



TripAdvisor and hotel consumer brand loyalty

Stephen W. Litvin & Kaitlyn M. Dowling

To cite this article: Stephen W. Litvin & Kaitlyn M. Dowling (2016): TripAdvisor and hotel consumer brand loyalty, *Current Issues in Tourism*, DOI: [10.1080/13683500.2016.1265488](https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1265488)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1265488>



Published online: 11 Dec 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 15



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

RESEARCH NOTE

TripAdvisor and hotel consumer brand loyalty

Stephen W. Litvin^{a*} and Kaitlyn M. Dowling^b

^a*Department of Hospitality & Tourism Management, School of Business, College of Charleston, 66 George Street, Charleston, SC 29424, USA;* ^b*Honor's College Graduate, Hospitality & Tourism Management, School of Business, College of Charleston, 66 George Street, Charleston, SC 29424, USA*

(Received 23 June 2016; accepted 21 November 2016)

Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Consumer Generated Media (CGM) have become important aspects of the hospitality and tourism marketing mix. This research looked at hotel reviews on the CGM review-site TripAdvisor to determine the influence loyalty to a hotel brand has upon postings. From the literature, one would expect brand loyalty to have a positive impact upon a poster's reviews. The findings, however, do not support this relationship. Brand loyalists were found to be neither more or less generous, nor volatile, than were other posters. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: brand loyalty; social media; CGM; eWOM; hotel marketing

Introduction

Websites that provide consumer generated media (CGM) have gained tremendous popularity and influence upon consumers. In no marketplace is this more prevalent than hospitality and tourism. This study considers the impact that brand loyalty to a lodging brand may play upon a poster's hotel review patterns. To determine this, TripAdvisor posters were selected and segmented based upon the variable *hotel brand loyalty*. TripAdvisor provides users no indication of the brand loyalty status, if any, of its posters, upon whose ratings and commentaries purchase decisions are often predicated. If a difference exists in the way brand loyalists, versus other reviewers, rate hotel properties, potential consumers may be unduly influenced by the bias of their reviews. The intent of this research note is to determine if postings by hotel brand loyalists exhibit such bias, and if so, to suggest review-site policy change to afford additional confidence to their users.

Literature review

The underlying literatures that support this research relate to electronic word-of-mouth [e-WOM] and brand loyalty. These well-explored topics are touched upon below.

CGM sites such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, Expedia, etc., provide a comprehensive store of e-WOM. As noted by both Gretzel and Yoo (2008) and Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) in their early and often cited commentaries, potential hospitality and tourism consumers are strongly influenced by e-WOM as every review provides a reflection of a fellow traveller's

*Corresponding author. Email: litvins@cofc.edu

prior experience. A vast body of research has followed these early studies, strongly reinforcing the importance of CGM. For example, Prabu (2014) noted 80% of travellers consult review-sites before making a purchase decision; Ong (2012) commented that CGM provides an important tool for the evaluation of hotels, helping consumers narrow their choices; and Ye, Law, Gu, and Chen (2011) reported that 84% of those who consult review-sites are influenced by these when booking their reservation. Readers wishing additional e-WOM background are referred to recent comprehensive reviews of the e-WOM marketing literature provided by Babić, Sotgiu, De Valck, and Bijmolt (2016) and You, Vadakkepatt, and Joshi (2015).

Regarding brand loyalty, a consistent theme of the literature reflects the importance of cultivating loyal customers. Prebensen, Woo, and Uysal (2014) provide an extensive review of articles on the topic from a hospitality marketing perspective. The gist of these: loyal hospitality customers purchase more and spread positive word-of-mouth, likely in turn to influence others to become customers. As stated by McCall and McMahon (2016, p. 112), 'loyal customers offer businesses a steady customer base, more frequent purchase cycles, higher profit margins, and advocates who volitionally market the firm to prospective customers'.

Combining the above, the literature thus suggests eWOM is an important source of information for consumers as they formulate their travel plans, and loyal customers serve as a source of positive CGM that helps influence these purchase decisions. Given these premises, the research that follows was designed to determine the degree of influence hotel brand loyalty has upon the CGM of brand loyalists. Two evaluative factors were considered. First was rating volatility, comparing the posting pattern of hotel brand loyalists versus those whose review histories do not reflect loyalty to any specific lodging brand. The second factor considered was the average hotel ratings of brand loyalists versus other posters, accompanied by a comparison of the loyalists' ratings of their preferred-branded hotels versus other properties.

Method

TripAdvisor was used as the data source for this study. Reviews were collected from hotels in four USA cities, New York, Chicago, Charleston, and Seattle. Three properties were selected per city. The selected properties represented Hilton, IHG, and Marriott; each with a broad range of brands and an extensive company-wide loyalty programme. Different flags were selected in each city to provide variety to the sample.

Starting with each selected property's most current reviews, reviewers with at least 30 TripAdvisor hotel reviews were selected. It was felt that 30 reviews provided sufficient postings to determine the reviewer's degree of brand loyalty and to analyse their review tendencies. Strata-sampling was employed. At each property, 10 brand loyalists, defined as a reviewer with at least 40% of their postings within a single brand, and 10 non-brand loyalists, those with less than 40% within a single brand, were selected for analyses. Thus, the final 240 member sample included 120 brand loyalists and 120 non-brand loyalists. Their TripAdvisor profiles allowed us to extract a rating history, that is, the number of their hotel ratings within each of the five TripAdvisor rating categories (5 = Excellent to 1 = Terrible). For brand loyalists, the comparative rating of their preferred-branded versus non-preferred-branded properties was also extracted.

With these data in hand, the average ratings and degree of rating volatility of sample members were determined. Also, for brand loyalists, their 'harshness or ease of grading' of their preferred versus non-preferred-branded hotels was calculated.

Findings

To determine volatility, the standard deviation for the percentage of ratings within each rating category was computed for each member of the sample (range = 0.07–0.39). Volatile raters spread their reviews across the range of rating categories. Less volatile raters tended to award more consistent review scores. A comparison of means of the volatility scores, again determined by the standard deviation of the rater's posted ratings, determined a lack of statistical difference between the hotel brand loyalists and those posters whose rating history did not reflect loyalty to any specific brand. Brand loyalist had a mean volatility of 0.21 (SD = .06), virtually identical to the non-brand loyalists' mean of 0.21 (SD = .05; $t = .357$, $p = .721$). Brand loyalist ratings were neither more nor less volatile than were other posters.

When considering their average ratings, again no difference was noted between the two segments. The overall sample rating was 4.03 (SD = .33). Brand loyalist hotel postings reflected a mean rating of 4.02 (SD = .35). The non-brand loyalists' mean was 4.04 (SD = .31; $t = -.323$, $p = .747$).

Finally, the rating level of the brand loyalist postings was determined to be no different for their preferred-brand than other hotels they had reviewed (preferred-brand average = 4.03 (SD = .41); non-preferred-brand average = 4.01 (SD = .32; $t = -.495$, $p = .622$)).

Discussion and conclusion

These findings suggest that TripAdvisor contributor reviews reflect the same degree of volatility regardless of their poster's brand loyalty status; that brand loyalists are neither harsher nor more generous in their review patterns; and that brand loyalists rate hotels within their preferred-brand no differently than they do hotels not under their preferred-brand's umbrella. Familiarity neither creates a 'halo effect' resulting in loyal guests rating their preferred-brand's properties more generously than those of the competition, nor does 'familiarity breed contempt' with their shortcomings more strongly criticized.

The literature suggested that brand loyalists would be advocates for their preferred-brand. However, these findings suggest TripAdvisor contributors evaluate hotels through the same critical lens, regardless of their loyalty leanings towards the reviewed brand. While this would not seem the answer hotel marketers would desire as validation for the extensive marketing efforts they direct towards their loyal guests, it is an interesting commentary re CGM. We conclude from the above findings that TripAdvisor posters, at least those who frequently review hotels, given that we only considered posters with at least 30 hotel reviews, are objective with their postings, wishing to share with their 'community' unbiased reviews that reflect their vision of reality. The name on the hotel marquee does not seem to influence their property reviews. This is a positive result for CGM sites, and also encouraging for those who continue to note the power of e-WOM in our industry.

Despite the lack of review difference, TripAdvisor and other review-sites might consider identifying brand loyalists as part of their member profiles. Postings labelled as coming from brand-experts could provide consumers additional comfort when evaluating reviews. Currently, we know the poster's age, gender, and home location, number of reviews, 'helpful' votes, and a review score summary. Adding a brand loyalty badge would be an easy addition that would seem useful to those relying upon CGM when planning their travel.

Before concluding, it is important to note several limitations to this study. First is its limited scope. Future work with broader samples from multiple review-sites would help

ensure the current findings are replicative and generalizable. Furthermore, this study considered only quantitative review scores, without considering the accompanying commentaries. Perhaps there is a bias in these not reflected in the numerical rating. Future research that incorporates both numeric and descriptive reviews would be valuable. In addition, we have identified brand loyalists simply based upon booking patterns. Pritchard and Howard (1997) indicate that frequent traveller loyalty can be ‘spurious’. For hotels, this could include those who stay regularly within properties of a single brand simply to accumulate reward-points or to comply with corporate travel policy. The current research was unable to identify those whose loyalty is spurious to contrast their posting patterns with those contributors truly committed to the brand. If determinable, interjection of this variable would add an interesting aspect to a future study. Finally, a topic of ongoing concern for those using and studying CGM is the issue of potential review manipulation. We have accepted the reviews posted as legitimate, without reason or the ability to question their authenticity. However, had any of the selected reviews been posted by hotel management or their shills, clearly the results of this study would have been tarnished. Readers interested in learning more about review manipulation strategies are referred to a recent study by Gössling, Hall, and Andersson (2016). We hope that future authors will consider the above limitations and will extend this review of an interesting and important topic.

We are pleased to have provided these findings. It is valuable to have learned of the consistency and objectivity of the CGM reviews posted by hotel brand loyalists. Review-sites such as TripAdvisor show no sign of diminishing importance as an influencer of travel decisions. The lack of bias by their posters, as noted herein, is an important finding, adding credibility to the medium.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Babić, R. A., Sotgiu, F., De Valck, K., & Bijmolt, T. H. (2016). The effect of electronic word of mouth on sales: A meta-analytic review of platform, product, and metric factors. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 53(3), 297–318.
- Gössling, S., Hall, C. M., & Andersson, A-C. (2016, awaiting publication). The manager’s dilemma: A conceptualization of online review manipulation strategies. *Current Issues in Tourism*. doi:10.1080/13683500.2015.1127337.
- Gretzel, U., & Yoo, K. H. (2008). *Use and impact of online travel reviews*. In P. O’Connor, W. Höpken, & U. Gretzel (Eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism* (pp. 35–46). Vienna: Springer.
- Litvin, S. W., Goldsmith, R. E., & Pan, B. (2008). Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. *Tourism Management*, 29(3), 458–468.
- McCall, M., & McMahon, D. (2016). Customer loyalty program management: What matters to the consumer. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 57(1), 111–115.
- Ong, B.S. (2012). The perceived influence of user reviews in the hospitality industry. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 21(5), 463–485.
- Prabu, K. (2014). Vast majority of TripAdvisor users read at least 6–12 reviews before choosing hotel. *Tnooz Reports*. Retrieved from <https://www.tnooz.com/article/tripadvisor-online-review-insights-phocuswright-study/>
- Prebensen, N. K., Woo, E., & Uysal, M. S. (2014). Experience value: Antecedents and consequences. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 17(10), 910–928.

- Pritchard, M. P., & Howard, D. R. (1997). The loyal traveler: Examining a typology of service patronage. *Journal of Travel Research*, 35(4), 2–10.
- Ye, Q., Law, R., Gu, B., & Chen, W. (2011). The influence of user-generated content on traveler behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 21(2), 634–639.
- You, Y., Vadakkepatt, G. G., & Joshi, A. M. (2015). A meta-analysis of electronic word-of-mouth elasticity. *Journal of Marketing*, 79(2), 19–39.