Organic Versus Solicited Hotel TripAdvisor Reviews: Measuring Their Respective Characteristics

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Abstract

Hotels that participate in TripAdvisor's Review Express review solicitation programs add volume to their review count. But are the incremental reviews generated good for the hotel? This research note reports findings from a study comparing organic and solicited reviews on TripAdvisor for 50 hotel properties across 10 American cities. The mixed research results suggest that participating hotels carefully evaluate their property's postings to determine the positive and/or negative impacts solicited reviews may be having upon their online review image. Multiple review attractiveness measures are provided to assist hotel management evaluate their property's review postings and make informed decision regarding participation in review solicitation programs.

Keywords

CGM, hotel reviews, e-WOM, word-of-mouth, TripAdvisor

Introduction

Guests at TripAdvisor's Review Express participating hotels, following their stay, find in their e-mail inbox a request from the property asking them to post an online review of the property. (Many *CHQ* readers work at or own participating properties, but if unfamiliar, please see Figure 1 for an example of a Review Express solicitation.) Why does the hotel use the program to solicit guest reviews? The simplest answer is hotel management has accepted the "more-reviews-the-better" shibboleth and finds TripAdvisor's (2017) claim that "Review Express users see an uplift of 28% in the amount of TripAdvisor reviews for their property" too attractive to ignore.

Seeking enhanced review quantity is an approach generally supported by the hospitality literature. Although the contrafindings of Filieri and McLeay (2013, p. 53) concluded that, "*information quantity* does not appear to exert a significant influence on traveler's adoption of information from ORs [online reviews]," the preponderance of literature supports the contention that adding review quantity is a positive. For example, Xie, Zhang, and Zhang (2014) determined that the greater the review volume, the more influential their overall impact; Singh and Torres (2015) and Torres, Singh, and Robertson-Ring (2015) found review quantity positively correlated with ADR (average daily rate); Phillips, Zigan, Silva, and Schegg (2015) established a positive relationship between review quantity and sales; and Ladhari and Michaud (2015), Tsao, Hsieh, Shih, and

Lin (2015), and Gupta and Harris (2010) each found consumers associate review quantity with overall product quality. These and other articles establish a solid base of knowledge, yet, we feel there are additional questions to be asked related to the "more-is-better" premise. The research that follows specifically considers the value of participation in programs such as Review Express.

There is no doubting Review Express' claim that soliciting reviews from prior guests will add review volume. But are these incrementally solicited reviews advantageous? The current study adds to the electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) hospitality literature by addressing the lacuna that exists regarding differences between solicited and organic reviews on consumer generated media (CGM) websites. From a theory perspective, we are pleased to help expand our knowledge of the topic. From a practical managerial perspective, by combining the existing e-WOM literature with new evidence gleaned from our analysis of hotel review postings, hospitality managers and marketers are provided valuable insight regarding the strengths and weaknesses of solicited reviews. When addressing the question of whether it is in their property's best interest to be a

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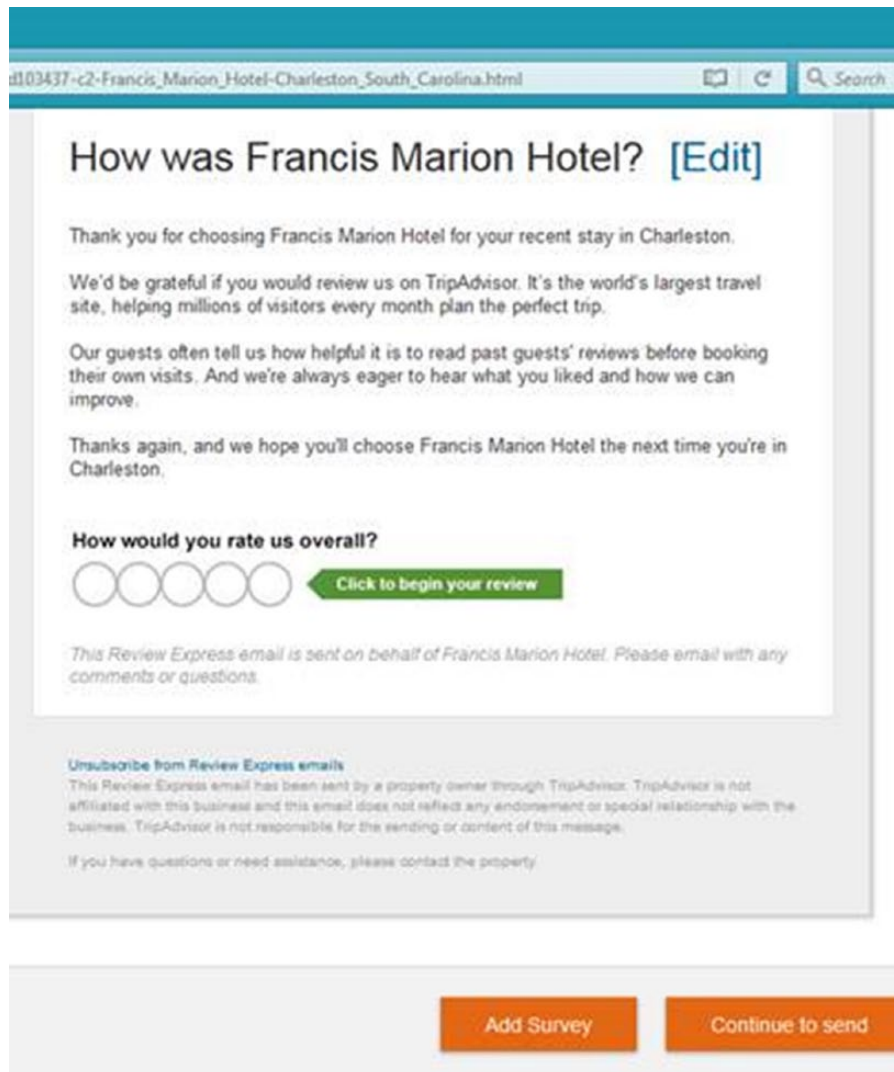Email: litvins@cofc.edu

Figure 1.
Example—TripAdvisor Review Express Request.

Review Express subscriber, having a blueprint to evaluate the impact these incremental reviews have upon their property's image will be of significant value.

Rather than introducing the research with a traditional literature review section, we have inserted relevant foundational research within the discussion of each test performed. For readers wishing a broader discussion regarding e-WOM's role in the marketing of hospitality and tourism products, we suggest two seminal articles, one penned by Xiang and Gretzel (2010), the other by Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008), both of which projected, in the nascent days of social media, the importance of the medium. During the decade since their publication, thousands of e-WOM studies have cited these papers—the vast majority supporting the importance of strong CGM programs. In addition, an overview of recent e-WOM studies, penned by Cantallops and Salvi (2014), may be of interest.

Method

A total of 4,000 TripAdvisor reviews were selected for analysis. These represented five "four-star" hotels in each of TripAdvisor's "top-ten" U.S. destinations. We specifically selected four-star hotels as these would represent high-quality properties with the potential for reviews that would fall both above and below their overall rating, which was not possible for five-star hotels. For each of the TripAdvisor's top 10 cities (alphabetically, Charleston, Chicago, Honolulu, Las Vegas, New Orleans, New York, Orlando, San Diego, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.), we started with the

first hotel listing provided and moved through the list until we had identified five properties that participated in Review Express. Review Express solicited reviews are easily identified, as each is tagged, "Review collected in partnership with (brand or 'this hotel')." The 50 selected hotels included both nationally branded ($n = 35$) and independent properties ($n = 15$). The largest number of nationally branded hotels flew Hilton ($n = 11$), Hyatt ($n = 10$), and Wyndham ($n = 6$) flags. Notably, there were no properties selected from the Marriott family of brands, as Marriott hotels do not participate in the Review Express program. For each of the 50 selected properties, 40 organic reviews, that is, those posted by TripAdvisor members directly, and 40 solicited reviews were selected for analysis. When selecting reviews for analysis, we began with each hotel's most current posting and worked backward until we had 40 reviews of whichever came first, organic or solicited reviews. We then continued to search for reviews of the other category until that set was also complete with 40 reviews. Multiple tests, discussed in the sections that follow, were run to analyze the collected data. The TripAdvisor mean organic and solicited ratings, straightforward calculations, were calculated based upon all 4,000 collected review scores. Analyses that required additional effort were based upon different subsets of the full database. The sample's most current 500 organic and 500 solicited review comments were run through both the Dale–Chall Readability and ReviewSkeptic software programs. Tests that evaluated the verbiage used and review length of the postings were based upon the sample's most current 1,000 organic and 1,000 solicited reviews, as analyzed by the software program LIWC2015. Finally, determination of the posting quantity and number of "helpful" notations by those who had posted reviews for the selected hotels were based upon the property's most current 1,000 postings.

Analyses and Findings

Review Quantity

As stated above, more reviews are considered better than fewer reviews. We noted TripAdvisor's (2017) claim that Review Express participation increases review quantity by 28%. With the caveat that we cannot project how many posters would have written reviews organically had they not been solicited, it seems for the hotel category studied – four-star hotels in major cities– that the Review Express 28% projection is considerably understated; as our 50-hotel sample had a median solicited review share of 46% ($M = 45\%$, low = 9%, high = 76%). For independent properties, the median was 54% ($M = 50\%$), somewhat higher than the chain properties' median of 44% ($M = 43\%$). Interestingly, the hotel with the single lowest share of solicited reviews among the 50 selected properties was an independent hotel

in the historic district of Charleston (9%), whereas the single highest share of solicited reviews was for another Charleston independent property, located directly across the street (76%). Similarly, two independent hotels in New York City were at opposite ends of the spectrum, one with 11% solicited reviews; the other with 70%. For branded hotels, Hilton properties generally had below average shares of solicited postings ($M = 32\%$), whereas Hyatt tended to have above average shares ($M = 55\%$). Hotels in both brands, however, were far from homogeneous. Hiltons ranged from 11% to 56% solicited reviews, whereas Hyatt's range was a somewhat tighter but still broad range of 35% to 68%. When looking at solicitation shares segmented by city, it was interesting to note that vacation-oriented destinations had solicited review shares near both ends of the spectrum. Honolulu hotels were below average, with a mean solicitation rate of 41%; whereas Las Vegas hotels' mean solicited review share of 49% was among the highest. Similarly, two cities with a strong mix of business and vacation travel, New York ($M = 32\%$) and Washington, D.C. ($M = 47\%$) were at opposite ends of the spectrum. What do these results suggest? That while Review Express will, with certainty, increase participating hotel's number of posted reviews, there is no clear-cut indication of factors that predict the degree of benefit likely to accrue.

The results of the following tests are summarized in Table 1.

Ratings

Filieri and McLeay (2013) determined product ranking (i.e., the number of stars awarded by the reviewer) was the strongest single predictor of information adoption from online review, while Ladhari and Michaud (2015) indicate that higher ratings produce "higher-relative-booking intention" (p. 41). According to Viglia, Furlan, and Ladron-de-Guevara (2014), the connection between ratings and purchase intent is a function of the social comparison theory, which suggests individuals select popular alternatives—based on the belief that the majority is "right." Although the linkage between ratings and both consumer attitude and consumer behavior are fundamental and perhaps intuitive, it is instructive that authors, such as those cited above, have provided empirical findings that measure and confirm the relationship. Furthermore, as noted by Melián-González, Bulchand-Gidumal, and González López-Valcárcel (2013) review quantity and overall ratings positively correlate, that is, the more ratings posted, generally the higher the rating. Thus, the increased quantity of ratings generated by Review Express can be expected to produce higher ratings for participating hotels.

In the current study, when the ratings of the 2,000 solicited reviews were compared with the 2,000 organic review ratings, the solicited reviews' mean rating of 4.26 was

Table 1.
Organic Versus Solicited Reviews.

Test Variable	Review Type	M	SD	t	p
TripAdvisor rating	Organic	4.13	1.04	−3.761	.000[a]
	Solicited	4.26	1.02		
Word count	Organic	112.0	91.7	14.057	.000[a]
	Solicited	66.2	47.0		
Dale–Chall readability	Organic	6.4	0.8	−0.913	.362
	Solicited	6.5	1.0		
Affect	Organic	7.2	3.7	−6.153	.000[a]
	Solicited	8.4	4.7		
Negative emotion	Organic	0.7	1.1	0.439	.661
	Solicited	0.7	1.3		
Positive emotion	Organic	6.2	3.7	−5.659	.000[a]
	Solicited	7.2	4.5		
Review credibility[b]	Organic	0.9	0.3	4.849	.000[a]
	Solicited	0.8	0.4		
Posters' number of previous reviews	Organic	49.2	98.1	12.398	.000[a]
	Solicited	6.8	45.8		
Posters' number of "Helpful" reviews	Organic	21.6	43.7	12.419	.000[a]
	Solicited	3.3	18.2		

[a]Indicates significant difference between segments.
[b]Additional review credibility test (Review Skeptic, 2013): solicited = 17.4% rated "fake"; organic = 7.4% "fake."

significantly higher than the organic review mean of 4.13 ($t = -3.761$, $p = .000$). The 0.13 positive differential provides a measurable and fundamentally important endorsement for participation in the Review Express program. We bootstrapped the analysis, reducing the number of tested ratings to a randomly selected 500, and found no significance change. We also disaggregated ratings on a property-by-property basis, determining that 35 of the 50 hotels had higher solicited ratings than those provided by their organic reviewers. Both tests confirm the finding that solicited reviews are, from a numeric rating perspective, more favorable than organic ratings.

Contrarily, Mango, Cassia, and Bruni (2018) suggested that solicitation hurts ratings. Their survey-based research (asking respondents to "think about the last time your review was solicited") determined that individuals were annoyed by solicitations requests and projected that recipient annoyance would result in poorer review scores. We do not question their work—It is likely that solicitation requests are indeed annoying to many, and while the annoyance factor adds a dimension to consider regarding the strengths and weaknesses of solicited reviews, it is noteworthy that our findings indicate that any annoyance felt by recipients did not appear to result in lower rated postings.

An additional important finding was that both the organic and solicited reviews in our test had virtually identical standard deviations (organic $SD = 1.04$; solicited $SD = 1.02$). This lack of differentiation suggests that solicited reviews are no more volatile than those posted organically by TripAdvisor members. This is important, for while Z. Liu and Park (2015) note that consumers perceive extreme reviews as more "useful" and "enjoyable," the literature generally supports the view that review volatility and the presence of extreme reviews are factors that decrease valence, and as a result purchase likelihood (e.g., Riasanow, Ye, & Goswami, 2015; Xie et al., 2014).

Review Length

The literature strongly suggests a positive correlation between review length and review influence (see Hong, Huang, Burtch, and Li (2016) meta-review of the literature). For example, Z. Liu and Park (2015) determined "message recipients perceive reviews with longer text to be more useful than those with shorter texts [as these] contain more information about the product, which helps consumers to obtain indirect consumption experiences" (p. 148). An additional multination test conducted by Y. Liu and Li (2017) reported a similar preference for lengthier reviews across users from the five nations tested.

When the word counts of our sample reviews were measured, it was determined that organic reviews ($M = 112.0$ words) were almost twice the length of solicited reviews ($M = 66.2$ words; $t = 14.057$, $p = .000$), suggesting, per the literature, that organic reviews are likely more influential to TripAdvisor users than are solicited reviews as potential guests consider and make their property selection decisions.

Readability

"Readability" refers to the interpretability and ease of understanding, as well as language, semantic, and lexical expressions used by reviewers (Wang & Strong, 1996). A Z. Liu and Park (2015, p. 148) study that measured "readability" of online review postings concluded, "In addition to customer perceived enjoyment, the readability of the message content appears to be an important predictor of reviews' usefulness." Filieri and McLeay's (2013) study, however, found online review readability did not affect purchase proclivity. Although the current research cannot help settle this debate, it seems intuitive that more-readable postings would be preferable to less-readable postings—particularly when attracting guests to the four-star quality properties tested herein.

To determine "readability," we utilized the "Dale–Chall Readability" (2017) scale, a popular software tool designed to measure comprehension-ease of text in standard English (Wu, 2013). The lower the Dale–Chall score, the more difficult to comprehend the writing, with a 6-7 score considered an appropriate readability level for the general public. Comparison of our organic versus solicited reviews revealed no significant difference between the writing sophistication of the two samples (Organic reviews = 6.4, solicited reviews = 6.5; $t = 0.913$, $p = .362$.) Thus, from a "readability" perspective, solicited reviews neither enhanced nor detracted from the quality of the hotels' postings.

Affect: Emotional Tone of the Postings

Z. Liu and Park (2015) determined that users of e-WOM are more influenced by emotional reviews than by less passionate reviews. Similar findings were noted by Martin, Sintsova, and Pu (2014), who stated,

> We were wrong to suppose that users would be more likely to be influenced by narratives containing fewer emotional terms, presenting the facts in a more objective fashion. We showed that the use of emotions in reviews had a positive impact on how much comments were influential. (p. 803)

Conversely, Hong et al.'s (2016), study found that greater emotion expressed in online reviews led to lower review helpfulness ratings. Given the mixed findings, it seems this topic requires additional study. We found, however, the literature's pro-emotion argument the more persuasive; suggesting reviews with greater emotion are likely more influential and thus preferable to those expressing less emotion.

To determine which of our two review types reflected greater emotion, we utilized Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count-2015 (LIWC2015) text analysis software, used extensively in the social sciences (Tausczik & Pennebaker,

2010), to test for the variable "affect." We also measured the reviews' positive and negative emotion scores, as these two variables constitute the subcategories of "affect."

Per LIWC2015, the solicited reviews had a mean "affect" score of 8.4 (10-point scale), significantly higher than the organic reviews' 7.2 affect score; reflecting the solicited reviewers' greater use of emotional words in their postings ($t = 6.153$, $p = .000$). The affect differential was solely a function of the solicited reviewers' greater expression of positive emotions. There was no difference between the negative emotion scores of the two samples. We suspect there are two explanations for the lower emotional expression in the organic reviews. First, this may be a function of review length, as organic reviews often contained factual and nonemotional narratives describing the hotel's facilities (e.g., "the swimming pool hours were 8AM to 11PM" or "When entering the lobby, reception is around-the-corner"). Similar comments were generally not found in the shorter solicited reviews. Second, it is feasible the higher "affect" score of solicited reviews is partially a function of these being posted following an invitation received directly from the hotel, with reviewers perhaps less likely to respond to what seems a "personal request" with negatively charged comments.

Review Credibility

There is much evidence that CGM users place significant emphasis upon the perceived trustworthiness of online reviews (Kusumasondjaja, Shanka, & Marchegiani, 2012). A recent example is Gavilan, Avello, and Martinez-Navarro's (2018) study that determined "rating trust" significantly and positively affected hotel choice. In consideration of this variable, we tested our selected reviews two ways. First, we had LIWC2015 test for "credibility." Table 1 reflects the statistically significantly higher "credibility" scores of the organic reviews. Second, we analyzed the postings using Review Skeptic (2013) software, which, per Steele (2011), has a 90% accuracy rate identifying inappropriate reviews. ReviewSkeptic flagged 17.4% of solicited reviews as "fake" versus 7.4% of the organic reviews—supporting the LIWC2015 "credibility" findings. Although solicited reviews, per both software tests, had test results that reflected lower credibility than organic reviews, it is important to note that solicited reviews are considerably more likely to be legitimate than are organic reviews, as Review Express solicitations are sent only to bona fide guests following their stay, whereas "fake" TripAdvisor organic reviews are much harder to police. We have no way of knowing the true share of dishonest reviews in either category. However, the important finding is that solicited reviews, again the category most likely to be in fact legitimate, will appear to users as less credible than those posted organically.

Table 2.
Organic Versus Solicited Reviews, Summary Findings.

If Most Concerned With	Better Method
Review quantity (assumed finding)	Solicited
Review score (posting numerical rating)	Solicited
Review length (number of words)	Organic
Review readability	Draw
Review affect (emotion reflected in review)	Solicited
Review credibility	Organic
Percentage of reviews identified as "fake"	Organic
Source credibility; posters' number of reviews	Organic
Source credibility; posters' number of "helpful" reviews	Organic

Reviewer Credibility—Posters' Number of Previous and Helpful Reviews

TripAdvisor poster profiles indicate the number of reviews previously posted by the reviewer and the number of "helpful" notations that reviewer has received. As noted by Xie and So (2017), "the powerful impacts of opinions from reviewers with expertise are well documented" (p. 2). TripAdvisor's designating reviewers as "helpful" thus provides a degree of credibility for users faced with multiple reviews to digest when evaluating properties. Lee, Law, and Murphy (2011), in a paper that touts the strong influence of "helpful" reviewers, provided the interesting comment: "The abundance of travel reviews in TripAdvisor and similar online communities makes information easy to find, but difficult to process and judge" (p. 676). We, thus, sought to distinguish the differences between the activity levels and "helpfulness" ratings of posters from our two sample segments.

It was found that organic reviewers were far more active on the TripAdvisor platform—with each organic reviewer having posted an average of 49.2 reviews; dramatically higher than the mean 6.8 reviews posted by solicited reviewers. The number of "helpful" reviews was similarly skewed in favor of organic reviewers. Organic reviewers averaged 21.6 "helpful" notations versus 3.3 for the invited reviewers. The number of "helpful" notations is logically influenced by the imbalanced number of postings. What is important, however, is that users will note the higher number of "helpful" reviews accredited to the organic reviewers, as well as the scarcity of these for solicited reviewers; and thus, per the literature, will attribute greater valence to the postings of organic reviewers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The above research provides a mixed set of findings. These are summarized in Table 2.

Clearly, review solicitation programs generate additional postings, but today, with CGM maturing and established hotels generally having thousands, often many thousands, of posted reviews, we wonder whether adding reviews, simply to have more reviews, remains an important criterion. The median number of reviews posted for the 50 hotels in our sample was 3,400 ($M = 4,340$; low $= 681$ for an independent hotel in Honolulu; high $= 21,882$ for an independent hotel in New York City). This is a substantial number of reviews, and it would seem that adding incremental solicited reviews, unless these are demonstrably better reviews, might not be particularly important. As noted above, additional solicited reviews can be expected to be 0.13 stars higher than organic reviews, inarguably a plus. However, for the average hotel in our sample (again, four-stars, with 3,400 current ratings, 46% of which were solicited) the impact of the 0.13 star-rating increment, over the next 1,000 postings, quick math indicates, will be a bump of approximately 0.02 stars. (The challenge for a hotel with a large inventory of reviews is consistent with that faced by a student in his or her senior year of college; it is hard to move one's GPA with lots of credit hours in the bank.) Of course, it is possible that 1000 ratings hence, which will come approximately twice as quickly than if the hotel does not participate in the solicitation program, the incremental 0.02 stars will bump the property from a four-star to a 4.5-star rating. Possible, yes; probable, no.

Beyond the benefits of increased quantity and the slightly higher ratings provided by the solicitation program, for many properties we feel the other review aspects we considered may be more influential. Hotels can expect there to be no difference in either the writing quality or the variability of their solicited and organic review postings, and from a positive perspective, their solicited reviews can be expected to be more "emotional" and thus more influential than are those posted organically. However, on the negative side of the equation, solicited reviews will be half the length of organic postings and, again, the literature indicates users are more influenced by longer reviews. They will also be written by far less "experienced" and less "helpful" reviewers, both liabilities. Finally, and importantly, users will find the solicited reviews considerably less trustworthy than those posted organically by their guests.

What do these findings suggest to the hotelier? For some properties, the benefits of solicited reviews will offset their shortcomings. We suspect, however, that for many hotels participation in a third-party review solicitation program may not be in their best interest. At some point, "enough is enough," and adding additional postings, even with the small incremental star rating they provide, may prove, as the negative aspects of solicited reviews are considered, to be an exercise of diminishing return. Such a decision will clearly vary, property-by-property, and it is incumbent upon hoteliers that they take a systematic approach to determine

what best fits their needs, as every hotel will have different circumstances. The right answer will only be found through a hotel's evaluation of their own postings as they seek to determine if fewer, but higher quality reviews are the better option for their property.

It would have been nice, rather than suggesting that each hotel evaluate their own circumstances, had our study provided a set of firm criteria for determining the best strategy. However, as indicated throughout the article, we encountered a consistent lack of consistency when attempting to identify the types of hotels that would most benefit from a solicitation program. In addition, what made solicitation more or less effective for one property versus another was not clear. Highlighting such findings: 15 of the 50 hotels in our sample bucked the trend and had higher organic than solicited review averages. Six of these exceptions were independent properties, but the other nine independents fit the norm. Hilton hotels collectively had higher solicited ratings, but of the 11 Hilton properties, four had organic ratings higher than solicited. Similarly, Hyatt properties collectively had higher solicited reviews, but three of the 10 tested properties proved to be exceptions. When it came to review quantity, a similar disparity was noted. Independent hotels fell at both ends of the spectrum, as did branded properties. Being a vacation-oriented hotel versus a business-oriented property was also not predictive. Thus, again, it is our strong suggestion to hotel management concerned with their e-WOM image that they replicate our study for their own property. It is worth adding that conducting such analysis is easily accomplished; with the analytical software employed herein both user-friendly and either freely available or purchasable at a minimal cost.

As a concluding comment, it is important to note that the importance of CGM is unlikely to soon diminish (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2018); having become, as cleverly penned by Baca (2016), the platform "where truth is negotiated in a public 'online court'" (p. 160). Thus, the goal must be getting the most value, and/or avoiding the most harm, from e-WOM. Many authors have suggested that properties not take a passive approach to CGM management. For example, Mango et al. (2018, p. 155) recommends hotels "build an emotional bond with their guests, because a strong emotional relationship is a predictor of guests' intention to spontaneously engage in Ewom"; and Baca's (2016) overview of CGM-related reputation management literature specifically recommends hotels develop plans and reward systems to motivate employees to encourage reviews by satisfied guests. Applying these suggestions with the current findings suggest that personally requested and well-targeted review personal requests, versus mechanically produced solicitation requests, may be the best strategy for many hotels; likely to produce incremental organic positive postings of greater length and greater credibility and, we suspect, higher rating, optimal attributes for e-WOM.

This research has shared our initial evaluation of differences between solicited and organic guest reviews posted on CGM websites and has provided direction to assist management make an informed decision whether it is in their hotel's best interest to participate in a third-party solicitation program. However, there is still much more we need to understand. We suggest additional research extend this initial review by surveying CGM users to measure their purchase proclivity following exposure to both organic and solicited reviews. Mango et al. (2018) studied attitudes. Future research focused upon behaviors would be a strong extension of the literature. In addition, as this research was limited to U.S. four-star properties, there is an obvious need for replication with other classes of hotels, and certainly beyond the United States, to allow generalization of the presented findings. We hope our study assists hotel management make informed decisions as they consider their participation in review solicitation programs and are pleased to have had the opportunity to extend the e-WOM literature.

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