

Key Drivers of Customers' Perception towards Hotel Brands through Online Booking Stages and Implications for Hotel Management

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Abstract

Building strong brand image in the online context can be considered as a key driver for hotel business's success. Hotels use their brand names, signs, logos (tangible) and images (intangible) to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Customer perception about a hotel brand is created from both offline and online contexts but only few studies have investigated the formation of brand image in online contexts, especially in hotel business. The paper primarily focuses on, and examines, the factors that determine online hotel brand-image from customers' perspectives. This is one of a few studies to discuss the dimensions of online brand-image for hotel business and provides an understanding of factors that hotel operators need to address in order to create a positive brand image in an online context.

In order to investigate the key drivers of online brand-image, semi-structured interviews and a scenario-based study with twenty hotel customers in UK and Thailand were conducted. The respondents were hotel customers who previously searched and booked hotels online in the last 18 months. Thematic analysis was used to classify and organize data according to key themes, concepts based from previous literature and emergent categories relevant to brand image, online brand-image and brand attributes. The findings significantly reveal that search engines, online travel-agent website information, website attributes such as site appearance, content, prior offline brand-image and online reviews and rating sites, influence customer perceptions on hotel brand-image in an online context. These results provide both academic and practical implications for the hospitality field.

Keywords: Online brand-image, Brand-image, Hotel, Website, Internet, Marketing

Introduction

Hotel companies now face the challenge to execute brand and branding in the online context (Rowley, 2004). The role of the brand on the internet has become complex, as customers now have greater control over marketing communication. Customer perception about hotel brand has been generated on the internet especially when customers are searching for a hotel with which they are not familiar. Customer brand-experience is determined by two channels — offline and online context — in different marketing communication forms such as magazines and e-newsletters. Companies need to ensure that consistent brand-image is maintained across these different channels (both online and offline channels).

Brand image is the mental picture of the product and service offering by a company. Hotel brand-image is now presented in both offline and online contexts, but empirical studies about the brand image perceptions of hotel customers in the online context are very limited, and there is a notable knowledge gap on factors that affect customer perceptions. Therefore, it is pertinent to investigate the factors that drive online brand-image from hotel customers' perspectives. In this paper, firstly we discuss online brand-image formation, and then, further to this, we elaborate upon the differences between offline and online brand-image to provide a conceptual framework for the study. Then, the paper significantly presents the factors that determine online brand-image from hotel customers' views based on semi-structured interviews and a scenario-based study. Finally, both academic and practical implications from the study are discussed in the conclusions.

Literature Review

The term “online brand-image” is new and it needs to be clearly defined. Traditionally, brand image can be considered as the combined effect of brand associations (attributes, benefits and attitude), brand personality and marketing communications held in the consumer's memory (Aaker, 1997; Biel, 1993; Keller, 1993; Park *et al.*, 1986). Table 1 provides the definition of each dimension of brand image.

Table 1 Dimension of Brand Image

Dimension of online brand image	Definition	References
Brand associations	The informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers.	Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Torres and Bijmolt, 2009.
Attributes	Attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a product or service. They can be classified as product-related attributes and non-product related attributes.	Keller, 1993; Park <i>et al.</i> , 1986; Plummer, 1985.
Benefits	Products and services designed to satisfy customers in three different categories; functional, symbolic and experiential.	Keller, 1993; Park <i>et al.</i> , 1986; Low & Lamb, 2000.
Attitude	A way of thinking and feeling about a brand. It can be related to belief about product-related and non-product related attributes.	Keller, 1993; Kotler, 1988; Park <i>et al.</i> , 1986.
Brand personality	The degree to which product or service usage can be attributed to a generalized image of the user.	Plummer, 1985; Sirgy & Danes, 1982; Jin-Soo & Back, 2010.
Customer prior offline brand knowledge	What customers think about the brand, based on their previous brand knowledge (brand recall and brand awareness).	Keller, 1993; Kwon & Lennon, 2009b
Marketing communications	Brands are directly and indirectly communicated with hotel customers through media advertising and social advertising in both offline and online channels.	Roth, 1995; Lewis & Chambers, 2000; Mangold & Faulds, 2009.

Christodoulides & de Chernatony (2004) suggest that brand image in an online context is the same as it is offline, because a “brand” is a universal concept, regardless of setting. This means both offline brand-image and online brand-image should present the same brand identity, while the one element that differs between offline and online branding is the enactment of the brand (i.e. the act of a brand in different environment). However, the dimensions of online brand image have been investigated in a limited manner (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004). Keller (1993) defines brand image as the type (attributes, benefits), favorability (attitude), strength and uniqueness of brand associations. In relation to brand image in online context, a website can be considered as a product-related attribute representing brand personality and providing brand

benefit (functional, symbolic and experiential) when customers navigate online. Da Silva & Syed Alwi, (2008) postulate that online brand attributes (i.e. website elements that illustrate hotel product-related attributes and non-product related attributes) such as personalization, ease of use, security and website personality (customers view a company name as a person), can be used to understand brand image.

However, based on our definition of brand image, online brand-image is not created solely by website attributes; online marketing also has a significant effect on customer perceptions of hotel brands. The Internet has affected the world of marketing not only by providing a distribution and communication channel from marketers to consumers, but it has also moved control of communication from marketers to customers. This is due to the intangible nature of hospitality and tourism services, where the tangible product cannot be evaluated before consumption. This means that the emotional risk of reference-group evaluation¹ is essential for the customer's decision-making process (Lewis & Chambers, 2000). Customers tend to have a certain level of perceived anxiety before the purchase of hotel products; interpersonal communication (i.e. electronic word-of-mouth) reduces the level of anxiety and may turn the prospective customer into an actual buyer (Bai *et al.*, 2008). The evidence from previous research suggests that negative online reviews impact on customer attitude and purchase intention (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Xia & Bechwati, 2008). This, therefore, demonstrates that online marketing impacts on customer brand-perception (Lewis & Chambers, 2000).

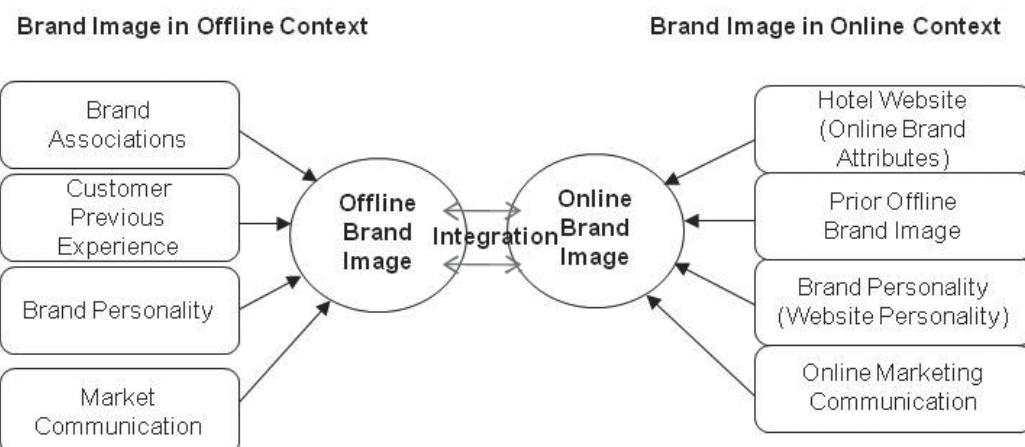
In order to sell products and services more efficiently, many hotels engage in multi-channel distribution such as online third-party websites. Previous studies have found that users have a more favourable attitude and higher intention to revisit third-party websites than hotel-owned websites (Morosan & Jeong, 2008). This research has demonstrated that third-party intermediaries perform well in terms of ease of use (easy-to-use, easy-to-follow sites), and provide complete information. Therefore, it is essential for hotels to offer effective websites (i.e. easy-to-use, complete information and reliable hotel photos) to attract, satisfy and ultimately retain loyal e-consumers and to enhance competitive advantage in a marketplace dominated by online travel agencies (Miller, 2004). This, in turn, has revealed that online third party websites have a significant influence on brand-image perception (Toh *et al.*, 2011)

In addition, it cannot be ignored that online brand-image has also been influenced by prior offline brand-image (i.e. customers' previous experiences with the brand). Kwon & Lennon (2009a), for instance, found that there is a direct and indirect halo effect of offline brand-image, and a direct effect of online performance that may

¹ A group which compares itself to another group.

influence customers' perceptions, expectations and loyalties regarding multi-channel retailers. Brand image can be formed either based upon information from all channels customers have experienced, or from a specific channel for a specific brand image (Kwon & Lennon, 2009a).

By reviewing previous studies relevant to brand image, online brand-image and consistently with the above discussion, it can be presumed that hotel websites and online travel agency (OTA) websites (online brand attributes), customers' previous experiences, brand personality (website personality) and online marketing communication (e.g. electronic word-of-mouth) all contribute to the formation of online brand-image (Coupland et al., 2003; Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008; Christodoulides et al., 2006). The seamless integration and cooperation between the two channels is essential because it helps to enhance customer experience, strengthens the brand image of companies and cultivates customer loyalty in both channels (Kwon & Lennon, 2009a). Therefore, this study explores the dimensions of brand image in an online context from a holistic perspective. This means that this is one of the few studies to identify all dimensions of online brand-image especially from hotel customers' points of view. Figure 1 shows the comparison of brand image models in both offline and online contexts based on the above discussion.



Adapted from : Aaker; 1997; Keller, 1993; Park et al., 1986; Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008; Morgan et al., 2003

Figure 1 A Comparison of Brand Image Models

Methodology

This is an exploratory research which aims to find out the dimensions of online brand-image from customers' perspectives. A scenario-based study with a semi-structured interview approach was implemented. The scenario-based study is the process whereby the interviewer provides the interviewees with a situation and then documents their response to that situation. The scenario of human-computer interaction was an appropriate approach to investigate how hotel brand-image has been formed online. The interview protocol was developed to explore the customers' opinions about what and how they thought about their online experience, these also elicited customers' points of view on website elements that impacted their perception. In addition, the scenario-based study with hotel customers was developed to investigate how online platforms (i.e. social media) influenced customers' perceptions of hotel brands (Bryman, 2004). The interview questions were tested by scholars in the field of hospitality research before distributing them to participants.

The interviews were firstly conducted in the UK and in order to increase the number of respondents and integrity of the research, the researcher interviewed more hotel customers in Thailand. As previously discussed, this study is an exploratory research aimed at finding out the key drivers of brand-image dimensions through the online hotel-booking stage, rather than comparing the perceptions of UK and Thailand sampling respondents. Since the generalization in terms of the different perceptions between UK and Thailand sampling respondents on brand image could not be established, this qualitative study suggests key drivers of online brand-image from hotel customers' perspectives, which will be beneficial for hotel operations. The sample may look small, but this is due to the nature of the study (qualitative research) and the targeted population – hotel customers. Considering that this is a preliminary study, the sample size (20 respondents) was considered appropriate (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interviews continued until data saturation was reached, which means until no new or relevant themes emerged (Bryman, 2004).

The participants were given the scenario of searching and booking a hotel in Thailand, online. They were offered a hypothetical budget to travel in Thailand for seven days. They were free to navigate to any websites and choose to book any hotels. The researcher observed and listed the websites that they visited; the activity was completed when they made a decision to book a hotel. Purposive sampling was used in this process. The criteria for the selection of participants were as follows: (1) the participant had booked a hotel online in the past 18 months; (2) the participant had visited hotel websites/third-party websites and used social media to share their previous hotel experience. The target sample size was determined by the point at which data saturation was reached.

Thematic analysis was applied to examine the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is used to analyze both the content and context of data (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003). A thematic framework is a matrix based on analytical methods which facilitates exact and transparent data management so that data can be analysed more systematically (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003). The coding system and categories were developed on the basis of previous theory on dimensions of online and offline brand-image (Keller, 1993; Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008). The study developed a deductive approach as the interview transcripts were examined based on previous theory of brand image. However, the researcher was open to discovering new themes relevant to the study. In order to ensure the quality of the transcript, the researcher asks the professional to assess the quality of content. In addition, to prevent researcher-bias and to increase the validity and credibility of coding, peer-debriefing and member-checking of information was used (Creswell, 1998). Figure 2 shows the steps for assessing the quality of semi-structured interview data with hotel customers.



Figure 2 Steps taken to ensure the quality of data (interview data from hotel customers)

The semi-structured interviews and scenario-based study with 20 participants were held in the UK and in Thailand. Table 2 summarises the socio-demographic profiles of the participants and indicates their online activities in terms of hotel booking. The code C1 stands for participating customer no. 1. On average, each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and all interviews were audio-recorded. Most participants (i.e. hotel customers) are full-time or part-time workers, and not only students as in numerous previous studies (Caprapa *et al.*, 2001; Sung & Yang, 2008).

Findings and Discussion

Among 20 participants, there were more females (65 percent) than males in the sample. The largest age groups were 20-25 and 36-45 year olds (25 percent for each group), followed by 31-35 year olds (20 percent) and people between the ages of 26-30 (10 percent). Nearly two thirds (approx. 67 percent) of the sample had previous hotel booking experience with hotel-branded websites and intermediate

websites such as Booking.com, Expedia.com and Lastminute.com, followed by a small number of those who had only booked with intermediate websites or hotel-branded websites.

Table 2 Profiles of Interviewees - Hotel Customers

Participant no. and code	Hotel Booking Experience	Nationality	Employment	Gender	Age
1-C1	Hotel website	Swiss	Full-time	Male	31-35
2-C2	Intermediary and hotel website	British	Full-time	Female	20-25
3-C3	Intermediary and hotel website	Polish	Part-time	Female	31-35
4-C4	Intermediary and hotel website	Bruneian	Part-time	Female	20-25
5-C5	Intermediary and hotel website	British	Student	Female	46-50
6-C6	Intermediary and hotel website	British	Full-time	Female	20-25
7-C7	Intermediary and hotel website	British	Full-time	Male	36-40
8-C8	Hotel website	British	Full-time	Female	46-50
9-C9	Intermediary and hotel website	Indian	Full-time	Female	26-30
10-C10	Intermediary and hotel website	British	Full-time	Female	31-35
11-C11	Intermediary and hotel website	American	Full-time	Female	36-40
12-C12	Intermediary and hotel website	Japanese	Full-time	Male	36-40
13-C13	Intermediary and hotel website	Chinese	Full-time	Male	20-25
14-C14	Intermediary	British	Full-time	Male	20-25
15-C15	Intermediary	Chinese	Student	Male	26-30
16-C16	Intermediary	Thai	Student	Male	31-35
17-C17	Intermediary	Brazilian	Student	Female	26-30
18-C18	Hotel website	British	Part-time	Female	36-40
19-C19	Intermediary and Hotel website	British	Full-time	Female	41-45
20-C20	Intermediary and Hotel website	Thai	Full-time	Female	36-40

The results from the scenario-based study were analysed using thematic analysis with the aid of the NVivo (version 9.1) computer program. The themes and sub-themes are presented below following the steps customers took during the time they were searching and hypothetically booking a hotel.

Figure 3 summarizes the findings from this scenario-based study. Most customers started their searches using search engines or online third-party websites (OTA). They read hotel information and viewed hotel pictures on both hotel websites and OTA websites. They also considered the brand benefits that they would receive from the hotel and, before making a final decision, they visited online reviews and rating sites.

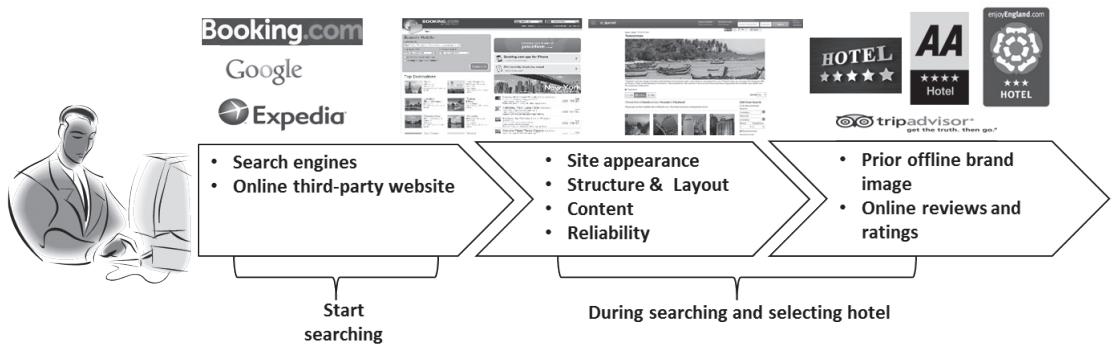


Figure 3 Summary of Findings from the Scenario-Based Activity

The next section discusses the themes found during three important stages (i.e. initial searching, during searching and selecting a hotel), with supporting quotes from the interviews.

1. Initial searches for hotel information

All participants received the participant-information sheet in advance, which detailed the interview process. When they had agreed and consented to participate, the interview time was then set. The findings reveal two main important themes (i.e. search engines and online travel-agent websites) during customers' initial online hotel-information searches.

1.1 Search Engines

During the scenario-based activity, most participants stated that they use search engines to search for hotel information, especially if the hotel's location (i.e. Thailand) is a place they have not visited before. Hotel brand-image has been formed when they start looking for a hotel in a given search engine. Customers' opinions are shown as follows:

"I use Google, search engine; I type hotel spa in a particular area; I definitely know the first page will have a lot of good quality, the second is better and the next one, later is not so good. I think the first three would be the right search (C10).

"If I will travel to Bangkok, I normally use search engines, Google to find information. I will open the first three pages on Google" (C12).

The above quotes highlight the importance of external searches (i.e. search engines). Ease of external searches is defined as the extent to which customers can easily find the website on the World Wide Web (Santos, 2003). As the findings reveal, it is significant for hotels to present their websites in the first three search pages as this will enhance their hotel brand-image and visibility online. This is substantiated by O'Connor (1999), who claims that most chain hotels have a central website with search-engine ability to facilitate potential customers' search for a product that matches their needs.

1.2 Online Travel Agent Websites (OTAs)

The findings show that online travel agents' websites are another channel that customers use to search for a hotel. Many participants went directly to online third-party websites when they started searching for a hotel:

"I like Expedia as it gives you an idea of hotels, then you can get the link to a hotel website directly or to other websites to show different types of hotels and to get an overview of how much things might cost (C16).

"The one that I normally use is booking.com, because I use it regularly in the past, they often send me emails with discounts. It's temptation for me as always. They also send me the feedback email asking about my hotel experience" (C7).

Because of the perishability of hotel product and service, hotels use online travel agent (OTA) websites to sell rooms (Anderson, 2011; Toh *et al.*, 2011). The results support Anderson (2011), who claims that customers use these OTA websites to search for a hotel's location, brand, room rate and service experience. This shows that hotel brand information has been delivered to customers via online travel agent website. It is essential for hotel managers to ensure that the OTAs deliver up-to-date hotel information on their websites and make hotel brand more visible on the internet.

2. During Searching for a Hotel

During participants' searches for hotel information, their behaviours were observed. The websites that hotel customers have visited, and their opinions on each website, were then recorded. Five themes relevant to website design have been found during customer searches for hotel information; they are site appearance, structure and layout, content, and reliability.

2.1 Site Appearance

The findings reveal that pictures play a major role in forming brand image in customers' perceptions. The following remarks show the importance of pictures and video from the customers' perspectives:

"I prefer to see a hotel room; if it shows it in 360 degrees, it will be perfect so I can see what the room looks like and I can imagine myself in that room" (C9).

"Yes, I prefer if it has video content, it shows a guestroom that looks very clean, classy, elegant and a perfect view and my room is right there. It's a cool way of doing it as it shows you everything about their events, the restaurant, the room, service and meeting facilities. I think it's done well; a pretty good snapshot" (C11).

The above statement confirms the significance of having pictures and video on hotel-branded websites. Because hotel products are intangible and cannot be easily described, customers tend to respond to pictures and videos on both hotel websites and online intermediary websites. Previous research has supported that website features, such as virtual tours and videos, influence customers towards positive attitudes on hotel brands (McMillan *et al.*, 2003).

2.2 Structure and Layout

Structure and layout are recognized as salient factors for e-service quality that impact on customers' perceptions. These terms refer to how a website's content and information are organized and presented, and how the company puts their logo presented on each page to enhance branding (Santos, 2003). Many participants expressed their interest in the structure and layout of the website when they did the scenario-based activity, and this is demonstrated by the following remarks:

"I like the layout of the page; that would make me click to the next one. I think there is something else that I would click to the next screen" (C8).

"I think the layout of a website is what matters to me, it should have visual images but if they have awful colour, no, I'd prefer to stay somewhere else" (C6).

Accordingly, participants found simple, clear and easy layout enhanced their perceptions towards a given hotel brand. These findings reveal that the structure, layout

and visual images on the websites impact customers' perceptions towards hotel-brand selection.

2.3 Content

Some participants expressed their concerns about language capability and currency conversion on the websites. They were reluctant to book if they found that the hotel website does not provide multi-lingual capability or is at least bi-lingual (host language and English). The following remarks show their interest in these issues:

"Having English language on the website, I book a lot abroad and sometimes the website is not in English so I have a difficulty which means I need to phone the hotel and ask to speak to someone in English" (C5).

"From the search engine, I open several websites and see one by one, I see the website and see what comes up because I don't know the place. This website does not do the currency conversion to pounds (£), I don't know how much it will cost: if I do not believe in the brand so I go to the next one" (C17).

From the participants' points of view, hotels should provide language selection capability and currency exchange conversion on their hotel websites. This result supports the previous studies, which suggest that bi-lingual or multiple-language selection capability can attract more customers (Hsu *et al.*, 2004).

2.4 Reliability

Besides the interview, the scenario-based activity confirmed that the reliability of content and images on the website are crucially significant to determining online brand image from the customers' viewpoint:

"I got the impact from seeing the picture; usually I found out that the room is not as in the picture when you get there. It looks older; it doesn't look like in the picture. I want to see the real picture" (C14).

"I think when I arrive at the hotel; I should get everything that has been written on the website. I prefer to have a realistic image if it's out of town, tell me it's out of town so I can prepare my mind. Don't tell me 10 minutes and I find no train and I need to pay more for a taxi. I'd prefer it if they gave me the real pictures and true hotel information (C16)".

As illustrated by the above quotes, participants were concerned about the reliability of content and pictures that they found on the websites. This study is in line with a previous study which suggested that the accuracy and frequently-updated content and pictures are important factors in influencing customers' perceptions of hotel brands (Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008).

3. Making the Final Booking Decision

The last step of the scenario-based study was to make the final booking decision. The findings revealed two main themes: prior offline brand-image and online review and rating sites.

3.1 Prior Offline Brand Image

Last, but not least, offline brand-image was also found to be an important factor that determined online brand-image from customers' perspectives. Prior offline brand-image is the brand image that a customer is previously exposed to in the offline channel (Kwon & Lennon, 2009b). Some participants expressed the view that when they already have a prior positive feeling towards a hotel brand, they believe that they will receive a positive online brand-experience when they book through the hotel-branded website:

"I know this brand hotel B, a fantastic hotel, so when you go to the website, you expect to see beautiful screenshots of the hotel. I can see that it's the hotel's image because it's consistent; you are bombarded with it, and you are drawn in by the logo. When you see the whole thing, some of them, they intend to use colour sort of really corporately or formally, and every page will have a certain feel to it" (C8)

The findings reveal that prior, offline brand-image impacts on customers' perceptions of online brand-experience. Their expectations are set based on their past experience with given hotel brands. Many scholars suggest that customers respond to a brand's marketing activity both in cyber and traditional marketplaces according to their prior brand image or associations that they have formed from their past experiences with the brand (Brady et al, 2008; Keller, 1993; Kwon & Lennon, 2009b). The variability of hotel message, and the lack of consistency between two channels (offline and online) dilute hotel brand-image from customers' perspectives. The findings support previous studies, and found that some participants cannot associate website attributes with prior brand-image experience. This dilutes hotel brand-image in customers' minds.

3.2 Online Reviews and Rating Sites

From observations during the scenario-based study, it could be seen that there are many participants who prefer to visit and read online reviews and ratings from dedicated third-party review sites such as TripAdvisor, rather than hotel-branded websites, because of the reliability of review information. They believed that hotels will only put positive reviews on the sites to influence customers' purchase intention.

"If it's on the website of the brand hotel, I don't think I will trust that much because probably they put only good reviews so I quite like to look at the reviews from different websites as well, and then I make the decision. I take them all into my consideration before making my decision" (C2).

"Reviews on hotel websites, I would probably believe them if they were negative comments and the hotel has responded to them quickly and also depending on the date because you can see some hotels where someone has left comments or they quoted the comment up there from someone but they do not quote the day; maybe it is two years ago someone said "we have had best time ever, it was wonderful" but if they are recent - through a mechanism or link to their Facebook page - you know you can see real time responses. I would say especially when the companies are willing to be transparent and probably willing to engage with customers that I would trust them customer comments more if they were on the website" (C11).

The findings reveal the importance of online reviews to customer perception, which corroborate previous studies. O'Connor (2010) claims that now, due to guest experiences becoming essentially transparent, the reviews are highly influential on customer decision-making. In addition, following to the intangible characteristics of hotel business, customers could not see and test service before they actually reach the hotel, so the presence of hotel ratings and other customers' reviews impact on customer brand perception and their decisions to book a hotel.

Moreover, this study also indicates that the transparency of a hotel's brand information does not only impact on customer purchase decisions but it also creates an effect on customers' perceptions of brands. It is important for hotel marketing managers to be able to respond to customers' reviews and they need to be more proactive, continuously engaging in dialogue with the customer, to protect and enhance their brand image (O'Connor, 2010).

Conclusions

The semi-structured interview and scenario-based study findings substantiate the importance of factors in affecting customers' perceptions towards hotel brands, providing support to existing research on both offline and online brand-image (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2006; Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008; Kwon & Lennon, 2009b). The scenario-based study of hotel customers' online searches for information helps to identify factors that determine online brand-image, the results show that search engines, online travel agent websites, website attributes (site appearance, structure and layout, content and reliability), prior offline brand-image and online review and ratings were important factors influencing customers' perceptions towards hotel-brand images in online contexts. In addition, it can be proposed that hotel companies should provide quality in both offline and online products and services in order to maintain a positive brand-image and gain customer trust for booking a hotel online. The theoretical and managerial contributions from this research are discussed in the following section.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several noteworthy contributions to both academic concerns and the hotel business. Firstly, through the increasing importance of the internet, the research has made an important contribution to the understanding of brand image in an online context. This study has identified the dimensions of online brand image from real contexts (hotel customers), which has made noteworthy contributions to brand image literature. In addition, the results corroborate previous studies that suggest brand image appears to have a significant and positive influence on travellers' attitudes to perceived quality and trust when they book hotels online. Prior offline brand-image which customers have with the hotel brand, affects their decision to book a hotel. This demonstrates that brand image contributes to trust in online purchasing.

Another contribution is the concurrent semi-structured interview and scenario-based approaches that were used in carrying out the research. The semi-structured interviews with hotel customers revealed how they perceived hotel brand-image in an online context. The scenario-based study enhances our understanding of how online experience, including experience of websites and social media, influence customer perception of hotel brands. However, to state the obvious, as it is exploratory research carried out with a focus on the hotel business, the generalizability² of the findings

² Also known as G Theory, generalizability consists of a statistical framework employed in the investigation and design of reliable observations.

beyond the population groups sampled is limited (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). To enhance this limitation, any future research may consider increasing the size of the sample or selecting the specific target group within one specific country. The findings from the research can be drawn from real practices for future hotel implications.

Managerial Contributions

For hotel implications, the proposed factors influencing customers' brand image are identified. Hotels need to address these factors in order to increase positive hotel brand image. The findings suggest that website attributes (e.g. site appearance, content, reliability), visibility of hotel name on search engine, prior offline brand image, and online reviews and rating sites impact on customer perception. Hoteliers should place emphasis on improving these website attributes and providing benefits (i.e. functional, symbolic and experiential benefits) to customers by offering products and services that meet their expectations. In addition, based on service companies' (hotels) characteristics of inseparable production and consumption process (i.e. the use of marketing tools, hotel product and service, customer contact with employees), website, hotel reservation system and online marketing tools can build stronger relationship with customers.

Moreover, the results support the idea that prior offline brand-image (brand knowledge) influences customer perceptions of hotel brands. Customers form a hotel brand-image through a synthesis of all the signals from both channels (offline and online). The poor performance of a hotel brand in one channel might impact the customer's image and expectation of that hotel in the other channel. Hoteliers, therefore, need to ensure that all channels perform well and present the same brand image, which will consequently enhance brand perception in customer memory. The seamless integration and cooperation between offline (e.g. hotel marketing collateral material) and online channels (hotel website, online third-party website, and global distribution channels) is essential because it helps to enhance the customer's brand-experience and strengthens hotel brand-image. Providing a consistent message across channels is therefore essential. Furthermore, online marketing has some significant impact on brand-image formation; hotel managers should not disregard it as it influences customer perception. Hotel Facebook fanpages and Twitter 'tweets' should be used to create good relationships and brand engagement with customers. Hotel managers need to ensure that their brands are well-presented on the first page of search engine results. Good cooperation between hotel and online third-party websites is also essential to ensure that these sites provide up-to-date

information and pictures and reduce the rate-parity problem. Moreover, hotel managers should regularly monitor online reviews and respond to them promptly to sustain and enhance their hotel's brand image. Last but not least this study does not only make noteworthy contributions to the hotel business — the results can be applied to other online retail business such as the online apparel business, online travel agencies and other business sectors.

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