

HOTEL ONLINE REPUTATION IN NIGERIA: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In an era dominated by the digital landscape, the online reputation of hotels has emerged as a pivotal determinant of their success. This theoretical article delves into the nuanced realm of hotel online reputation within the context of Nigeria. As the Nigerian hospitality industry experiences significant growth and digitalization, understanding the factors that influence hotel online reputation becomes paramount for both hoteliers and researchers. Drawing on an extensive review of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, this article explores the multifaceted nature of online reputation management in Nigerian hotels. Key factors affecting hotel online reputation in Nigeria, such as customer reviews, social media engagement, website quality, and cultural considerations, are comprehensively examined. The article also discusses the implications of these factors on the performance and competitiveness of hotels in the Nigerian market. In a globalized digital age, this article contributes to the broader discourse on online reputation management by presenting a context-specific analysis that illuminates the intricate interplay of factors shaping the online reputation of hotels in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Hotel online reputation, Electronic word-of-mouth, Digitalization, Online customer reviews, social media engagement.*

Introduction

In the digital age, the hospitality industry has undergone a transformation of unprecedented magnitude. Gone are the days when travellers relied solely on guidebooks and word-of-mouth recommendations to select their accommodations. Today, the decision-making process for prospective hotel guests heavily relies on the digital realm. Online reviews, social media presence, and the overall online reputation of hotels have become pivotal factors in travellers' choices. Nowhere is this shift more apparent than in Nigeria, a nation marked by its burgeoning tourism sector and increasing digital connectivity. Hotel businesses rely on their reputation to stay in business as hotel's online presence are essential for acquiring new customers, retaining existing ones and increasing revenue and this is why many hotels have

adopted online reputation techniques to make sure that their brand remains positive and trustworthy. Online customer reviews represent a form of electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) which is considered being more successful in influencing consumer behaviour, compared to traditional marketing tools. They are typically independent of marketers' selling efforts, so they appear more trustworthy and credible in the eyes of consumers. Hotel managers have to ensure the achievement of profitability, high enough to cover investment, assets and the related fixed costs.

This theoretical article aims to see through the intricate web of hotel online reputation management in Nigeria. It seeks to unravel the complexities of this phenomenon, shedding light on the unique challenges and opportunities that hoteliers in Nigeria encounter. Understanding these intricacies is not only valuable for businesses striving to thrive in a digitalized market but also for scholars seeking to contribute to the evolving discourse on online reputation management.

Literature Review

Online Reputation (E-reputation) is one of the most valuable brand asset characteristics that Nicoli & Papadopoulou (2017) defines as 'overall assessments of organizations by their stakeholders that produces support for the company'. It is considered as an important intangible asset of an organization (Meier & Portmann, 2012). With the growth of the internet and the customers' improvement of access to information, the current notion of firm reputation has evolved and expanded towards the so-called online reputation (Bakos & Dellarocas, 2011). Online is where reputations are currently made (Beal & Strauss, 2008). Meier & portmann (2012) stated that social media or social web becomes more significant in the process of reputation building. The e-reputation is particularly notable in the hotel industry, considering the high sensitivity and tremendous influence of electronic word-of-mouth activities of customer on a hotel's online reputation (Cantallops and Salvi, 2014). Regarding online reputation consequences, researchers agree with the idea that as online reviews is a crucial factor when selecting a hotel, a good online reputation positively influences the sustainability of a competitive advantage. Greater visibility on the web or positive online reviews will lead to higher occupancy levels and room reservations and increases in sales and performance.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM): Word-of-Mouth marketing finds ways to engage customers so they choose to talk with others about products, services, and brands, and is increasingly being driven by social media (Kottler & Keller, 2012). As a new form of communication, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) is the dynamic and ongoing information exchange process between potential, actual, or former consumers regarding a product, service, brand, or company, which is available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (Ismagilova et al., 2017). Electronic word-of-mouth occurs through customer ratings, which refers to the numerical or star value given by consumers to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the product, as well as reviews, which refers to a verbal message written by a consumer. Ismagilova et al (2017) stated that electronic word-of-mouth is a very powerful business tool for companies to attract more attention of their products, or services and increase sales that can lead to damage in reputation, decrease in sales, and even ruin the business if it is used incorrectly. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has two dimensions: The first is the "Communication scope"; which includes; one-to-one communication (e-mails), one-to-many (online review sites) or many-to-many (virtual pages, blogs and chat rooms). The second is the level of interactivity from asynchronous (e-mails, online review

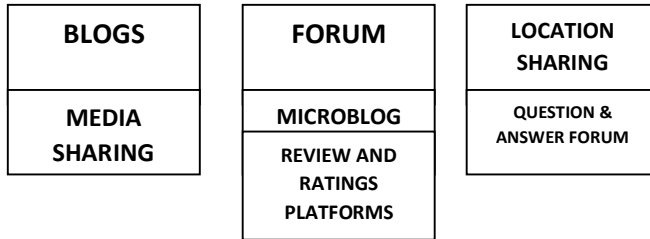
sites and blogs) to synchronous (chat rooms, newsgroups, and instant messaging) (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014; Litvin et al., 2008).

Online Review: In the modern business world, word-of-mouth has transformed into the power of the online review. Considered as electronic word-of-mouth, customer online reviews have a great influence on both consumers and business organizations (Niu & Fan, 2017). The rapid development of the internet with its much enhanced communication capabilities has dramatically increased the scale and scope of communication and online reviews have become a major informational source for consumers. The popularity of online review platforms is causing the business companies to be under increasing pressure to maintain a flawless online reputation (Proserpio & Zervas, 2016). It nowadays has become a highly influential decision-making tool in the hospitality industry (Lee & Blum, 2015). Online reviews for hotels, restaurants, and tourism services can be a critical input for people who have no service experiences (Kim, 2017). It is recognized as the most accessible and valuable feedback platform in the hotel industry as the previous customers tend to list their experiences, which potential customers review prior to their purchase. Customers want to be well-informed about both negative and positive reviews, and they would be inclined to purchase a hotel room based on positive reviews. In a recent TripBarometer survey, conducted by TripAdvisor, 89% of respondents said reviews had the most influence on their bookings (TripBarometer, 2014). Similarly, in Phocuswright (2015) study, over 80% of respondents said traveller reviews are an important influence on their booking decision and 54% would not book a property that does not have reviews. Deloitte (2015) presented the data that 42% of holiday makers use review websites, 59% say these sites have the most influence on their booking decisions and 46% search for feedback and comments by other people. Nguyen and Coudounaris (2015) also noted that 35% of travellers change their decisions of hotels after browsing social media, 53% of respondents stated that they will not book a hotel that doesn't have any reviews, and 87% of users said that site's review help them feel more confident in their travel decisions'.

Social Media: Social Media are online tools and platforms that allow internet users to collaborate on content, share insights and experiences, and connect for business or pleasure (Beal & Strauss, 2008:9). It becomes an alternative source for independent and unfiltered news and empowers people to expose wrong doing, report news, express resentment and mobilize protest against grievances (Wyrwoll, 2014). Ngai (2015), stated that social media allows people to create, receive, publish and exchange information online. The use of social media as a set of tools empowering the companies to communicate, cooperate and interact with customers, can in turn facilitate creating value and sharing the knowledge (Sigala & Chalkiti, 2015). According to Lessig (2001); Mu"nker (2009); Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith (2010); Solis (2010) and Anderson (2012), the democratization of information, the shift from one-to-many to many-to-many communication, and the transformation from consuming to publishing users of the Internet are essential aspects of social media. In the context of travel and tourism, consumers use social media for a wide spectrum of scenarios, e.g. sharing their travel-related experiences, engaging with others, connecting with people from different destinations, and buying travel-related products and services (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Zeng & Geritsen, 2014). Fotis et al (2012) stated that prospective tourists are influenced by social media, as content from other travellers can shape, guide and redirect their initial decisions. Since tourism related products and services are well differentiated and purchasing tourism products require higher levels of customer involvement, most travellers use social media to search various types of information before they make travel decisions in order to minimize their perceived risk and to avoid overpaying for service failure (Kim & Park, 2017). Social media help customers find product matching their needs. Studies show that functional and monetary

benefits from social media do have a positive relation with customers purchase decision (Song & Yoo, 2016). There are innumerable platforms that enable people to share contents on social media. The following social media categorization will serve as basis of comprehension for this research:

Figure 1: Social Media Categories



Sources: Anggani and Suherlan (2020).

The Management of E-reputation: E-reputation Management deals with monitoring and influencing the online record of a person, an organization, or a product by managing the Web reputation of a person, brand or business, with the goal of suppressing negative mentions entirely, or pushing them lower on Search Engine Result Pages (SERP) to decrease their visibility (Meier & Portmann, 2012). According to Destination BC (2014), e- reputation Management is the process of monitoring and engaging on the social web to drive higher awareness, customer satisfaction and revenue to the business. It is about adapting to change in the way people research travel and share experience online. It is about harnessing the powers of social media to get customers talking about and recommending our business. Managing the online presence and reputation requires initial and ongoing investments of time. Here are 4 (four) reasons why managing online reputation is a critical function for tourism businesses (Destination BC, 2014):

1. Social media has changed traveller behaviour (research trips, communicate with businesses and share experiences).
2. Consumers trust other consumers more than any other advertising source.
3. Business reputation is interdependent
4. Reputation drives revenue.

People access information online easier today, and this phenomenon has a huge contribution in determining the hotel performance. They lose their trust to the hotel or brand promotion, they trust more to the others’ reviews or testimonials based on the real experiences. It is in line with Kardon (2007) which stated that consumers rely more on peer reviews due to its independence and trustworthiness. E-reputation is significant and worthy of attention due to its impact on the customers’ purchase decision. It is also revealed that the power of digital word-of-mouth in the form of online reviews is greater than the hotel promotion. It is greatly important, particularly in determining the hotel sales performance. It means that the hotel companies need to put more attention to the e-reputation building through consumers’ review rather than focus only on intense hotel promotion. Online reviews and conversation about the business on social media, or media coverage contribute to the business e-reputation. It is the most required time for companies to entirely move into the digital era and fully focus on e-reputation. The e-reputation encompass the collection of every piece of information about the business online, and all of this information comes together to shape an opinion in customers’ mind about the business or company, whether positive or negative. Going digital and maintaining a good e-reputation is essential for the business survival and growth. It could not be denied that e-reputation is inevitably linked to social media. It puts the hotel companies in

a spotlight, in which billions of people are able to see the good and bad things about the company with only a few clicks of their mouse. Once the bad things appear online through social media, everyone including the customers, potential customers, partners, investors, and everyone else is going to hear about it rapidly. People use social media to share their product and service experiences with others and the information is publicly available for free. Products or services information provided by other consumers in social media who are free from commercial interests are considered to be less biased and more trustworthy (Wyrwoll, 2014). This makes social media a valuable source of information for consumers in their decision-making process. The researcher has also tried to find out what social media platforms are widely used by hotel industry. It is found out that Instagram, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, TripAdvisor and Online Travel Agents (OTAs) as travel review sites are the mostly used kind of social media.

Theoretical Framework

in today's digital era, the hospitality industry has witnessed a transformative shift in consumer behaviour. Travellers no longer rely solely on traditional promotional materials or personal recommendations when choosing accommodations. Instead, they turn to the vast online ecosystem of reviews, social media platforms, and booking websites to inform their decisions. This shift underscores the fundamental importance of online reputation management (ORM) for hotels. Online reviews, ratings, and overall digital sentiment now heavily influence potential guests' choices. Travellers have grown accustomed to assessing a hotel's reputation by scanning through aggregated scores on platforms like TripAdvisor, Google, or specialized hotel review sites. Positive reviews and a strong online reputation can translate into increased bookings and revenue.

Cheung and Thadani's study (2012) further solidify this perspective. Their research indicates that an overwhelming majority of travellers regard online reviews as a primary information source when selecting accommodations. Positive reviews can significantly boost a hotel's visibility and desirability, while negative feedback can deter potential guests. Consequently, hotels across the globe have recognized the criticality of actively managing their online reputation to thrive in this competitive landscape.

Online Reputation Management Models: Online reputation management is a multifaceted process. To provide hotels with structured guidance, Kim and Kim (2018) introduced the ORM Pyramid model, which comprises four hierarchical tiers: monitoring, managing, analyzing, and leveraging.

1. **Monitoring:** At the base of the pyramid, monitoring involves keeping track of online mentions and reviews related to the hotel. This phase focuses on passive engagement with the online landscape.
2. **Managing:** The second tier, managing, includes proactive steps to address and respond to online feedback. This phase is about actively engaging with reviews and managing online content.
3. **Analyzing:** Analyzing takes the process further by examining sentiment trends and making data-driven decisions. It's about turning data into actionable insights.
4. **Leveraging:** At the top of the pyramid, leveraging involves using a positive online reputation to drive marketing and branding initiatives.

Online Reputation in the Nigerian Hospitality Industry: Nigeria, as a nation with a burgeoning tourism sector and increasing digital connectivity, presents a distinctive environment for hoteliers seeking to establish and maintain a strong online presence. The Nigerian hospitality industry is experiencing remarkable growth, driven by both domestic and

international travellers seeking diverse experiences. Consequently, the online reputation of hotels has a direct and measurable impact on their competitiveness (Iwu-Egwuonwu & Ogbari, 2019).

Iwu-Egwuonwu and Ogbari's study (2019) underlines the intimate relationship between online reputation and hotel performance in Nigeria. Their research findings indicate that hotels with a more robust online reputation tend to attract a higher volume of guests and generate greater revenues. In a market characterized by increasing competition, where travelers meticulously scrutinize online reviews, Nigerian hotels cannot afford to underestimate the importance of online reputation management.

The applicability of ORM models like the ORM Pyramid to the Nigerian context is a critical consideration. Nigeria's unique socio cultural and economic landscape demands a tailored approach to ORM. Cultural preferences, local review platforms, and language variations should be taken into account when applying ORM strategies within the Nigerian context.

In the Nigerian, the Online Reputation Model serves as a critical framework for understanding how hotels in the region navigate the dynamics of online reputation management. Nigerian hotels, like their global counterparts, are impacted by online reviews and ratings, and they employ various strategies to manage and enhance their online standing.

This model considers the following key components within the specific context of the Nigerian hospitality industry:

1. **Nigerian Review Aggregation Platforms:** Nigerian hotels must pay attention to domestic review aggregation platforms and social media channels, such as Jumia Travel, Hotels.ng, and Nigerian travel blogs. These platforms play a significant role in shaping a hotel's online reputation within the local market (Olayiwola, 2019).
2. **Guest Reviews and Ratings in Nigeria:** Nigerian hotels receive guest reviews and ratings that reflect their service quality, guest experiences, and unique features relevant to the Nigerian market. These reviews and ratings may highlight factors like local cuisine, cultural experiences, and personalized services (Adeleke et al., 2020).
3. **Service Quality in the Nigerian Context:** Nigerian hotels should adapt the model to consider the cultural and regional nuances that influence service quality. This includes factors like staff behaviour, local customs, cleanliness, and unique hospitality offerings tailored to the Nigerian market (Ejiofor & Onwuegbuchulam, 2021).
4. **Management Responses in Nigeria:** Proactive management responses to guest feedback are crucial in maintaining and enhancing online reputation in Nigeria. Understanding the cultural sensitivities and communication preferences of Nigerian guests is paramount in shaping how responses are perceived (Akinbode, 2019).
5. **Nigerian Social Media Engagement:** Social media engagement plays a vital role in the Nigerian context. Hotels must actively engage on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, which are popular among Nigerian travelers. They can utilize these channels for marketing and reputation management (Uwazie & Chidozie, 2020).
6. **Impact on Decision Making in Nigeria:** The model recognizes the significance of online reputation in influencing travel decisions within the Nigerian market. Positive online feedback can lead to higher bookings and recommendations, particularly within the local and regional context (Oliver & Akomolafe, 2020).

Financial Impact of Online Reputation: Ye et al. (2011) provide quantifiable evidence of the financial impact of online reputation. Their study demonstrates that a one-point increase in a hotel's review score (on a 5-point scale) is associated with higher room prices and increased

occupancy rates. This direct correlation between online reputation and financial performance underscores the importance of active online reputation management as a business imperative.

Customer Reviews and Their Impact on Online Reputation

Customer reviews are the cornerstone of online reputation for hotels. They serve as a powerful means for potential guests to gauge the quality and authenticity of a hotel's services. In Nigeria, as in many other parts of the world, customer reviews are instrumental in shaping the online reputation of hotels. A study by O'Neill and Xiao (2006) underscores that online reviews, being largely user-generated, hold significant credibility among consumers.

In the context of the Nigerian hospitality industry, customer reviews play an even more substantial role. Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape and regional disparities mean that travellers often rely heavily on reviews to navigate through a wide range of options.

Research by Kim and Kim (2018) supports this notion, highlighting the role of reviews as "cultural intermediaries" in shaping tourists' expectations and choices. However, it is crucial to recognize the **potential challenges** associated with customer reviews. They including:

- a) Biased and Fake Reviews
- b) Negative Reviews
- c) Lack of Context
- d) Language and Cultural Differences
- e) Trolling and Harassment
- f) Competitor Sabotage by rival business.

The Role of Social Media Engagement: Research by Zhang et al. (2018) reveals that active social media engagement positively correlates with online reputation scores for hotels.

In the Nigerian context, social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have become essential tools for hotels to showcase their unique offerings. These platforms allow hotels to share captivating visual content, interact directly with guests, and address inquiries and concerns promptly. Effective social media management has the potential to amplify positive narratives and mitigate negative perceptions, thus enhancing the overall online reputation of Nigerian hotels.

Website Quality and User Experience: In the study by Chen et al. (2017), it is evident that user-friendly websites with compelling visuals and intuitive navigation contribute to a positive online reputation. Nigerian hotels should ensure that their websites are not only aesthetically pleasing but also functional and responsive.

Furthermore, localizing websites to cater to the diverse linguistic and cultural preferences within Nigeria is critical. This aligns with research by Buhalis and Law (2008), which emphasizes the importance of adapting digital platforms to accommodate local norms and preferences, thereby enhancing online reputation.

Case Study

It is important that we consider the activities of some notable hotels in Nigeria with regards to how they have been able to build and maintain their online reputation over the years that technology has been driving the operations of business activities. As a case study, we will be taking a look at Eko Hotel & suites (Lagos), and Ayalla Hotels (yenagoa).

Eko Hotel & Suites: Eko Hotel & Suites is one of the most prominent and largest hotels in Lagos. It's located on Victoria Island and offers a wide range of services and amenities. Eko Hotel & Suites has a substantial online presence and typically receives a mix of reviews on platforms like TripAdvisor and Google Reviews. Eko Hotel & Suites actively manages its online reviews. They respond promptly to guest feedback, both positive and negative, demonstrating their commitment to guest satisfaction. The hotel maintains a strong presence

on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. They use these channels to showcase their facilities, share guest experiences, and engage with their audience. Eko Hotel & Suites' also has a website that is user-friendly, providing clear information about their services, booking options, and promotions. It ensures a smooth online experience for potential guests.

Ayalla Hotels, Yenagoa: Ayalla Hotels is located in Yenagoa, the capital city of Bayelsa State. Its location makes it a significant choice for travelers visiting the area. Ayalla Hotels closely monitor guest feedback and respond to reviews to maintain a positive online image. Ayalla Hotels, use social media platforms especially facebook where it is most active to engage with their audience. They share photos, updates, and interact with potential guests.

The hotel's website is crucial for providing information about room options, services, dining facilities, and special promotions. Ayalla Hotels has also become aware of and responsive to the cultural preferences and expectations of the local community. This cultural sensitivity has positively impacted its online reputation.

These hotels actively engage with online reviews, maintain a strong presence on social media, provide user-friendly websites, and adapt their services to cater to local preferences. Additionally, being part of global hotel chains or having a strong brand reputation has also contributed to their online standing. The key takeaway therefore, is that a combination of active management and adaptability to local factors is crucial for effective online reputation management in the Nigerian hospitality industry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the digital landscape has profoundly reshaped the way travellers choose accommodations, placing online reputation at the forefront of their decision-making process. This is particularly pronounced in the dynamic Nigerian hospitality industry, where hotels' online reputation directly impacts their competitiveness and financial performance.

To succeed in this digital era, Nigerian hotels must actively engage with online reviews, social media, and website quality to enhance their online reputation. Customer reviews play a pivotal role, and while they provide authenticity, they also bring challenges related to bias, negative feedback, and cultural nuances.

The research revealed that the hotel companies are currently using six kinds of social media platforms which are classified into four categories according to Wyrwoll (2014), they are Media Sharing (Youtube); Social Networks (Instagram & Facebook); Microblogs (Twitter) and Rating & review Platforms (TripAdvisor & Online Travel Agents as travel review sites). This research found out that the e-reputation management of hotel industry consists of three kinds of activities which encompass online activities, offline activities and online & offline activities. Also, the ORM model offers a structured approach to online reputation management, and it must be tailored to fit the Nigerian context. Understanding the importance of local review platforms and cultural preferences is crucial for hotels operating in Nigeria.

Ultimately, a strong online reputation is not just a business advantage but a necessity in the modern hospitality industry. It attracts more guests, drives revenue, and shapes how hotels are perceived by their target audience. Nigerian hotels that effectively manage their online reputation will likely thrive in a competitive market driven by digital connectivity and cultural diversity.

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