The Unethical Practice of Hotel Review Ghost-Writers

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1 Introduction

Business ethics have increasingly attracted the attention of the business world over the last years. Notwithstanding, business ethics cannot be considered as to be a novel issue, since it has its theoretical roots in ancient times, where many philosophers and authors wrote about the business ethics. Today there are conflicting views related to the concept of business ethics, which have also stimulated many public discussions. Nevertheless, the numerous corporate scandals reported on a daily basis in the press, suggest that the need for ethical behaviour in business environment nowadays is as relevant as ever. Preventing unethical business behaviour is a complicated issue faced by business organisations today; and also a significant challenge for

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management, due to the fact that unethical business practices involve high cost for organizations, their stakeholders and the society in general (Bennett 2003).

The paper is going to examine the phenomenon of ghost-writers in the tourism industry. More recently, we have seen the phenomenon of 'water army' in the tourist community. The term 'water army' refers to ghost-writers that get paid to post comments serving particular commercial or political interests. These comments reflect a hidden motive, which is usually to manipulate and mislead public opinion for the benefit of certain interest groups. Particularly, this is a problem when governments are attempting to code and understand public opinion; it is difficult for them to hear the real voices from their target electorate. The existence of 'water armies' has been a long-standing issue for tourism companies and the industry as a whole, where it is fairly easy and cheap to hire people who upload misleading and/or manipulated content. So, this is an under-researched field of tourism as scientific literature on the topic seems rather limited. The aim of this paper is to examine the existing literature on ghost-writing in the context of tourism. First, we introduce the concept of business ethics and their application in tourism; and subsequently we discuss their applicability/relevance in relation to social-media campaigns.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Business Ethics

Business ethics is a field of applied ethics (Velasquez 1992) that examines ethical issues that arise in a business environment. According to De George (1987), business ethics entail five kinds of activity categories. The most dominant activity is the analysis of immorality incidents in business. The second type entails the empirical study of business practices while the third type consists of clarifying basic terms and revealing ethical business issues. The forth kind of activity concerns meta-ethical questions and a review of ethics theory. Finally, the fifth kind aims at the resolution of embedded problems.

2.2 The History of Business Ethics

Business ethics are essentially the application of ethical rules and everyday morals to business practices (Bennett 2003). An example that comes into mind from the Bible, are the Ten Commandments, an ethics guide that is still adhered to by many people today. The applicable notion of stewardship in business, as well as other relevant ethical principles, can be found in Bible (De George 2005). Ancient texts, similar to the Ten Commandments, are also to be found also in other religions or traditions that seek to exercise an influence on and provide guidance for people's actions. Moving

from religion to philosophy, there is also a long history related to ethics. Plato in 'the Republic', is known about his dialogues on the notion of justice, while Aristotle in his 'Politics', wrote about acquisition and trade as part of economic ethics. He also wrote about exchange, property, money and wealth and he made moral judgments connected to greed and the pursuit of wealth. Coming to the modern times, John Locke argued that defending private property constitutes a natural right, based on the labour one invests to secure/obtain the good in question. Adam Smith, before his most famous work The 'Wealth of Nations', wrote in the 'Theory of Moral Sentiments' about business ethics (Bennett 2003).

All these authors and many others have contributed to the historical development of ethics theory and their thoughts have become an integral part of the today's views on business ethics. The second half of the last century, was characterised by growing 'business ethics movement', originating from the US. This movement has spread from the US to other parts of the world, including Europe, where it has also become quite popular. According to Stieb (2009), business ethics in US has made great progress; both as an academic discipline and as a business practice over the last 40 years. The 1960s were known as the period of the rise of social issues in business, coinciding with the development of modern industries, the corresponding ecological problems caused, and growth of consumerism. Nevertheless, it was during the 1970s, when the rise of business ethics as a field of academic inquiry began. By the end of the decade, some central issues had emerged (like i.e. the moral status of the corporation, role responsibility in business, corporate disobedience) and many researchers turned their interest towards this new area (for instance Beauchamp, Bowie, Donaldson, Barry, De George, Velasquez). In the first half of 1980s, business ethics had become an academic field.

According to De George (2005), what differentiates the development of business ethics from the related isolated attempts until then, is the fact that business ethics became institutionalised. The business ethics field has developed alongside a growing a group of institutions, which were interested in its application and development. For the first time, it was also attempted to systematically study the entire range of moral issues in business as a whole. By the mid-1980s at least 500 courses in business ethics were attended by 40,000 students (De George 2005). In the earlier 2000s, a significant number of university courses in business ethics were in place; a small number of international journals were dedicated to this topic; and there were also many articles concerning business ethics in other academic journals (Hiironen 2004).

Nowadays, 'business ethics', as well as 'corporate social responsibility', are terms that are on everyone's lips in business. However, some people might think that business ethics is an oxymoron since "the mainsprings of business activity and the pursuit of profit preclude considerations of morality" (Barry 1997). Others may believe that business and ethics are complementary terms, since ethics is about the study of morality and there are plenty of moral issues that can arise in a business environment. Based on these conflicting views, one could say that business ethical issues actually reflect the interaction between profit maximizing behaviour and non-economic concerns.

2.3 Unethical Behaviour and Its Effects on Organisations

During the last decades, there is a growing crisis of confidence concerning corporate activity and also a strong belief that the business environment creates an atmosphere conducive to unethical behaviour. Besides, many researchers in the field of business ethics (e.g. Barry 1997), argue that the pursuit of profit precludes moral considerations. Thus, the goal of profit maximization, which according to Friedman (1970) and other theorists, is the only social responsibility of business, and thus compatible with unethical business behaviour. Nevertheless, unethical behaviour is one of the most corrosive and complex problems confronting business organisations today, becoming a critical field of research. Unethical issues can occur at any level—board of directors, executives, middle managers or staff—and within any operational area of the organization—production, accounting, finance, marketing, human resources (Collins 2011).

Examples of unethical business practices such as: bribery, illegal payments, kickbacks, improper accounting practices, employee discrimination, environmental pollution, insider trading etc. can be found in numerous corporate scandals, being reported on a daily basis by the media. Diverse terms have been adopted to describe employee misconduct in organisational settings such as: unethical behaviour, organizational misbehaviour, anti-social behaviour or deviant behaviour (Carvalho 2011). According to Badenhorst (1994), there are two types of unethical behaviour in organisations: unethical behaviour for personal gain and unethical behaviour that favours the organization. However, it appears that the latter type is more acceptable in the business community, as it is considered to be 'less ethical'; instead of 'unethical'. Furthermore, misbehaviour have been categorised as: extra-organizational and intra-organizational, depending where it occurs. Some authors also point out the difference between destructive deviant misbehaviour and unethical behaviour (Carvalho Wilks 2011). The former type is a set of intentional acts, conducted by employees that is against organisational norms and can harm the organization or its members, whereas the latter is "either illegal or morally unacceptable by the larger community" (Jones 1991).

There is a plethora of individual and situational factors that contribute to employees' decision on whether to behave ethically or unethically (Stead et al. 1990). There is little doubt that, personality, background, ethical decision history, as well as religious beliefs, age and quality of work experience, seem to all influence a person's ethical stance. Moreover, it is automatically assumed that unethical behaviour is the result of a person who has no value system; no clear distinction between right and wrong. Studies have shown that an individual's lack of moral values is not necessarily a cause for unethical behaviour. On the other hand, it appears that individuals with strong moral values do not maintain the same values in the business world, while they are often pressured to compromise their personal standards to achieve organisational goals (Carvalho Wilks 2011). Thus, we conclude that there is another set of factors within the organisational context, influencing individuals' propensity to engage in unethical behaviour. An organisational climate

that encourages unethical decisions, managerial philosophy and behaviour, the behaviour of colleagues and the absence of an ethics policy, all appear to be related to unethical behaviour. Unethical behaviour has several diverse effects in organisations. Perhaps the most obvious effect is that moral disengagement in organizations can undermine the confidence and trust of its stakeholders. Organisations, however, rely on their ability to maintain the confidence of their stakeholders in order to ensure profitability. Unethical business practices can, directly or indirectly, have an impact on sales, since the loss of trust amongst customers can reduce their loyalty and motivate them to turn to competitors. Besides, research in consumer marketing has shown that, whether a firm acts ethically or not is an important consumer concern and that consumers are not merely interested about a firm's ethics; but they also adjust their purchase behaviour accordingly. In addition, unethical conduct may well adversely affect the stock performance of the organisation. It seems that shareholders punish unethical behaviour by driving down the value of the organisation's share price for a considerable period of time (Rao and Hamilton 1996). Unethical business practices are also associated with legal costs for the organization. Lawsuits and fines harm the organisation's reputation and can cost millions. According to Collins (2011), in a 2007 survey, 40% of the 250 largest U.S. corporations had at least one new lawsuit filed against them, amounting to a worth of 20 million dollars. Other less obvious costs are monitoring and recruiting costs. Organisations that employ or do business with unethical individuals, need to closely monitor them in order to prevent unethical behaviour. Thus, management often implement and maintain expensive control systems, which are likely to hinder a trust culture within organisations. Furthermore, unethical organisations incur additional costs for recruiting employees, customers, suppliers and investors, since they need to provide some premium in to order to offset their ethical deficiencies. Finally, policies that promote unethical behaviours in organisations, can often drive the most productive employees to ethically superior competitors and as result lead to higher turnover and the associated costs (Cialdini et al. 2004). In addition, moral employees, who are required to engage in immoral behaviours, tend to be less satisfied with their job and less committed to the organisation. This has a negative impact on their productivity. From all the above, it can be concluded that immoral business practices represent a key issue for business organisations. This may explain why, more recently, organisations have moved from a passive awareness/acknowledgement of the problem to more active approaches and policies.

2.4 Social Media in Tourism

Information and communication through the internet is nowadays a common tool for the destination choice of tourists everywhere. As stated by Xiang and Gretzel (2010), the number of potential travellers who inform themselves and book online has been constantly increasing. The report of the European Travel Commission (2010: 13), points out that leisure and business trips are planned by a majority (64–65%) over the

Internet, including booking tickets for air travel and hotel rooms. Until recently, the internet served to obtain information only through official web sites (websites) tourist agencies and measured tourism agencies that advertise specific countries and locations. Social media equip travellers with information sharing capabilities regarding holidays and business trips (Chan and Denizci Guillet 2011). This communication is both informative and entertaining. In our times, the degree of information-intensity on tourism products continues to grow, with social media gaining ground over conventional media such as television, radio and newspapers reduced (Mangold and Faulds 2009).

The great popularity of social media, according to many scholars, is attributed to the fact that users can create their own content, which is informative, fun and entertaining (for example, Leung et al. 2013). Instead, the 'traditional' information tools render users passive, since there is limited interaction and mostly a one-way communication (Bruhn et al. 2012). In tourism, social media have been embraced by internet users in their search for tourist destinations and their planning of holidays and business trips, while the feedback from other travellers, often strangers enables interaction through messages and comments, images, video and audio, but also through story-telling (Leung et al. 2013). This type of open communication is performed through multiple Internet platforms, such as social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), and the websites dedicated to travel and restaurants like TripAdvisor and Yelp, and personal blogs.

Sparks and Browning (2011) emphasise the importance of mouth-to-mouth communication, through the Internet, dissecting consumer relationship management from the providers of products and services worldwide. Internet users who wish to purchase a product or service can now, through social media, be informed by other users who have made purchases in the past and have made their own experiences (Sparks and Browning 2011). At the same time, communication takes place now, not only among family members, friends or even acquaintances, but also among people who have never met each other, from every corner of the world.

2.5   Ghost-Writing and Social Media

The adoption and ubiquity of the internet and social media are as impressive as they are commonplace. Entrepreneurs in the hotel business enjoy international reach and can directly offer a variety of services to their visitors by communicating with the clients who are interested in booking their vacations at their establishments (Shleifer 2004). The right information at the right time, through the social media constitutes a significant advantage for tourism businesses. Guest reviews are a central influence on the decision-making processes of clients. Yet, there is a pending issue of credibility of such reviews, which are in many cases undermined by fact that a number of businesses create fake reviews for themselves or even for their competitors (Mayzlin et al. 2014). Consumer websites such as TripAdvisor are becoming increasingly popular today and have existed for a long time now. They contain more

than 60 million of reviews concerning restaurants, attractions and hotels, which have a direct influence travellers' choices and ultimately bookings. As the popularity of sites such as TripAdvisor has increased, so have the fraudulent practice of fake reviews. These is considerable anecdotal evidence that this is a type of cheating has become an epidemic in tourism. Little is known about the economic incentives behind this. The distribution of star rating is being changed by the hotel owners and this observation is related to a broader body of literature referring to the distribution of opinions in user generated content (Shleifer 2004).

Fraud responds to economic incentives and is mainly driven by the hotel sector, who are prone to 'playing' the system, regardless the real opinions of visitors. Those incentives become higher during the summer period. In addition to leaving comments for themselves, hotels may insert fraudulent reviews with the aim of defaming/discrediting their competitors. Hotels tend to place or outsource the insertion of negative fake reviews, when faced with an increase in competition from independent small hotels that offer similar kind of services (Mayzlin et al. 2014).

2.6   Ethics on Social Media: The Case of Ghost-Writers in Tourist Media

Tourism services need proper information to promote their products through social media. The Internet, as it is today, is enabling the sale of several different tourist products, and therefore it is difficult for companies to achieve the diversification of their products (Yang and Wang 2015). Tourism in Greece has increased through the use of the social media and the Internet, while at the same time, the technological progress has made it necessary for the entrepreneurs to develop more intelligent methods for attracting tourists. Oftentimes, due to a short tourist season, and regional competition, tourism has resulted to the devastation of islands justified by the amount of money tourists spend during the summer period (Yang and Wang 2015). These risks can be addressed in many ways, but mainly through the use of controlled information technology. As internet use proliferates for the spreading of information, its proper utilisation becomes increasingly important (Middleton 1994). The internet has restructured the tourism sector, establishing itself as the main medium for the exchange of information and as a key means of customer contact.

E-commercial and social media are more or less independent from national or geographic boundaries. Therefore, any company that has an online presence/social media profile is capable of increasing its turnover and its establishing its reputation beyond local markets. The possibilities of managing and operating worldwide, 24 hours a day, without the requirement of physical presence in the country where the business is, are allowing entrepreneurs to grow and expand in a rate previously not imaginable. Companies who adopt new technologies are able to competitively adapt, utilising social media to gain an advantageous position by offering online content and up-to-date, on-demand on a hotel, country or destination. Given that in a

few years all commercial activities will be operated through the social media, e-commerce is the biggest challenge for any company that wants to be innovative and competitive (Castells 2000).

It is well accepted that social media have dominated tourism more than may other sector in terms of customer decision-influencing. Until a few years ago, consumers would visit their local travel agent to make a booking. Today this is happening through social media and mostly through content brokers/aggregators such as tripadvisor.com and booking.com. A key determinant of the decision to make a booking or not, is the examination the corresponding reviews of other users, describing their experiences. This is the point where the challenges emerge. It is a common practice for many firms to use ghost-writers. Those are persons, often recruited online or from social media companies, who are paid so to write a positive review for the company or a negative review for a competitor. This turns to be a major inhibitor for the credibility and utilisation of social media for the tourism aggregators (Zeng and Gerritsen 2014). In many cases there are tourism companies, who are systematically using ghost-writers to, either to leverage their reviews when they have many negative ones, or to write a negative review for a competitor.

Actually, it seems that ghost-writing has become a rather popular job. A simple internet search reveals a large number of companies or freelancers offering this type of 'services'. There are also websites, providing review-manipulation hints and tips.[1] Surely, this corrodes the reliability and credibility of tourism companies and the sector as a whole. Many consumers cannot differentiate between real and fake reviews. This, in turn, affects their overall judgment and expectations of a hotel; and influence their decision to book or not. On this basis, one can assert that ghost-writing is a modern curse for the tourist industry (Kristensen 2013).

3   Discussion

Social media have dominated the world of tourism. Today, tourists use the social media to choose between destinations and holiday providers. For many, their holidays represent something sacred; after a long time, they will go somewhere to relax and spend some quality time. This means that they are seeking the best value for their financial possibilities. Therefore, they are likely to seek to read the reviews made from past users, hoping to make an informed and optimal choice. The fact that user reviews affect potential visitor choices, renders them a central issue for the industry. Some companies, take advantage of ghost-writers, who author fake reviews, especially on tripadvisor.com. To avoid and/or counter this phenomenon/practice some measures are possible. For example, booking.com requires that reviewers have actually booked a room and that the booking process done through

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[1]For example: http://tripadvisor-warning.com/share/post-false-reviews-on-tripadvisor-free-and-easy

their website. There are having been many cases of ghost-writing, which have undermined the value of TripAdvisor and of other web sites. In some cases, the website has been forced to publicly apologise to their customer or the businesses affected from this kind of malpractice. However, it seems that there is no waterproof method against fake reviews. Customers are called to also pay attention and develop a filtering competence for processing online holiday reviews (Papathanassis and Knolle 2011).

Our research has shown that there is an extensive amount of systematic review fraud in online review platforms. Thus, it is important for platform designers to develop several safeguarding mechanisms against fraudulent misinformation. Yet, despite such mechanisms, there is no perfect mechanism for eliminating review frauds. There are fraud detection algorithms that can identify the fake reviews, allowing social/review platforms to filter out offending or misleading reviews, whilst reprimanding the businesses engaged in this kind of activity. The advantage of this process is that it is simple and cheap to implement. In any case, these algorithms seem to lack transparency and often contain bugs. Moreover, the review platforms can restrict reviews to verified purchases. While this can limit the extent of fake reviews, it may also lead to a reduction of legitimate content. On the other hand, by implementing limits, the process becomes costly for the businesses soliciting fake review providers. Platforms would also be well-advised to highlight the issue of ethics every time a person wants to author a review.

4 Conclusions

The paper has introduced the case of ghost-writing on the tourist industry. It seems that many businesses in this sector are recruiting ghost-writers to leverage their reviews, or to use them against their competitors. This practice undermines the credibility and existence of review and content platforms. Surely, this is a key challenge for the information-intensive tourism-sector. Overall, this is a practice, which has not been sufficiently examined in academic literature. Indeed, our literature search produced rather modest results, suggesting that there is research potential in this area.

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