Electronic hotel customer satisfaction: e-WOM comments of hotels in Pilgrims Rest, Mpumalanga

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Abstract

In the hotel industry, electronic-Word-Of-Mouth (e-WOM) has a significant effect on customers' decision making. It helps them to reduce the risk along with buying services as intangible products. The purpose of this study was to measure hotel customer satisfaction using e-WOM comments of hotels. The survey instrument was based on Wong Ooi Mei, Dean and White (1999) HOLSERV model. In order to meet study objectives, structural equation modelling was conducted. The results show that the degree to which a promised service is performed dependably and accurately (reliability) highly impacts on customer satisfaction in hotels. This is followed by 'the degree to which service providers are willing to help customers and provide prompt service' (responsiveness), and 'the extent to which service providers are knowledgeable, courteous, and able to inspire trust and confidence' (assurance). To reduce negative e-WOM, hotels can make use of social media. Social media is a powerful tool to encourage positive e-WOM and a strategy to encourage interaction with past, current and future customers. The findings contribute to the existing literature on hotel customer satisfaction by analysing a less explored topic (e-WOM) by means of a comprehensive methodology that considers guest comments from an online source.

Keywords: e-WOM, customer satisfaction, hotels, social media, guest comments, HOLSERV

Introduction

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) can be defined as all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers (Fox & Longart, 2016). This includes communication between producers and consumers as well as those between consumers themselves - both integral parts of the WOM flow, and both distinctly differentiated from communications through mass media (Wensi, 2017). As technology has advanced, the internet has been widely applied in the hotel industry through the digitalization of word-of-mouth in the hotel industry (Ventura, 2017). Traditional word-of-mouth which spread from person to person vocally has been replaced gradually by electronic word-of-mouth.

Through recommendations or warnings obtained from friends or family members, Word-of-mouth provides the opportunity for potential customers to learn about the positive and negative aspects of services offered by hotels before making a reservation. Ventura (2017) spells out a disturbing fact regarding negative e-WOM. One out of 26 unhappy customers complains

through e-WOM, while the other 25 customers (96%). Negative e-WOM is suggested to have stronger influence than positive e-WOM on the purchase intentions of the consumers. This is especially true if negative e-WOM can be strengthen the power of negative e-WOM, as the records of the reviews can be stored on the Internet for an indefinite period of time. However, positive e-WOM tends to increase the number of first-time hotel customers to repeat guests by 5%, it can raise its profits anywhere from 25 to 125% (Wensi, 2017). Therefore, it is important for hotel managers to reduce negative e-WOM (Ventura, 2017).

In the hotel industry, e-WOM has a significant effect on customers' decision making. It helps them to reduce the risk along with buying services as intangible products (Pourabedin & Migin, 2015). Therefore, positive e-WOM helps hotels to create a positive image and increase customers' purchase intention. A satisfactory hotel experience in terms of attributes such as availability of services and products and surrounding conditions can lead to generate positive e-WOM. Consequently, it is important for hoteliers to understand which types of hotel experiences motivate customers to publish e-WOM (Harrison-Walker, 2001).

According to Wensi (2017) there are six types of e-WOM channels, namely, blogs, newsgroups, review websites, chat rooms, instant messaging and e-mails. However, the most popularly used e-WOM in the hotel industry is online review websites generated by internet users regarding their hotel experiences (Ventura, 2017). Online review websites enable hotel guests to share their e-WOM regarding their hotel experiences with other customers as well as communicate with the hotel management. This helps potential customers in their decision-making process, and also helps with management strategy modification as well (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). In the same vein, Hamdi (2017) found that it is possible for the review website to reach the number of consumers twice as many as offline channels. This is because review websites can provide information to a vast variety of potential consumers who are searching online for hotel information whereas traditional WOM can only reach close friends and families (Romaniuk, 2016). When it is not possible for a potential consumer to obtain reliable information about a hotel from acquaintances in real life, he/she is likely to search from review websites – as it is suggested that 77.9% of potential consumers are likely to read online reviews of hotels in order to form better purchase intentions (Mishra, 2016). Therefore, e-WOM plays an increasingly important role in the hotel industry as technology develops.

According to Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008), in the hotel industry e-WOM has affected consumer behaviour and their purchasing decision dramatically, due to the intangibility and experiential nature of services, forcing consumers to seek additional information to reduce the uncertainty and the complexity involved when making hotel choices. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has become a major source of information because of its (1) enhanced volume, (2) dispersion, (3) persistence and observability, (4) anonymity and deception, (5) salience of valence, and (6) community engagement (King, Racherla & Bush, 2014).

The hotel industry has been affected by e-WOM significantly (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Ong, 2012). Hotel guests review the advice from other guests from online sources such as blogs, forums and review sites. Cantallops and Salvi (2014) posit that the hotel industry is the most affected sector by e-WOM within the tourism industry. According to Cheng and Zhou (2010) and Tian (2013), e-WOM has a significant effect on travellers' choice of accommodation when planning a trip. By increasing the importance of e-WOM, it is necessary for researchers to study the specifics of e-WOM. According to Jeong and Jang (2011), understanding the motivations of e-WOM help marketers to know how to encourage e-WOM. Therefore, it is vital for hoteliers to manage electronic Word of Mouth, due to the competitive advantages gained from knowing the needs of the customers (Pourabedin & Migin, 2015).

The internet has transformed the way information flows across social circles and customers can use it to gather, distribute and publish information (Cakim, 2010). Virtual communities are

becoming very influential in hotel business. The consumers trust their peers rather than marketing messages and therefore people exchange ideas and experiences through media channels. A virtual travel community makes it easier to obtain information and make decisions. By creating an understanding of these communities and their users, hotels can facilitate consumer centric marketing or relationships (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Word of mouth has shown to influence a variety of conditions such as awareness, expectations and perceptions. It is said to be more influential then advertising in raising awareness and in securing the decision to buy a product/service. Word of mouth influences expectations and perceptions during the information search phase during the buying process (Buttle, 1998). Some studies have shown that good online reviews generate higher revenues in the hotel industry. Positive online reviews can increase the number of bookings in a hotel, however, a variance of word of mouth has a negative impact on sales. Studies have shown that a 10% improvement in reviews can increase the sales by 4.4% and a 10% increase in review variance can decrease sales by 2.8%. Consequently, hotel managers should emphasise the management of e-Word-of-mouth to increase revenues (Gu, Law & Ye, 2009). It is important to avoid the spread of e-complaints and localise them to cope with them professionally (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Thus, the new way of communicating requires new strategies that enable hoteliers to analyse and improve their services, to gain competitive advantage and a good brand (Goldsmith, Litvina & Pana, 2008). Therefore this study has put focus on how hotel marketers and managers may control the big amount of reviews being related to their hotels, and how to use it as a marketing channel. Such advertising can serve as an effective channel to retain customers and add to traditional marketing (Mills & Law, 2004).

Theoretical Background

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) developed a service quality model, the SERVQUAL approach, after realising the significance of service quality for the survival and success of service companies and the need for a generic instrument which would be used to measure service quality across a broad range of service categories. The model proposed a five-dimensional construct of perceived service quality – tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, with items reflecting both expectations and perceived performance – and comprised a 22-item scale for measuring customers' expectations and perceptions. According to Parasuraman et al. (1985:42), tangibles refer to 'the degree to which physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel are adequate', while reliability refers to 'the degree to which a promised service is performed dependably and accurately'. Responsiveness refers to 'the degree to which service providers are willing to help customers and provide prompt service', while assurance refers to 'the extent to which service providers are knowledgeable, courteous, and able to inspire trust and confidence'. Empathy refers to 'the degree to which the customers are offered caring and individualised attention'. However, Cronin and Taylor (1994) suggested that the measurement of service quality could be accomplished by using only the perception of customer experience rather than measuring the gap between expectation and actual experience of the service by customers. Cronin and Taylor (1994) later modified the SERVQUAL and named it SERVPERF which is only used to assess perceived service performance using a seven-point scale.

In 1995, Stevens, Knutson and Patton (1995) developed a modified version of SERVQUAL, named LODGSERV, which measures the expectations of hotel guests in terms of service quality using a 26-item index developed on the five dimensions of SERVQUAL. Subsequently, Stevens et al. (1995) created a different version of SERVQUAL to measure the quality of service in restaurants, which was named DINESERV. It was later refined by Wong Ooi Mei, Dean and White (1999) to suit the hotel industry and given a different name, HOLSERV. It comprised a 22-item scale with the following five dimensions, namely, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Table 1).

Table 1: HOLSERV (Hotel Service Quality) measurement attributes and dimensions.

TANGIBLES	V1	The hotel has modern-looking equipment
	V2	The hotel's physical facilities are visually appealing
	V3	The hotel's employees are neat-appearing
	V4	Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) at the hotel are visually appealing
RELIABILITY	V5	When the hotel promises to do something by a certain time, it does so
	V6	When you have a problem, the hotel shows a sincere interest in solving it
	V7	The hotel performs the service right the first time
	V8	The hotel provides its services at the time it promises to do so
	V9	The hotel insists on error-free records
RESPONSIVENESS	V10	Employees of the hotel tell you exactly when services will be performed
	V11	Employees of the hotel give customers prompt service
	V12	Employees of the hotel are always willing to help you
	V13	Employees of the hotel are never busy to respond to your requests
ASSURANCE	V14	The behaviour of employees of the hotel instils confidence in customers
	V15	Customers feel safe in their transactions with the hotel
	V16	Employees of the hotel are consistently courteous towards customers
	V17	Employees of the hotel have the knowledge to answer customer questions
EMPATHY	V18	The hotel gives customers individual attention
	V19	The hotel has operating hours convenient to all its customers
	V20	The hotel has employees who give customers personal attention
	V21	The hotel has customers' best interests at heart
	V22	Employees of the hotel understand customers' special needs

From the preceding points, a conceptual model for the study is proposed (Figure 1).
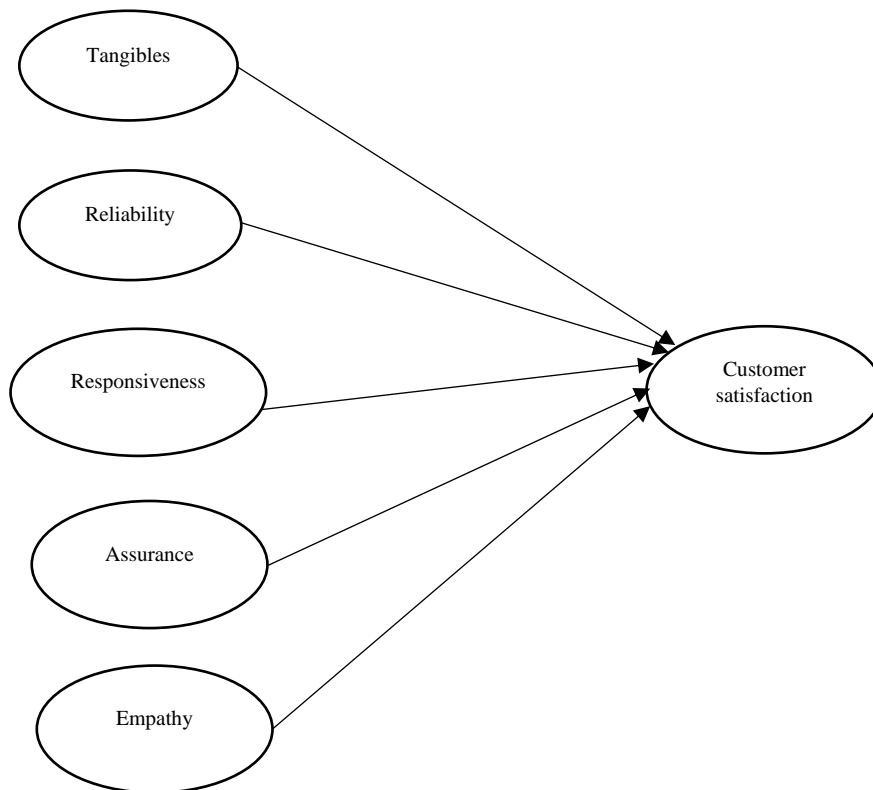

Figure: The conceptual model study of e-WOM (Authors own)

Hotel attributes and their effects on e-WOM behaviours: A literature review

Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) found that different e-WOM behaviours are triggered by different predictors. Specifically, in their study, e-WOM behaviour was operationalized in two ways: the frequency of consumers' visits to opinion platforms and the number of comments posted by consumers. Using factor analysis, they were able to extract eight predictors, including platform assistance, venting negative feelings, concern for other consumers, extraversion/positive self-enhancement, social benefits, economic incentives, helping the company, and advice seeking. Collectively, they found that all eight factors except helping the company influence the platform visit frequency. However, only four of the eight predictors (concern for other consumers, extraversion, social benefits, and economic incentives) influence comment writing. They also found that venting negative feelings may influence the frequency of visiting opinion platforms, but it has no influence on the number of comments written on opinion platform by consumers. When applying in the context of the hotel business, it is also possible that e-WOM praise and e-WOM activity may not be prompted by the same set of predictors.

Since e-WOM behaviour is a multi-dimension construct, we operationalized e-WOM behaviours with four sub-dimensions, which are intention, frequency, thoroughness, and praise, based on Harrison-Walker's (2001) conceptual model. In her study, Harrison-Walker included WOM activity, which includes the frequency of communication takes place, the number of participants, and the quantity of information provided by the message sender, and WOM praise, which reflects the valence of the communication. In the current study, the intention reflects the likelihood an individual would be engaging in e-WOM, while the frequency reflects the occurrence an individual would be engaging in e-WOM. Both of which represent the concept of WOM activity proposed by Harrison-Walker (2010). On the other hand, as other studies (de Matos & Rossi, 2008) suggest that e-WOM should also be assessed from the perspective of the content of the message as well since the valence has been found to have a significant influence on consumer behaviours (see works by Chakrabarti, 2010; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih & Lin, 2015). Therefore, the content of e-WOM was assessed with thoroughness (the quantity of information) and praise (the valance of information).

Studies have shown that hotel attributes influence customers' perception of service quality and staying experience. For instance, Yavas and Babakus (2005) compared business and leisure travellers' preference and found that people would place different emphasis on different attributes. They found that both business and leisure customers place general amenities as the most important attribute. However, business customers view convenience as the second most important attribute that hotels should offer and leisure customers view core services, such as reservation and check-in/out, is the second most important attribute when selecting a hotel.

Lockyer and Roberts (2009) explored key factors that may trigger customers' hotel selection and found that customers use different criteria based on the length of stay. They found that for hotel guests who stay only overnight, convenience is the most key attribute they are expecting. The hotel guests also feel that they can tolerate most situation since their stay is very short. Lockyer and Roberts also found that the longer a hotel guest stay, they will demand more from the hotel. More importantly, several tangible attributes like guestroom conditions were highly demanded by customers.

In the hotel business, core attributes are mostly related to the tangible aspect of the hotel, such as the guest room, the reservation system, swimming pool, or the business center (Slevitch & Oh, 2010). However, customer's experience in a hotel is not limited to tangible

aspects. The experience also depends on intangible service: the interpersonal interaction between service providers and customers. Facilitating attributes, defined as professionalism and the attitude demonstrated by service staff and the recovery speed from service failure, would complete a customer's assessment of his or her hotel staying experience (Slevitch & Oh, 2010). Identifying hotel attributes that are perceived important to hotel guests will enable hotel managers to improve current practices to meet customers' expectation.

Based on Sparks and Browning's (2010) study, customers often complain about the room features, such as the size of the room, cleanliness of the room, and the condition of the furniture and the equipment in the room, followed by the services they received, including the behaviours of the employees towards the guests being unhelpful, unfriendly, uncooperative, etc. Since core attributes are the basic and central to a customer's experience and satisfaction, it can be hypothesized that they have a significant influence on e-WOM activities, such as intention and frequency. In the meantime, facilitating attributes complement and/or enhance core attributes, thus, they would have more influence on the valence of e-WOM, which is related to the content behaviour of e-WOM. Since core and facilitating attributes may carry different weights on consumer behaviours, it is also assumed that their e-WOM behaviours could be different as well based on attribute performance.

Several studies found that satisfaction may not be the necessary antecedent to predict e-WOM behaviours all the time. For instance, Jeong and Jang (2011) found that restaurant service employees could trigger customers' positive motivation to post comments. Zhang, Zhang and Law (2014) also examined the relationship between attribute performance and e-WOM in a restaurant setting. They found that attribute performance has a symmetric impact on both positive and negative WOM. In specific, they found that "food taste, restaurant environment, and service have an impact on customer positive e-WOM; whereas food taste, physical environment, and price have an impact on negative e-WOM" (Zhang et al., 2014: 174). In a hotel context, Hartline and Jones (1996) attempted to explore the relationship between attribute performance and WOM intentions. Their findings suggest that housekeeping staff performance has a direct effect on WOM intentions, which does not involve satisfaction.

When assessing the relationship between attribute performance and consumer behaviours, Hui, Zhao, Fan, and Au (2004) found that there are interactions between process quality attributes and outcome quality attributes. Based on their explanation, process quality attributes are similar to core attributes and outcome quality attributes are similar to facilitating attributes. They found that these attributes have significant interactive effects on customer satisfaction and post-consumption behaviours. They also found that core attributes will have a more distinct influence on customer satisfaction and post-consumption behaviours when facilitating attributes is favourable than unfavourable. Slevitch and Oh (2010) examined the relationship between core and facilitating attribute performance in a hotel setting. They found that core and facilitating attributes are separated dimensions and have influences on customer satisfaction. Specifically, the results suggest that core attribute performance will moderate the effect of facilitating attribute performance on customer satisfaction. They concluded that more attention should be assigned to core attribute so it will maintain a positive performance. When "this condition is met, facilitating attributes will play their positive role" (Slevitch & Oh, 2010: 565) and additional input on facilitating attributes will generate results desired by hoteliers.

Research Methodology

To conduct this study, guest comments were analysed on the online Pilgrims Rest hotel guide http://www.amp.co.za which listed online comments of hotel guests who had previously stayed in Pilgrims Rest in Mpumalanga on its webpage. The hotel guide was selected for two reasons. First, the guide features a five point service quality rating for guests' experiences in hotels,

making it easier to compare guests' experiences and also to note negative comments. Second, this was one of the first online guides to attempt to ensure genuine reviews by asking reviewers for a valid email address or by having them register to post a review. Although this format can still be manipulated, it is much better than blogs and forums that allow the anonymous postings of inappropriately favoured comments. These hotels had to comply with the criteria set by Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA, 2017:3) for classification as a hotel, namely an establishment that provides formal accommodation with full or limited service to the travelling public. A hotel must have a reception area and also offer a dining facility. It must also have a minimum of 6 rooms but more likely exceeds 20 rooms.

Furthermore, the selection criteria were that the hotel either had an online presence so that the researchers could determine the style of service, or it had online articles that could serve the same purpose. In order to meet study objectives, structural equation modelling was conducted. Probability sampling was used since it is based on the principles of randomness and the probability theory, to accurately generalise to the population (Babbie & Mouton, 2008).

The population of the study comprised all the hotel customers in Pilgrims Rest with online comments. The questionnaire items were phrased in English, not only because the majority of hotel guests were expected to be quite conversant in English but also because it is one of the main languages spoken in Nelspruit, South Africa, apart from IsiSwati and Afrikaans. Therefore, all respondents were able to respond in English. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Mpumalanga. The hotel manager from the participating hotel was approached for permission to conduct the study.

Johnson and Christensen (2004) point out that a questionnaire should be phrased in the language that the respondents will easily understand and should be precise to maintain interest and to ensure reliability of the responses. The sample size for the study was determined such that it achieved a 95% confidence level and was within a 5% sampling error (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). This sampling method is comparable to the technique used by Marković and Janković (2013). Consequently, a sample size of 58 customers was deemed appropriate and used for this study.

Systematic sampling, which is a probability sampling method, was then used to select guests' comments by systematically moving through the sample frame and selecting every kth comment. As such, guest comments were systematically targeting every second comment until the sample size was reached. It was better to target every second comment so as to be discreet (Mhlanga, 2015). Guests' comments were collected in March 2018 during weekends and weekdays as recommended by various researchers (Marković & Raspor, 2010; Marković & Janković, 2013; Mhlanga & Tichaawa, 2016; Tsang & Qu, 2000). Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences which is a statistical analysis software programme.

Findings

Reliability and validity

Reliability in quantitative studies can be defined as the extent to which test scores are accurate, consistent or stable (Struwig & Stead, 2001). Taking into account that McMillan and Schumacher (2006) regard the Cronbach α coefficient as the most appropriate method to investigate the reliability of survey research where there is a range of possible answers and not only a choice between two items, internal reliability was tested using this measure. A Cronbach's α coefficient of higher than seven is acceptable (Pietersen & Maree, 2007). The Cronbach`s α coefficient for the total index was high (0.7904), while moderate to high reliability coefficients were calculated for tangibles (0.7931), reliability (0.8255) and responsiveness (0.7640), assurance (0.8468), empathy (0.8068), overall customer satisfaction (0.7329) (Table 2). The high alpha values indicate good internal consistency among the items. Pietersen and

Maree (2007) describe validity as the extent to which an empirical instrument "measures what it is supposed to measure". In order to ensure content and face validity (Babbie & Mouton, 2008), a literature study was undertaken and the survey instrument was scrutinised by academic and hotel experts before the instrument was finalised.

Table 2: Reliability and factor loadings of constructs.

	MEASURE/SCALE ITEM	LOADING	ALPHA
	TANGIBLES		0.79
V1	The hotel has modern-looking equipment	0.63	
V2	The hotel's physical facilities are visually appealing	0.87	
V3	The hotel's employees are neat-appearing	0.55	
V4	Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) at the hotel are visually appealing	0.36	
	RELIABILITY		0.83
V5	When the hotel promises to do something by a certain time, it does so	0.70	
V6	When you have a problem, the hotel shows a sincere interest in solving it	0.81	
V7	The hotel performs the service right the first time	0.59	
V8	The hotel provides its services at the time it promises to do so	0.77	
V9	The hotel insists on error-free records	0.92	
	RESPONSIVENESS		0.76
V10	Employees of the hotel tell you exactly when services will be performed	0.64	
V11	Employees of the hotel give customers prompt service	1.05	
V12	Employees of the hotel are always willing to help you	0.51	
V13	Employees of the hotel are never busy to respond to your requests	0.85	
	ASSURANCE		0.85
V14	The behaviour of employees of the hotel instils confidence in customers	0.68	
V15	Customers feel safe in their transactions with the hotel	0.96	
V16	Employees of the hotel are consistently courteous towards customers	0.44	
V17	Employees of the hotel have the knowledge to answer customer questions	0.74	
	EMPATHY		0.81
V18	The hotel gives customers individual attention	0.49	
V19	The hotel has operating hours convenient to all its customers	0.83	
V20	The hotel has employees who give customers personal attention	0.72	
V21	The hotel has customers' best interests at heart	0.68	
V22	Employees of the hotel understand customers' special needs	0.67	
	Overall customer satisfaction		0.73

The model was tested with SEM (Structural Equation Modelling). The results were x^2=496, df=102, p=0.000, x^2/df=5, CFI=0.91, GFI=0.90, AGFI==0.86, RMC=0.05. The analysis of SEM on the proposed model has generated results that are illustrated in Figure 2 and Table 3. Based on the five attributes tested, four were found to be significant at the level of 0.01. Tangibles had a strong negative relationship with e-WOM, motivated by customer satisfaction.

Reliability had a strong negative relationship with e-WOM, motivated by customer satisfaction. Assurance had a strong negative relationship with e-WOM, motivated by customer satisfaction. Empathy had a strong negative relationship with e-WOM, motivated by customer satisfaction. However, empathy did not have a significant effect on customer satisfaction.

The results corroborated literature findings (Henning-Thurau et al. 2004; Yavas & Babakus, 2005; Lockyer & Roberts, 2009; Slevitch & Oh, 2010) that found the influence of reliability, assurance, responsiveness and tangibles on customer satisfaction in hotels.
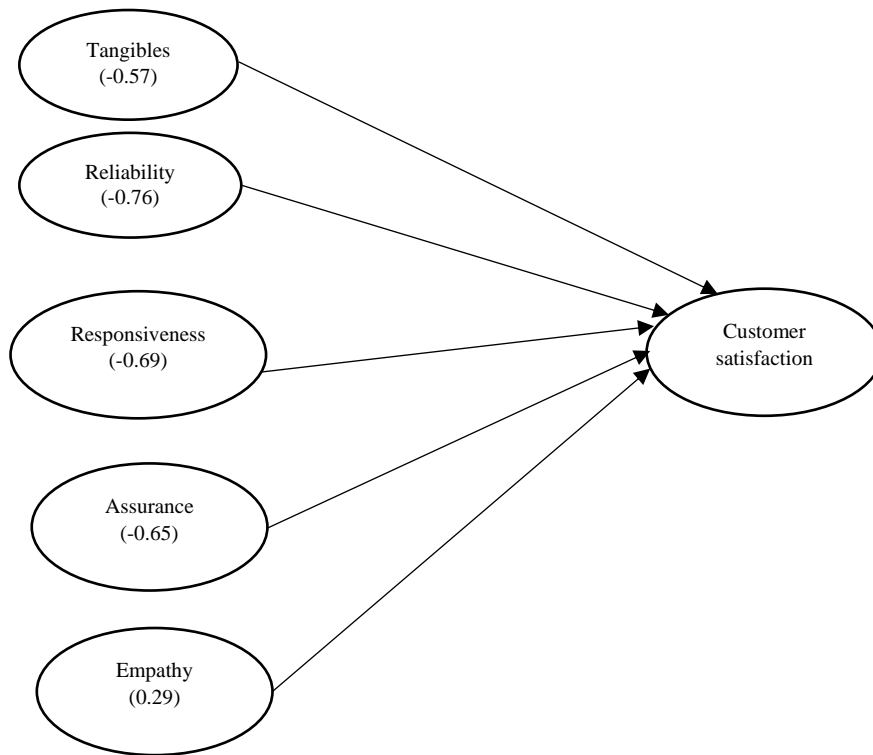
Figure 2: The analysis of SEM on the proposed model (Authors own)

Table 3: Results of the structural model

Paths	-β	t-values	p-values	Supported
Tangibles ⟶ Customer satisfaction	-0.57	8.44	<0.01	Yes
Reliability ⟶ Customer satisfaction	-0.76	6.39	<0.01	Yes
Responsiveness ⟶ Customer satisfaction	-0.69	3.93	<0.01	Yes
Assurance ⟶ Customer satisfaction	-0.65	1.43	<0.01	Yes
Empathy ⟶ Customer satisfaction	0.29	1.49	>0.05	No

The study clearly indicates that 'reliability' has the highest significant impact on customer satisfaction followed by 'responsiveness' and 'assurance'. The results are corroborated by Mhlanga and Tichaawa (2016) who found that reliability ranked highest among the factors that impact on hotel customer satisfaction. The results show that the degree to which a promised service is performed dependably and accurately (reliability) highly impacts on customer satisfaction in hotels. This is followed by 'the degree to which service providers are willing to help customers and provide prompt service' (responsiveness), and 'the extent to which service providers are knowledgeable, courteous, and able to inspire trust and confidence' (assurance).

Therefore, to improve customer satisfaction, the following service quality items should be improved, namely, reliability - When the hotel promises to do something by a certain time, it does so (V5), When you have a problem, the hotel shows a sincere interest in solving it (V6),

The hotel performs the service right the first time (V7), The hotel provides its services at the time it promises to do so (V8), The hotel insists on error-free records (V9). Responsiveness - Employees of the hotel tell you exactly when services will be performed (V10), Employees of the hotel give customers prompt service (V11), Employees of the hotel are always willing to help you (V12), and Employees of the hotel are never busy to respond to your requests (V13). Assurance - The behaviour of employees of the hotel instils confidence in customers (V14), Customers feel safe in their transactions with the hotel (V15), Employees of the hotel are consistently courteous towards customers (V16), and Employees of the hotel have the knowledge to answer customer questions (V17).

Conclusion

The purpose of this research endeavour was to measure hotel customer satisfaction using electronic word-of-mouth in Pilgrims Rest, Mpumalanga. Based on the results, hotel guests are likely to trigger positive e-WOM when service is performed dependably and accurately (reliability) as this attribute highly impacts on customer satisfaction in hotels. An enjoyable hotel experience with fast and excellent service provided by hotels motivates customers to publish their positive experience in online environment. The degree to which service providers are willing to help customers and provide prompt service' (responsiveness), and 'the extent to which service providers are knowledgeable, courteous, and able to inspire trust and confidence' (assurance) also reduces customers to disseminate negative e-WOM as it also highly impacts on customer satisfaction. Consequently, this will allow hotels to manage customer experience properly that ultimately results in customer satisfaction, loyalty and positive-word-of-mouth.

Managerial implications

The study provides hotel management with an improved understanding of the attributes that impact on e-WOM and customer satisfaction thereof. Management needs to be aware that to reduce negative e-WOM and improve customer satisfaction, they should provide a higher level of 'reliability', 'responsiveness' and 'assurance' to create favourable impressions of the hotel. The paper demonstrates that customer satisfaction in hotels can be measured by positive or negative of online reviews posted on hotel websites, providing further theoretical and practical knowledge on this topic. In particular, online hotel reviews is confirmed to be an important source of information which influences customer decision making process and booking intentions.

The presence of hotel managers' reply to customer reviews is not considered a key factor by the customer. On the contrary, it has a negative impact on customer booking intention. The source of information in this case is probably seen as not spontaneous and not independent from the organization. These results, in light of managerial implications described in the previous paragraph, can support hotel operators in defining integrated communications strategies based on a synergic use of new media and technologies, without forgetting the importance of personal relationships and service recovery when the customer is already at the hotel. In fact, service quality evaluation and customer satisfaction remains key factors stimulating positive online customer reviews.

To provide 'reliable' service, hotels may develop appropriate training and empowerment programmes, with specific emphasis on the development of front-office staff (Moolman, 2011). Hotel guests in South Africa have consistently complained of front-office employees for being unfriendly and unhospitable yet front office staff are the nerve centre of hotels, and the front

office is essential to keep up with what is happening at all areas of the hotels (Ali, Hussain, Konar & Jeon, 2017). Therefore, hotels should train their staff and also improve their online services to make the delivery of services to customers fast.

Furthermore, front office employees are the first point of contact with guests and the "face of the hotel" and are therefore responsible for the "moment of truth" or "critical fail point" (Namasivayam & Denizci, 2006). In order to improve customer satisfaction, hoteliers should provide decent work to all their employees, treat employees fairly, pay decent wages and provide them with career progression opportunities. Hoteliers should also understand that attempts to increase customer experience may have a positive impact on hotel employees' motivation and satisfaction thereof (Bernhardt, Donthu & Kennett, 2000). Management should understand that selection, promotion, motivation, training, empowerment and retention are of crucial importance for positive customer experiences. Therefore, hotel managers should focus on enhancing the knowledge, skills and commitment of their employees by providing regular trainings and incentives.

To increase customer satisfaction, hoteliers should focus on the attributes significantly related to e-WOM, namely overall hotel experience and reliability. This can be done by making use of social and or economic rewards. Khattab and Aldehayyat (2011) claim that social or economic rewards make hotel guests feel special, important and appreciated. Social benefits, include any preferential treatment or personalised recognition and attention given to individual customers whilst economic rewards include a complimentary room, room upgrade and discounts.

Hotels should develop and offer more customised social rewards, which can intrinsically motivate customers to foster a sense of belonging and emotional attachment to their hotel. Such a preferential treatment is so meaningful to customers that they become reluctant to switch to any competing hotel that offers equal or even better financial incentives. Social rewards positively impact on customer satisfaction because they enhance a customers' intrinsic reasons for sustaining and reinforcing emotional commitment and thus enhance attachment to a specific hotel (Mhlanga & Tichaawa, 2016).

Hotels can also offer loyalty programmes that offer preferential rewards for guests in proportion to how often they patronise a hotel. Luo and Qu (2016) argue that customers tend to keep subscribing to loyalty programmes because of economic benefits they gain. When hotel customers are exposed to customised, intrinsic offerings from a loyalty programme, they tend to be intrinsically motivated to stay with a hotel by developing emotional attachment, internal enjoyment and effective commitment. Consequently, hotels should consider economic benefits as a defensive relational strategy and social rewards as an offensive relational strategy in stimulating the relational behaviours of customers and thereby increase customer satisfaction.

Hotels can make use of social media to increase customer satisfaction. Social media is a powerful tool to encourage positive e-WOM and a strategy to encourage interaction with past, current and future customers. Furthermore, hotels can post videos and pictures with the 'best moments of guests at the hotel'. This will ensure that hotels engage with their customers. Positive online customer comments posted on hotel's social media build affinity with the guests. The findings contribute to the existing literature on hotel customer satisfaction by analysing a less explored marketing source (e-WOM) by means of a comprehensive methodology that considers different comments on customer satisfaction in hotels from an online review source. The results emphasize the importance of e-WOM on customer satisfaction in hotels and provide practical implications to hotel managers and marketers to reduce negative e-WOM. The research supports the strategic objectives of the National Tourism Sector Strategy (RSA NDT, 2011) to deliver a world-class experience to consumers in the tourism industry.

Suggestions on further research

This study has shown indications of how the hotel managers can manage online reviews in their marketing strategies and what the possibilities/challenges are. These results are only suggestions that might be useful when working with online reviews. However the study has only given brief suggestions and further research can be made to receive more in depth information about the marketing strategies used by hotels that work with e-Word of Mouth.

Therefore further research, with focus on specific hotels that work with e-Word of Mouth, can be useful for testing the validity of the strategies suggested in this thesis. This type of marketing still seems to be a new phenomenon, based on the empirical research made in this study. However some hotels seem to implement e-Word-of-Mouth strategies into their traditional marketing. Another suggestion is to study the influence of e-Word of Mouth regarding decision making and its impact on brand awareness by focusing on the view of hotel guests. This might give the research area a depth and make it easier to understand e-Word of Mouth as a whole.

Hotel managers should focus on developing and testing the validity of the electronic Word of Mouth strategies and find ways to actively encourage their guests to share their views. Focus can be put on how to control the online reviews and how their own web pages can be used as a viral community for their guests. Research can be made on their current guests to see how influential online reviews are on the decision making and what motivates them to share their views. This can help the hotel industry to understand the motivations behind online reviews, how influential they are how to control it and use it in their overall marketing.

Study Limitations

Although the researcher took great effort to enhance the trustworthiness and the validity and reliability of the research processes, as with any study, there remained certain limitations. These limitations expose weaknesses of this study, which could help researchers in future to design and conduct their research on customer satisfaction in the hotel sector more effectively. The results are based on a relatively small sample size chosen from a limited geographic area and gathered during a short period of time. Although it is not expected that the findings would be significantly different, it would be worthwhile to expand this research throughout the country to improve the generalizability of the results. Also, the measurement of hotel experience was limited to 22 hotel attributes. Even though these attributes were included in other studies and their validity tested, there could be other relevant hotel attributes that are likely to influence customer satisfaction in hotels. Last but not least, customer satisfaction can only be estimated through indicators and cannot be measured as clearly and precisely as profits (Vilares & Coelho, 2003).

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