



# The Ethical Standpoint of Social Influencers on Hotel E-Servicescape: A Theoretical Perspective on the Existing Literature

Shohel Md. Nafi\*

Lecturer, Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali, Bangladesh  
Email: [smnafi13@gmail.com](mailto:smnafi13@gmail.com)

Tanvir Ahmed

Department of Service Management, Lund University, Sweden  
Email: [tanvir.ayon.du@gmail.com](mailto:tanvir.ayon.du@gmail.com)

Corresponding author\*

## Abstract

Social media influencers create social media content and disseminate this to the customers. Currently before taking any purchase decisions, most of the consumers use e-servicescape platforms to find hotels review, ratings and pictures about the hotel service and product. At this stage consumers can get influenced by a group referred to as 'Influencers'. Most of the time influencers can easily persuade their audiences' judgment with their content. These contents can be unethically structured to gain benefits and they ultimately deceive the audiences. This article presents an inclusive review of different articles that were published in 49 research journals, internet columns, conference and book reviews.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Social Influencers, E-servicescape, Hotel, Customer

## Introduction

In January 2018, a social media influencer, Elle Darby reached out to Paul Stenson, the owner of a The White Moose Café, and requested a free five-night stay in exchange for exposure. Darby stated in her mail, "I work as a social media influencer, mainly lifestyle, beauty & travel based. My partner and I are planning to come to Dublin for an early Valentine's Day weekend from Feb 8th to 12th to explore the area. As I was searching for places to stay, I came across your stunning hotel and would love to feature you in my YouTube videos/dedicated Instagram stories/posts to bring traffic to your hotel and recommend others to book up in return for free accommodation." Ending her email, Darby mentioned that she had organized a similar collaboration with Universal Orlando in Florida last year and "it's been amazing for them!" (Chelsea Ritschel, 2018, January 18).

In response Paul Stenson responded by openly posting the whole matter in social media using the Hotels official Facebook page, "If I let you stay here in return for a feature in a video, who is going to pay the staff who look after you? Who is going to pay the housekeepers? ... Who is going to pay for the light and heat you use during your stay? Maybe I should tell my staff they will be featured in your video in lieu of receiving payment for work carried out while you're in residence?" the owner wrote on Facebook. The message concludes: "P.S. The answer is no." (Taylor Lorenz, 2018, June 13).

Consequently, this luxury boutique hotel made worldwide headlines overnight after openly exposing this incident to the social media. As a result, she has received countless negative comments including calling her a "disgusting freeloader." But in her response video 'she claims



it's how the whole industry is doing business. And the owner of the hotel unnecessarily publicly humiliated her by posting that private mail to get his exposé (Chelsea Ritschel, 2018, January 18; Rosie Spinks, 2018, January 23; Taylor Lorenz, 2018, June 13).

Several points may be noted here. Elle Darby reached out to the hotel owner for free accommodation in exchange for collaboration, the hotel owner doesn't believe that any positive outcome can be formed from this collaboration, he publicly humiliated her by posting personal mail publicly and used the hotel's e-servicescape (Official Facebook Page) to gain worldwide publicity. In the response video another burning issue came out, asking benefits in exchange for social media content have become a trend among these self-proclaimed social influencers. So, many of the reviews and contents claiming to have excellent experience in a hotel, are not authentic.

To explore and understand the context this section of the study will try to provide an overview of the key factors. The term Social media influencers represents "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011:90). Now, days before taking any purchase decisions, most of the hospitality consumers use e-servicescape platforms to find the hotels review, ratings and pictures about the hotel service and product. At this stage consumers can get influenced by a group referred as 'Influencers'. They can effectively spread information through various platforms to the desired target market. (Lai, Chong, Ismail, & Tong, 2014) and influencers can easily persuade their audience's judgment with their content. But the content can be unethically structured to gain benefits, ultimately deceiving the audiences. That's why it is important to understand the role of influencers in relevance within an e-servicescape environment (Huang, Li, Mou, & Liu, 2017). Unfortunately, the power to formulate mass opinion is providing unnecessary power to many untrained, biased and unethical persons.

Travel blogging isn't supposed to be all about 'Travel for free'. It should be about creating motivating contents with powerful stories to create a bridge between the destinations and the audience. Many investigative researchers have covered the activity of influencers and benefits of social media promotion of hotels separately. But in the process, we have the obligation to check and balance the notions for people who only have an agenda aimed at exploiting business and deceiving their audiences.

As the focus of this paper is to investigate the misuse of power by the influencers and their ethical position, the next section will provide further insights into this context and will introduce the research problem.

## **Problematization**

### ***Research area***

Over the years, tourism industry has grown immensely. Especially the accommodation sector is evolving quickly to cope with the changing demographics of their consumers and keeping track of all these changes is a huge challenge for researchers and academics. Researchers try to follow and note down the consequences of the indicators that are needed for future developments. But understanding the nature and motivators of the hospitality consumers and developing better marketing strategies to reach the potential niche demographic has been a challenge for tourism strategists (Ap & Crompton, 1998; Thakran & Verma, 2013). Digital influencers claim to have the capacity to play a vital role in those demographics and they can create personalized content and post them on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, blogs, Snapchat or platforms like Trip Advisor or booking.com etc.. They claim to possess the ability to create brand awareness for the hospitality related properties, or even ruin it (Lisichkova & Othman, 2017). Previously the area of recommendation was limited to friends and family, but social media has given them the power of



expressing their views globally. Moreover, their travel demands and increased pricing is driving the consumers to be far more careful when considering options from a vast amount available in hotel accommodation (Iacianci, 2015).

One of the influential social sites for tourism and hospitality business is Instagram. Instagram now has more than 800 million monthly active users and most of these users use it to gain travel ideas. Contributions made by consumers on different online platforms facilitate the interaction between similar minded communities with a similar interest in consumption. Via this process they hope to facilitate their decision-making processes (Amblee & Bui, 2011). Therefore, the influencers argue with the hospitality stakeholders that they can promote and reach out to the niche demographic audience more effectively than any other medium and generate profits for the companies involved. Many try to exploit the benefits by vaguely promising uncertain online promotion and engagement. This is the power to change decisions by expressing what is essentially a personal opinion. This power derives from social media that improves the ability to globally access and share information (Iacianci, 2015).

### ***Knowledge gap***

Finding out how the social influencers change the behavioral traits, and their ethical aspects, are some of the crucial objectives of this paper. This leads to investigating the actual usage caricaturists of social media platforms (Iacianci, 2015). A significant number of research has been conducted on various issues covering consumer behavior attributes on social networking sites. There is a positive side of taking an active role as a business operator on these platforms (Chu & Kim, 2011; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Kwok & Yu, 2013; Lin & Lu, 2011). Proactive response on hotel's e-servicescape platforms create a direct impact on a hotel's performance. Positive rating and reviews on reputed sites increase the possibility of booking up to 13.5% (Anderson, 2012). Decision makers in management positions of an accommodation business property should actively maintain and alternate their operational strategy to ensure a continuous positive success rate and growth. Their indifference to the review and rating system can result in drastic negative impact on the hotel's reputation and ultimately profits. As almost all the potential guests are more likely to do their research online by visiting these open platforms before making their reservation, this becomes critical. Since online reputation management helps to build trust and credibility of a business as well as help to manage any negative online presence while increasing the positive image, researchers needs to look more closely into this gap (Iacianci, 2015:3).

Surprisingly, within the last decade, the influence of the online reviews and ratings has become the most influential primary source of social influence to guide one to make their final purchase decision. E-Word of Mouth has become the most influential system in the tourism industry and will play an even more influential role in this industry in the near future (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2018). But, what happens if these contents turn out to be fake or secretly promote or mislead the audience in exchange for benefits? The area of defining a proper moral standpoint for social influencers is still a gray area. 'You have to give me what I want or else my negative review or blog post will affect your online reputation will be affected' this type of threat is very common for both hotel and restaurant service associates (Raas, 2015). The available examples throughout the media prove that it is a growing global issue (Rosie Spinks, 2018, January 23; STAMFORD, 2012, September 12; Telegraph Staff, 2014, May 08). This raises a burning question on the credibility of the authenticity of the social influencers motive to create content (Harcup, 2014). Unfortunately, influencers are not trained journalists and their position cannot be directly linked with journalism. But, their audiences often blindly follow them as specialists or experts of their field of interest, and consider them as a source of trustworthy information (Kaikkonen, 2016; O'Malley, 2014).



However, scientific literature related to the ethical considerations to be a social influencer is still hard to come by. Despite plenty of research having been conducted on the nature of e-servicescape, online reputation management and managing negative reviews on e-servicescape, there is still a research gap when it comes to determining moral issues related to unethical blackmailing of influencers and their sponsored contents targeted to intentionally mislead audiences. This paper tries to explore the scientific research articles related to the moral standpoint of social media influencers which is still underexposed and worthy of further investigation. Therefore this paper aimed to assess other literatures covering the fields related to ethical standpoint. Keeping the complexity of the research topic, the research question was formulated after investigating the patterns in the relevant academic field. The final research question is stated below followed by two relevant sub questions.

“What is considered ethical for social influencers in the hotel e-servicescape?”

- Why the role of an influencer needs to be necessary?
- How can hotels ethically manage their online representation?

### Methodology

This study accumulates content assessment to analyze articles that were published in different journals and websites. This is a very new field for the researchers. For that reason, only a few research articles have been found to analyze. The following table 1 accumulates 49 different articles, internet columns, conference and book reviews which were related to the topic “Ethical Standpoint of Social Influencers on Hotel E-Servicescape”. During the identification process, the authors read the abstract of each of the articles to primarily classify whether it is related to the social influencers and hotel e-servicescape. After that, full length articles of the identified abstract were thoroughly read to finally identify their appropriateness. These articles are grouped into some relevant categories namely Social Media, Social Influencers and e-servicescape which are directly related with this articles. Then the authors identified the research area and knowledge gap. The authors then analyzed contemporary servicescape vs e-servicescape of hotels, the role of social influencers on hotel e-servicescape platforms and ethical standpoint of social influencers on hotel e-Servicescape platforms.

No.	Author(s) Name	Year	Journal/Source Name	Title
1.	Amblee, N., & Bui, T.	2011	Journal of Electronic Commerce	Harnessing the influence of social proof in online shopping: The effect of electronic word of mouth on sales of digital microproducts.
2.	Anderson, C. K.	2012	Cornell Hospitality Report	The impact of social media on lodging performance.
3.	Ap, J., & Crompton, J. L.	1998	Journal of travel research	Developing and testing a tourism impact scale.
4.	Atanmo, G.	2018	theblogabroad.com	The good, the bad, and the ugly sides of influencer marketing.
5.	Bitner, M. J.	1992	The Journal of Marketing	Servicescapes: The impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees.
6.	Catriona H. J.	2016	cosmopolitan.com	Lauren bullen of gypsea lust denies claims the copycat instagram pictures story is fake.
7.	Chelsea R.	2018	independent.co.uk	Luxury Dublin hotel bans all social media influencers.
8.	Chu, S.-C., & Kim, Y.	2011	International Journal of Advertising	Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites.



9.	Cohen, J. F., & Olsen, K.	2013	International Journal of Hospitality Management	The impacts of complementary information technology resources on the service-profit chain and competitive performance of South African hospitality firms.
10.	Cox, S.	2017	hotelmanagement.net	Why influencer marketing is a game changer for the hotel industry.
11.	Darley, W. K.	2018	socialtables.com	Influencer marketing for hotels: 4 brands who are crushing the game.
12.	Diga, M., & Kelleher, T.	2009	Public Relations Review	Social media use, perceptions of decision-making power, and public relations roles.
13.	Dong, P., & Siu, N. Y.-M.	2013	Tourism Management	Servicescape elements, customer predispositions and service experience: The case of theme park visitors.
14.	Eroglu, S. A., Machleit, K. A., & Davis, L. M.	2003	Psychology & marketing	Empirical testing of a model of online store atmospherics and shopper responses.
15.	Fiore, A. M., & Jin, H.-J.	2003	Internet Research	Influence of image interactivity on approach responses towards an online retailer.
16.	Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A.	2011	Public Relations Review	Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality.
17.	Harcup, T. (2014).	2014	OUP Oxford	A dictionary of journalism:
18.	Harris, L. C., & Goode, M. M.	2010	Journal of Services Marketing	Online servicescapes, trust, and purchase intentions.
19.	Huang, D., Li, Z., Mou, J., & Liu, X.	2017	Information Technology & Tourism	Effects of flow on young Chinese consumers' purchase intention: a study of e-servicescape in hotel booking context.
20.	Hudson, S., & Thal, K.	2013	Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	The impact of social media on the consumer decision process: Implications for tourism marketing.
21.	Iacianci, C.	2015	Kent State University	Hotel Manager's Attitudes toward Social Media.
22.	Kaikkonen, A.	2016		Destination Image and Travel Blogs.
23.	Kechagia, K.	2018		Servicescape in Digital environment
24.	Koernig, S. K.	2003	Psychology & marketing	E-scapes: The electronic physical environment and service tangibility.
25.	Kwok, L., & Yu, B.	2013	Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	Spreading social media messages on Facebook: An analysis of restaurant business-to-consumer communications.
26.	Lai, K. P., Chong, S. C., Ismail, H. B., & Tong, D. Y. K.	2014	International Journal of Information Management	An explorative study of shopper-based salient e-servicescape attributes: A Means-End Chain approach.
27.	Law, R., & Chen, S. Z.	2012	Asia Pacific journal of tourism research	Representation of destination cultural factors on hotel websites: Content analysis of Beijing hotel websites.
28.	Lee, S., & Jeong, M.	2012	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	Effects of e-servicescape on consumers' flow experiences.
29.	Lin, K.-Y., & Lu, H.-P.	2011	Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking	Intention to continue using Facebook fan pages from the perspective of social capital theory.
30.	Lisichkova, N., & Othman, Z.	2017		The Impact of Influencers on Online Purchase Intent.
31.	Litvin, S. W., Goldsmith, R. E., & Pan, B.	2018	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	A retrospective view of electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management.
32.	Mazzarol, T., Sweeney, J. C., & Soutar, G. N.	2007	European Journal of Marketing	Conceptualizing word-of-mouth activity, triggers and conditions: an exploratory study.
33.	MediaCT, I.	2014	Google Travel Study	The 2014 traveler's road to decision.
34.	Migs Bassig.	2012	reviewtrackers.com	In 2014, an estimated 10 to 15 percent of reviews will be fake or paid



35.	NICHOLAS CONFESSORE, G. J. X. D., RICHARD HARRIS and MARK HANSE	2018	nytimes.com	The Follower Factory. The New York Times.
36.	Nilsson, E., & Ballantyne, D.	2014	Journal of Services Marketing	Reexamining the place of servicescape in marketing: a service-dominant logic perspective.
37.	O'Malley, L. (2014).	2014	Journal of Marketing Management	Relational marketing: development, debates and directions.
38.	Papadopoulou, P., Kanellis, P., & Martakos, D.	2002	Paper presented at the ECIS.	Trust Formation And Relationship Building In Electronic Servicescapes.
39.	Raas, K. M. R.	2015	University of Twente	The threat of social media blackmailing in the hospitality industry: when customers misuse their power.
40.	Rosie Spinks.	2018	qz.com	Yes, brands give influencers free stuff—but the relationship is getting more sophisticated.
41.	Schiffman, L. G., Sherman, E., & Long, M. M.	2003	Psychology & marketing	Toward a better understanding of the interplay of personal values and the Internet.
42.	Spoon.	2018	spoonagency.com	How the Marriott became a media company.
43.	Sreejesh, S., & Abhilash, P.	2017	Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	Investigating the process through which e-servicescape creates e-loyalty in travel and tourism websites.
44.	TAMFORD.	2012	telegraph.co.uk	Gartner says by 2014, 10-15 percent of social media reviews to be fake, paid for by companies
45.	Thakran, K., & Verma, R.	2013	Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	The emergence of hybrid online distribution channels in travel, tourism and hospitality.
46.	Tran, G. A., & Strutton, D.	2016	Springer, Cham	Investigating e-servicescape, trust, e-wom, and customer loyalty. In Celebrating America's Pastimes: Baseball, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie and Marketing? Developments in Marketing Science: Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Science.
47.	Uzunoğlu, E., & Kip, S. M.	2014	International Journal of Information Management	Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger engagement.
48.	Venkatesh, A.	1998	European Journal of Marketing	Cybermarketscapes and consumer freedoms and identities.
49.	Walsh, G., Gwinner, K. P., & Swanson, S. R.	2004	Journal of Consumer Marketing	What makes mavens tick? Exploring the motives of market mavens' initiation of information diffusion.

## Theoretical Outline

The following section presents the theoretical background of the study by first describing the formation of hotel e-servicescapes and different ways of looking at the influential factors in these social media. Next, the paper presents the ways influencers collaborate with the hotels and their ethical standpoint during this process.

### ***Contemporary Servicescape vs E-servicescape of Hotels***

The researchers investigated the level of influence physical behavior creates on human behavior in the service industry. The idea of servicescape has been around for a while, which has given the researchers ample time to study the different aspects of offline servicescape. The whole idea of servicescape is segmented into ambience, coordination between functions, layout, outdoor sign, symbol and the institutes setup itself (Bitner, 1992). To give an example for a hotel the servicescape will be the ambience of the lobby, amenities in the room, the service quality



orientation of the employees, food quality of the in-house restaurants, wifi speed, safety and security, car parking, sign and symbols to assist, concierge and information help and hundreds of physical environment of the property (Huang et al., 2017). This might be the reason, why many researchers have devoted their research focus to the managerial implications related to servicescape design of the tourism field and strategies to uniquely promote their the properties (Dong & Siu, 2013). But, the case of e-servicescape is more complex and multidimensional than offline environments. In this case the consumers interact with a more virtual environment of the institution through an electrical online terminal. Therefore, researchers in the relevant field have agreed to avoid traditional approaches to e-servicescape and deal with the fields separately (Huang et al., 2017; Sreejesh & Abhilash, 2017).

Historically the term e-servicescape has been formulated after it had been called several other terms. For instance, it has been multifariously referred to as “e-scape” (Koernig, 2003), “online physical environment” (Fiore & Jin, 2003; Schiffman, Sherman, & Long, 2003), “cyber marketplaces” (Venkatesh, 1998), “online atmospherics” (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003), and recently, “e-servicescape” (Harris & Goode, 2010; Lee & Jeong, 2012).’ All these conceptualizations indicate in one way or another the totality of the online service environment of the service provider (Sreejesh & Abhilash, 2017:22). The Internet allows the consumers to access information about products or service more easily than the traditional market of usual physical channel (Kechagia, 2018). Online environment or e-servicescape consists of attributes like system standards, Information relevance and service quality. The conceptualization of e-servicescape is presented by Harris and Goode (2010) as comprising three dimensions: aesthetic appeal, online layout and functionality, and financial security (Tankovic & Benazic, 2018:4). The study of Nilsson and Ballantyne in 2014 has summarized major changes needed during a shift from the classical servicescape concept to a more less physical digital online servicescape or e-servicescape environment (Nilsson & Ballantyne, 2014).

Table 2: Major changes in servicescape design by David Ballantyne & Elin Nilsson, Journal of Service Marketing, 2017

<b>Brick and Mortar Place</b>	<b>Digital/Virtual Space</b>
Service staff	Q&A, Chat rooms
Visiting different department in the store	Different service setting with a click
Background music	Musical options, sound effect
Shopping cart	Shopping cart/bag with a click
Communication as information transfer	Communication evolves as a process
Loyal individual customers	Brand community of loyal customers
Local service markets	Global service markets
Business places are customer focused	Virtual sites are community focused
You buy and take the product home	Virtual products stay on the virtual site
Consumers have an operant role	Avatars have an operand role
Value is embedded in products	Value may be co-created with customers
Suppliers dominant servicescape design	Customers participants in service design
Participants are usually task focused	Immersion into an imagined world
Objectivist space-time reality	More fluid space-time reality



Online transactions have created their significant contributions as a form of e-servicescape in the business world and it has been predicted to be more influential in near future. But as all the transactions and interactions take place virtually, trust is a huge factor here. O'Malley (2014) states that this communication on e-servicescape platforms is not always positive. It can also be manipulative and hierarchal. Many firms work in this field and often collaborate with trustworthy and ethical partners to co-create value. But they also make sure that their sponsored content has a clear indication referring to the facts. On the contrary, consumers can also affect the online reputation of institutions by posting personal experiences and take away the power of control of the property (O'Malley, 2014). Researchers have predicted and proved the significance of this online environment with more trustworthy transaction systems, flawless purchase or consumption and consistent trustworthy relationship building interactions which create a larger interactive audience who believe and trust influencers suggestions in their respective field (Harris & Goode, 2010; Lai et al., 2014; Papadopoulou, Kanellis, & Martakos, 2002).

### ***Role of social influencers on hotel E-servicescape platforms***

In this era, any modern hotel marketing plan will include a detailed or elaborated map of their future in the social media. As the industry is becoming more dependable on virtual technology, hospitality managers are also showing keen interest to the technological advancement in the relevant field (Law & Chen, 2012). Hotel GM, Director of operations, Head of marketing are taking decisions by implementing more advanced online reputation management strategies. They are constantly keeping in minds the social media trends and feedbacks of their guests on e-servicescape platforms and make judgment calls to gain competitive advantage over other properties in the same demographics (Diga & Kelleher, 2009).

A lot of hospitality firms has started using Information Technology as a tool to cope with this globalized world, intense global competition, changed guest/customer expectation and high ratio of guest turnover. That's why Investment in the online field for a hospitality based business entity needs to be more calculated and researched to ensure desired outcome; so that organizations can have a widened understanding of their online tools to achieve desired level of Consumer satisfaction (Cohen & Olsen, 2013). Currently social media platform is the key terminal to reach a more calculated and targeted consumers. For example, social media platform Instagram alone has 800 million active monthly users, and in every six months it is increasing its audience around 100 million. A staggering figure of 60% of online users who are adult have an Instagram account, creating significant opportunity for hotel marketers in this platform. In the year 2017, Around 120 million Instagram users reached out to the concerned business in response to the Instagram post. This is only one social media platform used by social media influencers. Researchers have acknowledged that in near future online media will take place of print media (Cox, 2017, Nov 30). Moreover, The development of online platforms has enabled hospitality consumers to easily reserve and purchase in any time and situation. This also gives them a wider access to hundreds of options to compare from review systems to judge before making a purchase decision for them (Tankovic & Benazic, 2018).

Even the largest Hotel brand 'Marriott' has started to invest billions of dollars in its own content studio and production of digital content studio. According to David Beebe, Production manager of Marriot Content creation division describes this issue as, 'the advantage of a creating content brand, will always be a strengthen relationship with the customers and easier to reach younger audiences.' Marriott's two films 'The Two Bellmen' and 'French Kiss' from 2015 generated more than 600,000 dollars in hotel reservations only (Spoon, 2018). The popularity of hotel reservation websites, booking platforms with evaluation and reviews systems has been noticed by the experts. This has made these online platforms an important distribution channel for hotels as well as a very sensitive tool for their brands (Thakran & Verma, 2013, p. 241).



### ***Ethical standpoint of social influencers on hotel E-Servicescape platform***

The ethical issues have been a topic for discussions in the lifestyle and travel journalism field. Promoting destination of resorts in the form of personal experience should be considered deceiving others in exchange of money. Influencer marketing in hospitality industry basically is a modern-day version of a person from newspaper visiting a café, pub or hotel who will write about in in the paper. This type of collaboration is now common among top brand hotels and the influencers with larger audience pool in the target niche market. Sometimes these collaborations comes with paid advertising format or sometimes it comes as mutual beneficiary sharing like complimentary accommodation in exchange of positive post and review about the property (Raas, 2015). There is absolutely no problem with sponsored collaboration or paid contents. But, it becomes a matter of ethical issues and authenticity when influencers use their powers deceive their audience, without acknowledging the collaboration in the post

#### *Controversial role of influencers on ethical standpoint*

Trust plays a vital role in formulating consumer's perception about a product or service. The level of customer satisfaction can vary on the created brand image by the word of mouth or the contents of social media posted by trustworthy people. Researchers found that, about 70% of the people from all over the world trust online consumer reviews and online sales can be bumped to 52% from 32% with good online reviews (Tran & Strutton, 2016). Trustworthiness is the greatest source of power of influencers. they reach a wider range of audience by using different social media platforms as well as creating creative contents (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). The main reason behind all the Instagram Influence's success is, the audience can relate themselves with the people in the shots and trust their stories. In addition, a creatively taken snaps represents a more fun loving and interesting destination distinguishing these photos from other general web pictures available on hotel and travel sites.

But, unfortunately the number of self-proclaimed influencers who has invested their time in this career just to gain benefits has tainted the legitimacy of all the bloggers and social content creators. For example, this year a renowned Singaporean photographer was exposed for buying stock footage and photoshopping himself into the photo to misled his 100,000+ followers. After this incident "sony pictures" has deleted all his sponsored pictures from their website and multiple other companies has released statement stating they are no longer associated with him (Atanmo, 2018, June 24). These series of events raising the ethical question even more and pointing us to be strict and assess the people who are calling themselves influencers.

Meanwhile, in 2009, U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) determined that any monetary or beneficial transection for positive reviews in online platforms without disclosing about the compensation will be considered deceptive advertising. Similar rules had been established in Finland and in South Korea where social media influencers are strictly asked to be transparent in sponsored contents. In April of 2017, FTC sent more than 90 legal notices to celebrities, influencers, and brands for violating guidelines around sponsored content. (Kaikkonen, 2016). But, even though multiple authorities have been working with this issue, the situation is worsening day by day. Influencers seem to intentionally avoid these rules and ultimately losing their credibility and trustworthiness. Prestigious Gartner report stated, 'In 2014, 10-15 Percent of Social Media Reviews is Fake or unethically paid for companies (Migs Bassig, 2012, Sepetember 24; STAMFORD, 2012, Sepetember 12).

Earlier this year, Instagram star Lauren Bullen, who blogs over at Gypsea Lust, wrote on her blog about discovering Instagram have been making *exact* copies of her photographs. She has been a successful influencer and involved in promoting many hotel and restaurant. so, eventually this news went viral. But, unfortunately later investigative reporters found out Lauren herself was



behind this plan. And that copycat Instagram profile belonged to her friend. The whole thing was an elaborate plan and a publicity stunt (CATRIONA HARVEY-JENNER, 2016, Nov 18). On another note, the new York times ran an investigative news where they exposed online influencers use of software bots and how they are fooling brands to pay them hundreds of dollars by showing them their fake followers and engagement on social media platform (Nicholas Confessore, 2018, JAN. 27).

So, Influencers are faking their travel story by photo shopping them in stock pictures, they are exploiting their power to access complimentary benefits, they are using software to show fake engagement count, they are responsible for misleading their audience that they are creating authentic contents whereas most of them are created by their client and sponsored. This kind of intentional misconducts by Influencers needs to be checked.

#### *How hotel chains are reacting?*

As Social media and online reputation management is a new task for hospitality business, mostly general managers are obliged to take the final decisions. But, most of the cases GM's does not have enough time or knowledge to manage it properly. This might lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the intended outcome (Iacianci, 2015). Since, either the content or the communication can't be completely controlled by the parent company's marketing authors. The main message or outcome can be beneficial and positive but can also bring negative image for the business (Mazzarol, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2007).

Luckily, the scenario has been changing dramatically as chains are realizing the necessity of online reputation management system. Because, it's been proven that a hotel chain decides to collaborate with travel influencers it can reduce lost revenues up to 20% to the online travel agencies. As using hashtag and web-links influencers directly drive the potential consumers directly towards the mainstream hotel website, resulting direct reservation and booking. Influencers can maximize the opportunity to cross sell or up-sell and increase the possibility of profitability up to 18%. Moreover, with highly personalized contents the influencers can create a high sense of loyalty and increased retention rate (Cox, 2017, Nov 30).

#### *Managing influencers ethically on e-servicescape*

As travel, tourism and hospitality industry provides, high involvement product. This industry is intensely competitive and with the advancement of technologies online booking number has been skyrocketed in last few years. Therefore it can be said that the number of online travelers is increasing and online review and contents has an important role in the consumer decision making process. E-servicescape is actually a great opportunity for hotels to be accessible to the global consumers and manage their online reputation system to bring higher ratio of reservation (Raas, 2015). But everything has its pros and cons. As a famous quote from Warren Buffet goes "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it". Over the years restaurants and hotels managers has seen a staggering rise of guests who likes to threat the staffs that they will give bad review to the popular website unless they receive discounts, free meals or complimentary upgradation of room (Telegraph Staff, 2014, May 08). Other self-proclaimed influencers tries lure resort and hotels into a deal where they will promote the property in their contents in exchange of complementary services. According to Walsh (2002), "reputations are made or destroyed online by any of the many different kinds of stakeholders who now have inexpensive and effective means to do it" (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004, p. 38).

There are many ways to deal with influencers. And if done properly it can be highly beneficial. Some successful hotel chains has been using influencers within ethical and appropriate structure. For example,



- Starwood Resorts has been making Instagram contents on their own since 2014. Its latest campaign has involved five travel-related Instagram influencers generating 500,000 new followers and created more than a million engagement.
- Marriott flooded the social media platform snapchat with its creative contents with the help of four influencers. They shared their stories with their followers through the Marriott official account and their individual Snapchat accounts to promote their Marriott Rewards program.
- Hilton@Play initiative is a social media activity program to engage young generations by providing them exclusive access to live music events @ Hilton properties. The artists conducted individual social promotional activity to sort out the guests or winners. In the process it created a hype among the youth demographic of the market.
- The Ritz Carlton decided that, instead of posting stock photography, their marketing team will use social influencers with thousands of followers and persuade them in active engagement. Then, they invite them to visit one of their properties, so as to look through their properties with their own perspectives and share their creative contents with their audiences.

All these successful campaign were conducted with the clear declaration of sponsorship and with both parties common interests in mind so as to create unique engagement between hotel brands and their audiences (Darley, 2018, February 15). These are the proper ways to engage with the influencers.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Researchers have found that historically the hospitality and tourism industry has been reluctant to change and this industry generally faces difficulty in coping with innovation. Additionally, it's safe to say that most of the managers involved in the accommodation business are comfortable in an environment where an autoreactive leadership style prevails (Iacianci, 2015). Hotel operations tend to focus on efficiency and social media and online reputation management does not fall into the standardized ways of efficient hotel operations. This might be the reason; international hotel chains were at first reluctant but eventually started to provide guidelines about their online reputation management. But the previously presented examples and research literature are the burning proof of the revolutionary growth of the hotel e-servicescape and their involvement with the influencers.

In 2014 the Google study mentioned that online is the most influential medium during leisure travelers decision making purchase choices and over 80% of consumers use social networks and content sharing sites for travel inspirations (MediaCT, 2014). According to another survey none by TripAdvisor, 89% of global traveler and 96% of hoteliers, consider reviews and ratings are influential in generating bookings. After realizing these phenomena hoteliers are more concerned about their online reputation than ever before. To avoid negative online representation, they are often forced to comply with the unethical demands of the consumers. Some greedy consumers realized the pressure point of the hoteliers and most of the time, by calling themselves "Influencers", they try to exercise their power of social media for their personal gain (Raas, 2015). Natalie Zfat, who works as a a social media consultant of hotel chains like Marriott and InterContinental has an interesting way of putting it, "The net is so wide, and the term 'influencer' is so loose. That, everyone with a Facebook or Instagram account these days is an influencer" (Taylor Lorenz, 2018, June 13). Though, influencers are not exactly journalists and most of the case analysers don't have proper training they are in no position to excuse themselves from clearly stating their ethical viewpoint (Iacianci, 2015; Raas, 2015). As millions of their followers trust their



opinions, they must bear the consequences of taking the responsibility and strive to be authentic and truthful to their followers.

This research problematization outline provided an overview of the existing literature on the ethical standpoint of the influencers in hotel e-servicescape. Additionally, it presented several practical dilemmas in dealing with the issue and several ethically justified campaigns with the influencers. As a new burning issue of the current hospitality industry it is still underexposed and needs further investigation.

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