Compliance with eWOM: The influence of hotel reviews on booking intention from the perspective of consumer conformity

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1. Introduction

Advancements in internet technology and its wide availability have radically altered the means by which and how consumers select hotel accommodations. Thus, the hotel industry is placing greater emphasis on online marketing management (Xie et al., 2011). The services provided by the hotel industry include core products (lodging services) as well as supplementary tangible products, such as dining and fitness facilities, that enhance the experience of customers. The hotel industry provides experience products, such that consumers are unable to judge the attributes or quality of the products prior to purchase. Thus, word-of-mouth (WOM) plays a pivotal role in this industry (Litvin et al., 2007). Kang and Schuett (2013) discovered that due to considerations regarding identification and internalization, consumers prefer to share their travel experiences on social websites. Law et al. (2014) also indicated that most consumers like to post pictures of their travels through multiple social websites. This online user-generated content (UGC), which is consumer-centered, enables them to share interesting or unique experiences. Even if it is biased, this free information helps readers understand new markets, new activities, and sensitive topics (Wu et al., 2014). This demonstrates that the appearance of internet media, particularly social websites, have changed the patterns in which people search for information before traveling and making travel decisions. This influence further extends to thoughts shared during and after the trip (Zhou et al., 2014).

As reported by Tnooz (2014), a recent global PhoCusWright survey indicated that over 80% of travelers read numerous reviews before making a decision in which hotel to stay and 53% indicated that they would not be willing to book a hotel that had no reviews. Online third-party travel intermediaries constitute a major source of consumer reviews. Like hotel websites, these websites allow travelers to post reviews to help other travelers make hotel choices. When potential hotel visitors consult these intermediaries for information, they can see the positive and negative evaluations of hotels shared by other consumers. According to the theory of negativity effects, negative information is easier for consumers to perceive than positive information; therefore,
negative information can have a stronger negative influence on purchase decisions (Park and Lee, 2009).

Conformity refers to tendencies in thinking and behavior aimed at gaining group approval and meeting group expectations (Bearden et al., 1989). High-conformity individuals often comply with the majority (to satisfy group norms and expectations), even if they are aware that such a position is not necessarily correct (Allen, 1965). When consumers see a large number of reviews dealing with a particular issue, they tend to interpret this to mean that the issue in question is popular (Chatterjee, 2001; Lascu et al., 1995). Individuals exhibiting a strong inclination to conformity also display higher degrees of normative and informative conformity than those who are less inclined toward conformity. Thus, potential hotel conformists will tend to be more easily persuaded by the content and number of eWOM and are therefore more likely to adjust their booking decisions in response (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Lascu and Zinkhan, 1999). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the conformity of consumers is a significant factor moderating the persuasiveness of eWOM.

We conducted a review of previous studies on eWOM and found that the variables moderating the effect of eWOM content (including quality and valence) and quantity on the persuasiveness can be divided into two categories: human traits and product type (Sen and Lerman, 2007; Park and Lee, 2008). Human traits can be further divided into the senders and receivers of eWOM. Receiver traits that have been discussed previously include the degree of professionalism, the degree of involvement, and gender. No previous study has addressed the issue of conformity, which is of even greater relevance in eWOM communication (Lee et al., 2007; Awad and Ragowsky, 2008). Some were qualitative researches proposing coping and management strategies with regard to eWOM (Litvin et al., 2007), some investigated the use of virtual world technology to create more positive eWOM (Kim and Hardin, 2010), and some examined the influence of eWOM on booking intentions with hotel awareness and consumer traits (professionalism, gender, and product knowledge) as moderators (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009; Kim et al., 2011). In the last two years, researchers have discussed the relationship between reviews and the rebooking intentions of hotel guests and whether it is appropriate for hotel management personnel to be active on non-trading websites (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013), as well as examining the means of reconstructing UGC review formats so as to obtain more powerful customer feedback messages (Zhou et al., 2014). However, no research has been conducted on the influence of eWOM valence and quantity on booking intentions from the perspective of the conformity displayed by potential hotel visitors. Consumers are more inclined to collect data from third-party online travel intermediaries, which provide information with less bias; therefore, it is likely that the persuasiveness of eWOM valence and quantity will vary depending on consumer conformity (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009; Litvin et al., 2007).

This study conducted two experiments associated with the hotel industry to examine the relationship between eWOM valence and booking intentions from the perspectives of eWOM quantity and consumer conformity. Our objective was to clarify the means by which the interaction effects between eWOM valence and eWOM quantity influence the booking intentions of eWOM readers expressing different degrees of conformity.

2. eWOM and hotel industry

Internet platforms used for the exchange of information generally have set themes about which consumers freely share their experiences, ratings, or knowledge, thereby producing eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Compared to traditional (offline) WOM, eWOM offers greater convenience, anonymity, many-to-

many communication, and a lack of restrictions with regard to time and space. As a result, eWOM exerts greater and wider influence than traditional WOM (Pan and Zhang, 2011).

Consumers now attach greater importance to information collected from a variety of online platforms and an increasing number of information platforms related to hotel accommodation have appeared on the internet. These sites provide relevant information on hotels and accommodations and enable consumers to share their experiences and opinions (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). The most common means of communication between hotels and consumers include (1) email and instant messaging, (2) hotel websites, and (3) blogs and virtual communities (Litvin et al., 2007). Consumer-generated media (CGM) encompasses a number of access options, including discussion boards, personal blogs, social networking sites (such as Facebook, Telnet://ptt.cc, Travel networks, YouTube), and customer review sites (Jeong and Jeon, 2008). CGM are more popular with consumers as they are generally unaffiliated with commercial interests and provide more biased information (Litvin et al., 2007). Online third-party travel intermediaries (such as Travelocity.com, TripAdvisor.com, and Expedia.com) provide more biased reviews of higher credibility. This has made these travel networks very popular (Kim and Hardin, 2010; Litvin et al., 2007).

According to a survey by Travel Daily News (2012), 87% of the individuals interviewed believed that reviews on TripAdvisor® helped them to make hotel choices more confidently, and 98% considered the reviews on this website to be accurate. An investigation by eMarketer (2013) revealed that consumers like to obtain inspiration and plans for traveling from internet media, in which online third-party travel intermediaries is their first choice, followed by Facebook. TripAdvisor.com has gained prominence as one of the leading global travel information advice websites, based on its database containing independent customer testimonials and evaluations of their real experiences with hotels and other travel-related products (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Gretzel et al., 2007). Thus, this study selected TripAdvisor.com as the social medium for our experiments.

In recent years, some studies on eWOM in the hotel industry have been conducted. One study proposed eWOM management strategies for hospitality and tourism based on a qualitative review of the literature (Litvin et al., 2007). Another investigated the means of applying virtual world technology to encourage interaction and participation among hotels and consumers, with the aim of creating a greater quantity of positive eWOM (Kim and Hardin, 2010). Still others have discussed the influence of eWOM valence on hotel attitudes based on the awareness of hotels and the expertise of reviewers (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). Researchers have analyzed the influence of eWOM on booking intentions based on the product knowledge and gender of the readers (Kim et al., 2011).

In the last two years, researchers have discussed how rebooking intentions relate to the expectations of the customers and valence of the reviews in addition to whether it is appropriate for hotel management personnel to be reply to consumer questions on non-trading websites (such as n TripAdvisor® and Lonely Planet) (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). They have also studied the means of reconstructing the formats of UGC online travel reviews so that readers can access more comparative and benchmarking reviews as well as bringing more powerful and accurate customer feedback messages to researchers and hotel managers (Zhou et al., 2014). The survey results and trends in recent research show that the influence of consumer reviews on online third-party travel intermediaries is receiving more attention from practitioners and academics. They are expected to become part of the mainstream in future internet marketing for the hotel industry.
3. Stage 1 of the study: influence of eWOM valence and eWOM quantity on booking intentions

Due to the intangibility and inseparability of service, consumers require more external information to help them make purchase decisions during the evaluation phase. Of all the information sources, consumers depend more heavily on non-commercial WOM to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty, which then influences their booking decisions (Chatterjee, 2001; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). Kim and Mattila (2011) advocated that convenience, quality, risk reduction, and social reassurance are major considerations when consumers read online hotel reviews. Tham et al. (2013) indicated that perceived enjoyment and ease of use are primary reasons why consumers adopt UGC as a source of information for travel planning. Previous researchers have pointed out the influence of review valence and quantity on WOM persuasiveness (Lascu et al., 1995; Park et al., 2007; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). We therefore focused on these two variables in Stage 1 of the study and investigated the influence of interactions between the two variables on booking intention.

3.1. Conceptual background and research hypotheses

Many avenues exist for the presentation of eWOM, among which online consumer reviews in third-party online travel intermediaries have particular influence on the travel plans and decisions of potential travelers (Xie et al., 2011; Tanford and Montgomery, 2014). Online hotel reviews generally include the experiences of travelers (tidbits and pictures), even positive or negative evaluations (advantages and disadvantages) or level ratings. Such content has significant influence on the perceptions and travel product purchase decisions of potential travelers. However, when consumers read these reviews, they may often come across a lot of conflicting information (such as different valence or ranking). Nevertheless, it more often than not determines their perceptions, intentions, and decisions (Sparks et al., 2013). Online hotel reviews both inform and recommend. Informative reviews provide additional information on products from the perspective of users, such as hotel attributes, characteristics, and performance. In contrast, recommendation reviews provide positive evaluations (praise) or negative criticism of the hotel (Park and Lee, 2008). The online consumer reviews associated with third-party online travel intermediaries fulfill both of these functions; therefore, we selected these as the form of eWOM for this investigation.

Product attitude connotes the subjective judgment and evaluations that consumers form toward a product after coming into contact with it and integrating internal experience with external information. Product attitude can have a deep influence on the purchase intentions and behavior of consumers (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). When potential hotel visitors read relevant travelers reviews on hotel forums, they form new overall evaluations on the expected service quality of the hotel, their expected satisfaction, and subsequent booking intentions.

Valence refers to the positive or negative nature of the statements in the message (Buttle, 1998). Positive WOM is associated with satisfying consumer experiences, whereas negative WOM is considered another type of customer complaint (Singh and Pandya, 1991). When potential hotel visitors see positive comments extolling the comforts of a hotel, they will associate the hotel with the attribute of comfort (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). Positive hotel reviews influence positive views and perceptions in potential hotel visitors with regard to the target hotel. They also increase interest in the hotel as well as booking intentions. In contrast, negative reviews can damage the image of a hotel and strongly diminish booking intentions (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. Positive online hotel reviews can influence consumer booking intentions more than negative online hotel reviews.

eWOM quantity refers to the total number of eWOM instances (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). According to the elaboration like-lihood model, eWOM quantity is a type of peripheral cue; for less involved consumers, eWOM quantity influences the type of elaboration routes that they take when forming perceptions and attitudes toward a product (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Greater eWOM quantities generally imply a high degree of concern over the issue in question and impart information on its popularity or trendiness (Lascu et al., 1995). When consumers read a large number of reviews regarding a product, it can affirm or change their previous opinions and attitudes as well as critically affect their purchase intention (Chatterjee, 2001). In addition, when consumers read a greater number of posts and reviews, they are more easily persuaded by the fact that many people have purchased this product, which further rationalizes their own purchase behavior (Park et al., 2007). D’Astous and Touil (1999) claimed that consensus is the most influential external cue. In both positive and negative reviews, a stronger consensus among reviews is better able to inspire the trust of readers. Research has indicated that when opinion sources lack consistency, the uncertainty of consumers increases, which under-mines the stability of their attitudes (Hogarth and Einhorn, 1992). Therefore, when two or more information sources are in agreement, the WOM effects will be more persuasive than when a single review is provided or multiple reviews lack consensus (Bone, 1995). These studies have shown that, aided by quantity, online reviews with consistent valence generate greater eWOM effects.

Krugman (1972) expounded the theory of repeated exposure in the adoption of an experiment to track and analyze the relationship between the number of exposures and an individual’s understanding of the object or matter to which they are exposed. The results indicated that the first exposure stimulates interest and curiosity, the second exposure helps the individual to form perceptions of the object, and the third exposure instills in the individual and the capacity to evaluate the object and formulate a purchase decision. Based on this theory, we can infer that when eWOM receivers are repeatedly exposed to information, a greater number of reminders will strengthen their belief in their initial impression, which then influences their assessment of the product and purchase behavior (Krugman, 1972; Cox and Cox, 1988).

Based on these theories regarding consensus and repeated exposure, we believe that a greater number of reviews with consistent valence will serve to strengthen the influence of reviews on booking intention. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. The influence of the hotel review valence on booking intention is strengthened with a greater number of reviews.

3.2. Methods

3.2.1. Design and subjects

This study used a 2 (review valence: positive and negative) × 2 (review quantity: 6 and 1) between-subject experiment factorial design. Each subject was randomly designated to one of four scenarios for the experiment.

This study selected Taiwanese with experience in browsing online hotel reviews and staying at hotels as subjects. To more easily recruit subjects that fit our requirements, we employed snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique which in this study involved reposting links on social networking sites (Facebook and the bulletin board system, Telnet://ptt.cc) to advertise our survey. JavaScript was used to randomly assign subjects that clicked on the links to one of four scenarios, thereby eliminating the influence of any extraneous variables that may have existed in the sample structure.
The period of this survey lasted from February 9, 2013 to March 5, 2013. A total of 160 subjects participated in the study. Validity was confirmed using one reversed question item and two manipulation check items, which resulted in a total of 142 valid questionnaires. The demographic characteristics of the subjects (such as gender, age, the number of stays per year, hotel type, and average expenses per stay) are listed in Table 1.

### 3.2.2. Development of stimuli and experimental manipulation

Posting hotel reviews on third-party online travel websites is currently the most common means of conveying WOM. We therefore used this online social medium to design and manipulate fictitious eWOM. Through six focus groups conducted during the course of two months, we interviewed 48 individuals, in which nearly nine out of ten expressed that TripAdvisor® was their main source of information on accommodations, followed by Traveling. At present, TripAdvisor® branded sites make up the largest travel community in the world, reaching nearly 280 million unique monthly visitors, and more than 170 million reviews and opinions covering more than 4 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions. The sites operate in 44 countries worldwide, including China under daoda.com (TripAdvisor®, 2014). This demonstrates the visibility and popularity of the travel website. We therefore adopted TripAdvisor® (http://www.tripadvisor.com.tw/) as the target of the experimental design in this study.

In addition to manipulating the valence and quantity of the fictitious reviews, we controlled other variables (contextual layout, tone, length, and font size) as much as possible to enhance the accuracy of the experiment. The contextual layouts of the reviews contained the following principles: (1) location, (2) attitude of service personnel, (3) length of check-in/out time, (4) software and hardware facilities, (5) lodging experience, and (6) review content and website information written in traditional Chinese. Previous researchers have suggested that when consumers read online reviews, they pay the most attention to the first three to five lines of each review. For this reason, we confined the reviews to three or four lines each. Positive or negative rhetoric (such as “the clerks at the front desk are polite” for positive or “the clerks at the front desk are discourteous” for negative) was used to manipulate the valence of the reviews. A quantity of six reviews is considered ideal for most readers; therefore, we used six reviews to represent a large review quantity as opposed to a single review for a small review quantity (Park et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2011). For the format and layout, we used an exact replica of that used by TripAdvisor®, except that the reviews were on a fictitious hotel called the Poly Hotel. This made the subjects feel as if they were on the actual travel website, which enhanced the accuracy of the experiment results. Appendix A displays one sample of four scenarios for the experiment.

Booking intention is defined as the likelihood that a potential visitor will book. We adopted the three-item metrics proposed by Dodds et al. (1991), including likelihood, probability, and willingness, based on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 7 (very high).

### 3.2.3. Experimental procedure

Messages related to the questionnaire were posted on Facebook and the bulletin board system Telnet://ptt.cc to solicit voluntary subjects. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of the four experiment scenarios using JavaScript. The homepage of the test website displayed guidelines on how to complete the questionnaire. Once the subjects finished reading the guidelines, they were asked to read the content of the experiment scenario and complete the questionnaire according to the instructions. This helped to ensure that the subjects followed the experiment procedure and gave valid answers to all of the questions. To increase their willingness to complete the questionnaire, we held a raffle that awarded 20 of the subjects a TWD 100 gift certificate.

### 3.3. Results

#### 3.3.1. Reliability analysis and manipulation check

Cronbach’s α of booking intention was 0.971, indicating this construct has a high degree of internal consistency (Wortzel, 1979). After the subjects had read the reviews, they were asked to answer two questions to serve as a manipulation check and confirm that the subjects were accurately situated within the manipulated scenario. The manipulation check questions asked the subjects whether the reviews they had read were positive or negative and how many they had read. Only the questionnaires with these two questions answered correctly qualified as valid. Based on this criterion, 142 of the 160 questionnaires were valid. We performed analysis on these 142 questionnaires only, thereby contributing to a 100% valid manipulation.

#### 3.3.2. Hypothesis testing

An analysis of variation (ANOVA) divides the variance within a set of data into multiple portions depending on the possible sources. In other words, each portion can be attributed to a certain reason (factor). The variances of these factors are obtained and tested for statistical significance, which assists researchers in shedding light on the factors that exert significant influence on experiment results. Furthermore, ANOVA can reveal whether interaction effects among factors influence experiment results (Underwood, 1997). Thus, the ANOVA is a suitable means of testing the hypotheses in this study.

The hypotheses were tested using 2 x 2 analysis of variance. As shown in Table 2, the main effect of review valence revealed a significant difference in booking intention (F(1,138) = 41.169***, p < 0.001). The results indicate that a positive review has a greater impact on booking intention than a negative review (Mpositive = 4.982 > Mnegative = 3.358; t = 6.417). The results indicate that positive reviews can induce greater booking intention than negative reviews. As a result, H1 is supported.

Table 2 shows that the interaction effect of review valence and review quantity had a significant influence on booking intention (F(1,138) = 12.172***; p < 0.01). The horn shape depicted in Fig. 1 shows that the influence of review valence on booking

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>64.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 or more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of stays per year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>52.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist hotel</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal hotel</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>42.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B&amp;B</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average expenses per stay (TWD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 1000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001–5000</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>78.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5001–10,000</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,001 or more</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
intention was magnified when six reviews were included. Furthermore, the test of the difference in means by the two-sample t-test showed that using six positive reviews, the influence on booking intention was significantly greater than when dealing with negative reviews ($M_{six,positive} = 5.319, M_{six,negative} = 2.871, t = 7.287, p < 0.001$). When only presented with one review, no significant difference was observed between positive and negative reviews with regard to their influence on booking intention ($M_{one,positive} = 4.490, M_{one,negative} = 3.766, t = 1.989, p = 0.051$). Thus, H2 is supported.

3.3.3. Discussion
What is worthy of note in Stage 1 of the study is that when review quantity was included, positive reviews became increasingly persuasive with quantity. Likewise, a greater number of negative reviews could be significantly more damaging to booking intention. This study demonstrates that consensus in eWOM in conjunction with repeated exposure magnifies the effects of eWOM (d’Astous and Touli, 1999; Krugman, 1972). It is therefore clear that eWOM quantity management is crucial, and corporations must make every effort to prevent the spreading of negative eWOM following the first appearance.

4. Stage 2 of the study: influence of moderating effect of conformity on booking intentions

Conformity behavior refers to the tendencies in thinking and behavior displayed by individuals seeking group approval (Bearden et al., 1989). Attribution theory and the cognitive dissonance theory can be used to explain the occurrence of conformity behavior and the process of changes in behavior (Huang and Chen, 2006). Attribution refers to the means by which individuals explain and interpret their own changes in behavior after observing the behavior of others. Attribution can be divided into internal and external attribution. Internal attribution (dispositional attribution), refers to behavioral changes that can be attributed to internal factors that are voluntary. External attribution (situational attribution), implies that the causes are external (Kelley, 1967). Based on attribution theory, we are of the opinion that when an individual observes that the views and behaviors in a group are unlike their own and are then forced to change for the sake of compliance (external attribution), dissonance occurs. To reduce cognitive dissonance, individuals tend to change their perceptions or behavior to meet the norms and expectations of the group (Festinger, 1957; Lippa, 1990).

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) claimed that conformity can be divided into two categories: informational and normative conformity motivations. They defined informational conformity as the influence to accept information from others to evince the truth of reality. Normative conformity was referred to as the influence to conform to the expectations of others. According to previous research, consumers believe that they can gain clearer information from the internalization of opinions or experiences provided by others (Kelman, 1961; McGuire, 1969). We therefore consider eWOM a type of external information and for individuals strongly inclined toward informational conformity, the influence of eWOM effects on booking intention is even more significant.

Previous studies have observed individualistic tendencies in the US and most English-speaking countries, whereas some European regions and Asian countries display stronger collectivistic orientations (Hofstede, 1990). Similar studies have also demonstrated that American and Chinese individuals present significant differences in the cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism (Bond and Forgas, 1984). Such differences also explain that more collectivistic cultures (such as Taiwan), entities, or virtual community members have greater influence over than the attitude and behaviors of an individual than that found in more individualistic countries (Lee and Green, 1991; Triandis et al., 1990). With the collectivistic culture of Taiwan, adding the variable of conformity behavior to investigate the persuasiveness of WOM is an appropriate consideration.

From Table 2 in Stage 1 of the study, we can see that the number of reviews does not exert a significant influence on booking intention ($F_{1,138} = 0.017, p = 0.896$); however, connections with conformity behavior have been found in the literature with regard to stock investment, online group purchasing, and box office revenue (Anand and Aron, 2003; Liu, 2006). We therefore included consumer conformity in Stage 2 of the study to explore the effects of eWOM more deeply.

4.1. Conceptual background and research hypotheses

On the discussion boards of travel websites, one need only be a member to start a new thread or respond to the posts of others. When readers enter the discussion board of a given hotel, they can read all of the reviews made by members. In addition to the

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**Table 2**
Two-way ANOVA test results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Booking intention</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review valence (A)</td>
<td></td>
<td>41.169</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review quantity (B)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$(A) \times (B)$</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.172</td>
<td>0.001**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**
Cell means for the booking intention — two factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Booking intention</th>
<th>Review quantity</th>
<th>Review valence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Six reviews</td>
<td>One review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review valence</td>
<td>Positive $n=44$</td>
<td>$n=30$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.319</td>
<td>4.849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.898)</td>
<td>(1.518)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative $n=31$</td>
<td>$n=37$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.871</td>
<td>3.766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.958)</td>
<td>(1.449)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review quantity</td>
<td>$n=75$</td>
<td>$n=67$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.307</td>
<td>4.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.870)</td>
<td>(1.513)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Standard deviations are in parentheses.
content, the number of reviews is also posted. As consumers collect information, the contents and quantity of the reviews (external information), produce effects that significantly influence final purchase decisions (Engel et al., 1984). Such hotel reviews and can sway the purchase intentions of consumers and are therefore regarded as opinion aggregators (Huang and Chen, 2006). The membership system of the website and the informative value of the eWOM thus provide more greatly indicative directions for potential visitors displaying high degrees of normative and informative conformity to follow, and therefore, it is expected that the influence of eWOM on booking intentions will be stronger among consumers exhibiting a high degree of conformity (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955).

Based on the process of situational attributions in attribution theory, when individuals receive input from hotel reviews (new situation), conformist individuals show a stronger tendency to change their intentions for the sake of social approval, compared to those exhibiting a low degree of conformity (Allen, 1965; Banerjee, 1992). Lascu and Zinkhan (1999) stated that when they encounter eWOM, high-conformity individuals go through the stages of compliance, identification, and internalization, the last of which occurs when the individual changes his/her original views following acceptance of the information. This helps to relieve the cognitive dissonance experienced by potential visitors (Lippa, 1990). From the literature review above, we can infer that regardless of whether the review is positive or negative, it will exert a greater influence on the purchase intentions of conformist consumers than on non-conformist consumers.

The number of online reviews generally implies the current awareness and perceptions of an issue among consumers. In addition to imparting information on the popularity or trendiness of a product, quantity also indicates whether many people are buying it or whether the volume of sales is high, which then influences purchase intention (Lascu et al., 1995; Chatterjee, 2001; Chen and Xie, 2008; Park et al., 2007). Non-conformist individuals do not necessarily comply with others as easily because they have a greater grasp of the essential knowledge or are inherently more strong-minded. Thus, it is natural that will require a greater number of reviews to persuade them. In contrast, as we previously inferred, conformist individuals are more likely to ignore their own views due to their disposition to comply with the group, and in such circumstances, the number of reviews is relatively less important. Based on conformity theory, we believe that the influence of the valence and quantity of online reviews and the influence of the interaction effects between valence and quantity on booking intention vary according to the conformity inherent in the individual. We therefore propose the following hypotheses:

H3. The influence of the valence of online hotel reviews is more pronounced among individuals who are strongly inclined toward conformity.

H4. The positive influence of the quantity of online hotel reviews is attenuated among individuals who are strongly inclined toward conformity.

H5. The strengthening effects of review quantity on the degree to which review valence influences booking intention is magnified among individuals who are strongly inclined toward conformity.

4.2. Method

4.2.1. Experimental design

The hypotheses proposed were tested in conducting a 2 (review valence: positive and negative) × 2 (review quantity: six and one) × 2 (conformity: high and low) between-subject factorial design. Each subject was randomly designated to one of eight scenarios for the experiment.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>50.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>49.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>19.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>68.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 or more</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The number of stays per year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>70.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>20.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hotel type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist hotel</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>18.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal hotel</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>40.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B&amp;B</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>36.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average expenses per stay (TWD)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 1001</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001–5000</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>71.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5001–10,000</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,001 or more</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The experimental design and procedures in Stage 2 of the study were entirely the same as those in Stage 1, except for the addition of consumer conformity. For conformity behavior, we referred to Bearden et al. (1989) and designed 12 question items (8 questions on normative conformity and 4 on informative conformity; see Appendix B) which were measured using a seven-point Likert scale. The question items used to measure booking intention were the same as those in Stage 1 of the study.

4.2.2. Participants

The period of this survey lasted from May 5, 2013 to July 18, 2013. The subject requirements and validity conditions in Stage 2 were identical to those in Stage 1. We recovered a total of 495 questionnaires, 391 of which were valid. The demographic characteristics of the subjects (such as gender, age, the number of stays per year, hotel type, and average expenses per stay) are listed in Table 4.

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Reliability analysis and manipulation check

Cronbach’s α of consumer conformity and booking intention were 0.908 and 0.952, respectively, indicating a high degree of internal consistency among the two constructs (Wortzel, 1979). The manipulation check was the same as that in Stage 1. A total of 391 valid questionnaires indicated that the manipulation check was 100% correct. Using the median (5.190) of the conformity scores, we divided the subjects into a high conformity group (192 subjects) and a low conformity group (199 subjects) (M<sub>high</sub> = 4.913, M<sub>low</sub> = 4.210, t = 6.538, p < 0.001). These results indicate that manipulation of the three factors in this experiment was successful and found to be effective in the following study.

4.3.2. Hypotheses testing

The hypotheses were tested using a 2 × 2 × 2 analysis of variance. As shown in Table 5, the main effect of review valence showed significant differences in booking intention (F<sub>1,383</sub> = 95.664***, p < 0.001), while the number of reviews was not significant (F<sub>1,383</sub> = 0.186**, p > 0.05). The interaction between review valence and quantity on booking intention was significant (F<sub>1,383</sub> = 20.242***, p < 0.001). The results for the main effects of valence and quantity and the interaction effects between the two on booking intention were the same as those in Stage 1 of the study.
This shows that the experimental designs of the two studies present suitable stability and reliability.

Table 5 shows that the interaction between review valence and conformity had a significant impact on booking intention ($F_{(1,383)} = 5.538$, $p < 0.05$). A further test of the difference in means showed that in the high conformity group, the influence of positive reviews on booking intention was significantly greater than that of negative reviews ($M_{high,positive} = 5.139$, $M_{high,negative} = 3.305$, $t = 8.193$, $p < 0.001$). In the low conformity group, the influence of positive reviews on booking intention was also significantly greater than those of negative reviews ($M_{low,positive} = 4.541$, $M_{low,negative} = 3.463$, $t = 5.559$, $p < 0.001$). The horn shape exhibited in Fig. 2 shows that the influence of review valence on booking intention was more pronounced in the high conformity group. Thus, H3 is supported. Furthermore, the linear slopes of the positive and negative review curves in Fig. 2 indicate that conformity and negative review were not significantly correlated ($M_{high,negative} = 3.305$, $M_{low,negative} = 3.463$, $t = -0.624$, $p > 0.05$). However, a significant correlation was found to exist between conformity and positive reviews ($M_{high,positive} = 5.139$, $M_{low,positive} = 4.541$, $t = 3.592$, $p < 0.001$). This implies that the persuasiveness of positive reviews is even more pronounced among conformist individuals, which demonstrates a positive-valence conformity effect.

Table 5 presents the interaction between review quantity and conformity has a significant impact on booking intention ($F_{(1,383)} = 10.767$, $p < 0.001$). Further examination of the difference in means revealed that in the high conformity group, the influence of six reviews on booking intention was not significantly different from that of one review ($M_{high,six} = 4.177$, $M_{high,one} = 4.546$, $t = -1.422$, $p > 0.05$). However, in the low conformity group, six reviews enhanced booking intention to a greater extent than did a single review ($M_{low,six} = 4.230$, $M_{low,one} = 3.788$, $t = 2.145$, $p < 0.05$).

In other words, among conformist individuals, even a small amount of eWOM can have persuasive effects, whereas non-conformist individuals require more eWOM to be persuaded, thereby supporting H4. The linear slopes of the two review quantity curves in Fig. 3 indicate no significant correlation between conformity and the effects of six reviews ($M_{high,six} = 4.177$, $M_{low,six} = 4.230$, $r = -0.206$, $p > 0.05$). However, conformity effects of a single review were significantly correlated ($M_{high,one} = 4.546$, $M_{low,one} = 3.788$, $r = 0.397$, $p < 0.001$). This shows that for non-conformist individuals, quantity is important and a greater number of reviews will tend to be more persuasive. In contrast, a small amount of eWOM will be equally persuasive among conformist individuals. We thus found that in terms of the number of reviews, consumers present a small-quantity conformity effect.

Finally, we analyzed the interaction effects among the three factors. Table 6 presents the mean and standard deviations of the eight cells involved in the experimental design for this study. Table 5 presents that the interaction effects among review valence, review quantity, and consumer conformity did not have a significant impact on booking intention ($F_{(1,383)} = 1.966$, $p > 0.05$).

The interaction effects in Fig. 4 show that the number of reviews strengthens the influence of review valence on booking intention in both groups, and therefore H5 is not supported. Nevertheless, we discovered an interesting situation by testing the difference in means in the group. In the high conformity group, the influence of positive reviews on booking intention did not change with the number of reviews ($M_{high,six,positive} = 5.270$, $M_{high,one,positive} = 4.956$, $r = 1.374$, $p > 0.05$). However, the influence of negative reviews on booking intention increased considerably as the quantity increased ($M_{high,six,negative} = 2.681$, $M_{high,one,negative} = 4.061$, $r = -3.523$, $p < 0.01$). Analysis of the low conformity group indicated that the impact of positive reviews on booking intention was influenced by quantity ($M_{low,six,positive} = 4.956$, $M_{low,one,positive} = 4.102$, $t = 3.707$, $p < 0.001$), whereas negative reviews did not appear to influence booking intention ($M_{low,six,negative} = 3.445$, $M_{low,one,negative} = 3.480$, $r = -0.116$, $p > 0.05$). In conclusion, a large number of negative eWOM are more likely to undermine booking intentions among conformist individuals, and a large number of positive eWOM are more likely to enhance the booking intentions of non-conformist individuals.

4.3.3. Discussion

In our investigation of the influence of valence and quantity on conformity, it was noted that conformists tended to comply with eWOM. The persuasiveness of positive reviews was more pronounced among conformists, indicating the positive-valence conformity effect. A relatively small number of reviews was
sufficient to persuade conformists, whereas non-conformists required a greater number of reviews to be persuaded, thereby presenting the small-quantity conformity effect. Furthermore, the interaction among the three factors revealed that a greater quantity of negative eWOM can be more damaging when dealing with conformists, whereas non-conformists are more easily persuaded by a large quantity of positive eWOM.

5. General discussion

5.1. Summary of findings

The hotel industry is easily influenced by eWOM, and travel and hotel review websites display the common intentions of the mass (Kim and Mattila, 2011; Tham et al., 2013; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Law et al., 2014; Tanford and Montgomery, 2014). Therefore, it is natural that the eWOM has a greater influence on conformists (Tsao and Hsieh, 2012; Ong, 2012). Thus, this study employed a quasi-experimental design and conducted two experiments to determine how the number of reviews moderates the influence of valence on booking intention. We also sought to clarify how consumers exhibiting different degrees of conformity are persuaded by reviews of different valences and whether this is affected by the number of reviews.

As expected, the results in Stage 1 of the study indicate that review valence has significant influence on booking intention. In other words, when a potential client reads a positive review, it significantly increases their booking intention, and vice versa. Our results verify that eWOM valence is essential to factors that influence the purchase intentions of consumers.

We discovered that the influence of review valence on booking intention is strengthened as with the number of reviews.

Repeated exposure to negative reviews is particularly damaging to booking intention, which accords with the negativity effect proposed in the past (Skowronski and Carlson, 1989). Moreover, these results also verify that consensus among a greater number of reviews magnifies their persuasive effects through repeated exposure (Krugman, 1972; Cox and Cox, 1988). Therefore, an increasing exposure strengthens the influence of review valence (both negative and positive) on booking intention. Due to the negativity effect of information, finding the means to prevent negative reviews from spreading online is a challenge for managers.

In Stage 2 of the study, we discovered that conformist consumers are more likely to comply with eWOM, regardless of valence or quantity. The persuasiveness of positive reviews was shown to be more pronounced among conformists, presenting the positive-valence conformity effect. Furthermore, a small number of reviews was sufficient to persuade conformists, whereas non-conformists require a greater number to be persuaded. Thus, review quantity and repeated exposure are crucial when dealing with non-conformists. Conformity associated with a small number of reviews presents the small-quantity conformity effect. For conformists, a large quantity of negative eWOM is more damaging to their booking intentions; for non-conformists, a large quantity of positive eWOM is more likely to increase their booking intentions. This was another novel and interesting finding in this study.

5.2. Managerial implications

Based on the findings above, we have formulated a number of suggestions, particularly for the hospitality industry. In a physical service environment, poor service has been shown to drive away both existing consumers and potential consumers. Previous
studies have also indicated that when consumers experience poor services, 48% of the consumers will share their experience with at least ten other people (thus forming negative eWOM) (Dixon et al., 2010). This shows that the quality of service is crucial to the generation of eWOM and the continued operations of a corporation. On the positive front, companies can satisfy consumers by providing high-quality services, which will tend to induce positive eWOM and reduce the chances of negative eWOM. We suggest that hotel management introduce customer relationship management (CRM) systems in which customer databases containing the unique needs of customers can be used to develop customized services. This would enable consumers to derive great satisfaction during their first stay, which will facilitate the conveyance of positive eWOM (Jones and Sasser, 1995; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

The hotel industry is a branch of the service industry in which service providers come into close contact with customers, and consequently, service failures are inevitable. When service failures occur, good service recovery is crucial to alleviating consumer dissatisfaction and preventing negative eWOM, and it may even reduce consumer defection (Smith et al., 1999; Kau and Loh, 2006; Keaveney, 1995). There always exists the possibility the effective service recovery could even increase the satisfaction of customers, which is referred to as the service recovery paradox (McCollough and Bharadwaj, 1992). This not only prevents negative eWOM from spreading but can even create unexpected positive eWOM (Maxham III, 2001).

Furthermore, a crucial skill in handling complaints is the means of keeping the complaints and opinions of dissatisfied customers within the company rather than being passed around outside the company. This involves the accessibility of complaint channels in the company and whether they moderately encourage customers to express their complaints onsite or offline (by phone or company website) of the service failure (BookingWhizz, 2014; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). Research indicates that things get tricky when negative consumer reviews appear, especially on third-party review websites such as TripAdvisor® (Tanford and Montgomery, 2014). A hotel must therefore have diverse communication channels, such as a discussion board on the official website, a hotline for customer complaints, an official e-mail address, an online phone service (Skype or Line), and customer feedback questionnaires. With Generation Z consumers arriving, discussion boards on official websites are also vital to keeping complaints under the control of the company and must be managed with care. They should be accessible, easy to use, and simple. Swift responses, the praise of creative reviews, and customer rewards can also be additional incentives (BookingWhizz, 2014). These could help to prevent customers from posting their complaints and criticism on independent online platforms, which could have devastating consequences (Collander and Wien, 2013).

According to the broken windows theory, any negative phenomena conveys a message that can cause other negative phenomena to spread. When corporations are slow to react to negative phenomena, are ineffective in rectifying them, or turn a blind eye to them, other consumers may rush to echo these sentiments, thereby causing the negative phenomena to spread (Wilson and Kelling, 1982). Hence, customer complaints and negative eWOM that generate after product or service failure can act as broken windows, which may become magnified or exaggerated once they appear. Thus, corporations should name a representative to monitor the content of consumer reviews posted on their official discussion boards as well as on third-party review websites (Ye et al., 2011; Xie et al., 2011). Although they cannot manipulate the occurrence of eWOM, they can respond to the questions and dissatisfaction of consumers in a timely manner, which could help to enhance the quality of online service recovery (Zeithaml et al., 2005). Relevant research has also indicated that hotels receiving higher praise from consumers are often keener on responding to online hotel reviews. When hotels reply to complaints, they should express gratitude, apologize, explain the cause of the failure, and propose a solution (Levy et al., 2013). This provides reference to other hotels wishing to increase their hotel service ratings.

Studies have also discovered that when hotel management gets involved in third-party websites such as TripAdvisor® or Lonely Planet, they should be careful to prevent their responses from affecting the neutrality of the website or the credibility of their company, which would raise objection among consumers. Thus, when hotel management participates in discussion boards, they should exhibit an open, honest, and authentic demeanor. This will enable potential consumers and customers to perceive that the complaints are being handled with sincerity. As they feelsurprised, delighted, and highly valued, it will further reduce the generation of negative WOM (Levy et al., 2013; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Brown et al., 2007). This shows that when corporations get involved in discussions on hotel review websites, they should fully disclose the handling and interaction processes on the aforementioned platforms to ensure that other consumers are aware of their concern for the negative feelings of consumers and that they are sincere in their efforts to make amends.

The findings of this study include the positive-valence conformance effect and the small-quantity conformity effect. It is difficult for corporations to know whether the consumers reading reviews are conformists or non-conformists; therefore, we suggest that corporations add a ratings function to the discussion boards on the official websites, thereby showing which reviews have earned more responses and which are more helpful. This will assist non-conformists to find the reviews they want. Another example is using page layouts to have positive or high-quality reviews pinned to the top of the page to reinforce the first impressions of conformists.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Despite the experimental design and rigorous pre-requisites, this study was still subject to a number of limitations. First, we did not consider other eWOM factors that influence booking intention, such as eWOM content, the arrangement and quality of positive and negative reviews, or the gender, expertise, and involvement of those posting comments (Park and Lee, 2008, 2009; Park et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2011). This study was limited to considerations of valence, quantity, and consumer conformity. Second, due to cost considerations, the experiments were performed using an online platform. Despite giving clear guidelines and instructions, we could not guarantee that every subject completed the tests or answered appropriately. Furthermore, even with rigorous question item selection and manipulation checks, a number of invalid questionnaires still appeared. Third, with only internet users as the subjects, the conclusions of this study are not necessarily applicable to non-internet users. Fourth, to make the experiment scenarios more realistic, we based the format on that used by TripAdvisor®. However, the general public has a certain degree of awareness regarding TripAdvisor®, and its source credibility is higher (Ayeh et al., 2013). Both of these elements may affect the results of this study. Fifth, to make the subjects feel as if they were in a real travel review environment, we only manipulated the valence of review content and the name of the hotel. The remaining content and layout were taken from the webpage regarding The Splendor Hotel on TripAdvisor®. Thus, the information on The Splendor Hotel (pictures, room rates, and location) and the TripAdvisor® webpage layout (advertisements) may also interfere with the results. Finally, we adopted an experimental design, and to prevent information overload from interfering with the results and in consideration of the number of online hotel reviews that consumers can read and understand at a
time, we only created six reviews and one review rather than the dozens, hundreds or thousands of reviews that an actual website may contain. These are the limitations of this study method.

In selecting independent variables of review quantity, we used six reviews to represent a large quantity. According to the theory of information overload, an excessive number of reviews could make readers with weaker information-processing skills feel overwhelmed and confused, which would undermine the persuasive effects of positive eWOM (Park and Lee, 2008). We therefore suggest that future researchers select these quantities according to the information-processing skills of the readers. Furthermore, if one's budget allows it, we would suggest conducting scenario manipulations in a laboratory to enhance research applicability and increase precision as well as the proportion of valid questionnaires. We also suggest that future studies include other variables such as eWOM quality, hotel star ratings, and national cultural dimensions (Lee et al., 2008; Schumann et al., 2010) to provide the hospitality industry with more comprehensive and valuable suggestions for the management of eWOM. In the selection of the experiment website, we suggest that future studies set up their own website. This can eliminate the potential influences of website credibility and awareness and enable control over webpage content and layout so as to reduce possible interference from textual content outside of the study variables, thereby overcoming the fourth and fifth limitations mentioned above. Future research can also adopt data mining or big data analysis to analyze databases to explore more realistic review quantities and enhance the meaning and practicality of the study results.
Appendix A. Sample of experimental hotel reviews (valence: positive/quantity: six)

Appendix B. Measurement items: consumer conformity

1. I rarely book rooms at the newest hotels until I am sure my friends approve of them.
2. It is important that others like the hotels I choose to stay at.
3. When selecting a hotel to stay at, I generally select hotels that I think others will approve of.
4. When selecting a hotel to stay at, I generally select hotels recommended by my friends.
5. I like to know what hotels make good impressions on others.
6. I achieve a sense of belonging by staying at the same hotels where others have stayed.
7. If I want to be like someone, I often try to stay at the same hotels that they have.
8. I often identify other people by staying at the same hotels that they have.
9. To make sure I select the right hotel, I often observe the hotels others have stayed at as well as their lodging experiences.
10. If I have little experience with a hotel, I often ask my friends about it.
11. I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a class of hotels. I frequently gather information from friends or family about a hotel before I stay there.

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