



In search of patterns among travellers' hotel ratings in TripAdvisor



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This paper examines travellers' rating patterns for independent and chain hotels.
- Five traveller profiles are considered: business, couple, family, friend and solo.
- Four regions are considered: America, Asia-Pacific, Europe and Middle East-Africa.
- Data were collected from the popular hotel review website TripAdvisor.
- Rating patterns for both hotel types differed across profiles and regions.

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on ways travellers' rating patterns in the hotel review website TripAdvisor differ between independent and chain hotels. To delve deeper, travellers were classified according to their profiles, namely, business, couple, family, friend and solo. Besides, hotels straddled across four geographical regions, namely, America, Asia Pacific, Europe as well as Middle East and Africa. A 5 (profiles) × 4 (regions) two-way factorial analysis of variance was conducted separately for independent and chain hotels. A qualitative analysis was further conducted to tease out the findings from the quantitative analyses. Travellers' rating patterns were found to differ substantially between independent and chain hotels across both profiles as well as regions. The paper concludes by highlighting its implications, limitations and potential directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

As users increasingly broadcast their opinions through Web 2.0 applications, the role of these platforms as a mass influencer is gradually being enhanced. A popular form of Web 2.0 applications includes online review websites. These allow users to effectively disseminate their post-purchase experiences of products and services to the online communities at little cost.

Online review websites such as TripAdvisor that are dedicated to the rating of hotels have been gaining immense popularity (Buhalis & Law, 2008). This is perhaps because tourism, which contributes to 9.4% of global GDP (Baumgarten & Kent, 2010), has become a worldwide phenomenon (Page & Connell, 2006).

Travellers visiting different parts of the world with varying purposes tend to seek advice prior to booking. It is therefore no surprise that almost half of all travellers around the world—regardless whether they tour for business or leisure, irrespective whether they globe-trot with acquaintances or alone—browse ratings in hotel review websites before confirming their accommodation (Chipkin, 2012).

Most hotel review websites solicit ratings from travellers in two parts: a star value generally ranging from one to five, and a textual description. Travellers' rating patterns may vary across hotel's ownership structure: independent or chain. Independent hotels are self-proprietary properties not affiliated to any brand, whereas chain hotels refer to those belonging to the same hotel group or consortium (Kirk, 1995; Namasivayam, Enz, & Siguaw, 2000). Given their differences, rating patterns attracted by independent and chain hotels may not necessarily be always comparable (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012; Yeung & Law, 2004).

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Within the independent-chain dichotomy of hotels, rating patterns can be further shaped by travellers' expectation-experience congruence. When their experience exceeds their expectation, their delight often resonates in their ratings. Conversely, when their experience fails to meet their expectation, their discontent could also be reflected in their ratings.

Stemming from the expectation-experience congruence, two factors can have a bearing on rating patterns. The first factor includes the profile of a traveller. Travellers who stay in hotels are commonly classified into five profiles, namely, business, couple, family, friend and solo (Dolnicar, 2002; O'Connor, 2008). A hotel recommended for one profile can be appalling for another given the difference in expectations (Keates, 2007). After all, a single hotel may not cater to the needs of travellers from all profiles (Weaver & Oh, 1993). It is quite possible for a hotel to delight a solo traveller without necessarily meeting the expectation of those travelling with family (Choi & Chu, 2001; Wu et al., 2010b).

The second factor entails the geographical region in which a hotel is located. In the context of tourism, four geographical regions—America, Asia Pacific, Europe, as well as Middle East and Africa—are widely studied both by the scholarly community (e.g., Aramberri, 2009; Chen, 2001; Singh, 1997) as well as by destination marketers or organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2013), and the World Economic Forum (Blanke & Chiesa, 2011). Whether travellers' experience meet expectation is in part dependent on the image of the destination (Chen & Hsu, 2000). However, the ways in which rating patterns for independent and chain hotels vary as a function of the interplay between profiles of travellers and geographical regions of the properties remain largely unknown.

For these reasons, this paper analyzes differences in rating patterns between independent and chain hotels. To enhance granularity of the analysis, travellers are categorized into five profiles, namely, business, couple, family, friend and solo, while hotels are studied across four geographical regions, namely, America, Asia Pacific, Europe, as well as Middle East and Africa.

The paper has the potential to contribute to both theory and practice. On the theoretical front, it seeks to explicate travellers' rating patterns as a function of hotels' ownership structure—*independent and chain*. Few studies hitherto have shed light on the independent-chain dichotomy of hotels. Additionally, the paper attempts to enrich the tourism literature by examining variations in rating patterns across travellers' profiles and hotels' geographical regions. Previous studies often failed to concurrently take these into account. Thus, this paper calls for more nuanced scholarly inquiry in the tourism domain. Furthermore, on the practical front, the findings of this paper may suggest ways for hotel managers and destination marketers to target specific market segments in various geographical locations.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature, which is followed by the Methods in Section 3. Thereafter, the Results and the Discussion are presented in Section 4 and Section 5 respectively. The paper concludes with Section 6.

2. Literature review

Travellers have a variety of motivations to rate hotels. For example, they may rate hotels to voice their pleasure and satisfaction, or to vent out their anger and frustration about their post-stay experience in hotels (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). Also, travellers often rate hotels out of altruistic concerns for other potential travellers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). They are generally motivated to recommend good hotels, and warn about sub-par ones (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). Furthermore, travellers

can rate hotels to reflect their attitude toward the properties. While some are interested to help hotels improve their service quality, others could be determined to show their disdain (Oliver & Swan, 1989; Sundaram et al., 1998; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008).

The motivations may however elicit different rating patterns from travellers toward independent and chain hotels. This is because on the one hand, ratings for independent hotels may reflect the degree to which the properties offer personalized services. On the other hand, ratings for chain hotels are shaped by the extent to which the properties uphold their brand values (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012; Choi & Chu, 2001; Holverson & Revaz, 2006). Unlike independent hotels, chain properties use their brand names to promote confidence and loyalty. Brand presence hence gives the latter an unfair advantage in influencing travellers' perceptions (Yeung & Law, 2004), which in turn may shape the rating patterns. Given that prior studies have not widely differentiated hotels based on their ownership structure, it is therefore interesting to study how travellers' rating patterns differ between independent and chain properties. Besides, rating patterns may further vary as a function of travellers' profiles and hotels' geographical regions.

2.1. Rating patterns across travellers' profiles

Travellers are commonly classified into one of the five profiles, namely, business, couple, family, friend and solo (Dolnicar, 2002; O'Connor, 2008). Given their different purposes and expectations (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012), inadequacies pointed out by travellers of one profile can appear trivial to another while blemishes that are diminutive to some may be completely unacceptable to others (Keates, 2007).

Travellers of different profiles possess varying preference levels toward hotels in terms of attributes such as cleanliness, safety, value for money and location (Atkinson, 1988; Lewis, 1985). For instance, business travellers are extremely concerned about the convenience of location, and availability of the Internet irrespective of room price (Bulchand-Gidumal, Melián-González, & López-Valcárcel, 2011; Rivers, Toh, & Alaoui, 1991). Satisfaction of those who travel as couples is largely affected by extraneous factors such as weather and perceived romanticism of the destination (Lee, Huang, & Chen, 2010). Those who travel with families or friends tend to emphasize more on safety and security compared with solo travellers (Lai & Graefe, 2000). Ratings provided by travellers of different profiles are thus likely to depend on their specific preferences (Poston, 2008).

Furthermore, when travellers rate hotels, they are often guided by commitment toward others of similar profiles (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). They generally tend to post their entries with a target audience in mind. A survey with users of TripAdvisor as its participants found that most travellers looked into ratings contributed by only those with a similar profile (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). Travellers of one profile rarely bother to go through ratings provided by those of other profiles. Hence, it is interesting to study the ways in which rating patterns vary across travellers' profiles.

2.2. Rating patterns across hotels' geographical regions

For the purpose of this paper, four geographical regions are considered. These include America, Asia Pacific, Europe, as well as Middle East and Africa. Globalization has resulted in making every part of the world accessible to all and sundry, thereby promoting worldwide cross-border tourism (Page & Connell, 2006). In particular, Europe attracts the highest world tourism arrivals followed by Asia Pacific, America, as well as Middle East and Africa. Again, the tourism growth rate is the highest in Asia Pacific

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