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Assessing the Predictors of Online Hotel Reviews in Kedah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

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In the contemporary era, travelers are increasingly inclined to prioritize peer reviews when making decisions regarding tourism products and services, rather than on information provided by businesses. With the advancement of communication technologies such as the Internet, a vast pool of opinions on hotels, tourism destinations, and travel services from a customer perspective is now accessible online. As online reviews become a primary source of information for travelers evaluating the quality of hospitality services, only hoteliers who leverage online reviews can capture the attention of travelers who rely on digital channels for information gathering. However, the impact of positive online consumer ratings on a traveler's purchasing choices remains unclear. Accordingly, this study examines the importance of customer online reviews on hotel websites for travelers in Kedah. The study focused on three main criteria: customer satisfaction with the service or product, the volume of reviews, and reviews from loyal customers. Both random sampling and quantitative methods were employed, with 119 survey responses collected via questionnaires from Kedah residents who have booked a hotel online. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The results of the study indicate a significant relationship between customer satisfaction with the service or product and trust in the volume of reviews. In contrast, reviews from loyal customers showed an insignificant relationship with customers' reliance on online reviews. These findings provide valuable information for increasing customer confidence in purchasing decisions based on online reviews. Implications and recommendations are also provided for future studies.

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I. Introduction

Nowadays, the advent of the Internet has given rise to the phenomenon of "electronic word-of-mouth communication" (eWOM), which enables individuals to quickly obtain ideas, opinions, assessments, and experiences from others (Sen & Lerman, 2007). This shift has expanded the ways people obtain and share knowledge about products, moving beyond face-to-face interactions to various online formats, including reviews, blogs, discussion forums, chat rooms, web-based opinion platforms, and newsgroups. This rapid growth and widespread adoption of virtual communities have led to the emergence of online consumer reviews, a prominent form of eWOM. Such reviews are posted by customers on company or third-party websites (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Customer reviews posted online represent prominent and influential forms of eWOM (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Purnawirawan, Dens, & Pelsmacker, 2012). Prior to making a purchase, most people typically consult online reviews, blogs, or other customer feedback. Senecal and Nantel (2004) found that consumers who read online reviews are twice as likely to purchase a product as those who do not. According to Dickinger (2011) posits that online reviews are more informative than official communication channels, such as city tourist boards. Consumers tend to trust information provided by other customers about hotel items and services more than official sources (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Accordingly, travelers highly value the content of online reviews, with 69 percent of customers

trusting reviews as much as personal endorsements (Anderson, 2011). The purpose of this study is threefold:

1. to determine the relationship between customer satisfaction with the service or product and customers' reliance on online reviews in facilitating purchasing intentions;
2. to determine the relationship between trust in the volume of reviews and customers' reliance on online reviews in facilitating purchasing intentions;
3. to determine the relationship between reviews from loyal customers and customers' reliance on online reviews in facilitating purchasing intentions.

A. Literature Review

1) Customers' Reliance on Online Reviews

Online reviews, which are typically written by consumers who have purchased and utilized a specific product or service, have become a primary source of information for many customers. Dedicated review sites host these reviews, which other users may rate for usefulness or accuracy. Consumers tend to place greater trust in information from other customers about hotel products and services than corporate information, as peer reviews are seen as more independent and trustworthy (Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Kardon, 2007). Commonly, travelers use online reviews to evaluate the quality of products, services, and experiences (Dickinger, 2011; Litvin et al., 2008; Ye et al., 2011). They share travel-related information and publish reviews and comments on travel communities and review sites (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Ayeh et al., 2013). Online reviews exert a significant influence on consumers' purchasing decisions, with 78 percent of British buyers reporting that reviews impact their shopping choices (RightNow, 2010). While some doubt the utility of firm recommendations (Coker & Nagpal, 2013), the popularity of online reviews indicates that customers find peer remarks more trustworthy than other sources (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Guests share their opinions on hotel stays online, with the hope that their feedback will improve service quality (Rhee & Yang, 2015). However, the abundance of reviews complicates the process of evaluating crucial information (Liu & Park, 2015), highlighting the need for strategies to manage and utilize online reviews effectively.

2) Customer Satisfaction Towards the Service or Product

Customer satisfaction is a primary criterion for evaluating the quality of a product or service. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) define satisfaction as the belief that a product or service delivers a gratifying level of consumption-related fulfillment. It reflects subjective customer assessments of the consuming experience's performance (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Customer satisfaction is vital for businesses, leading to competitive advantages (Cravens et al., 1988; Garvin, 1991). According to Kandampully (2000), services are intangible experiences, thereby, pre-purchase evaluation is a challenging experience. Therefore, customer satisfaction can drive repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth exposure. Choi and Chu (2001) identify staff quality, room quality, and value as the top three hotel influencing variables for traveler satisfaction. Satisfied tourists are more likely to return and make additional purchases if their expectations are met or exceeded (Shah Alam & Mohd Yasin, 2010). Meeting and exceeding client expectations enhances customer satisfaction and retention (Jones & Farquhar, 2003; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). Customer perceptions of value and satisfaction impact their behavioral intentions, indicating the quality of their service experience (Ryu et al., 2008). Additionally, customers who value the emotional aspects of their experience are more likely to spread favorable word of mouth. The willingness to recommend can be conceptualized as a positive behavioral intention derived from the perceived value of customer experiences (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Ladhari et al., 2008). Those who prioritize the practical aspects of their experiences are more likely to recommend the same experience to others.

3) Trust in the Volume of Reviews

Trust is defined as an individual's generalized expectation that another's word can be trusted (Rotter, 1967). Patrick (2002) describes customer trust as the ideas, feelings, emotions, or behaviors expressed when customers believe a supplier will act in their best interests. Meanwhile, Morgan and Hunt (1994) define trust as the belief in another's honesty and dependability. Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol (2002) posit that consumer trust represents the expectation that a firm is reliable and will fulfill its promises. Online reviews are a crucial component of the e-commerce process as it carries influence consumers' purchasing decisions and spending. Reviews can be either positive or negative. Research

indicates that negative reviews often have a greater impact on decision-making than positive ones (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). Negative online reviews (NOR) are associated with negativity which further affects product sales (Goyette et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Duan et al., 2009; Ye et al., 2011). Consumers tend to place a high degree of trust in the volume of reviews, believing that a larger number of reviews provides a more accurate picture of a product's quality and reliability. This trust influences their purchasing decisions, as they feel more confident in the collective opinion of many reviewers rather than a few isolated ones.

4) *Reviews from Loyal Customers*

Customer loyalty is defined as the likelihood of consumers returning and their willingness to engage in partnership activities with a business (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999). Loyalty is built on the quality and satisfaction of service, which can be demonstrated through positive experiences (Kandampully & Hu, 2007; Gursoy et al., 2014). A positive customer experience is a key driver of brand promotion (Khan & Rahman, 2017). Research by Cronin et al. (2000) revealed that service quality, customer satisfaction, and perceived value influence behavioral loyalty. Customer satisfaction directly affects behavioral loyalty, while loyalty programs develop an emotional commitment to the brand (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1998). These programs are designed to foster long-term customer loyalty, with the objective of establishing a lifetime relationship with the sponsoring corporation (Butscher, 2002). A study by Chong (2017) discovered that Malaysian customers are loyal to hotels due to the convenience and benefits offered by their loyalty programs. These programs provide both hard (monetary) and soft (non-financial) benefits. Hard benefits, such as discounts, refunds, or coupons, provide immediate savings but can be easily replicated by competitors. In contrast, soft benefits, such as special offers, value-added services, recognition, and rewards, are less tangible but highly valued by customers. Further, loyal customers' positive reviews can significantly influence potential customers by highlighting these benefits.

B. *Research Hypotheses*

Three independent variables are identified, including customer satisfaction towards the service or product, trust in the volume of reviews, and reviews from loyal customers. Meanwhile, the dependent variable is customers' reliance on online reviews. Based on this framework, three hypotheses were formulated:

- H1 : There is a relationship between customer satisfaction towards the service or product and customers' reliance on online reviews in facilitating the purchasing intention.
- H2 : There is a relationship between trust the volume of reviews and customers' reliance on online reviews in facilitating the purchasing intention.
- H3 : There is a relationship between reviews from loyal customers and customers' reliance on online reviews in facilitating the purchasing intention.

II. Method

A. *Sample and Questionnaire Design*

The population of this research included residents of Kedah, specifically Generation Z (ages 18-24) and Millennials (ages 25-40) who had booked a hotel online at least once. Following Roscoe's (1975) guidelines, the sample size ranges between 30 and 500. Using G*Power software for power analysis, the required sample size was determined to be 119. This study employed a quantitative research design, generating numerical data and using convenience sampling. Data were collected from each individual, with the unit of analysis being the individual.

The data were garnered using a questionnaire which was divided into two sections and four parts. The first section included three multiple-choice screening questions: "How do you usually book your accommodation?", "How often do you book your accommodation online?", and "Do you read customer reviews before making a purchase online?" The second section collects demographic information focusing on gender, age, race, and occupation.

The four main parts of the questionnaire used five-point Likert scale questions, ranging from "1-strongly disagree" to "5-strongly agree", with details of each part presented in the following.

Part A: Measures the study's dependent variable, customers' reliance on online reviews.

Part B: Measures customer satisfaction towards the service or product.

Part C: Measures trust in the volume of reviews.

Part D: Measures reviews from loyal customers.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

The garnered data were subjected to statistical analysis using Statistical Package Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26.0. A total of 125 data points were collected from the distributed questionnaire, but only 119 were ultimately included in the analysis. This is because a certain respondent did not answer the question completely and did not meet the criteria that have been set in the screening question. Cronbach's alpha was used to analyze the reliability of the questionnaire. Additionally, a pilot study was initially conducted to verify the reliability of the questionnaires by involving 30 random local travelers in Kedah. The Cronbach's alpha score yielded a value of 0.957, which is above the 0.7 threshold. In addition, a descriptive analysis (means, standard deviation, and frequencies) was used for all variables. Further, multiple regression analysis was used to measure the hypothesis and relationship between the dependent variable (customers' reliance on online reviews) and independent variables (customer satisfaction towards the service or product, trust in the volume of reviews, and reviews from loyal customers).

III. Results and Discussion

A. Demographic profile

This session describes the demographic profile of respondents. For the gender, the respondents were 52.1% female and 47.9% male. The majority of respondents identified as Millennials (25-40 years old), comprising 51.3% of respondents, followed by Generation Z (18-24 years old) at 48.7%. For the ethnicity, most respondents were Malay (70.6%), followed by other ethnicities (13.4%), Indian (8.4%), and Chinese (7.6%). Regarding the employment status, the majority were employed (60.5%), followed by students (31.1%) and the unemployed (8.4%). The frequency of accommodation booking is 62.7% of respondents usually book their accommodation online, while 32.8% use walk-in reservations. Further, most respondents book accommodation online once or more per year (81.5%), followed by once or more per month (16.8%) and once a week or more (1.7%).

B. Customers' reliance on online reviews

Descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation) were conducted for the dependent variable, customers' reliance on online reviews. Respondents answered five-point Likert scale questions ranging from "1-strongly disagree" to "5-strongly agree." The majority provided a minimum score of 3 and a maximum score of 5 for each question, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Minimum, Maximum, Mean and Standard Deviation for Each Question - Customers' Reliance on Online Reviews

Questions	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Customer reviews have an influence on purchasing decisions.	3	5	4.69	.548
Online customer reviews make the product or services worth purchasing.	3	5	4.42	.604
Online customer reviews make the decision making become easier and faster.	3	5	4.58	.604
Online customer reviews help the consumer to get a better idea about the product and service.	3	5	4.39	.614
The usefulness of customer reviews can change my expectations about the product or service.	3	5	4.57	.590

C. Customer satisfaction towards the service or product

Table 2 summarizes the results of descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation) for the independent variable (customer satisfaction with the service or product). These

questions used a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The minimum scales answered by the respondents are 2 and 3, and the maximum scale is 5.

Table 2. Minimum, Maximum, Mean and Standard Deviation for Each Question - Customer Satisfaction Towards the Service or Product

Questions	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
The physical environment is just what I had expected.	2	5	4.49	.609
Everything about the check-in procedure at the hotel is satisfactory.	3	5	4.53	.594
The employee is aware that I rely on their professional skills in order to meet my objectives.	3	5	4.36	.673
The attitude of the employees demonstrates their willingness to help me.	3	5	4.50	.566
The performance of this accommodation has met my expectation.	3	5	4.39	.584

D. Trust the volume of reviews

Table 3 presents the results of descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation) for an independent variable (trust the volume of reviews). These questions used a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The minimum scales answered by the respondents are 1 and 3, and the maximum scale is 5.

Table 3. Minimum, Maximum, Mean and Standard Deviation for Each Question - Trust the Volume of Reviews

Questions	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Negative reviews have a passive effect on my intention to book a hotel.	3	5	4.65	.619
The number of negative reviews directly affects my decision to book a hotel.	3	5	4.67	.554
Negative reviews have an effect on my decision to book a hotel because they are anonymous and I have no way of knowing who posted them.	1	5	4.13	1.204
Negative reviews decrease my intention to book a hotel, since user anonymity supports people to express opinions more authentically.	3	5	4.61	.612

E. Reviews from loyalty customer

Table 4 describes the results of descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation) for an independent variable (reviews from loyalty customers). These questions utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The minimum scales answered by the respondents are 2 and 3, and the maximum scale is 5.

Table 4. Minimum, Maximum, Mean and Standard Deviation for Each Question - Reviews From Loyalty Customer

Questions	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
The loyalty program provides me with added value.	3	5	4.54	.622
The loyalty program enticed me to spend money at the hotel.	3	5	4.30	.708
The loyalty program encourages the hotel employees to recognize me	2	5	4.34	.764
The loyalty program is really beneficial in terms of delivering information about products and services.	3	5	4.49	.609
The loyalty program makes me more special compared to other customers	3	5	4.49	.609

F. Multiple Regressions

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the independent variable (customer satisfaction towards the service or product, trust in the volume of reviews, and reviews from loyal customers) and the dependent variable (customers' reliance on online reviews). The results of multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 5. The results showed the value of the adjusted R square of 0.969 (96.9%) which indicates a better fit for the regression model. The findings also revealed that only two independent factors (which are customer satisfaction with the service or product and trust in the volume of reviews) have a significant influence on customers' reliance on

online reviews. The results indicated that 50.8% of respondents agreed that customer satisfaction with the service or product influenced the customer to provide a positive online review, while 43.5% of respondents agreed that they trusted the volume of reviews. The results indicated that 7.7% of the reviews were from customers who had demonstrated loyalty to the company. This indicates that the rationale for reviews from loyal customers is not substantial and has been rejected.

Table 5. Summary of the Multiple Regression Analysis

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficient Beta	Sig.	Result
Customer satisfaction towards the service or product	.508	.000	Accept
Trust the volume of reviews	.435	.000	Accept
Reviews from loyalty customer	.077	.420	Reject
Adjusted R square		.969	

Note: $n=119$. Dependent variable: customers' reliance on online reviews.

Travelers heavily rely on online reviews when planning trips and making decisions (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). Consequently, it is of paramount importance for hotels to gain an understanding of the manner in which online reviews influence booking intentions if they are to enhance their e-WOM marketing strategies. While previous research focused on either review characteristics or the information route, this study provides a comprehensive view, considering specific features of both review content and source. The data analysis results indicate that online reviews significantly impact travelers' actions, depending on three features: customer satisfaction towards the product or service, trust in the volume of reviews, and reviews from loyal customers. The presence of positive reviews facilitates a more expeditious decision-making process and a more comprehensive understanding of the products or services in question, thereby indirectly influencing expectations. A positive correlation exists between customer satisfaction and the reliance on online reviews. Satisfied customers are more likely to leave positive reviews and recommendations through word-of-mouth (Lee, 2013; Han and Chung, 2017). Service quality outweighs physical amenities in ensuring satisfaction. Trust in review volume also influences reliance on online reviews, aligning with prior studies (Reimer and Benkenstein, 2016; Qiu et al., 2012). Negative reviews can have a significant impact on purchase intentions, emphasizing the importance of hotel responses to negative feedback. However, reviews from loyal customers do not significantly influence the reliance on online reviews. It has been demonstrated that positive reviews foster loyalty and word-of-mouth, yet loyalty programs alone do not build substantial loyalty (Butscher, 2002). Instead, customer satisfaction drives positive reviews and loyalty. Our findings provide actionable insights for hoteliers to enhance their online review management. With e-WOM's significant impact on purchasing decisions, hotels should prioritize customer satisfaction and manage online reviews effectively to build loyalty and enhance their brand image.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the impactful relationships between customer satisfaction, trust in review volume, and reliance on online reviews, except for loyalty customer reviews. However, limitations are notable, as in all empirical inquiries. Firstly, the study's restriction to Kedah residents limits its applicability to the broader Malaysian population. To address this, future research should encompass other northern Malaysian states such as Perlis, Penang, and Perak. Secondly, the use of convenient sampling, while practical, may introduce biases and limit the generalizability of findings. Future studies could employ diverse sampling methods to ensure a more representative sample and enhance the validity of results. These considerations are vital for advancing our understanding of consumer behavior and online review dynamics in the hospitality industry.

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