Examining the Effect of Social Media on Online Reputation Management of Hotels
Special Reference to down South Area in Sri Lanka during COVID 19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Covid 19 has physically halted the world's activities. Almost every industry in the globe has failed, forcing them to choose whether to seize the firm or continue operating. Social media has emerged as a critical role in determining the fate of businesses and sectors. As the most significant force in the new normal, social media has produced a large demand for all sectors functioning throughout the world. Covid 19 has made the globe virtual and permeable, but social media contributes to the world's seamless virtual operation regardless of the field. During covid 19, hotels and tourist businesses that deal with customer satisfaction required to focus extra attention on strengthening their reputation and trust with their customers. In accordance with this, the study's goal is to investigate the impact of social media on hotel online reputation management, with a focus on down south area in srilanka. The purposive sample approach was used to pick a sample of 8 hotels from among hoteliers in the down south area. Thematic analysis was used in the study to assess the results of the hotel interviews. Social media marketing communication mix considered as the parental theme, while, social media marketing strategies, social media sales promotion and social media interactive marketing being the sub themes of the study. The study's key findings demonstrated that facebook and instagram play an important part in preserving and obtaining online hotel reputation, becoming the most powerful elements. Youtube drew less attention because of the time element being mentioned. The hotels have achieved a big and enormous online awareness and online reputation through viral intimacy marketing campaigns and paid advertising in order to optimize their occupancy levels. Viral intimacy marketing has gained significant advantages for hotels in terms of advertising and sales promotion while being the least expensive strategy. This study emphasizes that social media is serving as a lifeline in pandemic scenarios owing of the continuous service provided. Further research on the mediating role of wow and wom marketing and customer brand insistence is required in hotels in order to investigate the influence of social media on online reputation management.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

New Naval Corona (COVID 19)pandemic created a global emergency that impacts the ordinary life of everyone. Sudden changes of communication and transmission patterns of global pandemic has emphasized the necessity of isolation. Hence, the governments' promogulated a complete lockdown and safety measures with timely isolation of regions in order to mitigate the community spreading. Meanwhile, to adhere with new normal life under COVID 19, people refused public gatherings, dine-outs, and movements. . These scenarios adversely impacted on the survival and the growth of hotel industry. However, according to Nhamo, Dude, & Chikodzi (2020), the hotel industry was considered as one of the best income and job-generating industries of the world before the coronavirus. Hence, the hospitality industry is seeking the best solutions to regain lost reputation Since, the industry is sensitive and vulnerable to changes in the environment, it is at the risk of getting secured. At the peak of COVID 19, many hotels lost their stable income, directly and indirectly. Further employees lost their job opportunities. Hence, the COVID has created a huge damage to the industry, losing the reputation in numerous aspects.

Nowadays, the hotel industry is highly influenced by social media. It involves significant parts of the hotel business. Social media spread information via "electronic word of mouth" on products and services by addressing

every demographic group. With this popularity of social media, managers have increased pressure in reputation management (Proserpio & Zervas, 2016). Further, Social media has changed the decision-making patterns of customers of hotels. Hence. The habit of responding to the online platforms has been an online reputation management strategy. Sparks and Browning (2011) described that there was a positive correlation between social media and guest intention to make a reservation in the hotel. Further, Loureiro & Kastenholz (2011) argue that hotels can understand the perception of the guests on hotel service and the nature of the competitors via social media. In 2017, Nicoli and Papadopoulou mentioned that hotels have a great opportunity to establish close discussions and long-lasting bonds with the guests via social media. Hence, Social media can act a significant role by indicating many strategies for each hotel to deal with the contemporary situation via reputation. Since reputation is critical to the success, survival, and financial performance of hotels during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Among the tourist destinations in Sri Lanka, down south attracted both foreign and local tourists frequently. Especially, sandy coastal area, natural landmarks, historical and religious monuments in this area force tourists to allocate few days to stay (sometimes 2 or 3 weeks) in this area. As a result of that, there are many establishments to cater requirements of the tourists. In this, hotels played the leading role. According to Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (2019), the accommodation distribution at downsouth was 35.2% of the total accommodation capacity of Sri Lanka. But first and second waves of COVID 19 crippled the many hotels in down south by pulling them into financial losses. Some hotels are at a point to fail to recover. As stated earlier, On-line reputation management can be utilized as a strategy to win the current situation. Hence, this study aims to examine the effect of Social Media on Online Hotel Reputation Management with a special reference to Hotels in down south during COVID 19 Pandemic.

1.2 Problem Statement

Reputation is a critical success factor to any industry. Reputation attract people towards the industry and affiliate in creating the set of loyal customers. Many studies have investigated the topic of the reputation of the hotels. Some studies have found that "continuous monitoring", "quick responses", "training" and "transparency" as crucial factors for the online reputations of the hotels (Nicoli & Papadopoulou, 2017). Meanwhile, Aranda, Vallespin & Molinillo (2018) stated that "financial benefits", "relationship benefits", " band benefits" could be gained via reputation. The previous studies contributed to the existing knowledge on the online reputation management of hotels. But research gaps need to be filled with new studies, especially, in a critical pandemic

situation like COVID 19. There are very few studies that have investigated the area of online reputation management, even if, it is a key factor in financial performance and future survival during COVID 19 pandemic. Hence, this study aims to investigate the effect of social media on online reputation management. Accordingly, this study is aim to bridge the empirical and knowledge gap while focusing on "What is the effect of social media on online reputation management of hotels in downsouth during COVID 19?"

1.3 Research Questions

By reviewing existing literature on On-line reputation management, researchers have identified the following questions and objectives.

- How social media effect on online reputation management to hotels in down south during COVID 19?
- What is the most and least influential factor of social media on online reputation management to hotels in down south during COVID 19?

1.4 Research Objectives

Based on the research questions, the objectives of the research have been derived as follows.

- To identify how the social media effect on online reputation management to hotels in down south during COVID 19.
- To identify the most and least influential factor of social media on online reputation management to hotels in Down south during COVID 19

1.5 Significance of the Study

Online reputation management is still an emerging research area among academics in the hospitality industry. There are many things that need to be understood further in this research area. Especially during COVID 19 pandemic. Hence, this study attempts to contribute to the existing literature by upgrading the understanding of online reputation management. In addition to that, this study proposes new online reputation management strategies to the stakeholders in the hotel industry to deal with the contemporary situation in the world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Online Reputation Management

According to jones, Borgman & Ulusoy (2015), Social media platforms offer numerous opportunities for organizations to establish dialogues and create long-lasting and more engaging relationships with users in ways in which non-digital technologies are simply not capable of doing. Goodman (2014) argued that in an age where customer-experience is shared online platforms, many communications and business professionals consider electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as the most powerful form of communication that can either strengthen or

weaken reputation. A burgeoning number of customers now rely on online feedback and experience-sharing of previous customers when considering purchasing choices (Merkelsen, Möllerström & Platen 2016). Jones et al.,(2015) says that Immediacy and high exposure of negative comments have made it a priority for practitioners to continuously analyses and monitor online platforms in order to safeguard their organizational reputation. As Burke (2011) note, "it takes considerable time to develop an outstanding reputation; yet reputations can be damaged in an instant". The slightest negative incident can go viral and quickly become a major communication containment exercise for an organization on how it manages online reputation (Hiles, 2011). Further, Nicoli et al, (2017) suggest that online reputation needs to manage regularly in order to gain the maximum befit from being available in online platforms.

2.2 Social Media Advertising

Nguyen & Coudounaris (2015) shows the important of social media advertising. According to their findings, "35% of travelers change their decisions of hotels after browsing social media. 53% of respondents state they will not book a hotel that does not have any reviews, and 87% of users say the site's reviews help them feel more Confident in their travel decisions". Tsimonis & Dimitriadis (2014) says that due to the long hours spent by users in social media platforms most organizations have established a presence in order to be part of the discussions, to establish relationships with users and monitor whether they are being discussed about. As social media assessments expand, organizations are now more inclined to take note especially since they derive from electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication (Harrison, 2001, p. 70). Baka, 2016; Nguyen et al, (2015) emphasis that social media advertising help in the travel and tourism industry where travelers are more inclined to make decisions based on eWOM on account of not being able to physically review hotels and sites in advance. Zhao, Wang, Guo, & Law, (2015) note "searching for information relevant to their plans, from flights to hotel bookings, has become a dispensable step in travelers" decision-making process. Once the travelers are at their desired destination, they often use social media to enrich their experiences and acquire trustworthy, credible and relevant information (Yoo, Sigala & Gretzel, 2016). As Munar, Gyimothy,, & Cai (2013). note, "social media provide new channels for the production and circulation of meaning in the tourism experience and imagination. Morris (2016) found that "83 percent of British users were more likely to book accommodation if it had an award such as a Traveller's Choice recommendation". Nicoli et al, (2017) elaborate the importance of social media advertising by showing more travelers use social media platforms and read reviews before taking decisions on where to travel to

and which hotels to book. As such, professionals working within the industry take online comments, feedback and reviews seriously whereas formal accreditation mechanisms are increasingly becoming obsolete.

2.3 Social Media

Almohaimmeed (2019) states that social media are online platforms where users establish relationships with each other and create content that can be shared and redistributed. As more of the world's population uses social media instinctively Young and Åkerström (2016) calls it as a "digital naturals". Aula, (2010) shows the reason behind the higher popularity of social media is that social media are characterized by easy searching, open participation, a minimal publishing threshold, dialogue, community, networking, and the rapid and broad spread of information and other content via a wide range of feedback and linking systems. Leung, Law, Hoof, & Buhalis. (2013) states that these information, created and shared by individuals through Web 2.0 applications, is called UGC (User Generated Content).

By analyzing the emerging "digital naturals" Jones et al., (2015) elaborate that social media platforms offer numerous opportunities for organizations to establish dialogues and create long-lasting and more engaging relationships with users in ways in which non-digital technologies are simply not capable of doing. Due to this situation Merkelsen et al., (2016) shows that public relations and marketing practitioners are therefore left to rely on social media to communicate as an alternative, more proficient approach.

As well as all other industries in the world, tourism industry also got effected with emerging "digital naturals", Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier (2002) identified Online tourism platforms have grown to such a large extent some tourism scholars are calling the landscape a "virtual tourist community" while the notion of the "digital nomad", people who travel the world and use their portable devices and a connection to generate work, is now well-known within the blogosphere (Wasserman, 2014). By adding further information to this scenario, Kavoura and Borges (2016) define Trip Advisor and other social media platforms as an imagined digital community where users, although they have never met in person, will create content and assist each other in order to benefit the community.

Munoz-Leiva et al, (2012) claim that thanks to these new application's tourists are now able to obtain more useful and personalized information tailored to their tastes and preferences, thus allowing them to make faster and more effective searches for information about a hotel and/or destination. Law, Buhalis, & Cobanoglu, (2014) status that emerging "digital naturals" assists tourist's increasingly share their experiences with others by posting recommendations, opinions, photos and videos on the Internet. In the tourism and hotel industry, these kinds of

applications are very important sources of information for travelers (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

2.4 Social Media Sales Promotion

After advertising most important communication strategy is the sales promotion. When determining the impact of sales promotion on brand equity there are many arguments have been generated from the consumer perspective. Few research studies demonstrated there is a negative relationship between sales promotion and brand equity. the researcher mentioned logic behind the negative relationship. when developing brand equity consumers have to pay premium price initially the quality of the product. if product has successful brand equity, there is no need for sales promotion as price deal. . Other researchers concluded there a positive relationship between brand equity and sales promotion. These studies imply that sales promotion can be used to create positive brand association between consumers and brands. Sales promotion consider as the marketing strategy that are encored on social media. According to the Abetuniji. R, Rashid.M, &Isak.K (2017), argued that advertising is the most effective marketing communication due to the predominant use of social media. Hence there is a gap of knowledge within the various type of marketing communication as the social media sales promotion. According to the Abetuniji et al, (2017) there is a positive relationship between social media promotion with consumer brand equity based automotive brands.

Online reputation management is the way in which companies can deal with customer perception on social media. Wide variety of electronic applications as social network, review websites, blogs, photos and video exchange platform which facilitate to build interaction between consumers and companies. When posting recommendations, opinions and experiences these kinds of applications are very important sales promotion also. According to the Aranda et al, (2018), found three motivation factors that motivate consumers to adapt to the online reviews. Such as Convenience and quality, Risk reduction and social reassurance. Further researcher mentioned there is a significant contribution to the destination management. Identification of the reputation landscape (IDL) knowledge of websites where user can comment or evaluate its performance. Such as Bookong.com, Trip advisor, Expedia, Hotel.com, Orbit. Specific reviews and ratings should monitor through online reputation management.

2.5 Social Media Interactive Marketing

According to the Abetuniji et al (2017), social media interactive marketing has an insignificant role in consumer base brand equity. Interactive marketing is a type of marketing communication that is particularly relevant to social media and other digital platforms. According to Keller (2009), interactivity is one of the

noticeable differences of digital and traditional marketing communications. According to the Keller (2009), differences of digital and traditional marketing communication identified as interactive marketing. Further the ability to communicate and interact without any discrepancies of long distance and time differences called as the interactive marketing. To build connection between customers and the brand of the destination the marketers use interactive marketing. As the example linking social media pages with official websites, giving a pictorial experience of a brand and ensuring a direct link with brands. According to the Kotler et al.(2009), major attributes of the interactive marketing is customization, personalization, timely information, accountability, and traceability. Social media interactive marketing has a positive relationship with consumer-based brand equity of automotive brands (Abetuniji et al ,2017).

III.   METHODOLOGY

The Study focuses on examining the effect of Social media on online hotel reputation management with reference to hotels in down south during COVID 19 Pandemic. Down south in Sri Lanka is recognized as most attractive costal belt enrich with essential facilities for tourists to make their stay more memorable and comfortable. The study based on the tourists' hotel in down south Sri Lanka and the population of this study being the hoteliers in down south. In order to achieve the research objectives, eight hoteliers were selected as the sample. Purposive sampling technique/ judgmental sampling technique was employed as the sampling method for the study. The representative sample size of the study was limited to eight because, the study has been conducted during COVID 19 pandemic and due to the pandemic situation the operation of the tourist's property drastically dropped down. The primary data was gathered and used for the study in order to derive justified and reliable information. Personal Interviews were used as the data collection methodsince; the research has followed Qualitative approach. The collected data was analyzed using the thematic analysis method. Further, respondents were asked five open ended questions with the parental theme of "Social Media Marketing Communication Mix". Social media platforms, social media advertising, social media sales promotions and social media interactive marketing being the 3 sub themes discussed in the study.

01. What are the social media platforms used by the hotels?

02. What are the special social media advertising strategies and sales promotions used by the hotel during COVID 19 new normal?

03. What are the most and least influential platforms to gain reputation to your hotel?

04. How you maintain the relationship between hotel and client using Social Media?

05. Do you think that effective utilization of social media would help you to improve your hotel reputation?

The five open ended questions asked from the respondents were elaborated as above. A detailed analysis was applied to narrate the answers given by the respondents using 3 sub themes.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Social Media has become a strong influencer in the society with the invasion of COVID 19 around the world. With the COVID, the world halts its operations temporary, but Smart/Online has paved the way to begin the operations with fueling the world. The concepts like reputation, trust, recognition, social media marketing, sales promotions have come in to the action with the pandemic. The hotel industry is highly dependable on the social media before and after COVID 19. Recently, the hotel industry is fully run upon the social media since the world turns into virtual era.

The findings of the study suggests how social media effects on Online Reputation Management of Hotels in Downsouth. The thematic analysis was employed in analyzing the personal interviews held with the hotels. "Social Media Marketing Communication Mix" is the parental theme designed by the researcher while Social Media Advertising, Social Media Sales promotion and Social Media Interactive Marketing being the designed sub themes.

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TripAdvisor, WhatsApp and YouTube are the main software applications used by the hoteliers in social media marketing. They are not limited, but available at all the times for the effective usage. Wide usage of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is highlighted in the discussions held with the hotelier. COVID 19 have made them think out of the box and surf in the internet about how to attract guests. Social Media platforms has being the major influential factors for the hotel industry during the time on and off the COVID 19.

4.1 Findings Pertaining to Social Media Advertising

Advertising is a must formula for any kind of business. Hoteliers need to be more aware on the alternative marketing strategies in gaining their targets covered and achieving the desired profits to retain in the market. COVID 19 caused drastical damage to the hotel industry and their sustainability in the market. Since Hotels directly deals with the guests, the industry subjected to a demarcated decline. Out of the 8 hotels selected for the study, all of them suffer from issue of marketing themselves during COVID 19.

They have designed several strategies of social media advertising. Facebook and Instagram advertising are the main and most common technique used by the hotels as an advertising strategy. They have designed attractive and informative posts mentioning specially:

- Safety measures and precautions taken by hotel in preventing COVID 19
- Whether they have registered for SLTDA stamp certification catered by KPMG
- Safety measures and guidelines needed to be followed by the guests
- Card offers/ latest hotel packages and happy hours and promotions
- Property attractions/ activities and surrounding.

Two hotels out of the 8 mentioned, have given a special discount for guests who select the hotel only because of their Facebook posts. They have adopted a method of giving price reduction for the couples on their second visit, who get most Facebook comments or likes for the photos shared on their first visit to the hotel. They give the winners with half priced another day offer. As per the opinion with them, they said that, it was successful although they have some cost, at the same time they can retain the customers with them.

The hotels have created influencing short videos and uploaded them in YouTube. It is also a viral social media marketing strategy followed by them.

Social media provide the ability to reach exact target audience through paid advertising. Which hotels can utilize to improve the reputation among their customers, and this option can help to launch different advertising campaigns to different market segments. Paid advertising is another social media marketing strategy followed by the hoteliers in Downsouth. The major objective of paid advertising is to increase the number of post reach. They have designed "Ad Campaign" for the guests. Organic (followers) post engagement, Organic (follower) post reach and organic (follower) post boosting are done to get the feedback from the customers. At the same time, they can pay the Facebook for intentional sharing of the post contents. "Niche Categorizing" is another technique of social media advertising. When designing the ad campaign, the system itself allowed to categorize the target/focus group into several criteria's in terms of age, gender, family status etc. Then the ad will only share among the selected group. Easy identification of the interested parties will grab and share the posts related to the hotel. It is method of filtering the target group based on the hotel preference and catering the group according to their expectations. This method was highly successful since they would get the chance of catering to the exact needy points of the guests. Hence, this social media advertising appears as an investment to the hotel industry.

4.2 Findings pertaining to Social Media Sales Promotion

Social media provides new channels for the production and circulation of meaning in the tourism experience and imagination. Social Media sales promotion and advertising seems the equal in meaning, but two different concepts related to tourism and hospitality industry.

All of the 8 hotels have launch "viral marketing campaigns" and "Intimacy Advertising campaigns". Launching viral marketing campaigns involved in getting the help of visited and interested customers in attracting potential customers towards the hotel. The benefits given by the hotel may be free lunch, free dinner, free day-out package, free wine bottle, discount etc. the benefit will be shared among the two parties, which means , the party who distribute the posts and the party who come to the hotel due to the shared post. This illustrates that hotel occupancy is totally handled by the social media during the pandemic. Intimacy advertising campaign involves celebrity endorsement. This will be a huge boost to increase the customer trust on their brands. Ex: Weligama Bay by Marriot used newly wedded Saranga and Dinakshi to market their property. But the campaign went on Saranga's and Dinakshi's social media profiles. Hotel used the trending topic of Saranga's and Dinakshi's wedding to market their hotel on social media.

The hotels target only the promotion, not the sales. But sales are automatically promoted through the promotion. The tactic of indirect sales increment is done through the social media sales promotion.

4.3 Findings Pertaining to Social Media Interactive Marketing

Customer relationship building and maintain the relationship is not an easy task. Customers are the king in the field of hospitality and tourism industry. Without customers, the industry is no more. People get used to build relationships physically and maintain them in long run. But with the pandemic evolution, the relationships turned into virtual. The hotel sector have to build and maintain trust and loyal relationships virtually and it was really challenging as par the discussion held between the hoteliers. They cannot guaranty the virtual relationships since the inherent difficulties available with the technology. High and quick obsolesce of the technology and difficulty of assessing the changes of customer behavior were the major awkwardness they have to face with.

Making available the website updated at every moments, sequence and prompt online feedback generation system, boosting the customers mind with safety first actions taken against COVID 19 are done by the hotels to maintain the interaction with the customers. The hotels have to burden an extra effort to maintain the clientele of the hotel. Social media was utilized effectively but, moderately helped them to maintain the customer engagement with the hotel.

To conclude, the social media has cooperated the hotels in maintaining the online reputation management of the hotels in above discussed three ways. The hoteliers agreed that they have had utilized social media as a method of gaining online reputation and recognition to the hotel.

V.   CONCLUSIONS

As per the one to one discussion conducted by the researcher, below mentioned conclusions and recommendations are formed in order to examine the effect of social media on online reputation management of hotels. Almost all the hotels in down south are available in most popular social media platforms around the world context and Sri Lankan context. Hoteliers do maintain their online image in Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor, WhatsApp and YouTube. By making those self-visible on above mentioned platforms open up the pathway to reach billions of customers around the world.

During and post COVID 19 background, social media advertising strategies holds an important position in order to develop the online reputation of hotels. Social media provide the ability to reach exact target audience through paid advertising. Which hotels can utilized to improve the reputation among their customers. And this option can help to launch different advertising campaigns to different market segments at the same time. Importance of paid reach to get more attention and attraction has grown to a high essential level than ever due to COVID 19 pandemic. Hotelier's used paid advertising to increase the number of post reach and that plays a vital role in maintaining the positive online reputation.

Viral marketing campaigns are another popular method to maintain online reputation in social media platforms. Due to the pandemic higher number of people spent more time on social media and this become a good opportunity to launch viral marketing campaigns. Higher engagement from the target audience help to spread the campaign and hoteliers got the opportunity to communicate their messages to the audience in an effective manner.

By using the sensitive part in the mind of target audience, hoteliers launched intimacy advertising campaign to generate positive online reputation towards their brands. Social media influencers like famous celebrities and spot stars were used to liftoff intimacy advertising. Because of campaign runs on social media influencer's timeline, people use to engage more and that helped the hoteliers to build and maintain positive online reputation.

Due to the nature of tourism industry, among the above mentioned social media platforms most influenced

platforms are Facebook and TripAdvisor. Higher level of customer engagement is the main reason behind this statement. Another main reason is higher level of value for the ratings that can earn through these platforms. This rating can influence a lot on online reputation of a hotel property and it can put a direct effect on hotel's revenue and repeat guest ratio.

YouTube can be identified as a least influence social media platform in order to build and maintain online reputation. But YouTube itself is a well-established social media platform in the world. Above clarification made only by analyzing the impact of the YouTube's ability to develop hotel's online reputation comparing with other social media platform's ability to develop hotel's online reputation.

To build up and maintain customer relationship with hotel, hoteliers used number of techniques in social media platforms. Responding to guest comments and guest reviews as soon as possible is one of the most effective method in building online reputation. Under COVID 19 pandemic scenario best method to maintain online reputation and customer relationship by posting hotel's safety precautions to safeguard guests from COVID 19 regularly on social medias. One end this is one of the most trending topics in the world and hoteliers can use more topics under same nature to address their customer base regularly in order to develop and maintain customer relationship and online reputation.

Updating social media platforms regularly is a very important step in maintaining social media reputation and developing customer relationship. Continuously updating the social media content helps the hotels to develop higher engagement with their target audience. Researcher found that effective utilization of social media would help to improve the hotel's social media reputation. Due to higher usage of social media, hotels can easily reach to their target customer base by spending lower amount of expenditure which is a huge advantage for the hotel industry that runs through lower revenue generating time period. Ability to reach higher number of customers will give more opportunity to build the brand reputation within shorter period of time.

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