

The Influence of Reference Groups on Consumer's Online Hotel Booking Intentions (A Field Study on the Egyptian Consumer)

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Abstract

The rise of new technologies now-a-days have rapidly increased the numbers of consumers who tend to rely on information about hotel products and services provided by customers who have past experiences in various hotels' accommodations, indicating the power and persuasiveness of online product reviews. Through a descriptive and empirical study, researchers are mainly investigating the impact of reference groups on consumers' purchase intentions regarding travelers' decision-making and hotel bookings. Purchase intention is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors. Researchers are focusing in this study on the external influential aspects, which can include peers, members of the family, opinion leaders, and celebrities, in a manner, building up our reference groups. These reference groups inspire individuals' tendency toward certain brands or set of products. For example, individuals tend to make purchasing decisions of products/services, which will reflect their belonging group. Results indicated that the online reference groups have an influence on customers' hotel booking intentions. Results also indicated that the type of online reference groups has a different effect on consumer purchase intentions. Finally, the research verified the usefulness of online reviews and its positive influence on hotel online bookings.

Keywords

Reference Groups, Hotel Booking, Purchase Intentions, Decision-making, Online Reviews

1. Introduction

Many consumers believe that all the information about hotel products and online comments by fellow customers can provide persuasiveness of online product reviews. Many individual travelers intend to view the online comments and room price before they make any confirmation to reduce their risks. Customers rely more on peer reviews than on information that is provided by business entities because peer customers are considerably independent and trustworthy. Online reviews have become crucial resources for travelers to evaluate product quality, services, price ranges, and consumption experiences. Accordingly, many hospitality firms are maximizing online reviews as a new tool to attract information searchers and, ultimately, brokers.

Additional information in the hotel website had been

regarded as a powerful channel to directly market hotels' environmental initiatives to customers. This fact triggered the researchers to tackle this topic trying to find out the real driving forces behind the increase or decrease of hotels' booking and behind customers' booking decision making considering the power of online publicity, online reviews and reference groups in this technological era [1].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Purchase Intentions

Purchase intention is a sort of decision-making that identifies the purpose of buying a specific brand by customer. Purchase intention can be defined as the case in which consumer tends to buy a particular product in a specific situation. The preference of buyer to purchase a good or

service is the purchase intention. In another words, a consumer with an intention to purchase will do several evaluations before buying a product. Many forces influence the buyer's intention while choosing the product or brand, and the eventual resolution depends on buyers' intention with Variety of external factors. Amidst these external factors, a paramount one is the reference groups' influence. [2] Consumers' purchase intentions are one of the primary aspects that marketing managers use to forecast future sales and to determine how will they test their actions on consumers' purchasing behavior [3].

Purchase intentions are sometimes used to measure consumer demand for new products using concept and product tests. Marketers are conducting studies to measure consumer's purchase intentions for the sake of assessing whether to launch new products and how to best use the elements of the marketing mix to maximize sales.

2.2. Definition of Reference Groups

Reference groups can be defined as those whose rules, values, and basics are mimicked by an individual as ground of his everyday behavior. Persons seem to be under societal effect when they choose to pursue a decision of purchasing a product of a high value, and that requires high degree of involvement [4].

It could be added that a reference group is an accumulation of individuals that we use as a standard of examination for ourselves paying little respect to whether they are a piece of that gathering. The social group surrounding of the consumer affects his final decision of which brand to be selected. The choosing of a brand is usually based on the individual's reference group attachment to the brand [5].

The individual considers that his reference group or some members of his reference group have rich information about the brand, which can make him to buy the same brand used by his reference group [6]. The major factors that have impact on the consumer buying intentions are the reference groups, roles, aspirational groups, member groups, status, and family. This demonstrates that the external influences of other people on an individual's buying decisions can be direct or indirect. Social factors are considered amongst the factors that affect the consumer behavior in a paramount way. These social factors can be divided into three major categories, which are social roles, family, and reference groups [2].

2.3. Impact of Reference Groups on Consumers' Purchase Intentions

The consumers depend on reference groups to comprehend social standards, which at that point shape their qualities, thoughts, conduct, and appearance. In some cases, groups can influence an individual's attitudes and values or influence an individual to take on a specific behavior. For example, some individuals prefer to represent the similarity between themselves and a given group just to conform to others and to develop their social identity and be seen as a member of

society [7].

A person, whose parents or friends have high social status tend to purchase luxury products or prestigious brands to achieve group acceptance. Parents, families, or friends can influence an individual's norms and attitudes through interactions. However, influencers and celebrities often represent high standards of achievement, such as success stories, glamorous lifestyles, and popular opinions, through which individuals observe these values. Sociologists trust that our relationship to groups and to society everywhere shapes our individual musings and practices. How they identify with reference groups is integral to how social gatherings and society apply social power on us as people [8].

2.4. Reference Groups Types

Formal Reference Groups:

The Formal group is called secondary group that have less or no face to face interaction, having mostly structure and mission such as known people in societies. It has been stated that primary formal groups have a more formal structure [9] [10]. The shopper usually is exposed to these groups. Promoters present membership in such groups as methods for winning item approval. Secondary formal groups are not critical to the buyer, as they meet occasionally, are organized, and are nearly knit. For example, graduated class groups, business clubs, and so forth. Marketers are keen on studying the formal groups as they help in creating item features, tastes and preferences and furthermore specifically affect the buying behavior of a person. Therefore, the individuals from groups with the best contact in different situations will probably purchase similar brands [11].

Informal Reference Groups:

I. Family:

Informal group is called the primary group, which is not specifically having mission or structure, it involves mostly face-to-face interactions, as family and peer influencer groups by affecting many product behavior and have a large influence on the consumer behavior.

The family is the strongest influencing factor for almost any person. A family forms a climate of socialization within which a person will incubate, develop his identity, and acquire values. Inside the family environment, an individual will establish attributes and opinions upon multiple matters such as social attachment, family interests, or his own desires [2].

Marketers deem this as a crucial problem, because more effort needs to be exerted in order to convince and influence the buyer's close family members who affect his purchase intentions. For instance, if the wife may influence the purchase decision of a specific product, hence marketers will attempt to indirectly target women in their promotional messages. One of the Marketers' major objectives is to influence the influencers in order to attract more base of potential customers toward their products [4].

II. Peers:

As a reference group, peers impact varies across the

different types of brands and products. Over the past years, evidences and experiments had approved that the peer impact on the buyer is more powerful and significant when it comes at purchasing publicly used products, especially the luxurious ones, than for necessities products, which are privately consumed [12].

It could be stated that previous researches emphasized that peers cause a fundamental social pressure on nearly all the customers. Friends and colleagues, through their everyday interactions with individuals, pass their behavior standards, values, views, and even norms to these individuals. Hence, individuals can replace their norms and lifestyles in order to go in parallel with their friends [13].

III. Aspirational Reference Groups:

An individual's main objective when he/she joins to a group is either for self-verification, self-enhancement, or may be both. Being attached to a group can fulfill the one's need to be accepted, and recognized in a positive way by others. When the individual achieves this primary objective, he or she will be more attached to the group he belongs to, and thus, internalize the attributions and behaviors of this group. Inside the reference group, persons are spontaneously allocated to a sub-group, whether an aspirational group or non-aspirational group. The aspirational group is categorized as one of the types of reference groups to which a person desires to join. On the other hand, a non-aspirational group is also one type of reference groups in which a person desires to liberate and disconnect himself or herself from it [14].

2.5. Word of Mouth Communication Impact on Online Hotel Room Reservation

It has been argued that consumer booking intentions and attitudes are affected by WOM. Previous studies proved that online WOM affect the profit and loss of companies and that 70% of the interviewees stated that they believe online consumer reviews affect consumers' buying intentions [15].

Many individual travelers will search online hotel websites prior to making hotel confirmations to reduce their risk in choosing hotel accommodation. They defined independent travel as people being involved in the travel completely from trip planning to actual travel experience and until the end of the trip. Quite few studies confirmed that online WOM gives complete information more than did the official website and leads most respondents' purchase intention. Additionally, celebrity online comments (WOM) are more credible than those from ordinary people and positive WOM is more powerful than the negative one.

2.6. Consumers' Purchase Intentions Toward Online Hotel Room Reservations

Online hotel room reservation recognition has become one of the global trends in the past five years. Now-a-days, most hospitality businesses must implement an internet based booking system in order to cut down on their distribution costs and deploy the system while at the same time tackle customers to use their online reservation system. Hence,

hospitality businesses have looked for the best solutions and formula of customer satisfaction with online travel services and customers' preferences of online buyers and browsers. All that in the context of travel websites; factors affecting online reservation and online airfare reservation services. However, consumers' impressions are affected by the website's design, atmosphere, events and other online features while interacting online; and therefore businesses should highly consider consumer's overall perception on the online firm and its products. Web experience includes three main factors which are functionality factors, which means consumers are exposed to an easy, fast and interactive website. Psychological factors are about the trust and security issues when consumers go online [16].

Trust toward the hotel could ultimately lead to consumers' booking intention. In addition, trust is developed through customer relationship management customers' online reviews, which provide useful references for potential consumers before purchase and easily accessible up-to-date information on hotels, which is more reliable than content posted by service providers themselves.

Positive online reviews can significantly increase customers' trust and the number of bookings in a hotel. Finally, the content factors, which entail marketer's creativity in presenting their website. This final factor is important in attracting consumers to the business website and buying from that site [17].

2.7. Online Reviews Influence to Online Hotel Booking Intentions

Travelers depend now-a-days profoundly on online reviews to evaluate product quality, service excellence and consumption experiences. Accordingly, attentive hospitality firms are considering online reviews a new tool to attract information searchers and bookers. These businesses are providing travel-related information to consumers on online review sites, proactively encourage virtual interactions among consumers and publish their comments and feedback.

The Internet has been regarded as an effective channel to directly market hotels' environmental initiatives to customers. Being provided by anonymous individuals who have a particular propensity to post messages about shopping and the marketplace messages, is making 'online reviews' more persuasive [18].

The number of online comments signals the level of agreement among consumers and whether these comments are positive or negative, they are more likely to attract information seekers and then increase product awareness. Finally, the information the consumers are looking for, need to be timely and up-to-date to have a greater influence on consumers and attract definitely more bookers.

2.8. Social Media Impact on Online Hotel Room Reservation

It could be confirmed that individuals who participate in virtual communities might be offering or searching for

advice, exchanging technical information and knowledge, or discussing other community members. Prior studies have explored the role of online communities in value creation, the development of brand loyalty and the impact of consumers' participation in online communities on their buying decision making [19].

A multi-method study investigating how consumers use online communities as social and information networks in their decision-making processes, found that virtual communities serve as reference groups exposing participants to the most diverse opinions and behaviors. Additional research suggests that virtual communities may act as important reference groups for homogenous consumers. Social media allows two-way communications with the potential consumer on a more personal level; it gives you an immediate doorway to your client or engages a group of consumers interested in a specific topic. Hotels have implemented extensive marketing efforts to generate potential consumers through Facebook, twitter, and other forms of social media in order to promote their services, and products offering discounts and specials. Beside Facebook and Twitter, YouTube (38.8%), Flickr (26.9%), and Trip Advisor (23.9%) are among the social media sites used in the hotel industry. As for travel planning process, the internet plays an important role; sites like Trip Advisor and Travelocity permit customers to submit both qualitative and quantitative data feedback, on their travel experiences. A study of electronic word-of-mouth reviews shows that participants are favoring traveler reviews over professional reviews. These reviews can lead to profit or loss for tourism and hospitality enterprises. Many hotel owners now have stopped advertising in tour books; they choose to go online, as it has proven its paramount effect on customers' booking, feedback, business and management [20].

2.9. Impact of Advertising and Celebrity Endorsement on Online Hotel Room Reservation

Advertising and commercials have become part of our daily lives today. Consumers are bombarded by a huge stream of advertisements by the day, which makes available, information about goods and services and creates or increases awareness of product in the likely consumer who may be utterly unaware of the product that satisfies his unmet need. Additionally, advertisements develop an emotional bond that connect the consumer and the product together. Marketers do effort to win customer's purchases towards certain non-essential products through psychological appeals [21].

Advertising has a strong potential on our buying behaviors through influencing our cultural values. It could be stated, that the most common way to build a powerful brand image is through the right celebrity endorsement, as well as strong persuasiveness. All these factors, in addition to products' price and quality, are the real contributors towards the impact of advertising on consumers buying behavior and consumers' hotels' booking intentions. Nowadays, promotions play a paramount role in accomplishing the organization's missions

and long-term goals, especially in the automotive market field. The greatest improvement in the promotions field is involving a celebrity as an advertising tool. This in turn fosters the buyer purchase and booking intention and motivates the buyers and consumers to acquire loyalty toward a specific hotel brand [22].

Marketers confirm that placing celebrities in their advertisements will establish a connection and unique linkage inside the consumers' minds between the celebrity used and the endorsed brand. People perceive celebrities as a reference group that influences their purchase intentions and the whole purchase process. People are convinced that purchasing a brand or choosing for example certain hotel accommodation that is endorsed by certain lovable celebrity will make them have the same lifestyle and values of that celebrity. Celebrities tend to have capability of boosting the customer's willingness to purchase the endorsed product [23]. A potential consumer who is searching for information about a certain product, when he sees an advertisement that includes his loveable celebrity endorsing that specific product or booking or praising a certain hotel, subconsciously he will form a positive impression about this particular brand [24].

3. Research Hypotheses

H.1 Online reference groups influence customers' hotel booking intentions.

H.2 Each type of online reference groups has a different effect on consumer purchase intentions.

H.3 The usefulness of online reviews will positively influence hotel online bookings.

4. The Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

Researchers started to explore and get more insights about the concept in hand by gathering data using confirmatory methods and exploring secondary sources of datum. They used pilot testing to verify the major functionality of the questionnaire before conducting it with the sample. Self-administered questionnaire was the major tool the researchers used. Nominal and Likert scale were used as major forms of tools for collecting data. Our sample size targeted 261 respondents in Cairo and Giza governorates; and the sampling technique was the 'Non-probability – Convenient' sampling method. The researchers used the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS); they also used 'Alpha Cronbach' for testing the reliability of questionnaire statements. All three hypotheses statements' proved a reliability between 0.626 and 0.802.

5. Results and Discussion

Testing Hypothesis One:

"Online reference groups influence customers' hotel booking intentions".

A significant portion of the respondents showed that online reference groups do have an effect on the respondents' evaluation of different hotels in Egypt. The evaluation stage primarily encompasses searching for information to differentiate each hotel from the other. Furthermore, majority of the respondents prioritized knowledge sharing as an important benefit provided by brand communities; which indicates again that respondents seek information from various reference groups.

The most effective source on the respondents while searching for the most suitable hotel, was friends' experience regarding staying in a certain hotel. Friends influence proved to be the highest on the respondents compared to the influence of other reference groups.

The brand preference (see table 1 and 2 in appendix) showed the highest frequency compared to other factors that influence the respondents' booking intentions. Finally, there was a high agreement among respondents that online reference group including the family, parents in particular friends, are considered the most important influencers on customers towards their booking intentions. The formal online reference groups did not prove any direct relationship with customers' hotel booking intentions. Hypothesis one is accepted.

Testing Hypothesis Two:

"Each type of online reference groups has a different effect on consumer purchase intentions".

Respondents are more likely to be utilizing formal reference groups as a source of information. Referring to the tables 3 and 4 in appendix a significant portion of the respondents showed that formal reference groups do have an effect on the respondents' evaluation of different hotels.

The evaluation stage primarily encompasses searching for information to differentiate each hotel from the other. Majority of the respondents prioritized knowledge sharing as an important benefit provided by brand communities; which indicates again that respondents seek information from formal reference groups. (table 1 in appendix) Hence, the results showed that there is no direct relationship between formal reference groups, and the consumer purchase intentions. Although, there is a remarkable difference between opinion leaders, celebrities, and brand communities in terms of how they can affect the respondents booking intentions and the respondents' attitude towards them as well. Respondents referred to opinion leaders as an immersive source of information. As for the informal online reference groups, the analysis proved that it is highly recognized as a source of information.

Additionally, the informal reference groups influence on the brand preference is considered the most effective element for the respondents. Informal reference groups have an influence on the brand preference for most of the respondents (table 2 in appendix) While the other factors as the influence of the evaluation of a certain hotel showed the second high frequency to influence the respondents' booking intentions. Finally, it is proved that there is a high majority agreement that the informal reference group including the

family, parents in particular and friends, are considered the most important influencers on customers' hotel booking intentions. (table 5 in appendix) Hypothesis two is accepted

Testing Hypothesis Three:

"The usefulness of online reviews will positively influence hotel online bookings".

This study found a positive relation between usefulness of online reviews and hotel online booking. Consumers looking for the most suitable hotel are considered in an information overloading situation, therefore, hotels' own Web sites, need to invest resources in enabling Web site visitors diagnose the usefulness of available reviews. In addition, this study also found a positive relationship between reviewer expertise and people's booking intentions. A substantial body of research confirms its importance in various areas. It would be very wise of hotel executives to seek out and obtain more specific information about opinion leaders, such as how they present and share their personal experiences of consuming hotel products and services. (table 6 in appendix) Hypothesis three is accepted.

6. Conclusion

As proved by the empirical study the researchers have conducted on consumers' intentions towards online hotel booking in Cairo and Giza governorates, that online reference groups (especially the informal type) do have a great impact on customers' online hotel booking intentions. It was also proven that the usefulness of online reviews has a profound impact on consumers' online hotel booking. Online reviews are a useful information source for most travelers; it helps them to take the right trip and hotel booking.

Online reviews are a valuable channel of various hotelier information, which serves as predictive indicators of consumers' attitudes. In the hotel industry, hotel marketers should allocate more resources in managing their reviews which could lead to increases in bookings or sales. They should also handle carefully customer complaints more strategically and deal effectively with service recovery. More provision of up-to-date information would arouse potential consumers' attentions.

As consumers are bombarded with information from a variety of media channels and in addition to the increase of consumer awareness, hotel marketers are facing profound challenges, but at the same time this has been regarded as a key variable in describing consumer choice, which will eventually lead to consumer purchase intention. Mainly consumers rely on categorical information because it is simple and easy to understand, but this study found that in virtual communities, the mere presence of arguments and anonymity on the Internet lead people to require more data to judge information based on arguments. Furthermore, this study found a positive relation between usefulness of online reviews and online purchase intentions. As mentioned above, consumers are currently in an information overloading situation. Therefore, Web sites, especially hotels' own Web sites, need to invest resources in enabling Web site visitors

diagnose the usefulness of available reviews. In addition, this study also found a positive relationship between reviewer expertise and people’s booking intentions. In the hotel industry, this expertise includes good reputation, greater hotel knowledge and good credit record, all of which are typical features of opinion leadership. Opinion leaders are individuals who can influence the opinions and behaviors of others positively and frequently. It would, therefore, benefit hotels to seek out and obtain more specific information about opinion leaders and use it to increase consumers’ online hotel booking and purchase intentions.

7. Suggestions for Further Research

Future research could investigate online and offline marketing strategies and compare their effectiveness; as consumers often make offline decisions based on online information. Many studies showed that offline promotions may reduce the usefulness of online reviews. It is advised that marketers and tourism and hoteliers should use different information channels to optimize their promotional efforts and adjust the resources allocation accordingly. Further studies could compare the impact of online reviews across different tourism sectors and only confined to hotels as this one.

Appendix

Table 1. Influence of Formal Reference Groups such as Brand communities on Consumer Hotel Booking Intentions.

Type of Influence	Frequency	Ranking
1- Brand Preference	97	2
2- Willingness to book	41	4
3- Evaluation of a certain hotel	141	1
4- None of the Above	43	3

Table 2. Influence of Informal Reference Groups such as Brand communities on Consumer Hotel Booking Intentions.

Type of Influence	Frequency	Ranking
1- Brand Preference	141	1
2- Willingness to book	71	3
3- Evaluation of a certain hotel	86	2
4- None of the Above	23	4

Table 3. Formal Reference Group Impact (Opinion Leaders) on Consumers’ Hotel Booking Intentions.

Statements	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Mean
1- I consider the recommendations provided by Opinion Leaders	70 (26.8%)	122 (46.7%)	53 (20.3%)	4 (1.5%)	4 (1.5%)	261	3.93
2- I trust the information about hotels provided by Opinion Leaders	56 (21.5%)	109 (41.8%)	81 (31%)	5 (1.9%)	5 (1.9%)	261	3.77
3- I believe that opinion leaders are knowledgeable about hotels	109 (41.8%)	113 (43.3%)	32 (12.3%)	2 (0.8%)	2 (0.8%)	261	4.23
4- Opinion leaders can influence my choice of a certain hotel	43 (16.5%)	70 (26.8%)	91 (34.9%)	15 (5.7%)	15 (5.7%)	261	3.32
5- Opinion leaders can reinforce my choice towards a certain hotel	58 (22.2%)	110 (42.1%)	61 (23.4%)	10 (3.8%)	10 (3.8%)	261	3.70

Table 4. Formal Reference Group Impact (Celebrities) on Consumers’ Hotel Booking Intentions.

Statements	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Mean
1- I am more likely to book in a hotel if a celebrity I like is supporting it	8 (3.1%)	27 (10.3%)	45 (17.2%)	96 (36.8%)	85 (32.6%)	261	2.15
2- I believe that if a well-known celebrity is appearing in an advertisement endorsing a certain hotel, I will be convinced of this hotel	6 (2.3%)	44 (16.9%)	63 (24.1%)	89 (34.1%)	59 (22.6%)	261	2.42
3- Credibility of the celebrity can influence my choice of a certain hotel	12 (4.6%)	25 (9.6%)	51 (19.5%)	94 (36%)	79 (30.3%)	261	2.22

Table 5. Informal Reference Group Impact on Consumers' Hotel Booking Intentions.

Statements	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Mean
1- Before booking in a hotel, I seek information from my family	98 (37.5%)	99 (37.9%)	42 (16.1%)	14 (5.4%)	8 (3.1%)	261	4.05
2- Before booking in a hotel I depend on my friends' past experiences.	115 (44.1%)	112 (42.9%)	28 (10.7%)	5 (1.9%)	1 (0.4%)	261	4.13
3- My friends can influence my choice of hotels	61 (23.4%)	108 (41.4%)	66 (25.3%)	18 (6.9%)	8 (3.1%)	261	3.72
4- I would follow my friends' choices regarding hotel bookings	17 (6.5%)	40 (15.3%)	64 (24.5%)	85 (32.6%)	55 (21.1%)	261	2.35

Table 6. Usefulness of Online Review Impact on Consumers' Hotel Booking Intentions.

Statements	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Mean
1- Review contents are relevant to products	75 (28.73%)	105 (40.22%)	53 (20.30%)	17 (6.51%)	11 (4.21%)	261	4.05
2-Review contents are genuine	56 (21.5%)	109 (41.8%)	81 (31%)	5 (1.9%)	10 (3.830)	261	4.13
3-Review contents are reliable	109 (41.8%)	113 (43.3%)	32 (12.3%)	2 (0.8%)	2 (0.8%)	261	3.72
4-Review contents are neutral	53 (20.30%)	78 (29.88)	87 (33.33)	23 (8.81)	20 (7.66)	261	2.35
5-Online reviews are useful	58 (22.2%)	110 (42.1%)	61 (23.4)	10 (3.8%)	10 (3.8%)	261	3.70

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