



Online content responsiveness. An exploratory empirical study on strategies for managing UGC in Italian hotels

Maria Vincenza Ciasullo

Department of Management & Innovation Systems
University of Salerno (Italy)
Email mciasullo@unisa.it

Raffaella Montera

Department of Management & Innovation Systems
University of Salerno (Italy)
Email rmontera@unisa.it

Rocco Palumbo

Department of Management & Innovation Systems
University of Salerno (Italy)
Email rpalumbo@unisa.it

Abstract

Purpose of the paper: This paper investigates the different types of strategies for managing User Generated Content and their main effects. A large sample of Italian hotels with current and prospective customers in the digital environment is investigated. Then a taxonomy of user-provider interactions mediated by User Generated Contents is provided.

Methodology: An exploratory, factor analysis and a cluster analysis were performed to explain hoteliers' behavior toward users' contents, especially e-WOM, generated on digital platform. A random sample of Italian hotels was involved in the analysis.

Main Findings: We identified three clusters, which depicted three different types of interactions between hotels and customers in the digital domain.

Practical implications: Hotels are generally unaware of the importance of UGCs and web-based communication with customers to improve their digital business strategy. Tailored management approaches are needed to realize the full potential of hotels' online content responsiveness for the purpose of value co-creation.

Originality/value: This is one of the first studies investigating the strategic and management perspectives embraced by hotels to handle their interactions with customers in the digital arena.

Type of paper: Research paper

Keywords: Tourism industry; UGCs; Value co-creation; Tourism; ICTs

1. Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have dramatically changed consumer behaviour. *Inter alia*, digitalization and web 4.0 have transformed the way people search for products and services, obtain information, make evaluations, and reach purchase decisions. The spread of user-generated contents (UGCs) – especially in the form of reviews – further contributed in this process. Missing first-hand experiences, potential consumers tend to rely on others' experiences and evaluations to compare products and services (Flanagin and Metzger, 2013). Therefore, reviews are a major source of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) that reduces information asymmetry for prospective consumers (Li et al., 2017). The influence of online information on consumer behaviors seems to be more relevant for services as compared with goods (Christodoulides et al., 2012; Michaelidou and Argyriou, 2012) due to the more intangible and ambiguous nature of the former. Tourism services, whose experiential nature triggers subjective evaluations (Litvin et al., 2008; Li et al., 2017) and makes it difficult to assess service quality (Casalo et al., 2015), are particularly affected by e-WOM.

Indeed, tourism and hospitality have been found to be vulnerable to online reviews (Min et al., 2015). A recent study underlines that 53 percent of online purchases in European Union include travel and holiday accommodation (Eurostat, 2017). Moreover, travellers use review websites as influential sources of information to inform their purchase decisions (Levy et al., 2013; Kwok et al., 2017). Hence, new opportunities emerge for tourism businesses to improve their competitive advantage shaping appropriate digital marketing strategies (Pühringer and Taylor, 2008; Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). Nonetheless, scholars maintain that tourism businesses, in particular hotels, are unwilling to use web-based technologies as a part of their business strategy (Pesonen et al., 2013; Burgess et al., 2014, Lui et al., 2018). In fact, they frequently use the Internet as a distribution channel for promotional purposes, rather than for better understanding customers' needs and expectations.

In addition, digital technologies and e-WOM are largely analysed from the traveller point of view in the hospitality context (Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). Most attention has been focused on the economic and financial impacts of consumer reviews on hotel performance (Anderson 2012; Xie et al., 2014; You et al., 2015) in terms of market share (Duverger, 2013), hotel room sales (Phillips et al., 2017), and occupancy rate (Viglia and Buhalis, 2016). Conversely, few studies deal with managerial behavior and capabilities to exploit digital channels (Assimakopoulos et al., 2014; Abramova et al., 2015). From this standpoint, this article aims to highlight new ways of doing business, leveraging on user-generated content provided by digital technologies. Starting from the importance of proficiency in external information systems management for hotel providers, it investigates if and how hotel managers handle digital channels as a part of their business strategies. The objectives and ways with which hotel managers collect, manage and monitor the UGC are also investigated. In sum, this study tries to identify the different strategies implemented by hoteliers in the online context. On the one hand, the attitude of hotel managers toward digital channels was examined; on the other hand, the role of hotels in improving the value of user-generated content was analyzed.

To achieve these research aims, we designed an empirical study focusing on a large sample of Italian hotels. The focus on the Italian context was motivated by two factors. Firstly, the population of Italian hotels primarily consists of small-sized family hotels which are not affiliated to multinational chains and which cannot count on international strategies for managing e-WOM provided by the chains. For these hotels, effective strategies of e-WOM management are needed to enhance their consideration in the customers' mind shaping

meaningful interactions (Magno et al., 2018). Secondly, Italy has an international relevance as a tourist destination: according to the data provided by the World Travel & Tourism Council, Italy places at the sixth place – out of 185 countries – in terms of importance of travel and tourism overall contribution to GDP and in 2017 contributes to 13 % of GDP (WTTC, 2018).

2. Literature review

2.1 Defining e-WOM in the hospitality context

ICTs and web 4.0 have altered the origin of information: firms are not anymore able to dictate how information is presented and consumed. The user is now in control of the information. This makes the web a user-driven repository of information and relationships for firms. User-generated content has been proven to be more influential than marketing communications in affecting consumer decisions. This has important implications for business, not least the travel sector, which needs to embrace user-generated content as a strategic mechanism. The success of hospitality firms depends on their capability to strategically use information provided by consumers, fostering their engagement through interaction.

As far as travels are concerned, the type of user-generated content receiving most attention by consumer is e-WOM. Analysing the tourist behaviours, scholars underline that online hotel reviews or comments in consumer opinion sites (e.g., Online Travel Agencies, hotel official websites, and online travel communities) are considered the most important forms of e-WOM to book a hotel and to experience the service (Hu and Kim, 2018). Generally speaking, e-WOM is an informal type of post-purchase on-line communication (online reviews, rating, recommendations, opinions). It includes communications by consumers to other consumers – both prospective and past – about usage or characteristics of particular goods and/or services, as well as communications between consumers and companies (Litvin et al., 2008). E-WOM's spread has been facilitated by the increase of websites including consumer review websites (*i.e.* TripAdvisor, Booking, Expedia, etc.), online communities, and C2C websites (*i.e.* Airbnb).

The defining feature of WOM and e-WOM is the independence of the source of the message from commercial influence. Therefore, both offline and online word-of-mouth are viewed by consumers as more credible, relevant and trustworthy than corporate led communications. E-WOM is much more influential than WOM offering greater convenience, anonymity, many-to-many communication, and no restrictions in terms of time and space (Litvin et al., 2008; Xu and Li, 2015; Tsao et al., 2015). In the hotel setting, e-WOM takes different forms (Phillips et al., 2017). *Inter alia*, we can list blogs, comments, pictures and/or videos on customers' personal social media networks (Yoo and Gretzel, 2011).

Many studies have been carried out to identify factors motivating consumers to write online review and produce e-WOM, and the effects of e-WOM on consumer behavior. Within this research stream, some factors emerged as leading to e-WOM, such as satisfaction, commitment, social identity, pre-purchase expectations (Crotts et al., 2009; Casaló et al., 2010), sense of community belonging, gender, and age (Sun and Qu, 2011; Nusair et al., 2011; Bronner and Hoog, 2011). Another stream of consumer research identifies e-WOM as one of the most important factor affecting the consumer decision-making process (Litvin et al. 2008; Xie et al. 2011), online consumer buying decisions and purchase intentions (Ye et al., 2009), loyalty (Loureiro and Kastenholz, 2011), product acceptance, brand awareness, and risk reduction (Kim et al., 2011; Sparks and Browning, 2011). Both source factors (reviewer identity disclosure, source trustworthiness, reviewer expertise, and credibility), and message factors (review readability, review length, and review history) have been proven to matter

(Kwok et al., 2017; Filieri et al., 2019).

Conversely, although e-WOM management is deemed to be influential on hotels reputation, the provider side is under-explored, thus being a fertile ground for research. Studies adopting a provider perspective are mainly focused on analysing the effects of e-WOM on hotel performance. In this case, research considers the impact of e-WOM on sales (Ye et al., 2009) and financial performance (Xie et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2017; Raguseo and Vitari, 2017). In particular, the effects of e-WOM on hotel performance are mainly investigated at financial level (RevPar), operational level (room occupancy) and organizational level (customer satisfaction). A recent study proved the effect of digital marketing strategies - which included the responsiveness to e-WOM – on operational and organizational performance in hotels (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018). This sheds light on the importance for hotel management of devoting considerable attention to user-generated content.

2.2 Strategies for managing e-WOM

There are several strategies for managing e-WOM and information originating from travel websites and social media. Litvin et al. (2008) identified two main strategies that hotels might implement. The first strategy focuses on e-WOM use to collect market intelligence and generate information. Such information can be used to identify hotel strengths and weaknesses, the service elements that customers consider more relevant and the emerging needs or potential gaps which need to be filled in order to enhance services, and to benchmark the competitors' online reputation (Burgess et al. 2014; Aureli and Supino, 2017). In this perspective, such information can be used to support decision-making by providing new service development (Sigala, 2012), adapting pricing strategy (Levy et al., 2013) and sustaining digital marketing based on data monitoring. The second strategy focuses on e-WOM use to build relationships with customers and influence prospective consumers by creating a good online reputation. This involves responses to customers' review – both positive and negative. In order to respond to consumers' comments hotels manager' need a well-defined strategy on when and how to respond. There is no one well-defined response strategy and a firm can enact a range of response strategies. Researchers have tried to identify strategical issues that can enhance the relationships with customers improving their satisfaction and hotel reputation. Such issues can be grouped into the following categories:

✓ source of responses: hotels can manage responses internally or hire third-party companies specialized in online reputation management; they can appoint dedicated resources to e-WOM or incorporate this role into an existing employee's role; responses can be provided by the general manager or the social media manager (Sparks et al., 2016; Aureli and Supino, 2017). Empirical findings are mixed: some studies find that responses by low-position employees are more effective than those by senior staff (van Laer and de Ruyter 2010), whilst others find no difference (Sparks et al., 2016);

✓ efficiency of the responses: the lower the time taken by a hotel to post an online response to customers' online reviews the higher the effectiveness (Xie et al., 2014; Min et al., 2015; Li et al., 2017; Lui et al., 2018);

✓ communication style of the responses: it refers to the voice of responder that is how the content of the response is communicated: professional responses are more formal and task-oriented, but limited in affective content; conversational responses are more informal and direct mimicking one-to-one communication (Sparks et al., 2016);

✓ content of the responses: it refers to the content of the message and its capacity of tailoring the response content. The content can be defensive or accommodative and can have a narrative or analytical format (Lee and Song, 2010; Lee and Cranage, 2014). A defensive

response usually uses justification to deny hotel's responsibility for the problem or excuses to negate it. The accommodative response is used when the firm takes substantial responsibility for the problem and attempts to amend it (Lee and Song, 2010). Defensive responses have been proven to be more effective than accommodative responses for low consensus reviews, whereas accommodative for high consensus ones (Lee and Cranage, 2014). The content of the response can be tailored to the review by implementing a personalized and specific response addressing issues relevant to the particular customer review or not (Min et al., 2015; Crijns et al., 2017). Specific responses have been demonstrated to be more effective than generic ones (Wei et al., 2013; Min et al., 2015);

✓ *action frame of the responses*: this refers to the time and type of corrective actions undertaken. Indeed, management responses may indicate that the problem highlighted in the online review has already been solved (actions have already been taken) or that problem resolution is in progress or it will be addressed in the future (an action is promised to be taken in the future) (Sparks and Bradley, 2017). Moreover, hotels can provide financial compensations and corrective remedies such as refunds or replacements to answer consumers' concerns (Gu and Ye, 2014);

✓ *target of responses*: it refers to responses targeting prospective consumers and responses targeting the complainers (Gu and Ye, 2014; Ma et al., 2015);

✓ *archetypes of the responses*: it refers to the type of action implemented which may consist of: no response; Strategic Customer Orientation (SCO) when the hotels answer only to some reviews usually the lowest or the highest; Full Response Strategy (FRS) when the hotels address all guest comments regardless of their comments; No Strategy (NS) when the hotels only randomly choose the few reviews to answer to without a rational response strategy (Lui et al., 2018).

As previously anticipated, despite the potential value offered by response features, there is little research focusing on response management strategies in the hotel industry (Abramova, et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2015; Lui et al., 2018) and few studies rigorously and empirically classify them in terms of effectiveness for hotel marketers (Rose and Blodgett, 2016). From this point of view, our study differs from previous research on management response in two aspects. Firstly, we conceptualize strategies for managing user-generated content in a more comprehensive way as the capability of exploiting the opportunities offered by the Internet which ranges over a continuum including both the informative potential of user-generated content, the online reputation monitoring and the response strategies to single reviews. Secondly, the investigation of the different types of strategies for managing user-generated content allows the identification of the main effects of specific response strategies. In this way, a more fine-grained analysis of the managerial strategies of e-WOM is provided.

3. Research method

3.1 Sample selection

Population size (N) comprised 4,986 hotels located in Italy and identified from Aida-Bureau Van Dijk, a database that includes financial information and business context about more than 1 million Italian companies. Sample size (n) was calculated using the formula for finite population. It was considered satisfactory to set a confidence level at 95 percent (standard value of 1.96); a standard deviation of 0.5 was set according to a pilot survey conducted on a small number of units; lastly, 5 percent was attributed to the allowable error. In sum, a sample consisting of 536 units was considered to be sufficiently large and representative. A simple random sampling approach was used to identify the units of analysis.

3.2 Data collection

An online survey was used for data collection. In October 2018, the sample hotels were invited by e-mail to take part in the survey using Survey Monkey, a web-based survey tool. The involvement of owners, general managers, social media managers, community managers, digital marketing managers was required. Two recalls were done by e-mail and phone until May 2019. The administered questionnaire consisted of three sections:

1. The first section concerned the hotel profile in terms of location, category, and ownership type; moreover, it allowed us to identify the organizational roles in charge of digital marketing function and the digital tools mainly used.
2. The second section contained questions about hoteliers' commitment towards digital channels and applications of UGC by hotel management.
3. the third section referred to the e-WOM consideration, strategic and operative features hotel responses, and effects of responding.

We mainly used 5-points, closed-ended questions. Respondents indicated their perceived degree of adoption of the practice described in the item (1 = never; 5 = always) or the agreement with the statement reported (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

3.3 Data analysis

3.3.1 First stage: Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

Data were analyzed using SPSS #14. An EFA (Principal Component Analysis; Varimax rotation) was performed to reduce the number of factors explaining hoteliers' behaviour toward UGC, especially e-WOM. More specifically, EFA aims to find the smallest number of interpretable factors that can adequately explain the correlations among a set of variables (Fabrigar et al., 1999). Items that are grouped together are presumed to be measuring the same underlying construct (Kerlinger, 1986). A large pool of items for each of the dimensions was generated to tap the domain of each dimension as closely as possible. The items are derived from the literature review conducted in the domains of UGC and e-WOM. In particular, in order to study the strategies for managing UGC, 25 items were operationalized and grouped into six dimensions (Tab. 1). Kaiser rule was used to extract the components (Kaiser, 1970).

Table 1: Items for each dimension of UGC management

Dimensions	Items	Sources
1. Attitude toward digital channels	a) Familiarity with Internet, social networks, and online travel agencies b) Use of software to track and analyze the data from social media c) Knowledge of the main social media metrics	Our operationalization Adapted from De Pelsmacker, van Tilburg, Holthof (2018)
2. UGC Applications	a) Hotel uses UGC to support decision-making process	Adapted from: Bressler (2007); Lanz, Fischhof, Lee (2010); Levy et al., (2013)
	b) Hotel uses UGC to monitor competitors	Adapted from: Pühringer and Taylor (2008); Burgess et al. (2014)
	c) Hotel uses UGC to identify gaps for hotel services, staff and location (e.g. ease of transportation, view of the hotel surrounding area)	Adapted from: Sigala (2012)
	d) Hotel integrates commercial review sites' (e.g. TripAdvisor) review on its website	Adapted from: De Pelsmacker, van Tilburg, Holthof, (2018)
	e) Hotel encourages guests to the digital interactions and many-to-many communication flows	Adapted from: Lanz, Fischhof, Lee (2010);

		Noone, McGuire, Rohlfs (2011)
3. e-WOM consideration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) An investment that benefits the hotel in the long run making customer more willing to engage in business with the hotel b) A third-party observation about hotel's strengths and weaknesses c) A dangerous weapon with which consumers draw their own conclusion about the hotel and their opinion become easily viral 	Our operationalization
4. Features of organizational response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Hotel responds to guests' comments using a professional tone of voice b) Content of hotel responses is tailored c) Hotel quickly responds to guests' comments d) Hotel prefers synthetic responses 	Sparks et al. (2016) Adapted from: Crijns et al. (2017) Adapted from: Min et al. (2015) Adapted from: Li et al. (2017)
5. Managerial response approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The hotel never addresses any of the guests' online concerns b) The hotel selectively responds to extreme guests' comments (negative or positive) c) The hotel responds indiscriminately to all guest comments to signal its attention to all customers' comments d) The hotel addresses customer comments at random without following a specific response strategy e) In the case of guest complaints, financial compensations (e.g. discounts for future services, gifts) are more frequently used to remedy the damage f) In the case of guest complaints, social compensations (e.g. apology) are more frequently used to remedy the damage g) In the case of guest complaints, hotel prefers to find a justification for the negative event 	Lee and Song (2010); Lee and Cranage (2014); Lui et al. (2018) Gu and Ye (2014) Our operationalization
6. Perceived effects of responding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Influence on the subsequent opinions of reviewers and potential guests who read the review and hotel response b) An effect of responding is a favorable reputation that allows to mitigate damage when implementing recovery strategies c) An effect of responding is a greater profitability in terms of numbers of repurchases and new bookings 	Adapted from: Rose and Blodgett (2016)

3.3.2 Second stage: Cluster analysis

A k-means cluster analysis was ran using factorial scores as input data to group the hotels relative to the factors that better explain the dimensions of UGC management by hoteliers.

4. Findings

220 hotels responded to the survey; 34 surveys had to be discarded due to missing data. In sum, 186 usable surveys were entered into the analysis, with a response rate of 41%.

4.1 EFA findings

EFA generated 3 factors with eigenvalue greater than 1. Table 2 shows the factorial model and the loading (loading under | .35 | are not shown). Both the Bartlett sphericity test (0.000 < 0.001, df = 820) and the KMO sample adequacy measure of 0.781 (> of 0.50) confirmed the appropriateness of the development of a factor analysis (Lattin et al., 2003).

Table 2: EFA findings

3.a) e-WOM as investment that benefits the hotel in the long run making customer more willing to engage in business with the hotel	,741
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Excellence in Services

2.e) Hotel encourages guests to the digital interactions and many-to-many communication flows	,736
5.c) The hotel selectively responds to extreme guests' comments (negative or positive)	,729
2.c) Hotel uses UGC to identify gaps for hotel services, staff, and location (e.g. ease of transportation, view of the hotel surrounding area)	,670
2.a) Hotel uses UGC to support decision-making process	,662
6.a) Influence on the subsequent opinions of reviewers and potential guests who read the review and hotel response	,655
4.b) Content of hotel responses is tailored	,617
2.d) Hotel integrates commercial review sites' (e.g. TripAdvisor) review on its website	,584
4.c) Hotel quickly responds to guests' comments	,564
1.b) Use of software to track and analyze the data from social media	,552
6.b) An effect of responding is a favorable reputation that allows to mitigate damage when implementing recovery strategies	,507
1.a) Familiarity with Internet, social networks, and online travel agencies	,488
5.f) In the case of guest complaints, social compensations (e.g. apology) are more frequently used to remedy the damage	,468
5.b) Hotel responds indiscriminately to all guest comments in an effort to signal its attention to all customers, regardless of their comments	,742
3.b) e-WOM as third-party observation about hotel's strengths and weaknesses	,733
5.e) In the case of guest complaints, financial compensations (e.g. discounts for future services, gifts) are more frequently used to remedy the damage	,651
1.c) Knowledge of the main social media metrics	,617
2.b) Hotel uses UGC to monitor competitors	,567
6.c) An effect of responding is a greater profitability in terms of numbers of repurchases and new bookings	,455
4.a) Hotel responds to guests' comments using a professional tone of voice	,431
3.c) e-WOM as dangerous weapon with which consumers draw their own conclusion about the hotel and their opinion become easily viral	,801
5.d) The hotel addresses customer comments at random without following a specific response strategy	,687
5.g) In the case of guest complaints, hotel prefers to find a justification for the negative event	,570
4.d) Hotel prefers synthetic responses	,415

Item 5.a is not present in table because loading under | .35 | are not shown

All the variables show a commonality equal to or greater than 0.50, showing a good overall significance of the analysis, which produced a 3-factor structure. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for the individual factors was satisfactory (1st factor: 0.77; 2nd factor: 0.74; 3rd factor: 0.76). Finally, the total variance explained was 62%. Three dimensions were identified through the interpretation of EFA results, defining hotel responsiveness as the underlying capability in managing UGC. On line content responsiveness reflects the capability of hotels managers to collect intelligence in order to generate valuable knowledge, manage digital interactions to engage and to empower users, address their concerns, and restore their satisfaction using online review system. That said, the first factor is named *proactive online content responsiveness*. It explains 38% of variance and includes the highest number of items referred to attitude toward digital channels, UGC application, features of organizational response, and perceived effects of responding. In this case, online review system is used to engage not only consumers (reviewers) that have already experienced the service, but also the online users as prospect guests, whose centrality is recognized in the offering's creation, and is aimed to foster the sharing information in many-to-many interactions.

Going over, second and third factors comprise mainly items referred to managerial response approach showing hotel efforts in UGC monitoring. Anyway, they involve different types of online content responsiveness. The second factor, that explains 18% of variance, is named *reactive online content responsiveness*, because online review system is used to monitor and analyze the feedback generated by guests following a service recovery approach and trying to address hotel weaknesses to fill gaps of the offering. The third factor, that

explains 6% of variance, is named *passive online content responsiveness*, since there is not awareness of the strategic opportunities for hotel businesses deriving from users' requests and suggestions generated in online context. This is showed by the high coefficient of item referred to the e-WOM as a dangerous weapon (.801) and by the adoption of a random response approach (.687).

4.2 Findings of cluster analysis

To infer the correct cluster number, a pseudo-F test was conducted (Calinski and Harabasz, 1974). Pseudo-F increases up to the three-cluster solution, suggesting the latter as the optimal one. The three-cluster solution yielded F-values larger than 58.138 (all *p*-values <.0000). Table 3 shows final centroids and proportions for the three clusters.

Table 3: Final centroids for the three-cluster solution

Dimension	Cluster		
	1	2	3
% Proportion	39.78	26.34	33.87
Proactive online content responsiveness	.464	-.121	.961
Reactive online content responsiveness	.860	.349	.569
Passive online content responsiveness	-.163	.790	.149

Positive scores on one dimension indicate higher than average traits within the clusters.

Negative scores on one dimension indicate lower than average traits within the clusters.

Hotels belonging to cluster 1 (39.78%) are characterized by the highest scores on reactive online content responsiveness (.860). Cluster 2 (26.34%) shows the highest scores on passive online content responsiveness (.790). Finally, cluster 3 (33.87%) groups hotels with the highest scores on proactive online content responsiveness (.961). To gain further support for the three-cluster solution, a validation procedure was conducted according to Lattin et al. (2003). The sample was split into two subgroups by applying a random selection procedure. Specifically, the calibration sample included about 70 percent of hotels, whereas the validation sample encompassed about 30 percent of hotels. Next, four steps followed. Firstly, a k-means cluster analysis was run on the calibration sample and saved final centroids; the resulting three-cluster solution was substantially identical to the whole sample analysis. Secondly, final centroids from the calibration data were used to classify hotels from the validation sample. This classification was denoted as S1. Thirdly, a k-means cluster analysis was run on the validation sample and final centroids from such application were used to classify hotels from the validation sample. This classification was denoted as S2. Lastly, a Rand Index of .924 was found, showing an agreement between S1 and S2 and suggesting a strong capability of the clustering model to classify hotels relative to their relative to the factors of online content responsiveness. Starting from the table of the cluster membership where each observation is referred to the relative cluster (Tab. 4), some descriptive variables are presented below to better report the features of three cluster (Tab. 5).

Table 4. Cluster membership

Clusters	ID observations
Cluster 1	2-6-8-13-14-17-19-21-22-25-26-28-31-33-37-38-40-44-45-47-48-49-53-56-57-59-61-66-68-70-72-74-75-76-80-82-83-84-87-91-92-93-95-96-103-107-111-112-113-117-121-123-127-128-131-133-134-135-136-143-144-147-151-155-156-159-160-161-162-166-169-170-175-183
Cluster 2	1-5-7-11-12-18-24-29-30-34-46-54-55-58-60-62-63-67-79-88-89-94-99-101-102-104-105-108-120-130-132-139-140-141-145-146-149-150-152-153-158-164-167-168-171-172-181-182-184
Cluster 3	3-4-9-10-15-16-20-23-27-32-35-36-39-41-42-43-50-51-52-64-65-69-71-73-77-78-81-85-86-90-97-98-100-106-109-110-114-115-116-118-119-122-124-125-126-129-137-

Table 5: Clusters' profile (%)

Descriptive variables		Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Geographic location	Northern Italy	35	12	44
	Central Italy	39	41	16
	Southern Italy*	26	47	40
Category	Up to 3 stars	51	40	55
	From 4 stars up	49	60	45
Ownership type	Chains	43	33	40
	Independent	57	67	60
Digital marketing function	Specific roles**	48	20	63
	General roles***	45	71	29
	External providers****	7	9	8
	Travel websites	40	34	21
Digital tools	Hotel websites	38	48	24
	Social media	15	13	30
	Apps	7	5	25
Speed of responses	Daily	71	13	97
	Weekly	14	68	3
	Monthly	10	12	-
	Less frequently	5	7	-

*Islands included

** Social media manager, community managers, digital marketing manager

*** Owner, general manager, sales director

**** Social media consultants

Cluster 1 is the most numerous, comprising 74 hotels located in Central (39%) and Northern (35%) Italy. They are mainly independent hotels (57%) up to 3 stars (51%). Inside their organization, both specific (48%) and general (45%) roles cover the digital marketing function and manage digital systems to monitor the market. In particular, responses are managed on daily basis (71%). Travel websites (i.e. TripAdvisor) (40%) and corporate websites (38%) represent the more used digital tools. 49 hotels, up to 3 stars (40%) and independent (67%), belong to Cluster 2, that shows a geographical concentration in Southern Italy (47%) – probably inner areas – and Central Italy (41%). Digital marketing function and online contents monitoring are performed by general roles (71%) that often use the hotel website among digital tools (48%). Responses are managed on weekly basis (68%). Cluster 3 comprises 63 hotels located in Northern (44%) and probably in developed touristic destinations of Southern Italy (40%). They are mainly independent hotels (60%) up to 3 stars (55%). Inside their organization, specific roles (63%) deal with the digital marketing and online contents monitoring, managing responses daily basis (97%) in real time. Various digital tools are used from social media (30%) to apps (25%) and hotel websites (24%).

5. Discussion

The exploratory factor analysis, followed by a cluster analysis, allowed us to deepen the knowledge both on Italian hoteliers' strategies in managing UGC and the managers' attitude toward digital platforms. In an inter-cluster perspective, research findings highlighted that Italian hotels are aware that digital marketing plays a critical role in their business strategies. This is confirmed by the fact that almost the entire sample manage internally the management of online platforms and UGC, excluding the outsourcing' option. Anyway, Italian hotels show different attitudes that correspond to various type of online content responsiveness strategies. In particular, findings underscore that the majority of hotels in Italy (Cluster 1) adopts a reactive strategy implementing a problem-solving approach in order to manage online contents. This strategy is characterized by a reductionist approach, as it exclusively embraces

a monitoring attitude toward UGC and a service recovery logic in the online interactions with guests.

Online contents are utilized as mechanisms for a quickly, efficiently and discreetly resolution of complaints by guests. Thus, managers address close attention to the rating and ranking provided by the online monitoring services mainly to the aim to analyze competitors. A more conventional utilization of digital technology is evident in this cluster, as demonstrated by the massive use of online websites (i.e. TripAdvisor, Hotel.com; Booking.com; Expedia) and the corporate website, and – conversely – by the limited use of social media and mobile Internet. In other words, these hoteliers are willing to increase their popularity and give online visibility to their offerings using online travel agency websites; however, they show a limited involvement in managing UGC analysis in a customer perspective.

This is also found with the response strategy adopted (Lui et al., 2018). In fact, it consists in responding indiscriminately to all guest comments, utilizing a professional style of communication, in an effort to signal attention to all customers. This attention is demonstrated by the importance attributed to the high speed of responses, believing that frequent responses lead to positive reviews, higher rating, and more helpfulness scores for hotels enhancing their popularity in digital competitive scenario (Sparks et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017). In case of negative opinions, hotels adopting this reactive strategy solves any damages through technical recovery actions proposing financial compensations (i.e. discounts, refunds, etc.) as a contingent attempt to restore customer satisfaction and prevent customer exits that could benefit the competitors. The professional style of communication adopted represents a formal style that provides just standardized and often generic responses that are considered profit-driven and task-oriented (Locke et al., 2004; Sparks et al., 2016). Moreover, financial compensations are considered a practice of accommodative response (Lee and Song, 2010; Lee and Cranage, 2014). They are related to a value exchange just based on value for money but customers could be more interested in nonmonetary compensations (i.e. apology, showing care, fairness).

However, in the context of online management response, customer satisfaction is achieved not just in terms of leveraging on speed of responding and number of responses (quantity), but on quality and effectiveness of responses: it is how a company responds to customer complaints that enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty. This aspect is emphasized in the cluster of hotels showing a proactive responsiveness (Cluster 3), characterized by a high attitude towards the use of the digital platforms and UGC, and embedded interactions with users. A more holistic approach emerges, because hotels included in this cluster consider digital platforms and contents as strategic resources for market analysis and for engaging customers (Brodie et al., 2015), implementing relation-oriented channels such as social media and apps to join the conversation with users on an ongoing basis, talking, listening, learning and responding to their contents generated and integrating their resources in the service offering.

This is also evident in the response strategy adopted which focuses on extreme positive and negative reviews. The importance of extreme reviews is stressed in different studies (Lui et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2009). In general, customers pay more attention to extreme reviews than moderate ones. Responding to positive reviews is a way to reinforce the relationship with customers recognizing their supportive comments and creating a positive online interaction with them (Dickinger and Lalicic, 2014). It has also an effect on future customers' behaviors: by signaling an attention, care and appreciation of customers' experience they enhance future customers' positive attitude toward the hotel (Deng and Ravichandran, 2016). In addition, responding to positive reviews may influence the propensity of other customers to leave a

positive comment due to the perceived higher usefulness of the response. Otherwise, the response to extreme negative reviews plays a key role in reinforcing trust with actual customers and reassuring future customers that the experience described in the negative reviews is unlikely to be repeated (Chevalier et al., 2016).

The use of a communication style based on a human tone of voice and a detailed, personalized and authentic response when they interact with customers (Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010) and the presence of a dedicated role in charge of online monitoring contribute to reinforce the interaction with customers. Social compensations also improve customers' morale and attitude toward the hotel, by signaling the capability of the hotel of listening, by expressing the attention to users' needs and wants, by demonstrating the interest in respecting justice and fairness (Sahin et al., 2017). Both responses to extreme reviews, the personalized content of responses and social compensations contribute to reinforce emotional and cognitive value exchanges, strengthening emotional bonds with users and reducing the cognitive distance with guests.

In sum, this strategy seems to be grounded within a service oriented logic, based on ongoing customer engagement and co-creation leading to functional, cognitive, emotional and psychological value as an outcome (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). On the contrary, the minority strategy (Cluster 2) considers UGC as a threat instead of an informational resource (as in the case of Cluster 1) or a relational opportunity (as in the case of Cluster 3). A minority of Italian hotels (Cluster 2) follows a passive strategy in managing online contents without implementing a clearly defined strategy. The passive online content responsiveness is linked to an excuse strategy, characterized by the seeking of justification for negative events. More specifically, managers try to shift the responsibility for a service failure to a third party or factors beyond the control of the hotel. If the negative event is due to controllable causes, distancing themselves from the incident reduces the customers' trust (Abramova et al., 2015). Conceiving e-WOM as dangerous weapon, these hoteliers prefer short and standardized responses which lose in informational value and do not contribute to reduce the uncertainty perceived by prospective consumers. In this way, prospective users face more difficulties for evaluating the hotel experience before consumption. This group of hotels treat web-based technologies, especially corporate websites which represent the most used digital channel, as a push channel to distribute the core services (i.e. booking, tidiness, comfort, restaurant, location, sport facilities, personal care amenities, etc.) or deals and promotions. In addition, general roles of hotel are involved in the responding activity carried out on weekly basis. Despite the destructive power of consumer voice broadcasted on digital channels is recognized, it is evident that these hoteliers are unaware of the opportunities for improving their e-business strategy leveraging on a strategic use of UGC.

Finally, contrary to expectations that a less strategic management of UGC and digital channels by lower star hotels, the belonging to lower hotel category provides clear and added impulses towards digital technologies. Hotels up to three stars comprised in the Cluster 1 and Cluster 3 are more receptive to opportunities provided by online contexts, because their percentage incidence in each clusters considered is higher than percentage incidence the hotels from 4 stars up. This may indicate that smaller hotels are aware of the opportunities deriving from online contents, conceiving UGC as a less costly and more effective way of communicating and building service interactions with customers to enhance their overall competitive performance.

6. Conclusions

New opportunities for value creation exist in the digital environment (Barile et al. 2017). The development of information technologies defines new insights and possibilities for tourism businesses to adjust firm strategies and improve service quality and value. In an increasingly competitive and technological driven world, the future of the tourist sector is progressively reliant on ICTs and UGC and the ability to leverage users and their opinions as key strategic resources to create new forms of value and competitive advantage. The need for tourism and hospitality businesses to deeply understand and systematically exploit customers' contents has been intensified by the wide-ranging impact of word of mouth and the practice of sharing it online as results of the technological progress (Baka, 2016). Despite that, a full integration of UGC - especially e-WOM - in hoteliers' digital business strategy has not yet been achieved. For this reason, it is important to contribute to the knowledge of decision-making processes about the use of online channels and digital tools within the e-WOM in hotel and accommodation setting.

UGCs have intrinsic business value. On the one hand, they reflect in detail the customers' service experience and perceptions, spanning information and knowledge in many-to-many interactions; on the other hand, they are able to foster loyalty of actual consumers and influence future consumers booking decisions. Therefore, UGCs need to be strategically analyzed, integrated in the business core processes and managed following a service oriented logic (Lusch et al., 2008). The managerial implication of this consists in the demonstrated importance of using online personalized and in-use interactions as a basis for value co-creation between consumers and providers thereby improving relational, informational and motivational benefits (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). Then hoteliers should invest in engagement platforms characterized by interactional assemblages, such as digital forum, social media brand pages or specific digital and interactive tools, to facilitate the acquisition, accumulation and interpretation of customer-generated data. Besides, human skills for big data analytics are needed to qualitatively analyze big data, collect intelligence and spot sentiments. As customer service interactions are increasingly mediated by digital technology, the ability to foster high quality online data analysis and provide individual responses by dedicated team coupling with specialized competences will become a critical competitive lever in hospitality management transforming data in social and economic value.

The results of this study should be considered with the following limitations, that suggest the need for future investigations in this field. Firstly, data were collected from the Italian hospitality industry, and consequently, the findings may be generalizable only to that population. Future research should be conducted within different geographical contexts and the results obtained should be compared. Secondly, another limitation of this research is related to the data collection technique. We use a survey to detecting the perception of managers about their managerial use of UGC and digital platforms. This perception may be biased due to the social desirability effect, that is the tendency of respondents to answer the question over-reporting the capability or under-reporting the lack of such a capability, so that they will be viewed favorably by interviewers. Further investigations are required based on direct content analysis of hotels' responses to online reviews.

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