger influencer in the purchase decision process than corporate branding, doesn't it have the potential to dictate, the entire stay experience by influencing the expectations of the guest prior to them arriving on the property? For example, if a hotel is an eco-destination and they focus their branding on their website around sustainability and the retreat nature of the hotel. Yet, guest reviews constantly discuss how dissatisfactory the service and food was with no mention of nature or sustainability, will future reviews then focus primarily on the food? Using text analysis software to examine over 25,000 online reviews, we explore the extent to which new reviews are influenced by wording used in previous reviews for a hotel property, versus content generated by corporate positioning. Additionally, we investigate how distinct hotel related UGC is across different types of tourism destinations. Our findings suggest that UGC can have a greater impact on future reviews, than corporate branding and there is more cohesiveness across UGC of different types of hotel properties than anticipated. A model of User Generated Content Influence is presented and the managerial impact of the power of online reviews to trump corporate branding and shape future user experiences is discussed.

Keywords : user generated content, UGC, corporate branding, online reviews, hotels and tourism

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