

Please keep my room clean: How eWOM can influence the consumers' perceptions of cleanliness in hotels?

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been a growing emphasis on cleanliness in society, including the hospitality industry (Park et al., 2019; Zemke et al., 2015). With the pandemic (i.e., COVID-19) set to hit the world in 2020, cleanliness has become an international issue and a need for human survival. According to industry reports, customers do not want to travel to their destination and stay in hotels due to the pandemic (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). Recent empirical studies (Shin & Kang, 2020) have shown that the perception about potential health risks will influence hotel booking intentions. As a result, in order to be effective, the hospitality and tourism sectors must adapt to the consumer demand for enhanced hotels cleanliness. Meanwhile, research has begun to give credence to the notion that cleanliness can play a critical role in the hospitality sector's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Shin & Kang, 2020). As prospective consumers' consumption behaviors may be influenced by online reviews and ratings (Casaló et al., 2015), this study aims to understand how electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can influence potential consumers' perceptions of cleanliness in hotels. Thus, the study postulates the following hypothesis:

(H1) Potential consumer's perceptions of hotel cleanliness depends on guest perception of hotel facilities.

(H2) Potential consumer's perceptions of hotel cleanliness depends on guest perception of hotel building.

(H3) Potential consumer's perceptions of hotel cleanliness depends on guest perception of hotel service.

(H4) Potential consumer's perceptions of hotel cleanliness depends on guest perception of hotel rooms.

(H5) Potential consumer's perceptions of hotel cleanliness depends on guest perception of hotel location.

(H6) Comfort moderates the relationship between guest perception on hospitality service attributes and potential consumer's perception on hotel cleanliness.

2. Method

The data used in this research is scraped from the online travel agency (OTA)'s ratings available on the trivago platform (www.trivago.in). This online platform is deemed suitable for this study as it offers an inclusive view of the supply side (Razavi & Israeli, 2019). The study includes hotels that operate in the top five international tourism destinations: France, Spain, United States, China, and Italy (*UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex, August/September 2020*, n.d.). To ensure the sample credibility, the study comprises hotels with more than 200 reviews (Sann et al., 2020). In total, a sample of **419** unique hotels with 5,75,948 (mean=1374.58; Std. Deviation= 1368.023) guest reviews were included in the study. A regression model is used to measure the effect of various hospitality service attributes on customer perceptions of hotel cleanliness. There was no evidence of problematic collinearity among the variables (Hair, 2006).

Results

The study analyzed the consumer perception of cleanliness based on six independent measures, i.e., guests' overall perception of service, facilities, building, room, location, and comfort; five interaction terms (comfort * room; comfort * service; comfort * facilities; comfort * location; comfort * building); and controlling for price, country, and accommodation type -through a regression model based on hotel guests' responses. The overall model was statistically significant, and statistically, a significant interaction was retained in the model (*adjusted R*²= 0.825) (see Figure 1).

The finding suggests that service is a significant determinant of hotel guests' perception of cleanliness (*B*= 0.368; *p*-value= 0.000). Then building (*B*= 0.240; *p*-value= 0.000) and room (*B*= 0.155; *p*-value= 0.000), respectively. Perceptions of facilities and location increase cleanliness perceptions to a relatively lesser extent (at *p*<0.05). One interpretation could be that hotels with a limited range of desirable facilities and room standards can still compensate by maintaining high service and building standards. The effect of the

interaction term (comfort*room) is small but not ignorable ($B = -0.098$; small effect). The inclusion of interaction term improved the overall model ($R^2 \text{ change} = 0.012$; $\text{Sig. } F \text{ Change} = 0.000$). Even after statistically controlling for the effect of price, accommodation type, and country, the model has a significant variance prediction. There is a negative and relatively weak impact of the interaction term on the relationship between room and perceived cleanliness (see Figure 2). The study recommends that hotels should primarily focus on improving service to improve the property's perceived cleanliness.

Further, a hotel should improve on building standards and could also choose to improve room standards. Nevertheless, if the hotel fails to improve on one or the other attributes, it can be adequately compensated by improving service and other attributes. It would be helpful for hoteliers to note that comfort reduces the relationship between room and perceived cleanliness. The room's main effect on perceived cleanliness should be interpreted in light of the significant interaction between room and comfort.

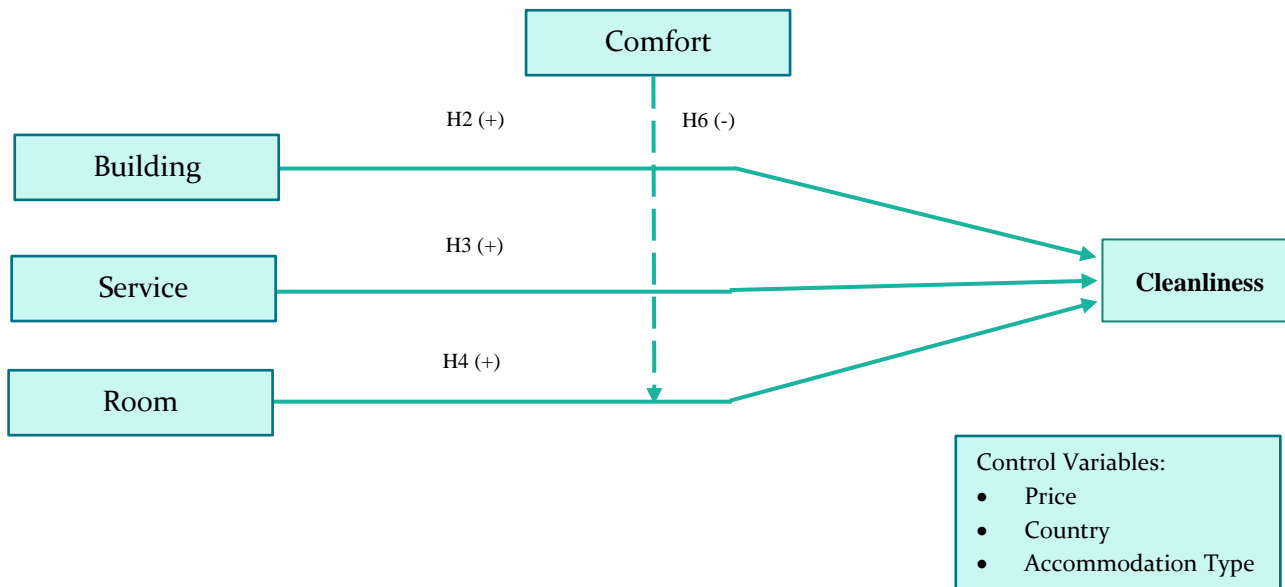


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

Note: Moderating effect (---) ; Direct effect (—);

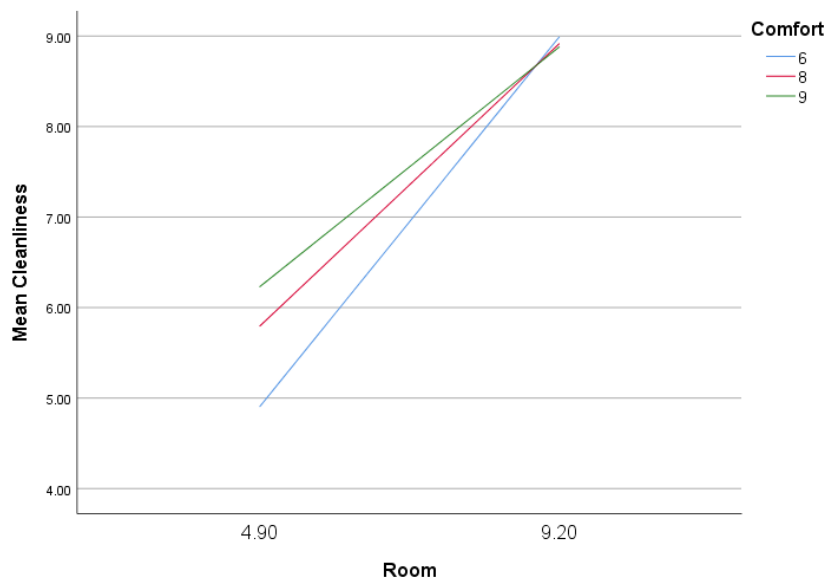


Figure 2 Interaction Effect on perceived cleanliness

3. Conclusion

The study emphasizes the importance of leveraging available resources, i.e., OTA's eWOM, to influence consumer perceptions during a pandemic and post-pandemic world. The study adds to the ongoing debate about how cleanliness can help the hospitality industry recover from a pandemic crisis (Yu et al., 2021). The study confirms that service is a strong and significant driver in hotel guests' perceptions of cleanliness, and it requires increased attention, particularly during pandemics. The study adds to the body of knowledge about eWOM and its application to improving the hospitality experience.

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