

**OPINION LEADERSHIP IN ONLINE TRAVEL COMMUNITIES AND THE
PURCHASE OF HOTEL PRODUCTS AND SERVICES IN KENYA**

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other University.

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DEDICATION

For my family; for Grace and Peter Mengo, for Adrian, for Kathleen, Onsembe and Moturi.

And for Sheilla and Ella.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ANOVA	Analysis of variance
EBM	Engel Blackwell and Miniard
ELM	Elaboration Likelihood Model
eWOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
KNBS	Kenya Bureau of Statistics
KTRI	Kenya Tourism Research Institute
NACOSTI	National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation
SMCR	Source Message Channel Receiver model of communication
SNA	Social Network Analysis
SPSS	Statistical Package of Social Sciences

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

Between-subjects experiment – An experiment with two or more groups of subjects being tested by a different testing factor simultaneously

Centrality – An individual at the centre of information pathways

Change agent – A person or thing that encourages people to change their behaviour or opinions

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) – The passing on of information from person to person that happens on the internet

Hotel products – Encompasses both goods and services provided at the hotel

In-degree – The amount of information flowing toward one individual

Innovator – A person who introduced new ideas, methods or products

Market Maven – An individual who is a market participant with a great deal of connections and knowledge, thus having a trusted opinion on market events and speculation

Non-opinion leader – A member of a community who may not have influence or clout

Offline – Activities performed whether in a state of disconnection from either a computer or the internet.

Online – An activity or service controlled by or connected to a computer and is performed using the internet.

Opinion Leader – A well-known individual in a community who has the ability to influence public opinion, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour

Out-degree – The amount of information produced by an individual to other

Prosumer – A prospective consumer who is involved in the design, manufacture, or development of a product or service

Purchase behaviour – Decision processes and actions of people involved in purchasing a product or service

Social Media – Computer mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks.

Social system – A patterned series of interrelationships existing between individual, groups or institutions and forming a coherent whole

TripAdvisor – A social media forum where travellers exchange information about airlines, accommodations, attractions and restaurants

Valence – The degree to which a post's sentiment is negative or positive

WebCrawler – A program which browses the World Wide Web in a methodical and automated manner

Word-of-mouth – The passing on of information from person to person by oral communication

ABSTRACT

Opinion leaders are individuals who influence opinions, behaviour, beliefs, and purchase decisions of people in their social circles. Opinion leaders have been studied extensively in a traditional offline context, but little attention has been given to them online especially in high involvement products like hospitality. The main objective of this study was to investigate opinion leaders in an online context and their influence on the purchasing of the hotel product in Kenya. Specific objectives were to discover who opinion leaders in an online travel community are; investigate personal characteristics travel opinion leaders display online; explore their online communication behaviour; and to explore the role of non-opinion leaders and the moderating effect of management responses to reviews in influencing the purchase of hotel products in Kenya. The research was carried out on mainly TripAdvisor within the context of Kenya as a destination. An explanatory sequential design was used with two phases: a quantitative phase followed by the qualitative phase. The quantitative phase used three methods to achieve the objectives: expert identification, sociometry, and an experiment. Purposive, census and random sampling techniques were used. Respondents for expert identification were 563, with 368 from the experiment and 131 from sociometry. The qualitative phase used content analysis of information from TripAdvisor. Instruments used were semi-structured questionnaires and observation checklists. Data analysis involved the use of descriptive statistics where correlation, regression, ANOVA, Seven-degree index and content analysis were used to analyse relationships between variables. Findings endorse the robustness of the Seven-degree index as a tool for measuring opinion leadership in online communities. Destination Kenya travel opinion leaders are mainly male (54.7%) baby boomers (51%) who shun self-disclosure online (66%) and travel mainly for business (39%). Opinion leaders influence other customers during purchase of hotel products even though their effect is relatively small ($\beta=0.265$). They are more trusted and are considered more reliable than other travellers due to their expertise in travel and consistency in providing reliable information. Non-opinion leader reviews are only trusted by other customers if their reviews occur in large numbers ($\beta=0.257$). Management responses have no intervening effect with opinion leaders ($F(1,321) = .192, p = .661$). Customers trust opinion leaders more than management; when management responds to opinion leader reviews. Opinion leaders are more likely to use rational and logic words, and score highly in systematic and rational thinking. The study proposes marketers include online opinion leaders in integrated marketing communications as they are a key influential group online. It is important to understand opinion leaders and how they behave online as it will help in designing subliminal marketing campaigns and behavioural targeting that resonate with opinion leaders, which in turn targets other customers of similar characteristics. This would lead to achieving Vision 2030 and SDG goals in Tourism, in areas such as Development of Niche Products, Destination Marketing Programmes, and Marketing Kenya.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter covers the background to the study, problem statement and justification, purpose of the study, objectives, research questions and hypotheses. The chapter also gives significance, scope, delimitations, limitations and assumptions of the study.

1.1 Background to the Study

Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) has been shown to have a major impact in consumer purchasing decisions (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). Product reviews from other consumers are a key source of information for consumers and they play a major role in a consumer's decision making processes. The underlying belief is that consumers tend to rely on information about products and services provided by fellow customers (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008).

In recent years, the rise of new technologies like the broadband Internet and Web 2.0 applications have rapidly increased the numbers of consumer-generated media platforms, leading to word-of-mouth (WOM) communications be transformed into various types of electronic communities and virtual networks (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2011). This has led to the growth of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). eWOM has broadened consumers' options for gathering product information from online platforms and social networking sites. There are two main types of reviews on the Internet; review by consumers and reviews by professional editors (Racherla & Friske, 2012). These two types of product reviews do not offer the same information. Consumer reviews have been known to include critical information that organisations are reluctant to reveal to the public (Lee, Park & Han, 2008). Kardon (2007) has shown that consumers tend to rely more on online reviews from other consumers than information provided by business entities, because peer customers are more independent and

trustworthy. Furthermore, consumers are believed to have no vested patterns when posting a review online and there is no structured pattern for them to post their experiences on the web (Park & Kim, 2008).

The hospitality industry, being a service industry, encounters massive challenges in the promotion of their services to customers (Aye, 2012). Perhaps the biggest challenge is the intangibility of services making it hard for customers to assess a product before purchase, thus elevating the importance of interpersonal influence (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). Customers will therefore tend to rely heavily on word-of-mouth from an experienced source to lower perceived risk and uncertainty before purchasing the hospitality product (Gakhar & Chahal, 2016; Iyengar, Van den Bulte, & Valente, 2011).

A wealth of opinions on hotels, travel destination, and travel services are often articulated in the form of online consumer reviews. Sites such as TripAdvisor connect consumers all over the world as they assess hotels, restaurants and flights based on their own experiences (TripAdvisor, 2016). A vast majority of the reviews found on TripAdvisor are considered reliable as demonstrated by a survey of Singapore (Chua & Banerjee, 2013) and Chinese hotels (Chua & Banerjee, 2013; Mandabach, Stringam, Ma, Van Leeuwen, & Gerdes, 2014). Consequently, searching for information relevant to their plans, from flights to hotel booking, has become a dispensable step in travellers' decision-making process is (Ye et al., 2011).

A survey conducted by eMarketer, on digital media and internet marketing found that in the US alone, nearly two-thirds of web users relied on assorted digital channels for travel information (eMarketer, 2013). Accordingly, alert hospitality firms are taking advantage of online reviews as a new tool to attract information searchers and ultimately, bookers (Dickinger, 2011). They distribute travel-related information on online travel communities

and review sites (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), proactively encourage virtual interactions among consumers (Litvin et al., 2008), publish travel reviews and comments, and sometimes they allow review functions on their official websites in forms of edited testimonials (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013). More importantly, the Internet has been regarded as an effective channel to directly market hotels' environmental initiatives to customers (Chan, 2013).

Within any social structure, there are individuals who tend to be influential in providing information as well as persuading others (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013). These individuals include opinion leaders, innovators, market mavens, and change agents; and they play different roles within a social system (Gakhar & Chahal, 2016; Raghupathi & Fogel, 2015). Opinion leaders are influential individuals within communities who shape other consumers' thoughts and behaviour. They influence the opinions, beliefs, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviours of others as well as their purchasing patterns (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). They are important diffusers of information early in the life cycle of product or service as they can be used to influence other consumers and drive sales (Ruvio & Shoham, 2007).

In online communities, opinion leaders play two roles: influencing consumer decisions and dispersing opinions through electronic WOM. Given that opinion leaders have large online audiences, with some individuals having millions of viewers/followers/friends, the impact of their communication can be extensive. From a marketing perspective, while online opinion leaders might have less influence on any one consumer that they interact with, they are more likely to have a much greater scope of influence, as they can reach thousands or even millions of potential customers (Winter & Neubaum, 2016).

eWOM communication from opinion leaders usually involves transmission of information and opinions through writing, video, pictures, or emotion-laden characters (i.e., emoticons or

emojis) in various virtual communities (Dickinger, 2011). Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have created platforms for online opinion leaders to serve as brand ambassadors and influencers for products and services. These sites have provided the opportunity for opinion leaders to interact with their followers, share information, and promote products (Yu & Zou, 2015; Casalo, Flavian & Ibanez-Sanchez, 2018). Facebook opinion leaders were found to have a substantial amount of influence on other consumers' purchase intention purchase behaviour in New York (Raghupathi, Arazy, & Kumar, 2009) while Finnish customers reported to be influenced to buy a product they had seen on a blog, even of a brand they hadn't considered before (Nousiainen, 2014). In a USA based study, Litvin, Blose and Laird (2004) observed that tourists' restaurants selections were predominantly influenced by the eWOM recommendations of opinion leaders, with surprisingly few decisions being based on the influences of more formal media.

In Nigeria, the concept of opinion leadership has not been fully integrated as a marketing strategy and no clear opinion leaders were found with sound knowledge of insurance services, thereby making it difficult to assess their influence (Bassey, Efiok, Sylvester, & Osemudiamen, 2015). No other studies were found on opinion leadership from the continent. In this regard, appreciation of the contribution of opinion leaders to African businesses is important.

In Kenya too, an increasing number of travellers are using electronic media to post and read information concerning destinations, hotels, restaurants, attractions and transportation alternatives. Especially in the hotel industry, the electronic mediums are the primary source of information during travel decision and purchase phases (Njung'e and Liswani, 2013). Travel industry need to understand eWOM, acknowledge its importance and create strategies

to control these comments. One way to do this is to define who these opinion leaders are and create strategies targeted to them. It is against this background that the study seeks to establish the role of online travel opinion leaders in the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.

1.2 Problem Statement and Justification

Within a social setting, opinion leaders are individuals who are considered role models or authorities and are able to influence opinions, attitudes, beliefs and purchase decisions of people within their circles (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). For modern travellers, the decision making process is increasingly being influenced by electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as consumers turn to online sources of information (Agag & El-Masry, 2016; Sparks & Browning, 2011). However, with inundation of information online, it is difficult for customers to sift through the barrage of information to find reliable, trustworthy titbits. Since customers are likely to trust other customers more than a marketer, an opinion leader is therefore significant to travellers (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013). Likewise, with the propagation of fake news online, it is vital that customers receive the correct information from trusted sources. If overlooked, online brand reputation may be ruined and customers may be misinformed about the organisation. This has the potential to negatively influence customer purchasing patterns and negatively affect the performance of a hotel.

It is essential when researching eWOM that both the originator as well as listener is studied (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). A system can also be developed to identify individuals that are most likely to recommend the hotel to other customers (Mandabach *et al.*, 2014) and thus influence their purchasing behaviour. Understanding who supplies the travel advice is crucial in understanding the dynamics of travel eWOM in social media (Yoo, Gretzel, & Zach, 2011).

This will aid in targeting of marketing ads, as well as ensuring organisations add their voice to conversations online. It will also allow marketers to better understand their target markets and effectively formulate marketing strategies that build an online brand reputation.

Despite the increasing significance of online opinion leadership and seeking, limited studies have investigated the role and characteristics of opinion leaders and non-opinion leaders. Opinion leaders have been studied in various fields from smart phones (Karaca & Uyar, 2014), mobile phones, fashion, music, banking and movies but very rarely to tourism and hospitality (Gakhar & Chahal, 2016; Karaca & Uyar, 2014; Raza & Hanif, 2013; Raghupathi *et al.*, 2009; Ribeiro-Cardoso, Teixeira, & Santos, 2016; Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006; Mwaisaka, 2017). Many of these studies have also been studied in developed countries. It is therefore evident that there is paucity of research origin-of-message in travel eWOM especially (1) tourism specific opinion leadership, and (2) in the online context.

Given the growing importance of social media activities among travellers, it is vital to understand online opinion leadership from a conceptual point of view. In addition, it is of great practical relevance to know who these travel opinion leaders are and what characteristics their counterparts, non-opinion leaders, have. Consequently, this study sought to test a scale to measure online opinion leadership and seeking in the travel context and how this affects purchase of hotel products and services. Further, it sought to investigate how opinion leaders differ from non-opinion leaders. This study sought to investigate travel opinion leaders within an online context, exploring their observable characteristics and investigating their influence on the purchase of the hotel product by other consumers.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine who travel opinion leaders are in an online setting; measure their influence on the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya; and to observe the personal and communication behaviour they exhibit in an online setting.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

1.4.1 General Objective

To investigate travel opinion leaders in an online context and their influence on the purchasing of hotel products and services in Kenya

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

1. To examine the influence of opinion leaders' travel reviews on the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.
2. To determine the influence of non-opinion leaders' travel reviews on the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.
3. To investigate the moderating effect of management responses to opinion leader and non-opinion leader travel reviews on the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.
4. To determine who the opinion leaders in an online travel community are.
5. To explore the personal characteristics displayed by travel opinion leaders online.
6. To explore the online communication behaviour of travel opinion leaders on hotel products and services.

1.5 Hypotheses

H₀₁ There is no significant relationship between opinion leaders' travel reviews and purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.

H₀₂ There is no significant relationship between non-opinion leaders' travel reviews and purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.

H₀₃ Management responses have no significant moderating effect on the relationship between opinion and non-opinion leaders' travel reviews and the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya

1.6 Research Questions

1. Who are the opinion leaders in an online travel community?
2. What personal characteristics do travel opinion leaders exhibit in an online setting?
3. What communication behaviours are displayed online by travel opinion leaders?

1.7 Significance of the Study

Understanding opinion leaders allows marketers to better understand their target markets and effectively formulate marketing strategies. Hospitality and tourism organizations can use opinion leaders and other members of influence in online communities as part of their marketing strategies. The study also contributes to understanding information processing of consumer reviews and their subsequent influence on purchase. Since customers trust peer to peer information more than marketing sources, marketers can utilize the reach, influence and networks of opinion leaders to better reach target markets and influence purchase. A better understanding of opinion leader characteristics would also be advantageous to hospitality and tourism marketers in the selection of the right opinion leaders to use to enhance their brand. It is imperative that selected opinion leaders reflect the brand's image as well.

The Kenya Tourism Board has put in place measures to market the country better, using campaigns like '*Tembea Kenya*' targeted at local tourists; as well as destination rebranding under the slogan '*Magical Kenya*'. This study will contribute to these marketing efforts

through formulation of strategies that target specific market segments by use of opinion leaders; as well as diversification of the Kenyan destination from the ‘bush and beach’ safari options. Hospitality marketers will also better understand strategies they could employ towards the integration of user generated content as part of their marketing strategy (Ayeh, 2012).

Theoretically, this study addresses the current knowledge gap regarding consumers who are opinion leaders in tourism and hospitality and seeks to understand their characteristics and strategies as well as their influence over other customers (Yoo *et al.*, 2011). It also furthers sociometric research especially in online communities as it observes the relationships opinion leaders and fellow consumers enjoy.

1.8 Scope of the Study

The study observed individuals who were considered travel opinion leaders, and who communicate online regularly about their experiences in Kenyan hotels. It also observed customers and their reaction to opinion leaders’ messages in an online setting. The study considered both domestic and foreign tourists and was limited only to communication about hotels that happens on travel site TripAdvisor.

1.9 Limitations

Limitations to this study were:

- i. Finding the opinion leaders and observing them. The researcher sourced them from an online platform with already established measures on the most impactful contributors and observed them.
- ii. Opinion leaders were observed only on one platform: TripAdvisor. Results were generalised to other review platforms as TripAdvisor is the biggest Travel review

platform (TripAdvisor, 2016) and many travel review sites are modelled in a similar manner.

- iii. Low response rate to online questionnaires. Researchers have encountered low response rates when questionnaires are distributed online. Although it is a superior method for reaching respondents who are distributed over a large geographical location, its challenges lie in the low response rates. The researcher addressed this by supplementing with paper questionnaires distributed to hotels in the sample.

1.10 Assumptions

The study assumed that the characteristics, influence strategies, attitudes and expressions of the opinion leaders are genuine, not malicious, and unbiased and their sincerity in expression cuts across all their travel destinations. This assumption was met as the reliability measure was able to meet the threshold. Cronbach's measure for the study was 0.709. It also assumed that the views expressed and the behaviour displayed on TripAdvisor is generalizable to all online review platforms.

1.11 Conceptual Framework

The framework highlights a conceptualized view of travel opinion leaders and innovators and their influence on their followers within an online context.

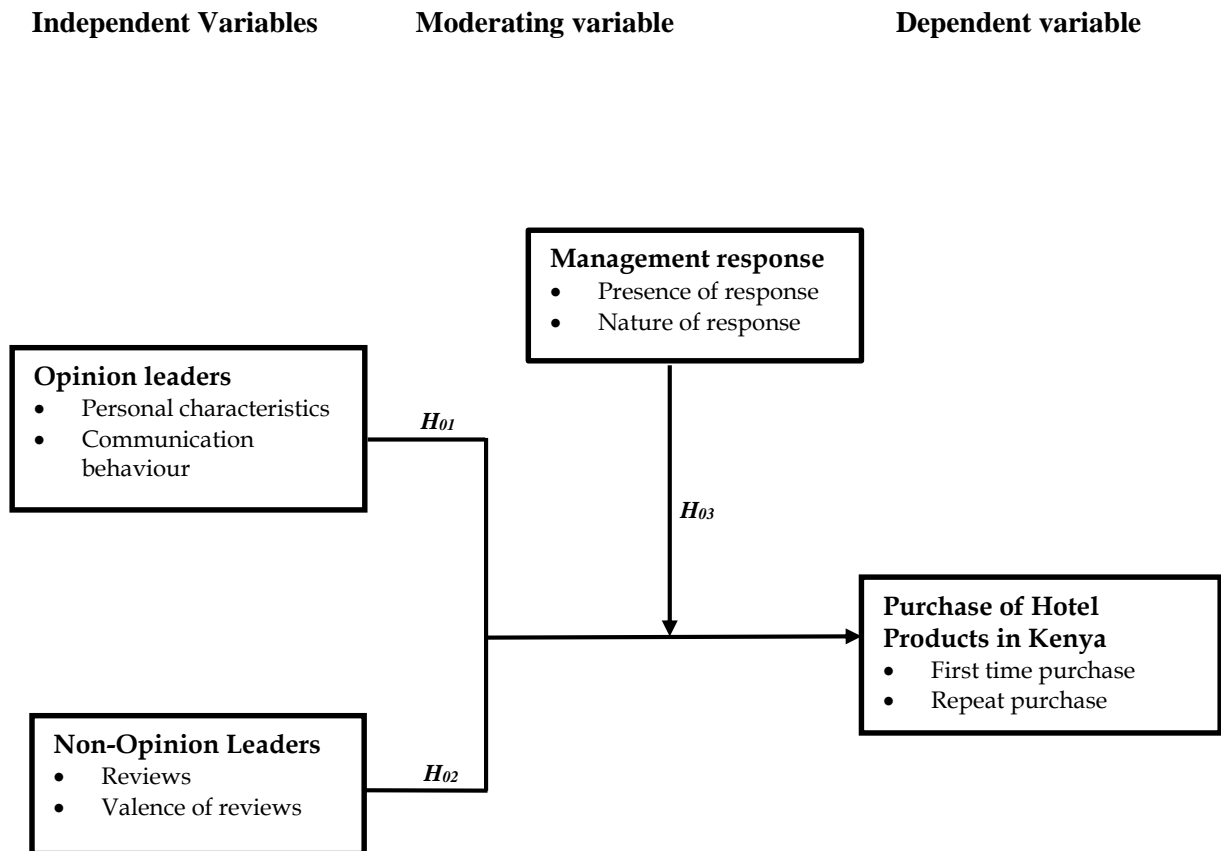


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework on the influence of online travel opinion leaders on the purchase of the hotel product

Source: Adapted and modified from (Chaudry and Irshad, 2013); (Gakhar and Chahal, 2016); (Karaca and Uyar, 2014); (Ribeiro-Cardoso, Teixeira, & Santos, 2016); (Raza and Hanif, 2013); (Ruvio and Shoham, 2007); (Umeogu, 2012); (Kucukusta, Law, Besbes & Legoharel, 2015); (Murphy and Chen, 2014); (Avant, 2013); (Couture, Arcand, Senecal, & Ouellet 2015); (Zhang & Vásquez, 2014).

The framework is based on the two-step flow of communications theory which was advanced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), which hypothesizes that ideas flow from mass media to opinion leaders and from them to a wider population. The framework posits that the personal characteristics opinion leaders exhibited online, their communication strategies, as well as other reviews from non-opinion leaders influence first time as well as subsequent purchases of hotel products by other consumers in Kenya. It also proposes that the influence of opinion leaders and non-opinion leaders is at times mediated by management responses to reviews and this affects purchase of hotel products in Kenya.

Drawing from literature reviewed and past research, the study adopted Opinion Leadership measures. Opinion leadership was measured using variables relating to personal characteristics i.e., the travel and innovative characteristic (Chaudry and Irshad, 2013; Gakhar and Chahal (2016); Karaca and Uyar (2014); Ribeiro-Cardoso, Teixeira, & Santos, (2016); and Raza and Hanif (2013). The message was measured using variables relating to communication channel behaviour of opinion leaders, that is, influence strategies and message content. This is adapted from the SCMR Theory of Communication and has been used by Chaudry and Irshad, 2013; Ruvio and Shoham, 2007; and Umeogu, 2012. The measurement of the mediating role of management responses was adapted from (Kucukusta *et al.* (2015); Murphy and Chen (2014); Avant (2013); Couture *et al.* (2015) and Zhang & Vásquez, (2014). These were measured against the dependent variable, purchase of hotel products.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of literature that defines the foundations of this study. The chapter details the empirical foundation and theoretical framework guiding the study. Dimensions of opinion leadership and their influence are discussed.

2.1 Empirical Literature Review

This section covers previous studies related to the topic and objectives of the study. The review covers; concept of opinion leadership, personal characteristics of opinion leaders, influence of opinion leaders, influence of non-opinion leaders, moderating effect of management responses to opinion leader and non-opinion leader reviews, communication behaviour of opinion leaders, other webpage characteristics and industry context.

2.2 The Concept of Opinion Leadership

The basic concept idea of opinion leadership started in the 1940s and 1950s to explain the process of media communication and its effects. In 1944, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet hypothesised that mass media does not directly influence individuals but reach opinion leaders first, who then pass on information and interpretation to their everyday associates for whom they are influential.

An opinion leader is an individual whose opinions are highly respected and utilized by others to help in making decisions (Bassegy et al., 2015). They are ‘models’ for opinions within their group (Bassegy *et al.*, 2015) and influence opinions, beliefs, attitudes as well as behaviours of others within their circles, including purchasing patterns (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). An opinion leader normally has been involved with a product, and from

experience, develops an attitude or a judgement about the product, which he then shares with other consumers.

Identification of opinion leaders is a major concern for businesses because they have outstanding impacts on various stakeholders including the company, customers, and society in general. In order to speed up the adoption of new products, marketers search for ways to determine and target opinion leaders; they are highly connected to information sources, and they are constantly exposed to innovations (Goldenberg, Han, Lehmann & Hong, 2009). Secondly, they rarely ignore the information that others have (Iyengar et al., 2011) which results in knowledgeability about a particular product (Grewal, Chandrashekar, & Citrin, 2010). Lastly, they are more involved in new products than others (Goldenberg et al., 2009). Due to these, opinion leaders are more likely to adopt early.

There are two main criteria to derive opinion leadership: expertise/knowledgeability and connectivity/connectedness (Wuyts Dekimpe, Gijbrecchts & Pieters, 2011). First, opinion leaders are considered to be the source of information due to their expertise about a certain topic. For example, in the case of new products, consumers seek out information from people who have expert knowledge in the field. This information is not only technical understanding but also product conceptualization, risk factors, compatibility and procedural knowledge related to that particular product; therefore opinion leaders convey very useful information to mainstream consumer (Wuyts *et al.*, 2011). Secondly, opinion leaders do not only have a great deal of knowledge but also they also transfer it to the others in their network (Wuyts *et al.*, 2011). Connectivity indicates the degree to which an individual is in relationship to others. A study by Düring and Wolfram (2015), shows that opinion leaders play a fundamental role in

connecting the members of a network by managing the information inflows and outflows among them.

With the development of the internet, more 'ordinary' people are becoming opinion leaders. Whereas as traditional opinion leaders only reached people within their influence circles, the reach of online opinion leaders is limitless, thanks to the vast nature of the internet Meng, Wei & Zhu (2011). Interaction platforms include website logs, social media networks (e.g. Facebook), industry specific social networks (e.g. TripAdvisor.com-dedicated to travel), sites dedicated to user generated product reviews (e.g. Epinions.com) and person-to-person sites (e.g. WhatsApp).

In recent years, the identification of opinion leaders is a subject which has been of great interest. So far, some researchers have studied on opinion leaders, some of them situated within the field of sociology (Jiang, *et al.*, 2015). The studies on opinion leader identification can be divided into two parts: (1) link-based opinion leader identification methods that consider the social interactive structure of the network; and (2) mixture of opinion leader identification methods that combine the social link information with semantic-based information embodied in documents (Charlier, Stewart, Greco & Reeves, 2016).

Danesi (2013) reveals that the opinion leaders do not necessarily have formal positions within the society, and they do not wield power in the formal contexts. However, Bilinska and Sztangret (2013) have identified the opinion leaders as individuals who act as intermediaries to inform others about what the salient issues are as determined by the media; according to the foregoing scholars, in the process of influencing the behaviours of opinion seekers, the opinion leaders also pass their personal opinions, which are often believed.

Opinion leadership in the online context has been likened to opinion leadership in the offline context. It is from this premise that researchers have sought to explore online opinion leadership mediated by the internet. Raghupathi and Fogel (2015) explored how the social networking site Facebook affects the intention to purchase and purchase behaviour of consumers. The study found that while people value postings from a Facebook friend who was also a face-to-face friend, when it comes to actual purchase, the type of friend does not affect purchase behaviour. Weeks, *et al.*, (2017) tested a theoretical model of attempts by highly active social media users (prosumers) trying to change other people's political attitudes and behaviour. Prosumers were found to be more active politically both online and offline, frequently attempt to persuade others, and tend to believe that they are influential and politically persuasive.

Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner (2010) pointed out that the online opinion leaders in the online communities affect the mechanism of eWOM dissemination, and that marketers can influence the eWOM dissemination partly by utilizing opinion leaders. However, the mechanism of how opinion leaders affect the purchase intentions of consumers in the virtual communities is still unclear. Obviously, if the marketers could better understand the mechanism, they could develop better strategies for utilizing opinion leaders. Meanwhile, when faced with the virtual communities of consumption in which the opinion leaders cannot be identified directly, it becomes a question for the marketers to identify the opinion leaders.

Identifying opinion leaders in a community is imperative for many manufacturers and businesses, as they play a major role in the diffusion of information. Researchers have attempted over time to devise methods of identifying opinion leaders within communities. Rogers (1995) discussed four methods of measuring opinion leadership viz. (1) Sociometric,

(2) informants ratings, (3) self-designating techniques and (4) observations. Likewise, Valente & Davis (1999) developed the social network analysis approach, and defined it as ‘an analysis of interpersonal communication in a social system by determining who talks to whom’. Further research from Valente and Pumpuang (2007) designed 10 comprehensive methods for the identification of opinion leaders. These are methods (Table 2.1) that were used to identify and recruit opinion leaders in a behaviour change program, in this case, in the health field.

Table 2.1: Methods, techniques, advantages and disadvantages and instruments for identifying opinion leaders

Method	Technique	Advantages	Disadvantages	Instruments
Celebrities	Recruit well-known people who are national, regional, or local celebrities	Easy to implement Pre-existing opinion leaders High visibility	Contradictory personal behaviour Difficult to recruit	Media or individuals identify
Self-selection	Volunteers are recruited through solicitation	Easy to implement Low cost	Selection bias Uncertain ability	Individuals volunteer for leadership roles
Self-identification	Surveys use a leadership scale and those scoring above some threshold are considered leaders	Easy to implement Pre-existing opinion leaders	Selection bias Validity of self-reporting	When you interact with colleagues, do you give or receive advice?
Staff selection	Leaders selected based on community observation	Easy to implement	Staff misperceptions Leaders may lack motivation	Staff determines which persons appear to be opinion leaders

Figure 2.1, continued

Positional approach	Persons who occupy leadership positions such as clergy, elected officials, media, and business elites	Easy to implement Pre-existing opinion leaders	May not be leaders for the community Lack of motivation Lack of relevance	1. Do you hold an elected office or position of leadership? 2. Are you a member of any community organizations? Which ones?
Judge's ratings	Knowledgeable community members identify leaders	Easy to implement Trusted by community	Dependent on the selection of raters and their ability to rate	Persons who are knowledgeable identify leaders to be selected and rate all community members on leadership ability
Expert identification	Trained ethnographers study communities to identify leaders	Implementation can be done in many settings	Dependent on expert's ability	Participant observers watch interaction within the community and determine who people go to for advice
Snowball method	Index cases provide nominations of leaders who are in turn interviewed until no new leaders are identified	Implementation can be done in many settings Provides some measure of the social network	Validity may depend on index case selection It can take considerable time to trace individuals who are nominated	Randomly or conveniently selected index cases are asked who they go to for advice Those nominated or a random selection of those nominated are also asked this question
Sample sociometric	Randomly selected respondents nominate leaders and those receiving frequent nominations are selected	Implementation can be done in many settings Provides some measure of the network	Results are dependent on the representativeness of the sample May be restricted to communities with less than 5,000 members	Randomly selected sample or cases are asked who they go to for advice

Figure 2.1, continued

Sociometric	All (or most) respondents are interviewed and those receiving frequent nominations are selected	Entire community network can be mapped May have high validity and reliability	Time-consuming and expensive to interview everyone May be limited to small communities (i.e., less than 1,000 members)	All respondents are asked who they go to for advice
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Source: Valente & Pumpuang (2007)

Social network analysis (SNA) was developed in the 1960s by Simmel. It views the social structure as an interpersonal network that emphasizes on interpersonal relationships (Luo, 2010). Social networks reflect real-life social structures, illustrating actors and the relationships among them (Ning, Yijun, Ruya & Qianqian, 2012). Social network analysis has been widely applied to many studies in sociology, organisational behaviour, management, economics, and psychology and so on. More recently, SNA is being applied to social-media based communication research to better understand social media interrelationships (Luo, 2015). The Eight degree index, proposed by Ning *at al.* (2012) is one such measure that developed from social network analysis and content analysis to recognize opinion leaders in online communities. In the study, a social network of online communities was constructed to track information spread within an online community following the death of a prominent figure. Based on existing studies on opinion leaders, the ‘Eight Degree Index’ was then created and eight attributes proposed to be used in identifying online opinion leaders (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Eight degree index

Item	Description
The Connected Degree	The connected degree measures the heat level and enthusiasm of the users to participate in the discussion.
The Attention Degree	The attention degree is a summation of the clicks per post
The Activity Degree	The activity degree stands for the frequency of discussion during an event. The more content the participant posted, the more active they are deemed to be.
The Influence Degree	The influence degree stands for the number of posts which have the same attitude as the main creator, and the response rate to the posts.
The Diffusion Degree	The diffusion degree measures the diffusion or spread of the post in terms of who replies to a post and the extensiveness of the reply.
The Posts Length (Degree)	This is the total number of words in a post. Generally, the longer the post, the more influential it is.
The Centrality Degree	The centrality degree is used to find the core members of each network by measuring the location of each node in the network.
The Change of Average Path (Degree)	The change of average path traces the path of a post to identify who plays a key role in the connection of the whole network.

Source: Ning *at al.*, (2012)

It is important to note from opinion leadership research that opinion leaders hold as much influence in the traditional offline context as they do in online communities. While there have been various methods of identifying them offline, it is imperative that there be more robust methodologies for identifying them online, given the differences between the two communities. This study sought to locate online opinion leaders in a travel community, using two methods to improve efficacy.

2.3 Personal Characteristics of Opinion Leaders

Opinion leaders exhibit characteristics such as being very informed in their field of interest. They read more media than other consumers; and are more involved in activities related to their interest (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013). They are ardent information seekers who get

information from newspapers, magazines, trade fairs, and the internet (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Goldsmith & Foxall, 2003) making them experts and more knowledgeable since they are exposed to more information about products. Since they are first to adopt a product and do not rely on others' experiences, they must create knowledge for themselves from what is available on mass media (Couture *et al.*, 2015).

To identify opinion leaders, Feder and Savastano (2016) indicated that one may use conventional characteristics of opinion leaders which have been generalized through several studies asking who opinion leaders are in a social system and how opinion leaders are distinguished from others. From the early study of opinion leadership, Katz (1957) explained that opinion leaders could be distinguished from others in terms of three criteria: 1) "who one is"—the personification of certain values, 2) "what one knows"—competence, and 3) "whom one knows"—strategic social location. More specifically, through decades of studies, Rogers (2003, pp. 316-318) identified seven generalizable characteristics of opinion leaders as: 1) greater exposure to mass media than their followers, 2) more cosmopolite than their followers, 3) have greater contact with change agents than their followers, 4) have greater social participation than their followers, 5) have higher socioeconomic status than their followers, 6) are more innovative than their followers and 7) are more innovative, but when the system's norms do not favour change, opinion leaders are not especially innovative.

Opinion leaders are the first in a social system to adopt a new product or innovation and are regarded as authorities or role models in their social system (Couture *et al.*, 2015). Opinion leaders are risk-takers, price insensitive and display heavy product usage and higher levels of spending in a product category (Goldsmith & Foxall, 2003; Flynn *et al.*, 1996). They have

interest in the product, and therefore spend heavily and own more products from the product category than other consumers (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013).

According to Fu (2010), online opinion leaders can be divided into two types: The first type is those who have been opinion leaders in the real world already. Some public figures, with high social status and influence in real life or who have already been successful, have a certain degree of influence offline and can become online opinion leaders easily. They have unique advantages online when considering spreading information. The second type is those whose opinion leadership generate influence online directly. It is the openness of network that enables individuals to become online opinion leaders. With the desire to spread information, corresponding knowledge objectively and being access to the Internet, even the most ordinary citizens have the possibilities to share information, affect others and become opinion leaders in a certain aspect.

Another characteristic is uniqueness; this has been considered as a state in which a person feels differentiated from other people around him or her and involves using behaviour that others will pay attention to. It is connected to the extent to which these behaviours are perceived as being specific, really special and different. As a result of being perceived as unique, a personal image might be created that is admired by others (Gentina, Shrum, & Lowrey, 2016). It has been used as a way to distinguish between opinion leaders and non-leaders (Tsang & Zhou, 2005).

As Internet technologies enable interpersonal communication online, some recent studies have examined opinion leadership in the online context. Sarathy (2011) found that the characteristics of online opinion leaders are similar to the characteristics of opinion leaders in an offline setting. Their findings show that online opinion leaders possess significantly higher

levels of enduring involvement, innovativeness, exploratory behaviour and self-perceived knowledge than non-leaders. In addition, online opinion leaders possess greater computer skills and have used the Internet for longer periods of time and more frequently. Sarathy (2011) also found consistent patterns of opinion leadership and seeking behaviours across online and offline environments.

Even though these normative and overarching attributes of opinion leaders give researchers a general sense of who opinion leaders are, it is difficult for one to actually identify opinion leaders in a social system with these personal attributes because all social systems have their own particularity and uniqueness. However, there is need to assess whether personal attributes are a determinant in measuring the clout of opinion leaders. This study sought to explore personal characteristics displayed online by travel opinion leaders.

2.4 Communication Behaviour of Opinion Leaders

Opinion leaders are important diffusers of information early in the life cycle of a product or service (Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). They are active at information seeking and information sharing (Wang & Chen, 2012; Yo *et al.*, 2011). They are also very active in social groups, often discussing and interacting with other consumers, frequently sharing product information with and answering questions from other consumers (Flynn *et al.*, 1996; Wang & Chen, 2012). Opinion leaders get involved with a product; develop an attitude or a judgement about the product, which they then share with other consumers (Rogers, 2003).

Opinion leaders are a major source of word-of-mouth communication, as they frequently communicate with others. They are regarded as valuable information sources because they have knowledge and expertise that will guide the decision making of opinion seekers. Product, self, message, and other involvement (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013) have been given as some of

the reasons for opinion leadership. Enduring product involvement has been assumed to drive opinion leadership, which in turn leads to gaining knowledge, information sharing, and exerting influence (Feder & Savastano, 2016). However, enduring involvement by itself may not be able to explain the tendency to share information and to influence others. Opinion leaders can be motivated by deeper psychological influences related to their social needs (Raghupathi & Fogel, 2015). Bassey *et al.* (2015) Furthermore stress that little attention has been paid to studying the motivational psychology of both opinion leadership and communication behaviour.

Opinion leaders have been found to have a high degree of centrality. Simbeck (2013), while studying small business owners, proposed the identification of network members' roles solely through their ties between each other and using degree centrality to identify opinion leaders. The study also revealed that there is a difference between local and national networks: "being acquainted with more distant peers increases the likelihood of one being an opinion leader.

Shi & Wojnicki (2014) investigated the effectiveness of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations for consumers' online social-network referrals, specifically across "opinion leaders" and "non-opinion leaders." The authors utilized a unique dataset that matched a survey with an online field experiment. The empirical results indicated that online referral rates were higher when extrinsic rewards were conferred. Notably, the effect of an extrinsic reward was significantly stronger among opinion leaders. Opinion leaders may have developed a reputation of intrinsically motivated referrals across their social networks, shielding them from potential loss of social capital associated with extrinsic rewards. It is expected that the way in which opinion leaders communicate is singular, leading them to be regularly consulted by other members of the community; and reflects the morals of a virtual community. This

study sought to explore online communication behaviour of travel opinion leaders on hotel products and services.

2.5 Influence of Opinion Leaders

Opinion leaders are ‘models’ for opinions within their social group. They influence their circle of friends, relatives and acquaintances in various ways including in their purchasing patterns (Bassey *et al.*, 2015; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). They act as ‘consultants’ for other buyers since they have more product involvement and richer knowledge and have a considerable amount of influence over purchasing patterns their followers (Aghdam & Navimipour, 2016). Other consumers tend to treat product information from an opinion leader as more reliable than any information retrieved from commercial sources (Wang & Chen, 2012) as their opinions are “highly respected and utilized by consumers when making decisions across a variety of situations” (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Wang & Chen, 2012).

Opinion leadership, defined as the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals’ attitudes or behaviour, was examined in two studies with contradictory results. Yoo *et al.*, (2011) reported that online travel purchasers had higher scores on opinion leadership than non-purchasers. On the other hand, Kamarulzaman (2007) results indicated that there was not a significant relationship between opinion leadership and the adoption of online travel shopping. Kamarulzaman (2007) argues that in spite of this insignificant relationship, marketers should not ignore the role of opinion leaders in influencing Internet users’ decisions to adopt online travel shopping.

Goldenberg *et al.* (2009) argued that if opinion leaders create and spread favourable product reviews to other users via their webs of trust and distrust, other users are likely to be motivated to try out a new product. During such a diffusion process of WOM marketing messages, the

strength of the trust and distrust relationships of opinion leaders with their neighbours will ultimately determine the reach and success of SNM campaigns. Therefore, SNM managers are very interested in identifying opinion leaders and determining their influences on other users using well-known graph topological measures (in- and out-degree measures).

In social network literature, opinion leaders are often recognized as influential, mavens, or social hubs (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2009). While these opinion leaders may exercise a major impact on the opinions of others with their broad experiences and profound knowledge, they are often affected by other people due to their large number of social connections (Iyengar *et al.*, 2011). That is, even if opinion leaders may not be innovative by their disposition, they are likely to adopt new products at an early stage because they maintain social connections with many neighbours who try out new products right after they are available in the market.

Dalrymple, Shaw and Brossard (2013) have done a substantial number of empirical studies in which they have established that opinion leaders have statistically significant influences on the individual behaviours of other people. Dalrymple, Shaw and Brossard (2013) have provided generalized information, and they failed to give the demographics of the opinion leaders and the level of their influences in terms of age, gender and other factors. Besides, the above researchers have failed to indicate whether the study was conducted worldwide or within a specific location.

Chakrabarti (2013) and Gielens (2012) affirm that opinion leaders play a major role in influencing the way opinion seekers behave or act with respect to making purchases in the services and goods markets. Conversely, even though the affirmation is true, it is so only to a certain extent. There are other factors, which actually play a major role in determining the behaviour of consumers toward making purchases. For instance, Diaz and Maria (2013)

contend that prices play a critical role in influencing consumer behaviours; if consumers are presented with relatively high prices, they are more likely to shift to the purchase of alternative products. This implies that it does not matter what the recommendations of opinion leaders are, consumers will consider the price they are required to pay and the value of what they purchase.

They can influence other consumers' adoption of new products as they are likely to talk to others about new products. Aghdam and Navimipour (2016), using a trust based framework to select opinion leaders, propose that using an in-degree, top out-degree, top centrality and hybrid in-out degree method provides more conclusive results. Ning *et al.* (2012) also used a social network analysis method to emphasize the structure of the social network and the relationship between members. It introduced an eight-degree attribution index to enable researchers to consider an individual's online ability to participate, the relationship with other members and the influential power residing in the discussion interaction.

Vishwanath (2014) examined the impact of the number of opinion seekers and opinion leaders on individual technology-related attitudes and behaviour. Contrary to the dominant theoretical position, the number of opinion leaders did not always influence technology attitudes; rather, in host of high-attraction conditions, the number of opinion seekers had a significant influence. The influence of the number of opinion seekers was moderated by the degree of cohesiveness indicating internalisation of attitudes rather than compliance. Also moderating this relationship were the type and level of uncertainty and the type of media chosen.

Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl & Pingree (2015) used the Facebook API to manipulate whether a news story appeared to have been posted on Facebook by one of the respondent's real-life Facebook friends. Results show that social media recommendations improve levels of media

trust, and also make people want to follow more news from that particular media outlet in the future. Moreover, these effects are amplified when the real-life friend sharing the story on social media is perceived as an opinion leader.

Van, Jagger & Leafang (2011) investigated the critical role that opinion leaders (or influential) play in the adoption process of new products. Empirical findings of the study show that opinion leaders, in addition to having a more central network position, possess more accurate knowledge about a product and tend to be less susceptible to norms and more innovative. Opinion leaders increase the speed of the information stream and the adoption process itself. Furthermore, they increase the maximum adoption percentage. These results indicate that targeting opinion leaders remains a valuable marketing strategy. In a highly experiential good like travel, it is important to measure the relative influence and sway that opinion leaders have over the decisions of other consumers, and at which stage of the purchase process. This study addressed this gap by examining the influence of opinion leader travel reviews on the purchase of hotel products.

2.6 Non-Opinion Leaders

While opinion leaders may in some instances be opinion seekers, not all opinion seekers can be opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are distinguished from non-opinion leaders by their level of activity within a social network (Piiro, 1992). Researchers have made attempts to distinguish the two constructs to better understand the relationship between the two. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) investigated consumption of eWOM among travellers. Their research found that those who passively consume travel related eWOM grossly outnumber those who actively create and contribute to eWOM. These passive consumers are also referred to as lurkers and in this study, non-opinion leaders.

Likewise, Girardi, Soutar, and Ward (2005) when studying OECD nations in the context of wine consumption observed that the correlation between composite measure of opinion leader and opinion seeker is -0.35 . This shows that both the constructs are distinct. Another study in the wine industry also found similar results (Vigar-Ellis, Pitt, & Caruana, 2015). Tsang and Zhou (2005) studied online opinion leaders and seekers in the context of internet newsgroups and found that both the constructs are distinct. Further, they noticed that opinion seekers are more active in the online environment than they are offline.

Non-opinion leaders tend to be more active in the online environment than they are offline. Lyons and Henderson (2005) studied online opinion leaders and non-leaders in the context of e-commerce. They noted that non-opinion leaders in virtual communities possess much lower levels of innovativeness, enduring involvement, exploratory behaviour, self-perceived knowledge, and computer skills as compared with opinion leaders. In the context of ICT in mobile phones, Vishwanath (2014) echoes these findings and notes that technology influences non-opinion leaders more than opinion leaders.

Chakrabarti (2013) adopted Flynn *et al.* (1996) opinion leadership scale in the context of high-end smartphone products in India and observed that the opinion leadership scale was distinct from that of non-opinion leaders. Moreover, Chakrabarti (2013) reported that there is a significant difference between an opinion leader and a non-opinion leader in a computer mediated environment. The study concentrated on both opinion and non-opinion leadership concept and modified Flynn *et al.* (1996) opinion leadership scale to adopt it in the online context. It was concluded that non-opinion leaders probably are looking for advice from their peer groups in more cases compared to opinion leaders especially during the initial stages of product introduction.

When making customer referrals, non-opinion leaders may be judged harshly by other community members especially where referral rewards are involved. Ryu and Feick (2015), indicated that when an opinion leader receives a referral reward, the consumer's referral motive more likely is to be perceived as intrinsic relative to a non-opinion leader. Non-opinion leaders' referrals, however, are likely to be perceived as induced by the reward. The net effect of extrinsic reward on referral propensity clearly depends on opinion leadership: The incremental loss of social capital due to receiving an extrinsic reward is smaller for opinion leaders than for non-opinion leaders. Kamenica (2012) argued that non-opinion leaders do not have a reputation for making intrinsically motivated referrals. As a result, when receiving rewards from current referrals, these referrals likely will be perceived as selfish and extrinsically motivated. This shows that the level of trust in non-opinion leader is low especially where referrals are involved.

While researching travel non-opinion leaders, Yoo & Gretzel (2011) found that they are more likely to unequivocally trust reviews posted by other travellers and believe the reviews are a reliable source of travel information. They, however, are less likely to trust official sources of travel related information than opinion leaders. This, therefore, suggests the relative importance of eWOM to virtual communities of travel. It is imperative, then, that non-opinion leaders are investigated as much as opinion leaders are. As consumers of eWOM, both actively and passively, they form the bulk of members in virtual communities. Likewise, in a highly experiential product as travel, it is important that non-opinion leader influence is contextualized. The study therefore sought to assess the influence of non-opinion leaders' travel reviews on the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.

2.7 Management Response to Online Reviews

Management response to online reviews also has a significant effect on customers' perceptions of an establishment. Avant (2013) studied the impact of management responses and found that the perceived image of a hotel increases if managers (1) take time to give any kind of response to negative reviews online and (2) take time to address an issue and attempt service recovery. Dickinger & Lalicic (2017) assessed management responses to negative reviews and recommended practitioners develop skills and strategies to design appropriate responses in social media spaces. Engaging customers online and crafting appropriate service recovery responses can lead to an increased level of customer satisfaction and positive online image.

The practice of publicly responding to consumer reviews has emerged as an alternative reputation management strategy that is legal, endorsed by review platforms, and widely adopted by managers (Sparks, So, & Bradley, 2016). A management response is an open-ended piece of text that is permanently displayed beneath the review it addresses. Unlike the review itself, the response does not carry a rating, and it does not affect the responding firm's average rating. While review platforms ensure that responses meet basic standards (such as avoiding offensive language), they allow any firm to respond to any reviewer (Zhang & Vasquez, 2014). Most major review platforms, including TripAdvisor and Yelp, allow firms to respond. Yet, despite management responses now being commonplace, their efficacy in recovering a firm's reputation remains an open question.

The increasing role attributed to online reviews in motivating and informing travel decision-making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) has prompted marketers to re-conceptualize their approach. As a consequence, responding to online reviews has emerged as an important part of managing

a business's reputation. Although consumers who post online reviews may not expect any direct online response, whether the business posts a response is likely to affect how others perceive the brand and possibly influence their willingness to purchase (Ye, Law and Gu, 2011). Chan and Guillet (2011) have argued that being unresponsive to guest online commentary may result in the company losing future business, Meng, Wei & Zhu (2011) have urged hospitality businesses to actively respond to customer online comments. Mainstream commentary on online reputation management suggests that businesses require a whole new skill set to effectively manage online reviews, signifying the importance of hotels to monitoring the "online conversation and engaging with customers and the tech-savvy to promote themselves in the best channels.

In online social media, service recovery typically takes the form of management responses. The objective of the management is to provide economic or social resources to compensate customers for losses incurred due to service failures (Smith, Fischer & Yongjian, 2012). Service providers can offer a variety of resources in their response to customer complaints, ranging from financial compensation such as a discount for future services to social resources such as an apology. These efforts influence customer satisfaction by moderating customer perception of justice and fairness (Mccoll-Kennedy & Sparks 2003). Behavioural economics studies also reveal that fairness concern plays an important role in individual decision makings (Bolton, Katok & Ockenfels, 2004). In the context of online management responses, customers assess the level of injustices in the service failures and form an expectation with regard to the likelihood of receiving management responses.

Sparks *et al.* (2016) indicated that the provision of an online response (versus no response) enhanced inferences that potential consumers draw regarding the business's trustworthiness

and the extent to which it cares about its customers. Using a human voice and a timely response yielded favourable customer inferences. Inferences did not vary with response source or action frame. Implications are drawn for effective management of negative online reviews. Zhang and Vasquez (2014) conducted a study on Hotels' responses to online reviews. The study investigated the generic structure of hotel responses to customer complaints posted on popular travel website (TripAdvisor, 2016). The results of their study suggested that online responses from businesses replying to user-generated reviews tend to be highly formulaic and conventionalized, with thanking and apologizing among the most common moves identified. The also indicated that hotel personnel tended to emphasize a corporate (rather than personal) identity when constructing responses to complaints.

Applying a panel data model that controls for regression toward the mean and heterogeneity in individual preference for hotels, Gu and Ye (2014) found that online management responses are highly effective among low satisfaction customers but have limited influence on other customers. Moreover, they show that the public nature of online management responses introduces a new dynamic among customers. Although online management responses increase future satisfaction of the complaining customers who receive the responses, they decrease future satisfaction of complaining customers who observe but do not receive management responses. The result is consistent with the peer-induced fairness theory.

Online opinion leaders' reviews have transformed consumer decision making in the hospitality industry by making information about "experience goods" such as a hotel stay available to anyone on the internet (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). As online opinion leaders' reviews have increased in importance, research has begun to reveal the importance of online opinion leaders' reviews from a consumer standpoint. Hospitality managers now face a new question:

Do I respond to online opinion leaders' reviews, and if so, how? Little is found about online opinion leaders' review responses in the academic literature. Managers looking in online opinion leaders' review sites for examples will likely find, as we have, that hospitality firms are using very different approaches to online opinion leaders' review response, even within the same brand families. Some hotels or restaurants respond to every single review, whereas other direct competitors rarely or never respond online. Still others respond to every review for a short period and then go silent. Thus, this study is motivated by the practical challenge of hospitality managers deciding when and how to respond online. Why do hotel managers decide to respond (or not) in a certain way, and what major issues affect their decisions? What effect do these responses have on the purchase intentions of customers? This study sought to investigate the effect of management response to reviews and how their responses may (or may not) affect the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.

2.8 Impact of Reviews on Purchase of Hotel Products

The purchase decision process is a multi-stage process that a consumer goes through when purchasing a product. It involves stages of i) need recognition, ii) information search, iii) evaluation of alternatives, iv) purchase decision, v) purchase, and lastly vi) post-purchase evaluation (Kotler and Keller, 2005). Once a need is recognized, the customer then embarks on searching for information to aid in the evaluation of alternatives. This information is gathered from various sources, one of them being customer reviews online. These reviews are non-commercial, detailed and offer experiential first-hand information, and consumers who collect it are better informed (Sotiriadis & Van-Zyl, 2013).

The process of information search arises from the need for customers to reduce purchase uncertainty. Huang et al. (2009) found that although customers may take a lot of time to

evaluate alternatives, they may, in the long run, lack confidence to make purchase decisions from information retrieved. Mudambi and Schuff (2010) discovered that this imbalance may occur when a customer is positively disposed toward a product, but has not acknowledged the main reasons why they could be picking it. It may also occur if, on the other hand, a customer is negatively inclined toward a product but does not have the motivation to search for information on alternatives. In such instances, a customer may look for information from someone who has already experienced the product to aid in the decision making process. Accordingly, customers are most confident in their decisions if the information is highly analytical.

Park, Wang, Yao and Kang (2011) found that if a customer notices that a review or recommendation is credible; he will learn from and use the review. However, if the credibility of the review is doubtful, then the review is disregarded, thereby minimizing its effect. Apart from review credibility, the credibility of the person writing the review is often scrutinized. Hu (2015) found that family and friends were the most credible sources of information for customers when they needed to make a purchase decision. The least credible sources were politicians.

However, product type had an effect on the perceived credibility of sources. Hu, Ha, Mo, and Xu, (2014) found that customers were more likely to consult traditional WOM and eWOM when buying books, movies, music and games, while they would most likely consult experts; both online and offline when it came to buying electronic products. According to Hu (2015) sport stars, politicians and brand sources on social media were perceived to be the most credible when purchasing entertainment when product cost was low and people were not confident; but they were least credible when the cost was high and people were not confident.

Similarly, Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik (2010) found that product type had a significant effect on source credibility. People relied more on outside information for services than physical goods.

Aside from source credibility, trustworthiness has been found as another important factor in determining people's online purchase behaviour. Social media is expanding the range of people consumers trust (Powers, Advincula, Austin, Graiko & Snyder, 2012). Trust is a key performance indicator for online virtual communities as it impacts on the perceived risk, attitudes, and consumer intentions to purchase travel online (Agag & El-Masry, 2016). When it comes to websites, Agag and El-Masry (2016) found that perceived reputation is positively related to website trust. The better the social standing of the website, the more likely customers will trust information retrieved from it. It is important for customers to trust websites as this reduces the perceived risk associated with purchasing online.

When assessing how customers assign trust to reviews, Filieri (2016) discovered four categories:

- i) The content and writing style of a review,
- ii) The review extremity and valence
- iii) The source of communication
- iv) The pattern emerging from reading several reviews

Likewise, consumers trust reviews that are relatively lengthy as opposed to short ones, Reviews with pictures are perceived to be more detailed (Filieri, 2016). In other words, detailed and descriptive reviews are more likely to sway customers' purchase intentions.

The rise in popularity of customer reviews as an information source prior to purchase has been caused by various reasons. Manigold and Fauld (2016), while investigating the contribution of social media to the integrated marketing mix paradigm delineated these reasons. First, customers talk to each other on various social media platforms, thereby exchanging vast amounts of information. While this communication takes place, it affects the various stages of purchase, from information search to post-purchase expressions of dissatisfaction and/or satisfaction. As a result of this interaction, customers are therefore more inclined to trust information on social media as opposed to information from traditional promotion mix, especially advertising. This dynamic puts management control over information in a predicament, forcing them to look for alternative approaches to effectively reach customers.

The rise in popularity of customer reviews may also be attributed to eWOM trends within social networking sites. According to Chu and Kim (2011), 'eWOM spread within social networking sites due to users' desire to establish and maintain social relationships within their personal networks. Therefore, by sharing their experiences on social networking sites, users can help their online connections to make purchase decisions based on information shared. Seeing as social connectivity is the fundamental aspect of social networking sites, one of the main drivers of the spread of eWOM in social networking sites is interpersonal influence.

Interpersonal influence has gained footing in social networking sites because community members are increasingly becoming peer recognition grantors. The interpersonal influence then automatically extends to purchase decision instances. Reviews that provide positive product evaluations can help customers make informed purchase decisions while reviews that provide negative product evaluations can help customers avoid bad purchases (Avant, 2013; (Wetzer, Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

Various aspects of a review are responsible for influencing customers and persuading them into action. The valence – positiveness or negativeness of a review is one such aspect. Researchers have found that positive reviews are viewed to be more persuasive than negative ones. East, Hammond and Lomax (2008) suggest that positive reviews have more impact than negative reviews in predicting the probability that customers will purchase a product. Additionally, Wang, Cunningham and Eastin (2019) reiterate that ‘message valence has a persuasive effect towards customers purchase intention’. While studying message valence, they found that contrary to previous research, positive messages tend to carry more weight in predicting purchase intention than negative ones. They also suggest that when positive reviews are benefit-centric, customers tend to recall them more and this has the greatest positive impact on customer product attitudes and purchase intentions. Therefore, customers are more likely to remember a review that focused on the reviewer’s personal feelings and emotions toward a product than a review that was objective and tries to sell the technical attributes of a product.

Emotions and sentiment relayed in reviews is another aspect that influences customers’ perception of message quality and reliability and eventually affect their purchase intentions. Emotions come into play when there is no clear cut information that can help a customer makes a purchase decision, or when information received is conflicting (DeSteno et al., 2004). According to Lee (2013), the two main types of emotions – positive and negative – exist simultaneously among shoppers. However, their relationship is not proportional, i.e. an increase in negative emotion does not lead to a decrease in positive emotion and vice versa. In furthering research in emotions, Pappas *et al.* (2016) found that positive emotions, whether they were weakly positive or strongly positive, may sway shopping intentions when a customer is unsure, and may even lead to impulse buying. They also found that even if quality

and benefits of a service is low, customers may be inclined to purchase based on weak positive emotions. For that reason, retailers are encouraged to ensure that they encourage positive feelings of joy, contentment and pleasure for customers.

Another aspect that affects customers is review interestingness. Yu and Zou (2015) discovered that the more incredible and interesting reviews about a location are, the more likely that customers will purchase and/or tell their peers about the destination. This is because interesting reviews appeal to customers, in turn creating social media engagement leading to the gaining of more customers.

While reviews are helpful, inundation of information is counter-productive in the purchase decision making process (Ayeh et al., 2013). When faced with a large volume of reviews that may be difficult to process, or that may take too long to process, customers may take short cuts to reach purchase decisions. One way of processing information overload is by using review ratings. According to Sparks and Browning (2011), when a customer is in a goal oriented mode, they are more likely to search for easy to process information such as category ratings to aid in decision making. Easy-to-access and easy-to-evaluate information is more beneficial when the customer does not have the time to dive into volumes of information presented in the reviews. Further, Anderson (2015) found that only 13% of customers would consider using an organisation with one or two-star ratings. This demonstrates the relative influence of other review characteristics on purchase decision making.

Customers also process reviews heuristically when they do not have a desire to delve deep into reading a large volume of reviews. Findings from Forman, Ghose & Wiesenfeld (2008), show that when customers were quickly scanning reviews from multiple sources, source characteristics had much larger impact on sales than the message content. Source

characteristics were an efficient and effective approach on which to base purchase decisions. Therefore, customers may be more inclined to make purchase decisions when they can identify, or identify with the reviewer. The same study also found the influence of customers' geographical location on online purchase behaviour. Findings suggest that customers would benefit from accessing reviews from members in the same geographical location.

When it comes to comparing goods and services, the information requirement for purchase decisions may differ. As an experience good/service, travel lacks the features of pre-trial. Therefore, information shared by others who have experienced the service is extremely useful to customers during the purchase decision making process (Buhalis 2003, Litvin et al., 2008). Reviews aid travel decision makers to achieve satisfaction in the trip planning process since they are able to gather needed information. They also provide realistic expectations and confidence in decisions being made (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

When looking for travel information online, Verma, Stock and McCarthy (2012) found that travel consumers tended to gravitate to different websites at various stages of the purchase process. In the initial stages, customers tended to refer to search engines when researching destinations. Once a destination was selected, brand websites, online travel agencies (e.g. Travelocity) and review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor) were consulted when exploring prospective hotels in the destination. When it was time to book, customers preferred using hotel websites and online travel agents. This goes to show that customer reviews are most important to travellers in the middle stages (evaluation of alternatives and purchase decision) of the purchase process as information needs differ at different stages.

Globally, online travel booking in 2018 amounted to US\$345.6 billion with an average growth rate of around 6.4% annually (Outlook, 2019). This goes to show the importance and use of

the internet during the travel purchase process. Booking of travel related services may differ depending on the market segment. Agag and El-Masry (2016) found that different market segments have disparate distribution channels when selecting and purchasing travel related products. Older generations and people who do not travel frequently may entrust their trip planning to traditional travel agencies while business and frequent travellers may do their own planning or use online intermediaries. However, this may depend on a number of details such as the security of internet transactions; reliability and quality of information they can access; and the convenience of the entire process. Given the importance of the internet and indeed reviews to travel planning and bookings, it is imperative that their impact on purchase is assessed. This study sought to explore how, and the extent to which reviews impacted purchase behaviour in travellers to Kenyan hotels.

2.9 Theoretical Review

This study was guided by the following theories; two step flow of communication theory, Engel-Blackwell-Miniard model of consumer behaviour, diffusion of innovation theory and social identity theory.

2.9.1 Two Step Flow of Communication Theory

This study posits that travel information flows from the source, then onto opinion leaders, who then disseminate information to others within their social circle, over whom they exert some form of influence. The two-step flow of communication theory as advanced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) suggests that opinion leaders obtain information from the media and pass it on to their followers. The message (which is information from the marketer) flows from the mass media (either print or electronic media) to the opinion leaders, from where it is

transported to the masses. Followers therefore form opinions and are influenced by information received from these opinion leaders.

The theory laid emphasis on the role opinion leaders played in a social system based on the premise that they are a major means of spreading information, developing both negative and positive attitudes and influencing behaviour. It describes interpersonal relations as channels of communication, as well as the influence of these relations in decision making (Katz, 1957). Therefore, the receiver is more likely to be influenced by the opinion leader than by mass media.

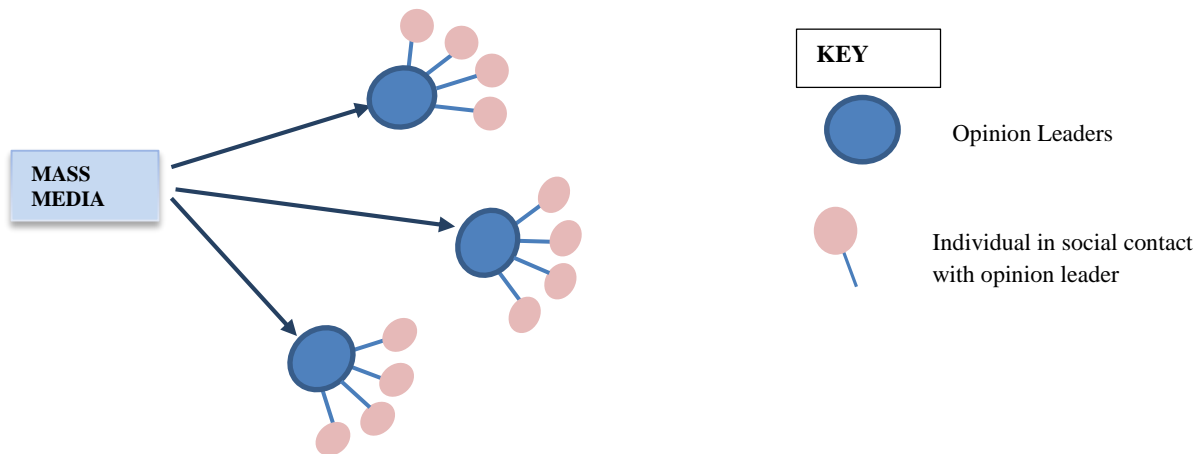


Figure 2.1: Two-step flow of communication model

Adapted from Katz (1957)

As applied to this research, three main features of the two-step flow of communication theory are important for this study. These are:

- i. Opinion leaders retrieve information from various sources e.g. travel agents, online research, even personal experience and even other travellers. They then, through online

communities, disseminate information to other consumers. This aspect of information sharing is fundamental to conceptualising the spread of eWOM.

- ii. Another important element of this theory that informed the study is the idea of social contacts between the opinion leaders and followers in their circle. Contact in this study is computer mediated, and is measured from the perspective of virtual communities.
- iii. The receiver's travel decisions are more likely to be affected by information they learn online from opinion leaders than information they get from official sources such as destination management organisation (DMO) websites, online travel agents or travel marketers.

2.9.2 Engel-Blackwell-Miniard Model of Consumer Behaviour

The Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (EBM) model is a consumer behaviour model that was developed to show various components of the buyer decision making process and the relationship between them. The model consists of four sections: information input, information processing, decision process and variables influencing the decision process. This study posits that consumers get information from reading travel reviews from TripAdvisor, which helps them in the decision making process.

Information is received from both marketing and non-marketing stimuli and fed into the information processing section of the model. This information then goes into the memory of a consumer, to be retrieved later. As applied to this research, consumers prioritize opinion leader sentiments when information processing and also when making purchase decisions. Information stored in memory is the initial trigger in the needs recognition stage when a consumer realizes that they have a need that should be fulfilled. If information stored in memory is inadequate, then more information is sought from external sources.

The third section (the decision process section) includes: need recognition, search, pre-purchase alternative evaluation, purchase, consumption, post-purchase alternative evaluation and divestment. The entire process is influenced by environmental forces and individual differences. The core of this theory is ‘information’, which is central to this study. The study’s foundation is the exchange of information and how information affects the travellers’ decision making process.

2.9.3 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

This study posits that opinion leaders communicate travel information to followers, especially relating to destinations/hotels/attractions they have never visited before. The theory of diffusion of innovation was first advanced by Rogers (1976) who defined diffusion as the process through which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system (Rogers, 2003; Couture *et al.*, 2015). It is a special type of communication, in that messages are concerned with new ideas. The newness of the idea in the message content gives diffusion its special character. The main elements of diffusion of are: (1) the innovation, (2) communicated through channels (3) over time (4) among the members of a social system (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Rogers, 2003).

Consumers are grouped into five categories depending on their time of adoption: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. Opinion leaders fall in the first two categories. The role of an early adopter is to decrease certainty about a new idea by adopting it and then conveying a subjective evaluation of the innovation to near-peers by means of interpersonal networks. Opinion leadership is earned and maintained by an individual’s technical competence, social accessibility and conformity to societal norms (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Gakhar & Chahal, 2016).

2.9.4 Social Identity Theory

The concept of social identity emerged from social psychological research that examined the causes and consequences of individuals seeing themselves, and being seen by others, and as part of a social group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory postulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggests that after being categorized in terms of a group membership, and having defined themselves in terms of that social categorization, individuals seek to achieve or maintain positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from a comparison out-group on some valued dimension. This quest for positive distinctiveness means that when people's sense of self is defined in terms of 'we' (i.e. social identity) rather than 'I' (personal identity), they strive to see 'us' as different from, and preferably better than, 'them' in order to feel good about who they are and what they do.

The Social Identity Theory has been applied in the arena of online technology. In the social media context, social identity is a positive perception of belonging to a community in which people are motivated to interact socially with others, and this has a positive impact on both their intentions to use social media and their social media use (Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). Overall, this theory suggests that people materialize a sense of themselves from the groups to which they belong. Thus, a social identity indicates that individuals believe they are connected to a certain social group and they think that this participation is worthwhile. As a consequence, an identity consciousness is established between members.

This study posits that when searching for information, especially for a high involvement product like hospitality, people are more likely to trust; as well as place higher credibility and relevance to sources of information from a fellow customer than from a marketer (Ayeh et al., 2013). Therefore, for modern travellers, the decision making process is increasingly being

influenced by electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as consumers turn to online sources of information (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012). Innovative consumers and opinion leaders have been observed as role models or authorities within their social systems as they influence the purchase decisions of other consumers (Couture *et al.*, 2015).

2.10 Summary of Literature and Research Gaps

The literature review revealed that research on role of online travel opinion leaders has been mainly conducted with travellers from the United States of America and China. On the other hand, the majority of the studies focus on travel products, without making a distinction between product categories. Other studies (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Litvin *et al.*, 2008) have shown that online shopping motivations differed regarding the type of travel product bought, while others focused specifically on low complexity travel services, such as accommodation (Kim & Kim, 2004) or airline tickets (Kim, Kim, and Kim, 2009), but there is scant research that focuses exclusively on a high complexity product, such as holiday packages and other hotel products and services.

There is limited research on opinion leaders in an online context and how they affect the purchase behaviour of other consumers. The bulk of opinion leadership studies have been in offline settings (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Gakhar & Chahal, 2016). An online environment differs from the offline environment in a number of ways: lack of non-verbal cues when communicating, degree of interactivity, control of information, ease of comparing options and reachability (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Hu, 2015; Moe & Schweidel, 2011). Therefore, there may be an observable difference between opinion leaders in an online context versus the traditional offline context. As a key source of

information online, they are an important group to study in relation to their influence over other consumers' purchase of a product.

Previous research has focused on studying opinion leaders in a 'snapshot', that is, in a short and defined period of time (Basseby et al., 2015; Gakhar & Chahal, 2016; Lowry, Wilson & Haig, 2014; Simbeck, 2013; Yoo et al., 2011). Studying opinion in a small amount of time may not be effective in observing behavioural characteristics. This study attempted to bridge this gap by taking on a longitudinal design, where behaviour of opinion leaders was studied over the course of two years, in order to conclusively report on opinion leaders' online behaviour. This approach is significant as it addressed limitations such as seasonality of travel.

Previous research into sociometrics has come up with indices that measure events in online platforms. However, these indices fall short of measuring opinion leaders' behaviour in platforms with frequent and continuous information feeds by different participants. This study critiques and adds variables to the Ning *et al.* (2012) index to aid in identification of Opinion Leaders within a forum that is continuous and evolving.

Thus while there is a paucity of information about opinion leadership in the existing literature as a whole, far too little is known about how it applies to the purchase of hotel products and services. The few studies available, furthermore, contain some major weaknesses; for example:

1. Few studies considered more than a few of the dimensions of opinion leadership, and many involved a single dimension. Thus the relationships among various dimensions within a single population are unclear.
2. Varying methods for measuring opinion leadership were used, including self-designation, reputational, and judge ratings and snowball.

3. The various studies spanned a wide range of disparate populations: housewives, doctors, businessmen, teenagers, and college students. Therefore this study seeks to fill the above research gaps by focusing on the role of online travel opinion leaders in the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya.

Table 2.3: Summary of knowledge gaps

Author (year)	Focus of the Study	Knowledge gaps	Current Study
Charlier et al., (2016)	Emergent leadership in virtual teams: A multilevel investigation of individual communication and team dispersion antecedents.	The study focused on influence of (communication apprehension [CA] and text-based communication ability [TBCA])	The focus of the study is influence of online opinion leaders reviews
Weeks et al., (2017)	Social media use, opinion leadership, and political persuasion	The study looked at the influence of opinion leadership on political persuasion	Will focus on the role of opinion leadership on purchase of hotel products
Iyengar et al., (2011)	Opinion leadership and social contagion in new product diffusion	How opinion leadership and social contagion within social networks affect the adoption of a new product.	How opinion leadership affects purchase existing hotel products and services
Raghupathi and Fogel (2015)	The Impact of Opinion Leadership on Purchases through Social Networking Websites	The role of opinion leadership on the social media networking website of FaceBook	The research was carried out on mainly TripAdvisor within the context of Kenya as a destination
Chaudry & Irshad, (2013)	Opinion leadership and its role in buyer decision making.	This is a desk research and research type utilized is qualitative research	An explanatory sequential design was used with two phases: a quantitative phase followed by the qualitative phase

Table 2.3, continued

Couture <i>et al.</i> (2015)	The impact of tourism-specific consumer innovativeness (i.e., domain-specific innovativeness) on their information search, purchasing, and communication behaviours on tourism websites.	The study did not look at the influence of online opinion leaders	Influence of online opinion leaders on purchase behaviour
Sarathy (2011)	The role of affect and cognition on online consumers' decision to disclose personal information to unfamiliar online vendors	The study did not look at the influence of online opinion leaders	The link between opinion leaders review and purchase intention was established
Wang & Chen, 2012	The Impact of Interactivity on Involvement and Social Presence: The Moderating Effects of Opinion Leadership	Opinion leadership was the moderating variable	Opinion leadership was the independent variable
Dalrymple, Shaw and Brossard (2013)	Using Opinion Leaders in Environmental Strategic Communication	This study explores potential factors that lead to environmental opinion leadership behaviours	The current study explores online travel opinion leadership behaviours
Kamenica (2012)	Behavioural economics and psychology of incentives	The study looks at the relative role of beliefs, preferences, and technology in the anomalous impacts of incentives	The current study looked at the role of technology especially use of internet on purchase behaviour

Table 2.3, continued

Sparks <i>et al.</i> , (2016)	Responding to negative online reviews: The effects of hotel responses on customer inferences of trust and concern.	The study focused on general online reviews	The current study was limited to online opinion leaders reviews
Zhang and Vasquez (2014)	Hotels' responses to online reviews: Managing consumer dissatisfaction.	The study looked at generic structure of hotel responses to customer complaints	The current study will look at the moderating role of management responses to online opinion leaders reviews

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the methodological process guiding the study by giving the research design, study area, target population, sampling techniques, research instruments. It also discusses pre-testing, validity and reliability of the research instruments, data collection, data analysis, logistical and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is a belief about the way in which data about a phenomenon should be gathered, analysed and used (Mkansi & Acheampong, 2012). Research philosophy guides on the research assumptions on the development of knowledge. Research philosophy can be pragmatism, positivism, realism or interpretivism (Vagle, 2018). Research philosophy approaches are either epistemology (what is known to be true) or doxology (what is believed to be true) which informs the research design. Epistemology is derived from a Greek word ‘episteme’ which means knowledge and ‘logos’ meaning explanation (Miller & Brewer, 2003). “*Epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge*” (Goldsmith & Foxall, 2003). Epistemology approach informs the theoretical approach one chooses while collecting and analysing data. The epistemological approach provides a road map for the research process from research design, sampling, data collection and analysis to generate knowledge that is possible and legitimate. Epistemological approach helps the researcher to systematically justify the choice of study methodology in order to enhance the justification of a given research.

The philosophical assumption used in this study is pragmatism. The choice of pragmatism was guided by the mixed or multiple method designs (quantitative and qualitative) approach of research design. Pragmatism focuses on the outcomes of the research rather than antecedent conditions. It utilizes multiple methods of data collection to better understand research questions and focuses on practical implications of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The methodological assumption guided in exploring the relatively new concept of online opinion leaders and their observed behaviour in the online context. Pragmatism focused on cognizance of the role of opinion leaders and utilized different methods of data collection for an in-depth understanding.

3.2 Research Design

The study was guided by explanatory sequential and experimental designs as discussed in the subsequent sections.

3.2.1 Explanatory Sequential Design

The design employed was an explanatory sequential design. The explanatory sequential design uses a qualitative approach to explain quantitative results and answers the question: ‘In what ways does the qualitative data explain the quantitative result?’ (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It is a two-phase design where the qualitative study depends on the quantitative results. This design was preferred as it allowed a deeper qualitative investigation into opinion leaders’ personal characteristics and communication behaviour after an analysis of their influence on other customers.

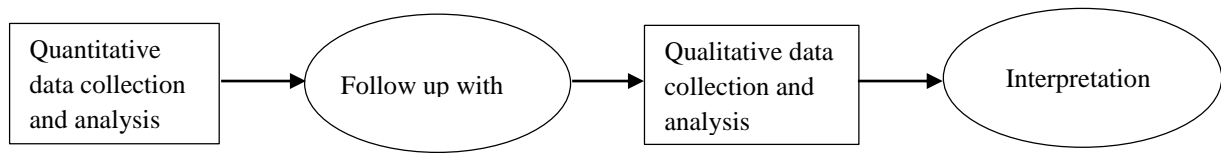


Figure 3.1: Explanatory sequential design

Adopted from (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The research was executed in two phases: a quantitative phase (phase one) followed by a qualitative phase (phase two). Phase one, the quantitative phase, was guided by the exploratory research design. Researchers employ exploratory design when little is known about the topic and previous theory or ideas do not apply, and a study is therefore conducted to provide a better understanding of a situation (Stebbins, 2001). The primary objective of exploratory research is to explore the relationship between variables and their influence on dependent variable (Kothari, 2014). This design was deemed appropriate because even though opinion leaders have been studied extensively, there is scant research about their behaviour and influence in an online communities and whether their characteristics offline are transferable to an online context.

The quantitative phase identified opinion leaders in an online context, and explored their and non-opinion leaders' influence other customers' purchase of hotel products. It also assessed the intervening effect of management responses to reviews. To achieve this, two methods were used. These are:

- i. Expert identification
- ii. Sample sociometric

Expert identification and sample sociometric were used to locate opinion leaders. These two methods were used to balance out the disadvantages brought about by using only one method of locating opinion leaders, and to provide a more comprehensive method of locating opinion leaders. Valente and Pumpuang (2007) state that there are various ways used to identify opinion leaders within social settings. The methods that can be used are: Celebrities, Self-selection, Self-identification, Staff selection, Positional approach, Judges' ratings, Expert identification, Snowball method, Sample sociometric, and Sociometric. Previous research including Chaudry and Irshad, (2013), O'Donnell and Sauer (2005), Ruvio and Shoham (2007) and Yoo et al., (2011) has often used only one method when identifying opinion leaders within social systems. This study's use of two methods balanced out any biases and shortcomings that may stem from using only one method.

Phase two, the qualitative phase, investigated in-depth the personal characteristics and communication strategies of identified opinion leaders to explain how they influence other customers' purchasing intentions and habits. To accomplish this, documents were retrieved from an online community of travellers. Content analysis was carried out on these documents through the mining of textual and pictorial data to investigate opinion leaders' personal characteristics and communication strategies.

3.2.2 Experimental Design

An experimental design refers to the process in which data is collected whereby certain controls are exercised over one or more aspects to determine their influence on variables of interest. This method determines the causal relationships interactions between the independent, dependent and intervening variables. An experiment carried out in a controlled

environment controls for selection and unobservable variable issues that may be present in field data (Chen & Lurie, 2013).

The experimental design was used to evaluate the influence opinion and non-opinion leaders' reviews on purchase of hotel products as well as to measure the intervening effect of management responses on the reviews. Through the use of experiments in a controlled environment with other variables held constant, the influence of opinion leaders and non-opinion leaders, as well as management responses were better observed. A 2x2x2 between subjects experiment was created to test the relationships between the variables.

This design was used to triangulate data from the explanatory sequential design to increase the credibility and validity of the results. A summary of research designs is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Summary of research designs

Phase	Objective	Method	Sampling technique	Data collection instruments
Quantitative (Phase one)	To examine the influence of opinion leaders' reviews on the purchase of hotel products in Kenya	Experimental	Purposive	Questionnaire
		Sociometry	Purposive & random sampling	Questionnaire
	To determine the influence of non-opinion leaders reviews on the purchase of hotel products in Kenya.	Experimental	Purposive	Questionnaire
		Sociometry	Purposive & random sampling	Questionnaire
	To investigate the intervening effect of management responses to opinion leader and non-opinion leader reviews on the purchase of hotel products in Kenya.	Experimental	Purposive	Questionnaire
Sociometry		Purposive & random sampling	Questionnaire	
To determine who the opinion leaders in an online forum are	Expert identification	Purposive & census	Observation form	
	Sociometry	Purposive & random sampling	Questionnaire	
Qualitative (Phase two)	To explore the personal characteristics displayed by travel opinion leaders online	Content analysis	Purposive	Manual scraping
	To explore the online communication behaviour of opinion leaders on hotel products in Kenya.	Content analysis	Purposive	Manual scraping

3.3 Study Area

The study area was the travel reviews website, TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor is the largest travel site in the world reaching 350 million monthly unique visitors with 385 million reviews and opinions covering 6.6 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions (TripAdvisor, 2016). TripAdvisor was selected among other platforms as it is the most popular travel reviews website globally and would provide the largest and most in-depth content. The study was also

carried out in the top 20 hotels in Kenya as at October 2017 as rated on TripAdvisor (Appendix IV).

3.4 Target Population

The target population was domestic and international tourists who had vacationed in Kenyan hotels between October 2015 and October 2017, and subsequently shared their experiences on TripAdvisor. The study also targeted 20 top hotels that are listed in TripAdvisor.

3.5 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

3.5.1 Sample Size and Sampling Technique for Opinion Leaders

Expert identification is a method that uses trained ethnographers to study a community and identify potential opinion leaders: the observers watch interaction within the community and determine who people go to for advice (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). Expert identification was used to identify who opinion leaders in an online setting are. Mixed sampling technique was used for the expert identification method. This included purposive and census sampling techniques. Members of TripAdvisor are divided by the platform into 6 different Levels (Levels 1-6). Level 6 is the highest membership level a member of TripAdvisor can attain. Members gain points for their participation on the platform based on factors such as: the number of people who read an individual's posts, the number of cities a traveller has visited, the number of reviews written, the number of photos posted, the number of times an individual has been first to review and the number of times other members have termed their review as helpful. Members of Levels 6, the highest obtainable level, were purposively selected for the study. A census of Level 6 members who have travelled into and within Kenya from October 2015 to October 2017 was then carried out.

All Level 6 members were considered for further analysis. As at the time of data collection – October 2017, there were 482 Level 6 members who had travelled to Kenya and subsequently shared their experiences on TripAdvisor. A complete census of 482 were selected for further analysis.

3.5.2 Sample Size and Sampling Technique for Tourists

Purposive and random sampling techniques were used for the sample sociometric method. Given that the membership of TripAdvisor is above 10,000 with members joining and exiting frequently, membership is considered as an unknown. The sample size determination used the formula:

$$n = \frac{z^2 * p (1-p)}{e^2}$$

where: n = desired sample size (if the target population is greater than 10,000)

Z = standard normal deviate at the required confidence level of 95%

p = proportion in target population estimated to have characteristic to be measured

e = estimate error within 5% of true value

Therefore:

$$n = \frac{1.64^2 * 0.5(1-0.5)}{0.05^2} = 269$$

3.5.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique for Experiment

Subjects that participated in the experiment were drawn from a population of undergraduate students enrolled in Hospitality and Tourism Management. Subjects may be drawn from

samples if they share similarities with the targeted population. University students were selected as they shared similar characteristics to TripAdvisor users in terms of general technology usage and knowledge of tourism products. As a homogenous group of respondents, they also reduce chances of making false conclusions about whether there is co-variation between the variables under study (Webster & Sell, 2014).

The total sample was 368 students. Given that there were 8 treatment conditions, the 368 were assigned into each treatment condition, thereby allocating 46 participants per condition. The sample for the experiment was calculated by conducting a power analysis to ensure that there are enough participants in each treatment condition to enable the researcher to be able to detect differences in between the conditions (Webster & Sell, 2014). Figure 3.2 indicates the power calculations for sample size determination.

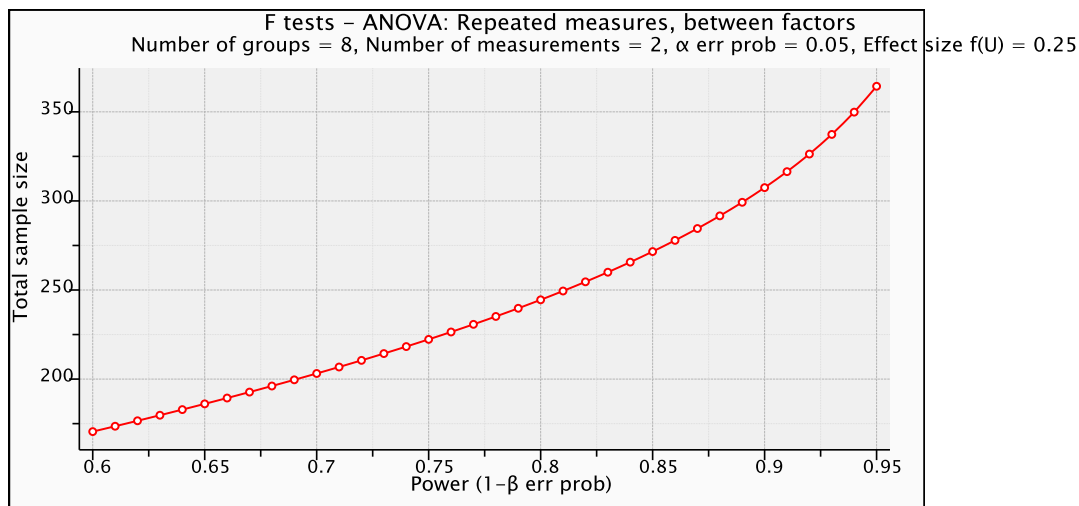


Figure 3.2: Power analysis and Sample size determination of Experimental

Source: (Webster & Sell, 2014)

3.6 Research Instruments

The study used observation checklist and two sets of questionnaires to collect primary data as discussed in sections below.

3.6.1 Observation Checklists

Primary data was collected from TripAdvisor through the use of observation checklists. Observation checklists are used when observing people to learn how they interact within a setting, how things are prioritized and organized in that setting, and what is important to people in a particular setting (Wagner, Kawulich, & Garner, 2012). Observation checklists were used to observe and record online profiles of TripAdvisor members. Observation checklists were suitable as they enabled the complete observation of opinion leaders' activities within the TripAdvisor setting. They were created to record different aspects of opinion leadership, which were derived from the Ning *et al.*, (2012) index.

3.6.2 Questionnaires for Tourists

Primary data from the domestic and international tourists and respondents that participated in the in the experiment was collected using questionnaires. Semi-structured questionnaires, containing both open and closed ended questions were used.

Sociometry is a way of measuring the interpersonal relationships in a group of people. This method was deemed appropriate for use as it makes an inquiry into the position of individuals within communities, making it apt for studying online opinion leaders. This method was used to identify opinion leaders in an online setting, and the influence of their reviews. It also sought to investigate the influence of non-opinion leader reviews and management responses

on the dependent variable. It was used triangulate data obtained from the experiment and observation instrument.

3.6.3 Simulated website and Questionnaires for Experiment

A simulated website containing reviews on hotel products and services was created. To ensure the manipulations in the experiments would generate expectancy violations, the stimulus materials were created based on actual product reviews (Dellarocas, 2006). TripAdvisor reviews with management responses were randomly collected from top ranked hotels in Nairobi and Mombasa. The hotels were selected on the basis of their popularity on TripAdvisor; and they had to be exclusive of the thirty gazetted 4 and 5 star rated hotels in Kenya (Kenya Gazette, 2015). Selected hotels were: Ziwa beach Resort, PrideInn Paradise Beach Resort, Hotel Royal Orchid Azure, La Maison Royale Hotel Nairobi.

To strengthen external validity, the reviews were chosen on the basis of the star rating attributed to the hotel by customers who had previously visited the hotel. The hotels are ranked in order of customer star rating. The reviews were then broken into three groups: highly rated (4 and 5 stars), medium rated (3stars) and lowly rated (1 and 2 stars). 50 reviews in total were collected. Of the reviews collected, 10 were grouped in the highly rated group, 20 in a medium rated group and 10 reviews were classified as lowly rated ones.

The reviews were then cleaned up to remove the names of the establishments so as to eliminate bias from the subjects. All 'lodge', 'resort' words were replaced with 'hotel'. Any other mentions of affiliates e.g. tour companies were eliminated. Any wording that may give away the location of the hotel were eliminated. To enhance readability, reviews selected contained not more than 150 words.

The reviews selected were then taken through a pre-test using a convenience sample of participants (n=60), who were asked to rate the reviews on a 5-point likert scale according to what they felt was the overall valence of the review. The responses were analysed and ranked. Two reviews with the highest means (M=4.80 and 4.60) were selected as representative of the positive reviews; three reviews were selected to represent neutral ones (M=3.00, 2.85 and 2.80); and two of the lowest rated reviews were selected to represent negative reviews (M=1.25 and 1.00). A summary of reviews is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Manipulation check reviews

	Review	Mean	Std. Dev.	Selected	Code
Positive reviews	Great Boutique	4.8	0.447	√	P1
	Skyview	4.4	0.548		
	Nice Place	3.8	0.447		
	West of town	4	1.00		
	Lovely stay	4	0.707		
	Place to be	4.6	0.548	√	P2
	Excellent customer service	4.2	0.447		
	Decent for one night stay	4	0.707		
	Disco closed	4.4	0.894		
		Untitled review	4.4	0.548	
Neutral reviews	Pleasant surprise	4.17	0.408		
	Not so impressed	2.33	0.516		
	Recharge batteries	3.67	0.516		
	Past its prime	2.33	0.516		
	Quiet place	3.5	0.548	√	L1
	Each year	1.83	0.408		
	Hotel stay	2.67	1.366	√	L2
	Solid hotel	3.33	0.816	√	L3
	Disorganized	2.33	0.516		
	Standard secure clean	3	0.894		
Negative reviews	Great beach experience	1.5	0.577		
	Worst place	1.5	1		
	Liars thieves	1.25	0.5		
	Well located	1.25	0.5		
	Trained properly	1.5	0.577		

Table 3.2, Continued

Taps run dry	2.25	0.5		
One big disaster	1.25	0.5	√	N1
Horrific experience	1	0	√	N2
Big warning	1.25	0.5		
Most terrible place	1.25	0.5		

Source: Research data(2018)

3.6.3.1 Stimulus Material

The stimulus material for the experiment consisted of three pages: an introduction page to experiment, the stimulus website and a questionnaire. An experimental website of a fictitious hotel, Lamei Hotel, was created. The website contained the name of the hotel, pictures, short description of the hotel, room price per night in Kenya Shillings, 5 reviews from past guests as well as the guests' accompanying profiles.

Independent variables for the study were opinion leader reviews and non-opinion leaders' reviews, while management response to reviews was the intervening variable. Opinion leaders and non-opinion leader reviews were operationalized as either positive or negative. Management responses to reviews were operationalized by either being present or absent.

The dependent variable was purchase of the hotel product. This was operationalized by a question that asked participants whether they would consider booking the hotel after the reviews they just read.

To achieve a 2x2x2 between subjects design while manipulating for all variables, 8 different web pages were created. The 8 pages created were:

- i. Condition 1: Opinion leader review positive // Other reviewers positive // Management reply present

- ii. Condition 2: Opinion leader review negative // Other reviewers positive // Management reply present
- iii. Condition 3: Opinion leader review positive // Other reviewers negative // Management reply present
- iv. Condition 4: Opinion leader review negative // Other reviewers negative // Management reply present
- v. Condition 5: Opinion leader review positive // Other reviewers positive // Management reply absent
- vi. Condition 6: Opinion leader review negative // Other reviewers positive // Management reply absent
- vii. Condition 7: Opinion leader review positive // Other reviewers negative // Management reply absent
- viii. Condition 8: Opinion leader review negative // Other reviewers negative // Management reply absent

Reviews were arranged as such: neutral, neutral, opinion leader, non-opinion leader, neutral. The positive and negative comments were manipulated depending on the treatment condition. A study by Browning, So & Sparks (2013) indicated that recent positive reviews are able to moderate the effect of negative reviews when it comes to booking attention. To control for this, the framing order of the reviews has arranged so that the neutral reviews appear before the positive reviews. The time the review was posted was also eliminated as Chen & Lurie (2013) propose that the presence of a time-stamp influences the impact of a review and increases the usefulness of a positive review.

Apart from these manipulations presented, every other aspect of the experimental website was held constant. This was done to control for the effects of other extraneous variables in order to correctly measure causal effects. Neutral photos of travel icons were selected for profile pictures as opposed to pictures of real people to reduce bias of participants. The name of the reviewer was an acronym. This is because profile pictures as well as gender of the reviewer have been known to influence how customers assess and react to online reviews (Kraft & Weber, 2012; Perju-Mitran & Budacia, 2015; Rahim, Mustaffa, & Mun, 2012; Wanjoga, 2002).

Finally, after viewing the experimental webpage, participants were asked to answer a 4-item questionnaire. The questionnaire measured the intention of participants to book a hotel after viewing the website as well as 3 manipulation check questions that were used to check for believability.

3.7 Pre-Testing

3.7.1 Pre-Testing of Observation Checklists

Pre-testing was carried out on Level 5 TripAdvisor contributors who had travelled to Kenya from October 2015 to October 2017. A total of 166 level 5 contributors were retrieved, to which the social network analysis and attribution index was applied.

3.7.2 Pre-Testing of Questionnaires for Tourists

Pre-testing for domestic and international questionnaires was done on 30 local tourists who had used TripAdvisor and did not form the final sample. This was undertaken to gauge the usefulness and clarity of the questionnaires, and to ensure the respondents understood the questions (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2014). Pre-testing was carried out on Level 5 TripAdvisor contributors who had travelled to Kenya from October 2015 to October 2017. A total of 166

Level 5 contributors were retrieved, to which the social network analysis and attribution index was applied.

3.7.3 Pre-Testing of Experimental Questionnaires

The experimental website was pretested on 15 postgraduate students in three different sessions. During the first session, each student was exposed to 4 randomly selected webpages. Thereafter, interviews were conducted to get their feedback on the webpage. Their views were sought on the page outlay, clarity, wording, review strength, influence of other aspects of the website (apart from the manipulation areas), length of time taken, recording of results after the experiment. Changes were made according to their recommendations. One week later, the same group were exposed to 4 randomly selected websites again, and their opinions sought. Any misunderstandings and ambiguity about the manipulations were resolved until the website was considered fit.

Finally, one month later, a pre-test of the final website was undertaken with all 3 webpages including the introduction page, the main webpage and the questionnaire. A number of changes were made in response to participant feedback: some questions were reworded for clarity, reviewer profiles were made more prominent, page orientation was adjusted and the introduction page reworded. The pre-test also strengthened the choice of using a between-subjects experiment as opposed to a within-subjects experiment. Exposure of participants to multiple pages bored and frustrated participants, who reported that they stopped concentrating on reading the reviews and instead rushed to answer the questionnaire.

3.8 Validity and Reliability

3.8.1 Validity and Reliability of Observation Checklist

Validity is the extent to which a research instruments is able to measure what it is supposed to measure. Validity of the observation checklist and the index was sought through discussions with supervisors and experts in eTourism and eCommerce.

Reliability of an instrument is done to ensure the measurement instrument yielded consistent results. A test-retest was done on the observation form and the index. Level 5 members were purposively selected for the test-retest on two separate weeks. Results obtained from the two weeks were then compared to ensure that there was a correlation.

3.8.2 Validity and Reliability of Questionnaires for Tourists

Validity of instruments is vital since it measures the extent to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure. Content validity seeks to ensure there is adequate coverage of all concepts under study, criterion-related validity relates to the ability to predict the outcome of some current condition, while construct validity is the degree to which measurements correlate with other theoretical propositions (Kothari, 2014). Validity of the instrument was sought through discussions with supervisors and experts in eTourism and eCommerce.

A test of reliability is an essential test as it measures the soundness of the instrument and whether it produces consistent results (Kothari, 2014). Reliability of questionnaires was tested using an internal consistency measure, which generates a coefficient value of Cronbach's Alpha. It is used where a Likert Scale is present and the researcher wishes to verify the reliability of the scale to determine how items correlate among themselves. The closer Cronbach's Alpha is to 1.0 the greater the internal consistency of the items. A reliability of at

least 0.7 at $\alpha=0.05$ significance level of confidence is acceptable (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). A standardized composite alpha value of 0.709 was obtained, which was considered significant.

Table 3.3: Cronbach's alpha test for reliability for tourists questionnaires

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No of Items
.705	.709	10

Source: Research data (2018)

Validity is the extent to which a research instruments is able to measure what it is supposed to measure. Validity of the observation form and the index was sought through discussions with supervisors and experts in e-Tourism and e-Commerce.

Reliability of an instrument is done to ensure the measurement instrument yielded consistent results. A test-retest was done on the observation form and the index. Level 5 members were purposively selected for the test-retest in two separate weeks. Results obtained from the two weeks were then compared to ensure that there was a correlation.

3.8.3 Validity and Reliability of Experimental Questionnaires

The main concerns in an experimental design are reliability, replicability and validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, manipulation checks were conducted to test the believability of the website and Levene's test of equality of error performed to test the variances of each treatment condition. Reliability was achieved through the use of double-blind experimental design. This is where participants are randomly assigned treatment groups where neither the researcher nor the participant knows which group they are assigned to. Using double-blind design reduces the risk of measurement error and bias (Creswell & Creswell,

2017). Reliability was also tested using an internal consistency measure, which generates a coefficient value of Cronbach's Alpha. The closer Cronbach's Alpha is to 1.0 the greater the internal consistency of the items. A reliability of at least 0.7 at $\alpha=0.05$ significance level of confidence is acceptable (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). Cronbach's Alpha test was .712 indicating a great believability in the simulation exercise (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4: Cronbach's alpha test for reliability for experimental questionnaires

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.712	.712	3

Source: Research data (2018)

Replicability is achieved by ensuring the documentation of the experiment is expressly and sufficiently detailed. This ensures that the study can be replicated in future to test the variables.

Validity was addressed using three manipulation check questions to ensure the internal validity of the experiment. The manipulation check also allows for the performance of correlational analyses to strengthen this conclusion: Are changes in the dependent variable mediated by changes in the manipulation check? External validity was achieved through the series of pre-tests and pilot testing.

Manipulation checks were conducted to measure the believability of the website. Manipulation checks were carried out using two methods: during pretesting and through a t-test of 3 believability questions. During pretesting, participants were asked what they observed from the website, how they interpreted information presented on the website and clarity of the website. Additionally, a one sample t-test was performed on the three believability questions. Results are as indicated in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5: Believability of the website

One-Sample Test								
Test Value = 3								
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	95% Interval of the Difference	Confidence of the Upper
							Lower	
Realistic site	13.048	328	.000	3.73	1.012	.732	.62	.84
Site provides adequate information	14.423	328	.000	3.80	1.008	.804	.69	.91
Can use site to book	19.289	328	.000	4.04	.975	1.036	.93	1.14

Source: Research data (2018)

A one sample t-test was performed to determine whether scores for believability of the simulated website was different to normal. A believability score of 3.0 or higher is a positive indicator that the experimental condition is similar to normal conditions.

Mean believability score for the first item “the site is realistic” ($M=3.73$, $SD=1.012$) was higher than the normal believability score of 3.0, a statistically significant mean difference of 0.732, 95% CI [0.62 to 0.84], $t(328)=13.048$, $p<0.001$. This shows that participants believed that the experimental website seemed realistic.

Mean believability score for the second item “the site provided adequate information to allow me to make a decision” ($M=3.80$, $SD=1.008$) was also higher than the normal believability score of 3.0, with a statistically significant mean difference of 0.804, 95% CI [0.69 to 0.91], $t(328)=14.423$, $p<0.001$. This shows that participants believed that the experimental website contained enough information to allow them to make a booking.

Lastly, the mean believability score for the third item “I can imagine using this site to book” ($M=4.04$, $SD=1.036$) was also higher than the normal believability score of 3.0, with a

statistically significant mean difference of 1.036, 95% CI [0.93 to 1.14], $t(328)=19.289$, $p<0.001$. This shows that participants felt the website was as believable as other booking sites and could thus be used to make a booking. On the basis of these three believability questions, the website was thus considered appropriate for use in the experiment.

Altogether, the manipulation and believability results imply the manipulation of the independent variables of reviews from opinion leaders, non-opinion leaders and management responses were perceived as intended and not confounded. Likewise, believability of the simulated task was satisfactory and consistent across the treatment conditions.

Levene's test of equality of error is performed to test the variances of each treatment condition. This is done by ensuring that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups. Levene's test of equality of error was performed for the eight (8) treatment conditions proposed. Results for this test are presented in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Levene's test of equality of error variances

Dependent Variable: Booking/Purchasing intention			
F	df1	df2	Sig.
6.652	7	328	.000

a. Design: Intercept + Opinion leader + Non-opinion leader + Management response + Opinion leader * Non-opinion leader + Opinion leader * Management response + Non-opinion leader * Management response + Opinion leader * Non-opinion leader * Management response

Source: Research data (2018)

The output for Levene's test of equality is for the 2X2X2 ANOVA is $F(7,328) = 6.652$, $p<.001$, $\alpha=.05$. The p value is less than α level of the test, indicating that the variances in the treatment groups are unequal. This therefore means that the variances across the treatment groups were observable. Therefore, the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable were observable within the study.

3.9 Data Collection Techniques

3.9.1 Data Collection Techniques for Observation Checklists

Observation checklists were used to observe online profiles of Level 6 members of TripAdvisor who travelled to Kenya between October 2015 and October 2017. This time period was selected so as to avoid variability that might come about as a result of selecting only one travel season. This way, both peak and off peak seasons were taken care of. Since the Ning *et al.* (2012) study measured an event in time while this study tracks behaviour over a period of time, modifications were proposed to the index to make it relevant to this study. The newly suggested attributes to be included in the index were: The Posts Degree, New Product Purchase, New Product Ownership and New Product Knowledge. These attributes were included on the basis of opinion leader characteristics suggested from previous research (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Couture *et al.*, 2015; Goldsmith & Foxall, 2003). Therefore, the attributes used for this study were:

- i The Connected Degree - $CO_i = In-d_i + Out-d_i$
- ii The Attention Degree - $At_i = \sum Rea$
- iii The Activity Degree - $Aci = \sum Fq/M$
- iv The Posts Degree - $Ti = \sum Wi / \sum Ph$
- v New Product Purchase - $NP_i = \sum Ex$
- vi New Product Ownership - $NO_i = \sum Pass$
- vii New Product Knowledge - $NK_i = \sum ExpPoi / \sum Exp$

Table 3.7: Data collection techniques for observation checklists

Item	Description	Formula	Measurement
The Connected Degree $CO_i = In-d_i + Out-d_i$	The connected degree measures information flow between the opinion leader and members of the online community. In-degree and Out-degree are degrees of centrality which measure the number of direct connections made in networks. High indices for in-degree and out-degree indicate high participation by the member.	$In-d_i = \mathbf{Help} + \mathbf{Rep} + \mathbf{Ques}$ $Out-d_i = \mathbf{Rev} + \mathbf{For} + \mathbf{Ph}$	$In-d_i$ (in-degree) = number of responses received from others; $Out-d_i$ = total number of posts posted. Help is Helpful votes Rep is Replies Ques is Questions asked Rev is the number of Reviews For is the number of Forum Posts Ph is the number of Photos.
The Attention Degree $Ati = \sum Rea$	The more the readership, the higher number of people who consult the member	$\sum \mathbf{Rea} =$ summation of readership	$\sum \mathbf{Rea}$ is the summation of the readership that a contributor has
The Activity Degree $Aci = \sum Fq/M$	The more content the member posted, the more active they are.	$\sum \mathbf{Fi} =$ total points $\mathbf{M} =$ months	$\sum \mathbf{Fi}$ stands for the frequency of posting, a measure which shall be retrieved from the total points of each contributor; \mathbf{M} is the number of months the contributor has been a member.

Table 3.7, Continued

The Posts Degree $T_i = \sum W_i / \sum Ph$	The lower the number, the more influential the member due to richness of information (information using multiple media).	$\sum W_i = \text{Reviews} + \text{Forum posts} + \text{Ratings}$ $\sum Ph = \text{photos}$	$\sum W_i = \text{Reviews} + \text{Forum posts} + \text{Ratings}$, this is the total number of textual posts; $\sum Ph$ will be total number of photos by the contributor.
New Product Purchase $NPi = \sum Ex$	Opinion leaders always have novel ideas and are the first to embrace a new product. A high number indicates that the member was among the first to review a new hotel, attraction or restaurant		$\sum Ex$ is the summation of the Explorer reviews
Item	Description	Formula	Measurement
New Product Ownership $NO_i = \sum Pass$	Opinion leaders are innovative and may own many new products, and in this case, have travelled to many new destinations.	$\sum Pass = \text{total number of cities visited}$	$\sum Pass$ is the total number of cities the contributor has visited
New Product Knowledge $NKi = \sum ExpPoi / \sum Exp$	Opinion leaders are normally knowledgeable about a particular subject; therefore, high scores will show that the member is knowledgeable	$\sum ExpPoi = \text{Expert points accumulated}$ $\sum Exp = \text{Experts level}$	$\sum ExpPoi$ is the summation of the total number of Expert points accumulated; $\sum Exp$ is number of Experts levels that are presented

An attribute matrix (Table 3.8) was constructed based on the seven degrees presented.

Table 3.8 Seven degree index attribute matrix

	D₁	D₂	D₃	D₄	D₅	D₆	D₇
A₁	d ₁₁	...	...	d ₁₄	...	...	d ₁₇
...
A_i	d _{i1}	...	...	d _{i4}	...	...	d _{i7}
...
A_n	d _{n1}	...	...	d _{n4}	...	...	d _{n7}

Where

$A = (A_1, A_i \dots A_n) =$ Opinion leader (member)

$D = (d_{i1}, d_{i4} \dots d_{n7}) =$ Degrees of measurement

$d_{ij} =$ the j -th attribute for the i -th member

By normalizing initial data to 0-1, each opinion leader was evaluated by the average value of all seven attributes using the formula below

$$Ei = \frac{1}{m} \sum_{j=1}^m zij$$

Where: $Ei =$ Expected interval

$m =$ number of attribute indexes

$i =$ agent

$j =$ attribute

$zij = d_{ij}$ after normalization

3.9.2 Data Collection Technique for the Experiment

The experiment was set up in computer labs in the respective universities. Participants were invited to randomly select computers in the labs. Random assignment to treatment groups reduced the risk of bias towards the experiment. The study was then explained to the participants. They were also informed that each page was different from most of the other participants. Participants were then asked to read the instructions on the introductory page, and then imagine they were a customer reading reviews and respond to a short questionnaire afterwards regarding how likely they were to act and feel if faced with a similar situation. All responses collected were anonymous and participants were not required to divulge any demographic information.

3.9.3 Data Collection Techniques Using Questionnaires

Questionnaires were handed out to domestic and international tourists over two months - September and October 2017 in the hotels they were visiting. The respondents used the questionnaires to indicate whose advice they seek on TripAdvisor before making purchasing decisions, who they consider as online opinion leaders, as well as the extent of the influence of online opinion leaders on their purchasing of hotel product. Data collection was performed both offline and online. This was done as the researcher had anticipated a low response rate from the online questionnaires and therefore prepared for an offline option. This is because previous research has indicated low response rates to online surveys as compared to paper surveys, with an average response rate of 33% (Liu & Wronski, 2018; Saleh & Bista, 2017). First, the online questionnaires were handed out in September 2017, followed by offline distribution in October 2017. 100 questionnaires were distributed online and the remaining 169 distributed offline. Each hotel received a link to the online questionnaires and was asked,

through the guest services desk, to share the link with at least 5 customers. Likewise, 9 paper questionnaires were handed out to guests in the selected hotels either directly or through the guest relations manager's desk.

Data from opinion tourists was gathered through manual scrapping, following TripAdvisor's rules on the ban of webscrappers. Information retrieved included all personal information presented on opinion leaders' profile pages and hotel reviews. Additionally, one (1) review per month was randomly selected from each member's profile page from October 2015 – October 2017. Only hotel reviews were considered. Reviews were collected manually by the researcher and transferred to a document for further analysis.

3.9.4 Data Collection Technique for Experiment

The experiment was set up in computer labs in the respective universities. Participants were invited to randomly select computers in the labs. Random assignment to treatment groups reduced the risk of bias towards the experiment. The study was then explained to the participants. They were also informed that each page was different from most of the other participants'. Participants were then asked to read the instructions on the introductory page, and then imagine they were a customer reading reviews and respond to a short questionnaire afterwards regarding how likely they were to act and feel if faced with a similar situation. All responses collected were anonymous and participants were not required to divulge any demographic information.

3.10 Data Analysis

3.10.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The raw quantitative data collected was systematically organized in a manner that will facilitate analysis. Data was cleaned and edited then coding, classification and tabulating

carried out. Qualitative data was also cleaned, coded and themes developed. Means were used to determine the most frequently mentioned opinion leader while standard deviation measured the dispersion of the results. The study also tested for normality. To determine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables multivariate analysis will be performed. Multiple correlation and regression will be used to test relationships between variables. To test the hypotheses developed for the study, manipulation checks were conducted on the believability of the website and a one sample t-test performed on the three believability items was also performed. A summary of methods of data analysis for this phase are provided in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9: Summary of methods for quantitative data analysis

Objectives	Research Design	Data collection	Method of Analysis
To determine who the opinion leaders in an online forum are	Explanatory sequential design	Observation checklist Questionnaires	Seven degree attribute index
To examine the influence of non-opinion leaders' reviews on the purchase of hotel products in Kenya		Questionnaires Between-subjects experiment	Multiple regression and correlation Between-subjects ANOVA
To explore the role of opinion leaders on the purchase of hotel products in Kenya		Questionnaires Between-subjects experiment	Multiple regression and correlation Between-subjects ANOVA
To investigate the moderating effect of management responses to opinion leader and non-opinion leader reviews on the purchase of hotel products in Kenya		Questionnaires Between-subjects experiment	Multiple regression and correlation Between-subjects ANOVA

3.10.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Data analysis involved data cleaning of raw data and content analysis. When coding, reviews were coded per paragraph and reviews related to multiple concepts were attributed to multiple themes. Thematic analysis was performed, first to identify expected themes that coincided with information from literature review; and emergent themes that became apparent from the reviews. Coding and analysis was performed by using data analysis software NVivo v12 and the dictionaries of Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). Table 3.10 provides a summary of methods of data analysis for this phase.

Table 3.10: Summary of methods of qualitative data analysis

Objectives	Research Design	Data Collection	Method of Analysis
To explore the personal characteristics of travel opinion leaders online	Explanatory sequential design	Textual classification and interpretation	Content analysis
To explore the online communication behaviour of opinion leaders online of the hotel product in Kenya		Textual and pictorial classification and interpretation	Content analysis

3.11 Logistical and Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained approval letters from graduate school, Kenyatta University and NACOSTI before commencing the field work. The study also ensured the respondents' confidentiality is maintained and consent was sought before proceeding with data collection. No WebCrawler was used in accordance to TripAdvisor's regulations about information mining from the website.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of the study was to determine who opinion leaders are in an online setting; observe the characteristics they exhibit and measure their influence on the purchase of hotel products in Kenya. This chapter focuses on the findings and discussions of the study.

4.2 Response Rate

The study employed an explanatory sequential design, and employed a mixed methods approach in order to achieve its objectives. Four different methods were applied in the study i.e. questionnaires, observations, an experiment and document analysis. Three of these instruments collected quantitative data while one collected qualitative data. Data was collected through the use of these four methods in order to achieve data triangulation.

Table 4.1: Response rate

Instrument	Target	Returned	Valid for analysis	Percentage
i Observation form	All	563	563	100%
ii Questionnaire (Experimental)	384	368	329	95.8%
iii Questionnaire (Sociometric) – total	269	131	96	47.6%
• Online	100	27		27%
• Offline	169	104		61.5%
Average response rate				81.1%

Source: Research data (2018)

Respondents for the observation form were retrieved online from the travel platform TripAdvisor. A census of all level 6 members who had visited Kenya as at October 2017 was performed. The number of participants for observation forms was 563.

Participants for the experiment were university students. The number of participants for the experiment by use of questionnaires was 368, with 48 assigned to each group. After screening the data, 39 cases were eliminated due to missing values, leaving a total of 329 participants. A sociometric study was performed both online and offline. The number of participants for the sociometric through the use of questionnaires was 131, 27 online and 104 offline. After screening the data, 35 cases were eliminated due to missing values and failing the screening question, leaving a total of 96 participants. This represented an overall response rate of 81.5% which was deemed adequate for analysis. Table 4.1 presents the response rates for the study.

4.3 General Findings

4.3.1 Demographic Information of Sociometric Respondents

Demographic data was collected from domestic and international tourists. Table 4.2 presents demographic information of respondents.

Table 4.2: Demographic information of respondents

Item	Frequency	Percentage	
Gender	Male	44	45.8%
	Female	45	46.9%
	Prefer not to say	7	7.3%
Age	Below 20 years	8	8.3%
	21-30 years	32	33.3%
	31-40 years	29	30.2%
	41-55 years	23	24%
	Over 55 years	4	4.2%
Education level	High school or less	4	5.7%
	Diploma	19	27.1%
	Some college	10	14.3%
	Bachelors' degree	30	42.9%
	Postgraduate degree	7	10%

Table 4.2, Continued

Origin	Africa	45	46.9%
	Europe	20	20.8%
	South America	8	8.3%
	Middle East	7	7.3%
	North America	6	6.3%
	Asia	5	5.2%
	Central America	5	5.2%
Travel in the last two years	Yes	79	86.8%
	No	12	13.2%

Source: Research data (2018)

About 46.9% of the respondents were female while 45.8% were male. Majority of the respondents (63.5%) were between 21-40 years. 33% of respondents were between 21-30 years while 30% were 31-40 years. More than half (52.9%) of the respondents had at least a bachelor's degree (42.9% bachelors and 10% Postgraduate) while 14.3% had some college education.

Africa produced the highest percentage of respondents (46.9%) followed by Europe (20.8). the lowest number of respondents were from Central and North America (5.2% and 6.3% respectively.) In terms of frequency of travel, 86.8% of respondents indicated that they had travelled in the past two years. This was indicative that majority of respondents were Millennials, meaning that as a destination, Kenya is attractive to younger tourists. More respondents were male and this is was congruent with reports that indicate that 93 out of the top 100 tourist sources all had a larger number of male than female tourists (Tourism Research Institute, 2019). The highest percentage of respondents was African, followed by Europeans. The study findings were consistent with Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and Kenya Tourism Research Institute (KTRI) research conducted into tourists' arrivals that reported Africa (40.76%) as the largest source market for tourists into Kenya in 2018 followed

by Europe (30.22%) (KNBS 2019; KTRI, 2018). This may be attributed to the open border policy that allows Africans to get visas on arrival and revitalised marketing efforts by the Kenya Tourism Board. The ease of entry into the country by members of African states is bound to be far reaching and will increase numbers of tourists into Kenya especially when initiatives such as the Single African Air Transport Market come into effect.

4.3.2 Online Sources of Information

Findings indicated that the most frequently used sources of travel information online were Facebook.com (39.6%), Hotels.com (38.5), Booking.com (32.3%), Expedia.com (31.3%) and YouTube.com (21.9%) as shown in Figure 4.1. TripAdvisor use is at 100% as it was the screening questions so all respondents to the study indicated that they had used it.

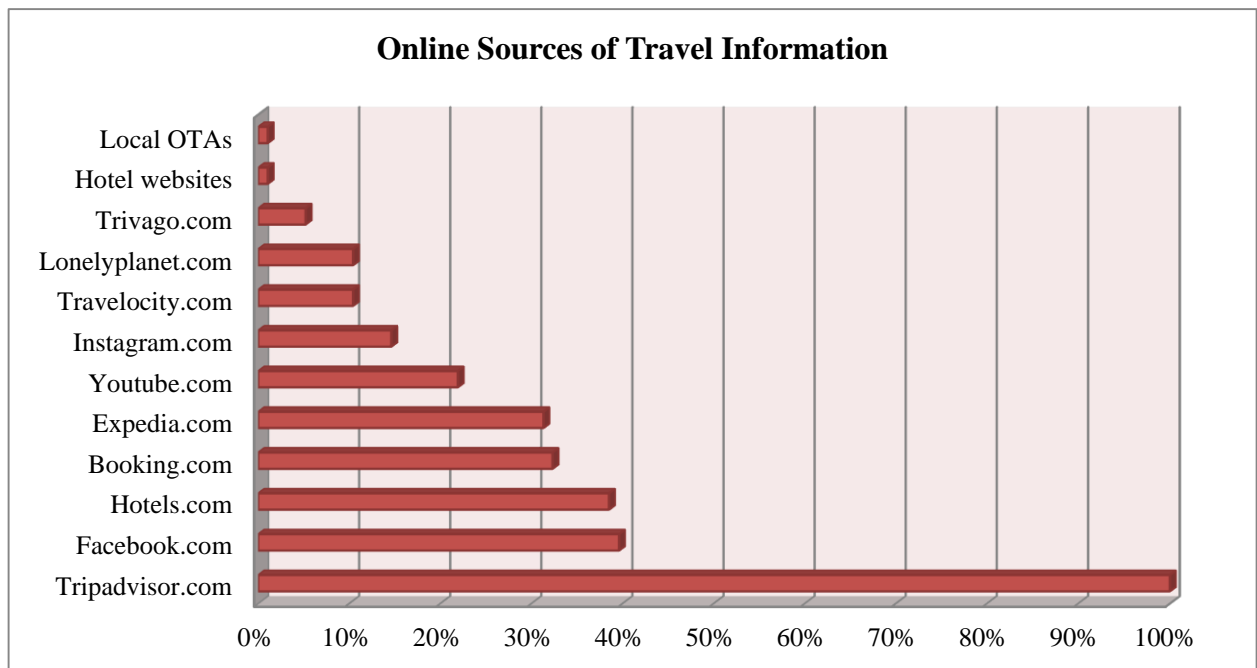


Figure 4.1: Online sources of information

Source: Research data (2018)

Customers most frequently used the social networking site Facebook for travel inspiration, even more than sites that were primarily dedicated to travel. This echoes KPMG (2017) report that indicated that globally, Facebook is the most preferred social media site used by customers to post reviews and provide feedback to companies. The most popular sites used are interactive. Therefore, sites that provide eWOM are highly favoured as customers get to interact with each other by giving feedback, responding to queries, giving each other advice and sharing photos. This is supported by many other researchers who point out the pivotal role eWOM plays in online travel decision making (Ayeh, 2012; Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012; KPMG, 2017; Mack, Blose & Pan, 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011).

However, findings from this study indicate that the least used sites are hotel websites and sites of local online travel agents. This is in contrast with other researchers who report that customers tend to trust information from reliable sources (e.g. corporate websites) more than consumer generated reviews. According to previous research, consumers consider corporate sources to be more credible sources of information than review sites and thus place higher levels of trust in them (Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schafer, 2012; Dellarocas, 2006; Sotiriadis & Zyl, 2013; Yu & Zou, 2015). This does not demonstrate congruence in the relative influence of various online sources on consumer travel planning.

This may be due to differences in the travel purpose of respondents, i.e. respondents who travel for business may differ from leisure tourist when it comes to online search behaviour. Other differences may be the travel destination or the age group of the respondents in the study. Other demographic factors such as frequency of the internet use and devices used to connect to the online sources of information may also present contrasts.

4.3.3 Reasons for Trusting Opinion Leaders

Respondents were asked reasons why they are trusting of opinion leaders' reviews. Information retrieved was organized into themes with the most related Table 4.3 presents reasons supplied by respondents.

Table 4.3: Reasons for trusting opinion leaders

Reasons for Trusting Opinion Leader Reviews	Frequency	Percentage
Authentic / credible/ reliable information	18	24.6%
Are experienced travellers/I consider them experts	12	16.4%
Provide good descriptions	10	13.7%
Timely delivery of information	5	6.9%
Know them personally	5	6.9%
They answer questions/give feedback	5	6.9%
They provide good/accurate information	4	5.5%
Are popular	3	4.1%
Don't remember/don't follow specific person but location	3	4.1%
Are not biased	2	2.7%
Are accessible	2	2.7%
Provide destination specific information	1	1.4%
Are representative of all travellers	1	1.4%
Are ethical/portray ethics in their reviews	1	1.4%
Company responds to reviews	1	1.4%
Total	73	100.00

Source: Research data (2018)

Majority of opinion leaders are trusted because they provide authentic, reliable and credible information (24.6%). Customers suggested:

'...they are real in exposing any unworthy experience they have encountered during trips'

'... their experiences are not biased'

'...I enjoy the way they express their views, they are always real'

'...the posts are consistent'

'...some are career photographers hence capture true pictures'

'... they don't pretend in their comments, they mean it all'

Opinion leaders are also trusted as they are experienced travellers (16.4%). Customers said:

'... some are frequent travellers hence have more experience than me'

'...have visited many places hence have many experiences'

'...they have travelled more and have more experience'

Opinion leaders also provide good descriptions (13.7%) in their reviews.

'...the way they describe hotels'

'...really knows how to describe hotels and experiences'

'...I enjoy the way they express their views, they are always real'

'...the energy in their description'

'...their way of describing places they have visited'

Respondents also have ties to some of the opinion leaders mentioned. The opinion leaders are able to reach out for direct advice on travel questions:

'...they sent messages to my inbox to attend to my grievances on a personal level'

'...some are close friends hence I always have first-hand info from them'

In comparison to literature reviewed, credibility and reliability of information from opinion leaders on TripAdvisor is the major reason of other consumers trusting their reviews. These findings are in tandem with Park *et al.*, (2011), who noted that customers perceive eWOM as credible, they are highly likely to base their purchasing decisions based on reviews they liked. Source credibility and its effect on purchasing online has been researched on extensively (Ayeh, 2012; Hu, 2015; Lowry et al., 2014; Nowak & McGloin, 2014; Park *et al.*, 2011). Findings have been largely consistent on consumers' evaluation of online messages.

Consumers evaluate credibility of sources constantly before trusting and utilizing the information.

Expertise in travel and travel related activities was also cited as one of the primary reasons customers trust opinion leaders on TripAdvisor. This finding is in agreement with other scholars' who note the two most agreed upon constructs in terms of source credibility are expertise and trustworthiness (Ayeh, 2012; Park *et. al.*, 2011; Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Ohanian (1990) defines expertise as the extent to which a source is perceived "to provide valid assertions". It is expressed by scholars using different words e.g. "expertise", "competence", "authoritativeness", "qualification" and "professionalism" (Berlo, Lemert & Mertz, 1969; McCroskey, 1966; Ohanian, 1990). Even though there might not be one commonly agreed-upon word for it, the concept still remains that it influences consumer attitudes with regard to how they behave towards the source.

Of note, too are the 6.9% who reported to trust opinion leaders they know personally. This shows that familiarity with the opinion leader also influences the consumer's attitude towards booking hotel rooms. It also goes to show that people seek out online others with whom they have strong social ties with and trust their information too. This is in agreement with researchers who have argued that consumers are more influenced by people within their circles with whom they have strong social ties (Hu, 2015). Strong social ties may be comprised of friends and family while weak social ties may be acquaintances and work mates. Therefore, weak ties play an important role when it comes to getting information from the outside world, but in the long run, strong ties are more trusted during decision making (Barabasi, 2002).

4.4 Objective 1: To Examine the Influence of Opinion Leaders' Reviews on the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

4.4.1 Overview of Objective One

The first objective sought to analyse the influence of opinion leaders' reviews on the purchase of hotel products. Two methods: an experiment and a sociometric analysis were used to achieve this objective. These two methods were used to achieve triangulation of data. Both sets of participants responded to questionnaires and the quantitative data collected was analysed on SPSS version 20. A total of 425 questionnaires were used for analysis.

4.4.2 Frequencies

The most influential aspects of an opinion leader are the travel experience a member has and the positive reviews posted by the member. Figures 4.2 to 4.5 show the level of influence opinion leaders have online.

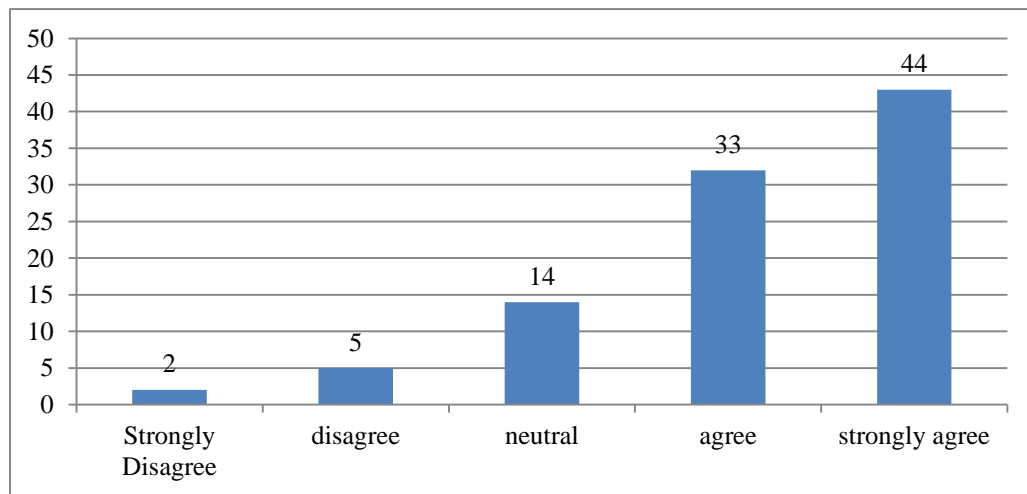


Figure 4.2: Positive reviews by opinion leaders drive me to visit

Source: Research data (2018)

Respondents indicated that if opinion leaders write a positive review about a hotel they have never visited, they would be inclined to visit the place (strongly agree = 44.8% and agree = 33.3%). This seems to indicate a high level of trust for opinion leader reviews.

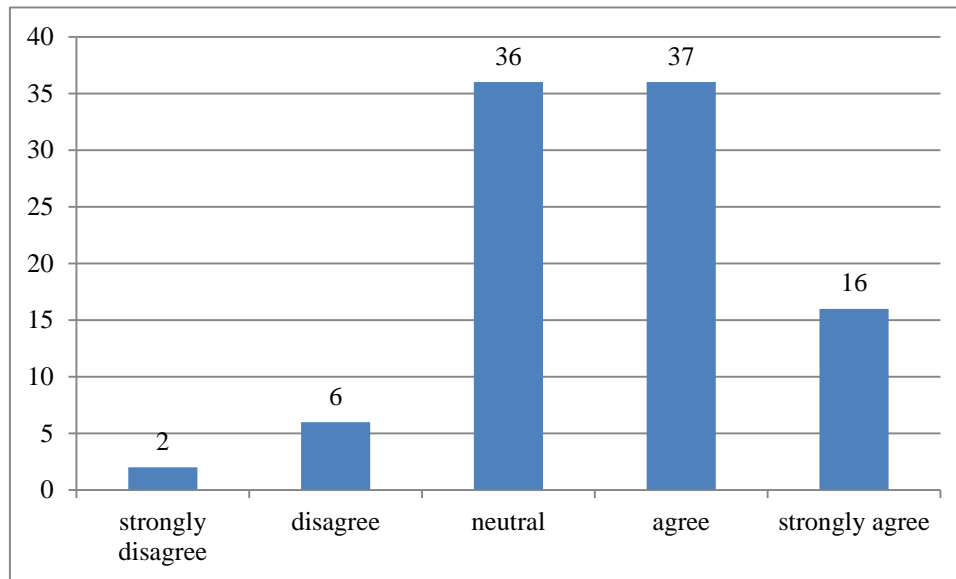


Figure 4.3: Positive reviews from opinion leaders about a hotel I have been to before

Source: Research data (2018)

Likewise, 54.2% of respondents (agree = 37.5%, strongly agree = 16.7%) indicated that if opinion leaders write a positive review about a hotel they have been to before, they would be glad about their stamp of approval and visit again. This seems to suggest that opinion leaders influence not only first time purchase, but repeated purchase as well. It also seems to point to the fact that customers seek approval of other customers to validate their purchase and reduce any cognitive dissonance that may occur.

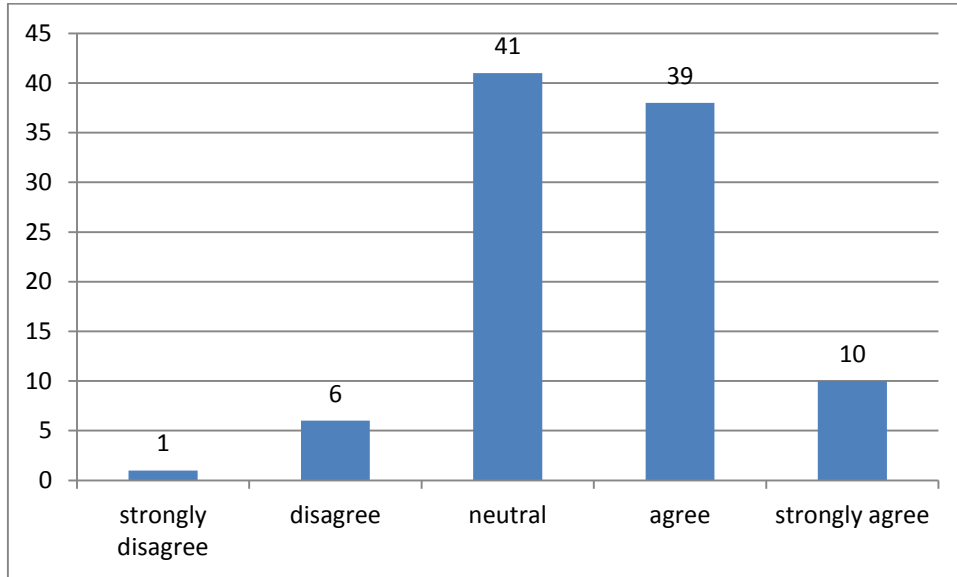


Figure 4.4: Reviews from opinion leaders have made me book a specific hotel

Source: Research data (2018)

About 49.6% of respondents (strongly agree = 10.4% and agree = 39.6%) indicated that reviews from opinion leaders have, at one time or another, made them book a specific hotel.

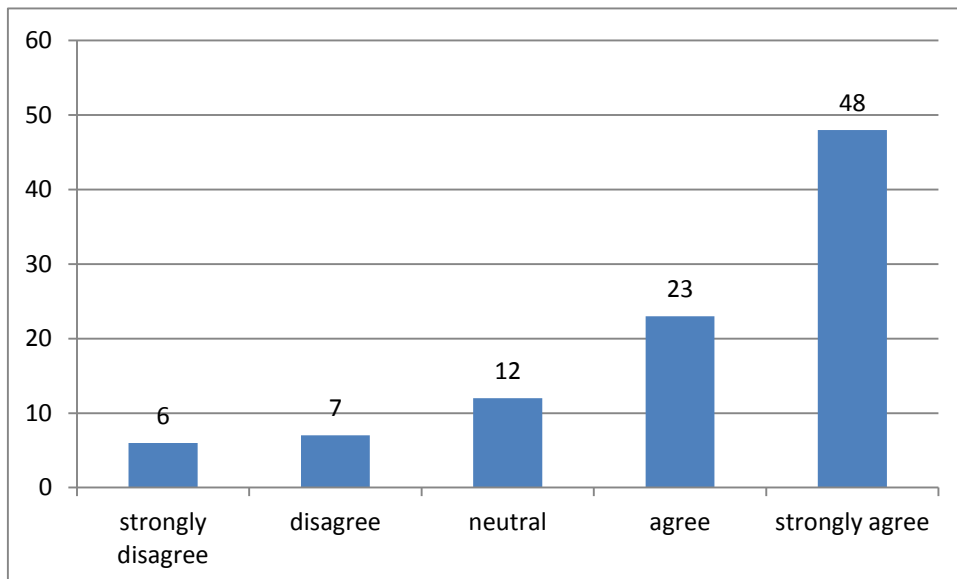


Figure 4.5: Influenced by travel experience an opinion leader has

Source: Research data (2018)

An overwhelming 74% of respondents indicated that the more travel experience a TripAdvisor member has, the more seriously their opinion is taken. Therefore, it is apparent that expertise in travel matters also carries a lot of weight when it comes to trusting travel information online.

4.4.3 Pearson Correlation Coefficient Analysis Opinion Leaders' Influence on Purchase

The Pearson correlation coefficient analysis between opinion leader aspects and purchase and is presented in table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Pearson correlation on opinion leaders' influence on purchase

Correlations		OL1	OL2	OL3	OL4	SOL	Mean Purchase
OL1	Pearson Correlation	1	.200	.279**	.265**	.708**	.241*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.051	.006	.009	.000	.018
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
OL2	Pearson Correlation	.200	1	.455**	-.051	.581**	.270**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.051		.000	.620	.000	.008
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
OL3	Pearson Correlation	.279**	.455**	1	-.022	.605**	.361**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.000		.830	.000	.000
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
OL4	Pearson Correlation	.265**	-.051	-.022	1	.584**	-.001
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.620	.830		.000	.996
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
SOL	Pearson Correlation	.708**	.581**	.605**	.584**	1	.319**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.002
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
Mean Purchase	Pearson Correlation	.241*	.270**	.361**	-.001	.319**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.018	.008	.000	.996	.002	
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Key: OL1: Never visited hotel; OL2: Have visited hotel; OL3: Reviews made me book; OL4: Member's experience

The results of the Pearson coefficient analysis on the influence of Opinion leaders (SOL) and Purchase indicates significant and positive relationship between the two variables [$r(96) =$

0.319, $p=0.002$]. Opinion leader reviews significantly correlate with the purchase of hotel products by other customers on TripAdvisor. The results imply that the more customers read opinion leaders' reviews, the higher their purchase intention.

4.4.4 ANOVA for Opinion Leader Reviews on Purchase

The next table to consider was the ANOVA table for opinion leader influence on purchase. This test was carried out to find out how well the regression equation fits the data (i.e. how well it predicts the dependent variable, purchase).

Table 4.5: ANOVA table for opinion leader influence on purchase

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.398	4	1.099	4.453	.002 ^b
	Residual	22.470	91	.247		
	Total	26.868	95			

a. Dependent Variable: Mean Purchase
b. Predictors: (Constant), OL1, OL2, OL3, OL4

Key: OL1: Never visited hotel; OL2: Have visited hotel; OL3: Reviews made me book; OL4: Member's experience

From Table 4.5 it was noted that the regression model predicted the dependent variable significantly well with $p=0.002$. The result indicates a statistical significance on of the regression model that was run. The low p value therefore means that the results can be generalized to the population from which the sample was drawn. Overall, the regression model statistically and significantly predicts the outcome variable (i.e. it is a good fit for the model).

Next, 2x2x2 between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to observe the effect of opinion leader reviews on purchase (Table 4.6).

Table 4.6: Opinion leader * Purchase

Estimates				
Dependent Variable: Purchase				
Opinion leader	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Negative	3.102	.111	2.884	3.320
Positive	3.773	.110	3.556	3.990

Source: Research data (2018)

Results revealed an effect for opinion leader reviews, $F(1,328) = 18.415$, $p < .001$, $\alpha = .05$ (see table 4.9). There was a statistically significant difference in terms of purchase when the opinion leader review was positive ($M=3.773$) and when the review was negative ($M=3.102$). This suggests that the valence (positivity or negativity) of the review written by opinion leaders has an influence on other customers' purchase intention.

Opinion leaders have been found to influence opinions, beliefs, attitudes as well as behaviours of others within their circles, including purchasing patterns (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). Sparks & Browning (2011) also found that valence of reviews greatly affected booking intention, and is directly influenced by the framing of the reviews on the page. According to this finding, if review valence is negative, a positive frame can increase booking intentions of the customers. Even though there is scant research on the direct influence of opinion leaders' positive reviews on purchasing, studies like Huffaker (2010), and Ruvio and Shoham (2008) assert on the reputation of opinion leader reviews. Their reviews are considered to be more reliable than those from other members, with opinions more likely to be accepted thereby leading to higher adoption intention.

4.4.5 Linear Regression Analysis

Linear regression analysis was performed to test the level of significance and determine the influence of opinion leaders on purchasing habits of other customers. The results of the model summary are presented in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7: Model Summary opinion leader influence and purchase

Model Summary ^b										
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.405 ^a	.164	.127	.49691	.164	4.453	4	91	.002	2.199

a. Predictors: (Constant), Influenced by travel experience a member has, Their reviews made me book a specific hotel, Positive reviews drive me to visit, Positive reviews about a hotel I have visited before would make me visit again

b. Dependent Variable: Mean Purchase

The R value which denotes simple correlation was found to be 0.405 which indicated a moderate degree of correlation between purchase and the group of independent variables. The adjusted R^2 value, which indicates how much of the total variation in the dependent variable is explained by the independent variables, was 0.127. Therefore, 12.7% of the variation in purchase intentions can be explained as influence from opinion leader reviews. The next table to consider in linear regression analysis was the coefficients table. The predictors of Opinion Leadership were included in the model. The regression analysis coefficients results are provided in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8: Linear Regression analysis of opinion leader influence on purchase

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		β	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.529	.327		7.737	.000
	OL1	.081	.056	.151	1.443	.153
	OL2	.069	.063	.117	1.085	.281
	OL3	.174	.073	.265	2.398	.019
	OL4	-.012	.044	-.029	-.286	.776

a. Dependent Variable: Mean Purchase

Key: OL1: Never visited hotel; OL2: Have visited hotel; OL3: Reviews made me book; OL4: Member's experience

Only OL3, $p=0.019$, at 95% confidence level had a statistically significant value with purchase. The other attributes OL1, $p=0.153$; OL2, $p=0.281$; and OL4, $p=0.776$ did not have a statistically significant relationship with purchase. Therefore, only 'Reviews (from opinion leaders) made me book' had a statistically significant effect on purchasing.

The model outcome was determined as follows:

$$\text{Purchase} = f\beta + \text{Opinion leader} (\beta_1 \text{OL}_1 + \beta_2 \text{OL}_2 + \beta_3 \text{OL}_3 + \beta_4 \text{OL}_4)$$

Therefore

$$\text{Purchase} = 2.529 + \text{Opinion leader} (0.265 \text{OL}_3)$$

Since all but one of the beta values were positive, there was a relationship between the predictors of Opinion Leadership and the outcome, Purchase. However, of the four, only one had a statistically significant positive relationship (Reviews from OLs made me book $\beta=0.174$). The other three predictors all had p values which were >0.05 indicating that they

did not contribute statistically to the model. Therefore, to a larger extent, a unit increase in opinion leader reviews will not lead to an increase in purchasing by other customers.

The standardized β values of the predictor of opinion leadership (reviews from opinion leaders made me book) is $\beta=0.265$. The extent to which the coefficients differed significantly from zero using an alpha of 0.05 was indicated by the standard error. The coefficient of opinion leadership was significantly different from zero in the coefficient of 'Reviews from opinion leaders made me book' of $\beta=0.265$ was significantly different from zero because the p-values was less than that of $p=0.05$.

These findings support research that underscores the position and relative influence of opinion leaders within communities. Opinion leaders influence their circle of friends, relatives and acquaintances in various ways including in their purchasing patterns (Bassey *et al.*, 2015; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). Other consumers tend to treat product information from an opinion leader as more reliable than any information retrieved from commercial sources (Wang & Chen, 2012) as their opinions are "highly respected and utilized by consumers when making decisions" (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Wang & Chen, 2012).

However, these findings contradict other scholars' who propose that expertise is an influencing factor to trusting and utilizing online sources. Most researchers agree that expertise or authoritativeness is a key component in influencing customers towards attitude and behavioural change (Ayeh, 2012; O'Keefe, 2002). These contradictions in findings may be as a result of channels under study, methodologies applied or the product under study.

Opinion leaders exert some influence to other tourists' choice of hotel products. They are bound to be more influential when they post positive comments than when they have negative comments. This is a stark contradiction with other reviewers on review platforms who are

usually more impactful with negative comments. This means that opinion leaders are held to a much higher pedestal as they are trusted on account of their expertise. Therefore their positive comments are not misconstrued as baseless, untrue or as marketing gimmicks. Likewise, this shows that other customers believe in the good intentions of opinion leaders, and trust that they (opinion leaders) know what they are writing about.

There was, however, no difference in opinion leader influence the first and subsequent times a customer purchases/visits a hotel. This may suggest that opinion leader influence is equal at all times, and in all instances of a visit. Customers therefore trust opinion leader reviews whether they have been to a hotel before or even when they have never visited. This underscores the importance to businesses of ensuring that customers, especially opinion leaders post reviews about properties. These continuous and updated messages influence new and repeat customers about the property in regard to what to eat, where to sleep, whether any new renovations have been made to the property, whether the food and/or drinks menu has changed etc. This drives customers who have visited before to desire to return again. Uploading of recent pictures would also likely influence returning customers.

An interesting finding from this study is that customers said they do not view members' profile when reading reviews; therefore they do not confirm that knowing that someone is an opinion leader makes them more influential. Although this is in contradiction to earlier admissions of opinion leader influence, this may stem from several factors. First, customers may only view profiles of other members when it is time to make a difficult decision, or a decision between two or more alternatives which are very similar. They may then read reviews more intently and decide to let opinion leaders' reviews carry more weight as they are more knowledgeable than other travellers. Secondly, customers may only be influenced by numbers i.e. go by the

valence of the majority of reviewers. Such that, if the overwhelming population reviews a hotel positively, they would be more inclined to visit, despite what other contradicting reviewers, opinion leader or otherwise, say. Further, some age groups may be more susceptible to interpersonal influence in online settings from ‘recognized’ opinion leaders. Younger customers who participate vibrantly in online communities may be more easily influenced than older customers.

Management of hotels and website creators should therefore find an easier way of ensuring an opinion leaders’ profile is more visible and easy to glean off information at a glance. This can be done either by highlighting names, providing visible trophies or even displaying opinion leaders’ profile pictures and supporting information in different colours from the rest of the population. If customers are able to quickly notice that a particular review comes from an opinion leader, their influence will be felt much more.

4.4.6 H₀₁: There is no Significant Relationship between Opinion Leader Reviews and Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

The first hypothesis related to objective one proposed that there is no significant relationship between opinion leader reviews and purchase of hotel products in Kenya.

Table 4.9: Hypothesis Testing

Dependent Variable: Purchase						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	88.474 ^a	7	12.639	6.330	.000	.121
Intercept	3862.295	1	3862.295	1934.316	.000	.858
Opinion leader	36.770	1	36.770	18.415	.000	.054

The 2x2x2 between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect for opinion leader reviews, $F(1,328) = 18.415$, $MSe = 1.997$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .054$, $\alpha = .05$. Since the p value is lower than α , H_{01} was rejected. This means that there is sufficient evidence that opinion leader reviews influence purchasing intentions of customers. The simple effect ($\eta^2_p = .054$) in the model indicates a moderate effect of opinion leader reviews on the purchasing intention of customers. This means that 54% of the purchasing intention of customers can be attributed to opinion leader reviews.

4.5 Objective 2: To Determine the Role of Non-Opinion Leaders on the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

4.5.1 Overview of Objective Two

The second objective sought to examine the influence of non-opinion leaders' reviews on the purchase of hotel products. Two methods: an experiment and a sociometric analysis were used to achieve this objective. These two methods were used to achieve triangulation of data. Both sets of participants responded to questionnaires and the quantitative data collected was analysed on SPSS version 20. A total of 425 questionnaires were used for analysis.

4.5.2 Frequencies

The number of reviews read, valence of reviews and members' profiles all seem to influence customer's purchase of hotel products. Figures 4.6 to 4.8 show the level of influence non-opinion leaders have online.

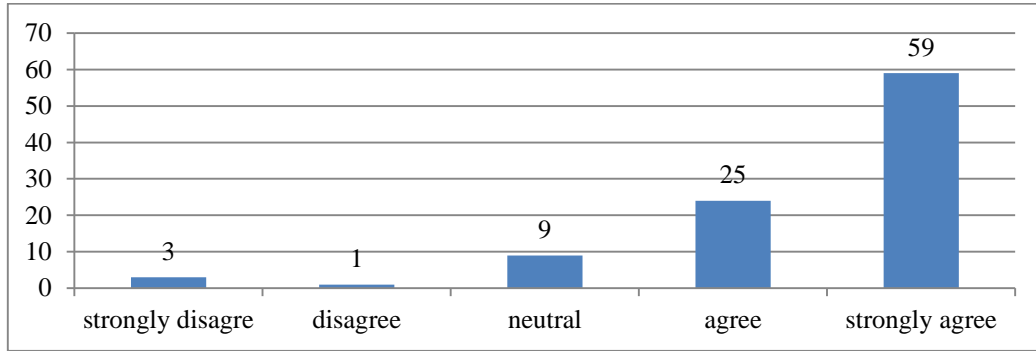


Figure 4.6: Consider reviews from many members before I decide to book a hotel

Source: Research data (2018)

Respondents (86.5%) indicated that when they read reviews on the TripAdvisor page, they consider reviews from many members before deciding to book a hotel.

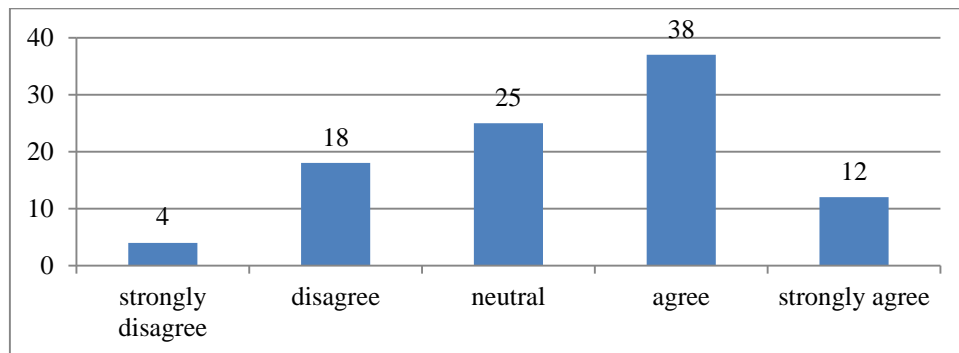


Figure 4.7: Always look at the member's profile

Source: Research data (2018)

Likewise, 51% of respondents (strongly agree= 12.5% agree = 38.5%) indicated that when they read reviews on the TripAdvisor page, they always look at the member's profile.

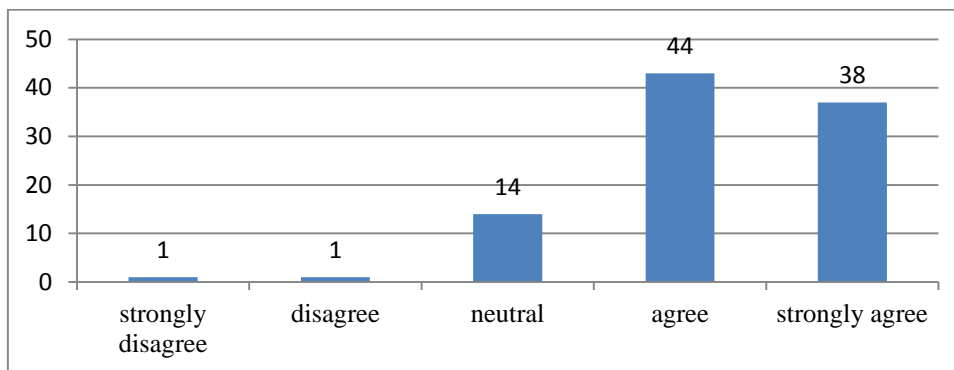


Figure 4.8: Valence of majority of the reviews I read

Source: Research data (2018)

Similarly, 83.3% of respondents indicated that when deciding to book a hotel for the first time, if majority of the reviews read are positive, they will book the hotel. The individual influence of non-opinion leaders in this case is therefore lessened as customers consider many reviews before reading. This may point to a cheerleader effect, where customers are more likely to consider reviews in totality if there is no clear distinction on criteria to apply in trusting particular reviewers.

4.5.3 Pearson Correlation Coefficient Analysis between Non-Opinion Leaders and Purchase of Hotel Products

The Pearson correlation coefficient analysis between other non-opinion leaders and purchase of hotel products are presented in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10: Pearson correlation of non-opinion leaders and purchase

		NOL1	NOL2	NOL3	Mean. Purchase
NOL1	Pearson Correlation	1	.171	.369**	-.071
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.050	.000	.248
	N	96	96	96	96
NOL2	Pearson Correlation	.171	1	.179	.172
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.050		.042	.049
	N	96	96	96	96
NOL3	Pearson Correlation	.369**	.173	1	.193
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.042		.031
	N	96	96	96	96
SNOL	Pearson Correlation	.725**	.693**	.681**	.137*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.095
	N	96	96	96	96
Mean Purchase	Pearson Correlation	-.071	.172	.193	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.248	.049	.031	
	N	96	96	96	96

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Key: NOL1: Consider reviews from many members; NOL2: Members profile; NOL3: Majority of positive reviews make me book

The results of the Pearson correlation coefficient analysis on the influence of non-opinion leaders (SNOL) and purchase of hotel products indicate a significant and positive relationship between the two variables [$r(94) = 0.137, p=0.095$]. Non-opinion leader reviews significantly correlate with the purchase of hotel products by customers on TripAdvisor. The results imply that the more customers read interact with other webpage features, the higher their intention to purchase hotel products.

4.5.4 ANOVA for Non-Opinion Leader Reviews

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to investigate how well the regression equation fits the data (i.e. how well it predicts the dependent variable).

Table 4.11: ANOVA table for non-opinion leader reviews influence on purchase

ANOVA ^a						
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	3.841	6	.640	2.442	.031 ^b
	Residual	22.811	87	.262		
	Total	26.652	93			

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase

b. Predictors: (Constant), NOL1, NOL2, NOL3,

Key: NOL1: Consider reviews from many members; NOL2: Members profile; NOL3: Majority of positive reviews make me book

From Table 4.11 it was noted that the regression model predicted the dependent variable significantly well with $p=0.031$. The result indicates a statistical significance on of the regression model that was run. The low p value therefore means that the results can be generalized to the population from which the sample was drawn. Overall, the regression model statistically and significantly predicts the outcome variable (i.e. it is a good fit for the model).

Next, a one-way 2x2x2 between-subjects ANOVA was performed to test the effect of non-opinion leader reviews on the purchase.

Table 4.12: Non-opinion leader *Purchase

Estimates				
Dependent Variable: Purchase				
Non-opinion leader	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Negative	3.174	.110	2.958	3.390
Positive	3.701	.111	3.482	3.919

Source: Research data (2018)

Results revealed an effect for non-opinion leader reviews, $F(1,329) = 11.362, p = .001, \alpha = .05$ (see table 4.15). There was a statistically significant difference in terms of purchase when the non-opinion leader review was positive ($M=3.701$) and when the review was negative ($M=3.174$). This indicates that valence of the review written by non-opinion leaders shows an influence on other customers' purchase intention. Customers are more influenced when non-opinion leaders write positive reviews about it than when the reviews are negative. These results are in contradiction to many other researchers' who emphasize on the fact that credibility, experience and expertise of the source influences customers' purchase intentions. They suggest that trust in information is strongly correlated with the experience a traveller has. Past research suggests that purchase intention is higher for opinion leaders than non-opinion leaders (Gu & Ye, 2014; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Huffaker, 2010; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007).

This contradiction may lead to the assumption that customers do not pay attention to profiles information of reviewers on TripAdvisor and do not filter information received respective of who is supplying the information. It also indicates that customers rely on the overall valence of reviews on the page rather than rely on individual reviews. This suggests that before booking, customers may consider a group of reviews as more influential than relying only on one review from particular members. This alludes to the cheerleader effect, indicating that customers are more attentive on overall valence than on individual customer opinions.

4.5.5 Linear Regression Analysis between Non-opinion Leader Reviews and Purchase

Linear regression analysis was performed to test the level of significance and determine the influence of non-opinion leaders reviews on purchase. The results of the model summary are presented in Table 4.13.

Table 4.13: Non-opinion leaders reviews and purchase model summary

Model Summary^b										
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin - Watson
					R Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.380 ^a	.144	.085	.51205	.144	2.442	6	87	.031	2.157

a. Predictors: (Constant), NOL1, NOL2, NOL3

b. Dependent Variable: Purchase

Key: NOL1: Consider reviews from many members; NOL2: Members profile; NOL3: Majority of positive reviews make me book

The R value which denotes simple correlation was found to be 0.38 which indicated a moderate degree of correlation between booking intention and the group of independent variables. The adjusted R^2 value, which indicates how much of the total variation in the dependent variable is explained by the independent variables, was 0.085. Therefore, 8.5% of the variation in purchasing can be explained as influence from other webpage characteristics.

The next table to consider in linear regression analysis was the coefficients table. The predictors of non-opinion leader reviews were included in the model. The regression analysis coefficients results are provided in Table 4.14.

Table 4.14: Linear regression analysis between non-opinion Leader reviews and purchase

Coefficients ^a						
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	2.879	.377		7.640	.000
	NOL1	-.105	.061	-.186	-1.709	.091
	NOL2	.050	.057	.099	.872	.386
	NOL3	.172	.073	.257	2.367	.020
a. Dependent Variable: Purchase						

Key: NOL1: Consider reviews from many members; NOL2: Members profile; NOL3: Majority of positive reviews make me book

Only NOL3, $p=0.020$ at 95% confidence level had a statistically significant value with purchasing. The other attributes NOL1, $p=0.091$ and NOL2, $p=0.386$ did not have a statistically significant relationship with purchase. This means that of all the variables, only 'Majority of positive reviews make me book' had a statistically significant value with purchasing.

The model outcome was determined as follows:

$$\text{Purchase} = f\beta + \text{Non-opinion Leader } (\beta_1\text{NOL}_1 + \beta_2\text{NOL}_2 + \beta_3\text{NOL}_3)$$

Therefore

$$\text{Purchase} = 2.879 + \text{Non-opinion Leader } (0.172 \text{ NOL}_3)$$

Since all but one of the beta values were positive, it can be concluded that there was a relationship between the predictors of non-opinion leader reviews and the outcome, Purchase. However, of the three predictors, only one had a statistically significant positive relationship (Majority of positive reviews make me book $\beta=0.172$) with the outcome. The other predictors

all had p values which were >0.05 indicating that they did not contribute statistically to the model. Therefore, to a larger extent, a unit increase in webpage characteristics will not lead to an increase in purchase by other customers.

The standardized β value of the predictor of Non-opinion leader reviews was: Majority of positive reviews makes me book $b=0.257$. The extent to which the coefficients differed significantly from zero using an alpha of 0.05 was indicated by the standard error. The coefficient of non-opinion leader reviews was significantly different from zero as follows:

The coefficient of Majority of positive reviews make me book $\beta=0.257$ was significantly different from zero because the p-values was less than that of $p=0.05$. These findings confirm that many positive reviews will make customers choose to purchase/book a hotel. This means that the volume of reviews read will influence whether customers choose to purchase/book a hotel or not. Past research has suggested that many positive reviews drive up hotel performance (Phillips, Barnes, Zigan, & Schegg, 2016) influence box office revenue (Dellarocas, 2006) and affect new product sales (Cui, Lui & Guo, 2012). However, (Chintagunta, Gopinath & Venkataraman, 2010) in their study of box office revenues, disagree and report that volume of ratings do not explain revenue on opening-day.

Customers are more likely to be influenced by non-opinion leader reviews when the reviews posted are positive than when they are negative. This might be because they are trusted less due to their limited expertise in travel. Their effect may therefore not be felt, especially singly. It is therefore likely that customers will tend to trust reviews from non-opinion leader sources when they occur in large numbers. As they form a larger part of the travel population, non-opinion leaders and in general customers, should be strongly encouraged to share their experiences in review platforms, especially if they are positive. The provision of ample

positive information may have a strong influence on other customers. Information supplied in plenty across various platforms can aid other customers in forming a picture of the hotel and its products. Likewise, additional information may be availed on other platforms such as micro blogs and websites to augment information received from review sites.

It is interesting to note that customers indicated that they do not look at members' profile details when making purchasing decisions. This further cements the cheerleader effect that when customers are faced with a lot of items, they form impressions on account of the whole set, without taking into account individual characteristics of members of the set. Therefore, customers will look at the overall review valence, rather than concentrating on specific community members' reviews. This presents implications on design and interactivity of review websites. Websites can be designed to maximize on highlighting a number of reviews from different members, and showing the authenticity of these reviews. As much as possible, the sites should be designed in a way that focuses on communicating product attributes as soon and as frequently as possible.

4.5.6 H₀₂: There is no Significant Relationship between Non-Opinion Leaders'

Reviews and Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

The second hypothesis of the study proposed that there is no significant relationship between non-opinion leaders' reviews and purchase of hotel products in Kenya.

Table 4.15: Results on hypothesis testing significant relationship between non-opinion leaders' reviews and purchase of hotel products

Dependent Variable: Purchase							
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	
Corrected Model	88.474 ^a	7	12.639	6.330	.000	.121	
Intercept	3862.295	1	3862.295	1934.316	.000	.858	
Non-opinion leader	22.687	1	22.687	11.362	.001	.034	

Source: Research data (2018)

The 2X2X2 between-subjects ANOVA revealed a main effect for non-opinion leader reviews, $F(1,328) = 11.362$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .034$. Since the p value is lower than α , H_{02} was rejected. This means that there is sufficient evidence that non-opinion leader reviews influence purchasing intentions of customers. The measure of the simple effect ($\eta^2_p = .034$) indicates a small-moderate effect of non-opinion leader reviews on the purchasing intention of customers. This means that 34% of the purchasing intention of customers can be attributed to non-opinion leader reviews.

4.6 Objective 3: To Investigate the Moderating Effect of Management Responses to Opinion Leader and Non-Opinion Leader Reviews On the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

4.6.1 Overview of Objective Three

The third objective sought to investigate the moderating effect of management responses to opinion leader and non-opinion leader reviews on the purchase of hotel products. Two methods; an experiment and a sociometric analysis were used to achieve this objective. These two methods were used to achieve triangulation of data. Both sets of participants responded

to questionnaires and the quantitative data collected was analysed on SPSS v20. A total of 425 questionnaires were used for analysis.

4.6.2 Frequencies

Management responses to reviews posted online have an influence on customer purchase of products in Kenya. Figures 4.9 to 4.11 show the influence management responses have to reviews posted.

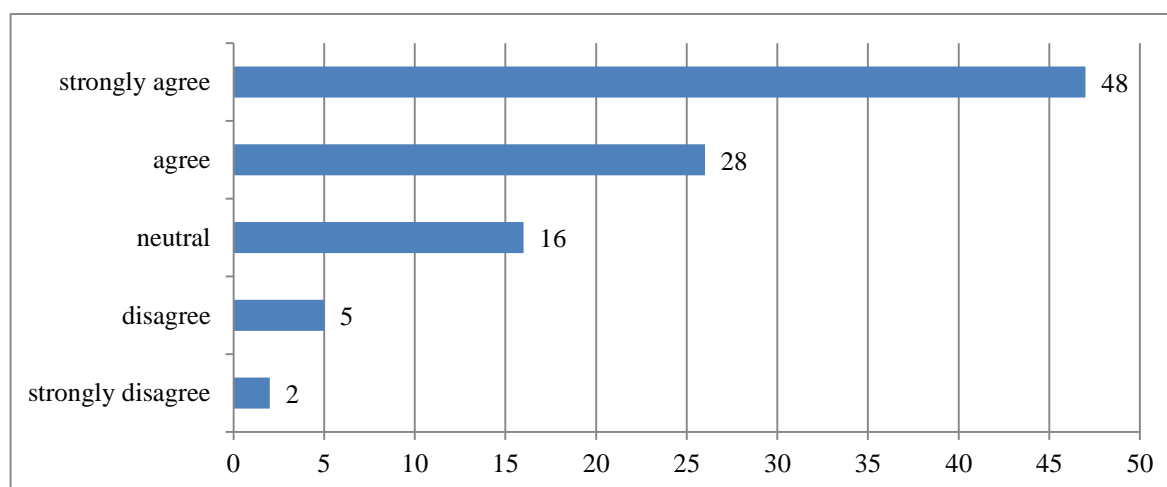


Figure 4.9: Managers' responses to customer reviews posted online

Source: Research data (2018)

How a manager responds to customer reviews influences customers' decision to book a hotel. Respondents overwhelmingly (76.1%) indicated that the response from a manager aids in purchase decision making. Therefore, managers are encouraged, in order to aid in brand building efforts, to respond to customer complaints online as it not only affects the customer writing the review, but also others who read the review.

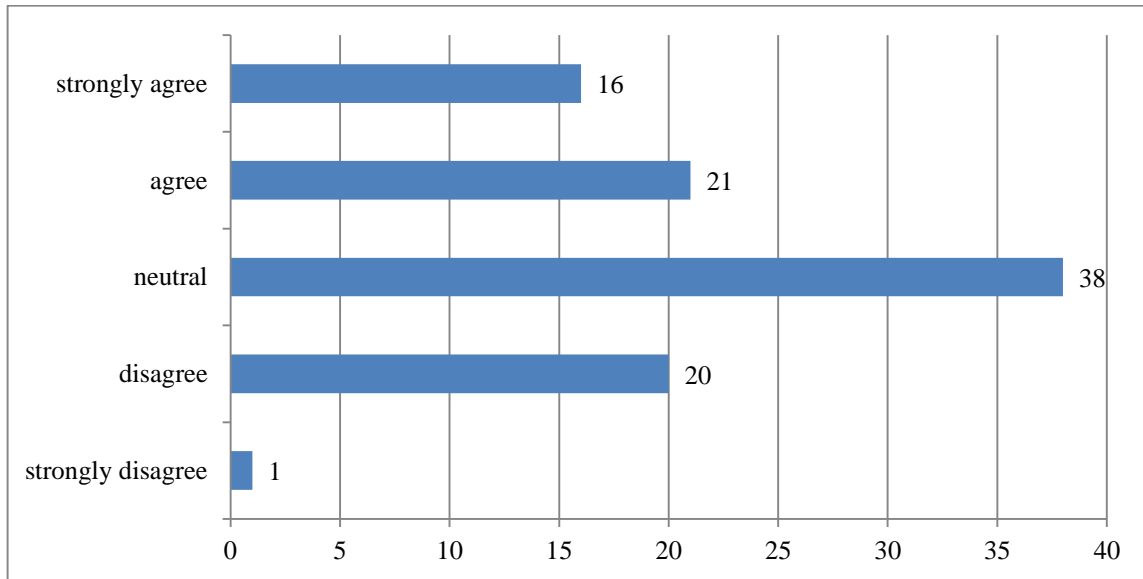


Figure 4.10: Manager's reply to a positive comment

Source: Research data (2018)

Respondents were non-committal (neutral=39.6%) about a manager's reply to a positive review influencing their purchase. They both agreed (21.9%) and disagreed (20.8%) on managers' reply to a positive comment.

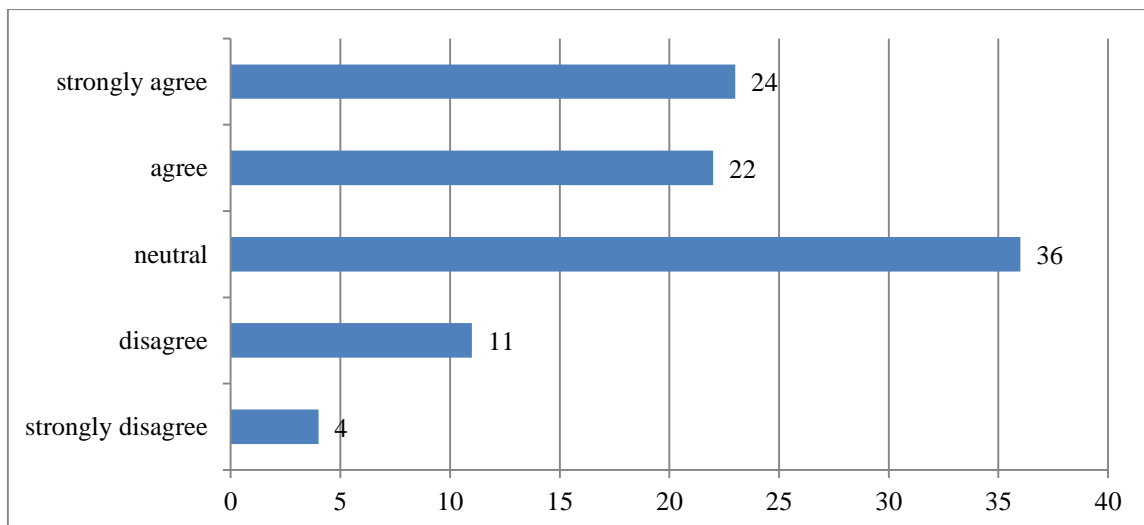


Figure 4.11: Manager's lack of reply to a negative comment

Source: Research data (2018)

However, 46.9% agreed that lack of reply will influence whether they book the hotel (agree = 22.9%, strongly agree = 24%). It is therefore imperative that when engaging customers online, it is essential to engage them especially in the event that a service failure has occurred. Addressing negative comments increases the likelihood of other customers' purchase.

4.6.3 Interactive Effect of Management Response to Opinion Leader Reviews on Purchase of Hotel Products

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the interactive effect of management response to opinion leader reviews on purchase of hotel products. Table 4.16 gives means for the interactive effect of reviews from both opinion leaders and management responses on the dependent variable, Purchase.

Table 4.16: Interactive effect of management response to opinion leader reviews on purchase of hotel products

Opinion leader * Management response					
Dependent Variable: Purchase					
Opinion leader	Management response	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Negative	Absent	3.180	.153	2.880	3.480
	Present	3.024	.160	2.708	3.340
Positive	Absent	3.919	.151	3.623	4.216
	Present	3.626	.161	3.309	3.943

Source: Research data (2018)

There was no significant interactive effect for opinion leader reviews and management responses on purchase $F(1,328) = .192, p = .661$. This means that there is insufficient evidence that when considered together, reviews from opinion leaders and the management response to these reviews influence booking and purchasing intentions of customers.

However it is noteworthy that means were lower when management responded to opinion leaders' reviews ($M=3.626$; $M=3.024$) than when they do not respond ($M=3.919$; $M=3.180$). These results imply that opinion leader reviews are trusted more than management information. When customers are faced with information from both opinion leaders and management, customers are more likely to trust information from opinion leaders. These findings are interesting as on one hand, they support research that underscores the position and relative influence of opinion leaders within communities. Opinion leaders are 'models' for opinions within their social group. They influence their circle of friends, relatives and acquaintances in various ways including in their purchasing patterns (Bassey *et al.*, 2015; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). Other consumers tend to treat product information from an opinion leader as more reliable than any information retrieved from commercial sources (Wang & Chen, 2012) as their opinions are "highly respected and utilized by consumers when making decisions" (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Wang & Chen, 2012).

Contrariwise, these findings contrast previous findings on the importance of participation of management on online platforms. Researchers suggest that the presence of a response increases the perceived value of guest feedback, impacted customers perception of the hotel image and intent to stay and intent to return (Avant, 2013; Litvin et al., 2008; Hoffman & Chung, 1999). Snubbing reviews may make customers feel ignored, which may make the customer feel like the hotel doesn't care, thereby leading to dissatisfaction. (Avant, 2013). When customers realize that their opinions matter, they end up having a positive image on a hotel's service quality (Sigala, 2006). Figure 4.12 displays marginal means retrieved from the one-way ANOVA for the interactive effect of opinion leader reviews and management responses on purchase.

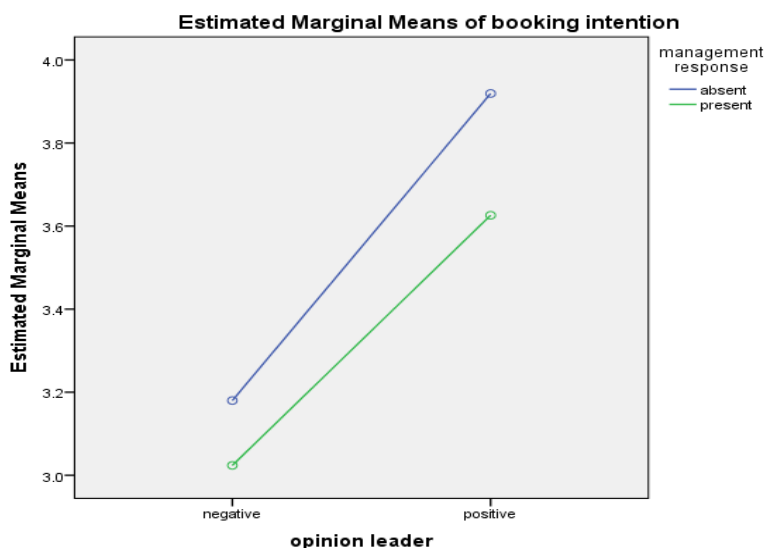


Figure 4.12: Marginal means for interactive effect of opinion leader and management response on purchase

Source: Research data (2018)

The estimated marginal means comparing the effect of opinion leaders and management responses show that purchase intention increases in all instances that have a positive review. However, purchase intention is higher in situations where there is no management response to reviews by opinion leaders. Findings indicate that opinion leaders' effect is lowered when management responds to their reviews. In fact, marginal means are lowest when management responds to a negative opinion leader review. However, means are highest when reviews are positive but management does not respond.

Management responses do little to influence customers' purchase intention, and in some cases, actually lower customers' attitudes toward the hotel when considered together with opinion leader reviews. A response from management to an opinion leaders' review is appreciated when opinion leaders have positive reviews. It continues the valence of the review and encourages other customers during purchase of hotel products. In a sense, it would aid in

adding fuel to the fire in building a positive brand. Management is therefore encouraged to actively engage in social media interactions to boost public perception.

Contrariwise, when opinion leaders' reviews are negative, it is advisable to management not to respond to the review. Responding to reviews at this time does not increase customers purchase intentions. It is advisable to management to refrain from responding and look for alternative ways to increase purchase intention of other customers. This may be because customers tend to be mistrustful of information from organizational sources as they are viewed to be more of marketing strategies than the 'truth'. However, it is not advisable for management to completely ignore negative reviews. In this internet age, negative word of mouth spreads fast and wide and can badly damage a brand within a very short span of time. This is where it may be advisable to use other marketing approaches to rebuild a brand that may suffer under opinion leader reviews. Communication between management and customers on social networks should be encouraged as social networks present a good 'place/location' for direct interaction. These platforms are ideal as they would help in direct interactions between management and customers.

4.6.4 Interactive Effect of Management Response and Non-Opinion Leader Reviews

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the interactive effect of non-opinion non-opinion leader reviews and management response to these reviews on the dependent variable, purchase. There was a significant interactive effect for non-opinion leader reviews and management responses on purchase intention of customers $F(1,328) = 5.961, p = .015$.

There was a statistically significant difference in terms of purchase when non-opinion leader review was positive, with management response present ($M=3.779$) and with management response absent ($M=3.622$). There was a significant difference on purchase intention also

when non-opinion leader reviews were negative in the absence of management responses ($M=3.477$) and when present ($M=2.871$). Table 4.17 gives means for the interactive effect of reviews from both non-opinion leaders and management responses on the dependent variable, Purchase.

Table 4.17: Interactive effect of non-opinion leader reviews and management response on purchase

Non-opinion leader * Management response					
Dependent Variable: Purchase					
Non-opinion leader	Management response	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Negative	Absent	3.477	.152	3.179	3.775
	Present	2.871	.159	2.557	3.184
Positive	Absent	3.622	.152	3.324	3.921
	Present	3.779	.162	3.460	4.098

Source: Research data (2018)

These results suggest that unlike opinion leaders, where customers automatically trust information received and shun management information, they do not do the same with non-opinion leaders. Trust in a non-opinion leader's review is dependent on the valence of the review. When a non-opinion leader's review is positive, customers are more likely to purchase products if there is backup information from the management on the particular review.

Previous research supports the idea that management should respond to positive reviews as it directly influences customers' relationship with the company. The engagement with customers online makes them feel valued and this leads to brand loyalty (Marlo, Eisingerich & Auh, 2014; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). Researchers suggest that the presence of a response increases the perceived value of guest feedback, impacted customers perception of the hotel image and intent to stay and intent to return (Avant, 2013; Litvin *et al.*, 2008).

In terms of negative reviews, literature reviewed recommends management response to it as it provides a chance for service recovery and positively influences customer attitudes (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012). Negative reviews may end up generating additional negative eWOM which may damage the hotel's image and reputation (Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). Snubbing reviews may make customers feel ignored, which may make the customer feel like the hotel doesn't care, thereby leading to dissatisfaction. (Avant, 2013). Hotels are therefore encouraged to employ crisis management processes in these instances in an attempt to rectify a service failure (Lee & Cranage, 2014).

Figure 4.13 presents the marginal means for the one-way ANOVA for the interactive effect of reviews from both non-opinion leaders and management responses on the dependent variable, Purchase.

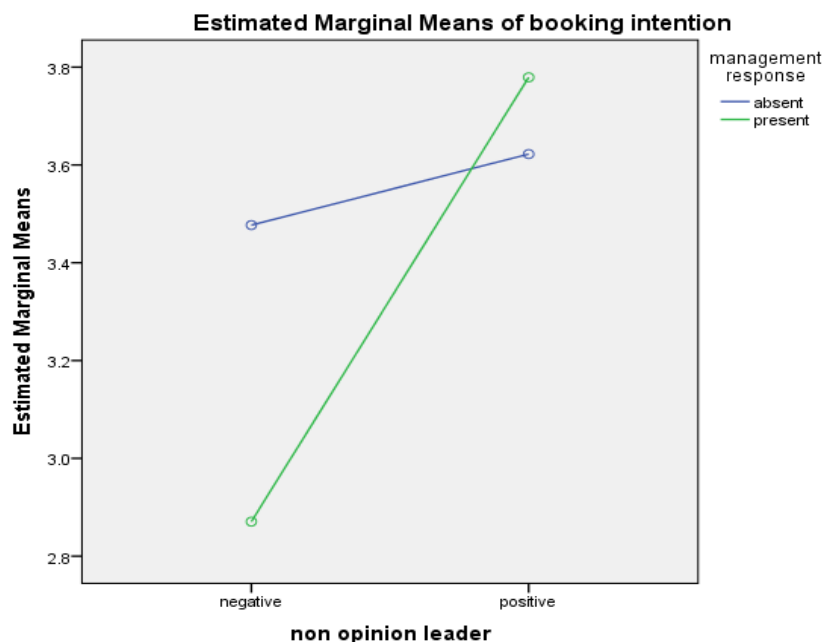


Figure 4.13: Marginal means for interactive effect of non-opinion leader and management response

Source: Research data (2018)

The estimated marginal means comparing non-opinion leaders and management responses show that purchase increases when there is a management response to a positive comment compared to when a response isn't given. Marginal means are lowest when management responds to a negative comment. There is a small difference in purchasing when management does not respond to either a positive or negative review.

Engaging customers online and crafting appropriate service recovery responses can lead to an increased level of customer satisfaction and positive online image. When customers realize that their opinions matter, they end up having a positive image on a hotel's service quality (Sigala, 2006). Van-Vaerenbergh, *et al.* (2012) also found that when managers respond specifically to complaints and show the intention on implementing changes based on complaints, a positive image of the hotel is re-established. In contrast, ignoring customer reviews, especially negative ones reinforces negative reactions, thereby increasing customer dissatisfaction, and declining the hotel's reputation (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Avant (2013) studied the impact of management responses and found that the perceived image of a hotel increases if managers (1) take time to give any kind of response to negative reviews online and (2) take time to address an issue and attempt service recovery. Dickinger & Lalicic (2017) assessed management responses to negative reviews and recommended practitioners develop skills and strategies to design appropriate responses in social media spaces.

Management response in non-opinion leaders has an opposite effect from opinion leaders. Customers seem to place more trust in management responses when the valence of the review is positive. Customers seem to expect a confirmation of the account that the reviewer presents from another outside source before believing it. In this case, the outside source is an authoritative one. Therefore, management response aids in cementing the picture that non-

opinion leaders are trying to create. This is a good opportunity for managers to ensure that they reinforce the image created by non-opinion leaders by providing responses in relation to posted reviews. Ultimately, this will lead to strengthened brand presence and build customer loyalty. Responses would not only encourage other customers to purchase hotel products, it also aids to build the credibility of non-opinion leaders to the extent that they can be trusted as reliable sources of information.

Ignoring customers may hurt a brand therefore it is prudent that management considers other methods of addressing negative reviews as they may go viral. Aside from considering the use of other marketing and PR strategies, management can find other ways of interacting with customers that can build trust.

4.6.5 H₀₃ Management Responses Have no Significant Moderating Effect on the Relationship Between Opinion and Non-Opinion Leader Reviews and the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

Hypothesis 3 was split into two: H_{03a} posited that management responses have no significant moderating effect on the relationship between opinion leader reviews and the purchase of hotel products in Kenya; while H_{03b} suggested that management responses have no significant moderating effect on the relationship between non-opinion leader reviews and the purchase of hotel products in Kenya.

Table 4.18: Hypothesis testing

Dependent Variable: Purchase						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	88.474 ^a	7	12.639	6.330	.000	.121
Intercept	3862.295	1	3862.295	1934.316	.000	.858
Opinion leader * Mgt. response	.384	1	.384	.192	.661	.001
Non-opinion leader * Mgt. response	11.903	1	11.903	5.961	.015	.018
Error	640.948	328	1.997			
Total	4645.000	329				
Corrected Total	729.422	328				

a. R Squared = .121 (Adjusted R Squared = .102)

Source: Research data (2018)

The ANOVA did not reveal a significant interaction effect for opinion leader reviews and management response, $F(1,328) = .192$, $p = .661$, $\eta^2_p = .001$. Since the p value is higher than α , H_{03a} was accepted. This means that there is insufficient evidence that when considered together, reviews from opinion leaders and the management response to these reviews influence purchasing intentions of customers. The ANOVA also revealed an interaction effect for non-opinion leader reviews and management response to their reviews, $F(1,328) = 5.961$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2_p = .018$. Since the p value is lower than α , H_{03b} was rejected. This means that there is sufficient evidence that reviews from non-opinion leaders and management response to these reviews influence purchasing intentions of customers. The measure of the interaction effect ($\eta^2_p = .018$) indicates a small effect of non-opinion leaders and management response to these reviews on the purchasing intention of customers. This means that 18% of the purchasing intention of customers can be attributed to the interaction effect of non-opinion leaders and management response to these reviews.

4.7 Objective 4: To Determine Who Opinion Leaders on an Online Forum Are

The fourth objective sought to determine who the opinion leaders in an online forum are. Two instruments, observation forms and questionnaires, were used to achieve this. To achieve data triangulation and adequately address this objective, two methods were used: observations and sociometric. From the observation forms, all level 6 members were selected bringing the number to 482. From the sociometric, only members who were mentioned more than 5 times were selected: they were 52. A total of 534 members were therefore used for analysis. Ranking was done after applying the ‘Seven Degree Index’ to retrieve the top 10% performing opinion leaders.

Table 4.19: Opinion leaders retrieved from observation and sociometric analysis

Instrument	Number	Participants selected
Observation form	482	Census (All level 6 members)
Questionnaire	52	Participants mentioned more than 5 times
Total	534	

Source: Research data (2018)

Information from their profiles was then retrieved and a ‘Seven Degree Index’ attribute matrix created for each member. Table 4.20 shows 10 randomly selected members and the initial data of their attributes.

Table 4.20: Initial data of ‘Seven degree index’ attributes from TripAdvisor

N	Name	The Connected Degree, Coi	The Attention Degree, Ati	The Activity Degree, Aci	The Posts Degree, Ti	New Product Purchase, NPi	New Product Ownership, NOi	New Product Knowledge, NKi
1	Diana_Man galagiu 35-49 / F France	Helpful votes 87 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 209 Forum posts 1 Photos 15	Readership(total) 160,000	Total points 21,162 Months 48	Reviews 209 Forum posts 1 Photos 15 Ratings 1	Explorer reviews 15	Passports 92	Expert point 240 Expert level 80
		Coi =312	Ati=160,000	Aci = 440.875	Ti = 14.067	NPi= 15	NOi = 92	NKi = 3
2	Puchka 50-64 F India	Helpful votes 344 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 842 Forum posts 2 Photos 107	Readership(total) 485,000	Total points 89,519 Months 128	Reviews 842 Forum posts 2 Photos 107 Ratings 95	Explorer reviews 92	Passports 177	Expert points 891 Expert level 297
		Coi =1295	Ati=485,000	Aci = 699.367	Ti = 8.776	NPi= 92	NOi = 177	NKi = 3
3	Alexzhdanov 25-34 / M Russia	Helpful votes 709 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 413 Forum posts 0 Photos 71	Readership(total) 460,000	Total points 44,224 Months 89	Reviews 413 Forum posts 0 Photos 71 Ratings 17	Explorer reviews 61	Passports 232	Expert points 627 Expert level 209
		Coi =1193	Ati=460,000	Aci = 496.89	Ti = 6.056	NPi= 61	NOi = 232	NKi = 3
4		Helpful votes 43 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 153 Forum posts 0 Photos 93	Readership(total) 100,000	Total points 18,248 Months 58	Reviews 153 Forum posts 0 Photos 93 Ratings 13	Explorer reviews 15	Passports 73	Expert points 150 Expert level 50

Table 4.20, continued

		Coi =289	Ati=100,000	Aci = 314.62	Ti = 1.785	NPi=15	NOi = 73	Mohammed A 25-34 / M USA
5	Charn P 65+ / M Thailand	Helpful votes 735 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 1249 Forum posts 8 Photos 2497	Readership(total) 1,105,000	Total points 202,760 Months 59	Reviews 1249 Forum posts 8 Photos 2497 Ratings 411	Explorer reviews 103	Passports 362	Expert points 1347 Expert level 449
		Coi =4489	Ati=1,105,000	Aci = 3436.61	Ti = 0.668	NPi=103	NOi =362	NKi = 3
6	LondonWol fee 65+/M UK	Helpful votes 159 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 196 Forum posts 1 Photos 0	Readership(total) 270,000	Total points 19,829 Months 117	Reviews 196 Forum posts 1 Photos 1 Ratings 10	Explorer reviews 21	Passports 102	Expert points 309 Expert level 103
		Coi = 356	Ati=270,000	Aci = 169.48	Ti = 207	NPi=21	NOi = 102	NKi = 3
7	Maritimeex plorer 65+/M Canada	Helpful votes 596 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 349 Forum posts 1 Photos 1,733	Readership(total) 325,000	Total points 87,556 Months 165	Reviews 349 Forum posts 1 Photos 1,733 Ratings 10	Explorer reviews 18	Passports 202	Expert points 417 Expert level 139
		Coi = 2679	Ati = 325,000	Aci = 530.642	Ti = 0.2077	NPi=18	NOi =202	NKi = 3
8	EyeKaytoo 50-64 / M Germany	Helpful votes 396 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 1076 Forum posts 0 Photos 233	Readership(total) 690,000	Total points 115,206 Months 94	Reviews 1076 Forum posts 0 Photos 233 Ratings 34	Explorer reviews 234	Passports 289	Expert points 1107 Expert level 369

Table 4.20, continued

		Coi = 1705	Ati = 690,000	Aci = 1225.59	Ti = 4.764	NPi=234	NOi =289	NKi =3
9	Nycitygal_1 000 USA	Helpful votes 55 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 118 Forum posts 0 Photos 17	Readership(total) 145,000	Total points 12,365 Months 116	Reviews 118 Forum posts 0 Photos 17 Ratings 0	Explorer reviews 20	Passports 49	Expert points 168 Expert level 56
		Coi = 190	Ati= 145,000	Aci = 106.594	Ti = 6.941	NPi= 20	NOi = 49	NKi =3
10	TimJMeyer 50-64/M USA	Helpful votes 182 Replies 0 Questions asked 0 Reviews 390 Forum posts 2 Photos 1	Readership(total) 425,000	Total points 39,277 Months 56	Reviews 390 Forum posts 2 Photos 1 Ratings 5	Explorer reviews 28	Passports 212	Expert points 441 Expert level 147
		Coi = 575	Ati=425,000	Aci = 701.375	Ti = 397	NPi= 28	NOi = 212	NKi =3

Source: Research data (2018)

The results were then normalized to a scale of 0-1, the ‘Seven Degree Index’ calculated, and the top performers retrieved. Table 4.21 presents the results from observations checklists of top 10% members in the ‘Seven Degree index’ and their corresponding values.

Table 4.21: Top 10% of opinion leaders from observation checklists

Rank	Name	Value	Rank	Name	Value	Rank	Name	Value
1.	Hermes_NL	0.563	18.	Alexzhdanov	0.197	35.	Glenn M	0.124
2.	Jenabaintheworld	0.431	19.	SydneyTraveler	0.186	36.	Lasa88	0.122
3.	Charn P	0.423	20.	Savvy_Dave	0.183	37.	Edmundo_de_ABQ	0.119
4.	Eyekeytoo	0.349	21.	Hilarymunro	0.171	38.	Rockdoc7	0.117
5.	Esther P	0.327	22.	TheTravelPirate	0.170	39.	Juan carlos F	0.114
6.	OneAddictedTraveler	0.277	23.	Colint50	0.168	40.	William G	0.113
7.	Heb999	0.271	24.	Maritimeexplorer	0.163	41.	The_Egyptian_couple	0.107
8.	loveDCA	0.258	25.	DERtravels	0.163	42.	MisterCheeky	0.106
9.	Roryjdoyle	0.254	26.	Steve K	0.160	43.	Abbotsbury92	0.103
10.	DAEsmae	0.236	27.	Di S	0.155	44.	JupiterNine	0.099
11.	Yogiacomo	0.230	28.	Beatriz O	0.149	45.	Uclatraveler9	0.097
12.	Puchka	0.210	29.	Carol W	0.146	46.	VindalooQueen11	0.090
13.	Tmuc	0.209	30.	James G	0.142	47.	EatDrinknbMarried	0.088
14.	Ludo-Owen	0.206	31.	Barbara W	0.140	48.	Aboudy G	0.087
15.	TimJMeyer	0.204	32.	Outofdodge_10	0.134			
16.	Escape-overseas	0.202	33.	BigKevTravels	0.133			
17.	oilmanDOrset_U_K	0.201	34.	MontanaSplash	0.127			

Source: Research data (2018)

The results from questionnaires were normalized to a scale of 0-1, the ‘Seven Degree Index’ calculated, and the top performers retrieved. Table 4.22 presents the performance from the questionnaire of the top 10% members in the ‘Seven Degree index’ and their corresponding values.

Table 4.22: Top 10% of opinion leaders from questionnaires

Rank	Name	Value	Rank	Name	Value
1.	Ibadanboy	0.702	4.	Tdhat	0.124
2.	HappyTraveller604	0.136	5.	BG	0.088
3.	Safari aficionado	0.132			

Source: Research data (2018)

4.8 Objective 5: To Investigate Personal Characteristics of Online Travel Opinion Leaders

4.8.1 Overview of the fifth objective

The fifth objective investigated personal characteristics that travel opinion leaders displayed in an online setting, and in this case, on TripAdvisor. This information was retrieved from the profiles of the top 10% identified opinion leaders (see Table 4.21 and Table 4.22). The profiles of the 53 Level 6 members were manually collected and analysed. Opinion leaders' characteristics were then classified according to demographic characteristics, travel style and travel type.

4.8.2 Demographic Characteristics of Opinion Leaders

After applying the 'Seven Degree index', a total of 53 members were selected (see Table 4.21 and 4.22). A summary of their demographic characteristics is displayed in Table 4.23.

Table 4.23: Demographic characteristics

Attribute		Frequency	Percentage
Age	Absent	13	24.5%
	25-34	4	7.5%
	35-49	9	17%
	50-64	17	32.1%
	65+	10	18.9%
Gender	Did not indicate	10	18.9%
	Male	29	54.7%
	Female	14	26.4%
Name	Pseudonym	35	66%
	Real name	18	34%
Profile photo	Other photo	32	60.4%
	Own photo	19	35.8%
Origin	Did not indicate	1	1.9%
	North America	24	45.3%
	Europe	13	24.5%
	Africa	6	11.3%
	South America	3	5.7%
	Asia	2	3.8%
	Australia	2	3.8%
	Middle East	2	3.8%

Source: Research data (2018)

More than half (51%) of the population of opinion leaders are above 50 years of age. The biggest age group was 50-64 years (32.1%), followed by members above 65 years (18.9%). 35-49 year olds were only 17% of the population while 25-34 year olds were 7.5%. These findings show that people above 50 years travel more and are more willing to share their experiences frequently. The results are in conflict with other scholars who found that consumers who wrote online reviews were a younger demographic (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008a).

It is also contrary to Yoo *et al.*, (2011) who concluded that travel opinion leaders were more likely to be Millennials and Gen Xers.

Majority of opinion leaders (54.7%) were male compared to 26.4% females. This shows that male travellers are more inclined to share their travel experiences and are more active in creating content on TripAdvisor. Research into travel opinion leaders has shown that they are predominantly male (Yoo *et al.*, 2011). This is also in agreement with other scholars who have noted differences in gender and consumer generated media creation (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008a; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011)

In an analysis on the representation of self, majority of opinion leaders used a pseudonym online (66%) compared to the ones who used their real names (or what appeared to be real names-34%). Likewise, very few opinion leaders used their own photos as part of their profile. Opinion leaders who used their own photos were 35.8% while the rest used photos that could not be used to easily identify them (60.4%). These included photos of scenery, animals, and travel locations. The use of pseudonyms and unidentifiable photos indicates averseness to sharing personal details and information on TripAdvisor. This indicates very low levels of self-identity disclosure on the platform.

Literature reviewed has indicated that opinion leaders typically present a true version of themselves online as this disclosure enhances their status in communities through peer recognition and yields affirmation (Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008). The disclosure of identity has been shown to reduce consumer uncertainty and enhances source credibility, leading to building of trust in the person reading reviews (Hu, 2015; Kusumasondjaja, Shanka, & Marchegiani, 2012; Tildwell & Walther, 2002). In contrast, Kazakov and Predvoditeleva

(2015) who classified content communities, of which TripAdvisor is one, as low in self-presentation and self-disclosure. This difference may arise from evaluation of diverse online communities which have varied levels of reviewer anonymity.

In terms of origin, majority of opinion leaders were from North America (45.3%). Europe (24.5%) and Africa (11.3%) were the next two areas of origin. The fewest opinion leaders were from South America (5.7%), Asia, Australia and the Middle East (3.8% each). As this was a sample of opinion leaders who have visited Kenya, it shows that North America, Europe and Africa are the main contributors of frequent travellers to Kenya. Other scholars of the tourism market in Kenya have found similar results albeit with lower rankings of guests of African origins (Maingi, 2014; Mutisya, 2011).

Opinion leaders can therefore be profiled as older (above 50 years), male, with an aversion to disclosing their real identities. They are less likely to use their real names or their real photos on review platforms. When it comes to opinion leaders in the Africa tourism landscape, an overwhelming majority are North American.

4.8.3 Travel Style

TripAdvisor provides members the option of describing their travel styles on their profiles. When describing themselves, opinion leaders most frequently described themselves as foodies (10.4%), nature lovers (10%), history buffs (9.6%) and luxury travellers (9.1%). Table 4.24 presents the self-described travel styles of opinion leaders.

Table 4.24: Travel style

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Foodie	24	10.4%	54.5%
Nature lover	23	10.0%	52.3%
History buff	22	9.6%	50.0%
Luxury traveller	21	9.1%	47.7%
Like a local	18	7.8%	40.9%
Urban explorer	19	8.3%	43.2%
60+ traveller	16	7.0%	36.4%
Art and architecture lover	12	5.2%	27.3%
Peace and quiet seeker	12	5.2%	27.3%
Thrill seeker	12	5.2%	27.3%
Beach goer	10	4.3%	22.7%
Family vacationer	9	3.9%	20.5%
Eco-tourist	9	3.9%	20.5%
Backpacker	6	2.6%	13.6%
Nightlife seeker	6	2.6%	13.6%
Thrifty traveller	5	2.2%	11.4%
Trendsetter	4	1.7%	9.1%
Vegetarian	2	0.9%	4.5%
Total	230	100.0%	

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Source: Research data (2018)

Case wise, more than half of the opinion leaders described themselves as foodies (54.5%) and nature lovers (52.3%). This means they have a particular and refined interest in food and would therefore be interested in the gastronomy of the region where they travel to. As nature lovers, it means that they would enjoy exploring the outdoors and engaging in outdoor activities such as hiking, beach going, surfing, swimming etc. This is supported by Jamrozy

et al. (1996) who suggest that nature based opinion leaders travel more and are more involved in nature tourism. On the contrary, other self-descriptions related to nature were scored very low with opinion leaders. These included beach goer (22.7%), eco-tourist (20.5%), and peace and quiet seeker (27.3%). The disharmony for this may be because the activities they engage in, may not be listed on TripAdvisor, and there isn't a provision to add more categories.

Less than half (47.7%) of opinion leaders described themselves as luxury travellers with a small percentage (11.4%) describing themselves as thrifty travellers and backpackers (13.6%). This indicates that opinion leaders are high income earners and high spenders in addition to being frequent travellers. This has been confirmed by previous studies which have shown opinion leaders to be price insensitive, wealthy and heavy spenders (Chaudry & Irshad, 2013; Flynn *et al.*, 1996; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006).

Half (50%) of opinion leaders described themselves as history buffs, which means they seek out historical details of the places they visit. When opinion leaders travel, they will more likely want to explore urban areas (43.2%) and experience life as a local (40.9%). This indicates that opinion leaders are very interested in their new locale and are inquisitive of new locations, cultures and peoples. It shows that they seek out information and knowledge about the environments they find themselves in. Scholars have described opinion leaders in the same way. They have been previously found to have all round knowledge, exhibit exploratory behaviour and possess self-perceived knowledge than non-opinion leaders (Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Yoo *et al.*, 2011).

Interestingly, only 9.1% of opinion leaders thought of themselves as trendsetters. This means an overwhelmingly large percentage of the population consider themselves unadventurous

and conformist. This is quite in contrast to studies done by researchers who describe them as innovative, (Lyons & Henderson 2005) early adopters of new products (Kaiser & Bodendorf, 2012), and trendsetters in trendsetters for restaurants (Bilgihan, Peng & Kandampully, 2014). Likewise, Goldsmith and Foxall, (2003) found positive correlations between opinion leadership and innovativeness. On the other hand, Valente & Pumpuang (2007) refute the idea of opinion leaders as trendsetters and early adopters. They argue that although opinion leaders embrace an idea before the majority do, they are not automatically the earliest adopters of an innovation, as it might be risky to their position in communities.

When describing themselves from a set of pre-determined options, majority of opinion leaders are foodies and nature lovers. They are luxury travellers and heavy spenders and are very curious about the destinations they visit, so are bound to be inquisitive about the history of the destination. They are also bound to be explorative of their destination and enjoy immersive experiences. They, however, do not think of themselves as trendsetters nor are they vegetarian.

4.8.4 Travel Type

Reviewers on TripAdvisor are usually asked to group their travel type in 5 groups. From the reviews collected, opinion leaders mainly travelled for business (39%) and travelled as a couple (33%). Opinion leaders travelled little with their families (14%) and in very few instances did they report to have travelled alone (7%) or with friends (7%). Figure 4.14 presents travel types of opinion leaders.

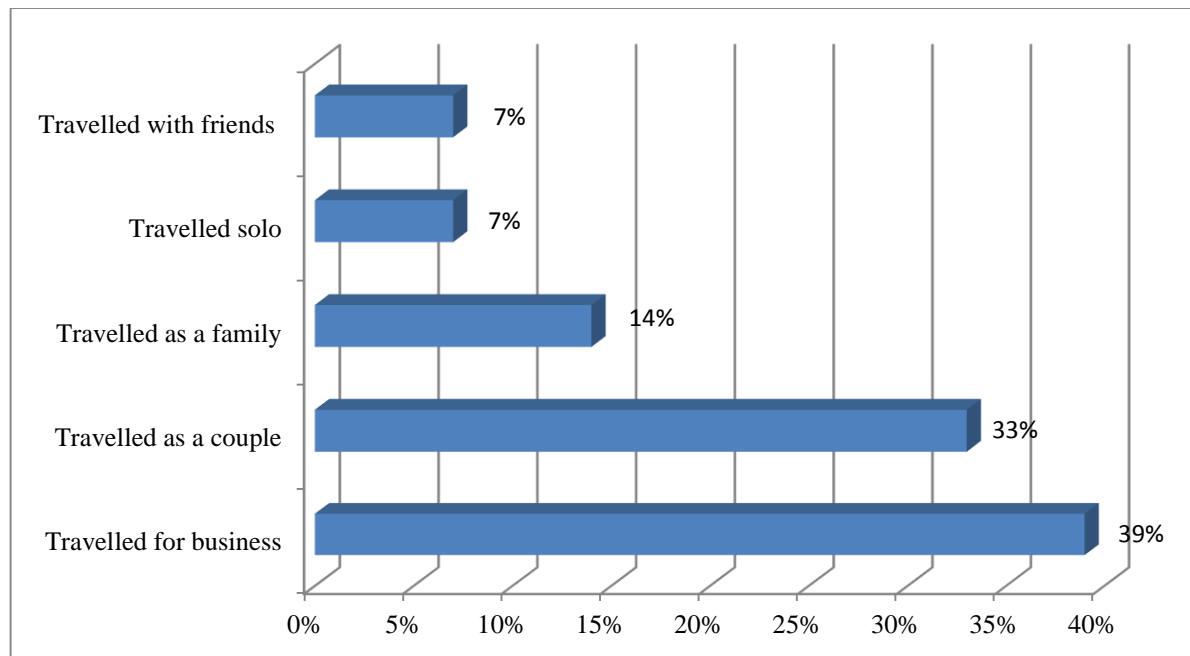


Figure 4.14: Opinion leader travel type

Source: Research data (2018)

It may be tempting to conclude that opinion leaders mainly travel for business, but this is not an exact picture. Although this paints a picture of business travel being the most prevalent reason for travel for opinion leaders, findings may be mixed because TripAdvisor only offers reviewers the chance to pick only one of 5 categories, ignoring the others. This fails to paint a complete picture of travel as sometimes reasons for travel may fall in more than one of the 5 categories. For example, one may travel for business and decide to go to with family. Or one could travel solo but for business.

4.9 Objective 6: To Explore the Online Communication Behaviour of Opinion Leaders

4.9.1 Overview of Objective Six

The sixth objective sought to explore the online communication behaviour of opinion leaders. This objective was based on findings from previous objectives. This objective performed an in-depth qualitative analysis of findings from the first, quantitative part of the study. To explore in-depth the communication behaviour displayed, reviews from opinion leaders were manually mined from TripAdvisor. One review per month was randomly selected from opinion leaders' pages for 24 months (from October 2015 – October 2017.) Only hotel reviews were considered. A total of 807 reviews were collected. Non-English reviews were eliminated, leaving a total of 752 English reviews. These were then cleaned up by conducting spell checks, punctuations and word repetitions. Thematic and sentiment analyses were then performed using NVivo v12 and LIWC. Table 4.25 presents an overview of opinion leader reviews collected.

Table 4.25: Opinion leaders' reviews overview

Review language	Number of reviews collected	Number of reviews usable after clean-up	Number of words	Average words per review
English	807	752	149302	198.54

Source: Research data (2018)

The following themes emerged from analysis of opinion leader reviews. They were classified into 3 categories: hotel related attributes (products and services), context of the review and pragmatism of the reviewer (personal related attributes). Table 4.26 gives a summary of themes.

Table 4.26: Opinion leader reviews' themes

Attribute		Number of Mentions	Frequency %
Hotel/experience attributes	Location	350	16.68
	Room	330	15.73
	Public areas	316	15.06
	Staff, Language	294	14.01
	Food	271	12.92
	Experience	127	6.05
	Reservations	80	3.81
	Wi-Fi/Internet	64	3.05
	Value for money	55	2.62
	Activity	33	1.57
	Loyalty status	25	1.19
Context		129	6.15
Practical		24	1.14
Total		2098	100%

Source: Research data (2018)

4.9.2.1 Hotel Related Attributes

Hotel related attributes had to do with reviewer's comments and communication about their overall experience at the hotel. The top 15 attributes by opinion leaders were: Room, Parking, Experience, Activity, Staff, Loyalty status, Location, Food, Transport, Wi-Fi/Internet, Value for money, Reservations, and Facility. The relatively small difference in % of various themes

shows that customer experience is complex and dynamic and different services, amenities and products work together to influence the overall experience of a guest (Phillips *et al.*, 2016). The top five ranking attributes were room, followed by location, staff, facility and food. This is in line with (Bertan, Bayram, & Benzergil, 2015; O'Connor, 2010; Phillips *et al.*, 2016; Qi & Ning, 2017) study of negative reviews which ranked Room, Service, Staff, Time (taken to be served) and breakfast as the top five reviewed categories. This implies that these are the areas customers use to assess quality of services received.

I. Location

Table 4.28 indicates that majority (16.68%) of respondents mention the Location theme in the reviews. The place a hotel is situated seemed to be significant:

Elephant bedroom camp lives up to its name, a boutique camp where elephants wander freely around the camp and the accommodation both day and night...

This resort is in a beautiful setting in the middle of a tea plantation....

... is a relatively new hotel in the Bole district in Addis. Spacious and clean rooms, the hotel is well located...

This heavenly resort situated on two islands....

The convenience of the location of the hotel was also mentioned, in relation to transport access, attractions, central business district:

Set in the centre of Sandton, the new CBD of Johannesburg...

The hotel is placed in the centre of Bukhara and very close to all of the local attractions

...the location of the hotel on the first day. Once realizing the convenient subway, train, and bus systems are available around the hotel, we were able to explore the city easily...

Fantastic central location very near the Station where the Express train from KLIA arrives....

But there is a little red light district that is across the street as well as late night falafel places.

But it's safe and the hotel itself reflects nothing of its neighbourhood...

Of interest too was the views one experienced from the hotel.

It has a superb situation overlooking the river at Brunswick Heads...

.... had room 206 which has a small balcony overlooking the main square and the Church on the other side of the square...

Wow, what a lovely view of the lake and the castle on the hill...

The location is uniquely historic for Sydney and Australia. From the cliff top to the beach location of the boiler house restaurant ...

Transport was also considered as a subtheme linked to location.

With the hourly shuttle services provide the convenience of getting there and back...

Quite frankly I was amazed to be able to get a bus in the airport that took me to the hotel.

Very efficient and handy...

... as we used the train,we were pleased to see that the station was also within easy walking distance..

The Hyatt Place is a superb hotel in a really good location if you are moving around Amsterdam by car - very close to the A4 and the A5. Also conveniently connected to Schiphol airport by half-hourly shuttle...

The location can't be beat -- it is just above the main Suwon subway stop which means that you can easily get into downtown Seoul or elsewhere...

We loved the location, only a short boat ride from Universal Studios. Boats ran pretty often, I can't remember ever waiting more than 10 minutes...

Shuttle service was efficient. So if you're on the expressway and looking for a budget stop with breakfast then give it a try...

Some reviewers mentioned parking facilities in their reviews. In almost all instances, pricing of the parking facility was mentioned. The location of the parking facility in relation to the hotel was also reported.

I ended up street parking temporarily at the front of the queue of taxis outside the hotel, jumping in to ask the receptionist where I could park and then driving into the vast underground parking area under the station. The car park was large, clean with piped music giving the impression of being a safe place to leave my car...

Limited parking is available behind the hotel as well...

Also the hotel parking was completely full with airline customers who take a stay & park deal. People were already doubly parking on the curbs...

.... there's lots of parking and it's easily accessible from the 101 in a quiet part of Oxnard...

Opinion leaders felt strongly about paying for hotel parking, with many citing displeasure at having to pay for it, and vice versa. This is illustrated below:

The hotel is a little tired but for a short stay, close to the town centre, with free easy parking, it ticks all the boxes...

Also, the only parking option is valet, @ \$35/day, which is also a minus...

This time our visit was marred by the parking situation. The hotel has outsourced the valet parking. Although I was able to have them park my car last year, this year they refused to take my Tesla S. Instead they offered to charge our room if we self-parked 2.5 blocks away. This was very inconvenient and could have been a disaster in bad weather. Also, they charged us the same \$65/night rate that we would have paid if they had valet-parked the car on premises. I find this unacceptable...

It is noteworthy that location ranked higher than other product related attributes. This implies that relative to reasons of travel, the convenience of a hotel location will either lead to customer satisfaction or contribute to their disappointment.

Previous research indicates that location was highly ranked during visitors' online search behaviour prior to a trip, and more so for business tourists (Leung, Dickinger & Nixon, 2017; Kazakov & Predvoditeleva, 2015). Location plays an important factor in guest satisfaction (Dickinger & Mazanec, 2008; Guillet & Law, 2010). Customers' ratings on hotel locations also positively influence a hotel's performance (Phillips *et al.*, 2016). On the contrary, research into brand loyalty indicates that Chinese tourists don't place a high value on location or the convenience of the location of the hotel (Mandabach *et al.*, 2014)

II. Rooms

The second highest mentioned theme in opinion leaders' evaluations of hotel products and services was related to Room (15.73%) as shown in Table 4.28. This emphasises the standing of rooms as a core product of high esteem among travellers. Managers should therefore ensure that hotel rooms are clean, well equipped, sizeable and with necessary amenities that contribute to guest comfort. Rooms are also a key contributor to hotels' revenue (Phillips *et al.*, 2016)

Reviewers described rooms as:

The room is quite big, with balcony and ocean view...

It's very nicely appointed-colonial style rooms...

...the room which we were allotted, the walls were stained, furniture chipped and unpolished...

The room was fantastic and decorated with flowers on the bed and candles)...

Bathrooms were also commonly mentioned by customers as a factor that contributed to their favourable/unfavourable evaluation. Customers place importance in size, presence/absence of bathtubs and cleanliness:

...liked the modern bathroom – there was a decent sized, walk in shower as well as a separate bath tub and a large washbasin...

Both rooms had clean, bright, modern en-suite bathrooms. We liked the large shower heads in the bath tubs...

...and the bathroom was clean and well laid out...

The bathroom showed a facelift too and gel and shampoo dispensers in the shower were welcome, reducing the waste of the small containers still widely in use in the hotel industry.

Hot shower came on instantly when opening the tap, another plus...

Amenities supplied with the room were also of importance to opinion leaders. These included electronics, seating area/space, and Wi-Fi, working desk and coffee making facilities:

...each room of the hotel is provided with TV, Fridge and air conditioner...

I liked the flat screen telly, free coffee and tea facilities, bottled water and free Wi-Fi...

There was a good sized glass desk, plenty of plugs, free Wi-Fi which worked (Chinese style), large flat screen TV with international channels and free bottled water...

Charging tablets, phones and camera batteries too was made easy as there were USB port connectors available, a great solution to the problem of not having enough sockets...

Sleep quality is one of the categories on TripAdvisor which reviewers are asked to star rate a hotel on a scale of 1-5. Customers prefer hotels where they can sleep peacefully and sleep quality affects their attitudes towards a hotel (Bertan et al., 2015). Opinion leaders mentioned beds in their analysis of the room they spent the night in:

The simple room is spacious however the double bed is too small for two adults to sleep in....

The large double bed was comfortable...

As mentioned by other reviewers, the mattresses in the beds are less than perfect and appear to sag a bit around your body...

Bed very comfy...

....but the bed was rock hard...

My room had incredibly comfortable bed and comforter...

As the core product offered in hotels, rooms contribute heavily to evaluation of a hotel by customers as well as customer satisfaction (Mandabach, *et al.*, 2014; Mutisya, 2011). Rooms also create perceptions towards value among hotel guests (Bertan *et al.*, 2015). O'Connor (2010) while analysing TripAdvisor reviews found 'rooms' to be the third most frequently used expression used by both satisfied and unsatisfied customers.

III. Public Areas

'Public areas' theme grouped reviews that mentioned other areas of the hotel excluding the rooms, bars and restaurants. Public areas was a frequently mentioned theme (15.06%) as shown in Table 4.28, with opinion leaders attempting to paint a vivid picture of the hotel. Various aspects related to general experience in the facility were recounted generally by opinion leaders in regard to public spaces:

We also found the large common area of the hotel to be most useful...

As for the kids or adults guests (young-at-heart), there is a slider from the first floor down to the lobby which is fun to try...

We did truly appreciate the relaxed colonial style the reception offered...

In a clear day, the beautiful sunset is guaranteed from the MAI Sky Roof Terrace...

Entering the hotel from the main entrance you are greeted by beautiful architecture and architectural details...

Opinion leaders shared their emotional reactions to aspects of public spaces they encountered:

Stones in the walkway are picturesque, but uneven...

As for the kids or adults guests (young-at-heart), there is a slider from the first floor down to the lobby which is fun to try...

I enjoyed exploring the hotel. There is a bit of a museum lining the halls on the ground floor. The courtyard is lit at night - which is lovely...

These cases suggest that various aspects of the facility can bring about emotional reactions, which in turn affect the overall experience of guests. Emotional responses have been known to drive overall satisfaction and repeat intent with customers (Mutisya, 2011).

Being frequent travellers, they seemed to notice intricate aspects of hotel design, and even speak like are professionals in hotel design:

The hotel was well managed with friendly and helpful personnel however the function rooms and the internal traffic were poorly designed...

The Movenpick Siam Hotel Pattaya is a rather contradiction like the building structure it occupied. Looking up from the pool, the condo side is empty lacking even basic decoration...

It seems opinion leaders perform an evaluation of the hotel's design and use this as one of the aspects that contribute to their overall evaluation of their stay.

Opinion leaders also stayed in unique hotels, and delighted in describing their distinctive aspects:

This resort is in a beautiful setting in the middle of a tea plantation...

I enjoyed exploring the hotel. There is a bit of a museum lining the halls on the ground floor...

I had the pleasure of spending two nights on a Mascot Houseboat in June, 2017. the whole houseboat has carved, cedar panelling and custom furniture) and even the extremely stable Wi-Fi. The houseboat has four rooms on the main level and one suite on the upper level...

We enjoyed our visit to see the castle and explore part of the hotel, including, of course, the crypt for a bit of a scare...

Accommodation comprises of permanent tented structures, raised above the ground, with a timber terrace and stairway to the front overlooking the river...

The cottages resemble Masai huts with thatched roofs and a rustic decor, with all modern amenities...

Encountering unusually designed hotels led to an expression of excitement, delight and enjoyment from opinion leaders, which they seemed to want to share with others.

What is not clear is whether opinion leaders booked these hotels for their uniqueness. Only one indicated that they were booked in by other parties:

I was with a group and it was part of our tour, or I never would have thought of staying here....

This therefore does not show us whether opinion leaders purposefully seek out unique experiences at unusual hotels or whether they stumble upon these locations inadvertently.

Frequently, opinion leader reviews mentioned cleanliness of the hotel:

Everything was modern and clean – in fact many items seemed to be brand new...

The spa was clean and service excellent...

Clean hotel and still relatively new looking...

.... the rooms and public areas were spotlessly clean...

The rooms are clean, but seem dated, e.g., there were no USB power ports available...

To underscore the importance of cleanliness, a number of reviewers indicated what impact lack of cleanliness had on their evaluation of the hotels where they stayed in:

The reason that the 4 stars or very good is given is due to need of improvement in the total cleanliness in public areas... more attention in detail to cleanliness, this property can easily pass my 5 stars or excellent grade...

Cleaning in the hotel pool was disgusting, one of the bathrooms was pretty bad, only after I complained 3 times! The management sent someone to clean it (disappointed)...

Room in general rather dirty and only superficially cleaned (disappointing)...

It seems that cleanliness greatly influences customer evaluation of a hotel, and can lead to customer satisfaction. This has been supported by other researchers as a key area of interest in customer reviews. Public areas in general frequently appear in the top ten areas of customer comments and complaints both offline and online especially as they are core features of the hotel (Avant, 2013; Carroll & Siguaw, 2003; O'Connor, 2010; Mutisya, 2011; Sparks & Browning, 2010).

IV. Pool / Gym/Spa

Opinion leader reviews also revealed that opinion leaders utilized leisure centres during their stay at the hotel. These included swimming pools, fitness centres and spas.

The boutique hotel boasts of its numerous pools to satisfy guests...

With three pools, many bars and restaurants there are not too many reasons to leave the hotel...

But I would like to record officially here my use of the fully stocked gym on a least a couple of occasions...

.... it was a disappointment to see that the gym was out of commission for a month...

The gym is fully staffed (thus, with limited hours) and huge as it serves the community as well.

In addition to its wide variety of equipment, hotel guests can also take the classes for free...

I was thoroughly impressed by their brand new Spa, which must rank among the very best in Nairobi and showed some serious class...

Other services like the massage at the pool and spa really must be tried to be appreciated...

The frequent mentioning and utilization of these luxury centres indicates that opinion leaders regularly travel to hotels in the luxury end of the market, or holiday hotels with an all-inclusive concept. Sentiment concerning these areas were that the presence of these amenities increase enjoyment and relaxation, and fun.

.... we chose to make the most of our time relaxing by the rooftop pool and with a swim...

.... massage in the spa complex. That took a full hour and I certainly came away feeling relaxed and highly perfumed...

In addition the Spa, Fitness, and Kid's Room enable the guests to maximize their enjoyment during their stay...

We enjoyed the pool and also the Jet Ski equipment--- much fun and well supervised...

V. Staff

“Staff” was the fourth most mentioned theme (14.01%) as shown in table 4.28, with sub categories such as ‘helpful’, ‘friendly’, ‘attentive’ indicating that the service provision by staff members is very critical to the evaluation of a service experience. “Staff” was ranked below two core services of a hotel, indicating that whilst important, other core services are more influential in shaping a customers’ perception of service quality. This is supported by (Browning et al., 2013) in their evaluation service quality attributions of service vs. core features. Both good and bad service encounters were reported:

All the staff were more than helpful and friendly...

Exceptional service throughout...

....colleague and I arrived in the early hours one morning on a flight from Sydney and we were greeted at reception by two friendly guys...

... untrained receptionists for general information...

My only complaint was waiting for the bell boy to come to pick up my luggage on checking out. After calling the bell desk twice I gave up waiting and dragged my four pieces of luggage down to reception on my own...

Service was great. Housekeeping staff were all hospitable...

The reception staff came to the car which dropped me off from the airport and my bags were carried away to the check in desk / concierge desk...

The names of members of staff were mentioned; especially those who had provided outstanding service and provided a personal touch and making the guest feel at ease:

You'll surely meet Ahmet whilst you are there. He walked around the site to come and clean my sunglasses on a daily basis!...

.... special mention to trainee Srushti who chatted with me towards the end of my stay at the hotel, making guests feel welcomed and special...

Clint at the front desk seems to put in long hours but is always friendly and helpful...

A highlight of my stay was the food. Chef Marnus Scholly took serious pride to explaining his new menu creations...

.... the one good aspect of our stay was our interaction with the manager on duty, Lesa. She sympathized with the parking problem and tried to help in any way she could...

Gabriella (?) at the front desk could've cared less about helping us out - she looked bothered when I asked her for directions and rudely referred me to the concierge. I also chatted with her earlier and received the same cold reception...

Staff were also notably mentioned to go the extra mile in their duties:

A helpful lady suggested that I might want to freshen up before my long journey home. She pointed me in the direction of the hotel spa on the second floor where I could take a welcoming shower and change my clothes...

You'll surely meet Ahmet whilst you are there. He walked around the site to come and clean my sunglasses on a daily basis!...

... the kind lady asked me if I needed anything for my homeward journey and offered me a plastic carrier bag with a free bottle of mineral water and a fruit bar. That was a nice gesture...

... the hotel provided assistance by arranging their Chief of Security to accompany us to the local Chief of Police to report the crime and deal with the administration....

I was surprised by the number of staff who knew my name after only our first day at the hotel...

Concierge was helpful with map, directions, advice, and ordering taxis...

In a few instances, language barrier was referred to by opinion leaders. Since only English language reviews were used, all references were in English. Opinion leaders indicated language proficiencies of hotel staff in the hotels they visited, especially in non-English speaking countries. They registered surprise in finding staff who could communicate in English and exasperation if they were unable to communicate to staff.

.... the desk clerk spoke only rudimentary English...

The owner doesn't speak very much English...

.... our service spoke excellent English...

When I called room service, English was a problem each time (4 times), and other people were eventually found who could speak with me...

Reception staff speak English and are very helpful...

The team immediately escorted us to Frankie, a guest services Cast Member, who spoke excellent English to assist us with check in...

The implication for this is that managers should try as much as possible to ensure that their staff members speak the language of their foreign guests. This will lead to better communication between guests and the hotel, and also improve on overall guest experience (Bertan *et al.*, 2015)

Previous research has recurrently mentioned the key role staff plays in forming attitudes about service quality and rating customer satisfaction. Browning *et al.*, (2013) report that customers rate service quality attributes for core services (room, meals) are higher than for staff service. This means that reviews concerning core service have a stronger influence on customers' perception of service quality than staff service. Staff attitude also affects hotel performance and guest satisfaction, and regularly attracts complains from guests (Avant, 2013; Bertan *et al.*, 2015; O'Connor , 2010; Phillips *et al.*, 2016; Sparks & Browning, 2010;). Managers therefore need to form policies, standards and procedures to improve on the provision of service by staff.

VI. Food

Analysis of reviews revealed that the fifth most mentioned aspect (12.92%) of opinion leaders' stay was food as shown in Table 4.28. Breakfast was the most mentioned sub-theme in terms of food, underlying its importance as a product offering. Service styles and the menu were reported:

The small breakfast the hotel provided daily was also sufficient for us with the all-day available coffee...

Breakfast is served buffet style for when you return from your morning game drive...

I especially enjoyed the buffet breakfast -- the best I had during my nine days in HaGiang and Lo Cai provinces. There are Asian and Western choices and also an egg chef...

Breakfast was buffet style with what appeared to be a high emphasis on organic products. Serving tea as a glass of hot water with a tea bag on the side...

The Thai breakfast of congee, park& sticking rice, partongo (a Thai donut), and coffee is good for the local...

We stayed for three nights and left satisfied..... The restaurants Seminyak served wholesome breakfast...

There was dissatisfaction in the event that one was unable to get any breakfast on the premises:

What I didn't like was the fact that my corporate room rate did not have breakfast. That would have been OK so long as I could, at least, grab a coffee and a croissant in the morning. Unfortunately the coffee shop in the foyer was not open early enough for me so I found myself nipping around the corner to Starbucks. Is this what Hilton wants?...

Variety of the menu seemed to be a selling point for the breakfast menu, and a source of customer delight. The variety described came from the number of meals on offer and from cyclic menus:

Breakfast was good. There is a good choice including a range of full English breakfast cooked items. But beware - don't help yourself here - your choice is prepared on your plate from the buffet for you...

I took my breakfast in the main restaurant which was fortunately open from 07:00 until 11:00 each day (the last hour was the "late breakfast" slot). If I had known earlier I would have gone over to the La Salsa Mexican a la carte restaurant more often for breakfast. On our last day we discovered the breakfast there which was a lot smaller, but in a much quieter setting. You should try that...

The only complaint was that the breakfast was exactly the same thing every day (I stayed 6 nights), which was good for a predictable routine, but bad if you're looking for variety...

The breakfast was great - the menu changed daily (we stayed 3 nights) and focused mostly on Japanese offerings with a limited pastry selection. During the on-breakfast hours, the lounge offers unlimited soft drinks, coffee/espresso drinks, and a small selection of soups (all from free vending machines)...

I sampled breakfast at Pablo's the second day and was pleased with the variety of the hotel's selection, from fruits to cereals and from pastries and breads, from a cheese board and cold cuts to sandwiches and a selection of hot dishes.

Service was swift and friendly, my order for tea taken the moment I had selected my table and plates cleared when they were empty. After a while my waitress came back to ask if I needed freshly made tea as mine might have gone cool and I accepted. I managed to have a chat with the executive chef who personally made me an Egg Benedict and then shared some recipe insights with me, only rounding up an overall very good impression...

Pricing of the breakfast, when it was not included in the room rate, was often declared to be high. Opinion leaders then opted to have breakfast outside the hotel in order to reduce on costs:

We didn't take breakfast in the hotel as it was far too expensive...

Be careful on breakfast--- seems it's no longer in all room packages, and its 35\$, which is ridiculous for a buffet...

I was the only one in our party to get up in time for breakfast the next day. I didn't need that much and I was a little disappointed to have to pay 14,00 Euro for breakfast. For the others I drove down the road to a local discounter supermarket and bought them their breakfast from there...

Other meals were described as well, though to a smaller extent than breakfast. Lunch, dinner, room service as well as the selection of menu to expect and the style of service were reported, with buffet style being the most predominant:

Dinner was very good- the beef is terrific...

Breakfast is served buffet style for when you return from your morning game drive, whilst lunch and dinner are served by staff, with a choice of four varieties of main meals and associated deserts. The food is again excellent, a theme which runs throughout the camp...

The buffet dinner (16 euro) as well as buffet breakfast (included) is outstanding -- lots of choices. Be forewarned that at dinner, they put the salmon mousse by the fruit and it looks suspiciously like a dessert. It is still very delicious, but it is not a dessert! ...

Velia runs the kitchen and gave us a wonderful cooking lesson. Food is excellent, and plentiful...

The main buffet style restaurant was a key focus for most families and that did get quite busy in the evening. We were pleased with the vast choice available, notably of the salads,

vegetables and fruit to ensure a healthy balance. We liked the focus on the many Turkish delicacies in addition to some standard international cuisine. I also ate a lot of fish in our 2 week stay there...

The Marriott has some outstanding food options, ranging from pub grub at the renewed WHTFLD pool bar, a nice outdoor "Streetfood" buffet in the atrium, to top notch Italian at Alto Vino. And not to forget the club lounge, which has the best food I have ever seen in a club lounge...

When I called room service, English was a problem each time (4 times), and other people were eventually found who could speak with me. The food quality was ok-- not fabulous despite rather high prices--and took 30 min to arrive...

Food was well presented and tasty with a choice of three main dishes for every meal, lunch and dinner, a starter at lunch, a soup for supper and a choice of two desserts. I could not have asked for more and both meat and fish dishes were done to my specifications...

Whenever I entered the restaurant tent and sat down at my table, was my selection of dishes promptly served by immaculately dressed waiting staff, wearing white gloves like it was in the olden days. The food was delicious, portions large enough to avoid a second helping and the food presentation on the plates was truly 5 star...

After arriving fairly late was a buffet dinner available on the lawn, with varied choices of dishes, well presented and tasty...

Dining was very good, at lunch and dinner...

Great place to have a cold one and some lunch. Simple, well priced and hearty...

Service during mealtimes was presented in two ways: either the staff were efficient, friendly and adept at their jobs, or they were overwhelmed by the buffet crowd and couldn't accomplish their duties:

The worst was the buffet breakfast, was scheduled between 6:30-10:00 hour. We arrived at 9:00. The buffet line was left with couple of empty trays without being refilled. One tray was for fried eggs and the other looked like for scrambled eggs. Further on, another tray had some congee which looked unappetizing. The clerk that collected our breakfast coupons sat next to the buffet line. She simply ignored the lack of refilling. We were totally turned off by the state of the buffet that we skipped breakfast both days...

Breakfast itself was a little disappointing due to the number of guests, who had no doubt, a little like us, left breakfast to the last minute. The staff were clearly overwhelmed in replenishing the buffet...

The breakfast area was pure chaos - even though the staff tried their best to maintaining order...

Room service is good quality and prompt...

Service was swift and friendly, my order for tea taken the moment I had selected my table and plates cleared when they were empty. After a while my waitress came back to ask if I needed freshly made tea as mine might have gone cool and I accepted. I managed to have a chat with the executive chef who personally made me an Egg Benedict and then shared some recipe insights with me, only rounding up an overall very good impression...

Again, food selection was adequate and service, mainly to bring and refill tea, swift and friendly...

Breakfast was included--- and a good buffet option overall---although I went later and some of the food was dry--had been there a while...

Staff at the restaurant/breakfast rude...

Clearing tables at lunch was slow at best and I and one of my colleagues subsequently twice cleared a table ourselves to allow us sit down. On one occasion did a waiting staff stare at us in some sort of disbelief but instead of coming to assist walked away...

Opinion leader reviews also showed a number of them getting creative when it comes to food, especially if they are not happy with hotel offering. These cases below illustrate such:

Japan can be rather expensive if one has to eat in restaurants throughout the week. Therefore our ready-to-eat food from the supermarket plus the facilities in the common room allowed us to have our healthy meals whenever we felt like it...

I was the only one in our party get up in time for breakfast the next day. I didn't need that much and I was a little disappointed to have to pay 14,00 Euro for breakfast. For the others I drove down the road to a local discounter supermarket and bought them their breakfast from there...

I advise against having ANY meals at the restaurant; it is overpriced and service can be poor. We bought cereal, milk, etc. at the general store for breakfast and brought Subway sandwiches back for dinner...

VII. Experience

Opinion leader reviews recounted their experiences (6.05%) at hotels and their sentiment about the atmosphere, ambience and mood of their travel experiences as shown in table 4.28.

One sentiment expressed was they felt welcome:

Finally our stay was really made particularly special through the kind and thoughtful welcome of our hosts, Nicky and her husband...

A special mention to trainee Srushti who chatted with me towards the end of my stay at the hotel, making guests feel welcomed and special...

The welcome was superb, cold towels after a sweaty day out on game drive and on the boat and a refreshing juice, replenished the moment the glass was empty...

Smaller hotels have often great charm and the Clico Hotel did not disappoint... In the words of one guest spoken with over breakfast, he said he found a 'permanent home' in Johannesburg when staying...

The ambience of the hotel in terms of noise was also expressed. Quiet environments seem to contribute to relaxation and intent to return.

I had booked the first five nights on my own and had room 704 on the top floor away from the elevators and very quiet...

And for those staying overnight they were really appreciative of the peace & quiet, the unique & subtle decorations and overall lovely atmosphere of this special place. I hope to return – and soon! ...

What a lovely boutique hotel. Quiet and relaxing...

By the sea in a quiet area and yet close to the centre of Dakar...

A nice quiet oasis in Nairobi...

The relative quiet was also expressed in relation to the location of the hotel. Customers expressed delight in being able to enjoy quiet rooms despite being in essentially noisy environments:

Very quiet despite being located on the Main Street with public transport plying. The glass windows are sound proof to filter out the noise...

And the room was so quiet, I would never have believed that I was still in the middle of a busy airport...

Enjoyment, or on the other hand, disappointment was conveyed by customers while describing experiences:

We really enjoyed the resort, and check in was easy and friendly...

We enjoyed a very family party on a Sunday afternoon in hotel Royal...

If you want to be pampered with personal attention, have curated meals, never repeated, you have chosen right; all this is extended by Ranjan and his efficient staff effortlessly. Our stay here for five days has been incredible...

You will be hosted and entertained by Sunny Upadhyay who has developed this oasis over the past 11 years. I especially enjoyed listening to his stories around the after-dinner bonfire...

We stayed for three nights and despite the intermittent rains, enjoyed every moment indoors and outdoors, away from the din of city life...

We spent 3 days there and enjoyed every minute, the staff was outstanding, the food was wonderful, and our guide Makiba was special. The tents are large and well-appointed with most everything you need including internet that worked all the time!...

Good value for money vacation for all the family but the staff need to smile a lot more. Wi-Fi works quite well throughout almost all of the resort. It is disappointing that you have to pay extra for all the fun sports such as scuba diving and a number of other water sports. It is also disappointing that you have to book the free sports in advance and the a la carte restaurant in advance and only at a certain time, You can you book and be told it's full already. It is also disappointing to be given rules and regulations and booking times when you just want to relax and be on vacation and precisely, not having to think about specific booking times and to be told no, this or that is full. Really dampens what is supposed to be a vacation. I don't think we will be back here again...

A large number of factors affecting the enjoyment levels of customers seem to stem from how they are handled by staff, more than core product offerings. Customers are therefore more likely to enjoy their experience if employees connect and relate with customers in a positive way (Sparks & Browning, 2011). This will eventually lead to customer satisfaction, return intentions and brand loyalty.

Another important aspect reported by opinion leaders was the degree of comfort experienced:

On the plus side, the beds are comfy as predicted and the rooms fairly well soundproofed...

The room was clean and comfortable. A comfortable reading chair would be the only addition desired...

This Wilderness Safaris camp is comfortable, with spacious tents, good bath facilities, and nice food....

Rooms were comfortable, pretty standard size room and bath...

The Sheraton Grande has very comfortable suites and a superb club lounge...

Majority of the reviews that touched on comfort referenced rooms in particular. Standards of comfort have been found to be a determinant of guest satisfaction and encouragement of repeat visits (Mandabach, *et al.*, 2014; Mutisya, 2011). *Reservations*

Opinion leaders' reservation experiences (3.81%), as shown in Table 4.28, were varied in terms of how they made reservations. Some used online resources and communicated with hotels through online channels:

Booking is easy through the website; included breakfast is ok for an Ibis...

My welcome letters both times arrived via email and notably, unlike at many other IHG properties where I stayed in the past, there was no fruit basket or complimentary bottle of wine in the room on arrival...

... I spent a considerable amount of time arranging the stay and the rooms required by email with numerous members of staff including the General Manager...

Majority of the reviews always made reservations, either by themselves or through third parties. There was no review that showed opinion leaders as walk-in guests:

Having been rescheduled from my original itinerary from Singapore to Dusseldorf, I found myself with a 10 hours overnight layover in Dubai. Emirates had reassured me that they had arranged a hotel for this transit...

My company had booked into the Sofitel for my 3 night business trip recently, mainly because of the convenient proximity to the centre of town...

As our original booking had been for 2 persons but, with a late change of plans we became a party of three, he had noticed my late change in the booking and was flexible enough...

Booking is easy through the website; included breakfast is ok for an Ibis...

This therefore means opinion leaders always plan out their itineraries in advance.

Customer experiences at check-in were also narrated. Speed and ease of check-in were the most highlighted:

... greeted at reception by two friendly guys. They checked us in quickly and I was soon on my way to my room on the 5th floor...

Despite it being only 8 in the morning, the hotel reception handled my taxi bill and the check in with speed and efficiency...

The folks working at this Hampton inn are all top notch - really helpful and quick at check-in, always cheerful when passing by, and quick check-out...

Overall, an excellent business hotel. Check in and out is efficient and helpful...

The online check in is really useful...

I arrived in the wee hours of the morning, just after half past four, but my room was ready, my check in swift and both the night receptionist and a cleaner sweeping the floor in the Lobby Cafe were prompt to offer take my luggage upstairs...

The check in staff, after I gave them my name, offered to escort me to the VIP check in facility as I was booked in a suite but they were cheerful and did the job just as well and with very keen enthusiasm...

Additionally, guests were surprised and excited if the check-in process included other services. These included food and drinks, and important information that guests may need to ease their stay in the location:

Check in was fast, but not very friendly, also no further advice or service provided...

When you check in you don't get just a welcome drink, you get welcome drink, snacks and hot food even! ...

The friendly salon check in with beverages was soothing...

The check in staff, answered a few questions about the neighbourhood of the hotel and recommended I should use the courtesy bus to the nearby Gautrain station and take the express train to O R Tambo the next day...

It is therefore important that guests' first experience with a hotel should be positive as this will set a tone of expectancy for the rest of their stay.

Equally, the professionalism with which check-out was handled was recounted. Check out reviews mentioned billing and payment procedures:

The check-in and check-out was inordinately delayed. The staff at the reception have poor knowledge and comprehension of English. Billing was messed up and had to be pointed out and redone...

Check out took a little time as my German company required the bill to be prepared in a certain way for fiscal reasons which doesn't match the IT system of the hotel...

Check out also included the ferrying of luggage to waiting cars:

On check out, the only slight problem was waiting around for someone to collect my substantial luggage and take it down to my waiting car...

Check out again was like a walk in the park, the same team on duty who checked me in and they made sure my bags were brought down and loaded into the shuttle bus before again escorting me to the vehicle to bid a final goodbye to me...

Time spent at check out, as well as the efficiency of staff at this stage evoked different feelings for customers:

Check out was also highly efficient...

Quiet and relaxing. Easy check in and check out...

Check out again was like a walk in the park, the same team on duty who checked me in....

I didn't feel the five star atmosphere, I had to wait in the queue for the check out almost 10 minutes until I was able to do so...

As other scholars state, reservations processes, reservation systems, ease and speed of checking in and out of a hotel can be a source of pleasure if handled well, or a source of great

customer dissatisfaction if mishandled. Allowing customers to book online, as well as allowing customers to check in online, and handling customers at the front desk with speed and efficiency are the recipe for customer satisfaction (Carroll & Siguaw, 2003; Kucukusta *et al.*, 2015; Mutisya, 2011; Sparks & Browning, 2011)

VIII. Wi-Fi

Opinion leaders were very keen to remark upon (un)availability of internet connection and Wi-Fi, which seems to be very important especially to today's connected guests as shown in table 4.28. Comments included:

.... free Wi-Fi available...

Join Accor Hotels for free unlimited Wi-Fi. Otherwise only two (consecutive) hours are free...

Wi-Fi is excellent at non-peak times of the day. When I woke up at 6am, I was impressed with the speed. By 7:30, it had slowed down considerably. I suspect the more people that use it, the slower it gets...

Electricity cut out for me a few times, but goes immediately back on. Sometimes the internet connection is lost. But Wi-Fi is complimentary and fast, so the occasional outages are not that much of a problem...

There was a safe, free Wi-Fi which worked...

Unfortunately the Wi-Fi didn't work....

Internet is inconsistent at best, no credit card payment...

Premium Internet access was VERY SLOW on the top floor...

The Wi-Fi was weak but worked - and was free...

There was free Wi-Fi which I find to be an essential requirement nowadays...

Wi-Fi and internet connectivity have become an essential requirement in hotels nowadays. The key features needed for internet connectivity to please guests seem to be two-fold: it should be fast, and it should be free.

In fact, just like other product offerings, the internet seems to be making it high in the list of core products expected from a hotel. This is shown by the fact that customers are ready to rate an establishment lowly just because of their internet speed:

Negative was just the internet that didn't work half of the time and I had to complain a few times...

Minus for internet, in our room it didn't work properly...

All the facilities are in place and up to four star standards, except that its Wi-Fi connectivity is chargeable. This erodes the rating which otherwise could have quality for a five star rating in terms of comfort level and facilities on board....

IX. Value for money

Value for money is when a customer performs a cost-benefit analysis and reaches an agreement that the price paid is worth the product/service offering. Opinion leaders found various ways to express their sentiments on what they considered was value for money for the products and services offered as shown in Table 4.28. Sometimes this was expressed succinctly:

Service was impeccable. Expensive but you get value for money...

The room rates of Bht850 and Bht1200 are affordable for all types of visitors. With the simple concept, the hotel is attracting constant guests all year round. In turn, the place is kept clean, fresh, and bright. All import daily items e.g. beddings, towels are clean and relatively new. Good value for money...

... they charged us the same \$65/night rate that we would have paid if they had valet-parked the car on premises. I find this unacceptable...

The All-Inclusive deal offers tremendous value for money with snacks and alcoholic drinks including selected cocktails also included...

The main key word when it comes to displaying what value is to them is the use of the word 'reasonable':

A great address if you are in the region and the price is really reasonable...

Very reasonable prices overall, including for restaurant and room service plus laundry...

And I also didn't like the price list for additional toilet items (razors, combs etc.) Clearly I have been spoiled by too many visits to nice, reasonably priced 5 star luxury hotels in Asia where such things are all free of charge and immediately available...

While the hotel may have many offerings, the most frequently mentioned in terms of providing value for money spent was food:

My son took breakfast outside for much less than the hotel breakfast...

Food in the hotel is expensive...

Be careful on breakfast--- seems it's no longer in all room packages, and its 35\$, which is ridiculous for a buffet. Room service is also VERY expensive...

We didn't take breakfast in the hotel as it was far too expensive...

The food was solid Dutch cooking, however not cheap (23,50 for a steak)...

Food is ok albeit a bit pricy...

I advise against having ANY meals at the restaurant; it is overpriced and service can be poor.

We bought cereal, milk, etc. at the general store for breakfast and brought Subway sandwiches back for dinner...

Value for money is therefore of significance to customers and is related to their satisfaction ratings (Mutisya, 2011). Customers like to feel that the prices they pay are proportionate to the products and services they receive in return. This is especially true of hotel with high prices and high ratings. This is because when prices are high and the ratings high as well, customers have higher expectations of the hotel. When these expectations aren't met, then guests end up thinking negatively about the hotel and rating the hotel lower (Avant, 2013; Fernandez-Barcala, Gonzalez-Diaz, & Prieto-Rodriguez, 2009;)

X. Activity

To add to their narrative and create a clear picture, some participants talked about activities that they undertook during their stay at the hotel as shown in Table 4.28. The activities were varied, indicating the various reasons of travel:

10 of us stayed here on a golf break to celebrate a friend's 60th birthday...

I was there on business and everything went very smoothly...

Conference services ok...

The park also has many fine trails to hike...

It is disappointing that you have to pay extra for all the fun sports such as scuba diving and a number of other water sports. It is also disappointing that you have to book the free sports in advance...

We enjoyed the pool and also the Jet Ski equipment--- much fun and well supervised. They have good equipment for Jet Ski, banana boat, kayaks-- all with life jackets...

Activities were not necessarily limited to the hotel premises:

I would return there to have more game drives, as the one drive in the morning, while rewarding in terms of game, was just not enough...

Many guests are here because of the amusement park and racing track nearby...

XI. Loyalty Status

Though ranking the lowest in themes analysed, loyalty status is mentioned by opinion leaders a number of times as shown in Table 4.25. This is in relation to membership status in hotels, and room upgrades received during travel. Opinion leaders seemed to be keen on invoking their rights as loyalty members mostly to get upgraded rooms and any additional perks that came along with membership.

“Smooth check-in and upgrade for Platinum PC was nice as I got king studio.” ...

“Received pleasant SPG platinum upgrade to a suite with two rooms (small desk in bedroom though rather than in sitting room)” ...

As a Platinum IC member was offered an upgrade also ...

Marriott gold status was well recognized with an upgrade to a nice refurbished corner room and free parking...

We had the privilege of booking the Grande Bretagne hotel on SPG points and cash, and were able to use three of our suite night awards for this stay...

Our room was a privilege room (I am platinum with Accor) on the fourth floor...

Membership helped in ensuring repeat business as customers tend to always stick with a trusted brand. This is a potential goldmine for hospitality marketers, as it is cheaper to maintain a customer than to gain new ones.

I am a gold level HHonors member and try to stay within the brand when I travel...

Opinion leaders were a bit disappointed when their loyalty points did not earn them perks:

As with most flagship Hiltons, don't expect any special treatment with your HHonors status as they'll follow the book to the "T". For instance, some properties will upgrade gold members to the executive floor, but not this one...

... by two delightful receptionists who politely played along with my banter in my failed attempt to get a superior room (my club membership apparently meant nothing here)...

Even though I was a HH-gold member, there was no offer of an upgrade and they probably gave me one of the worst locations for the room...

4.9.2.2 Context

Context refers to the story behind the review. Opinion leaders show a tendency to give a brief background to the review, and especially what drove their decision to check into a specific hotel. Of the reviews analysed, 33.8% mentioned the context of the review as shown in Table 4.28. Opinion leaders use very descriptive language to make the reader feel as if they are experiencing the moment along with them.

Context was classified using phrases which had reference to prior visits e.g.

... I was staying here five years ago and was surprised at the difference! ...

... we have been coming to this fine pub for years...”

Context was also applied if reviewers give a brief back story of why they were in the particular hotel e.g.

... my company booked the hotel for my 3 night business trip recently...”

“10 of us stayed here on a golf break to celebrate a friend's 60th birthday”...

Context was also applied if reviewers gave a historical background of the hotel, whether it was the history of the hotel itself or of past guests.

“The Casa cu Cerb was the choice of HRH Charles, the Prince of Wales when he came to Sighisoara...”

“The property was built years back when the area was newly developed....”

“With a presidential history this hotel holds pride of place....”

“I was just a little apprehensive to see if the change of ownership from the Intercontinental hotel group to Ayana would have any negative impact...”

“The Nyali beach Voyager resort may be 40 years old but it is still going strong”...

4.9.2.3 Practical.

When we say opinion leaders are practical, we mean that they encountered service failures and dealt with them practically, to conditions favourable to them. These include instances involving meals, luggage, money spending, and even accessing the hotel on satellite navigation.

“After calling the bell desk twice I gave up waiting and dragged my four pieces of luggage down to reception on my own...”

“I tried one of the restaurants in the hotel (29 Grill) but I found the prices to be exorbitant. So I simply walked out of the hotel to find somewhere nearby... Later I stopped off at a local Seven/Eleven store, picked up some snacks and came back to my room...”

“As I was only leaving on a late, evening flight, I checked out after breakfast and left my luggage in storage with the concierge as I went to work in the building just behind the hotel. Later, after evening dinner, I collected my luggage, went down to the changing rooms in the pool area to change out of my suit into comfortable clothing for the long flight back to Europe...”

“Clearing tables at lunch was slow at best and I and one of my colleagues subsequently twice cleared a table ourselves to allow us sit down...”

“I took one of the available baggage trolleys from near the reception to take my bags upstairs as the hotel had no porter available, not something I really missed...”

“The bedside table was filthy-- and I cleaned it my first evening, turning a white towel black with the grime...”

“We bought cereal, milk, etc. at the general store for breakfast and brought Subway sandwiches back for dinner...”

4.9.3 Travel Type vs. Themes

A cross-tabulation of travel type and emergent themes further indicates that the top mentioned themes by opinion leaders across the board were location, facility, room and staff. In fact, aspects of the facility (i.e. parking, pool, spa, gym, and ambience) were the top mentioned in all travel types except when opinion leaders travelled solo. When traveling solo, opinion leaders mostly mentioned the location of the hotel (including views and how to access the hotel) and the hotel room.

Table 4.27: Cross-tabulation of travel type vs. themes

THEME RANK	Travelled solo	Travelled as a couple	Travelled as a family	Travelled with friends	Travelled for business
1	Location	Facility	Facility	Facility	Facility
2	Room	Location	Location	Location	Location
3	Facility	Staff	Staff	Room	Room
4	Food	Room	Room	Staff	Staff
5	Staff	Food	Food	Food	Food
6	Wi-Fi/ Internet	Experience	Context	Context	Experience
7	Context	Context	Experience	Wi-Fi/ Internet	Reservations
8	Experience	Reservations	Value for money	Value for money	Context
9	Loyalty status	Value for money	Reservations	Experience	Wi-Fi/ Internet
10	Value for money	Wi-Fi/ Internet	Wi-Fi/ Internet	Activity	Value for money
11	Practical	Loyalty status	Practical	Reservations	Activity
12	Reservations	Activity	Activity	Practical	Practical
13	Activity	Practical	Loyalty status	Loyalty status	Loyalty status

Source: Research data (2018)

When traveling for business, opinion leaders cared most about the facility as a whole and the location of the hotel; and least about loyalty status. This is an interesting result as it was expected that as the most frequent travellers, business travellers would mention and use their loyalty statuses more. Opinion leaders were more concerned about reservations, when traveling for business than when traveling for leisure.

When travelling in a group - friends or family, opinion leaders ranked value for money aspects higher. Travellers in groups also mentioned the context of the stay more, giving details about the hotel's history and their decision process of selecting the hotel. Travellers who travelled

as a family are more likely to provide context for their visit than any other traveller. Solo travellers care the least about reservations and activities carried out in or around the hotel, while those who travelled as a couple cared least about being practical when faced with difficult situations. Loyalty status relating to upgrades and other favours enjoyed as a result of membership was mentioned most frequently by solo travellers as opposed to opinion leaders who travelled with friends, as a family or on business. Interestingly, Wi-Fi/Internet mentions were referenced more when traveling solo than with other people.

When travelling with friends, none of the opinion leader reviews sampled mentioned loyalty status or the need to be practical. Mentions for reservations and activity undertaken were extremely low. The need for Wi-Fi/internet also ranks higher when reviewers travelled with friends than other travel styles. When traveling as a couple, food and room were among the top five themes referenced by reviewers. Staff behaviour (friendliness, attentiveness, speed of service and language of communication) ranked the highest when reviewers travelled as a couple more than all other travel styles.

4.9.4 Message Content

Heuristic systematic analysis of reviews by opinion leaders analysed reviews' heuristics (review length, hotel ratings and pictures) and systematic cues (cognitive, affective, positive emotion and negative emotion). Heuristic cues were analysed using SPSS v20 while systematic cues were analysed using LIWC. Results are presented in Table 4.28.

Table 4.28: Explanation and descriptive Statistics for textual content of opinion leader reviews

Variable	Descriptive	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Review length	Refers to the number of words in the review	32	1781	169.84	219.51
Hotel rating	Refers to the star rating the OL gives the hotel	1	5	4	1.125
Cognitive	Refers to beliefs about product attributes	2.75	10.27	7.50	1.55
Affective	Refers to feelings and emotions towards a product	3.85	11.45	6.61	1.89
Positive emotion	Refers to positive sentiment towards product	3.20	11.25	5.69	1.97
Negative emotion	Refers to negative sentiment towards product	0.0	1.69	0.72	0.41
Clout	Refers to confidence or leadership displayed through writing	26.27	86.69	61.05	13.94
Analytical thinking	Refers to critical, methodical and rational thinking displayed through writing	63.85	97.21	85.62	8.61

Source: Research data (2018)

Table 4.29: Explanation and descriptive statistics for pictorial content of opinion leader reviews

Variable	Descriptive	Present (%)	Absent (%)
Pictures	Refers to whether there were pictures or not	293 (69.9%)	126 (30.1%)

Source: Research data (2018)

4.9.4.1 Heuristic Cues.

Average review length by opinion leaders was 169.84 (SD = 219.51) words as shown in table 4.30. The highest review count was 1,781 words. This indicates that opinion leaders are very descriptive and tend to go into great detail to describe products and services experienced. Average hotel rating by opinion leaders was 4(SD = 1.125) as shown in Table 4.30. On a scale of 1-5, on average, opinion leaders therefore rated their stay above average. This high score may partly be as a result of staying at luxury hotels as 47.7% of opinion leaders had indicated that they are luxury travellers. Researchers have had conflicting results about ratings by reviewers. On one hand, research shows that luxury hotels and generally 5-star hotels are rated most favourably on TripAdvisor (Chua & Banerjee, 2013). On the other hand, researchers argue that more expensive hotels with a higher rating are likely to attract negative reviews because guests have higher expectations of the property as a result of read reviews. When the hotel does not meet preconceived standards, customers then rate it negatively (Avant, 2013; Chuang *et al.*, 2012; Fernandez-Barcala *et al.*, 2009). The differences may have come about due to ratings that were being studied. For example, further research has shown that ratings for ratings for cleanliness and locations positively affected hotel performance while ratings for purchase value negatively affected performance (Phillips *et al.*, 2016; Xie, Zhang & Zhang, 2014).

With regard to presence of pictures in reviews, it was found that 69.9% of opinion leaders attached pictures as shown in Table 4.31. This indicates the desire by opinion leaders to provide as much detailed information as possible, thereby including pictures to support their narrative. It also shows opinion leaders' desire to use multiple methods to communicate their

message, and suggests opinion leaders' knowledge sharing characteristic. This supports previous findings which suggest that opinion leaders possess a richer knowledge of products and are more driven to share information and opinion within the community in great detail (Kaiser & Bodendorf, 2012; Yap, Soetarto & Sweeney, 2013; Wang & Chen, 2012; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014)

Opinion leaders are generally expressive and provide vivid descriptions of their experiences to benefit other customers. They also are highly likely to attach pictures to accompany their descriptions as they purpose to share a holistic picture of their experience. This suggests conscientiousness and their desire to discuss at length products they are familiar with. They should therefore be provided with platforms that give them opportunities to be visible and communicate with other customers about their travel. Management and interactive websites can incorporate them into their digital marketing strategies more through tactics such as letting them handle their Twitter or Instagram accounts for a period of time. This direct interaction with fellow customers on interactive and vibrant channels not only provides the opinion leaders to apply their travel expertise, it might build a closer relationship between customers and the brand.

Opinion leaders' average ratings of hotels were pretty high (4 out of 5). This suggests that globally, the hospitality industry is excelling in satisfying customer needs. As frequent travellers who reach all parts of the world and experience a range of services, this is a great endorsement to service providers. This high rating should lead to boosts in revenue as eWOM is disseminated far and wide. Parties that are most likely to benefit from this are hotels which

have little online visibility either due to being in the developmental stages of brand development or those in highly competitive markets.

4.9.4.2 Systematic Cues

Cognitive statistics were 7.5 (SD = 1.58) while affective statistics were 6.61 (SD = 2.66) as shown in Table 4.30. This means that 7.5% of all the reviews were cognitive while 6.61% were affective. This shows that opinion leaders are more likely to use rational and logical words to describe their stay than emotional words. Their descriptions are more from a reasoning, rational perspective about product attributes. They are less likely to overstate feelings they might have towards the product. Previous research has shown significant positive effect of cognitive aspects in driving customer engagement in online brand communities (Dessart *et al.*, 2015), and in offering personalized, user-centric customisation during online shopping (Cyr *et al.*, 2009; Kamis *et al.*, 2008; Pappas *et al.*, 2015; Shen, 2012; Zhou *et al.*, 2013).

Affective aspects of WOM have also been found to persuade recipients of WOM messages and influence their use of user generated content for travel planning (Ayeh, 2012; Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007; Soetarto, Yap, & Sweeney, 2009;). Used together, both cognitive and affective aspects work hand in hand to determine the effectiveness of a message. A combination of cognitive (reliability, detail and information clarity) and affective elements (richness of communication, tone, vivid language and descriptive words) create an effective message (Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007; Soetarto, Yap, & Sweeney, 2009; Yap *et al.*, 2013)

With regard to emotional content of the review, positive emotion (M=5.69, SD=2.01) was indicated to be higher than negative emotion (M=0.72, SD=0.41). This indicates that positive

sentiments in opinion leader reviews were much higher than negative reviews, by more than 5 times. Therefore, sentiments expressed by opinion leaders were more positive than negative, meaning their evaluation of products and services was positive. Previous studies into psychological meanings of words expressed on online review communities suggest that people who scored high on extraversion (of which opinion leaders might share this trait) used more social words and positive emotion, and engage more in social interactions (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

Research has commonly found negativity bias in reviews, where negative reviews are found to be more influential than positive reviews (King, Racherla & Bush, 2014; Lehman, Kovacs & Carroll, 2018; Yin, Bond & Zhang, 2014). However, a different school of thought suggests negative emotion reviews seem to be inauthentic and irrational. Even though they are more influential, negative emotion reviews are found to be invaluable and have less informational value as consumers find them irrational (Kim, Xu & Gupta, 2010). Positive emotions help to build a weak brand (Dessart et al., 2015) while images that create positive emotions stimulate approach responses such as the urge to recommend a product (Lin, Lu & Wu, 2012).

The results show the measure for clout to be 61.05% (SD=14.22) as shown in Table 4.30. This indicates that 61.05% of each review written by opinion leaders expresses confidence and leadership. This means that opinion leaders are self-assured in their communication of their travel experiences. It also shows they know their position of leadership as widely travelled members and thus write authoritatively. This is supported by previous research which finds opinion leaders as experts in their specific product domain due to heavy product usage and

higher spending (Goldsmith & Foxall, 2003; Flynn *et al.*, 1996; Van de Brink & Rusinowska, 2013)

Finally, reviews reflected analytical thinking at 85.62% (SD=8.78) as shown in Table 4.30. This means that each review scored 85.62% on average when analysed for opinion leaders' analytical thinking/skills. This indicates a very high score for opinion leaders in terms of rationality, and systematic and logical thinking. This reflects earlier results on cognitive statistics and agrees with previous research into opinion leaders' roles and activity in communities and the process through which they establish a leadership position (Zhang, *et al.* 2015). Research also shows that opinion leaders provide clear, strong evidence and logical discussions as well as a high quality of argument (Kaiser & Bodendorf, 2012; Zhang, *et al.*, 2015)

Opinion leaders are very expressive both logically and emotionally. There is clarity and logic in the way they describe experiences which confirms their analytical skills. This suggests that they are able to communicate in a rational way whether or not they had a good experience at a hotel. However, as rational as they may be, their reviews are still able to have affective connotations, thus are able to tell a story with necessary emotive language that connects to readers, without taking away from effectively communicating travel experiences and product attributes. From their vast traveling experience, opinion leaders are probably more perceptive of product and service attributes and can easily evaluate quality provided. This may aid managers when designing marketing messages targeted to this segment. By understanding their communication style, it will be easy for managers to create digital campaigns that would speak directly to this group.

Opinion leaders display high positive emotions in their writing, and this portrays them as authentic. They also write authoritatively as they probably consider themselves more knowledgeable than general travellers. These are characteristics they may be interested in reinforcing as they protect their reputations in social media spaces. These traits are also essential for reputation building. Authenticity and trust are basic foundations for a reputable opinion leader, and are traits that would ensure longevity in a particular community. They, in all probability, search for more information from other sources such that as they communicate, they are able to provide a true picture. For that reason, it is important that opinion leaders be supplied with adequate, rich information from authoritative sources so that they may communicate this information to other customers. Likewise, website designers can provide a digital space where customers can easily get in touch with opinion leaders and directly engage them.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The findings are based on four main sources of data: experiment, observation, questionnaire and content analysis. TripAdvisor, the largest online travel website was selected.

5.2 Summary of Findings

The summary of the findings are based on data collected and analysed in relation to research objectives and hypotheses. The general objective of this study was to determine who opinion leaders are in an online setting; observe the characteristics they exhibit and measure their influence on the purchase of the hotel product in Kenya. The specific objectives that guided the study were: - To examine the influence of opinion leaders' reviews on the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya; To determine the influence of non-opinion leaders' travel reviews on the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya; To investigate the moderating effect of management responses to opinion leader and non-opinion leader travel reviews on the purchase of hotel products and services in Kenya; To determine who the opinion leaders in an online forum are; To investigate the personal characteristics of travel opinion leaders online; and To explore the online communication behaviour of opinion leaders online of the hotel product in Kenya. Based on these objectives, null hypothesis and research questions were set and tested in the study and are presented below.

5.2.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics

From the analysis of demographics, respondents were equally distributed in terms of age. In regard to age, majority (63.5%) of the respondents were Millennials (21-40 years old). More

than half (52.9%) of the respondents had at least a bachelor's degree. Africa produced the highest percentage of respondents (46.9%), followed by Europe (20.8%). Majority of respondents (86.8%) indicated that they had travelled in the past two years. Respondents used peer-to-peer sites more (Facebook.com = 39.6%) for information about travel than review and booking sites (Hotels.com = 38.5), Booking.com =32.3%). Opinion leaders are trusted because they provide authentic, reliable and credible information (24.6%). They are also trusted because they are considered travel experts (16.4%).

5.2.2 Summary of Findings on Objective One: To Determine the Influence of Opinion Leaders Reviews on the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

In terms of the first objective, opinion leaders seem to exert some influence to other tourists' choice of hotel products. Correlations, Regressions and One-way between-subjects ANOVA were performed. A 2x2x2 between-subjects ANOVA revealed an effect for opinion leader reviews ($F(1,328) = 18.415, p < .001, \alpha = .05$). They are bound to be more influential when they post positive comments ($M=3.773$) than when they post negative comments ($M=3.102$). Their positive comments are not misconstrued as baseless, untrue or as marketing gimmicks. Likewise, this shows that other customers believe in the good intentions of opinion leaders, and trust that they (opinion leaders) know what they are writing about. Management of hotels and website creators should therefore find an easier way of ensuring an opinion leaders' profile is more visible and easy to glean off information at a glance. The null hypothesis that stated that there was no significant relationship between opinion leader reviews and consumer purchase of the hotel product was rejected ($p < .001$).

5.2.3 Summary of Findings on Objective Two: To Determine the Influence of Non-Opinion Leaders Reviews on the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

The second objective sought to examine the influence of non-opinion leaders' reviews on the purchase of the hotel product. Correlations, Regressions, and One way between-subjects ANOVA were performed. A 2x2x2 between-subjects ANOVA revealed an effect for non-opinion leader reviews ($F(1,329) = 11.362, p = .001, \alpha = .05$). Valence of the review written by non-opinion leaders shows an influence other customers' purchase intention. Customers are more influenced when non-opinion leaders write positive reviews ($M=3.701$) about it than when the reviews are negative ($M=3.174$). Likewise, the volume of reviews read will influence whether customers choose to purchase hotel products or not. The null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between non-opinion leaders' reviews and consumer purchase of the hotel product was rejected ($p < .001$).

5.2.4 Summary of Findings on Objective Three: To investigate the Moderating Effect of Management Responses to Opinion Leader and Non-Opinion Leader Reviews on the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

The results showed that management responses to opinion leader and non-opinion leader reviews had a moderating effect on purchasing of hotel products. A one-way 2X2X2 between subjects ANOVA was conducted. There is insufficient evidence that when considered together, reviews from opinion leaders and the management response to these reviews influence purchasing intentions of customers ($F(1,328) = .192, p = .661$). However, means were lower when management responded to opinion leaders' reviews ($M=3.626; M=3.024$) than when they do not respond ($M=3.919; M=3.180$). Managers' responses to opinion leader

reviews therefore reduced the effect of opinion leaders on purchase. A response from management to an opinion leaders' review is appreciated when opinion leaders have positive reviews. When opinion leaders' reviews are negative, it is advisable to management not to respond to the review.

There was a significant moderating effect of management responses to non-opinion leader reviews on purchasing hotel products ($F(1,328) = 5.961, p = .015$). Trust in a non-opinion leader's review is dependent on the valence of the review. When a non-opinion leader's review is positive, customers are more likely to purchase products if there is backup information from the management on the particular review ($M=3.779$). However, when a review is negative, the presence of a manager's reply reduces the likelihood of customers booking the hotel ($M=2.871$).

5.2.5 Summary of Findings on Objective Four: To Investigate who Opinion Leaders in an Online Forum are

The fourth objective was to determine who the opinion leaders in an online forum were. Using data from observation forms and questionnaires, 534 members were identified. These were then subjected to the 'Seven Degree Index', realizing 53 members, the top 10% of the group. The tool was considered a satisfactory measure of opinion leadership having taken into account opinion leadership attributes suggested by other researchers. It is the first time the 'Seven Degree Index' tool has been used to measure opinion leadership within a continuous and constantly evolving online community.

5.2.6 Summary of Findings on Objective Five: To explore the Personal Characteristics of Travel Opinion Leaders Online

The fifth objective sought to analyse the personal characteristics opinion leaders display in an online setting. Half (51%), of the population of opinion leaders are above 50 years with majority of them being male (54.7%). They mainly use pseudonyms (66% online and do not display personal photos on their profiles (60.4%). A larger percentage of opinion leaders were from North America (45.3%) and Europe (24.5%). In terms of travel type, they are mostly foodies (54.5%), nature lovers (52.3%), history buffs (50%) and luxury travellers (47.7%). Opinion leaders mainly travel for business (39%).

5.2.7 Summary of Findings on Objective Six: To explore the Online Communication Behaviour of Opinion Leaders on Hotel Products in Kenya

The sixth objective sought to determine communication behaviour exhibited by opinion leaders online. Qualitative data was collected, analysed, and themes developed. Themes revolved around hotel attributes communication about their overall experience at the hotel. The top 15 attributes by opinion leaders were: Room, Parking, Experience, Activity, Staff, Loyalty status, Location, Food, Transport, Wi-Fi/Internet, value for money, Reservations, and Facility. Location was the most mentioned theme in the reviews (16.68%), followed by Room (15.73%), Public areas (15.06%), Staff (14.01%), Food (12.91%), and Experiences (6.05%). Opinion leaders show a tendency to give a brief background to the review (Context= 6.15%), and especially what drove their decision to check into a specific hotel.

Opinion leaders are practical, and their reviews contain both heuristic and systematic cues. They are very descriptive (averaging 169 words per review) and tend to go into great detail to

describe products and services experienced. Majority of opinion leaders attach pictures (69.9%) to their reviews to support their narrative. They rated hotels very highly (4/5) and majority were luxury travellers. They are also more likely to use rational and logical words to describe their stay than emotional words. Their descriptions are more from a reasoning, rational perspective about product attributes. They communicate both affectively (6.61%) and cognitively (7.5%), which is one of the most effective modes of communication. Positive sentiments (5.69%) in opinion leader reviews were much higher than negative reviews (0.72%), by more than 5 times. Reviews written by opinion leaders convey confidence and leadership (61.05%). Opinion leaders score very highly in terms of rationality, and systematic and logical thinking (85.62%).

5.3 Conclusions

Tourism is a major contributor to the Kenyan economy and a key sector in the economic pillar of Vision 2030. Strategies toward realizing higher revenues and decent work and economic growth need to be put in place, according to SDG number 8. Learning how customers behave in online communities will help a destination/hotel/attraction in the creation of marketing promotions, especially subliminal marketing campaigns. Likewise, it will inform decisions for integrated marketing communications. Understanding customers, and in essence opinion leaders, will aid in the behavioural targeting of marketing campaigns. By knowing the personality of the people being targeted, marketing communications can be nuanced in a way that it resonates with these strategic influential groups. These marketing communications will in turn target people of similar characteristics. This would aid in achieving Vision 2030 goals in the Tourism sector, in programmes such as Development of Niche Products, Business and

Conference Tourism Initiatives, Destination Marketing Programmes, and ultimately, Marketing Kenya.

5.3.1 Conclusions Based on Objective One: To Examine the Influence of Opinion Leaders' Reviews on the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

Opinion leader reviews are considered to be more reliable than those from other members, with opinions more likely to be accepted thereby leading to higher adoption intention. Customers tend to believe opinion leaders' reviews more than any other information they receive, including information from management. Credibility of the reviewer, provision of reliable information, expertise in travel and travel related activities and social ties are the major reasons other consumers trust opinion leader reviews.

Marketers need to carefully identify opinion leaders and utilize them alongside other integrated marketing communications strategies to reach customers. Opinion leaders ought to be actively encouraged to share their experiences in their online communities. One way of doing this is by offering them complementary products, services and experiences and thereafter sharing their experiences with others in their communities of influence.

Opinion leaders can be incorporated during product design and diversification stages to share the views of customers from the viewpoint of an expert traveller. They can also be used as focus groups during product design and diversification and designing effective marketing campaigns.

Marketing campaigns can be designed with opinion leaders in mind. By targeting this core group, marketers will in turn reach the target market as they share similar characteristics. Observing how opinion leaders react to activity from marketers e.g. adverts can help to deduce

the reaction of the target market. Therefore, they can be used as an experimental group for major marketing strategies.

Opinion leaders have been displayed by other authors to engage in a two-way discussion with followers. However, this rarely happens on TripAdvisor as communication is one way and engagement with followers is minimal. Nevertheless, their impact is still felt. This adds extensions to Source Credibility theory in aspects such as clout and authenticity.

5.3.2 Conclusions Based on Objective Two: To Determine the Influence of Non-Opinion Leaders Reviews on the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

Non-opinion leaders are not trusted as credible and reliable sources of information. Unless they occur in large numbers, non-opinion leader reviews are often doubted. Marketers should encourage customers, irrespective of position held in a community to share their experiences online. It is essential to package tourism and hospitality products in a way that excites and encourages peer-to-peer online sharing and recommendation. This will aid other customers in travel decision making. . Increased peer-to-peer sharing will increase number of reviews, which in turn gives an overall valence to hotel/destinations/attractions.

5.3.3 Conclusions Based on Objective Three: To Investigate the Moderating Effect of Management Responses to Opinion Leader and Non-opinion Leader Reviews on the Purchase of Hotel Products in Kenya

Purchase intention is lowered when management responds to any opinion leader review. It may therefore not be prudent for managers to respond to opinion leader reviews. However, the effect is different when it comes to combining opinion leaders and other reviewers. When an opinion leader writes a positive review but non-opinion leader writes a negative review, it

is wise for management not to respond. Management response in such situations drastically reduces the intention for customers to purchase products. Alternately, when an opinion leader writes a negative review while others write positive reviews, it is best for management to have an appropriate response. Ignoring reviews in this case reduces the chances of customers purchasing hotel products.

The manager's best time to respond is when all reviewers write positive comments, as it increases the booking intention of other customers. However, even if a manager does not respond, it will not affect the purchase intention of customers. Conversely, the worst time for a manager to respond is when all reviews from both opinion leaders and non-opinion leaders are negative.

5.3.4 Conclusions Based on Objective Four: To Determine who Opinion Leaders in an Online Forum Are

The Seven-Degree Index is a sound instrument to use in identifying opinion leadership in evolving communities that have been in place, bearing in mind behaviour changes over time and communities where participants have had a chance to grow into positions of influence.

5.3.5 Conclusions Based on Objective Five: To Explore the Personal Characteristics of Travel Opinion Leaders Online

Opinion leaders for destination Kenya are males from the baby boomer generation and are averse to self-disclosure in online settings. They are from the main Kenyan Tourism source markets and travel mainly for business. Understanding personal characteristics will aid marketers to better focus on understanding and fulfilling tourist needs. Marketers need to design, package and promote destinations/hotels/attractions in a way that resonates with

opinion leaders who in turn will influence the desired target groups. If marketers know the personality of the people they are targeting, then marketing promotions can be designed in a way that communicates effectively.

5.3.6 Conclusions Based on Objective Six: To Explore the Online Communication Behaviour of Opinion Leaders on Hotel Products in Kenya

Opinion leaders communicate most about a hotel's location, room, public areas and staff members. They were highly likely to attach pictures to their reviews. Opinion leaders are more likely to use rational and logical words than emotional words. Their descriptions are more from a reasoning, rational perspective about product attributes. Opinion leaders are therefore self-assured in their communication of their travel experiences and thus write authoritatively. They also score very highly in terms of rationality, and systematic and logical thinking.

5.4 Recommendations

This research has major implications for destination management organisations, hotel managers, online travel agents, and marketing and social media managers in the tourism and hospitality industry. In line with the outlined conclusions, the study makes the following recommendations:

5.4.1 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- i. The study findings showed the relative influence of opinion leaders' reviews in influencing the booking intention of other customers. There is therefore need by marketers to concentrate on this market segment; identify, anticipate and respond to their travel needs appropriately. Travel packages that directly and uniquely cater to them should be created.

- ii. Hospitality marketers, as well as KTB should identify and engage with opinion leaders from various source markets and integrate them into their marketing promotions to improve brand image.
- iii. Management responses to reviews should be carried out strategically in a manner that positively influences other customers. Carefully choosing which reviews to respond to, will increase booking intention of customers.
- iv. There is need to ensure the most significant aspects of a guest's stay are enhanced to enhance customer satisfaction. Aspects that matter to frequent travellers e.g. hotel's location, rooms, public areas and the members of staff should be refined.
- v. Marketers should incentivize customers to share their experiences in online communities in order to increase the spread and reach of eWOM.
- vi. Websites can be designed to maximize on highlighting a number of reviews from different members, and showing the authenticity of these reviews. As much as possible, the sites should be designed in a way that focuses on communicating product attributes as soon and as frequently as possible.
- vii. Management of hotels and website creators should find an easier way of ensuring opinion leaders' profile is more visible and easy to glean off information at a glance. This can be done either by highlighting names, providing visible trophies or even displaying opinion leaders' profile pictures and supporting information in different colours from the rest of the population.
- viii. Local and county governments can provide support in the developing a destination image adapted to changing tastes and new market segments. As technological approaches advance, there is a ripple effect on marketing approaches as consumers are

increasingly tech-savvy. The Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of ICT should come up with policies towards monitoring the spread of fake reviews that hurt tourism businesses. Fake reviews could hurt the business and the image of the destination.

- ix. The study recommends that KTB partners with opinion leaders and influencers to enhance brand communication from the eyes of a customer. This would aid in developing niche products such as mountaineering, kayaking, and beach sports.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Further Research

This study recommends studies in the following areas:

- i. There is need to further assess the relative effect of other TripAdvisor features e.g. price, location, hotel pictures, hotel ratings, amenities etc. in influencing customer intention to book.
- ii. There is need to analyse the influence of opinion leader reviews when other external factors are employed such as time of the year, peak/off-peak seasons, temporal cues in the review, travel styles of customers and other influencing socio-demographics.
- iii. There is need for a comparative study of opinion leaders' influence between tangible products and experience products should be carried out.
- iv. There is need for a comparative study on opinion leaders' profiles and communication strategies across selected African destinations.
- v. There is need to perform a longitudinal study that follows a traveller all through the purchase journey, noting websites and people that influence actual booking of hotels over a long period of time in order to observe purchasing behaviour customers and the relative influence of opinion leaders.

- vi. Studies should be carried out on other networking sites to investigate whether the same aspects influencing purchase on TripAdvisor are the same on other sites, as well as for other products.
- vii. There is need to assess the relative impact of other review features on TripAdvisor e.g. pictures, videos, and ratings on influencing customer intention to book.
- viii. The ‘Seven Degree Index’ should be applied to other platforms on websites that share the same characteristics as TripAdvisor or websites of high involvement products, in order to fine tune the instrument to be a true way of measuring opinion leadership.

5.5 Contribution to Knowledge

The study made the following contributions to the existing body of knowledge and practice on opinion leadership.

- i. The study improved on an existing index to identify opinion leadership in a continually evolving online community
- ii. The study contributed to existing literature by observing opinion leaders over a long period of time, irrespective of seasonality and time of year to conclusively report on observed behaviour.
- iii. The study added to existing literature by highlighting more differences between opinion leaders online and offline, and their modes of communications, characteristics and personal exposure.
- iv. The study also added to existing literature the influence of management response to online reviews in influencing customers’ purchasing intentions.

- v. The study has provided an extension of the Source Credibility theory as it has added knowledge to aspects of clout and authenticity in communities where it is apparent where you get your expertise from, therefore, people don't have to guess.

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APPENDIXES**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Domestic and International Tourist****Section A: Opinion leadership**

Dear Sir/Madam

I am a PhD student in Hospitality Management at Kenyatta University. As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting a survey on **The role of Online Opinion Leaders in Purchasing of Hotel Services in Kenya**. I would greatly appreciate it if you took time to fill this short survey. Your response is crucial to the study in helping us understand how people influence each other online while purchasing hotel services. **It will not take more than 15 minutes.**

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you must be 18 years or older. Your responses will be kept anonymous and used for research purposes only.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

For further enquiries, kindly contact me through nyabisi.mengo@gmail.com.

Nyabisi Mengo, PhD candidate

Kenyatta University

Screening question: The aim of this study is to investigate the influence of members' reviews in purchasing hospitality services. Therefore, if you have never read TripAdvisor reviews when planning a trip, please terminate the survey now.

- I have recently used TripAdvisor and agree to continue

Section 1: Demographic information

1. What is your gender?

MALE

FEMALE

PREFER NOT TO SAY

2. How old are you?

3. What is your level of education?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Below 20 years</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>21-30 years</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>31-40 years</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>41-55 years</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>over 55 years</i>

<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>High school or less</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Diploma</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Some college, not completed</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Bachelors degree</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Postgraduate degree</i>

4. In what region of the world do you reside?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>North America</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Central America</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Europe</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Asia</i>

<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>South America</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Africa</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Middle East</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Orient</i>

YES

NO

5. Have you taken a trip in the last 2 years?

6. Before going on a trip, which of these online sources did you use to get more information about your destination?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>TripAdvisor</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Expedia</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Facebook</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Hotels.com</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Booking.com</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Instagram</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Virtualtourist</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>YouTube</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Lonelyplanet</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Trivago</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Other</i> _____		

Section 2 : TripAdvisor Members

Please recall the reviews you have read from other members on TripAdvisor. Of the members who post reviews on TripAdvisor, which one(s) best represents the statements below?

1. This member has posted a high number of reviews on TripAdvisor.

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

2. When this member talks about their experiences, they are very descriptive and share a lot of information in great detail. They always explain their experiences in totality. Their posts are informative and quite helpful.

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

3. This member seems to have visited many new hotels. They seem to know a lot about new hotels, restaurants and attractions than other people do.

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

4. If I wanted to visit a new hotel or attraction or restaurant, I would read this member's reviews to see what their experience was.

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

5. They readily answer any questions asked in the best possible way.

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

6. In general they seem to always be among the first to visit a new hotel, restaurant or attraction. Their posts are always among the first in a new attraction and they have a few Explorer badges.

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

Name of the member: _____

7. Are there any other reasons why you trust posts of the people you mentioned above?

8. We are interested in the reviews you have read from the members you have mentioned above. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Opinion Leader Reviews	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
If they write a positive review about a hotel I have never visited, I would be inclined to visit the place					
If they write a positive review about a hotel I have been to before, I would be glad for their stamp of approval					
Reviews from them made me book a specific hotel					
The more travel experience a TripAdvisor member has, the more seriously I consider their opinion					

Section 3: Other Information on TripAdvisor

In this section, we are interested in other information you see on TripAdvisor.

9. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Other Webpage details	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
When I read reviews on the TripAdvisor page, I consider reviews from many members before I decide to book a hotel					
When I read reviews on the TripAdvisor page, I always look at the member's profile					
When deciding to book a hotel for the first time, if majority of the reviews I read are positive, I will book the hotel					

10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Management's response	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
How a manager responds to customer reviews will influence my decision to book a hotel					
A manager's reply to a positive comment review will influence whether I will book a hotel or not					
A manager's lack of reply to a negative comment will influence whether I will book a hotel or not					

Section 4:

11. In this section, we would like to know your booking habits the first and subsequent times you visit a hotel.

Booking habits	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
If I am booking a hotel for the first time, reviews I read online will influence me to book a specific hotel					
If I am booking a hotel for the first time, I always look out for information from management					
If I have visited a hotel before and I find negative reviews online, I will not visit again					
If I have visited a hotel before and it has positive reviews online, I will always go back there					

12. What other information encountered on the TripAdvisor page influences your decision to book a hotel?

Appendix II: Observation Form

Contributor	The Connected Degree, <i>Coi</i>	The Attention Degree, <i>Ati</i>	The Activity Degree, <i>Aci</i>	The Posts Degree, <i>Ti</i>	New Product Purchase, <i>NPi</i>	New Product Owners hip, <i>NOi</i>	New Product Knowledge, <i>NKi</i>
1	Help _____ Rep _____ Ques _____ Rev _____ For _____ Ph _____	Rea _____	Fq _____	Rev _____ For _____ Ph _____	Expl _____	Pass _____	ExpPoi _____ ExpLev _____
2	Help _____ Rep _____ Ques _____ Rev _____ For _____ Ph _____	Rea _____	Fq _____	Rev _____ For _____ Ph _____	Expl _____	Pass _____	ExpPoi _____ ExpLev _____
3							
....n							

Where:

Help = Helpful votes

Resp = Responses

Ques = Replies to questions asked

Rev = Reviews

For = Forum posts

Ph = Photos

Rea = Readership

Fq= Frequency of posting

Pass = Passport for cities travelled to

Expl = Explorer points

ExpPoi = Expert points gathered

ExpLev = Expert level

Appendix II: Experimental Website

HOME

Home ▢ Lamei Hotel

The influence of Opinion leaders in an online setting

Introduction

Dear participant,

You are invited to participate in a research on the Influence of Online Opinion Leaders in Purchasing Hotel Products and Services. The study is being conducted by Nyabisi Mengo, a PhD student at the Kenyatta University - Kenya, under the supervision of Dr. Mary Mutungi and Dr. Esther Munyiri.

We are interested in furthering our understanding on how people influence each other online while purchasing hotel products and services.

We estimate that this experiment will take about 15 minutes of your time. Your responses will be kept anonymous and used for research purposes only. Risks to participants are considered minimal and there will be no costs for participating.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you must be 18 years or older. You may withdraw your participation at any time without any penalty.

If you have any questions, kindly send an email to nyabisi.mengo@gmail.com. If you wish to receive the results of the study, kindly send an email to the above address, and it will be sent to you once published. However, the researcher cannot provide you with personal data since all data is analysed at group levels.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a study participant, you may contact Dr. Alice Ondigi, Dean School of Hospitality and Tourism, Kenyatta University, dean-hospitality@ku.ac.ke, +254 20 871.1622, Ext 570.22.

By clicking on the 'Next' button below, you are agreeing that you are above 18 years of age, and that you are giving your consent to participate in the experiment.

Thank you.

Instructions

You are about to view a webpage of a fictitious hotel. Take your time to go through it, and consider all it contains.

After you are finished, click the tab at the bottom of the page to answer a short questionnaire.

[Click here to proceed to Hotel Review](#)

Activate Window
Go to Settings to acti

Lamei Hotel

price from
Ksh3500/night

Photos Gallery



Exceptional!

4.0 of 5 guest rating based on 1535 reviews

About the Hotel

Lamei Hotel is situated close to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. The hotel offers modern stylish guest rooms. Other features include heated rooftop swimming pool, fitness center, and complimentary self-operated laundry. The Garden Grille & Bar offers freshly prepared meals with an array of local and international beverages. Meetings and Conferences consist are also available.

Hotel Reviews



D K
 Level 3
 23 Reviews
 6 Cities Visited
 20 Photos Posted

MIXED EXPERIENCES

After a long trip from the airport, the concierge was completely non-existent, however the beauty of the hotel was comforting. The rooms are cosy but could have more kiddy friendly TV channels.

The swimming pool is lovely for the kids and adults, it gets uncomfortably overpopulated on the weekends when the non-residents guests arrive and you need to watch your little ones VERY closely regardless of there being (not very kind) lifeguards.

The food is under-whelming especially the kiddy menu at dinner.

I recommend the hotel to young families, on a bed and breakfast option, then order food ala-carte or go out for lunch and dinner.



H L
 Level 1

SHOWING ITS AGE

Perfectly reasonable hotel in town that's starting to show signs of wear. On a short stay, the office was surprised when I mentioned a pole dancer at what we all expected was a business hotel.

Activate Window:
 Go to Settings to activate



ACM
Level 6
230 Reviews
75 Cities Visited
30 Photos Posted

GREAT BOUTIQUE HOTEL WITH ALL THE AMENITIES OF A BRAND HOTEL

This was our first time staying or hosting anything at the Hotel. What a great time! The Guest Relations Manager made sure we got the best banquet hall they had and big enough to cater for our big family of around 100. The F&B Manager coordinated a fantastic celebration meal and made sure the open bar was well stocked and staffed, the food was delicious! Our group had a great experience at the anniversary celebration. The rooms were super clean and well maintained.

This is such an amazing place for the entire family or even the business traveler looking for a quiet serene environment. Our family will definitely be staying here the next time we are in town!!



R M K
Level 1
4 Reviews
2 Cities Visited
2 Photos Posted

BIG WARNING FOR THIS PLACE THEY ARE TRYING TO RIP YOU OFF

Came there, for a price for 3500 ksh, asked if they had Wi-Fi which they confirmed they had. Day after we complained about that, the shower in the room doesn't work and that the heater gives electric shocks. They said it will probably work day after so we stayed another night, the room offered no working shower, no Wi-Fi so they offered us another room which we moved to. I asked the bell boy who took our bags to next room if the wifi works here now, he said yes so all good.

However after sleeping some hours at the new room, waiting for the power to get back (realized later that they have their own generator and turns it off during day time) we asked more or less everyday when wifi will work, all same story "will work tomorrow".

There's plenty of hotels that offer more quality for less money, this Hotel is just a rip off. On other side notes, both ACS they have leak water so expect water on floor from it Power is off during day time every day. Food is only vegetarian and bad quality.

Mosquito nets are full of holes and the hotel is located in some big mosquitos infested place, there are also no fans.



W K E
Level 2
7 Reviews
2 Cities Visited
3 Photos Posted

STANDARD, SECURE AND CLEAN HOTEL IN A GREAT NEIGHBORHOOD

The hotel is in a great neighborhood. It is a decent, standard hotel - the concierge on the front door is great! But on 5th floor we had really loud, unpleasant noises from the Lift Shaft for all of our stay.

[Click here to proceed to questionnaire](#)

Lamei Hotel (6)

This questionnaire contains questions about the web page you have just viewed.

Please give your opinion on the web page you just viewed

1. Imagine you are planning a trip in the next month. After reading the above reviews, would you book Lamei hotel?

Yes

No

Maybe

2. I think the hotel review site was realistic.

strongly disagree

Disagree

3. The hotel review site provided enough information that I could use to make a decision about booking the hotel

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

4. I could imagine myself using a website like this to evaluate a hotel before booking

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

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Google Forms

Active
Go to S

Appendix IV: Tripadvisor Observation form Results

	PROFILE	The Connected Degree, Coi	The Attention Degree, Ati	The Activity Degree, Aci	The Posts Degree, Ti	New Product Purchase, NPi	New Product Ownership, NOi	New Product Knowledge, NKi	OL Σ
1	Ibadanboy 35-49/M KENYA	0.521	1.000	1.000	0.000	1.000	0.392	1.000	0.702
2	Hermes_NL 50-64//M Netherlands	1.000	0.390	0.582	0.000	0.608	0.663	0.698	0.563
3	Jenabaintheworld USA	0.130	0.279	0.096	1.000	0.442	0.486	0.584	0.431
4	Charn P 65+/M Thailand	0.316	0.390	0.413	0.001	0.306	1.000	0.532	0.423
5	Eyekaytoo 50-64 M Germany	0.120	0.244	0.147	0.004	0.694	0.798	0.437	0.349
6	Esther P 25-34/M USA	0.106	0.214	0.083	0.376	0.214	0.870	0.427	0.327

7	OneAddictedTrav eler 65+/M USA	0.184	0.180	0.094	0.000	0.214	0.931	0.334	0.277
8	Heb999 50-64/F UK	0.335	0.127	0.586	0.000	0.145	0.635	0.069	0.271
9	loveDCA 35-49 M USA	0.096	0.237	0.113	0.004	0.344	0.608	0.404	0.258
10	Roryjdoyle 50-64M Malaysia	0.109	0.263	0.234	0.002	0.169	0.586	0.416	0.254
11	DAEsmae 35-49 F USA	0.079	0.134	0.056	0.020	0.383	0.715	0.263	0.236
12	Yogiacomo	0.121	0.214	0.282	0.001	0.493	0.088	0.409	0.230
13	Puchka 50-64 F India	0.091	0.171	0.084	0.007	0.273	0.489	0.352	0.210
14	Tmuc Germany	0.047	0.152	0.125	0.386	0.178	0.345	0.227	0.209
15	Ludo-Owen M Switzerland	0.064	0.152	0.135	0.004	0.223	0.602	0.263	0.206

16	TimJMeyer 50-64/M USA	0.040	0.150	0.084	0.308	0.083	0.586	0.174	0.204
17	Escape-overseas 50-64 M UK	0.092	0.217	0.111	0.005	0.214	0.423	0.353	0.202
18	oilmanDOrset_U _K 65+ M UK	0.046	0.102	0.057	0.373	0.110	0.511	0.207	0.201
19	Alexzhdanov 25-34M Russia	0.084	0.163	0.060	0.005	0.181	0.641	0.248	0.197
20	SydneyTraveler 50-64/M AUSTRALIA	0.050	0.106	0.050	0.393	0.042	0.445	0.217	0.186
21	Savvy_Dave 35-49//M UAE	0.058	0.110	0.056	0.386	0.122	0.326	0.227	0.183
22	Hilarymunro 50-64/F UK	0.042	0.092	0.065	0.341	0.098	0.387	0.175	0.171
23	TheTravelPirate 35-49/M USA	0.065	0.145	0.131	0.005	0.080	0.494	0.273	0.170

24	Colint50 50-64 M Australia	0.106	0.087	0.126	0.001	0.083	0.517	0.257	0.168
25	Maritimeexplorer 65+/M Canada	0.189	0.115	0.064	0.000	0.053	0.558	0.165	0.163
26	DERtravels 50-64/F USA	0.058	0.118	0.051	0.002	0.107	0.613	0.193	0.163
27	Steve K USA	0.068	0.150	0.151	0.001	0.024	0.511	0.216	0.160
28	Di S 65+/F Bermuda	0.043	0.110	0.064	0.266	0.092	0.320	0.191	0.155
29	Beatriz O 35-49 F Brazil	0.043	0.064	0.113	0.020	0.279	0.337	0.190	0.149
30	Carol w 65+ F Canada	0.036	0.090	0.072	0.341	0.068	0.246	0.172	0.146
31	James G 50-64M UK	0.056	0.136	0.085	0.015	0.050	0.406	0.246	0.142
32	Barbara W 65+/F UK	0.035	0.099	0.044	0.249	0.077	0.323	0.153	0.140

33	HappyTraveller6 04 65+F Canada`	0.074	0.099	0.070	0.001	0.163	0.315	0.231	0.136
34	Outofdodge_10 35-49/F USA	0.081	0.127	0.085	0.001	0.157	0.268	0.216	0.134
35	BigKevTravels 50-64M UK	0.049	0.095	0.094	0.017	0.056	0.390	0.229	0.133
36	Safari aficionado 65+/M Uganda	0.096	0.104	0.084	0.001	0.160	0.251	0.231	0.132
37	MontanaSplash 50-64/M USA	0.032	0.078	0.073	0.264	0.065	0.224	0.149	0.127
38	Tdhat 35-49/M UK	0.052	0.087	0.072	0.003	0.104	0.365	0.184	0.124
39	Glenn M USA	0.041	0.115	0.115	0.019	0.036	0.365	0.175	0.124
40	Lasa88 50-64 F USA	0.105	0.099	0.076	0.000	0.053	0.329	0.190	0.122

41	Edmundo_de_AB Q 65+/M USA	0.047	0.080	0.057	0.004	0.148	0.312	0.187	0.119
42	Rockdoc7 M USA	0.034	0.081	0.077	0.120	0.071	0.265	0.173	0.117
43	Juan carlos F 35-49M Venezuela	0.059	0.113	0.059	0.002	0.142	0.227	0.197	0.114
44	William G SA	0.037	0.072	0.129	0.049	0.089	0.229	0.187	0.113
45	The_Egyptian_co uple Egypt	0.034	0.072	0.053	0.015	0.104	0.318	0.153	0.107
46	MisterCheeky 50-64M Canada	0.074	0.108	0.062	0.002	0.042	0.240	0.212	0.106
47	Abbotsbury92 50-64//M USA	0.075	0.101	0.048	0.001	0.119	0.218	0.159	0.103
48	JupiterNine M USA	0.054	0.088	0.047	0.002	0.104	0.238	0.156	0.099
49	Uclatraveler9 25-34/F	0.071	0.078	0.060	0.001	0.045	0.282	0.141	0.097

USA

50	VindalooQueen1 1 25-34//F Qatar	0.041	0.076	0.056	0.020	0.092	0.210	0.135	0.090
51	EatDrinknbMarri ed USA	0.034	0.078	0.027	0.018	0.089	0.224	0.149	0.088
52	BG Namibia	0.031	0.071	0.083	0.008	0.101	0.199	0.122	0.088
53	Aboudy G USA	0.033	0.080	0.074	0.003	0.092	0.191	0.135	0.087

Appendix V: LIWC Results for Message Content

Filename	WC	Analytic	Clout	Affect	Pos.emo	Neg.emo	Cog.proc
Alexzhdanov	698	89.22	62.38	8.88	7.02	1.43	8.31
BigKevTravels	619	80.94	68.02	11.15	10.99	0.16	2.75
Charn P	2582	95.46	76.79	5.96	5.23	0.58	7.75
DAEsmae	2104	63.85	61.42	4.75	3.99	0.57	10.27
DERtravels	1376	92.54	86.69	3.92	3.71	0.07	6.69
Escape overseas	2462	97.19	71.39	5.20	3.90	1.18	6.46
Esther P	3273	80.98	45.38	6.51	5.41	0.92	6.66
Eyekeytoo	9287	91.75	53.92	5.58	4.47	0.94	7.33
HappyTraveller	948	86.00	55.02	5.80	5.17	0.53	8.23
heb999	3377	79.84	71.81	7.02	6.13	0.62	7.28
Hermes	3340	92.74	49.88	6.53	5.81	0.54	7.34
Ibadan boy	489	97.21	60.49	11.45	11.25	0.00	4.91
Jenabaintheworld	2173	78.74	55.30	7.36	6.17	0.60	7.78
Lasa88	1533	75.53	77.14	6.46	5.61	0.65	8.41
LOVEDCA	2774	84.96	49.28	5.55	4.36	1.08	8.72
Maritimeexplore	12971	88.31	58.47	3.85	3.30	0.45	9.18
MisterCheeky	4718	83.68	72.42	6.02	4.98	0.68	7.65
One addicted traveller	1011	85.74	77.99	6.33	5.54	0.40	7.62
Puchka	1756	94.85	64.24	5.58	4.90	0.57	6.55
Roryjdoyle	1775	94.15	44.18	7.66	6.93	0.68	7.94
Safari aficionado	6693	90.90	36.04	3.96	3.20	0.64	7.31
Steve K	1749	89.45	64.08	5.20	4.06	1.09	5.77
The travel pirate	1028	85.89	56.19	8.37	7.59	0.68	6.81

TimJMeyer	986	83.44	61.58	6.59	5.07	1.42	7.51
Tmu	1008	78.35	26.27	7.54	5.36	1.69	10.22
Yogiacomo	739	64.52	81.04	8.53	7.85	0.54	9.61
Mean	2748.81	85.62	61.05	6.61	5.69	0.72	7.50
Std. Dev.	2829.10	8.61	13.94	1.89	1.97	0.40	1.55
Max.	489.00	63.85	26.27	3.85	3.20	0.00	2.75
Min.	12971.00	97.21	86.69	11.45	11.25	1.69	10.27

Appendix VI: Top 20 Hotels on Tripadvisor as at October 2017

S. No.	Name
1.	ibis Styles Hotel Westlands Nairobi
2.	Best Western Plus Meridian Hotel
3.	Severin Sea Lodge
4.	The Sands at Chale Island
5.	Diani Reef Beach Resort & Spa
6.	Palacina Residence and Suites
7.	Hotel EnglishPoint & Spa
8.	The Heron Portico
9.	Voyager Beach Resort
10.	Baobab Beach Resort and Spa
11.	Intercontinental Nairobi
12.	Kilanguni Serena Safari Lodge
13.	Leopard Beach Resort & Spa
14.	Medina Palms
15.	Prideinn Paradise Beach Resort
16.	Sarova Woodlands
17.	Lantana Gulu Beach
18.	Prideinn Hotel Westlands
19.	Kola Beach Resort
20.	Alba Hotel Meru

Appendix VII: Experimental Website Treatment Groups

Opinion leader reviews was varied at two levels (positive vs negative); other members' reviews was varied at two levels (positive vs negative); and management reply was varied at two levels (management response present vs absent). The total number of conditions generated was 8 and varied as follows:

Table 4.2 Experimental groups' participants

Condition	Description	N
1	OL review positive * NOL review positive * Management reply present	40
2	OL review negative * NOL review positive * Management reply present	36
3	OL review positive * NOL review negative * Management reply present	37
4	OL review negative * NOL review negative * Management reply present	42
5	OL review positive * NOL review positive * Management reply absent	46
6	OL review negative * NOL review positive * Management reply absent	41
7	OL review positive * NOL review negative * Management reply absent	42
8	OL review negative * NOL review negative * Management reply absent	45
Total		329



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