



**ONLINE RESPONSE MANAGEMENT: EXPLORING HOW HOTELS IN CAPE  
TOWN'S CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT (CBD) MANAGE ONLINE REVIEWS**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The tourism sector and hospitality industry were among the first industries to employ information and communication technology almost solely for business purposes. An online response management (ORM) system is a customer service system that is supported by information technology. This study focused on guests' online reviews (OLR) and how hotels respond and use online response management systems to manage these reviews. A significant gap exists regarding the management of online reviews at accommodation establishments in Cape Town. In order for hotels to remain relevant within the dynamic tourism industry, studies have been conducted focusing on the impacts of technological developments, such as social media and online reviews on hotels. Existing research focuses primarily on the positive and negative impacts of online reviews from the consumers' perspectives, however limited attention has been given to shed light on how hotels manage their online reputation.

The aim of the study was to understand how hotels manage their online reputation when responding to online platforms visitor reviews. This study employed a qualitative methodology and exploratory research design that utilised purposive sampling, whereby seven accommodation establishments ranging between 3-star and 5-star rating categories, located within Cape Town's CBD, were selected to participate in the study. Following the steps in the scientific qualitative data analysis of the research, statistical data was arranged categorically based on the perspectives of the participants. Data were collected via face-to-face and online interviews. The study presents the following assumptions drawn from existing research: (1) hotel management employs processes and systems to respond to online reviews, (2) hotels are equipped to respond to online reviews during a pandemic, and (3) hotel management perceives negative and positive reviews to be impactful. The results of the analysis reveal that hotels are aware of online response management systems and how negative and positive reviews impact the brand of the establishment. When utilised correctly, online review management systems have increased the opportunity for hotels to monitor and maintain their reputation online. A contribution of the study was the adoption of positive response actions to an existing online review response framework.

**Keywords:** Online response management (ORM) systems, hospitality star ratings, online review management, COVID-19, strategic marketing plans

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## ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ATA	African Travel Association
CBD	Central Business District
COVID-19	Coronavirus
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
CRS	Computer Reservation System
eWOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
GRI	Guest Review Intelligence
ICCA	International Congress and Conventions Association
ICT	Information Communication Technology
OLR	Online Review
OMBOK	Online Marketing Body of Knowledge
ORM	Online Reputation Management
OTA	Online Travel Agency
PMS	Property Management Systems
POS	Point of Sales
SAT	South African Tourism
TGCSA	Tourism Grading Council of South Africa
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organisation
WOM	Word of Mouth
WTTC	World Travel and Tourism Council

## GLOSSARY

<b>Term</b>	<b>Description</b>
Accommodation establishment	An accommodation establishment can be described as an establishment that conducts overnight lodging (with or without meals) for gain (Tourism Act, No. 72 of 1993) (South Africa, 1993:3).
eWOM	The current form of communication online through the Internet, by sharing information through social media, websites, blogs and other interactive platforms sites, are known as electronic word of mouth (Huete-Alcocer, 2017).
Hospitality industry	According to Skripak (2016:334), the hospitality industry is seen as an amalgamation of accommodation, food and beverage groupings together under the biggest industry segments in tourism.
Hotel	A hotel is described as a permanent lodging establishment which provides accommodation to various guests through services such as food, beverages, and additional facilities for conferencing and leisure (Talabi, 2015:6).
Information and communication technology	ICT is a field of science, technology, engineering, and management that is used to handle information and its utilisation in connection with social, economic, and cultural issues (Ratheeswari, 2018:45).
Intangible offerings	Alsaqre Enizan (2011:15) describes intangible offerings of service quality as those factors that are not touched which include reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.
Internet	The Internet is useful technology which can be identified as “a global system of interconnected computer networks that use the standard Internet protocol suite (TCP/ IP) to serve billions

of users worldwide”. It serves as layers of communication accessible privately and publicly (Hill, 2013:2).

Marketing plan	Marketing plans are formulated documents to create opportunities for businesses to identify objectives or goals through various actions or tasks over a period of time (Oxford College of Marketing, 2018).
Online reputation	Online reputation refers to how an organisation is seen online by users through various communication channels such as websites, social media platforms, and other social related networks (Vartiak, 2015:271).
Online reviews (OLRs)	Park and Nicolau (2015:4) define online reviews as forms of eWOM whereby information is shared online about a product or service, through online platforms, to assist customers with their decision-making processes. Pee (2016:2) identifies negative online reviews as information or opinions posted online which creates an unfavourable judgement about a particular product or service.
Social media	Treem et al. (2016:768) note that social media is a very broad term that comprises of various definitions. The authors add that it is initially seen as web-based communication tools that enable online interaction which emerged in the early 1990s.
Star rating	Also known as “grading systems”, a star rating serves to enhance the value and overall quality of various types of accommodation establishments in South Africa such as hotels, guesthouses, bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), lodges, backpackers, caravans, and camping sites (du Plessis & Saayman, 2010:131).
Tourism	Regarded as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside of their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes (UNWTO, n.d.).

Tourism Grading  
Council of South  
Africa (TGCSA)

The Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) is the only “recognized and globally credible quality assurance body for tourism products in South Africa” (TGCSA, n.d.).

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### 1.1 Introduction

Within the last decade, tourism-related companies have developed their own technological channels such as websites and apps (applications) to serve as a basic tool for customer engagement and interaction (Mugica & Berne, 2020:2). These Internet-related technologies have presented travellers with new and convenient ways to research travel information and plan trips (Mendes-Filho et al., 2018:425). Travellers now have the opportunity to use the Internet as an ideal platform for sharing and distributing information online. This information assists in reducing uncertainty about products (Pee, 2016:2). According to Gretzel et al. (2007:4), more travellers are resorting to online reviews (OLRs) of sites for travel-related content that has been posted by past travellers, as opposed to service providers. Henning-Tharau et al. (2003:51) indicate that OLRs are positive or negative statements about a product, and “therefore, today consumers are more empowered than ever” (Broniarczyk & Griffin, 2014:1). The OLR sites are considered to be trustworthy not only in the area of travel but in other industries as well (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015:283). The vast availability of travel information on the Internet has allowed travellers to search for information, compare, evaluate the alternatives, and make decisions according to their preferences (Dissanayake & Malkanthie, 2018:41). The nature of sharing electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has altered the marketing domain of hospitality which were not present a few years ago (Sherif, 2018:57). In the field of travel and hospitality, consumers post OLRs as a “post behavioural engagement to indicate their level of satisfaction and inform others about their hotel experience” (Sherif, 2018:59). OLRs may take various forms, such as pictures, stories and videos as “moments of truth” that travellers have experienced during their travels and stay (Browning et al., 2013:1). OLRs posted by travellers are not always seen as expertise in the hospitality and tourism fields, but rather a post based on traveller experiences, opinions, and recommendations (Dissanayake & Malkanthie, 2018:27). Browning et al. (2013:2) also indicate that this poses a challenge as OLRs present equally positive and negative evaluations which remain on sites for extended periods of time. In the fields of travel and hospitality, consumers use OLRs as a platform to inform others of their level of dissatisfaction and hotel experience (Sherif, 2018:59). According to Godovykh and Tasci (2020:3) the guest experience consists of emotional, cognitive sensorial and conative components which capture the intangible characteristics of tourism and hospitality industries.

Characteristics of tourism and hospitality offerings include intangibility, inseparability, perishability, and variability (Chen & Tabari, 2017:53). The first characteristic is intangibility. A service product is said to be intangible if it influences consumer behaviour, particularly purchasing behaviour. Therefore, it is assumed that making a purchasing decision is more unpredictable than choosing products that can be tested and returned (Rahmiati et al., 2019:306). Intangibility in the travel and tourism sector can be summed up as the interaction and experience in providing a service that is essential for customer satisfaction (Dupont, 2014). Another characteristic of tourism is inseparability. The majority of travel-related goods are manufactured, sold, and then consumed all at once. This is a feature that clearly distinguishes tourism from material goods (Kaiser, 2012). When a service product is perishable in the tourism sector, it means that its value will be permanently lost if it is not sold (Dupont, 2014). Lastly, Variability is described as a difference in service delivery from customer to customer that makes it challenging to standardise employee-customer interactions (Rahmiati et al., 2019:306). Ponte et al. (2015:286) add that the Internet serves as an ideal platform to reach its intended target market based on these characteristics. Hotels especially can use social media as a tool for the consumers to acquire hotel-related information by creating an in-depth understanding of their needs, and allow them to respond directly to consumers (Kang, 2011:4). Providing such responses can reduce negative and potentially erroneous conclusions and enhance positive perceptions of the hotels (Sparks & Bradley, 2017:1). Begwani and Pal (2015:2) add that by connecting with social media, hotel establishments can grow their “digital footprints”. Hence, every response to an OLR is imperative to maintain the brand image of an establishment or organisation (Yazdanifard & Yee, 2014:11).

With more than a million hotels listed, 435 million reviews and opinions, and 390 million users, TripAdvisor is the top tourism and hospitality social media platforms and application where users can read and post reviews about locations, restaurants, and accommodation (TripAdvisor, 2017). Users who use OLR sites, as opposed to traditional methods, have a better chance of reaching a wider audience, and posts remain visible for a longer period of time (Chen & Tabari, 2017:54). While most enterprises have a tangible offering, the tourism industry’s intangible offerings rely on perceived brand image and reputation (Chen & Tabari, 2017:54). Understanding customers and responding to their complaints can assist hotel businesses to engage in a two-way communication with their guests about their offerings (Camaide, 2013). OLRs through social media have a strong impact on consumer’s purchases behaviour in terms of tourism and hospitality products, especially the millennial generation (millennials) and Generation X (Chen & Tabari, 2017:53).

Horwarth (2016:3) remarks that accommodation is in the frontline of customer satisfaction, and is a vital component in the travel and tourism industries. Therefore, it is deemed imperative for the hospitality industry to change their operational strategies to adapt to the impact of social media (Bizcommunity, 2018). Most brands within the tourism and hospitality industries are maintaining a presence on social media to monitor and influence online interactions (Benjamin et al., 2016:4). While using social media to effectively promote the goods and services of an accommodation establishment, the threat of negative OLRs is more significant than ever (Raas, 2015:2). Gellerstedt (2019:289) supports this by stating that a negative OLR may “outweigh” a positive recommendation in booking a hotel. This has empowered consumers to take the lead in impacting the success and reputation of the hotel establishments (Bulamer & DiMauro, 2014). Establishments also have the added burden of tracking reviews and responding online, however the response time might be of limited effect once the negative statements have reached the broader community on social media (Lovering, 2017). As a result, establishments will have to fight hard to maintain their favourable reputation in the eyes of customers. This means that establishments are no longer able to strictly manage the company's information and content released on the web (Ajanovic & Cizel, 2015:182). In addition, hotel establishments are no longer in stringent control of their information and content published online. To keep abreast with the changing times and trends within the hotel sector, establishment should understand customer needs and satisfaction through strategic marketing plans (Slootweg & Rowson, 2018:85). Due to the speed at which information technology is developing, the hotel business is evolving quickly, making strategic marketing plan (SMP) essential. To be able to prevent the impending threats that were present in the market and economic conditions throughout the preceding two decades, hotel establishments should engage in strategic marketing planning (Imoukhome et al., 2022:493). In order to ensure the survival and expansion of the establishment during a crisis, a strategic marketing plan is crucial (Sigalingging & Leiwakabessy, 2022:320).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic crises had an unprecedented impact on the travel and tourism industry which resulted in lockdown and travel restrictions (Gossling et al., 2020:3). The restrictions influenced how consumers selected and opted for services, particularly those associated to accommodation and travel due to concerns over safety and the possibility of infection (Sekar & Santhanam, 2022:1). Consumers' expectations of the kind of service have changed as a result of the pandemic (Gossling et al., 2020:3). Sekar and Santhanam (2022:2) add that the pandemic might have impacted how consumers evaluated the services provided by tourism service providers on a contextual level. Positive interactions with service providers will result from meeting the expectations of visitors regarding the hotel rooms, food and beverage places, and compliance with other tourists' rules and regulations

(Arica et al., 2021:6). Hotel establishments have the added responsibility of creating short term strategies to maintain financial performance, operations of the hotel and their online reputation (Song et al., 2022:133). Hence, it can be argued that today any establishment's reputation is an "online reputation" (Fertik & Thompson, 2010:88). Bulamer and DiMauro (2014) add that the reputation of an hotel establishment can no longer rely on what they report they stand for, but is rather defined by the disclosed opinions of consumers online. They therefore face the ultimate challenge of preserving a positive image in the views of potential customers (Ajanovic & Cizel, 2015:182). Alternatively, anyone with a motive can potentially harm an establishment and its online reputation through damaging false reviews (Dellarocas, 2013:1408). The trustworthiness, subjectivity, and credibility of online travel information, especially through reviews, are considered relevant (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014:49). The presence of both negative and positive OLRs should be posted online to create a better understanding of the hotel, and to increase the trustworthiness of that hotel (Dissanayake & Malkanthie, 2018:44). Although consumers generally post and share anonymously online, reviews which disclose the reviewer's identity are allegedly more valuable than those that do not disclose such information (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Kiran & Visantha, 2015). Therefore, it is virtually impossible for an accommodation establishment to control information spread online about themselves (Raas, 2015:5). Understanding the synergy between online platforms and how customers distribution information online can assist in hotels managing the impact and responses online (Bruno et al., 2019:215).

## **1.2 Problem statement**

It is crucial to emphasise that the final and most crucial link in the tourism chain – accommodation services – represents a temporary "home" for travellers looking for an area of their own (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012:460). The tourism and hospitality industries largely depend on the Internet to provide a good platform for the distribution of information (Dissanayake & Malkanthie, 2018:42). It is therefore important for hotels to encourage travellers to honestly post about their experiences online, as subsequently the positive review may permeate the impacts of the negative review (Torres et al., 2015:76). Furthermore, Torres et al. (2015:80) opine that hoteliers can utilise negative reviews to implement plans of improving fewer positive aspects of their hotels. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009:123) initially indicated that OLRs acted as a tool which held hotel management teams accountable for their reputation and created an opportunity for improvement rather than a threat.

OLRs have a significant effect on consumer behaviour in different industries including travel and hospitality (Dissanayake & Malkanthie, 2018:41). The ever-changing online customer influence creates risks as well as opportunities for various businesses (Henning-Tharau &

Walsh, 2003). Impacts of negative OLRs pose a risk as they are difficult to control because it can be posted online by anyone who has access to the Internet (Pee, 2016:2). On the other hand, Bruno et al. (2019:214) state that OLRs create the opportunity for establishments to understand customer preferences, demands and assist building online reputation. Lappas et al. (2016:941) assert that positive reviews attract customers, whereas negative reviews have a negative impact on a business' online reputation. Present research focuses primarily on the impacts of OLRs from the consumers' perspectives, but minimal attention is given to how hotel management responds to such reviews (Magno et al., 2017:11). Responses from hotel managers to guest comments, inquiries, and suggestions are crucial for both hotels and customers (Lui & Law, 2019:468). While OLRs are imperative for business survival, management thereof is "not often effective" (Simao & Farias, 2019:2). Responding to OLRs is seen as an intervention strategy to enhance or protect the hotel's online reputation and increase performance (Xie et al., 2014:8). Companies are forced to develop online monitoring and response strategies to mitigate threats on revenue or reputation on diverse online platforms (Chua & Banerjee, 2015:255).

However, Dai and Jiang (2016:206) mention that studies focus predominantly on the "stand-alone" response approach, while few literature studies are conducted on how management responds and interacts with consumer OLRs. e-WOM has mostly been examined from the perspective of the customers (Kwok et al., 2017:308). OLRs have a significant impact on how consumers choose hotels (Chen & Tabari, 2017:55). The impact of OLRs on consumers' choice-making, contentment, and hotel loyalty has received most of the attention (Ciasullo et al., 2020:2). Although research on the effect of consumer reviews on consumer decisions has been conducted, minimal research has focused on management's response to these OLRs (von Helversen et al., 2018:1).

Many hotels are unsure of how to respond to user evaluations, which may in part be a result of a lack of knowledge about how customers use Internet reviews to inform their purchasing decisions (Ong, 2012:465). It is becoming more and more crucial for managers of hospitality services to understand how this new communication channel affects their company, to create managerial actions that boost service quality, and as a way to comprehend the influence of user reviews on the process of selecting potential customers (Oliviera et al., 2019:32). Regarded as one of the top tourist destinations, Cape Town relies on the hospitality industry for its growth (Musavengane & Steyn, 2013:56). Therefore, this study will aim to address the knowledge gap related to the management of OLRs of 3 to 5-star hotels in the Cape Town central business district (CBD).

### **1.3 Aim and objectives & research questions**

#### **1.3.1 Aims and objectives of the research**

The aim of this research was to explore the management of OLRs as part of online reputation management (ORM) in the hotel sector.

#### **1.3.2 Research questions**

The study endeavoured to answer the following research questions:

- How did 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in Cape Town's CBD manage OLRs pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Which systems and processes are in place to respond to OLRs in 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD?
- How are OLRs included as a significant part in the development of the strategic marketing plan of the 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD?
- What recommendations should be presented to improve a response management guideline to managing positive and negative OLRs for 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD?

#### **1.3.3 Research objectives**

The objectives of the study were to:

- Determine how 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD managed OLRs pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Determine which systems and processes are in place to respond to OLRs in 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD.
- Understand how OLRs are included as a significant part in the development of a strategic marketing plan of the 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD.
- Recommend improvements to a response management guideline for managing positive and negative OLRs for 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD.

## **1.4 Research methodology**

Rajasekar et al. (2013:5) describe the methodology as various ways to obtain systematic solutions to a problem. It is evidently the way researchers compile their work, i.e. by describing, planning, explaining, and predicting.

### **1.4.1 Literature study**

A literature review was conducted in order to obtain secondary data relating to the research topic. Secondary data is sources that are included in research or academic writing that has not been collected as part of that study (Horn, 2009:135). This adds value to a study during the preliminary preparation and literature review components of the research project.

For the purposes of this study, the secondary data sources that were consulted included journal articles, government publications, online publications, textbooks, course notes, newspaper articles, abstracts, and existing theses and dissertations.

### **1.4.2 Research design and data collection methods**

A qualitative method was selected for this study. Qualitative research can be described as that which relies on the views of participants and asks broad and general questions. Qualitative research focuses on describing, generating theories, interpreting, individual occurrences, and workplace experiences and perspectives (O'Brien et al., 2014:1245). Data which is collected through this type of research consists largely of textual findings, and participants' in-depth responses to specific prompts, describing or analysing research findings according to the themes which can sometimes be subjective and biased (Terrell, 2012:256). According to Baskarada (2014:7), over the years the qualitative research paradigm has served as a "unique option for knowledge sharing, academic debate and participant feedback".

Social media is a relatively new subject of study in development with the progression of social media technologies and the extensive use thereof (Duggan et al., 2015). According to Snelson (2016:3), qualitative approaches have the potential to reach new insights into the trends and developments of social media today. Creswell (2019:26) states that rather than to generalise a population, qualitative research develops an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon.

Exploratory studies are applicable when limited information is available on a topic and further exploration of the area of interest is needed (Louise, 2008:50). The participants selected for the study participated in a virtual and face-to-face interview which provided exploratory input

in the research area. An exploratory study focuses on a qualitative approach rather than descriptive research (Hearn, 2012:29). The primary goal of exploratory research is to gain a better understanding for more rigorous work at a later stage (Hearn, 2012:48). This study consisted of 7 participants from 4-star accommodation establishments within the CBD of Cape Town. The participants' key roles were general managers, reservation managers, marketing managers, and their assistants.

#### **1.4.3 Pilot study**

A pilot study is a quick feasibility investigation used to assess several aspects of the methods that would be applied in a longer, more in-depth, or confirmatory investigation (Lowe, 2019:117). A pilot study's main objective is to prevent researchers from beginning a major study before thoroughly understanding the procedures being employed (Polit & Beck, 2017:213). Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001:1) cite "qualitative" researchers' claims that separate pilot experiments are not required for interpretive research. A piloting approach may be less important when small-scale exploratory inquiries are conducted solely to determine whether a problem is acceptable for more extensive research (Malmqvist et al., 2019:3). A questionnaire was shared with industry professionals who specialise in the research topic and verbal feedback was given, where adjustments were necessary, and these were implemented accordingly as per their recommendations.

#### **1.4.4 Sampling method**

Horn (2009:110) defines a population as the set of individuals, items, or data from which a sample is taken. Asiamah et al. (2017:1608) added that in both qualitative and quantitative studies, population specification is a requirement. The survey population for this study included 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD, which are accredited by the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA). The perimeters of the CBD were supplied by the Cape Town Central City Improvement District (CCID) (2018). The CBD's geographical boundaries are within 1.62 km<sup>2</sup> of the Cape Town Metropole (CCID, 2018). The CCID (2018) further divides the area into four precincts within these perimeters. The previous population consisted of 22 hotels within the CBD area. However, due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of these establishments either underwent new management, participants shifted roles, or they experienced a permanent shutdown. In order to continue with the study, the researcher extended the study perimeters outside of the CBD area but remained within Cape Town. The challenges forced the research to alter the parameters to increase participation in the study. The final participation concluded with seven participants, all ranging in 4-star accommodation establishments within Cape Town.

Latham (2007:2) describes a sample as a “sub-group of a population” which involves taking a representative selection of the population and using data collected from them as research information. The author also adds that the same sample should be “representative in the sense that each sampled unit will represent the characteristics of a known number of units in the population” (2007:2). Statistic Solutions (n.d.) indicates that qualitative dissertations can either have a combination or individual use of various sampling methods. Sampling methods reduce research costs, conduct research more effectively, and provide for greater flexibility and accuracy (Latham, 2007:3).

As part of the South African Tourism (SAT) business unit, the TGCSA offers SAT products which are recognised and accredited as part of quality assurance scaling (TGCSA, n.d.). Based on the data retrieved from the TGCSA and CCID website, the researcher was able to classify the ratings of each hotel within the Cape Town CBD area. Although the quality criteria were important, the researcher extended the research area to Cape Town, but not limited to the CBD area. The CCID website provided not only the CBD precincts but also the outlying areas to Cape Town.

Naderifar et al. (2017:1) identify *sampling* as selecting participants from the study population to represent the whole population. In order for the analysis to be comprehensive, the researcher considered the sample as a representation of the whole population (Naderifar et al., 2017:2). According to Etikan et al. (2016:1), the term *population* not only refers to a number of people but also to the amount of things or cases which are in the research subject area.

This study made use of *purposive sampling*. For the purpose of this study, the researcher identified hotels which were rated by the TGCSA but also fell within Cape Town. Purposive sampling, also known as judgement sampling, is where the researcher intentionally selects informants based on the qualities they possess (Dolores & Tongco, 2007:147). Bernard (2002:9) describes *informants* as “observant, reflective members of the community of interest who know much about the culture and are both able and willing to share their knowledge”. Informants can be selected through recommendation or out of convenience (Dolores & Tongco, 2007:153). Etikan et al. (2015:2) identify purposive sampling as a non-random technique that does not need a set number of participants or underlying theories. Etikan et al. (2015:3) add that purposive sampling rather involves a selection of identified individuals or groups that are seen as field experts to provide knowledge and experience within the area of interest. Qualitative methods such as purposive sampling, focus on achieving in-depth understanding and knowledge about a phenomenon from its participants (Patton, 2002:3). More so, Creswell (2019:26) adds that qualitative methods rely on extracting data from texts and diverse designs through a data analysis process. Crossman

(2019) identified *total population sampling* as when the researcher selects the full population according to one or more shared characteristics or qualities. This works well when the number of participants or cases included in the study is rather small (Etikan et al., 2015:3). The hotels who met the selection criteria (rated by the TGCSA and based in Cape Town) were contacted via email and telephone to introduce the study and request their participation. The participants had to be key role players in responding and actively participating in OLR communication. Although the pandemic impacted the responses, seven (7) participants agreed to participate in the study.

#### **1.4.5 Data collection methods**

The researcher employed in-depth interviews to cover the key areas/topics of interest. Ayeh et al. (2012:132) explain that in-depth interviews have been commonly “used to explore practitioners’ perceptions regarding social media and to examine the strategies being applied in engaging social media to influence decision-making”. Therefore, in order to understand how hotel management responds and manages OLRs, the data collection consisted of interviews. The key participants were marketing managers, reservationists, or any key hotel representatives who are actively managing the OLR platforms. Due to the impact of COVID-19, many roles were shared amongst different departments within the hotels. This meant that the range of participants expanded to general managers and room division managers. The initial key participants also included marketing co-ordinators and marketing assistants. The interviews were scheduled according to the availability of each participant, regardless of the star ratings or location. The data collection process was deemed complete once all seven participants from the hotels had been interviewed.

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2020:1) highlighted that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has been experiencing a global health and economic emergency. The pandemic has mostly affected the travel and tourism industry by minimising “international tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020 by a fraction of what they were a year ago” (UNWTO, 2020:1). While causing a disruption to travel and tourism, the pandemic forced worldwide destinations to implement strict travel restrictions and lockdown measures (UNWTO, 2020:3). Lockdown requires citizens to remain at home and avoid contact by practicing social distancing, to reduce the spread of the virus (Western Cape Government [WCG], 2020). Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were scheduled via online video recording platforms. The online platform was confirmed upon consent from the participant. Alternatively, face-to-face interviews were conducted, where permitted. The interview schedule consisted of closed and opened ended questions. The interview schedule was designed in semi-structured format. According to Adams (2015:495), semi-structured interviews are conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, and

employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up ‘why’ or ‘how’ questions. Welman et al. (2005:174-175) define open-ended questions as those which the interviewer asks without prompting, and the participant’s reply is verbatim; closed-ended questions are defined as those which offer the participant a range of answers to choose from, either verbally or from a show card. The questionnaire consisted predominantly of open-ended questions where the participants had an opportunity to respond in a narrative format, with fewer close-ended questions, using yes/no options or Likert scales.

#### 1.4.6 Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research involves the process of segmenting and dissecting data of the findings retrieved (Creswell, 2019:26). The data received was considered to be “data-rich” and, according to Guest et al. (2014:79), researchers partake in a process called “winnowing” whereby they focus on selective parts and disregard the rest. Figure 1.1 depicts the process of qualitative data analysis by Creswell (2019:26).

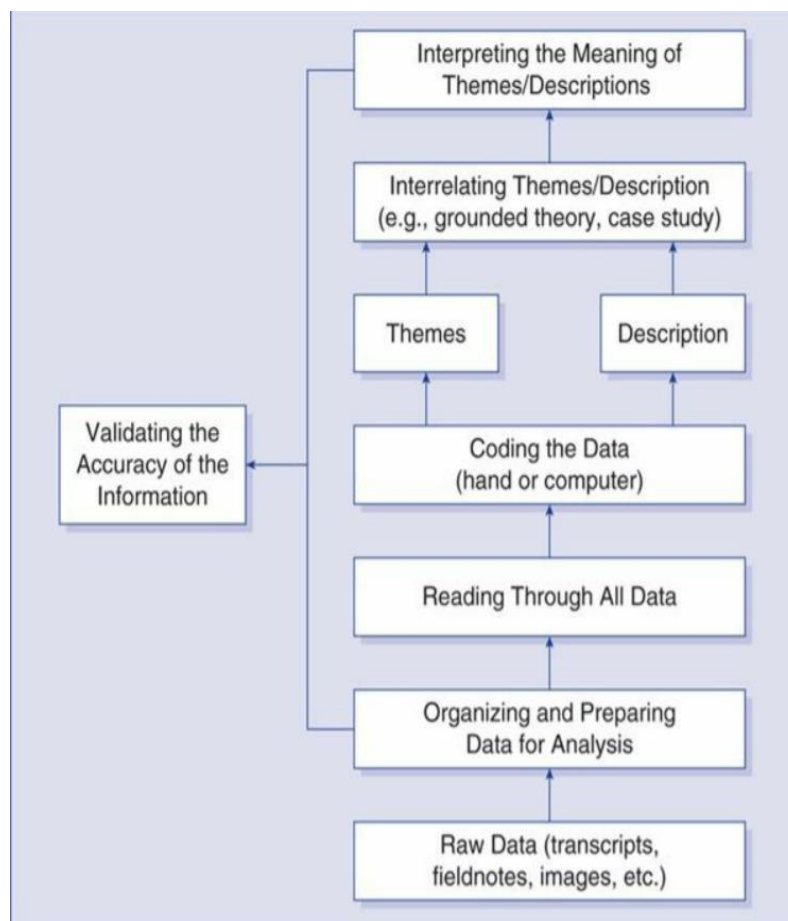


Figure 1.1: Data analysis in qualitative research

Source: Creswell (2019:26)

Creswell’s six steps for qualitative data analysis:

**Step 1: Organisation and preparation of data.** This step focuses on the transcription of interviews, viewing material/content, and collating field notes and images by arranging them into various types of the sources of information obtained (Creswell, 2019:247). The researcher sourced a reputable external data analysis company to transcribe the interview recordings. After the transcripts were received, the researcher conducted a quality check to ensure the responses were transcribed correctly. A letter was received from the transcription company as proof of services rendered. Where responses were too vague for interpretation, the researcher contacted the participant/s for further probing.

**Step 2: Read all the data.** According to Smit (2002:65), Atlas.ti comprises of a system that is able to analyse qualitative data, especially content that is mainly text, audio, or visual data. Smit (2002:65) notes that Atlas.ti will aid the researcher during the data analysis process where large texts are analysed and interpreted by means of annotating and coding actions. Atlas.ti web version 8 was used to analyse the data collected for this study. The findings were presented through discussions, word clouds, and visual aids to support the research context. All seven transcripts, including the emailed questionnaire, were uploaded to Atlas.ti web version 8.

**Step 3: Begin coding of all the data received.** This involves the process of taking the data gathered during data collection and organising it into segments or chunks by means of a word representing a category in the margins (Creswell, 2019:248). Deductive coding was introduced when the researcher drew codes from the four objectives in the study. The researcher then implemented the box framework (see Appendix D). The box framework assisted the researcher in categorising each code to a theme. As the researcher read each transcript, inductive codes emerged through the online(web) application analysis. Each code was then grouped according to each research objective. This feature is unique to the Atlas.ti web version 8. The grouping of codes allowed a smooth transition to developing themes in the next step of analysis.

**Step 4: By means of the coding process to create a description of the setting, or people, as well as the categories or themes for analysis.** Creswell (2019:248) describes the term *description* as an in-depth version of the information about people, places, or events in a particular setting. Creating codes for each description can assist the researcher by generating a select number of themes or categories for the research study (Creswell, 2019:248). Researchers are able to identify additional layers of complex analysis through coding themes (Creswell, 2019:248). The box framework was a guideline for the researcher to develop themes that emerged in the deductive and inductive coding process. Each theme was grouped accordingly as mentioned in stage 3, as per the box framework.

**Step 5: Representation of description and themes in the qualitative narrative.** The most popular and preferred way of conveying the findings of the data analysis is through a narrative approach (Creswell, 2019:248). A representation of the findings through illustrations, visual graphs, various opinions from individuals or a “discussion with interconnecting themes” form part of a qualitative narrative (Creswell, 2019:248). The themes were grouped according to the research objectives. This was to ensure that each objective was successfully met during the interview period. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, minimal graphs and visual representations were used in the findings chapter. This was done after the coding and thematic process was completed. The findings were predominantly presented in texts and verbatim quotes/extracts from the participants.

**Step 6: Interpretation in qualitative research of the findings and results.** This step entailed a comparison of past literature with the information of the data analysis in the current study, and then considering the comparison between the findings of the literature or theories (Creswell, 2019:248). This could be an opportunity for questions to arise that were unforeseen earlier in the study as well. However, by using the theoretical approach, interpretations can create channels for reform and change (Creswell, 2019:248). The researcher used existing literature to substantiate and support the findings of the research. In some cases, the findings proved to contradict the existing literature used and this was deemed as valuable information to the researcher. A clear comparison was presented through recent secondary literature and the current findings in this research.

### **1.5 Ethical considerations**

Kovacs (1985) indicates that ethics is part of a philosophy that entails the way people conduct themselves as well as their standards of behaviour and relationships with each other. It is therefore the role of the researcher to ensure a sound, moral way of conducting and disseminating their research findings (Cooper & Schindler, 2005:28). The authors also add that the objective is to ensure that no participant is harmed during the research process. In adhering to the above, permission letters were sent to the hotel managers of each hotel identified. The interview process only began after written acceptance was received. The interview schedule included a declaration of anonymity to ensure the privacy of the participants, and, in addition, participation was completely voluntary. Permission was granted by the hotel establishments to access and retrieve information from their website. The information obtained was only for research purposes and would not be shared with other hotels during and after the research process. All responses (recordings and transcripts) were coded as “participants” and no names were included when storing the data. Furthermore, prior to the commencing of this dissertation, it was subject to the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences’ (FBMS) Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of

Technology (CPUT) for ethical clearance (FOBREC819), which was approved on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2020 (see Appendix A).

## **1.6 Significance of the study**

Gellerstedt and Arvemo (2019:290) comment that the travel market is a heavily affected industry, where OLRs influence over \$10 billion purchases in online travel per year. The authors add that within the travel industry, the accommodation sector is mostly affected. As hotels use OLRs as a platform to interact with current and potential customers, reactions by management are seen as a crucial element in online engagement (Drozdowska et al., 2019:75). This research is intended to contribute significantly to the hospitality industry. Findings gathered from the research were used to uncover gaps within various hotel management communication strategies used to respond to OLRs. The hospitality industry is service driven which requires thorough training for its employees; the findings would thus assist and guide management in proper training content to better its current OLR management systems. The research data were collected from key participants that play an active role in managing OLRs at the identified hotel establishments. The hoped-for outcome was the development and implementation of strategic marketing plans within various accommodation establishments in Cape Town. More so, it can provide insight into how hotel establishments utilise OLRs before and during a worldwide pandemic.

## **1.7 Limitations**

According to Theofanadis and Fountouki (2018:156), *research limitations* can be referred to as any restriction that is beyond the control of the researcher which can be assigned to the selected research design, statistical and funding constraints, or other factors. This section presents the limitations of the current study. The first limitation was that it focused only on online management perspectives of 3- to 5-star hotel establishments within the Cape Town CBD. This meant that only hotel establishments within the CBD was of interest for the study. However, due to the COVID-19 challenges, the area was extended to the Cape Metropole. The second limitation was that the interviews had to be conducted virtually, rather than face-to-face due to COVID-19 restrictions. This could impact the results of the virtual interviews. Creswell (2014:240) notes that conducting interviews in qualitative research might limit the researcher through indirect information filtered through the views of interviewees and/or a researcher that is present during the interview which may impact responses through bias. The third limitation is that researchers who adopt qualitative research for a “small” sample size are prone to limit the generalisation of their results (Vasilieou et al., 2018:14). In this case, the small sample size of seven participants within Cape Town cannot be generalised to the larger hospitality community.

## **1.8 Outline of chapters**

### **1.8.1 Chapter 1**

Chapter 1, the introductory chapter, explained the research study, provided the background to the research area, and defined the research problem. The aim, objectives, and research questions were also clearly stated. Additionally, a brief sketch of the methodology employed in this study was provided, along with the data analysis process that was followed. The limitations of the study were also mentioned, including an outline of the forthcoming chapters.

### **1.8.2 Chapter 2**

Chapter 2 presented the literature review of the study. Topics addressed in this chapter included:

- Defining tourism
- Tourism in South Africa
- Defining hospitality
- Background on hospitality and accommodation in South Africa
- Accommodation: Western Cape/Cape Town
- Role of strategic marketing in tourism and hospitality
- Factors influencing marketing in tourism and hospitality
- Defining information technologies and information communication technologies
- Systems in customer relationship management (CRM)
- Systems and processes for online reviews in hospitality
- Defining online response management
- COVID-19 impacts
- Online response management during COVID-19

### **1.8.3 Chapter 3**

Chapter 3 described the research methodology in detail. Existing knowledge was drawn upon to consider both the advantages and challenges associated with the selected methodology. By drawing on previous examples and theories of related studies, the researcher illustrated why the selected methodology is most appropriate for this research study. The interview schedule design; the data collection methods; the target population and representative sample; and statistical package, were discussed herein. The methods of data capturing and analysis were also given attention.

#### **1.8.4 Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 presented the primary data of the study and represented the discussion component of the dissertation. The data that were collected and analysed were discussed herein, observable trends were noted, and the study's research findings were presented. The latter addressed the research questions and objectives which are discussed in the final chapter that follows.

#### **1.8.5 Chapter 5**

Chapter 5 provided the research conclusions based on the outcomes of the data analysis. This chapter also discussed the implications of the research conducted and, through this, made relevant recommendations and suggested improvements. The chapter also explained how the objectives of the research, as stipulated in Chapter 1, were met.

#### **1.9 Summary**

In addition to introducing this study and topic under investigation, this chapter also presented the main elements of the research process. The next chapter undertakes a review of relevant literature to elucidate the topic further.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 consists of an in-depth literature review on the importance of OLR systems in hotels, and the role the Internet and social media play in online brand management. The chapter also gives background to the tourism sector, its various sectors, the development of tourism and hospitality within South Africa, and advancements of technology within the hospitality industry. In addition, the main themes cover the purpose of marketing plans; the development of marketing within the tourism sector and hospitality industry; identifying online response management systems; and lastly, the impact of COVID-19 on the sector. The flow of topics is depicted in the theoretical structure below (see Figure 2.1).

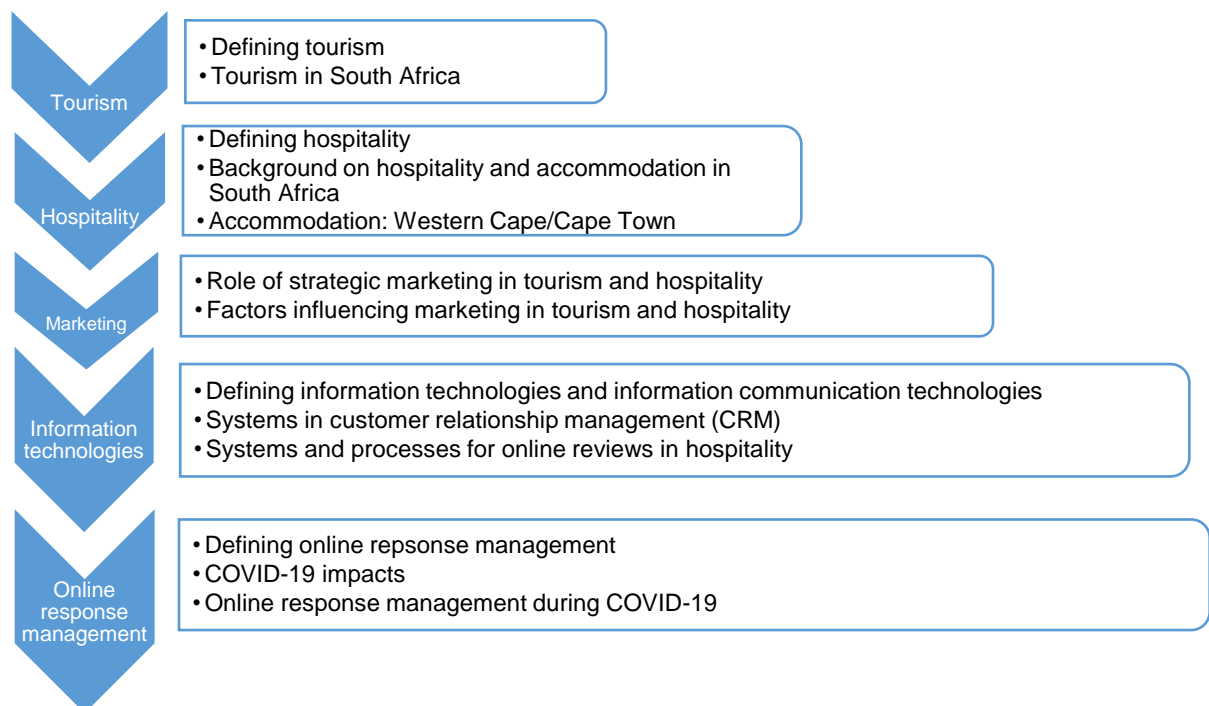


Figure 2.1: Theoretical structure of flow of topics

Source: Researchers own concept

These themes are described in more detail below under their respective headings.

#### 2.2 Defining tourism

Tourism is regarded as an important activity that contributes to a country's gross domestic product (GDP) as a revenue source and is part of the exportation category globally (de las

Heras-Perdrosa et al., 2020:2). Brelik (2018:44) adds that tourism is treated as a priority sector on a global scale due to the economic benefits of the industry. The UNWTO (n.d.) recognises tourism as a “social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes”. Wearing and McGehee (2013:120) similarly identified tourism as a social and cultural trend that has progressed in both developed and developing countries, with Skripak (2016:331) further elaborating on the definition as the movement of people for a number of purposes either business or leisure. All these elements are essential functions for a successful tourism destination and operate within private and public sectors, such as creating the processes, activities, and effects of tourism globally (Skripak, 2016:333).

The terms ‘tourism’, ‘travel’, and ‘hospitality’ are sometimes misconstrued or characterised as the same thing, even though *tourism* is the broad umbrella term that encompasses all of the activities and industries that contribute to the tourist experience (Brelik, 2018:49). The term ‘travel’ and ‘tourism’ is defined by UNWTO as the action of often moving between different places for any purpose, but most frequently for leisure and entertainment (UNWTO, n.d.). Wearing et al. (2010:5) add that tourism is an “arena of interaction” which contributes to the tourists’ experiences through various surroundings, locations, and cultures of the interested destinations (Wearing et al., 2010:5). This means that tourists’ perceptions of their experiences are not one-dimensional but rather a totality of their senses, through walking, smelling and feeling connected to the surroundings of the area of choice (Rainwater & Hirshon, 2015). Triarchi and Karamanis (2017:40) add that tourist interactions are a multifaceted process that is built through use, visual consumption, and imagination that can accommodate experiences made by alternative tourism.

Figure 2.2 illustrates the relationship between travel, tourism, and hospitality industries. Stear and Griffin (1993:43) explain that while tourists are away from their normal abode for a period of time, they require food and shelter when visiting or exploring various destinations. The authors add that the needs by tourists present the importance for a relationship between travel (mobility in destinations), tourism (exploring the destinations), and lastly, hospitality (lodging or place to stay). Another shared aspect between these industries revolves around “encounters between people” who are identified as “strangers” to each other (Bell, 2009:20). The encounter involves the movement of the guest or traveller to the destination of another guest (host). While this happens, the guests rely on the industries to explore the destinations (Bell, 2009:23). The following section will consider the development of tourism in South Africa.

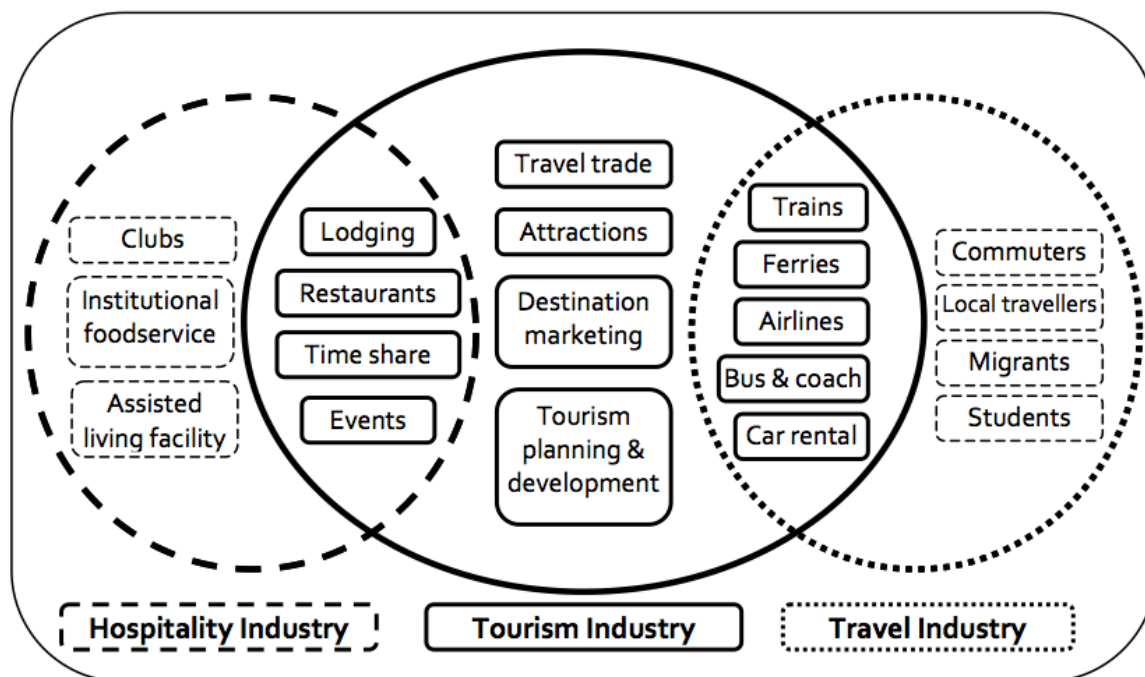


Figure 2.2: Relationship between travel, tourism, and hospitality industry

Source: Piboonrunroj (2013) and Pizam (2012)

### 2.2.1 Tourism in the South African landscape

South Africa not only attracts tourists for the events industry but provides a host of scenic experiences for travellers too (Banoobhai-Anwar, 2016:2). According to Africa Geographic Travel (2017), South Africa is a top-rated travel destination due to its amplitude of natural scenery, abundance of wildlife, temperate climate, diverse culture and history, array of activities, and its hospitable citizens. Tourism is a service industry where the product is consumed at the site of production, unlike agriculture or the industrial sector (McKelly et al., 2017:1). According to reports, South Africa was ranked among the top five countries in the world with reference to its increasing growth in tourism (South African High Commission in Singapore, 2014). Tourism is one of the primary sectors promoting transformation on the African continent, particularly South Africa (McKelly et al., 2017:2). Travel to South Africa from abroad accounted for 10.4 million trips there in 2017 and contributed R273.2 billion to the country's GDP in 2018. In the recent report of Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) in 2020, the number of international arrivals declined to 2.8 million visitors to South Africa during the period of January to December 2020. The decline was due to the lockdown restrictions as travel was only permitted in October 2020 (Department of Tourism, 2020). Over 1.5 million employments are supported by tourism, including 740,000 direct jobs (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2018:14). This includes work with hotels, travel agencies, airlines, and other passenger transportation services (excluding commuter services) (WTTC, 2018:8), as well as activities of the restaurant and leisure industries directly

supported by tourists (WTTC, 2018:4). According to the Department of Tourism (2020:19), employment in the tourism and travel industry experienced a steep 36% decline compared to that of 2018/2019. It is frequently the only source of economic activity in rural and distant areas. Regarded as a top travel destination for both leisure and business travel, Cape Town also experienced a drop in tourism as only 388,000 international travellers were welcomed in 2020 (WESGRO, 2021:6). The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted on Cape Town's tourism employment that declined from 73,406 in 2019 to 38,513 in 2020. The tourism employment is estimated to represent 5.3% of Cape Town's total employment (WESGRO, 2021:7). While the industry tries to adapt to the vast changes, the sector still provides chances for employment for men, women, and youth across the nation and is vital to many micro and small businesses. The section below will discuss the development and growth of hospitality and accommodation sector within the tourism industry.

### **2.3 Hospitality and accommodation on a global scale**

*Hospitality* can be defined as “the business of helping people to feel welcome and relaxed and to enjoy themselves” (Discover Hospitality, 2015:3). Hospitality is indeed the largest segment of the tourism sector, comprising of accommodation and food and beverage groupings (Parsons et al. 2016:8). The sector includes hotels, restaurants, and businesses that offer food, drinks, and other service-related offerings (Chan & MacKenzie, 2013:22). Olowoyo et al. (2021:1080) add that hospitality includes facilities such as bars, as well as bed and breakfast (B&B) establishments. Smith Travel Research (2020:3) states that the global hotel and resort industry generated over \$878 billion in revenue and created employment for over 4 million people in 2018. According to Callon et al. (2007:21), the accommodation industry is one of the most important industries within tourism. Smaller lodging establishments are acknowledged on a global scale as being essential to the tourism sector's sustainability (Glen & Mearns, 2018:86). In European towns, smaller independent accommodation establishments are key drivers for employment and to economic contribution (Bastakis et al., 2004:2), making accommodation an essential support facility in destination regions. With the importance of their role as chain operators, the hotel sector is not alone when it comes to growth and economic contribution (International Labour Organisation, 2010:10). Restaurants, especially coffee shops, and the fast-food industry have experienced significant expansion in many locations throughout the world, typically using the franchise model (International Labour Organisation, 2010:10). While the industry does its bit to grow the economy, it facilitates the countries' ability to offer various leisure activities, blue flag beaches, top accommodation offerings, and other related offerings (Department of Tourism, 2021:1).

In order to be successful in tourism and hospitality marketing, the organisation needs to have a good understanding of the industry characteristics and approaches (Westcott & Anderson, 2021:186), in order to respond well to the industry demands. The concept of marketing should be developed around the desires and needs of the customers combined with the unique experiences of hospitality (Periera & Almieda, 2014:92). These approaches can help the hotel to achieve a competitive advantage and possibly increase customer loyalty if implemented correctly (Periera & Almieda, 2014:93). Pizam and Shani (2009:135) identified various approaches and characteristics considered as guiding principles to define the nature of hospitality, namely:

- *Professionalism*: Attitudes, skills, and personality traits are required to present professionalism in the workplace by staff in the hospitality industry (Baum, 2007:1384). The hospitality sector offers qualified services to those that request them.
- *Hospitableness*: The focus here is on the sociocultural meanings of hospitality as opposed to just the business one (Bell, 2007:11). Viewing hospitality as a virtue: The interest in ensuring the guest's satisfaction so that he/she would feel sincerely appreciated and welcomed.
- *Hospitality as an experience*: Customers in the hospitality industry are now primarily motivated by a desire for unique and engaging experiences (Knutson et al., 2006:33). There is therefore the demand that theming, staging, simulation, and theatrical performance be integrated into hospitality operations.
- *Hospitality as a philosophy*: Hospitality is regarded as a service approach that may be applied to various services industries (Gilje, 2004:36). Employing the warmth and friendliness associated with hospitality may help other service providers deliver more attentive and sincere care.

### **2.3.1 Background and a framework of the hospitality and accommodation industry in South Africa**

The history of hospitality in South Africa dates back to the 1800s when Swiss and German hoteliers travelled to the country, imparting various hotel standards which can be seen today within the hotel industry (Flanders Investment and Trade, 2018:9). During the iconic South African election period in 1994, South Africa saw an increase of international travellers which required 5-star hotel establishments to be built in order to meet this demand (Flanders Investment and Trade, 2018: 10). South Africa took the opportunity to join relevant international organisations such as the UNWTO and the African Travel Association (ATA) (Olowoyo et al., 2021:1079). This led to South Africa's top destinations requiring various accommodation offerings within the hospitality industry (Banoobhai-Anwar, 2016:3).

According to a Reflections Report by SAT (2010), over 102 million beds were accounted for by the domestic market and over 81 million to international travellers all over South Africa.

Another turning point within the hospitality industry in the early 2000s in South Africa was the formulation of policies to stimulate growth within the hospitality sector (Olowoyo et al., 2021:1080). Evidence indicating relevant growth within the hospitality and accommodation industry points to 2010 (FIFA World Cup) when the industry provided affordable and suitable accommodation for visitors to the destination (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], n.d.). The increase in international arrivals to South Africa was due to the positive impacts from the 2010 FIFA World Cup (SAT, 2010:2). Fast tracking to 2019, the tourism contribution resulted in 1.49 million sector jobs, of which 19% accounted for the hospitality and accommodation sector in South Africa (Sucheran, 2021:118).

Clients demand high-quality services within the contemporary business environment in the hotel industry (Maric et al., 2015:10). By means of obtaining a competitive advantage, South Africa's tourism and hospitality industry strived to recognise the importance of quality assurance (du Plessis & Saayman, 2010:131). In 2000, the TGCSA established its globally accredited quality assurance body for tourism products in South Africa (TGCSA, 2016). The TGCSA assesses various establishments against set criteria and awards star grading based on services and facilities (WCG, 2021:6). The accreditation and grading system were developed for various types of accommodation establishments in South Africa, including "(Hotel, Apartment Hotel, Boutique Hotel, Small Hotel), Guest Accommodation (Bed & Breakfasts, Country Houses, Guest Houses), Self-Catering Accommodation (Exclusive, Shared), Game Lodge, Nature Lodge, Backpackers & Hostels, Caravan & Camping Sites and Venues" (du Plessis & Saayman, 2010:131). The TGCSA (2019) defines a hotel as an establishment that "provides formal accommodation with full or limited service to the travelling public. A hotel has a reception area and offers a dining facility. A hotel must have a minimum of four rooms". One of the six subsectors of the SAT industry is the hospitality subsector, which includes hotels (CATHSSETA, 2018). According to the WCG (2021:3), hotels belong to international and some local chains ranging from budget to luxury styles. The TGSCA (2019:4) also released an updated report which outlined hotel classifications and definitions (Figure 2.3).

# PROJECT OVERVIEW, CLASSIFICATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

SUB-CATEGORY	DEFINITION
<b>HOTEL ACCOMMODATION</b>	
Hotel	A Hotel provides accommodation with full or limited service to the travelling public and has a minimum of 80 rooms. A Hotel has a reception area and offers a dining facility.
Small Hotel	A Small Hotel provides accommodation with full or limited service to the travelling public and has up to approximately 10 rooms. A Small Hotel has a reception area and offers a dining facility.
Apartment Hotel	An Apartment Hotel provides accommodation with full or limited service to the travelling public and has a minimum of 10 rooms. An Apartment Hotel has a reception area and offers a dining facility. There is a kitchenette and dining area in each room.
Boutique Hotel	A Boutique Hotel provides accommodation with full or limited service to a travelling public. A Boutique Hotel offers unique rooms, has a reception area and offers a dining facility.

Figure 2.3: Hotel accommodation classifications and definitions

Source: TGCSA (2019:4)

Star classifications originated in Europe and are regarded as one of the best techniques for grading establishments (du Plessis & Saayman, 2010:132). The purpose of grading associations allows transparency and enhances the quality of the grading system (TGCSA, 2019), as these directly translate to value for money expectations of guests. As of 2019, the grading system criteria have advanced to more qualitative and quantitative core and quality standard requirements. The 5-star “premium” rating was officially introduced in 2019 by the TGCSA (BusinessTech, 2019). BusinessTech (2019) released a list of 5-star “premium” hotels in South Africa, including The Silo Hotel in Cape Town.

Some of the benefits for establishments with TGCSA grading include:

- The establishment will be approved and listed on the TGCSA website;
- The opportunity is created to advertise star-grading on the establishment’s marketing materials;
- The establishment receives feedback in the form of customer complaints or recommendations alerted by TGCSA (WCG, 2021:7).

Tefera and Govender (2015:2) explain that accommodation ratings are one of the first factors guests consider when selecting a place to stay. Guests should be vigilant of official and non-official rating systems. *Official rating systems* are usually followed and implemented by government agencies or associations, through a compulsory criteria and regulatory basis (Tefera & Govender, 2015:3). *Non-official rating systems*, on the other hand, are usually run

by private associations and participation is on a voluntary basis. The World Tourism Organisation (2014) says that grading is beneficial to both the guest and the hotel. In that, guests already have a perception of quality prior to staying at the establishment and, in addition, official grading systems set an internal benchmark for quality and services for all parties involved (Tefera & Govender, 2015:5).

### **2.3.2 Accommodation establishments in Cape Town CBD**

According to Airbnb (2018:9), although guests are discovering places across the country, Cape Town remains the most popular destination in South Africa. The International Congress and Conventions Association (ICCA) placed Cape Town as the best business tourism city in Africa in 2018 (PwC, 2018:9). The Western Cape's unrivalled natural beauty, legendary hospitality, cultural diversity, top-notch wine, and delectable cuisine make this city one of the world's top tourist destinations (South African Yearbook, 2019:12). Banoobhai-Anwar and Keating (2016:3) argue that Cape Town is regarded as the most "alluring and diverse tourist city in the country to visit". The oldest and second largest city in South Africa, it attracts international tourists for its Mediterranean climate, urban landscapes, and well-developed infrastructure (World Tourism Cities Federation, n.d.:1). There are around 4,000 tourism-related businesses in the city, including 2,742 guest accommodations of various types, 389 dining establishments, and 424 tourist attractions that welcome both local and foreign tourists (WTCF, n.d.:3). Voted as one of the top tourist destinations in the world, Cape Town offers budget friendly accommodation to 5-star luxury hotel accommodation (Cape Town Tourism, 2019:16).

According to Musavengane and Steyn (2013:55), the accommodation sector acts as an important element within the Cape Town hospitality industry. South African hotels are the most developed sub-sector of the accommodation sector, with Cape Town having a larger number of hotels in South Africa when compared with other provinces (Musavengane & Steyn, 2013:55). In 2017, Cape Town saw the opening of hotels which included the Radisson Blu Hotel & Residences and Radisson Red V&A Waterfront rated four stars, and the Stayeasy Cape Town City Bowl, a 3-star hotel (PwC, 2017:10). These accommodation establishments attract both business and leisure tourists to Cape Town. A key feature of Cape Town is the Central City, also known as the CBD (Central Business District). According to the CCID (2018:2), the area is bordered to the northeast by Table Bay harbour (the Port of Cape Town), including the V&A Waterfront, and by the largely residential suburbs around the rest of the perimeter known as the Atlantic Seaboard (to the northwest), the City Bowl (to the west and south) and District Six and Woodstock (to the southeast). In 2019, there were a total of 3,321 businesses operating within the CBD, 169 of which were accommodation and travel related establishments (CCID, 2018:13). Many of these are the

largest hotel complexes in the Central City, situated within walking distance from the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC) and the V&A Waterfront. These large complexes include the Westin, two Radisson hotels (Park Inn and Radisson Blu), three Tsogo Sun hotels (The Cullinan, Southern Sun Waterfront, and Sun1 Foreshore) and the Protea North Wharf (CCID, 2018:49). The city remains a magnet for business and leisure tourists, and the Central City benefits from both. The accommodation and travel sector remains strong (with boutique hotels featuring prominently and Airbnb becoming a feature) followed closely by the information communication technologies (ICT) and telecoms business sector (CCID, 2018:12).

#### **2.4 Role of strategic marketing within the hospitality industry**

Marketing has become an increasingly strategic resource for companies (Reeves & Deimler, 2011:138). The global economy perception of the marketing management approach becomes crucial to various sectors and organisations (Genchev, 2015:232). Varadarajan (2009:120) mentions that the American Marketing Academy (AMA) defines the goals of marketing inside an organisation include creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers while managing customer relationships in a way that benefits the organisation and its stakeholders as a whole. Now more than ever, marketing has discovered a spectacular role in organisational performance in the electronic age, where a company's survival and success are seriously dependent on its customers, competitors, and markets (Aghazadeh, 2015:128). From a theoretical point of view, marketing created a number of technical and conceptual contributions, namely segmentation, positioning, and targeting (Kirova, 2017:27). According to Jansen Van Rensburg et al. (2010:28), these are elements that involve strategic marketing:

- Defining the market: Identifying possible customers and understanding market dynamics.
- Segmentation, targeting, and positioning: The separation of a market into a number of uniform submarkets; the quantification and qualification of the needs of the identified customer groups (segments) within identified markets; and the choice of suitable target markets are all part of this basic strategic marketing activity (targeting). In order to address the needs stated by the segments, positioning requires developing acceptable value propositions based on product/service offers and costs (creating a sustainable competitive advantage).

Aghazadeh (2015:129) adds that strategic marketing is essential for connecting a business to its surroundings and enabling it to take proactive action by being prepared to adapt with

the changing environment. In addition, strategic marketing is so essential and can offer any market-related knowledge needed to make the right judgements (Aghazadeh, 2015:127). A marketing plan may provide several advantages to a business (Karppinen, 2011:31).

There are two types of marketing plans, tactical and strategic plans. *Tactical marketing* plans focus on the details to achieve business goals (McDuffee, 2018). Panno (2019) agrees that tactical marketing plans create pinpoint opportunities to achieve the business objectives or goals. The methods and strategies we might use to take action are familiar tactical marketing plans (Oxford College of Marketing, 2018). Kotler and Armstrong (2004:76) identify the methods of tactical marketing as tools to produce the response it wants from its potential target market through product, price, place, and promotions.

*Strategic marketing plans* are less thorough than a tactical marketing strategy, and it focuses on external environmental impacts and possibilities rather than the specifics of the firm's marketing strategy (Bowie & Buttle, 2004:316). Strategic marketing plans are used in business to adapt to changing markets and build competitive advantage (Jones, 2018:1). Based on the Principles of Marketing by Kotler et al. (2005:51), the mission, strategic objectives, strategic assessment, SWOT (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, portfolio analysis, objectives, and strategies are just a few of the parts that make up the strategic marketing plan. All of these feed from and into marketing plans. The Berlin School of Business and Innovation (2019) describes a strategic marketing plan as a method to differentiate a business' strengths, to provide better products and services through the perspective of the consumer. The main elements of strategic marketing planning are the profound insights of customer's necessities and the skill to acknowledge competitive behaviour. Strategic marketing has grown to encompass all aspects of the business (Bacanu, 2015:16). Genchev (2015:323) adds that strategic marketing planning is crucial for a company evaluation, as it provides direction and guidance, while enabling set objectives, but also identifying alternatives and strategies.

Therefore, a strategic plan for a tourism accommodation business would include initiatives or actions that advance the business's mission, connecting goals with available resources, and projecting future trends in terms of client wants and the actions required to achieve those expectations through supply (Bennett, 2002:139). An organisation may be able to find new product and marketing opportunities by utilising marketing activity, assessing those opportunities, and taking steps to develop them (Abuharris & Ruddock, 2002:4).

### **2.4.1 Factors that influence marketing in tourism and hospitality**

Bennett (2002:140) contends that the growing demand for tourism services can only be fully met by developing and implementing the best and most up-to-date market-based strategic plans. Strategic planning involves maintaining the organisation's goals and objectives, whilst keeping a consumer-focused approach in a constantly changing environment (Kotler & Armstrong, 2017:63). Unlike the product/hardware manufacturing sector, the services sector has some unique characteristics that make it difficult for marketers to define and evaluate quality, as was discussed in section 2.3. Therefore, an overall bouquet to achieve customer satisfaction can prove to be even more problematic, when not clearly defined (Sanasam et al., 2018:180). Hence, the requirements for guidelines and criteria set by the TGCSA outlined the terms for quality and service levels (TGCSA, 2016). When it comes to marketing their products and services, businesses confront a slew of obstacles (Karppinen, 2011:26). The primary purpose of tourist marketing is to successfully position the destination in an environment of ever-increasing supply and competition (Ketter et al., 2016:138). Organisations need to have complete strategies and core competences, such as knowledge and skills, to be successful in the service sector. These capabilities will allow them to create, cultivate, and maintain relationships with their clients that will benefit both parties (Cronin & Taylor, 1994:126). As illustrated in Figure 2.4, marketing planning is simply a tool by which an organisation achieves its objectives. The figure illustrates that to determine the organisation's objectives, maintaining relationships with customers, available resources, and potential possibilities, planning is a crucial activity (Abuharris & Ruddock, 2002:2). Other major goals are to promote the location and its tourism products, to encourage travellers and visitors, and to communicate the destination's distinct image and identity (Ketter et al., 2016:137). Dibb et al. (2005:228) add that the ability of managers to make strategic and tactical decisions can be improved by marketing planning, which can help managers understand marketing and markets better. Dibb et al. (2005:228) add that flexible planning methods are required to meet and react to changing situations. The model addresses flexibility and adaptability in changing environments when formulating a strategic or tactical marketing plan within a business.

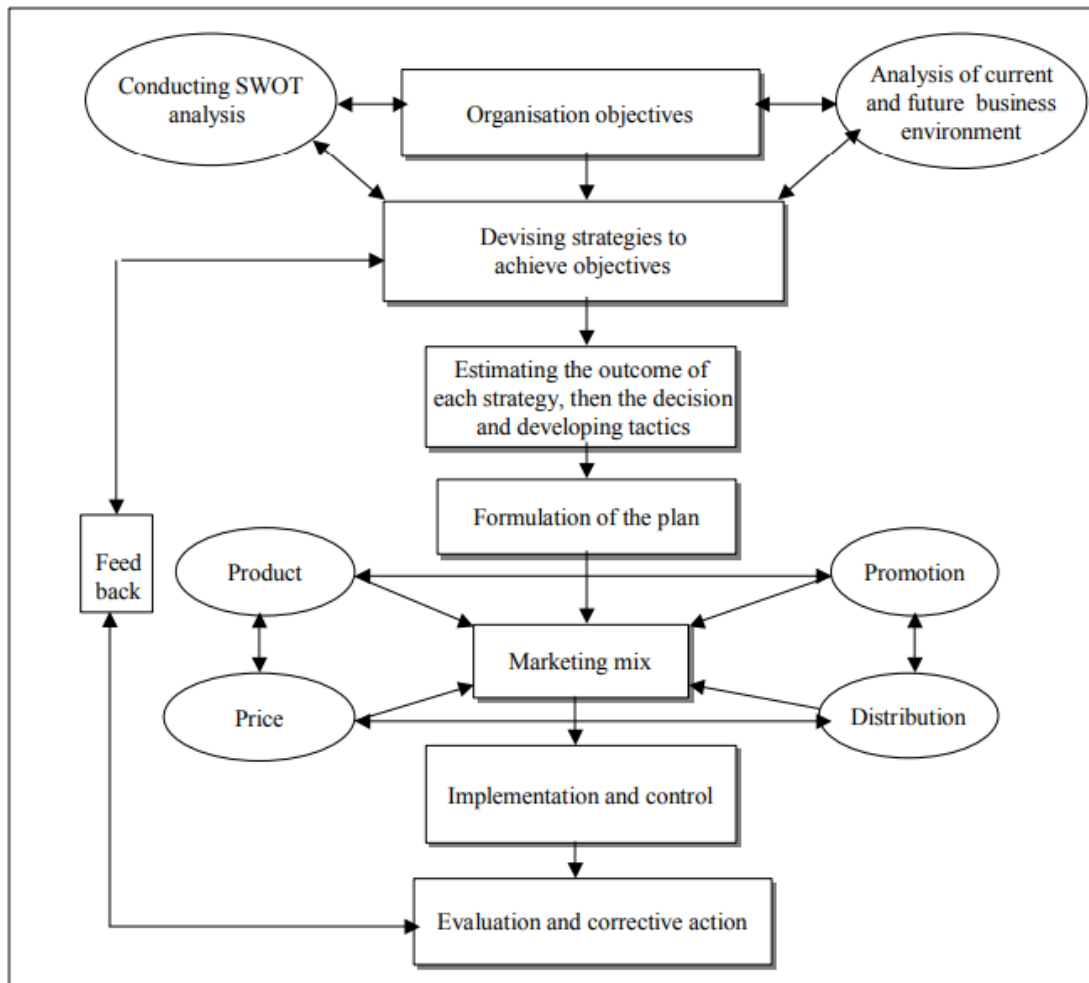


Figure 2.4 Tourism marketing planning stages model

Source: Abuharris and Ruddock (2002:3)

The hospitality sector is no exception, and hotels, for example, must be aware of the various unique aspects that influence their marketing (Karpinnen, 2011:26). This task is not easy to achieve given the nature of hotel service, which is described as intangible, inseparable, perishable, and heterogeneous (Ndizera, 2018:2). Unlike products, services are performances that cannot be seen, felt, tasted, or touched in the same way that goods can, thus making experiences of customers so much more critical in determining the level of service of the establishments they visit. The characteristics that make up the 'nature of the hotel service' are explained below:

- The intangible features provide value, distinguish hotels from one another, and are intended to provide further value to clients (Karpinnen, 2011:16). The term "inseparability of production and consumption" refers to the concurrent production and consumption that characterises the majority of services (Awara & Anyadighibe, 2014:35). Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2006) agree that services are sold first, then created and consumed simultaneously, in contrast to products, which are produced,

sold, and consumed one after the other. As for the term "heterogeneity", it refers to the possibility of a wide range of service performance. The quality and spirit of a service can differ from one producer to the next, from one customer to the next, and from one day to the next (Awara & Anyadighibe, 2014:35).

- Lastly, because of the potential losses generated by unsold or underused capacity, almost all types of services could be classified as perishable. Every unsold hotel room for a particular day and every unsold ticket for a particular flight, for example, is termed a financial loss because the potential income from these capabilities is completely gone (Aras et al., 2018:45).

These characteristics are not relevant to the product sector because they are significant in terms of selection qualities, which allow the consumer to carefully consider and experience a product before purchasing it (Girard & Dion, 2010:1080). It is difficult for service industry marketers to develop and offer a package of utilities that will further attract and keep clients in order to build a long-term service delivery system because the services industry does not have a specific product or technology, it is more of an experience (Sanasam et al., 2018:181).

It is crucial to implement marketing tactics for a service organisation like a hotel in order to increase its capacity to compete with other hotels, establish a competitive edge, and retain more clients (Petzer et al., 2008:3). However, a lack of a marketing strategy can have a wide variety of negative repercussions and for a hotel, this might entail failing to capitalise on prospective growth markets and other fresh marketing possibilities, as well as experiencing demand issues during low-season months (Cooper et al., 2004:548). The introduction and progress of digital technology has been a key transforming factor in the creation of marketing strategies and ease of reporting on market activity and impact on the business (Pereira, 2017:20).

## **2.5 The role of information technologies (IT) in tourism and hospitality**

Businesses operate in a time of fast change, in which the dynamic, complex, and competitive climate, changing client tastes, and the ongoing introduction of new technology push enterprises to constantly rebuild and reinvent themselves (Toumi et al., 2021:232). In an exceedingly dynamic tourist business, innovation and the application of sophisticated technology are not only a determinant of competition, but also of survival, growth, and development (Ilic & Nikolic, 2018:38). In the current information revolution, ICT has found applications in a wide range of sectors, including tourism (Ilic & Nikolic, 2018:39). The most recent innovation in the technique (electronics) and apparatus (computers and

communication technology) used for information collecting, processing, analysis, storage, retrieval, dissemination, and application is referred to as information technology (IT) (Haque & Rahman, 2012:111), which has become critical in the marketing activities of organisations.

The tourism sector was among the first to employ ICT almost solely for business purposes (Garzotto et al., 2004). ICT provides flexibility for information exchange, communication, and collaboration among hospitality and tourism suppliers and clients (Sheng et al., 2005:270). ICTs enable users to recognise, change, and acquire tourism items, as well as help business globalisation by providing tools for increasing, managing, and allocating worldwide offers (Khan & Hossain, 2018:60). ICTs are frequently employed in these two interconnected sectors and industries, namely, the tourism sector and hospitality industry (Khatri, 2019:79).

Pease and Rowe (2005:2) agree that tourism has benefited greatly from the advancement of IT and ICT. The most significant advantage given by ICTs is access to trustworthy information, which allows for the creation and exchange of knowledge across huge groups of people while also lowering costs and enhancing efficiency (Mihajlović, 2012:151). Morrison et al. (1999) stated that in terms of lower expenses, more revenues, simpler marketing research and database creation, and client retention, hospitality organisations have benefited from the use of technology as well. Tourism is a hybrid sector because, while it is driven by the supply of information, it is fundamentally about a physical commodity (Werthner & Klein, 1999:13). The hotel industry was an early adopter of digital technologies and digital platforms in the 1970s, paving the way for computer reservation systems (CRSs), global distribution systems (GDSs), and the Internet (Zeqiri et al., 2020:56). Similar research by Rahman et al. (2012:117) add that computer systems were employed to assist the internal processes of significant operators in the transportation, hotel, and food services sectors during the early years of widespread global tourism (from the 1950s through the 1970s). Tourist-related products, such as hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and tour operators, can help to boost the globalisation of the tourism business (Ilic & Nikolic, 2018:41). Previously noted by Wahab (2017), the advent of tourism web portals has fundamentally transformed all operations involved with the provision of services to tourists, since these portals have been effective in organising and disseminating all tourist requests and tourism sector offers. IT aids in addressing the expectations of clients for timely and accurate information, and IT adoption in the tourism and hospitality industries has recently increased at an unprecedented rate (Lee & Connolly, 2010:354).

Modern ICT accelerates the process of linking tourism offerings and tourist demand on the market, providing a whole new dimension to package vacation distribution, and increasing awareness and exposure of tourist offerings in the worldwide market (Ilic & Nikolic, 2018:43). Haque and Rahman (2012:113d) found that tourism goods need data collection from both

the customer and the provider, resulting in high information search costs. This is often used to improve communication between travel service providers, travel agents, and travellers (Khatri, 2019:75). A study in 2012 by Thomas Cook India revealed that growth in the tourism sector was driven by the online travel industry as 81% of users found information online to be “convenient” (Rahman et al., 2012:118). More recent research suggests that 75% of tourists plan their travels on the Internet, while 13% still utilise travel agents to do so (Vidal, 2019). Consumers across most segments are on the Internet now more than ever, while only a small percentage rely on traditional bookings through travel agents or operators (Sojern, 2020:5).

The Internet provides prospective travellers quick access to written and visual information about destinations around the world (Jadhav & Mundhe, 2011:2822), allowing consumers to make well-informed decisions since information is readily available 24/7 (Sinha & Batra, 2000:176). According to recent research (from 2015 to 2018) by Jasrotia and Gangotia, (2018:48), smart technology in the tourism and hospitality sector is being utilised to improve tourists' holiday and lodging experiences, as well as to deliver novel tourist services that raise overall trip satisfaction. As a result, smart technology can have an influence on how journeys are managed, marketed, and offered (Mohamed & Soliman, 2020:104). Atembe (2015:226) adds that from conventional location-based technologies to more modern mobile technologies, smart technologies can be considered as a logical development of ICTs. Stemming from two prominent words – “smart” and “intelligent” – smart technologies have certain functions that can sense the environment and learn actions to achieve particular objectives which have become relevant to the retail and tourism sector (Alt & Klein, 2011:43). Smart technologies have drawn the most attention in the tourist sector due to the quick growth of society and industries as well as the spread of ICTs (Atembe, 2015:226). In order to improve communication between tourism suppliers and customers, smart technologies and wireless connections are being used more frequently (Atembe, 2015:226).

### **2.5.1 Systems and processes for online CRM**

IT and marketing are combined in the management technique known as CRM (Zamil, 2011:451). IT, which encompasses telecommunications, data storage and retrieval technologies, and the World Wide Web (WWW), has sparked a revolution that has caused businesses to refocus their efforts on meeting the demands of their customers rather than on increasing production efficiency (Srivastava, 2012:16). CRM is a philosophy, technique, and concept of customer relationship development that conceptualises a particular form of communication as a result of developments that emerged over the twentieth century (Laketa, et al., 2015:242). CRM is a management strategy that aims to establish, grow, and improve

connections with carefully selected clients in order to optimise client value, business success, and therefore shareholder values (Srivastava, 2012:14).

The management of all client interactions, including marketing, sales, and service, is done through the use of CRM (Buttle & Maklan, 2019:3). Musnadi (2018:693) agree that CRM can be referred to as an integrated function that combines sales strategies, marketing, and customer service with the goal of boosting income from satisfied customers. Laketa et al. (2015:243) add that the idea of CRM was first introduced in developed countries, namely in businesses where keeping existing customers is a top priority in a cutthroat business environment. The goal of CRM is to gather information about every interaction a business has with a customer across all channels and keep it in the system to allow the business to fully comprehend consumer behaviour (Kaur, 2016:154). CRM principles and new forms of communication have been successfully implemented thanks to the quick advancement of technology and changes in customers' daily lives (Laketa et al., 2015:2424). CRM offers statistics and information on customers, including information about their purchasing patterns and consumption patterns for goods and services (Agrawal, 2004:3). Advantages of the CRM concept is reflected at operational, tactical, and strategic level which includes, but is not limited to, better management of consumer data; efficient services to consumers; effective segmentation of the market; and improved analysis, reporting, and prediction of consumer behaviours (Laketa et al., 2015:242). The software tools used to assist the marketing, selling, and service functions of enterprises are commonly referred to as CRM by IT companies (Buttle & Maklan, 2019:3).

Table 2.1 presents the priority tasks of the establishment's manager by identifying the initiatives which require improvements through technology (IT). The CRM programme involves creating a vision for how to alter their businesses or destinations and establish key qualities that will allow customers to feel connected to the business/destination, its offerings, and their desire to make a purchase (Mugnadi, 2018:693). The authors add that CRM applications enable businesses to take advantage of information from all client touchpoints, contact centres, field marketing and service personnel, including the web applications (OLR platforms). Due to increasing focus on customer engagement, more businesses will opt for various CRM technologies such as social listening and monitoring which can be managed through online platforms (Yasiukovich & Haddara, 2021:536). The connection between technologies and CRM requires strict organisational strategies to generate value to the business (Yasiukovich & Haddara, 2021:541). Through CRM and technologies such as OLR sites, businesses are able to gain from increased customer loyalty and have the ability to concentrate on lucrative clients (Zamil, 2011:452).

Table 2.1: Importance of technology for CRM initiatives

Initiatives to improve	Importance of IT to initiative	Requirements of CRM systems
Targeting of profitable customers	Very high	Introduce propensity modelling for example, rule-based systems to improve capture of most important customer variables
Ability to deal with follow up contacts	High	Create campaign library with history of offers made to targeted customers; make available online to call-centre agents
Convenience of response	High	Enable repose through convenient channels such as email, or mobile phone users, short messaging service (SMS)
Delivery of offer	High	Automate delivery of successive messages to customers who have not yet responded
Presentation of offer (sales pitch, material)	Low	Introduce sales scripts, employ support systems that customise per customer segment
Attractiveness of offer	None	N/A

Source: Musnadi (2018:693)

### 2.5.1.1 Defining OLRs and significance in ITs

An OLR system is a customer service system that is supported by IT (Lui et al., 2018:9). OLR systems, particularly for high-involvement products, can assist consumers in analysing the quality of commodities and services before making a purchase decision (Gou et al., 2016:4). Developing an efficient OLR system involves an awareness of how customers' reactions to the system might change their views and behaviour (Gou et al., 2016:4). Chen and Xie (2005:220) found that OLR platforms are often considered as a significant source of eWOM. Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) has updated its communication methods to make them available to all Internet users via online media in a new form called online WOM or electronic WOM (eWOM) (Jamrozy, 2019:86). The author adds that eWOM data have a substantial influence on travellers' buying intentions and decision-making processes. One of the aspects of OLR systems is that it aids in management of customer contact, and reputation and brand management (Baka, 2016:150). Gou et al. (2016:6) agree that by developing a successful OLR system, organisations require knowledge of how customers' reactions to the system might alter their attitudes and behaviour towards product and service offerings. Ratings and reviews have become more accessible, ubiquitous, and important as

the Internet, e-commerce, and online platforms develops over time (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020:6). Customer reviews, which demonstrate the seller's reputation and product quality, have a significant impact on purchases (Lui et al., 2020:1). Companies are now conscious that their existence depends on their customers (Zamil, 2011:451). Maslowska et al (2020:283) further indicates that Internet reviews are an important resource for customers when deciding where to go and what to buy.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020:8) states that businesses have realised the power of online consumer ratings and reviews to influence customer purchase behaviour and have developed systems to gather, organise, and display them. The capacity of operators to reply to guest reviews is key. Lui et al. (2018:3) highlight how this critical feature of current OLR systems is understudied. According to Mauri and Minazzi (2013), online customer evaluations have a substantial impact on travel information search and product purchases. The OECD (2020:13) states that according to available statistics, consumers research and read Internet ratings and reviews prior to actually making purchasing decisions. Millions of individuals produce and rely on other consumers' ratings and reviews to help them make purchasing decisions (OECD, 2020:6). According to the Netherlands Authority for Consumers and Markets (2017:3), businesses may help facilitate online customer ratings and reviews in a variety of ways. The degree to which companies control ratings and reviews varies, as do the strategies they employ (United Kingdom Competition and Markets Authority [UK CMA], 2015). The phases of this approach can be carried either manually or automatically using algorithms (OECD, 2020: 10), involving:

- **Information Verification:** Ratings and reviews submitted by users may be published immediately, although they are frequently checked by companies first.
- **Content Moderation:** The contents of a review or rating can then be controlled as a second stage. Businesses will have distinct moderating standards. This might result in the deletion/rejection or approval of ratings or reviews.
- **Complaint resolution:** Some businesses contact customers who have left poor ratings or reviews in an effort to address the customer's problem, potentially in the hopes of earning a favourable rating or review.

Third-party service providers are increasingly being used by businesses to manage the consumer rating and review process (OECD, 2020:11).

## **2.5.2 Systems and processes for responding to OLRs in the tourism and hospitality industry**

According to Jasrotia and Gangotia (2018:45), in order to thrive in the tourism sector, one must be clever given all the complicated dynamics the sector must deal with as well as the technology's prominent impact. The authors (Otowicz et al., 2022:8) describe this as the implementation of context-based information for the smart tourism destination and the traveller/information seeker. The term "smart" in the context of tourism refers to speed, convenience, and affordability for the traveller as well as efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and creativity for businesses in terms of the supply and consumption of tourism products and services. This is achieved through a network of cooperating businesses in the exchange of data and information between them or with institutions aiming to achieve mutual goals (Koo et al., 2017:685). According to research on "smart tourist destinations", ICT is used to improve the creation and production of tourism processes (Wang et al., 2016:311). One or more enterprises that cater to tourists that are situated in a neighbourhood or a city's core may be included in smart tourism destinations (Otowicz et al., 2022:6). Tourism is centred on a variety of smart-related topics, including, for instance, smartphone travel apps; smart hotels, looking at the use of IT in the hotel business and digital marketing strategies such as online booking systems; and smart guides in and around the destination (Otowicz et al., 2022:6).

Other studies have focused on the use of social media and review sites from a consumer's perspective and expectations, while minimal attention has been given to the managements' perspective from the accommodation industry (Xie et al., 2016:3). Companies may use IT to improve client connections in a variety of ways, and personalisation is the most common method (Assimakopoulos et al., 2014:4). OLRs are seen to be especially useful for giving information regarding subjectively experienced intangible or "experience" items such as restaurant visits and hotel stays in tourist destinations (Zhang & Vasquez, 2014:54). Many social media websites that sell hotel accommodation and travel amenities offer online channels for customers to engage with people who have past experiences with the hotels (Assimakopoulos et al., 2014:1). Hotels have created online apps with electronic forms for complaints and reviews in some instances, enabling direct communication with visitors (Assimakopoulos et al., 2014:4). More than 83% of all online reservations are influenced by social media, and 49% of customers will not consider reserving a hotel without reviews (TrustYou, 2013). Unique features of OLRs include real-time updates and the vast accessibility of information to various customers online (Shuckert et al., 2015:611).

Sheng et al. (2005:325) add that providing longer positive responses and identifying repeated OLRs by regular customers is advantageous when developing online response

strategies and marketing strategies to protect the reputation of establishments. Even though Internet reviews have such a positive and large influence on hotel booking intentions, they should be managed as a strategic communication channel (Hafeez et al., 2019:148). There are technologies available that may help manage the hotel's digital reputation more effectively and efficiently (Chamelian, n.d.:53). Monitoring, participating, and measuring are believed to be the three components of ORM application. This includes monitoring web 2.0, taking part in it, and primarily measuring the influence on reputation and branding (Jones et al., 2009:927). ORM and the role of the social media manager involve more than just monitoring and surveillance; they also entail responding to and participating in social media communication (Stenger, 2014:18). However, every form of communication has some impact on how stakeholders view a certain organisation and its operations, which has an impact on the organisation's identity, image, brand, and reputation (van Heerden & Rensburg, 2018:54). Social media sites create opportunities for travellers to post travel related information about establishments whereas online reputation applications use programmed software to sift through OLRs posted on social media sites (Hafeez et al., 2019:150). Social media platforms assist businesses in interacting with customers and managing their online reputations (Sirzad, 2022:224). Table 2.2 shows the clear distinction between popular online travel review sites and online response management systems. Businesses that take into account online response management tools use social media to engage with their audiences and offer answers and responses to consumers' comments, ideas, and complaints are more effective in creating, managing, and keeping their online reputation (Sirzad, 2022:229). The online travel review sites and online response management systems will be explained in greater depth below.

Table 2.2: Distinction between OLR sites and online response management systems

<b>Online travel review sites</b>	<b>Online response management systems</b>
Trip Advisor	TrustYou
Booking.com	Revinat
Trivago.com	ReviewPro
Expedia.com	For-sight

### **2.5.2.1 Online travel review sites**

The online travel review sites are unpacked below.

### **a) TripAdvisor**

According to O'Connor (2010:755), hotels should be actively aware of OLR platforms by managing their online reputation through monitoring reviews of their establishments online. In order to attract more customers, hospitality businesses – large and small – throughout the world are fiercely fighting for positive evaluations on TripAdvisor (see Appendix E) and other online platforms (Chen & Tabari, 2017:58). These online travel sites create an opportunity for consumers' OLRs to influence the online reputation of hotels within the industry (Xotels, 2012). Websites operated by third parties that permit comments from visitors are significant and may be seen as more reliable (Assimakopoulos et al., 2014:4). TripAdvisor is presently regarded as one of the most successful travel websites, offering travellers information on trip and hotel bookings, travel planning, and evaluations of various companies and services (Zhang & Vasquez, 2014: 55). With 411 million users accessing the site each month to browse the 700 million travel reviews, TripAdvisor has changed the way that businesses in the travel and tourism sector do business (TripAdvisor, 2017). TripAdvisor has created a large market coverage as it assists potential travellers to plan and book hotels online. The site serves as a search engine for hotels, transportation, restaurants, and various global activities (Mate et al., 2019:629). Gretzel et al. (2007) noticed that more than half of the travellers asked stated they utilised user-generated content to plan their holiday. Hoteliers were concerned about how to manage these OLRs as a result of the increased need for information on the part of potential visitors (Sherif, 2018:58).

### **b) Booking.com**

Booking.com, which has been in business since 1996, is one of the most widely used websites for making hotel reservations (Siguencia et al., 2018:203). The Booking.com (see Appendix F) website and mobile apps support more than 40 different languages, provide access to more than 28,618,191 total reported listings, and provide coverage for 134,510 destinations throughout 227 different nations and territories. According to Mellinas et al. (2016:81), the platform's user-friendly design is also highly powerful because it gives users access to important management tools as well as efficient filtering choices. Booking.com has been deemed as competitive online travel review and booking sites for its features such as interactive homepage, administrator function for offers and promotions, guest reviews, and analytic tools for sales reports and customer information (Tekin, 2018).

### **c) Trivago**

Trivago (see Appendix G) entered the online travel market as a hotel search platform and OLR site in 2005 (TradeTracker.com, n.d.). According to the United States Securities and

Exchange Commission (2017:5), Trivago offers over 400 booking sites which gives travellers the opportunity to make informed decisions through the supply of hotel information and prices. The most popular Trivago filters provide information on the most crucial elements for tourists to consider when booking a hotel (Trivago, 2019). Hoteliers and other providers advertise their rates and services on the Trivago website during the booking process and receive payment for clicks made by Trivago customers (Banerji, 2018:44). The author adds that the website has over 190 million reviews of accommodations, 14 million pictures, and reports over 120 million visitors per month (Banerji, 2018:45).

#### **d) Expedia**

Expedia (see Appendix H) is an online travel agency that provides business and leisure travellers with the technology and knowledge they need to effectively plan, research, and book their travel (United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2019:3). Travelers may manage all parts of their journeys, including airline tickets, hotels, vehicle rentals, cruises, insurance, and other requirements, using the most recent technology (United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2019:3). Expedia promotes to consumers using a range of methods, such as Internet searches, and the possibility of drawing customers improves notably in global marketplaces when numerous brands appear in search results. On websites under the Expedia brand, visitors can compare pricing, availability, and traveller reviews while browsing and booking a variety of travel-related goods and services, including airline tickets, lodging, car rentals, cruises, and numerous destination services like airport transfers, local attractions, and tours (Expedia, 2017).

### **2.5.3 Online response management systems**

The online response management systems are unpacked below.

#### **a) TrustYou**

Established in 2008, TrustYou developed a semantic technology and software to create opportunities for online reputation analysis through customer engagements on various platforms (TrustYou, 2013) (see Appendix I). Hotels can instantly offer tourists a summary of reviews with scores and review snippets on these essential features using a technology like TrustYou's Meta-Reviews (Ady, n.d.). In 2015, the AccorHotels Group chose TrustYou to provide "crystal-clear snapshot of their hotel's online reputation from the web as well as from guest satisfaction surveys" (AccorHotels, 2015). TrustYou collects 90% of the world's visitor reviews every day and can identify the feelings of up to 7 million guests in the same time period (De Kock, 2021). The hotel group added that TrustYou is a globally recognised ORM system that searches and analyses online opinions pertaining to businesses. It is a

prominent company in the hotel sector ORM marketplace and has over 50,000 hotels amongst its customers (Phillips et al., 2016:10). According to Phillips et al. (2016:15), it creates ORM systems for hotels, restaurants, and attractions based on Internet reviews. The TrustYou system includes a variety of capabilities, such as the ability to reply to and analyse feedback (TravMedia.com, 2018).

#### **b) Revinate**

Revinate (see Appendix J) provides hoteliers with simple web-based software that allows them to communicate with visitors before, during, and after their stay (Revinate, 2013). The software companies' core products revolve around comprehensive CRM, a marketing automation platform that measures and optimises guest experiences through OLRs, survey data, and social media mentions (Revinate, 2015). According to 1834 Hotels, the hotel group makes use of Revinate as part of their online response and reputation management tool (1834 Hotels, 2020). A study conducted by Revinate in 2011 revealed that 71% of online travellers perceive management's response as important (Dickinger & Lalicic, 2014:240). They believe that the "highly effective" dashboard creates an opportunity for the establishment to respond to OLRs in real-time (1834 Hotels, 2020).

#### **c) ReviewPro**

ReviewPro (see Appendix K and L) is the global leader in the hospitality industry's guest review intelligence (GRI) solution (Phan, 2020:2). The CRM software company has over 55,000 hotels in 150 countries to provide guest intelligence on one powerful platform (ReviewPro, 2019). PwC (2016) adds that ReviewPro is a global firm that provides hotels and other tourist organisations with GRI solutions, such as online reputation measuring and management tools. Thousands of hotels throughout the globe utilise the GRI as a baseline for reputation management, setting quality goals, and optimising online pricing and distribution methods (PwC, 2016). ReviewPro collects hundreds of millions of social media mentions from Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), review websites, and social media platforms in over 35 languages (Anderson, 2012:10). According to Chamelian (n.d.:54), ReviewPro was founded on the belief that if hotels could attend to and respond to what customers were saying about them online, they could enhance the customer experience while also increasing income.

#### **d) For-sight**

For-sight (see Appendix M) allows hotels to optimise their data and marketing channels by laser targeting its top guests resulting in higher guest retention, marketing reach, conversion rates, and direct bookings (Hospitality.net, n.d.). For-Sight connects hotel technology

platforms to convert solid visitor data and other transactional systems into a single source of truth for each guest and their experience with various hotels brands (Techtalk.travel, 2021). Since 2007, For-Sight has provided robust hotel CRM, email marketing, and reporting solutions to hospitality lodging providers ranging from huge groups to individual luxury hotels, allowing hotels to connect online with guests (For-Sight, n.d.). For-sight is a hotel CRM system that enhances guest experiences to drive online bookings, deliver personalised communications to guests, and assist in core operations such a Point of Sales (POS) and ORM (Source Forge.com, 2022).

Individual hotels, third-party management organisations, and international hotel brands can use these systems to gather Internet reviews, do automated sentiment analysis on key terms, compare review scores to rivals, and set up internal systems for tracking and responding to OLRs (Levy et al., 2013:51).

## **2.6 Online response management**

Online response management is becoming increasingly important for delivering helpful information for service quality improvement and innovation (Ciasullo et al., 2020:4). As eWOM develops in popularity and has an impact on consumer decision-making and spending, more businesses are taking note and understanding the value of ORM (Zhang & Vasquez, 2014: 55). Responding to eWOM is referred to as "Webcare", which is described as the process of actively exploring the web to handle customer feedback such as comments, questions, and complaints online (Jamrozy, 2019: 87). eWOM encourages hotel managers to participate in market intelligence gathering and information generation (Ciasullo et al., 2020:3). ORM in particular, as well as social media management in general, call for a variety of skills, positions, and areas of action (Stenger, 2014:18). Table 2.3 below describes the roles played by social media managers through activities to meet issues and objectives within the organisation. Customers may tell how responsive a business is by how quickly they receive a response to their query (Ali et al., 2021:19). Responsiveness also captures the concept of adaptability and the capacity to rework the service to meet the demands of the client.

Table 2.3: Roles played by social media managers in various organisations

<b>Activities (or missions)</b>	<b>Description/details</b>	<b>Issues and objectives</b>	<b>Roles played by SM managers</b>
Monitoring	Finding and monitoring what is said online by constituents (customers, employees, suppliers...) or any stakeholders (journalists, NGO...) about brands or firms/organisations	Corporate/brand reputation surveillance and protection	Watchman (including night watchman) or a radar
Content suppression	Dealing with content posted illegally and content that undermines the image and reputation of the brand	Copyright management, corporate/brand reputation protection	Firefighter or advocate/lawyer
Right of reply	Dealing with content that undermines the image and reputation of the brand/company	Corporate/brand reputation defence	Brand advocate
Crisis communication	Dealing with rumours, polemics, crisis communication	Corporate/ brand reputation management as a whole	Emergency doctor, crisis communication expert
Claims management	Dealing with a large number of claims on social media mainly coming from customers- or Internet users which can be anonymous	Reputation/ brand management, customer relationship management (CRM)	After sales/customer service, social customer relationship management (Social CRM)

Source: Stenger (2014:19)

Willemsen (2013) notes companies that employ Webcare aim to resolve concerns that drive customers to participate in negative eWOM while also reducing the potential harm that such complaints might bring to other consumers. Companies that respond to consumer complaints successfully benefit from increased brand loyalty and profitability, and the significance of the management response should never be underestimated (Levy et al., 2013:50). Efficient online responses from management play a role in increasing low-satisfaction ratings, however overall satisfaction is reduced when no responses are received

(Shen et al., 2019:439). The efficacy of the response is also influenced by the timing and type of preventive actions taken (Ciasullo et al., 2020:6). OLRs with manager responses depict a meaningful discussion between business and individuals, allowing future customers to assess the usefulness of an OLR from both the companies' and customers' perspectives (Anggani & Suherlan, 2020:10).

### **2.6.1. Online response management in hotel establishments**

In 2016, Rose and Blodgett (2016:2) found that minimal research focused on the challenges of the effectiveness of OLRs' responses by hotel marketers. In fact, hoteliers have been criticised for not investing sufficiently in ORM (ReviewPro, 2019). Studies that were conducted focused on the perceptions of customers towards hotels, however, Xie et al. (2014) investigated how managements' responses impact hotel performance. OLRs have changed the way people make decisions in the hospitality sector, making information on "experience products" like hotel stays accessible to anybody with access to the Internet (Park & Allen, 2013:64). OLRs support the importance of decision-making through consumer perceptions, rather than from the establishments' views (Park & Allen, 2013:65).

Reports show that responding to OLRs promotes an establishment's strategic capabilities, develops its abilities to achieve, discover, and innovate (Medallia.com, 2016). When a hotel replies to customers online, its rating improves and subsequently increases the probability of satisfied customers in the future (Proserpio & Zervas, 2017). Dissatisfied customers are now resorting to online travel sites to air their opinions (Chen & Tabari, 2017:53). Negative OLRs present establishments with challenges to offer suitable strategic responses to such reviews (Mate et al., 2019:627). Chen and Tabari (2017:53) elaborate that consumers are finding it effective and efficient to complain online as opposed to traditional methods. The authors add that such reviews reach a larger target audience and remain visible online for an extended period of time. Acknowledging customer concerns and reacting to them online has become a vital activity for the hospitality industry (Chen & Tabari, 2017:54).

Leung et al. (2013:5) say that social media also plays a pivotal role in strategic information sourcing as it proves to be a useful tool in consumer data collection. As much as positive reviews are important for travellers' decision-making process, similarly hotel managers should track, monitor, and observe negative OLRs to prevent, or at least reduce, the chances of it impacting the establishment's online reputation (Chen & Tabari, 2017:61). When negative opinions are communicated on social media, it can lead to undesirable consequences, such as a negative perception of the hotel's service quality (Vo et al., 2021:7). While hotel managers shift their focus to responding to OLRs, online users are eager to view these responses especially about negative reviews (Vo et al., 2022:8). Most

establishments rely on online responses as an intervention strategy to protect or enhance the financial performance of hotels (Sheng et al., 2005:316). The authors add that responding to such requests increases the ability to develop a sustainable competitive advantage.

Trevino and Castano (2013:238) discusses three categories of managing responses online: denying, accepting, and changing responses:

- *Denying* is where hotel management disagrees with the dissatisfied customer over service failure and claims that the customer is lying.
- *Accepting* refers to management acknowledging and gently explaining the issue that has generated consumer concern, but does not promise to make adjustments in the future.
- Lastly, *changing responses* refers to hotel management sincerely apologising and promising the customer that the failure will be improved for future trips (Trevino & Castano, 2013:238).

Managerial replies are responses provided directly by the hotel's management in response to online client feedback (Mate et al., 2019:630). The objective of the managerial response strategy is based on two perspectives, namely: the positive opinions of customer service and then addressing concerns or criticisms brought up by online customer reviews (Ye et al., 2009). The formulation and implementation of the correct online response strategy is important to mitigate the impact of negative reviews but also to use positive reviews for improving the business' reputation (Mate et al., 2019:31). Several research papers have focused on developing frameworks to assist in analysing online response strategies (Mate et al., 2019:631).

The integrated framework in Figure 2.5 addresses Coombs (1999:58) accommodative and defensive response strategies to initiate various response actions. No action and no response are categorised outside of the response action section. Sparks (2001:195) focuses on a defensive strategy under response action. The response dimension includes both the defensive and accommodative approach. Customer satisfaction is measured not just in terms of response time and volume, but also in terms of response quality and efficacy (valence) (Ciasullo et al., 2020:12). The framework signifies a flow from response to no response and the impact it will have on the reputation of a business (Mate et al., 2019:633). Sparks and Bradley (2017:722) note that a potentially bad reputation (image), low satisfactory reviews, and decreased brand loyalty could be consequences of not acknowledging online negative reviews pertaining to establishments. The significant impact of OLRs has the potential to impact establishments on the basis of consumer's perspectives.

By integrating previous frameworks, businesses are able to develop suitable online response strategies specifically designed for them (Mate et al., 2019:634).

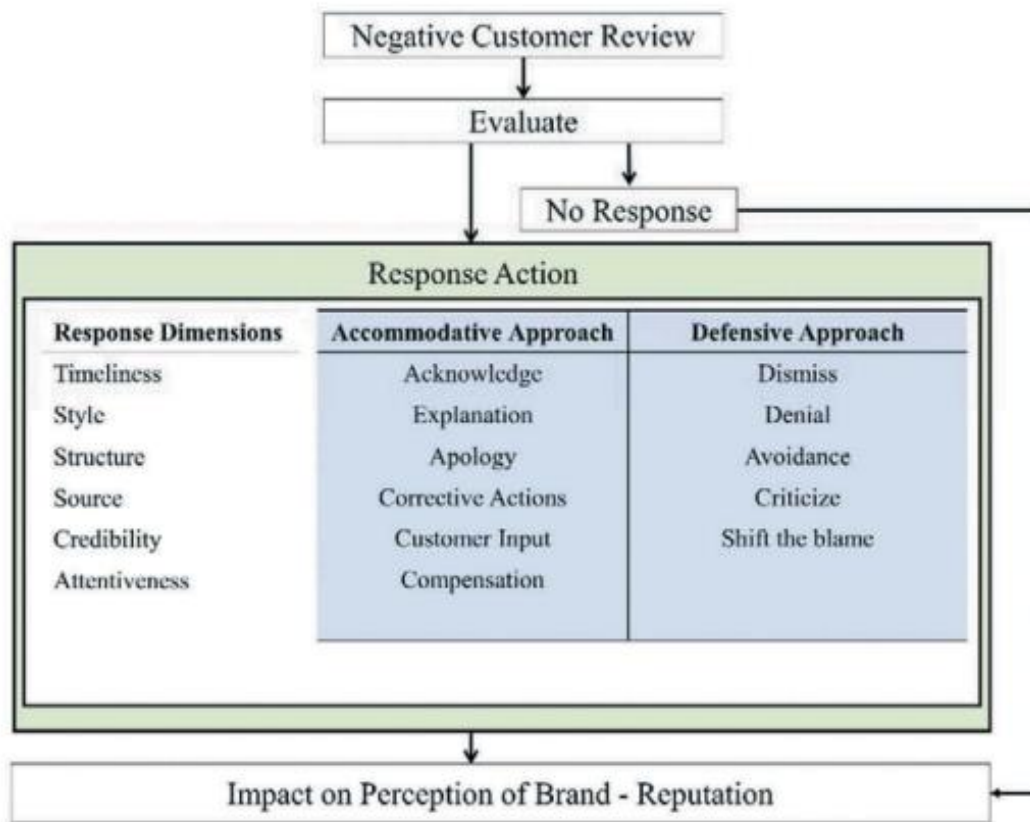


Figure 2.5: Integrated framework for analysing response strategies

Source: Mate et al. (2019:633)

### 2.6.2 COVID-19 and its impacts on global industries

In December 2019, Wuhan City in China recorded its first outbreak of SARS-CoV-1, also commonly known as COVID-19 (Torales et al., 2020:318; Congressional Research Service, 2022:2). It is now commonly agreed that the emergence of the coronavirus (COVID-19) caused the largest economic crisis since World War II due to its devastating effects on human health (OECD, 2021:2). Since then, the virus has proliferated over the globe, causing one of the worst global health catastrophes in history with huge socioeconomic effects (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021:6). Given that people are expected to move around for tourist experiences and adventures, the travel sector was mostly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak (Ugur & Akbiyik, 2020:101). According to Bahar and Celik Ilal (2020:128), the negative impacts of COVID-19 resulted in the immediate closures of hotels, tour operators, and other tourism related business operations. International travel activities plummeted by 87% during the pandemic (UNWTO, 2020). It forced tourism companies to

close and impeded individuals from traveling for pleasure and business both in and out of countries (Nyagadza et al., 2022:3).

### **2.6.2.1 Online response management during a pandemic (COVID19): Tourism and hospitality perspective**

Hospitality services have undergone substantial development, and today robot technology is used to do tasks including front desk jobs, transporting guests' bags, and room cleaning in the lodging industry (Zeng et al., 2020:1). Sam and colleagues (2020) acknowledged that during the COVID-19 pandemic, travellers chose hotels with robot technology over those with labour-intensive services. The conventional human effort is giving way to a new normal where technology rules hospitality (Nyagadza et al., 2022:5). Nyagadza et al. (2022:6) add that the hospitality industry has seen a significant digital transition, from in-room smart control devices to voice and facial recognition systems, digital payment methods, digital interactions, and other person-based technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how much is spent on advertising, marketing, promotions, and media, forcing companies and brands to re-evaluate current and upcoming advertising and marketing campaigns in order to maintain a steady flow of money (Holland & Knight, 2020). Businesses had to shift their focus to obtain consumers' trust through new digital capabilities (Gu et al., 2016:2267). Despite the fact that fear and misinformation may spread swiftly online – especially with COVID-19 – there were actions organisations could effectively take to properly manage online presence and protect the company's image (McQuilkin, 2020). Moore (2022) remarks that at the start of the pandemic Google deactivated the “business reviews” function due to an influx of negative reviews from dissatisfied customers from businesses that had closed down. The author adds that this meant once the function was activated by Google, they would have to rebuild their online reputation by responding to new reviews. The organisations would have to create online reassurance for past and potential customers in sharing authentic information about their business online, especially during a pandemic (Dorfman, n.d.). While COVID-19 measures are in place, it is critical that consumers be made aware of one's property's health and safety standards (Webrezpro, 2022). For the hospitality sector, dedicated ORM platforms such as Revinat, BirdEye and Blue Jay Reviews can assist in responding to reviews across all channels, access analytics, and prioritise improvement, especially during this unprecedented time (Webrezpro, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic should serve as a wake-up call to numerous industries, emphasising the importance of Industry 4.0 technology in a global economy (World Economic Forum, 2021:4).

## **2.7 Summary**

To conclude this chapter, tourism and hospitality are important industries that contribute to the growth of the economy in countries. UNWTO (n.d.) recognises tourism as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that entails the movement of people between various countries through individual motivations. While national economies rely on tourism and hospitality as key drivers in the sector, there are factors that impact the reputation of these entities. Through the development of ICTs, information sharing has become a prominent factor to the service sector, including tourism (Illic & Nikolic, 2018:39). The development of technologies has shifted the focus to the important role that tourism and hospitality marketers play in the role of managing OLRs posted by past or potential travellers. According to Bennett (2002:140), the growing demand of tourism services can only be met through developing and implementing strategic marketing plans. These consist of identifying the establishment objectives, namely online response management, and utilising the tools available to do so. The methodology employed to conduct this study is discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

Research methodology is a systematic process to gain insight into specific topics relating to a research problem (Patel & Patel, 2019:48). The purpose of this study was to explore how hotel establishments respond to OLRs pertaining to their establishments. The research specifically focused on 3- to 5-star hotel establishments within the Cape Town CBD. The previous chapter reviewed the developments of technology in the tourism industry and hospitality sectors as well as the importance of online response management in hotels. The nature of the hospitality sector means that OLRs play an important role in travellers' purchasing process (Zhang & Xie, 2014:14). Hotel managers who respond to OLRs can have a significant impact on the business and assist in developing a competitive advantage too (Sheng et al., 2005:316).

This chapter discusses the steps that were taken to carry out this research. The research design (explorative qualitative method) is discussed in this chapter. The sample size, the sampling technique utilised in the study, and the target population, although briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, are discussed in more detail below. The chapter concludes by explaining how the data collected were captured and analysed.

#### 3.2 Research objectives

Research designs are research philosophies and processes that vary from broad assumptions to specific data collection and analysis methodologies (Creswell, 2009:22). Patel and Patel (2019:51) explain that the research design facilitates the research process to be as efficient as possible to produce maximal information. Creswell (2009:23) adds that the type of research topic or issue being investigated, the researcher's personal background, and the intended audience of the study are all taken into consideration when selecting a research design. The present study was designed to address the following research objectives:

- To determine how 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD managed OLRs pre- and during COVID-19 pandemic.
- To determine which systems and processes are in place to respond to OLRs in 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD.

- To understand how OLRs are a significant part in the development of a strategic marketing plan of the 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD.
- To recommend improvements to a response management guideline for managing positive and negative OLRs for 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD.

### **3.3 Research methodology**

The current study made use of a qualitative research method to collect the data that was incorporated in the overall design. According to Fischler (n.d.), qualitative methods are more exploratory in nature and often entail listening to the participants' voices and putting the data to analytic induction such as detecting common themes. Qualitative research does not strive to define the core of a phenomena, but rather to characterise attributes connected with the phenomena under consideration, with a focus on type rather than number (Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2011:115). Walia (2015:124) agrees that in order to comprehend the meanings that people infer from their surroundings in daily life, this type of inquiry examines the world in its natural setting.

### **3.4 Research design**

The research design determines the technique for collecting and examining the required data, as well the methods that will be used to gather and analyse the data and how all of this will be put to use to address the research topic (Gray, 2014:12). The theory of research design is critical in detailing the methodologies, strategies, and data gathering procedures that will be employed in conducting a research project (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008:232). They can be categorised into three research types, namely: "qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches" which "provide specific direction for the conducting of procedures" (Creswell, 2014:41). Creswell (2019:26) adds that qualitative methods rely on extracting data from texts and diverse designs through a data analysis process.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005:21) add that the qualitative method is exploratory in nature, attempting to explain 'how' and 'why' certain social phenomena, or programmes, behave as they do in a specific setting. A qualitative design attempts to assist in comprehending the social world in which we exist and the reasons behind why things are the way they are (Polkinghorne, 2005). It significantly affects a variety of academic disciplines including management, information systems, sociology, anthropology, nursing, and education (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:24). Methods like interviews, focus groups, and direct observation are used to understand the issue and explain the preliminary findings, and qualitative researchers use interpretivism as a research paradigm (Dawadi et al., 2021:26). By its very nature,

interpretivism supports the importance of qualitative data in the search for knowledge (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994).. Chowdry (2014:434) suggests that interpretivism aims to comprehend and explore social reality from the perspective of the people being examined. The researcher therefore used an interpretivism approach within qualitative methods to explore how hotels in the Cape Town CBD manage OLRs through response management.

### **3.5 Population and sample selection**

The first stage in the sampling process was to define the study population (Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2011:95) which, according to the authors, are elements used to generalise the research findings to an entire population of interest. However, Casteel and Bridier (2021:340) claim that in order to generalise the outcomes, the ability to infer or transfer those results to the proper group is required. Individual groupings may be difficult and unexpected; people may or may not want to be analysed; and the traits being evaluated may change from day to day, or even hour to hour (Hammersley & Mairs, 2004:4). Populations provide the reader with contextual and environmental indicators and define the scope of the research (Casteel & Bridier, 2021:343). To describe each group, clear definitions of borders and other variables are required. Furthermore, the borders defined by social or political notions may differ depending on the geographical location (Singh & Masuku, 2014:3). According to Etikan et al. (2016:1), the term “population” not only refers to a number of people but also to the quantity of things or cases which are in the research subject area.

After determining the population of interest, the researcher needs to consider the sampling size (Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2011:97). Naderifar et al. (2017:1) identified sampling as a selecting process, where a portion of the population is selected to represent the whole population. In order for the analysis to be comprehensive, the researcher will consider the sample as a representation of the whole population (Naderifar et al., 2017: 2). Additionally, in order to make better estimates at a cheaper cost and with greater precision, sampling techniques are frequently used in research investigations (Singh & Masuku, 2014:2).

The survey population for this study included 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD, which are accredited by the TGCSA. Crossman (2019) identified total population sampling as when the researcher selects the full population based on one or more shared characteristics or qualities. This works well when the number of participants or cases included in the study is rather small (Etikan et al., 2016:3).

Table 3.1: Hotel categories as per TGCSA and CCID

	3 star	4 star	5 star	Total per precinct
Precinct 1	0	7	1	8
Precinct 2	3	4	1	8
Precinct 3	0	2	0	2
Precinct 4	2	1	0	3
Total per star rating	5	14	2	Total of 21 Hotels

Latham (2007:2) describes a sample as a "sub-group of a population" that is chosen at random from the entire population and used as a source of data for research. The author also adds that the same sample should be "representative in the sense that each sampled unit will represent the characteristics of a known number of units in the population". According to Statistic Solutions (n.d.), qualitative dissertations can either have a combination or individual use of various sampling methods. Sampling techniques increase flexibility and accuracy while also lowering research costs and conducting studies more successfully (Latham, 2007:3). Sampling is the practice of choosing a portion of a population to study in order to determine its characteristics (Singh & Masuku, 2014:3). Some of the most common sample designs mentioned in the literature are quota sampling, random sampling, and purposive sampling (Cochran, 1963:412).

The sampling method used for this research was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, also known as judgement sampling, is when the researcher intentionally selects informants based on the qualities they possess (Tongco, 2007:147). Bernard (2002) described "informants" as "observant, reflective members of the community of interest who know much about the culture and are both able and willing to share their knowledge". Informants can be selected through recommendation or out of convenience (Dolores & Tongco, 2007:153). Etikan et al. (2016:2) explain that as a non-random technique, purposive sampling doesn't require a predetermined number of participants or underlying assumptions. They add that purposive sampling rather involves a selection of identified individuals or groups that are seen as field experts to provide knowledge and experience within the area of interest (Etikan et al. 2016:3). For this study, total population sampling of 21 hotels was used. Qualitative

methods, such as purposive sampling, focus on obtaining an in-depth understanding and knowledge about a phenomenon from its participants (Patton, 2002:3).

Figure 3.1 displays the perimeters of the CBD of Cape Town supplied by the CCID (2018). The CBD geographical boundaries are indicated with the dotted line and lies within 1.62 km<sup>2</sup> of the Cape Town Metropole (CCID, 2018). The CCID (2018) further divides the area into four precincts within these perimeters. The current population consisted of 21 hotels within the CBD area. For this study, the full population of 21 hotels within identified precincts of the Cape Town CBD was intended to be investigated, with one participant from each hotel participating in the study. The participant had to fulfil the role of actively engaging and managing the online reviews for the establishment.

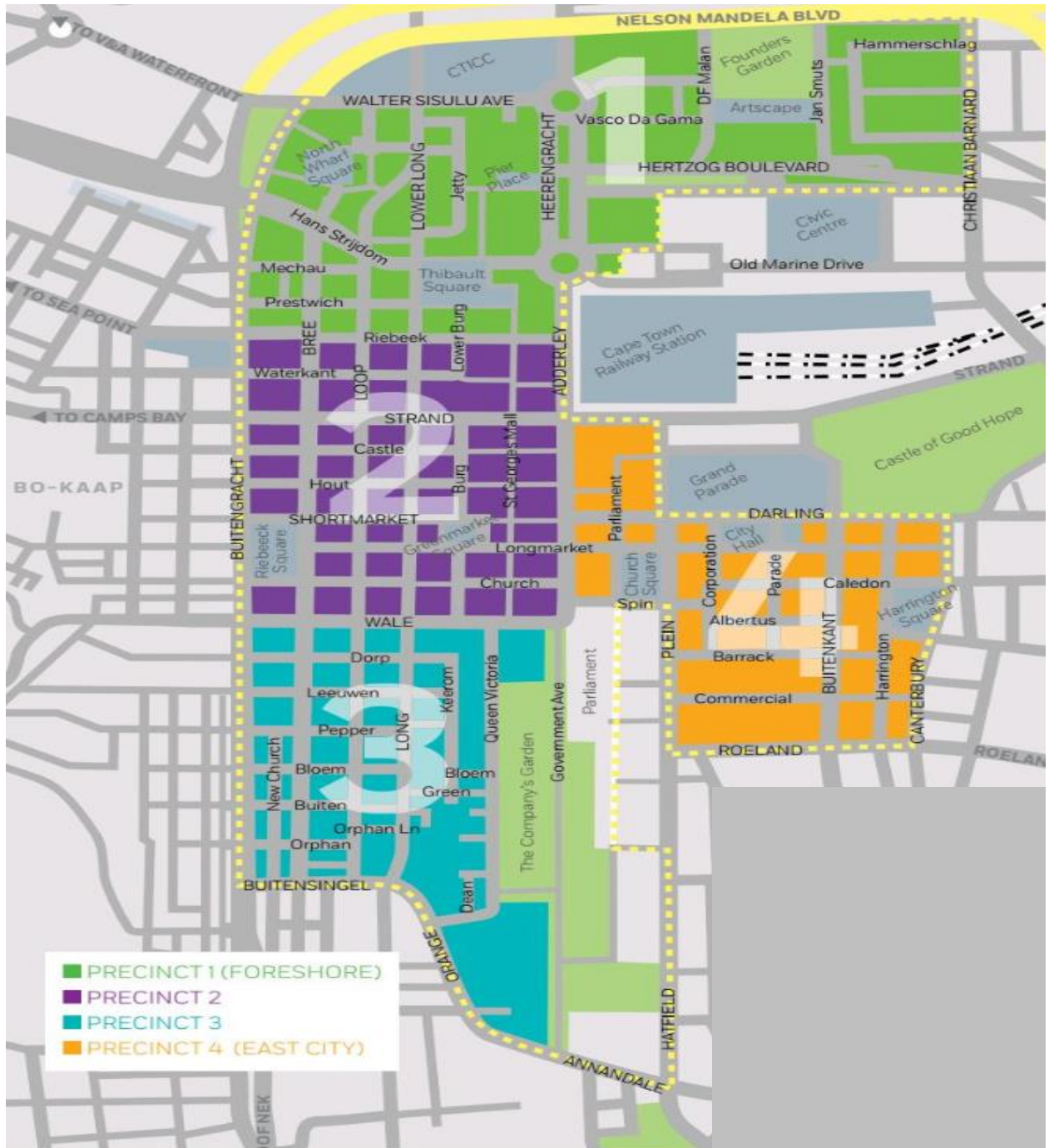


Figure 3.1: Map of Cape Town CBD

Source: CCID (2018)

As part of the SAT business unit, the TGCSA offers SAT products which are recognised and accredited as part a quality assurance scaling (TGCSA, n.d.). Based on the data retrieved from the TGCSA and CCID website, it was convenient to classify the ratings of each hotel within the Cape Town CBD area. Table 3.1 refers to the categories of accredited hotels listed on the TGCSA website as per star ratings and location (precincts) according to the CCID.

UNWTO (2020:1) indicates that due to the COVID-19 pandemic the world experienced a global health and economic emergency. The pandemic had mostly affected the travel and

tourism industry by minimising “international tourist arrivals” (UNWTO, 2020:1). While causing a disruption to travel and tourism, the pandemic forced worldwide destinations to impose strict travel restrictions and lockdown measures (UNWTO, 2020:3). Lockdowns require citizens to remain at home and avoid contact by practicing social distancing to reduce the spread of the virus (WCG, 2020). The high level of interaction in the hotel sector makes it susceptible to the transmission of infectious diseases (Sobaih et al., 2021:111). Hotel operations were severely disrupted and challenged by the outbreak of COVID-19 (Milovanovic, 2021:571).

As a result of the restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only three hotels confirmed their participation in the study, as most establishments had closed down temporarily or permanently over the period from March 2021 to June 2022, which was the data collection period for this study. Since the COVID-19 restrictions were implemented, most of the study participants had switched to working remotely. The hotels that closed down permanently unfortunately declined the offer to participate thus negatively affecting the study response rate.

The researcher adopted the previous approach in table 3.2 to improve participation in study. The researcher proceeded to extend the study period and contacted an additional 10 hotels that were located within Cape Town but were graded according to TGCSA. A total of four participants confirmed, three via face-to-face interviews and one via email participation. The confirmed number increased to a total of seven participants for the study. Many scholars debate whether sample size matters or not because this kind of research is emergent (Mocanasu, 2020:182). According to Sandelowski (1995:179), most qualitative studies are run on small samples. Patton (2002:44) supports this claim stating that qualitative samples can be reasonable in size, depending on the purpose of the study and the areas of interest of stakeholders. Vasileious et al. (2018) expressed the importance of units that are rich in data, over the importance of numbers (quantity of sample size). The data collection process was only deemed completed once all seven confirmed hotel representatives were interviewed and their responses received. The key participants were marketing managers, reservationists, or any key hotel representatives who were actively managing the OLR platforms. The interviews were scheduled according to the availability of each participant, regardless of the star ratings. Table 3.2 below provides an outline of the seven confirmed participants of this study.

Table 3.2: Confirmed participants of the study

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Star grading</b>	<b>Position at the hotel</b>
Participant 1	Cape Town	4	Groups Marketing Manager
Participant 2	CBD, Cape Town	4	General Manager
Participant 3	Cape Town	4	Marketing Assistant
Participant 4	CBD, Cape Town	4	Rooms Division Manager
Participant 5	Cape Town	4	Marketing Coordinator
Participant 6	Cape Town	4	General Manager
Participant 7	CBD, Cape Town	4	General Manager/Deputy Manager

### 3.6 Methods and tools for data collection

According to Ayeh et al. (2012:132), in-depth interviews have been commonly “used to explore practitioners’ perceptions regarding social media and to examine the strategies being applied in engaging social media to influence decision-making”. Therefore, in order to understand how hotel management monitors and manages OLRs, data collection consisted of virtual interviews, in-person interviews, and email responses. The researcher employed in-depth interviews to cover the key areas/topics of interest.

Altogether a combination of two virtual interviews (online) and four in-person interviews were conducted, and one email response was collected. The online platform and in-person interviews were confirmed upon consent from the participants. The same was considered when the participant confirmed participation via email. Alternatively, telephonic interviews were offered where online video recordings were not preferred. The interview schedule was designed in semi-structured format, with closed-ended and open-ended questions (see Appendix C). A semi-structured approach frequently involves a discussion between the

researcher and the participants, supplemented by follow-up questioning, probes, and comments, while being guided by a flexible interview framework (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019:1). Adams (2015:495) indicates that semi-structured interviews use a combination of closed- and open-ended inquiries, sometimes accompanied by follow-up 'how' or 'why' questions, which are performed informally with one participant at a time.

### **3.6.1 Interview schedule design**

Open-ended and closed-ended questions differ significantly, especially in terms of the role that participants play when responding to such questions (Ursa et al., 2003:161). Closed-ended questions may be simply answered, and data obtained from them is easier to evaluate because they are pre-coded (Gay et al., 2012:186). Hyman and Sierra (2016:2) highlight the advantages of closed ended questions which include quick and easy responses from participants since questions are pre-coded. According to Zarinpoush and Gumulka (2007:1), closed-ended questions may include dichotomised responses ("yes" or "no"), measurement scales, and listed categories/responses (multiple choice).

To thoroughly investigate themes, explain processes, and uncover potential causes of observed connections, open-ended inquiries are sometimes used alone and sometimes in conjunction with other types of questioning (Weller et al., 2018:2). Open-ended questions are frequently answered in a detailed manner (Popping, 2015:24). The author notes that the participants will provide a list of items, demonstrate their knowledge, or provide an explanation or rationale. The questions allow the participants to respond with a variety of options (Hyman & Sierra, 2016:3) that are not limited to simple "yes" or "no" because it requires a more detailed explanation (McLeod, 2018). The participants in this study were provided with a set of open- and closed-ended questions.

The researcher's primary goal is sometimes not to synthesise the participants' positions as such, but to capture their sentiments, behaviours, and pragmatic opinions concerning mutually exclusive concerns surrounding the phenomenon under study (Querios et al., 2017:370). The authors refer to this as a Likert scales. The research used such questions to identify the degree to which the participants 'always' or 'never' participated in certain roles within a particular position. Each of these statements and questions were assigned numerical values from 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=frequently, and 5=often to express their opinions around how often the participants receive positive and negative reviews about their hotel establishment online.

In addition, five other categories included (1=unimportant, 2=of little importance, 3=moderately important, 4=important, and 5=very important) to determine perceptions on

the importance of responding to positive and negative OLRs. The researcher included questions and statements pertaining to how often each participant responded to positive and negative reviews. The time difference categories (1=hourly, 2=daily, 3=weekly, 4=monthly, and 5=quarterly) were used to assess the feedback of the participants on this question.

Open-ended questions were structured around exploring the participants' job/role responsibilities within the hotel establishment, provide a clear understanding of the difference between positive and negative reviews, and how guidelines and procedures exist within the establishment when responding to OLRs.

Previous literature that followed a similar topic around online review management within hotels was used as a guide to ensure that the questionnaire contributed to the specific research area of interest. A few adjustments were made to align it with the research questions and objectives. The questionnaire was designed, and the interviews were conducted in English. The questionnaire consisted of four sections, namely:

**Section A:** This section focused on the management and monitoring pertaining to the OLRs. The questions were directed to find out which platforms were used to manage the OLRs about each establishment and who is responsible to respond to the OLRs.

**Section B:** The researcher aimed the questions at investigating how each participant differentiated between positive and negative OLRs pertaining to their hotel establishments. The focus of this section was to measure the influence the various positive and negative reviews had on each hotel establishment.

**Section C:** The layout of this section focused on the overall response management plan and procedures within each hotel establishment. The participants were asked to explain each step/procedure implemented by the hotel establishment when responding to the OLRs. This created an opportunity for the participants to point out challenges in the existing response management plans. This was deemed very useful.

**Section D:** The last section focused on hotel profiling. Questions were directed to classifying each hotel according to the star rating as per the TGCSA and defining the type of hotel establishment too.

### **3.6.2 Primary data sources**

Primary data are those that were gathered for a particular research topic using methods that were most appropriate for that topic (Hox & Boeije, 2005:593). Primary data are unprocessed raw data that have yet to be interpreted in any meaningful way (Kalu et al.,

2018:53). The authors note that although collecting and evaluating primary data may be costly and time-consuming, secondary data should be used wherever feasible. According to Driscoll (2011:156), planning and background research are essential for a successful primary research study. The three most frequently used methods for conducting primary research are surveys, interviews, and observations (Driscoll, 2011:154). The primary data sources that were used in this research study involved interview schedules conducted via virtual interviews.

### **3.6.3 Secondary data sources**

In an era where massive amounts of data are being gathered and preserved by researchers all over the world, the viability of using existing data for a study is becoming more and more prevalent (Smith et al., 2011:923). However, secondary data analysis is also an empirical exercise that incorporates methodological and evaluative procedures, just like collecting and analysing primary data. It is a flexible methodology that may be utilised in a variety of ways. (Doolan & Froelicher, 2009:204). Secondary data is information that has been obtained before and is being considered for use in new inquiries for which the data was not initially collected (Martins et al., 2018:2). The authors add that the utilisation of existing data to address research problems requires the use of secondary data analysis, which depends on the application of theoretical knowledge and conceptual skills. In the exploratory phase of the study, secondary data can be very beneficial for determining the research question/s and developing hypotheses (Kalu et al., 2018:55).

Secondary data can be accessible in the forms of governmental collected statistics, newspaper articles and other media reports, public service agencies (schools) and multi-international organisations such as UNWTO (INTRAC, 2017), and bigger, higher-quality datasets, such as the ones compiled by funded initiatives or organisations that use bigger samples and have a wider range to use from (Johnston, 2014:624).

The information collected from secondary sources facilitated the research design and survey design. Secondary sources that were used for this particular research included academic books, articles on tourism and hospitality on a global scale, journal articles on the impacts of OLRs and online response management on hotels' reputations, theses and dissertations, and credible Internet sites.

### **3.7 Reliability and validity of the research**

Reliability and validity are the two most important and fundamental characteristics in the assessment of any measuring apparatus or tool for proper research (Mohajan, 2017:58; Surucu & Maslakci, 2020:2698). Taherdoost (2016:28) explains that validity refers to how

well the data collection process covers the area of study. A measuring instrument's validity relates to how well it serves its function and is concerned with its ability to capture the behaviour or quality that it was intended to assess (Surucu & Maslakci, 2020:2965). Reliability is the extent to which a measurement of a phenomenon yields a constant and consistent result (Carmines & Zeller, 1979:544). Huck (2007:67) adds that the reliability check is essential since it deals with the uniformity of the parts in the measuring instruments. In general, a measuring device can be trustworthy without necessarily being precise, but if it is precise, it is also probably trustworthy.

Validity increases transparency and lessens the possibility of adding researcher bias to qualitative research (Singh, 2014:76). The aim of establishing reliability and validity in research ensures that the data are trustworthy and consistent, as well as that the conclusions are accurate. To guarantee that the findings of this study are valid and reliable, several steps were followed:

- The transcripts were double checked by the researcher after it was received from the transcription company;
- The codes and groups formulated in Atlas.ti (web version 8) were constantly cross-checked against its memo and themes;
- The participants' responses which required further probing due to a lack of context were contacted after transcription; and
- The recordings of the interviews were sent back to the participants for verification and a quality check so that all the gathered information could be used, and nothing omitted.

In addition to the quality checks, the interview questionnaire was reviewed by supervisors and industry professionals (internal review) before it was submitted for ethical approval.

### **3.8 Pilot study**

A pilot study is a quick feasibility investigation used to assess several aspects of the methods that would be applied in a longer, more in-depth, or confirmatory investigation (Lowe, 2019:117). A pilot study's main objective is to prevent researchers from beginning a major study before thoroughly understanding the procedures being employed (Polit & Beck, 2017:213). Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001:1) mention that "qualitative" researchers' claims that separate pilot experiments are not required for interpretive research. A piloting approach may be less important when small-scale exploratory inquiries are conducted solely to determine whether a problem is acceptable for more extensive research (Malmqvist et al., 2019:3). The interview schedule was shared with industry professionals who specialise in the research topic and verbal feedback was given where adjustments were necessary, and

these were implemented according to their recommendations. The first draft of the interview schedule was shared a month in advance when the research commenced in March 2020. The industry professional was not only an academic in the field of tourism but also specialised in accommodation operations. Areas of improvement included separating the questions into section/sub-sections aligned to the research objectives. The placement of participant profiling was shifted to the end of the interview schedule to create ease of flow during the interviews.

### 3.9 Ethical considerations

A branch of philosophy known as ethics studies how people behave and influence their moral standards and social interactions (Akaranga & Makau, 2016:1). Ethical issues are important in qualitative research because of how in-depth the study method is (Arifin, 2018:30).

Participants should only agree to participate in this study after receiving a thorough explanation of the research methods (Arifin, 2018:30). The researcher contacted the participants and obtained consent for their participation via email. The communication to each participant involved providing an explanation of the background of the study as well as that participation was completely voluntary. The consent form consisted of a formal letterhead signed and approved by the hotels' general managers. Once this was received, a date for each interview was scheduled according to the availability of the participants.

It is the responsibility of the researcher to design a project that does not jeopardise the safety and rights of interview subjects or responders (Akaranga & Makau, 2016:6). When a participant is anonymous, their names, racial or cultural backgrounds, and any other personal data about them are not revealed (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2013:323). Prior to providing consent, the researcher reiterated the importance of anonymity and confidentiality between both parties. It is crucial that approval be sought before the commencement of data collection from the participants involved since human research ethics committees cannot grant clearance for study once the data collection has started (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018:210). Ethical clearance for the study was also obtained from the Research Committee at CPUT (FOBREC819) (see Appendix A). As per CPUT's ethical guidelines:

- **Informed consent:** Participants all received a formal letter of consent and could only participate once it was signed and returned to the researcher (see Appendix B).
- **Confidentiality:** All participants were assured that information obtained during the interviews (prior, during, and after) were kept in confidence.

- **Honesty and professionalism:** Questions and findings were all honest and not fabricated or misinterpreted.

To ensure the safety and securing of virtual interviews, the interview process took place via the institutions' preferred online meeting platform – Blackboard Collaborate. The online platform is a secure meeting place for the researcher and the participants. Upon confirmation, the participants received a link to join the sessions. The interviews were recorded after obtaining permission from the participants. This applied to the face-to-face interviews as well. A mobile device was used to record the sessions. The participants were allowed a copy of the recording upon request.

### **3.10 Method of data analysis**

The process of giving textual and visual data significance is known as *data analysis* (Creswell, 2009:171). The gathering of data, as it is known among researchers, is merely the first step in the research process. To make it easier for researchers to understand the meaning of their data, formal techniques for qualitative data analysis have been developed (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003:65). As mentioned in section 3.3, the present research adopted a qualitative approach to focus on how hotels within the Cape Town CBD manage OLRs.

By arranging the responses into increasingly abstract pieces of data, qualitative researchers developed patterns, categories, and themes (Creswell, 2009:164). This approach of information gathering enables the collection of data from many sources in an effort to comprehend the challenges through the responders or involved audience (Akinyode & Khan, 2018:164).

The researcher adopted Creswell's proposed stages for data analysis to process and analyse the collected data. This entailed the following:

**Step 1: Organisation and preparation of data.** This step focuses on the transcription of interviews, viewing material/content, and collating field notes and images by arranging them into various types of the sources of information obtained (Creswell, 2019: 247). In order to identify specific issues, the approach should be very interactive and require the researcher to review events and compare them to original data (transcripts of field notes) (Akinyode & Khan, 2018:166). For the purpose of this study, the face-to-face and virtual interviews were transcribed by a reputable company. The researcher conducted a quality check and reviewed the transcripts to ensure the responses were transcribed correctly. Further probing was conducted where the recordings were unclear, or answers were too vague for interpretation.

**Step 2: Read all the data.** According to Smit (2002:65), Atlas.ti comprises of a system that is able to analyse qualitative data, especially content that is mainly text, audio, or visual data. Atlas.ti web version 8 was used to capture and analyse the data collected for this study. Smit (2002:65) notes that Atlas.ti aids the researcher during the data analysis process where large texts are analysed and interpreted by means of annotating and coding actions. The findings are presented through discussions, with verbatim extracts, graphs, word clouds, tables, and pie charts are used to support the research findings. All seven transcripts, including the emailed questionnaire, were uploaded to Atlas.ti web version 8.

**Step 3: Begin coding of all the data received.** This involves the process of taking the data gathered during the data collection and organising it into segments or chunks by means of a word representing a category in the margins (Creswell, 2019:248). The coding procedure allowed for fresh interpretations of lengthy texts and informational sections (Belotto, 2018:2624). Deductive coding was introduced when the researcher drew codes from the four objectives in the study. The researcher then implemented the box framework (see Appendix D). The box framework assisted the researcher in categorising each code to a theme. As the researcher read each transcript, inductive codes emerged through the online (web) application analysis. Each code was then grouped according to each research objective. This feature is unique to the Atlas.ti web version 8. The grouping of codes allowed a smooth transition to developing themes in the next step of analysis.

**Step 4: Utilising the coding process to provide categories or a central subject for study, as well as a description of the scene or the characters.** Creswell (2019:248) describes the term “description” as an in-depth version of the information about people, places, or events in a particular setting. Creating codes for each description can assist the researcher by generating a select number of themes or categories for the research study (Creswell, 2019:248). Researchers are able to identify additional layers of complex analysis through coding themes (Creswell, 2019:248). The box framework was a guideline for the researcher to develop themes that emerged in the deductive and inductive coding process. Each theme was grouped accordingly as mentioned in step 3, as per the box framework.

**Step 5: Representation of description and themes in the qualitative narrative.** The most popular and preferred way of conveying the findings of the data analysis is through a narrative approach (Creswell, 2019:248). This entails the representation of the findings through illustrations, visual graphs, various opinions from individuals, or a “discussion with interconnecting themes” (Creswell, 2019:248). The researcher can later review, retrieve, and look at motivational parts with the main themes coded in this way as separate files (Akinyode & Khan, 2018:167). The themes were grouped according to the research objectives. This was to ensure that each objective was successfully met during the interview

period. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, minimal graphs and visual representations were used in the findings chapter. This was done after the coding and thematic process was completed. The findings were predominately presented in texts and verbatim quotes/extracts from the participants.

**Step 6: Interpretation in qualitative research of the findings and results.** This entailed looking at a comparison of past literature with the information of the data analysis in the current study. Considering the comparison between the findings and the literature or theories (Creswell, 2019:248), there could be an opportunity for questions to arise that were unforeseen earlier in the study as well. However, by using the theoretical approach, interpretations can create channels for reform and change (Creswell, 2019:248). The researcher used existing literature to substantiate and support the findings of the study. In some cases, the findings proved to contradict the existing literature that was consulted which was deemed as valuable information to the researcher. A clear comparison was presented through recent secondary literature and the current findings in this research.

Data processing and storage are aided by technology which allows us to approach data intuitively (Coffey et al., 1996:9). The use of specialist software such as Atlas.ti fosters the analysis by increasing mental capacity for organising, remembering, and being analytical (Romero, 2016:226). The latest version of Atlas.ti (web version 8) was used to analyse the qualitative data collected in this study.

### **3.11 Summary**

Chapter 3 discussed the tools, methods, and research techniques used to collect the data. This section included clear and concise definitions of research terms such as population, sampling size, ethical consideration, and pilot studies. The chapter also highlights important data analysis processes which are relevant to qualitative studies, such as this one. The following chapter will present the findings using Creswell's proposed steps for data analysis and qualitative software, namely Atlas.ti (web version 8).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

The current chapter presents, clarify, and discuss the results of the study which was designed to explore how hotels in Cape Town utilise OLRs and manage their reputation online. The chapter showcases the participants' responses that were received through the interview schedules. Atlas.ti (web version 8) was the software tool used to analyse the data, using Creswell's six steps for qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2009:157). The discussion of the findings is based on the research objectives:

- To determine how 3- to 5-star establishments in the Cape Town CBD manage OLRs pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To determine which systems are in place to respond to OLRs in 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD.
- To understand how OLRs are a significant part of the development of strategic marketing plans in the Cape Town CBD.
- To recommend improvements to a respond management guideline for managing positive and negative OLRs for 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in the Cape Town CBD.

The findings were summarised and presented in a variety of ways, including verbatim quotes derived from the interviews, and tables and graphics that were used to present the emerged themes. Cristancho et al. (2021:110) advise that a strong results section allows the reader to interact with the findings in addition to reporting them. Any conclusions reached by the researchers must be backed up by actual quotes from the participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015: 229). This format was followed in this chapter.

#### 4.2 Profiling of participants

This section discusses the key findings that were obtained in relation to the participants' profile such as title or position at the establishment, star rating, and hotel type.

##### 4.2.1 Title or position of the participant at the hotel establishment

Table 4.1 shows the results that were obtained concerning the title or position of the participant. The majority of participants were general managers, which meant that their tasks included marketing related roles and playing an active role in managing OLRs pertaining to their hotel establishment. The remaining positions included: group marketing

manager, marketing assistant, rooms division manager, and marketing coordinator (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Title or position of the participants

Title/Position	Total
General manager/Deputy General Manager	3
Group digital marketing manager	1
Marketing assistant	1
Rooms division manager	1
Marketing coordinator	1

The findings indicated that three of the participants were in the roles of general managers at the hotels. Considering the number of responsibilities given to these managers, it is evident that their tasks are considerably more involved and difficult because they must also deal with difficulties related to both staff and guests at the hotels (Pirnar, 2014:5583). Besides these considerations, general managers should be able to acquire knowledge of: financial and accountancy skills, various purchases, marketing, interpersonal skills, technical competencies, safety and security management, cultural issues, effective planning and management, ethical understanding, quality management, staff development, green energy and sustainability management, advancements of e-tourism technologies and applications, and legal provisions (Kay & Russette, 2000; Kotler & Armstrong, 2001; Evans et al., 2002; Kotler et al., 2006; Yesawich, 2007)

#### **4.2.2 Roles and responsibilities of participants**

As knowledge about customers and the markets that hotels provide a service to grow and become more accurate, specialisation within the hotel organisational structure boosted the effectiveness with which the organisation managed and supplied its services (Rutherford & Fallon, 2007:69). Employees in several departments with varying tasks that depend on one another are necessary for a hotel to run smoothly (CareerTrend, 2018). Table 4.2 presents the roles and participant responsibilities which were quoted by each of the participants. Contrary to belief that most marketing efforts rely on the shoulders of the marketing manager, Rutherford and Fallon (2007:81) found that the effectiveness that results from a hotel's functional organisational structure is seen in each department as a whole. Participants 1, 3 and 5 all identified their roles as “marketing” related roles in marketing

efforts of the hotel, while Participants 2, 6 and 7 took on managerial roles which oversaw the “...*whole operations of the hotel*” (Participant 6).

Table 4.2 Roles and responsibilities as quoted by the participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Participants title/position</b>	<b>Roles and Responsibilities quoted by Participants</b>
Participant 1	Group marketing manager	<i>“I look after from [the] website [to] everything online, as well as marketing, so third-party sites’ production, from influences, or social media pages, websites, Google analytics page search, and reputation management”.</i>
Participant 2	General manager	<i>“I’m a general manager for the property and from an online managing... review perspective ... what we do is we’re constantly observing and reading the client’s behaviour”.</i>
Participant 3	Marketing assistant	<i>“So yeah, I’m obviously the marketing assistant. So I have access to guest review[s], because I then collect them, and I work with the brand manager”.</i>
Participant 4	Rooms division manager	<i>“... Front office management [to] overseeing operations, in-house, monitoring and responding to online reviews, act in absence of the hotel GM [general manager) as well”.</i>
Participant 5	Marketing co-ordinator	<i>“I oversee anything to do with brand and communications ... and social media, websites, press release, printed media, uhm, ... anything that has to do with media – voice of the hotel group – the hotel group, conference centre, and the restaurant”.</i>
Participant 6	General manager	<i>“I am the general manager of the hotel and [ I am] responsible for the whole operation [at the hotel]”.</i>
Participant 7	General manager/ Deputy manager	<i>“I manage all the head of departments that report to me, such as the FnB [Food and Beverage] manager, maintenance, and then report. Yes, part of my daily task is to answer online reviews”. “I have to make sure the hotel ... this business, is profitable”.</i>

One of the foremost experts in the topic of marketing, Kotler et al. (2001:164), defines marketing as "a social and management process by which individuals and organisations achieve what they need and want through generating and exchanging value with others" from a managerial point of view. Knowing more about the present as well as potential clients will be the key to successful marketing campaigns if the goal of marketing is to affect demand (Talabi, 2015:16). An interesting role which presented itself during the interviews, was that of the Rooms Division Manager. According to Participant 4, the roles extend further than that of guest rooms related management. It extends to playing an active role in "...*monitoring and responding to online reviews*" (Participant 4) and fulfilling the role of the general manager when requested. Since the role of marketing requires strict processing and decision-making skills, the roles reflected by the participants do indeed hold the knowledge and capacity to fulfil various responsibilities, including that of marketing.

#### **4.3 Type of hotel establishment**

In 2019, the TGCSA implemented the review of the criteria used to identify and classify various accommodation establishments in South Africa (TGCSA, 2019:2). The grading system introduced three new categories to cater for the hotels sector, namely: smaller hotels, boutique hotels, and aparthotels (apartment hotels). An establishment known as a *hotel* must have at least 80 rooms and can provide hotel guests with full or restricted services. In addition to having a dining room, hotels include a reception space (TGCSA, 2019:5). A *boutique hotel*, according to Rogerson (2010:425), is distinct from a regular hotel because it provides special "experiential qualities with strong emphasis placed upon the production of high levels of design, ambience, and offerings of personalised service" and "small properties which are primarily operated by individuals or companies with a small collection". A minimum of 10 rooms are required for an *apartment hotel* to offer the traveling public lodging with full or limited services. There is a reception space and a dining area in an apartment hotel. Each room has a dining area and a kitchenette (TGCSA, 2019:5). Participation by establishment type in the study was as follows: there were 4 hotels, 2 boutique hotels, and 1 apartment hotel.

#### **4.4 Star ratings**

Further to the TGCSA accommodation type categorisation, the hotel sector benefits from star ratings as this offers clients the chance to locate a hotel that truly meets their desired standard (Talabi, 2015:10). All participating establishments were graded as 4-star ratings. The rating is also advantageous to hotel management because it raises the standard of the service provided to visitors (Brody, 2014:5). The TGCSA may assess an accommodation between 1 and 5 stars based on the overall standard that a guest can expect as well as the

facilities available (Travelground, 2009). Travelground (2009) highlights that general finishes and service standards are of a higher calibre for 4- to 5-star hotels. Examples of these requirements include the requirement for a desk equipped work area in each guest room. The restrooms in these hotels come with a face cloth and body lotion in addition to the 3-star facilities. A 4-star hotel will also offer room service for at least 18 hours each day. The establishments that participated in this study are all 4-star rated establishments.

#### **4.5 Study themes**

While being able to describe and profile the participants and the type of hotel establishments is important, this section presents the themes that emerged from the codes that were identified from the data that were collected. The term "theming" describes the process of combining codes from a few transcripts to create a coherent and comprehensible presentation of qualitative research findings (Sutton & Austin, 2015:229).

The interview questions for this study were created to answer the research objectives. The codes were then developed from the interview questions, which were then used to analyse the interview transcripts, where trends and recurring patterns based on each participant's local knowledge and experience were developed. These clustered recurring patterns were regrouped into themes (see Appendix D: box framework).

The data are presented according to key themes, which includes sub-themes and interpretations of the findings (see Figure 4.1):

- Key Theme 1: Hotels' OLR management and monitoring systems. This theme focuses on identifying the OLR management systems used by hotels and the staff involved which are identified as key role players in active responses online, to address Objective 2.
- Key Theme 2: Effects of positive and negative OLRs on hotels (pre- and during COVID-19 pandemic). Discussions focus on the impacts of COVID-19 and future bookings but also participants' interpretation of positive and negative OLRs. Data from this theme will address Objectives 1 and 3, and
- Key Theme 3: Hotels' online response management guidelines and procedures. Discussions provide an in-depth perspective on how the role players identified in Theme 1 follow guidelines and procedures as part of the response plan. This will address Objective 4.

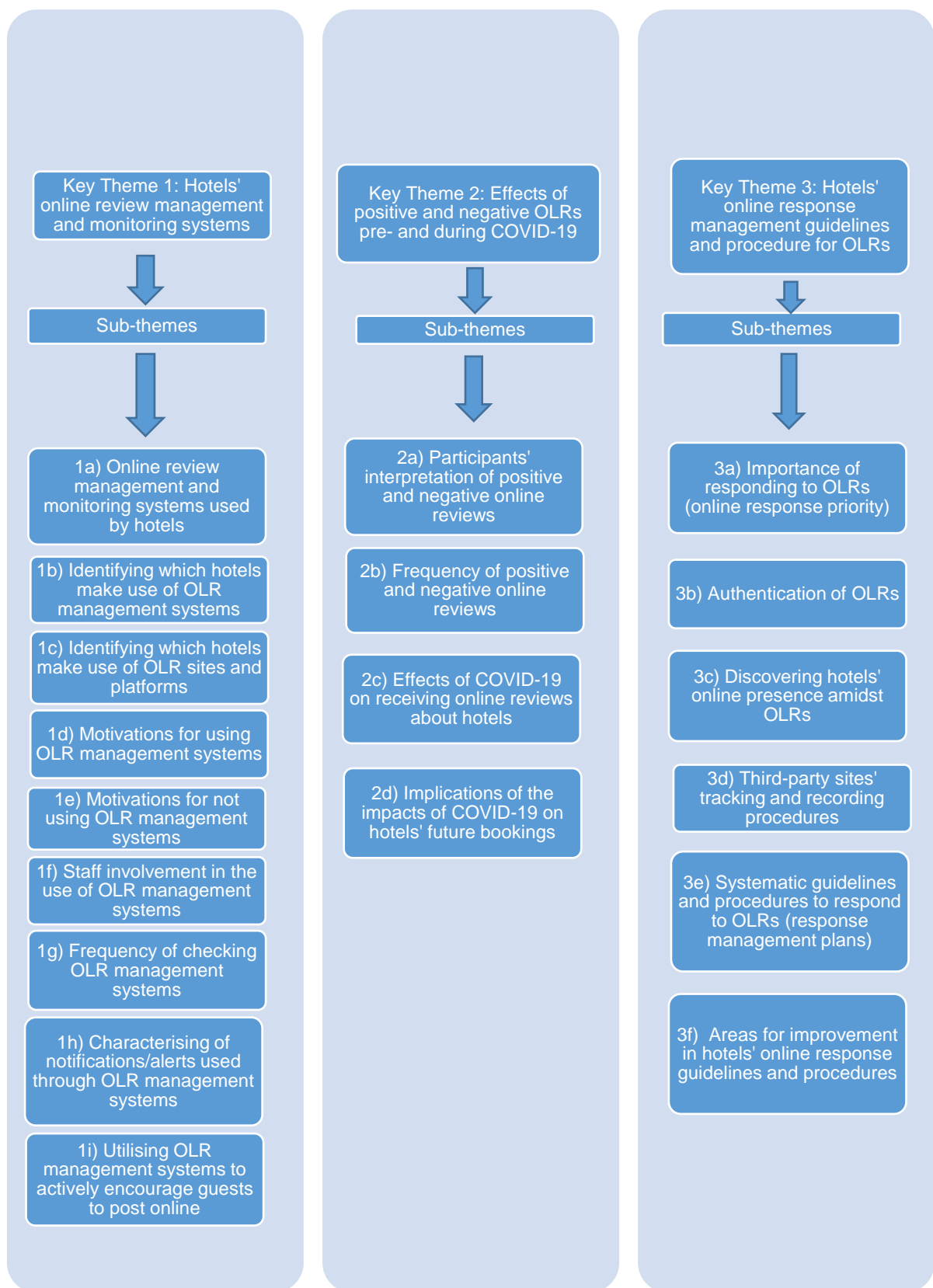


Figure 4.1: Key themes and sub-themes of the study

Source: Researcher's own contribution

#### **4.5.1 Key Theme 1: Hotels' online review management and monitoring systems**

In responding to research Objective 2, the theme and sub-themes listed below focus on identifying which OLR systems are utilised by the participants. Thereafter, the researcher shows how the staff actively managed the OLR management systems. Another pertinent area for analysis was how often the participants checked or monitored the OLR systems. The last sub-theme looks at how the OLR systems were used to encourage guests to post online.

Theme 1 comprises the following sub-themes:

- 1a) OLR management and monitoring systems used by hotels;
- 1b) Identifying hotels that make use of OLR management systems;
- 1c) Identifying hotels that make use of OLR sites and platforms;
- 1d) Motivations for using OLR management systems;
- 1e) Motivations for not using OLR management systems;
- 1f) Staff involvement in use of OLRs management systems;
- 1g) Frequencies of checking OLR management systems;
- 1h) Characterising of notifications/alerts used through OLR management systems;  
and
- 1i) Utilising OLR management systems to actively encourage guests to post online.

These are unpacked in more detail below.

##### **1a) OLR management and monitoring systems used by hotels**

In responding to Objective 2 about identifying the systems and processes used to manage OLRs, the participants were asked to indicate if the hotel utilised any form of OLR management software. Thereafter, the participants provided in-depth descriptions of the features and motivations behind each system. The results are presented in the following format: A short description of each theme followed by a detailed discussion of the findings. The results will consist of verbatim quotes from the participants as well.

##### **1b) Identifying which hotels make use of OLR systems**

After profiling each participant, the researcher enquired about which type of OLR management systems were utilised in the hotels. It was discovered that one hotel used Revinate; two hotels made use of ReviewPro; two hotels made use of GuestRevu; while two hotels did not employ any OLR management systems, but rather made use of other mechanisms to review OLRs from guests. The motivations for not using the OLR management systems are explained in Section 1c. The participants who used OLR

management systems briefly described how each system worked for the establishment. The overall finding was that the OLR management system used served as a filtering mechanism, as a 'one-stop-shop' which collected data in the form of OLRs posed about each particular hotel on various external sites:

*“ReviewPro is one of the biggest – it’s [a] bespoke hotel reputation and marketing tool so what it’s able to do it’s able to scrape all online reviews...”* (Participant 1).

*“Filter information but because it’s an online platform, [so] GuestRevu carries [the] same sentiments as the other social platforms”* (Participant 2).

*“We actually use a system called ReviewPro. This draws all online comments from external sites, you know, like your Booking.com, TripAdvisor, and social media. When a [guest] stays with us, they get a survey; and what they have to say about their stay, filters through ReviewPro”* (Participant 4).

The collection of data from the various sites acts as a tool to assist hotels in monitoring and managing OLRs, as well as engaging with the online community. The benefit of OLR management tools for businesses is the integration of social media in engaging with their audiences (Sirzard, 2022:229). Hotels are able to offer answers and responses to consumers' comments, ideas, and complaints (Kim & Kim, 2022:3). Most importantly, the OLR systems increase hotels' effectiveness in creating, managing, and maintaining their online reputation (Karlsson & Strom, 2020:8).

### **1c) Identifying which hotels make use of OLR sites and platforms**

While OLR management systems are imperative to gather information about hotels online, two participants (Participant 5 and Participant 6) mentioned that they were not relying on OLR management systems for the monitoring of reviews. One participant expressed that even though no OLR management system was used, they maintained online monitoring and engagements directly with the external sites. The external sites can be referred to as user-generated content sites, namely: social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter), review sites (TripAdvisor, Booking.com), and visual sharing content (YouTube) (Ghazi, 2019:62).

Participant 5, who works for a hotel group, added that *“we check Google Reviews, TripAdvisor, DinePlan, Booking.com ... even though we don’t have a system to respond, we still check these sites directly”*.

The Internet presents a chance for tourism enterprises to provide low-cost information and booking services to a huge number of travellers (Abiola-Olke & Aina, 2020:12). Online

booking sites allow travellers to search travel related information, which includes pricing (competitive rates) and purchasing options, directly through the sites (Inversini & Masiero, 2014:3). These online travel sites create an opportunity for consumers' OLRs to influence hotels' online reputations within the industry (Xotels, 2012). On the other hand, social media sites or platforms serve the purpose for content sharing through videos, images, texts, and even podcasts. Social media sites are usually consulted to provide additional information about a particular hotel (Lui et al., 2019:30). Participant 5 added that they also make use of social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram. While online booking sites are popular for OLRs, hotels also actively respond directly via the social media sites which is proven to be beneficial to the hotel and guests. Leung et al. (2013:5) say that social media plays a pivotal role in strategic information sourcing as they provide a useful tool in consumer data collection. There is a clear distinction between the booking sites and social media platforms, and hotel participants are aware that each play an important role when engaging online with guests.

#### **1d) Motivations for using OLR management systems**

The choice of an OLR management system is based on the system's ability to monitor and analyse feedback, assist in responding to customer feedback, and integrate data from third-party sites to improve hotel performance (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018:48). Participants appeared to be confident in using OLR management systems in their hotels and indicated the benefits for both guests and the establishment. Regarding the benefits for the establishment, four of the six participants (Participants 1, 2, 3 and 7) shared the motivations behind the choice of the OLR management systems used by the hotel, which included unique features, data analysis extraction, integration abilities, competitor analysis, and a variety of report formats.

Table 4.3 presents the motivations, and all the OLR management systems stood out with regards to the assessment of unique features. The first system that was mentioned, is 'Revinat'. The unique features of this system included the ease in which the system links to internal systems used within hotels, allowing for seamless integration of reporting. The system easily integrates into hotels' CRM and property management systems (PMS) that measure and extract online data for hotels (1834 Hotels, 2020). Another feature considered was that the system has a rich analytical data tool, making it a top-rated marketing tool. OLR management tools like 'Revinat' make it easier to aggregate online customer reviews from many sources, such as Trip Advisor, online travel companies, and social media (Torres et al., 2015:19). Various accommodation establishments within the sector make use of PMS internal systems, for benefits such as information that can be stored and shared with

departments in the hotel, assessing hotel performance, and forming business strategies to enhance the establishment (Moyeenudin et al., 2018:327).

Table 4.3: Participants' motivations for using OLR management systems

OLR management systems	Features	Verbatim quotes
Revinate	Bespoke marketing tool	<i>"One of the biggest, it's [a] bespoke hotel reputation and marketing tool; so what it's able to do, it's able to scrape all online reviews..."</i> (Participant 1).
	Links with hotels internal systems	<i>"...the whole system is designed that you can configure on the front end ... so it's the same as what you know from the PMS systems, you're able to log in"</i> (Participant 1).
	Rich analytical tool	<i>"does a lot of big hotel groups and is a very analytical tool and is a very good tool"</i> (Participant 1).
ReviewPro	Variety of integrated options	<i>"... the deal is to work with ReviewPro, and what ReviewPro offers you that Revinate doesn't offer you, is there's more integrated options such as GRI Index"</i> (Participant 2).
	Internal system integration	<i>"So if you have a specialised system that can extract not just the booking system, like as in when you're coming, when you're leaving, what goals you have today, but there's also like the system we're going to implement in our hotel group; across our hotel group, is a system that links up with ReviewPro. So we'll get all the information on your clients"</i> (Participant 4).
	Collates universal guest preference	<i>"Yeah, which is brilliant. Think about it, in the past you would go, and you would stay; Mrs. Van Niekerk, and we would say okay she had a fantastic stay and she'd like champagne, right. We'd put in the booking 'champagne', or she had this particular issue with a pillow, and we'd have to put in a trace for this but with the system's information, it really gives the guests feedback. All the information goes into the booking so what will happen then is, if you're staying in South Africa or if you're staying in Germany or if</i>

		<i>you're staying in Australia, that information because we're using one system" (Participant 2).</i>
GuestRevu	Serves multiple properties under hotel chain groups	<i>"There are two hotels here, have different online accounts and we use GuestRevu to help filter the online reviews" (Participant 7).</i>
	Visual data representation	<i>"...for the people who are not really numbers people, they can look at the how we're doing visually" (Participant 3).</i>
	Competitor analysis	<i>"And for the people who enjoy like stats and things you can see where we are as opposed to our competitors" (Participant 3).</i>

'ReviewPro' is the other OLR management system which was used by two establishments who participated in this study. Participant 2 shared further details about how the system extracts information from online booking platforms, such as Booking.com, TripAdvisor and Expedia.com, which proved to be beneficial for the hotel. The system's universal guests' preference feature was a strong motivator as mentioned by Participant 2. According to Participant 2, the guest preference feature enables the front desk to capture guest details and preferences, which are then shared with all hotels within the hotel chain group, regardless of destination (see Table 4.3). Such technological characteristics could have a big impact on a hotel visitor's overall pleasure and are key predictors of subsequent actions, such as the inclination to return (Bilgihan et al., 2016:119). ReviewPro's analytical and data extraction from TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and other online travel agencies not only measures the reviews but serves as an all-round integrated system for hotels (Queensland Tourism Council Industry, 2018). Based on the participants' verbatim quotes in Table 4.3, Revinate and ReviewPro have similar advantageous features, e.g. the ability to integrate systems with the hotels' internal systems such as PMS, and serves as a data collection tool to enhance the guest experience through data analytics. An additional feature that is unique to ReviewPro only is the GRI. Available exclusively to ReviewPro clients, thousands of hotels worldwide use the GRI as a benchmark for reputation management efforts and to set quality objectives as well as optimise online pricing and distribution strategies (PwC, 2016:5).

'GuestRevu', which was the third OLR system used by the hotels, was mentioned by Participants 3 and 7. In Table 4.3, the participants emphasised the convenience in the data presentation of the system, as well as competitor analysis features in the system. Online customer feedback not only assists hotels in improving quality in services and operations but allows hotels to measure their performance against competitors (Pavlova, 2020:15). Hotels use systems such as Guest Joy, GuestRevu, TrustYou, and Revinate to monitor

external sites for reviews and to set benchmark rankings against competitors (Stringham & Gerdes, 2021:16). The goal of benchmarking is to create and carry out action plans that will reduce or close the gap between internal operations and competition (Pavlova, 2020:16).

The hotel sector is well known for being a fiercely competitive market worldwide (Karlsson & Strom, 2020:1). Park et al. (2020:747) note that opinions posted online can be useful for service quality management and benchmarking when comparing the hotel's strengths and weaknesses against its competitors. The main feature of GuestRevu is the system's ability to conduct a competitor analysis. This is an important feature for hotel operations as it will determine how well the hotel performs compared to other hotels in the market.

### **1e) Motivations for not using OLR management systems**

The two participants (Participants 5 and 6) from the total interviews who indicated that their establishments did not use review systems, opted to directly review sites and social media.

Participant 5 mentioned that the hotel manages OLRs directly via the OTAs or social media accounts, stating *"we do Google Reviews, TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Dine Plan, uhm... social media as well"*. A few examples of third-party travel agencies that have been very popular with customers include Booking.com, Hotels.com, and TripAdvisor, since they offer a wealth of information on various hotels, particularly OLRs from customers (Karlsson & Strom, 2020:25). When prompted to indicate the motivation behind responding directly on the sites, the participant cited *"direct responses and convenience"* (Participant 5).

Participant 6 shared the same sentiments, that they *"do not use [an] online review management system"*. The participant was prompted to elaborate further via email and addressed the cost involved with OLR management systems: *"For our size hotel, the costs involved with an online review system were not beneficial"* (Participant 6).

Participant 6's hotel was identified as a boutique hotel, consisting of less than 20 rooms. In addition to usually offering excellent levels of service, boutique hotels are stylish, trendy, and offer a personal and cosy lodging experience (Dincer et al., 2016:95). Boutique hotels constantly keep up with the latest developments and strive to connect with potential consumers through the most efficient and affordable communication channels (Dincer et al., 2016:98). The management of small-budget boutique hotels usually have access to online communication channels thanks to the Internet's low cost and worldwide accessibility (Lwin & Phau, 2013:20).

Hotels have established web applications which contain electronic forms for complaints and comments, thus improving the dialogue directly with guests (Assimakopolous et al., 2014:4). Meng et al. (2018:24) emphasises the importance of OLRs, and says it is imperative that hotel managers reply to the OLRs, either through OLR management systems or directly through booking sites. However, other participants preferred to engage directly through external sites such as OTAs or social media platforms. Both paths require skills from the participants who play active roles in ensuring OLRs are managed correctly.

#### **1f) Staff involvement in the use of OLR management systems**

Marketing functions may be shared tasks amongst staff of different departments in a hotel. This sub-theme aims to understand the people in the hotel establishment who provided support to the key role players (participants) when managing OLRs in the hotel. These staff members may have also shared the responsibility of responding to OLRs.

The objective of managing a company's reputation should be similar, whether communication takes place online or offline (Lange et al., 2011:163). The participants indicated to a team of members in each department who share a responsibility in the hotel's reputation management. As the hotel group's digital manager, Participant 1 mentioned that there is a team which actively plays a part in the hotel operations and marketing operations for the hotel. In a hopeful tone, the participant expressed the impacts of COVID-19 on the reduced number of members and the hotel itself. The team had downsized from 12 to two members:

*"Yeah, so we have a team that assists in managing ... Just like a lot of hotels we had to downsize quite dramatically because, you know, the tourism industry, we lost 90% of all incoming business and foreign business when lockdown happened".*

Where hotel managers are considered, it is evident that their jobs are considerably more difficult and demanding, and they rely predominantly on supportive roles to complete tasks (Pirnar, 2014:5585). In some hotels, the general manager requires support from managers in other departments to take on the responsibility of monitoring OLRs. Participants 2 and 3 relied on the front office manager and deputy general manager to respond to OLRs as well.

Participant 2 said that the responsibility is shared with the front office manager as well. *"It is myself and [name omitted], we manage and respond to these ... you know, online reviews. We sort of extract all the information that's necessary ... so our responsibility is to review, take the information, and then submit it to the entire team".*

Participant 3 who is a marketing assistant spoke about a collaborative effort when collecting the data online and presenting it as posts on their social media platforms.

*“I’m obviously the marketing assistant. So I have access to guest review[s] because I then collect them, and I work with the brand manager, and we put it on our Instagram and Facebook as posts”* (Participant 3).

Functional staff/departments, alongside executives, should provide managerial responses, because their operational insights allow them to better address consumer comments (Ciasullo et al., 2020:4). In some cases, the participants found themselves in multiple roles, both managerial and supportive roles. Participant 4, a rooms division manager, was the primary role player when responding to OLRs, however this participant also provided support to the general manager in their absence.

*“One of my roles is to monitor and respond to online reviews, as well as act in [the] absence of the hotel GM, when needed”* (Participant 4).

The findings revealed that while supportive roles were important in the hotel, online management and response requires uniformity across all platforms.

*“Uhm, we keep it this way because of uniformity of responses; keep it the same way. We know how to respond to online reviews”* (Participant 4).

This could be the motivations behind the limited staff involvement in managing OLRs through the management systems.

While it is evident that most of the participants manage these individually and with limited staff involvement to avoid confusion and inconsistencies, and to maintain *“uniformity”* (Participant 4) when responding online. The next section will address how often the participants monitor OLRs.

### **1g) Frequency of checking OLR management systems**

This sub-theme presents data on the frequency the participants checked the OLR management systems for comments posted about the hotel. The results presented also include reasons for how frequently the OLRs were managed. The participants indicated that the online systems they used had automatic notifications via email prompting the participants to check the OLRs when there were OLRs. The participants created a daily habit of checking it more than once a day. The practice of frequently responding to customer feedback

becomes an alternative to the managers' reputation management technique (Proserpio & Zervas, 2016).

When asked about how often the OLR sites and systems were checked, all of the participants indicated *"always"*. Participant 1 in particular mentioned that the sites are checked as part of his daily tasks, indicating that *"I try make a point of checking our platforms every 15 minutes just to see what is going on [laughing]... if there's a live engagement or comment because I have about 13 channels that I look after, it's quite a bit"* (Participant 1). The OLR management system's feature plays a vital role in how often the participants actively check the OLRs.

Participant 7 indicated that *"I do it daily ... I respond as soon as it comes through, whether I am at work or not [laughs] ... I am always checking my phone to see"*. Another, Participant 3 mentioned that the monitoring took place upon arrival at the office. The participants expressed *"there's not a day that you don't go onto ReviewPro and there's not a review"* posted about the hotel, which prompts the participants to check the online booking sites and social media platforms. While these were responses from those that used OLR management systems, Participants 5 and 6 shared similar sentiments that OLRs sites specifically should be checked *"daily"*. The hotel management response is counted on the frequency, speed, and length of content to achieve effective customer interactions (Li et al., 2017:6).

According to De Pelsmacker et al., (2018:49), hotels are shifting away from passive listening and toward active participation through online response management. Online hotel reputation monitoring and response has not only emerged as a management platform, but also as an interactive communication method for engaging with prospective guests (Zhang & Vasquez, 2014:55). Participants are actively participating in online activities by acknowledging and responding to OLRs on a daily or regular basis.

#### **1h) Characteristics of notifications/alerts used through online management systems**

This sub-theme in particular will focus on how the OLR management systems generate notifications/alerts for the participants. Although some participants did not rely on the review systems previously mentioned, they were asked to include their interpretations of receiving notifications/alerts.

The participants appeared to be well versed in incorporating the monitoring process of OLRs in their daily operations. It is apparent that OLRs are impossible to control, however they can be managed through online monitoring (Looker et al., 2007:22). The participants indicated that notifications and alerts by OLR systems can prompt online monitoring and

engagement. The participants highlighted the convenience of notifications and alerts received by the OLR management systems as it is linked directly to the mailbox on the mobile device and computer:

*“I get a notification on my phone or my PC [personal computer] if anyone writes anything on Twitter, or LinkedIn, or Facebook”* (Participant 1).

The participants found the feature to be useful and efficient, especially when managing multiple properties within the hotel group. The OLR management system created notifications when information was posted online and extracted information from various external sites. Participant 2 mentioned that the alerts were based on selected criteria. ReviewPro allows one to link their email address to the system and select which type of content and alert should be notified, and also the channel of communication (ReviewPro, n.d.). Two participants using GuestRevu indicated the system as having similar notification features. The alert features in GuestRevu proved to be convenient:

*“So with GuestRevu, you can choose what kind of notifications you want to receive via email”* (Participant 3).

*“And I am able to see it, look at it, and respond on my phone [laughs] – always looking at my phone to see if there’s a review”* (Participant 7).

In a different scenario, Participants 5 and 6 did not utilise the OLR management, and therefore, did not receive alerts through the system, but received email notifications directly from external platforms. OLR management systems offer a range of notifications and alerts that allow hotels to not only monitor, but rather analyse and react to OLRs (ReviewPro, 2019).

Active online engagement prioritises customer relationship management which becomes fundamental to providing useful knowledge for service quality improvement and innovation, enhancing the opportunities to customise and personalise service offering (Ciasullo et al., 2020:5). Evidently, the hotel participants are able to build dynamic relationships while becoming involved in online discussions.

### **1i) Utilising OLR management systems to actively encourage guests to post online**

The participants mentioned using the OLR systems to encourage guests to post online about their experiences at the hotel. Some participants revealed that the system is not for encouraging guests but rather as a way to retrieve the information about their stay.

Encouraging guests to post online about their experiences assists hotels in understanding the needs of their customers (Ghazi, 2019:63). It was evident that the participants did not only use the OLR systems to manage reviews, but also to encourage guests to post during their stay at the hotel or as they leave. The participants valued the guests' opinions about their experience at the hotels and would suggest that these be expressed on a public platform especially, based on responses if they were positive:

*"It is important for the public to see what and who we are. The services we offer ... type of quality services"* (Participant 7).

The OLRs are important for the hotel's brand especially where quality services are acknowledged by guests. De Pelsmacker et al. (2018:50) advise that consumers already have solid opinions about a well-known hotel chain brand name, and may thus be less influenced by rating lists than by an unbranded, unidentified independent hotel. In contrast, if a hotel is featured as one of the best hotels in a well-known online travel community (such as Trip Advisor) with high rating OLRs, the hotel is more likely to have higher booking intentions (Vo et al., 2022:919). In a separate interview, another participant agreed to the value it adds to the hotel when guests are encouraged to post online. Encouraging guests to post online comes with its own set of challenges, as guests might feel *"pressurised to post online"* or *"feel like just a number"* (Participant 3). A probable solution would be the manner in which the guests are prompted to post online:

*"So if you ask nicely and it's kind of personal, and it's not like, you don't feel like you're just a number ... just to say hey we are on TripAdvisor could you please leave us a review, positive or negative, we take it as it comes"* (Participant 3).

In a similar scenario, some participants expressed concern about how this kind of encouragement surrounding these types of reviews can be damaging to the hotel's brand. This was deemed a less desirable approach by Participant 7 who responded,

*"We'd say, so please just find a way to not even review us because you're damaging our business. There are cases like that where somebody is just being vindictive or somebody's being malicious to us"* (Participant 7).

While encouraging guests to post OLRs seemed to have its positive and negative outcomes, two participants avoided doing so as it might negatively influence the establishment's brand. In this regard, they stated: *"I don't do that for specific reasons because you got to see what the intent is of why we are having more followers ... people, it's like if I'm forced to ask you something, what happens is I'm actually influencing their response"* (Participant 1). Sparks

and Browning (2011:1314) reiterate the importance OLRs have as a source of information for potential hotel visitors and the influence it has on trust and credibility.

Furthermore, post-stay OLRs were common in the findings of the research. Guests will post negative reviews about their stay if they are not satisfied with the hotel's service quality, and conversely, they would also post positive reviews if they were satisfied with the hotel's service quality (Alexandris et al., 2002). As part of the decision-making process to assess the quality of the hotel's services and products, customers rely on other customers to post online about their hotel experiences (Vo et al., 2022:921). This type of trust and reliability on OLRs might detract customer satisfaction from hotels' brands and impact the establishment's reputation (Vo et al., 2022:922). However, in this study, four of the seven responses revealed that guests were encouraged to post online during their stay as well, while two of the seven participants indicated to preferably not encourage guests to post about their hotel. On the other hand, hotels encouraged "real-time" (Participant 5) OLRs by placing social media account handles and links to OLR platforms on placards in the guests' rooms.

The advancements of technology have created an opportunity for hotels to utilise OLR management systems in the establishments. Based on the findings, it only required minimal staff involvement for online monitoring and responding, where role players were actively engaging in online interactions with customers. The features of the OLR systems assisted in the frequencies of response to monitor OLRs. Hotels should encourage clients to provide their feedback online within a certain amount of time following check-out, when their emotional connection to their stay is still fresh in their minds (Molinillo et al., 2016:22).

#### **4.5.2 Key Theme 2: Effects of positive and negative OLRs pre- and during COVID-19**

The tourism industry is considered one of the most economically important industries in the world (UNWTO, 2019). However, from 2020 to 2021, with the spread of COVID-19, the tourism industry was highly affected. This led to a major downfall of the national and international tourism industry (Hoque et al., 2020:55). Most airlines, due to lower demand and to adhere to international restrictions, were forced to reduce or cancel flights (Neuburger & Egger, 2020:1006). The hospitality industry was forced to close doors or reduce their staff due to low occupancy rates or government restrictions (Neuburger & Egger, 2020:1007). The pandemic has had several operational impacts, mainly in hospitality because of the need for social distance. As a result, determining the satisfaction dimensions from online customer reviews is crucial in order to determine their preferences for hotel services (Arasli et al., 2021).

This section will answer how the hotels responded to OLRs during a pandemic and how it impacted their future bookings.

This theme will focus on:

- 2a) Participants' interpretation of positive and negative OLRs;
- 2b) Frequency of positive and negative OLRs about hotels;
- 2c) Effects of COVID-19 on receiving OLRs about hotels; and
- 2d) Implications of the impacts of COVID-19 on hotels' future bookings.

## **2a) Participants' interpretation of positive and negative OLRs**

This sub-theme responds to Objective 1 of the study. The discussion explored the participants' understanding of positive and negative OLRs about the hotel. It will present the individual interpretations of differentiating between these OLRs. e-WOM is described as "any positive or negative statement made about a product or firm by potential, actual, or past customers, which is made available to a large number of individuals and institutions over the Internet" (Ghazi, 2019:2). The number of consumers who check reviews on sites such TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Expedia.com, before booking a hotel has increased over time. These websites provide consumers with positive as well as negative information about products or services, which can help consumers make a final purchase (Ghazi, 2019:3). Positive or negative OLRs have the power to benefit hotels or damage their image and reputation (Jeong & Jang, 2011:357).

Participants referred to a positive OLR as a guest who expressed their satisfaction of an experience at the hotel. The positive reviews are presented in star ratings, but some lack commentary or feedback to substantiate the ratings:

*"When it comes to a positive review, we will look at what rating they gave us out of 5 – if it was a good review or a bad review"* (Participant 6).

*"Positive online review, see, some people would see it as 5-star ... some people rate with stars but no comment"* (Participant 7).

The availability of user-generated reviews by OTAs has been demonstrated to influence travellers' channel preference toward OTAs over hotel websites (Liu & Zhang, 2014:74). Even when consumers book directly with a hotel, they often visit OTA sites to research travel and hotel information (Anderson, 2009:6). OTAs were often preferred over hotel direct booking sites (Stringham & Gerdes, 2019). OTAs and consumer opinion platforms employ various ways for gathering numerical ratings; some, like TripAdvisor, Expedia, or

Hotels.com, utilise a 1-5 rating scale, while others, like Booking.com, Agoda, or HRS, use an obvious 1-10 rating range (Martin-Fuentes et al., 2021:655).

OLRs that only received positive star ratings caused frustrations amongst the participants as the guests' motivations behind the ratings were not provided. The participants valued detailed OLRs over star ratings. According to the participants, the ideal positive review would include the highest ratings possible accompanied with a comment. Hotels with greater ratings on OTA websites rank higher in the listings when clients seek for the top reviewed hotels (Leung, 2019). As a result, a higher rating correlates to more reservations, more online hotel room sales, and higher occupancy rates (Cezar & Ogut, 2016). Qualitative feedback through OLRs proves to be incredibly valuable to the hospitality industry (Mathwick & Mosteller, 2017:206). While OLRs offer additional details on quality standards, star ratings continue to be an important factor for travellers looking for hotels (Mohsin et al., 2019:105). More so, it is important for OTAs to request customers to include not online ratings but evaluate positive and negative aspects of the accommodation in text responses as well (Martin-Fuentes et al., 2021:663).

Another participant expressed an unconventional way of defining a positive review, indicating that *"it could also be a bad review that is handled well and often I noticed [that] is a classic positive review, from this we often get the best responses from issues"* (Participant 1).

Participant 1 one identified how a negative review could evolve to a positive review if it is handled correctly. This is referred to as "service recovery" or "paradox". Service recovery is a technique that incorporates activities made by service providers in response to service failure (Mattila, 2001:584). Service failure can result in customer dissatisfaction which might cause discontent, anger, disappointment, or regret (Palmer, 2014). Effective service recovery can convert angry and disgruntled customers into loyal ones (Sadagashvili & Correia, 2019:3).



Figure 4.2: Word cloud representing participants' perceptions of positive OLRs

Positive reviews were also seen as an opportunity for development in various departments within the hotel. OLRs can help hotel managers to track the opinions and satisfactions of guests, and can thus serve as developmental feedback to staff and teams (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018:49). Positive reviews that included additional information were shared with department heads to *“boost staff morale”* (Participant 4). Hotel managers who place greater value on consumer feedback are more likely to share positive reviews with hotel staff as an act of appreciation to improve hotel service quality (Torres et al., 2015:80).

Negative reviews, on the other hand, were seen as *“less desirable”*. Participants defined negative reviews as *“anything that is lower than a full rating”* or *“reviews that we can’t do much about”* (Participant 5). According to Participant 7, anything that was *“1 star ... 2 stars is bad. It is [a] negative review for us”*. However, most negative star ratings included additional comments. Customers provided attractive titles and informative descriptive feedback when it came to negative OLRs (Banerjee & Chua, 2019:21). The participants felt a sense of urgency to respond as it had a negative impact on the hotels’ brand. A shared sentiment around negative reviews was that it held value online and drew attention online to issues that occurred during the guests’ stay. This meant that people were more likely to notice negative reviews over the positive reviews pertaining to hotels.



Figure 4.3: Word cloud representing participants' perceptions of negative OLRs

Quite similar to that of identifying positive reviews, the participants looked at the star ratings given online. Customers value other user's online ratings and rankings as a quicker, more efficient way to choose accommodation since ratings not only assist in decision-making but provide visibility for hotels online (Garcia et al., 2019:586). Overall, the participants shared that all OLRs, regardless of the type, required acknowledgement. Positive reviews also presented themselves in unconventional ways, resulting from negative OLRs. Hotels are also aware of how negative reviews can be altered positive reviews through service recovery.

## 2b) Frequency of positive and negative OLRs

A Likert scale question was included in the interview schedule with the following response options: 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=frequently, 4=very often, and 5=always. The participants were asked to indicate how often positive reviews were posted online about their hotels. The majority of the participants answered "daily" or "always", while the majority responses of negative reviews was "rarely".

As part of their daily tasks, the participants would check the OLR management systems and found positive OLRs about their establishment:

*"There's not a day that you don't go onto ReviewPro and there's not a positive review"*  
(Participant 2).

*“I think for the past four or five days, we’ve just received positive reviews”* (Participant 1).

The frequency of positive reviews was also dependent on the season. Some participants noted an increase in positive reviews during a busy period.

*“We receive positive reviews quite often ... It depends on the season. About 5 to 6 a day”* (Participant 5).

One participant was of the opinion that frequency was not a factor but rather that guests were willing to post positive reviews online because of their experiences: *“It has more to do with the business ... good, quality service [at the hotel]”* (Participant 7).

Six of the participants indicated “rarely” while only one participant indicated “frequently”. In addition to the response, some participants felt that guests valued their time and were reluctant to *“waste their time with a positive review, but if they have something negative to say, they tend to give a little more effort/detail into it”* (Participant 7).

The participants were asked to indicate how often negative reviews were posted online about their hotels. In response to the Likert scale options, six of the participants answered “rarely”. The frequency of negative reviews received online were *“far less than positive reviews”* (Participant 1) (Figure 4.4). Although not as frequent as positive OLRs, hotels would not be in operation if negative reviews exceeded positive reviews. The participants who rarely received negative reviews were confident in their hotel offerings, but remained vigilant of negative reviews:

*“Well negative [reviews] we get rarely actually ... we do pride ourselves on that. But obviously people are way more quick to post negative reviews”* (Participant 6).

In terms of benchmarking, some hotels strive to achieve 90% or higher and regard anything less as a negative review which requires *“improvement”* (Participant 7). Participants were confident in their quality of service and pride themselves in the amount of positive OLRs. They were also open to negative reviews which created an opportunity for the hotel to improve on areas which were not up to standards. Chen and Tabari (2017:56) recommend that hotels pay attention to controlling their online reputation and responding to unfavourable customer evaluations, as these will affect potential customers.

## **2c) Effects of COVID-19 on receiving OLRs about hotels**

This discussion follows on Objective 3 of the study, namely identifying how the pandemic impacted hotels receiving OLRs. Due to lockdown restrictions, staff numbers were reduced,

the workplace shifted to remote working. The COVID-19 pandemic enforced measures such as lockdowns, social distances, home orders, travel bans, and travel restrictions have been imposed (Gautam et al, 2022:2). Many hospitality establishments have been temporarily closed as a result of infection-control initiatives (Gautam, 2021). Hotels were experiencing booking cancellations as a result of the restrictions, which were predicted to result in the loss of four million jobs (Sucheran, 2022:35). It is projected that over 70% of the employees in tourism and hospitality were laid off (Radhakrishna, 2020). Live stream conferencing and remote working were more popular among hotels and their clients throughout the pandemic (Shapoval et al., 2021:).

Since the COVID-19 restrictions were implemented, most of the study participants had switched to working remotely. The hotels that closed down permanently unfortunately declined the offer to participate thus negatively affecting the study response rate.

Many participants mentioned the negative impacts COVID-19 had on their hotel establishments. According to the participants, factors such as price and quality influenced guests' expectations:

*“Covid has changed the expectation of what people require from their experience; people are prepared still to pay the price, full price... but demand better quality or service”* (Participant 1).

Some hotels struggled to adapt from a “hospitality approach”, which in its nature contains a social element. Adhering to social distancing regulations, which required to maintain a high level of service quality, was a challenge.

*“it’s the hardest thing for us is our industry ... by definition, i[t]’s almost like you have to give someone a hug and that’s hospitality, it’s friendliness, it’s a handshake; so how do you run a business where COVID-19 protocols are the opposite of that?”* (Participant 1).

This could also relate to how negative reviews could possibly increase, as service did not change but the impact of COVID-19 on hotels meant hotels needed to go the extra mile to maintain perceived levels of quality. The core of hospitality service is to provide distinctive experiences, frequently built on proximity with clients and individualised interactions with personnel and amenities (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2021:1). Hotel demand was significantly lowered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista, 2020). To provide a healthy atmosphere, all hotels implemented stricter cleaning and hygiene procedures, and hotels used a variety of contactless services (Kim & Han, 2022:2). The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advised reducing traffic in enclosed places and used technological solutions

whenever possible to minimise person-to-person encounters and maintain social distancing in hotels (CDC, 2020). Hotels had to promote their new attributes to convince guests that their service quality was not impacted by the pandemic (Kim & Han, 2022:3). The standard quality of goods and services should be maintained by hotels, but during this crucial time, hotel managers may be more proactive or even offer additional services to customers (Chan et al., 2021:553). From a different perspective, one participant felt that customers were more conscious when selecting hotel offerings due to a decrease in disposable income. Guests still demanded value for money even though they were paying much less than before the pandemic.

*“So that’s also the other thing that I picked up when I got their online reviews, is people are still wanting value for money even though they’re paying much, much, much less than before” (Participant 2).*

Natural disasters and pandemics cause longer-lasting crises, as their recovery takes longer than that of economic crises (Kubickova & Kirimhan, 2019:29). In terms of recovery plans implemented in hotels, hotel managers focused on developing special offerings to domestic markets, as well as promoting new products as services (Heredia-Colaco & Rodrigues, 2021:2). The recovery strategies relied on the marketing and sales departments in hotels to offer long-term vouchers for bookings, create attractive packages, and offer specials for existing markets. To attract new markets, the introduction of travel and booking incentives were considered (Heredia-Colaco & Rodrigues, 2021:4). All these efforts were digitalised marketing strategies and were advertised through different media channels (Garrido-Morena et al., 2021:4).

Guests were more active online during COVID-19 and held negative reviews *“highly”* according to Participant 5, when sourcing information online. The pandemic not only impacted OLRs, but also created a shift in marketing strategies within the hotel. One participant held a different view, stating that not much had changed prior to and during the pandemic in terms of the amount and types of OLRs received about the hotel.

Crises influence the macro-environment, which impacts how customers behave and how hotels perform (Campo et al., 2014:1295). Social media helped to maintain interest among users during the crisis and significantly reduced the feeling of social isolation among the general public by facilitating connections between people who are geographically distant (Yagnik & Chandra, 2020:99). Spending most of the time at home had increased excessive use of the Internet (Dixit et al., 2020:2). The amount of networking activity on these platforms increased dramatically, and in addition, it created a channel for raising awareness about

COVID-19 to contain the spread of fear and disseminate information on the safeguards that should be taken (Chandra & Yagnik, 2020:99).

## **2d) Implications of the impacts of COVID-19 on hotels' future bookings**

Vermeulen and Seegers (2009:124) found that consumers' exposure to OLRs improved the probability of booking a hotel. Nearly every aspect of a hotel's operations during the COVID-19 pandemic was impacted. Challenges included staffing strategies, provisioning of food and beverages, and reduced room occupancy rates (SNG Grant Thornton, 2021:2). The new scenario places hotels in an unknown territory, requiring them to adapt their entire value creation process to meet new health standards (Garrido-Moreno & Rodrigues, 2021:1). In the current uncertain scenario, hotels must re-engineer operations to become contact-free or contactless, rapidly adapting their entire service process (Sigala, 2020:313). During the interviews, the participants expressed their concerns of the implications of COVID-19 on future bookings at their hotels. The spike in activity on hotel OLR platforms during the lockdowns created a shared fear that guests spent more time online during that period and used the online platforms as an "escapism" to reality. Some hotels felt extra pressure to adhere to COVID-19 protocols, as a result, when the accommodation sector opened up again. Yu et al. (2021:2264) claim that many people's habits and motivations have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also transformed the way they purchase tourism related offerings. The participants were concerned that guests would rate the hotel negatively overall based on COVID-19 protocols:

*"So it's like the hotel's not performing by making sure the clients wear masks but it's like, in that split second, those guys decided not to wear their masks. You intercepted them before we could intercept; in your own perception, to say, 'well, this hotel's not following the protocol', ... becomes a challenge" (Participant 2).*

Responses from the participants indicated that the hotels' competitive features attracted customers on their own merit. Participant 4 mentioned that location was a draw card when guests preferred convenience.

*"Irrespective of what is online...because of our location [CBD] guest[s] prefer convenience" (Participant 4).*

The participants relied on the establishment's competitive advantage to positively impact future bookings, irrespective of the COVID-19 pandemic. They were also aware that they are now in a "digital age" as some shared the following sentiment: *"a lot of clients go online to review what is said about the hotel before making [a] booking" (Participant 5).*

### **4.5.3. Key Theme 3: Hotels' online response management guidelines and procedure for OLRs**

In responding to research Objective 3, this section focuses on the following points:

- 3a) The importance of responding to OLRs (online response priority);
- 3b) Authentication of OLRs;
- 3c) Discovering hotels' online presence amidst OLRs;
- 3d) Third-party sites' tracking and recording procedures;
- 3e) Systematic guidelines and procedures to respond to OLRs (response management plans); and
- 3f) Areas of improvement in hotels' online response guidelines and procedures.

#### **3a) The importance of responding to OLRs (online response priority)**

The participants relied on the OLR management systems' features to notify them when OLRs required an immediate response. This revealed how responses would be flagged as a priority.

The participants were asked to rate the importance of responding to OLRs, both positive and negative, according to the Likert scale, with the following options to choose from: 1=unimportant, 2=of little importance, 3=moderately important, 4=important, and 5=very important. This section shows how the participants categorised the OLRs according to response priorities. The rapid increase in OLRs has impacted the online hotel booking intentions within the hospitality industry (Hafeez et al., 2019:145). Responding to OLRs and participating in OLR communities is a good method to build a solid online reputation, which can enhance business performance and profitability (Andonov et al., 2021:1159). Response priority refers to how management effectively responds to OLRs pertaining to their establishments (Gu & Ye, 2014:572). The efficiency of a hotel's online reaction to guest evaluations is directly correlated to how quickly hotels respond (Ciasullo et al., 2020:4). An important element of response priority requires the content of the response to be adapted to the review by implementing a personalised and specialised response that addresses or does not address issues related to the specific OLR (Li et al., 2017).

Each procedure began with identifying the types of response priority. If the OLR impacted the hotel's brand, it prompted an immediate response. OLR systems, such as Revinat, would base response priority on "time-scales". If a guest reviewed the hotel as a 1-star rating, the hotel would have to respond within a certain time frame. If not, it would affect the overall

response time rating on the system. Participant 4 shared similar views about the OLR management system and how it assists in responding to “urgent” reviews, saying:

*“It then activates what we call a response priority, which means anything lower than a 7 will be flagged”* (Participant 4).

When asked to rate the importance of responding to positive reviews, all participants ( $n=7$ ) indicated “very important”. In the case of positive reviews, the participants said guests who posted positive reviews influenced the hotels’ brand image, while negative reviews impacted potential customers for future bookings. The type of response to a positive review required an “acknowledgement”:

*“Especially if it is a good review, it is very important to respond. So, I would say, very important. We need to say thank you... The ones who do post positive reviews, we need to acknowledge them”* (Participant 7).

Participant 3 explained that customers valued OLRs when managers personalised the acknowledgements. Review responses should have a “human element” instead of a generic robotic response. The best response strategy is a positive, personalised response within a short period of time (Levy et al., 2013:54). The availability of an online response, the timeliness of the response, and the use of a human voice rather than an automated voice increases trustworthiness and impressions of caring (Sparks et al., 2014:76). As a result, responses should go beyond simply repeating scripted responses and provide a clear indication that hotels have actually read the complaints (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018:50):

*“oh ... Very important. They want to know there is a real person to acknowledge the positive review.... Like no copy and paste”* (Participant 4).

The same question was asked to rate the importance of responding to negative OLRs and all participants indicated “very important”. While the participants found it easy responding to positive reviews, negative reviews were of importance as well, but not viewed as easy to respond to. Negative comments appear to have a greater impact on hotels than positive comments (Stenger, 2014:5). OLR management systems used the notification function to alert the participants about OLRs which required an urgent response. Hotels are able to use the alerts to manage their response priority plans to provide a speedy and timeous response to OLRs.

After receiving the alerts for response priorities, Participants indicated that a further investigation would be required in order to provide feedback on the issue. OLRs that require investigation are usually taken offline in the hopes of dealing with the issue directly with the

guest. It was important to be *“proactive”* (Participant 6) in these situations and solve the issues *“before guests make up their minds”* (Participant 6).

Participant 7 went a step further and said in most situations, the general manager would call the guest directly. As quickly as the situation was dealt with offline, the participant would refer back to the OLR and ensure feedback was given on the public platform as well.

One hotel in particular enabled a function in the system that alerted them to OLRs which required immediate attention. The response here indicated how review alerts were activated according to review rating criteria, as was defined in Section 4.5.1. This strategy was perceived to assist in response priority:

*“I think our reviews go from 1 to 10, but basically they graded, like 1 to 4 is bad, and 4 to 6 is okay, and 6 to 8 is pretty good, and 8 – great, and 10 out of 10 is excellent, which we strive for”* (Participant 1).

*“There’s a detractor, which is a bad review, so then first you’ll respond to that first. But you try to respond to the detractors immediately, because obviously the person’s upset”* (Participant 2).

Bearing in mind that the OLR management systems were seen as a *“revenue-generating tool”* (Participant 4), as customers were constantly monitoring how often hotels responded to OLRs about their establishments, some hotels were concerned that if the negative review was left unattended, it would affect their business, stating that:

*“Just as positive reviews may sway a guest to choose one hotel over the other, so negative reviews may achieve the opposite”* (Participant 6).

This was evident especially if it was an issue, such a negative review required further investigation. Positive ratings have been found to influence consumer behaviour, but it seems that negative reviews have an even greater impact (Salehi-Esfahani et al., 2016:927). Hotels should be cognisant of how they respond, by indicating an understanding of the issues and providing detailed *“actions”* for a solution based on the information found (Zinko et al., 2021:87):

*“We need to acknowledge the negative review. Before we respond to it, we would like to investigate, see the details of what happened and then try to fix it”* (Participant 7).

One participant mentioned that a response plan would assist in scenarios which required urgent responses. According to the participant, a uniformed approach may be the best approach as well, *“employing a response plan is so important. Not everyone can respond... everyone speaks differently, and you can open yourself to a lot of risk”* (Participant 1). The participants reiterated that this is why only a few “managerial” roles in the hotel are able to respond to OLRs.

Another participant shared their experience of responding to OLRs, whereby guests measure how active participants were on each site. The overall sentiments were that even though hotels could not respond to all OLRs, it was deemed critical that reviews which received 1- and 5-star ratings receive a response. These were the reviews that could ultimately impact the brand image of the hotel.

### **3b) Authentication of OLRs**

Participants were asked to explain the processes used to verify authentic or fake reviews posted online. The hotels not only relied on the OLR management systems, but also worked closely with third-party sites.

Large numbers of consumer reviews, which are regarded as more reliable than biased promotional tactics, are a major factor in the success of OLR platforms (Lu et al., 2013). OLRs can also be manipulated by dishonest companies that publish bogus testimonials about themselves or fake criticism of their rivals in an effort to influence the accessible information. This practice is known as review fraud (Luca & Zervas, 2016:2). A customer’s habit of using fake OLRs to coerce companies into making a concession, such as a price reduction, can have severe effects on small businesses (Lappas et al., 2016:3).

Participant 2 explained that the OLR systems are not able to filter through fake OLRs, but stated that there are ways in which they identify fake OLRs:

*“The system actually gives you an option. So the system allows you to actually go back to them. So, say you are in charge of TripAdvisor and we pick up a review that somebody stayed with us and it’s completely against what we have done. We can then type a message to TripAdvisor and say ‘listen can you please remove this review that has nothing to do with us and actually, the client didn’t stay here’, or whatever the case is. They will then remove the review”* (Participant 2).

This implied that organisations were then directed to the third-party site such as Booking.com, TripAdvisor, and Expedia.com, and would use their own verification process

to alleviate fake OLRs. They would investigate the OLR, and if proven to be untrue would request the review to be removed.

Participant 2 further elaborated that fake reviews could be interpreted in two ways. First, as an OLR that is untrue where it is was a verified guest who stayed with the hotel but was posting fake incidents that occurred, or secondly, it could be someone that did not stay at the hotel but was posting negative reviews.

Participants said the internal operational systems played a part in the verification process of OLRs, to assist with managing fake OLRs. Guests that claimed to have stayed at the hotel would be captured in the PMS system. The system kept track of all incidents that were logged during the guests' stay:

*"[name omitted] says, he confirms that the guest actually stayed at our hotel so their name and contact details will be in our PMS property management system"*  
(Participant 3).

Two of the participants indicated that at their establishment, guests were only able to post reviews once they received a link on departure. ReviewPro has a built-in authentication feature and requested guest booking details before the reviews were posted to external sites. This was part of the *"paper trail checking process"* (Participant 4).

One participant noted that, regardless of whether it was authentic or fake, the OLR required a response. Instead of engaging in a back-and-forth altercation, the hotel would acknowledge the review by responding with *"thank you for your review. Why don't you come and experience our property ...thank you"* (Participant 7). The participant felt that this would not intimidate the person who posted it, but rather encourage them to actually experience the services at the hotel establishment.

One challenge that presented itself in the discussion, regarding the paper trail of a guest's stay, was that guests who stayed with the hotel were captured in the PMS systems, however it was impossible to verify if the guest had visited other departments in the hotel, such as the restaurant or day facilities, where an incident might have occurred during their stay. This could be an indication that it was difficult to prove if someone posted about other "day visitor" facilities such as the restaurant:

*"There are reviews of people who stayed with us, and reviews of people who didn't stay with us. Some reviews, people visited the restaurant, and it is hard to prove it, you know"* (Participant 7).

### **3c) Discovering hotels' online presence amidst OLRs**

As the online community grew, it prompted hotels to play an active role through various online engagements. While some participants could not provide a definite answer as to when exactly hotels began responding to OLRs, hotels were aware of the importance of OLRs.

*“I think it was before both our time [laughs]. I think it's always been like that. I can't say from when I started, when this thing started. I think online reviews have always been an important aspect to any hotel”* (Participant 2).

The hotels acknowledged that the effects of OLRs have changed in the last five years. Another participant shared similar views on the development of social media over the last 10 years.

*“When [name omitted] took over, which was in 2010. I became more aware that paper ads [advertisements] were not where things are going. That's when they started engaging in the online reviews and responses”* (Participant 3).

This prompted the hotel groups to put more effort into creating an online presence. A similar scenario, once the hotel group created its first social media account in 2017, the hotel was forced to engage online and maintain the online presence.

### **3d) Third-party sites' tracking and recording procedures**

Tracking and recording of online responses create an opportunity for development feedback to be shared with hotels. This section focuses on which tracking and recording procedures are followed when utilising OLR management systems, to track reviews posted on third-party sites and social media.

According to the participants interviewed, the OLR systems employed a feature called linguistics and semantic analysis. This feature allowed hotels to track various OLRs posted on third-party sites:

*“Here's different options. You can go through what your ranking is against, you can go through the competitor index based on what your scores against competitors are, you can go for specific sectors; like they call it the semantic analysis, which is... Just talks about service and staff. It just tells us what they're saying”* (Participant 2).

The tracking commences when guests receive a review form (post-stay) generated by the hotel and when completed by the guest, gets filtered into ReviewPro. The system



Two of the participants who did not employ any form of OLR management system in their hotels, used manual tracking and recording procedures, annually checking each site and sharing feedback with departmental heads via the WhatsApp groups. The recording procedure proved to be beneficial to hotels as they would use information from the reports to share with the teams in daily meetings.

### **3e) Systematic guidelines and procedure to respond to OLRs (response management plans)**

This section explored whether any official guidelines or procedures were implemented when responding to OLRs. This pertained to physical written documents created either by the hotel groups or the marketing departments. The management and steering of Internet reviews, particularly unfavourable evaluations toward desired outcomes has received a lot of attention (Sparks & Bradley, 2017). Correctly responding to OLRs can help businesses build strong customer relationships and encourage repeat business from customers, in addition to expressing gratitude and apologies to customers (Li et al., 2017:11). Organisations create customer service standards to give workers procedures and guidelines to follow when interacting with customers, both physically and online (Institute of Customer Service, 2015).

Three participants indicated that they have a written document that supports guidelines and procedures within their establishments for responding to OLRs. Two of the three participants expressed the importance of templates as part of the response procedures. Response templates were generated over time and follow the type of OLRs, i.e. positive reviews and negative reviews. The reviews were also categorised accordingly, based on the context of the review such as food and drink, housekeep, or front desk. Participants had the options of using a “system generated template” or could adjust the response based on the review. Based on the response model in Chapter 2 and Figure 2.2, participants used the response priority as a guide when responding to either positive or negative reviews. The response plan still allowed the participants to personalise each message.

Sharing a similar guideline, Participant 4 mentioned that the template was used as a guide and still allowed the response to be personalised, stating that *“we try to use it to personalise the responses. Part of the response plan is to be personal... to avoid a copy and paste situation”* (Participant 4).

Another participant felt that templates were set up in a way that addressed each type of OLR, but still enabled the participant to edit responses where needed. The templates create a way for the response to be audible, apologetic, and uniformed.

*“When you have wording that’s already set up in such a way that describes empathy [or] sympathy – all the things that shows you are apologetic about what happened. Not that you don’t mean it, but it helps to interpret the message across” (Participant 2).*

In a different interview, one participant claimed to not have any guidelines in document format, indicating that OLRs at that establishment were handled personally and that responses were tailored to the guests. Three participants who did not have any guiding documents, indicated using step-by-step guidelines based on experiences when responding to OLRs, for example:

*“First we look at the star rating, then we look at the comments; we look at how we respond... We respond to the name, as is... “PinkTour” [laughs]. Really, if that is the name, we keep it as is. If there is an issue... ‘we have noted...’ your queries. They look for a senior person to handle the situation. There is no actual script or document set in stone. We already know how we are going to handle it because we have dealt with online... for a long time, you know, the experience that comes with it” (Participant 7).*

An assumption from the interview results could indicate that hotels that employed guideline documents found it to be beneficial for the establishments. The guidelines created a space to seek support when responding to OLRs. Most OLR management systems provided these support mechanisms as well.

### **3f) Areas for improvement in hotels’ response guidelines and procedures**

At the end of the interviews, the participants were asked to indicate if they felt that the existing guidelines or procedures required improvements. Most hotels were satisfied with the OLR management systems and how it assisted in the guidelines to responding to OLRs.

One participant shared that the filtering nodes in ReviewPro were too broad. The participants would prefer if each node would be broken up further, especially when providing developmental feedback to departments. This meant that the feedback given through the OLRs were sometimes too broad and not specific enough.

*“Service in which department, it covers a full blanket. What is the positive review about... the restaurant, [why not] break it down per department? We need to know which area the short comings are coming from. Too broad” (Participant 2).*

Participant 7 shared the same sentiment about the limited nodes. According to the participant, the previous OLR management system had the desired features,

*“It is not specific, unlike EGuest. It prompted you to specifically comment on the reviews. For example, EGuest allowed us to check, okay the issue is with reception, maintenance, security... per department”* (Participant 7).

Another concern was that OLR management systems only filtered OTAs and not social media sites. In this case, the hotel regional office would be advised by the marketing manager if OLRs require attention via the social media accounts.

#### **4.6 Summary**

This chapter presented the key findings of how hotels use OLRs to manage their online reputation in Cape Town. Tables and figures were used to reflect the analysis of the data, and to highlight associated implications. The key findings revealed that 46% of the participants profiled were general managers of the hotels. Five of the seven participants made use of OLR management systems while two participants did not. Most of the participants that utilise OLR management systems found the features to be beneficial, especially the alert/notification features. This was an important feature in creating a response priority plan.

In terms of overall impression of the OLR management systems, while most understood the advantages of these systems, there were a few areas for improvement as well. The next chapter presents the recommendations and conclusions that were drawn from the findings of the investigation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS

#### & CONCLUSION

##### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the findings, as well as recommendations, implications and conclusions based on the data analysed in the previous chapter, and the limitations experienced in the study. The most crucial element of the analysis process are recommendations, where one makes specific suggestions for actions or methods to deal with the problems and limitations found throughout the research (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2014). The research findings explore the issues and establish a final conclusion while reinforcing the thesis statement (Assan, n.d.:1). Conclusions may result from a comparison of the study findings with those of other studies (Moore, 2006:73), while recommendations must be in line with the study goals, evidence provided by the data, and interpretations made in order to be valid (Ebrahim, 2017:8).

##### 5.2 Summary of the research

The aim of this research was to explore how 3- to 5-star hotels in Cape Town's CBD manage OLRs as part of their ORM. The literature has presented research on OLRs from the guests' perspective, focusing on their decision-making, satisfaction, and loyalty to the accommodation sector (Kowk et al., 2017:310). There was an increasing need to understand review management from an operational point of view, and study how hotel managers and role players handle OLRs through the usage of online systems and web-based tools (Ciasullo et al., 2020:3).

Chapter 2 explored current literature on the development and management of OLRs, and how these developments impacted the tourism and hospitality industry. A background review of literature was conducted on the growth of the hospitality industry globally and nationally, as well as a synopsis of OLR sites, defining strategic marketing plans and existing response management plans.

The methodology for this was carefully considered. The research design was of an explorative nature, and a qualitative approach method was used, whereby participants were interviewed virtually and face-to-face, based on their comfort level during the data collection phase. According to Hearn (2012:48), the primary goal of exploratory research is to gain a better understanding for more rigorous work at a later stage, such as analysing and

presenting the data. In terms of the data analysis, the researcher organised and prepared the interview scripts received, and created themes/codes which are prominent, and analysed them using Atlas.ti (web version 8). Lastly, based on the completed coding process, descriptions and themes were presented in a qualitative narrative.

### **5.3 Research objectives addressed**

Research addresses knowledge gaps, advances previous work, and provides answers to problems of interest to other researchers (Forsyth, 2021:309). The research gap of this study was lack of research around how hotels manage and respond to OLRs. The results of the current study were examined and analysed according to the study objectives outlined in Chapter 1. The conclusions of the study are provided in the following sub-sections, with discussions based on the research objectives.

#### **5.3.1 Research Objective 1: To determine how 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in Cape Town manage OLRs pre- and during COVID-19**

##### **a) Conclusions**

The participants provided a clear interpretation of the difference between positive and negative OLRs. Most positive OLRs were described as a review that impacted the reputation of the hotel in a good way.

In contrast, a negative review could be a concern or issue from the guests' perspective that required investigation from the hotel's side. In terms of online ratings, hotels were flagged to treat negative OLRs as urgent because of the impact it had on the hotel's reputation. This meant that those responsible for managing reviews were more likely to notice negative OLRs over the positive OLRs pertaining to hotels.

Considering the effects of COVID-19 on the tourism and hospitality industry, the researcher wanted to investigate whether the pandemic had any effects on OLRs received during this time. A prominent challenge that hotels faced were the decrease in staff numbers which impacted hotel operations, especially responding to OLRs. This had a negative effect especially related to the importance of supportive roles when responding to OLRs. Although this role was actioned by small teams, sometimes only two people, the motivation for this was to maintain uniformity when responding to OLRs. Some participants in managerial roles acted as key role players in responding online as well as provided supportive roles to the general manager in their absence. While this was also due to the impacts of the pandemic, hotels had an effective system in place when responding to OLRs. Another challenge was an observed increase in guest demands for better service quality but at a reduced price.

A significant impact of the pandemic lockdowns was that expectations could not be fulfilled as the COVID-19 protocols required social distancing, a complete opposite of the operational process of what the hospitality industry stands for. The expectations of customers had changed as a result of COVID-19, which is illustrated by the accessibility of secure goods and services in the hospitality industry (Mehta et al., 2021:4). Based on the situation of the pandemic, guests would then rate the hotel negatively, based on the safety aspect of the protocols which were required to be in place, that impacted on hotel operations, and in most situations, were out of the hotel's control. However, Gossling et al. (2020:7) states that hotels are able to have satisfied customers during unprecedented times such as a pandemic. Ervina et al. (2020:17) add that hotels should manage "hotel preparedness" by adapting and improving innovation through their products and services. This means guests were satisfied if hotel management was consistent with the correct safety protocols and vigilance of a health crisis. Hotel preparedness refers to the establishment's ability to "bounce back" after a crisis to maintain guest satisfaction (Hussain et al., 2020:33). The author adds that while the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may linger, hotel managers can use new technologies to improve service quality for customers such as artificial intelligence (AI), monitoring OLR trends, and special robotics.

## **b) Implications**

Hotels have a good understanding of how to differentiate between types of OLRs about their establishments online. This could also motivate hotels to increase their online presence to assist in monitoring and managing their online brand reputation. While the pandemic was out of their control, hotels implemented internal recovery plans to manage the external factors such as impacts of positive and negative reviews due to service quality issues during the pandemic. Although the guests were well aware of these impacts, they maintained their service expectations throughout the pandemic. This meant that by assessing the situations, each staff member had a key role in managing the service quality and preparedness of the hotel.

## **c) Recommendations**

The study findings revealed the importance of responding to positive reviews indicating that positive reviews may also require priority in response when acknowledging the review. Chen and Tabari (2017:54) reiterates that OLRs reach a wider audience than traditional marketing methods and should require immediate attention and response. Positive reviews can enhance the hotel's opportunity for increased future bookings and create a reputable brand online, which will have positive spin-offs to sales.

Responding to favourable reviews also helps the hotel to improve the relationship with its customers, not just in the case of negative reviews (Lui & Ji, 2019:74). The participants were also aware of the dangers of not responding promptly to these OLRs. It resulted in negatively impacting the brands' online reputation, deterred potential customers from booking at the hotel, or even scared off loyal customers to the hotel.

The study adds to the existing literature by exploring how OLRs can be used to assist in the hotels' online reputation. It is recommended that literature should focus on how hotels manage OLRs through various situations, such as the pandemic or other external factors.

### **5.3.2 Research Objective 2: To determine which systems and processes are in place to respond to OLRs in 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in Cape Town CBD**

#### **a) Conclusions**

Study Objective 2 was aimed at determining which systems and processes are in place to respond to OLRs in 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in Cape Town CBD. The main purpose of online management review systems is to serve as a filtering mechanism which mines data directed at the hotel from various OLR sites and platforms. While some participants indicated that they did not make use of any OLR management systems, they felt that it served the hotel better if they responded directly via the online websites, booking platforms, and social media. Overall, the hotels were aware that in order to manage their online presence, they had to engage through OLR systems or social media.

The motivations for using OLR management systems expressed satisfaction of the features of the systems, which included data analysis extraction, integration abilities, competitor analysis, and the ability to draw a variety of report formats for the establishment. The participants found it beneficial to have the OLR systems integrated to the CRM and PMS systems. This meant that information that was extracted externally could be integrated internally for hotel customer relations management to improve service. Another strong feature of the OLR management system was the system's ability to create guest preference profiles through various hotels in the hotel chain group. This meant that regardless of which destination the guest chose, if the guest booked a hotel which was part of a hotel chain group, their preferences would be shared. This created a unique, personalised experience for the guest. Guest preferences profiling can be beneficial to hotels to increase their overall performance, but it also defines which service attributes are important to guests (Kamalpour et al., 2017:8). Participants who made use of OLR management systems found the data representation and competitor analysis to be advantageous to the hotel. This feature

assisted the hotels to benchmark their performances against other hotels who appeared online.

A critical feature of the online-management system was the notification/alerts feature. Notifications prompted participants to check OLRs as soon as one was posted. The notifications were received via email on the participants' mobile or computer devices. This created convenience in responding swiftly to guests directly with OLRs through third-party booking sites.

## **b) Implications**

While the majority of the hotels interviewed made use of OLR management systems, those that did not found the OLR system to be too costly for the size of the establishment. This meant that they had to frequently or regularly check social media platforms or OLR websites directly. If not managed consistently, the OLRs would not be attended to timeously. With that said, those hotels which did not make use of these systems, opted for direct or manual management protocols which proved to be just as beneficial for their establishment. In contrast, the OLR management systems each had unique features and were selected based on the objectives of each hotel. This was a key element when identifying the impact of the OLRs and how to manage them online. One key feature that was shared amongst all hotels was to ensure that guests were aware of their online presence, regardless of the platform used.

## **c) Recommendations**

Small to medium enterprises (SMEs) play a significant role in enhancing competitiveness, generating employment, raising employee wages, and mobilising societal resources for business growth investment (Cong & Thu, 2020:300). The SME hotels in the study did not make use of OLR management systems as the cost of installation and maintenance was too high for the establishment to cover. In this case, the findings of the study can assist SME hotel establishments in drafting an official guideline or procedure for responding to and managing OLRs, while considering the following guidelines:

- Compile an official response recovery and response priority plan. Develop a response management plan for smaller hotels that do not use OLR management systems
- Allocate thorough training on how to use the OLR management systems, especially if systems are changed annually
- Follow guidelines and procedures for responding to OLRs implemented by hotels

- Maintain relationships with third-party sites to assist with authentication/verification of OLRs (avoid online fraud)
- Consider subtle encouragements for guests to post online during their stay at hotels (in room social media placards on tables/desks)

### **5.3.3 Research Objective 3: To understand how OLRs are a significant part in the development of a strategic marketing plan of 3- to 5-star establishments in Cape Town CBD**

#### **a) Conclusions**

Objective 3 focused on how OLRs form part of the strategic marketing planning in hotels. A prominent concern here was that if the pandemic had any impact on future bookings, this would impact strategic marketing planning of hotels as well. Since the marketing and sales department managers were the key drivers to promote hotel offerings, these departments were vigilant of guests' online booking behaviours.

The participants were afraid that the lack of hospitality and interaction would negatively impact the perceptions and OLRs of guests. Industry tried its best to maintain the level of service quality, irrespective of the external challenges of the pandemic. Though COVID-19 impacted bookings, they were able to secure bookings based on their convenient location which was a draw card for most guests in the CBD. This was seen as a competitive advantage when compared to other hotels within the same location.

The evolution of the role of marketing in hospitality has evolved to associate itself with the trends of the current and potential markets with the important factors such as growing customer loyalty to the hotel brand, focusing on innovative technologies and strategic alliances, and ethical standards (Chen, 2017:54). Some suggestions for the recovery plan included offering incentives for bookings for new and existing markets, long term booking vouchers to compensate for the pandemic effects, and the creation of attractive packages. If hotel marketing efforts are done correctly and professionally, the establishment would reap the rewards of obtaining competitive advantage within the market (Goryushkina et al., 2016:210). According to the The Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation [COMCEC] (2017:8), part of a response recovery plan could include increased marketing, such as familiarisation tours and other promotional activities, emphasising upbeat messaging that highlight the best features of the location.

## **b) Implications**

Strategic marketing can assist hotels to create achievable objectives when faced with unpredictable situations. Hotels proved to be reliant on the marketing department's efforts to maintain their online reputation through OLRs. The study also revealed that hotels used their strengths as competitive advantages to assist in securing future bookings. OLRs created an opportunity for managers to engage with the online community. It is therefore suggested that hotels maintain a strong online reputation through constantly developing their strategic marketing plan in the marketing department.

## **c) Recommendations**

Online Marketing Certification Professionals [OMCP] (2022) identifies the Online Marketing Body of Knowledge (OMBOK) to recognise good practice of online marketing. The document is drafted by certified professionals within the industry that follow areas of good practice and techniques to increase the marketing success of a range of projects. OMBOK comprises of online marketing such as search engine optimisation, web analytics, email marketing, social media marketing, digital advertising (paid search), conversion rate optimisation, mobile marketing, and content marketing. The study gives insight into the use of OLRs and the role it plays within marketing. The results may be used as additional knowledge areas within OMBOK, especially through social media marketing and mobile marketing as well as improving strategic marketing plans.

### **5.3.4 Research Objective 4: To recommend improvements to a response management guideline for managing positive and negative OLRs for 3- to 5-star hotel establishments in Cape Town CBD**

#### **a) Conclusions**

Objective 4 was aimed at determining if there were improvements required on existing response management plans for OLRs. This was identified as "response priority". Response priority refers to how hotel management effectively responds and engages with guests online. The participants indicated that it was very important to respond to both positive and negative OLRs. The notifications feature of the OLR systems played a role in the response priority. According to the participants, positive reviews were likely to receive an acknowledgement whereas a negative review might require further investigation before responding to it. The more accommodating a hotel's COVID-19 reaction techniques are, the more favourable an impact they have on guest happiness (Yu et al., 2022:8). Part of the response priority was being aware of the type of response. Less accommodating approaches, such as denial and excuses, are less effective at reducing customers'

unfavourable reactions and preserving the reputation of the company, than highly accommodating tactics like avoidance and apologies (Grappi & Romani, 2015:25). Guests online preferred a personalised response as opposed to a generic response from hotel management.

Part of the online response management is the authentication process. False OLRs are misleading digital information that do not accurately represent the publisher's experiences (Elgarhy et al., 2021:132). Consumers place a great deal of trust in OLRs, therefore fake reviews have serious repercussions in the marketplace (Otero, 2021:181). Relating back to the study, a hotel's quality is assessed using a variety of techniques, including stars or ratings based on factors such as cleanliness, view, and staff friendliness. Sandifer et al. (2017:2) maintain that OLRs create a platform for hotel quality to be assessed and fake OLRs may negatively impact the accuracy of it. The participants relied on the third-party sites to verify the OLR before it was made public online. Online booking sites, e.g. TripAdvisor and Booking.com, had their own verification process. Hotels also used their own internal systems such as PMS to verify if guests who posted reviews actually stayed at the hotel. However, some reviews from guests who did not make use of the accommodation services, found it challenging to verify their experiences with hotels. For example, if a guest posted a review about an experience at the hotel's restaurant, that would not be captured in the PMS systems.

Most hotels did not have an official guidelines document but rather used the templates provided by the OLR management systems. Those participants who did not use OLR management systems had informal guidelines which were drawn up by the heads of each department. The online response template was seen as a guide rather than a rigid template for responding to OLRs. Depending on the review received, the template would be personalised for each response. In some cases, the template included suitable wording and empathy which helped interpret the message correctly across to the guests.

Overall, the participants were satisfied with the OLR systems employed in their hotels. However, some OLR management systems presented some limitations for hotels, such as filtering nodes that were too broad. This meant that specifying which department was being referred to in the OLR was difficult, although other systems offered this feature. Another concern was that the filtering systems only collected data from OTAs and not social media. This meant a major challenge for establishments that reported to a head office relied on centralised monitoring and reporting; thus, as a result, some reviews could not be effectively communicated to relevant departments.

## **b) Implications**

The results indicate that OLR management systems are advantageous to the hotel industry. While smaller hotels, such as boutique hotels, do not have the ability to cover the costs of OLR systems which are considered costly, they nevertheless remain active online. The OLR management systems showcase an array of features which assist in the hotels online response management plans. However, there are a few areas for improvement, such as allocating specific nodes and broader extraction from online sites. It is also evident that while these systems are valued, staff play an important role in the response management guidelines and procedures. Making use of the tools available, e.g. the online response template as an introductory guideline to responding to both positive and negative reviews, will allow uniformity in online responses.

## **c) Recommendations**

Managing eWOM is a crucial marketing tactic in the hospitality and tourism industries for achieving two goals: (1) information generation, and (2) income generation (Tam et al., 2022:124). The findings showed that OLRs can assist marketing departments to improve customer relationships (CRM) online. The impacts of positive and negative reviews have been outlined. Through implementing the framework in the strategic marketing plan, hotels are able to actively manage both positive and negative OLRs.

The existing model (Figure 5.1) focuses on negative reviews as a response priority only. The response process continues with evaluation and response actions. This will determine the outcome of the response. During the evaluation process, the participant will use various approaches to investigate the matter/issue further. As mentioned in the previous section, it is recommended that the response framework should be adopted to include positive reviews as well. While the positive review might only require an acknowledgement, it should be noted as a response priority alongside negative reviews. No response to either a positive or negative review will impact the perception of the brand reputation of the hotel.

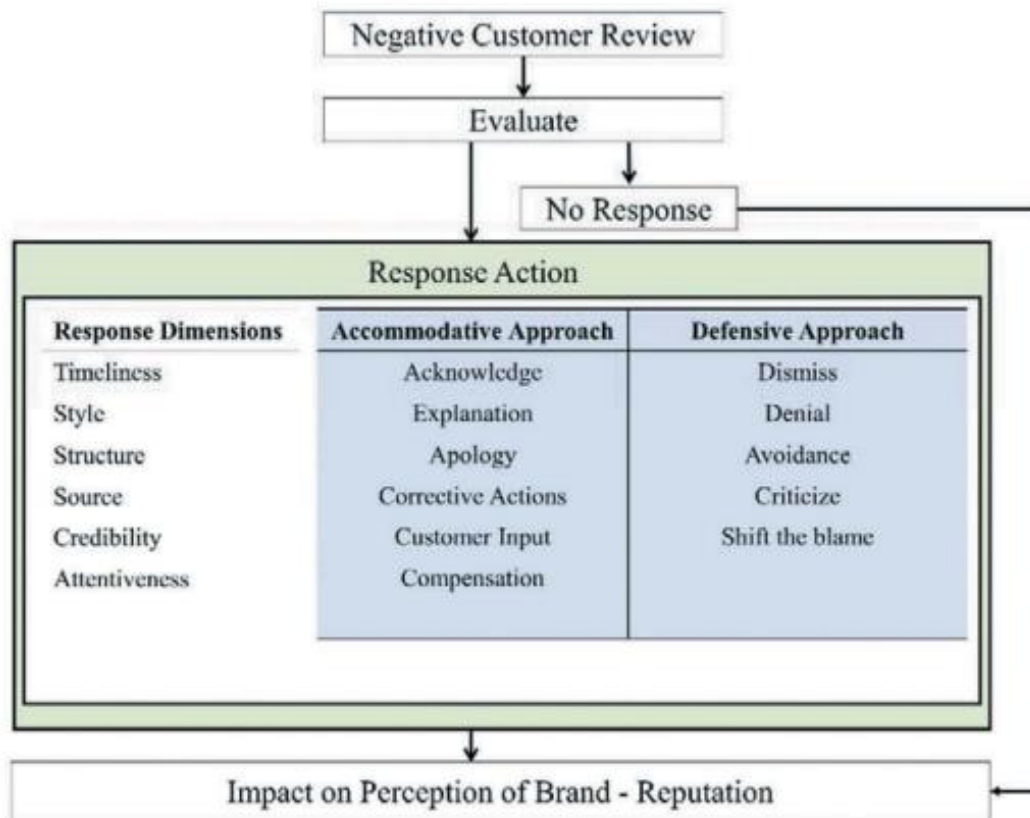


Figure 5.1: Integrated framework for analysing response strategies

Source: Mate et al. (2019:633)

Figure 5.2 below is based on the existing model by Mate et al. (2019:633) which is an integrated framework for analysing response strategies. In summary, the framework only focuses on response strategies to negative reviews (in blue). However, based on the current findings in this study, it was evident that both positive and negative OLRs were deemed as critical response priorities by the study's participants. The study results, in line with the framework, indicated that negative responses require urgent attention alongside positive reviews. Negative reviews might discourage guests to book online in future, which will impact the hotel's overall performance and online brand reputation. An efficient response strategy may both foster connections with contented customers and offer believable justifications for service failure (Angelo et al., 2016).

The researcher included recommendations in the framework for response strategies; and, based on the study's findings, suggested the inclusion of positive review response actions (in yellow) as depicted in Figure 5.2. One method of service recovery used by hotels is the response to negative OLRs (Lui & Ji, 2019:71). The participants actioned a positive review with an acknowledgement, whereas a negative review required further investigation into the issues. Regardless of the type of OLRs, each OLR required a timely response. According to Noort and Willemsen (2012:134), a prompt response to online complaints not only helps the

complainant and prevents needless follow-up assaults from other customers, but it can also boost customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive eWOM. Additionally, the participants also mentioned that if dealt with correctly, a negative OLR could result in a positive outcome for the customer.

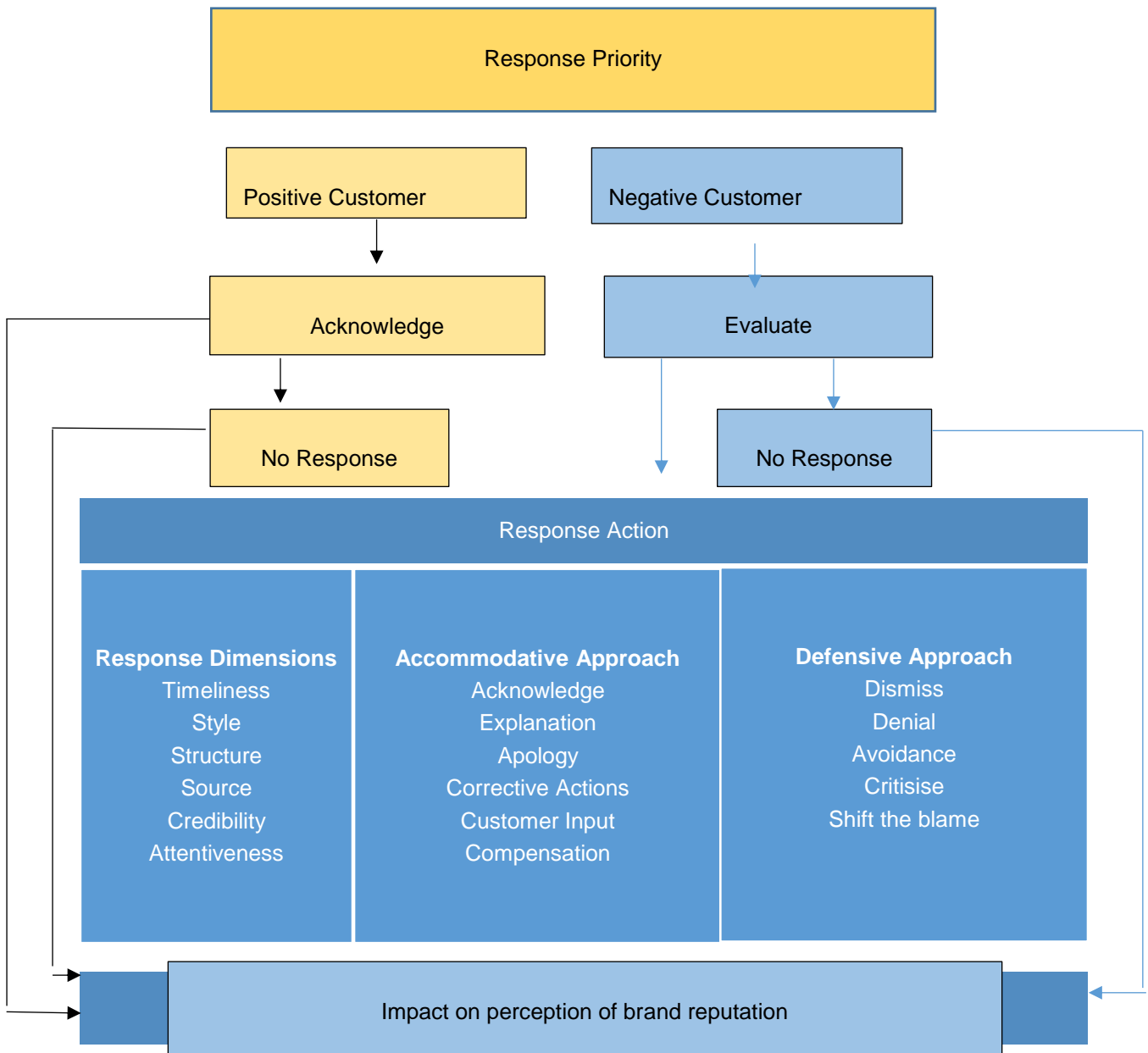


Figure 5.2 Recommendations for an adopted integrated framework for analysing response strategies  
Source: Mate et al. (2019:633) and researcher's own contributions

#### 5.4 Limitations of the study

The limitations of any particular study refer to potential pitfalls that are usually beyond the control of the researcher and are directly related to the chosen research design, statistical

model constraints, financing constraints, or other variables (Theofanadis & Fountouki, 2018:156).

With regards to the study limitations, the focus of the study was delineated to 3- to 5-star hotels, specifically those located within the Cape Town CBD. Data collection was planned for a period (start to end date). Then the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns were implemented, which initially indicated that data collection seized due to closure of the industry. The researcher experienced a decrease in responses when data collection recommenced, as the participants either withdrew their participation due to a change of management or indefinite closure of their hotels. As a result, the response rate was impacted. While the sample size was deemed sufficient, it is possible that the findings of the study might not represent the population completely. The participants included were not initially part of the study but were contacted to participate to improve data collection.

### **5.5 Future research**

The study was undertaken to explore how 3- to 5-star hotels in the Cape Town CBD manage OLRs. Chapter 2 reviewed existing literature on the topic and supported the importance of OLRs, as well as identified the current gap which necessitated this research to assess how hotels respond to OLRs pertaining to their establishments. Future research initiatives could focus on hotels developing and updating the response management plans used within hotels. The study area should be extended to further parts of Cape Town, into the Western Cape, and possibly other provinces so as to assess the use of online response management in the areas, which could have a positive impact on online visibility and the marketing of establishments. Since there were participants who did not make use of OLR management systems, this could be an opportunity to conduct a comparative study between those that do and those that don't use OLR management systems in hotels.

### **5.6 Concluding remarks**

This chapter, summarising the study, has provided conclusions and recommendations that could be implemented by accommodation establishments within the industry. The study also identified which OLR systems play a pivotal role in managing the hotels' online reputation. The findings can be used to develop a working framework not only for hotels but for all accommodation establishments in South Africa. Tourists rely on OLRs to make their travel decisions as it is challenging to arrive at the booked hotel without knowing anything about the location, brand, service, or other information (Lui & Ji, 2019:71). The study was able to address how hotel establishments employ OLR management systems to assist in maintaining their online reputation, through active online engagement, differentiating

between positive and negative reviews and developing response plans to assist in situations out of their control. Simply put, the advancement of technology can be beneficial to the accommodation industry and how these hotels use OLR systems to engage with customers online.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



P.O. Box 1906 • Bellville 7535 South Africa • Tel: +27 21 4603291 • Email: fbmsethics@cput.ac.za  
Symphony Road Bellville 7535


Office of the Chairperson Research Ethics Committee	FACULTY: BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES
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The Faculty's Research Ethics Committee (FREC) on **20 October 2020**, ethics **Approval** was granted to **Zea Tomlinson (211048828)** for a research activity **M Tech: Tourism & Hospitality Management** at Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Title of dissertation/thesis/project:	<b>Online response management: Exploring how hotels in Cape Town's Central Business District (CBD) manage online reviews</b>  Lead Supervisor (s): Mrs P Mokoena/ Ms E Venske
---------------------------------------	---

Comments:

Decision: APPROVED

	30 October 2020
Signed: Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee	Date

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER



**Faculty of Business and Management Sciences**

### Ethics Informed Consent Form

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

#### Category of Participants (tick as appropriate):

<i>Staff/Workers</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Teachers</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Parents</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Lecturers</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Students</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Other (specify)</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<u><i>Hotel representatives/marketing managers/general managers</i></u>							

You are kindly invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Zea Tomlinson from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The findings of this study will contribute towards (tick as appropriate):

<i>An undergraduate project</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>A conference paper</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>An Honours project</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>A published journal article</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>A Masters/doctoral thesis</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<i>A published report</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>

#### **Selection criteria**

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are:

- (a) An employee at a hotel within Cape Town
- (b) Liaise with customers via the marketing department at the hotel
- (c) Actively involved in managing and responding to hotel online reviews

The information below gives details about the study to help you decide whether you would want to participate.

**Title of the research:**

Online response management: exploring how hotels in Cape Town's Central Business District (CBD) managing online reviews

**A brief explanation of what the research involves:**

**The research involves interviewing selected hotel employees within the marketing department about how online reviews are managed. The research focuses on the importance of the hotel industry and its marketing efforts via online review management. The study hopes to highlight the various online management systems and develop a framework which hotels can implement within their respective marketing departments.**

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**Procedures**

If you volunteer to participate in this study the following will be done:

1. Describe the main research procedures to you in advance, so that you are informed about what to expect;
2. Treat all interviewees with respect by arriving on time for all the interview schedules and well prepared;
3. Conduct an introduction with the interviewee in order to break ice;
4. All the interviewees will be asked for permission to record the interviews and also take some note where applicable (online platform – Platform to be confirmed closer to interview date)\*\*;
5. In a case where there is no clarity, the interviewees will be allowed to ask for confirmation or clarity of words/sentences/phrases to ensure accuracy of the data collected;
6. Participants will be told that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs;
7. Participants will be given the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer or feel uncomfortable with;

8. Participants will be told that questions do not pose any realistic risk of distress or discomfort, either physically or psychologically, to them;
9. At the end of each interview all the interviewees will be thanked for their time and information provided for this study;
10. Participants will be debriefed at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study).

**\*\*Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, in adherence to government regulations, lockdown regulations prohibits gatherings, non-essential travel and encourages “social distancing”. Alternative arrangements have been considered to conduct the interview, to ensure the safety of the participant as well as the researcher.**

You are invited to contact the researchers should you have any questions about the research before or during the study. You will be free to withdraw your participation at any time without having to give a reason.

Kindly complete the table below before participating in the research.

<b>Tick the appropriate column</b>		
<b>Statement</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
1. I understand the purpose of the research.		
2. I understand what the research requires of me.		
3. I volunteer to take part in the research.		
4. I know that I can withdraw at any time.		
5. I understand that there will not be any form of discrimination against me as a result of my participation or non-participation.		
6. Comment:		

Please sign the consent form. You will be given a copy of this form on request.

Signature of participant	Date

## Researchers

	Name:	Surname:	Contact details:
1.	Zea	Tomlinson	0783206691
2.	Esti	Venske	0834829276
3.	Pavla	Mokoena	0828578486

Contact person: Zea Tomlinson

Contact number: 0783206691

Email: tomlinsonz@cput.ac.za

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Questionnaire # \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 2022

Hotel: \_\_\_\_\_

### Online response management: Exploring how hotels in Cape Town's Central Business District (CBD) manage online reviews

I am conducting interviews in order to explore the importance of online reviews in hotel establishment within Cape Town as a destination. The aim of this research is to collect data to evaluate the response management of online reviews by 3 to 5-star hotel establishments in Cape Town CBD. This study and the results thereof are for academic purposes only. **Your answers are very important to us.** All participation is on a voluntary basis with consent and should take about 20-30 minutes of your time. Please note that all answers will be kept confidential and presented anonymously and scientifically. **Thank you for your participation!**

#### SCREENING QUESTION

Do you actively play a role in managing online reviews pertaining to your hotel establishment (i.e check the online reviews on internal/external websites, respond and monitor online reviews, deal directly with customer online reviews)?

Yes	No
1	2

If you have said **YES** please state your job title/role

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If you have said **NO** please can you refer us to a member within your company that does

**SECTION A: MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING**

1. Which sites/online platforms do you check for online reviews about your hotel establishment? Please list them

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2. How many people within your establishment share the responsibility of checking/monitoring the sites? Please elaborate

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3. How often do you check these sites listed in Question 1?

Never	Rarely	Frequently	Very Often	Always
1	2	3	4	5

4. Do you receive notifications (via email) from external sites when reviews are posted online about your hotel establishment?

Yes	No
1	2

If **YES** Please elaborate

---

If **NO** Please elaborate

---

---

**SECTION B: INFLUENCES OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ONLINE REVIEWS**

5. How would you describe your understanding of positive online reviews?

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6. How would you describe your understanding of negative online review?

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---

7. Please rate the importance of responding to POSITIVE online reviews

Unimportant	Of little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
1	2	3	4	5

8. Please rate the importance of responding to NEGATIVE online reviews

Unimportant	Of little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
1	2	3	4	5

9. How often do you receive POSITIVE online reviews about your hotel establishment?

Never	Rarely	Frequently	Very Often	Always
1	2	3	4	5

10. How often do you receive NEGATIVE online reviews about your hotel establishment?

Never	Rarely	Frequently	Very Often	Always
1	2	3	4	5

11. Do you think POSITIVE online reviews about your hotel establishment affect future bookings?

Never	Rarely	Frequently	Very Often	Always
1	2	3	4	5

12. Do you think NEGATIVE online reviews about your hotel establishment affects future bookings?

Never	Rarely	Frequently	Very Often	Always
1	2	3	4	5

13. Please explain how POSITIVE online reviews has an effect on your hotel establishment pre COVID-19?

-

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14. Please explain how NEGATIVE online reviews has an effect on your hotel establishment pre COVID-19?

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15. How do you differentiate between fake and authentic positive/negative online reviews?

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**SECTION C: RESPONSE MANAGEMENT**

16. When did the hotel initially start responding to online reviews?

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17. How often do you respond to POSITIVE online reviews?

Hourly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly
1	2	3	4	5

18. How often do you respond to NEGATIVE online reviews?

Hourly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly
1	2	3	4	5

19. In terms of positive and negative reviews, which one receives an immediate response (response priority)? Please state why.

---



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20. Do you have a response management system that allows you to track and record online reviews?

Yes	No
1	2

If **YES** which systems do you use

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If **NO** please state why

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21. Briefly explain the guidelines or procedures for responding to a review received online.

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22. Do you encourage guests to post online about their stay at your hotel establishment? Please elaborate

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23. Which areas in the hotels guidelines and procedures for responding to online reviews require improvement?

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**SECTION C: HOTEL PROFILING**

24. Please indicate the type of hotel establishment

Hotel	Boutique hotel	Aparthotel	Resort Hotel	Other (Please specify)
1	2	3	4	5

Specify \_\_\_\_\_

25. Please indicate your establishment rating as per the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa

1 Star	2 Star	3 Star	4 Star	5 star
1	2	3	4	5

26. Please briefly explain your role within the hotel establishment (i.e which position, depart and responsibilities)

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!**

**APPENDIX D: BOX FRAMEWORK**

Research objectives	Questionnaire	Codes
<p><b>RO1: To determine how 3-5 star establishments in Cape Town CBD manage online reviews pre and during COVID-19 Pandemic</b></p>	<p>Do you actively play a role in managing online reviews pertaining to your hotel establishment (i.e. check the online reviews on internal/external websites, respond and monitor online reviews, deal directly with customer online reviews)?</p>	<p>Active roles in managing online reviews</p>
	<p>How many people within your establishment share the responsibility of checking/monitoring the sites? Please elaborate</p>	<p>Active roles in managing online reviews</p>
	<p>Please explain how POSITIVE online reviews has an effect on your hotel establishment pre COVID-19?</p>	<p>Impact of positive reviews pre COVID-19</p>
	<p>Please explain how NEGATIVE online reviews has an effect on your hotel establishment pre COVID-19?</p>	<p>Impact of negative reviews pre COVID-19</p>

	Do you encourage guests to post online about their stay at your hotel establishment? Please elaborate.	Encouraging online reviews
<b>RO2: To determine which systems and process are in place to respond to online reviews in 3-5 star hotel establishments in Cape Town CBD</b>	Do you receive notifications (via email) from external sites when reviews are posted online about your hotel establishment?	Methods for social media tracking/listening
	Which sites/online platforms do you check for online reviews about your hotel establishment? Please list them	Systems to respond to online reviews
	How often do you check these sites listed above	Processes to respond to online reviews
	When did the hotel initially start responding to online reviews?	Processes to respond to online reviews
	How often do you respond to POSITIVE online reviews?	Processes to respond to online reviews
	How often do you respond to NEGATIVE online reviews?	Processes to respond to online reviews

	In terms of POSITIVE and NEGATIVE online reviews, which one receives an immediate response (response priority) and why.	Processes to respond to online reviews
	Do you have a response management system that allows you to track and record online reviews?	Measuring advancement of online review tracking systems
	If YES, which systems. If NO, why not.	Systems to respond to online reviews
	Do you think POSITIVE online reviews about your hotel establishment affects future bookings?	Impacts of reviews during COVID-19
	Briefly explain the guidelines and procedures for responding to a review received online <b><u>(FIRST DISCUSS GUIDELINES!!)</u></b>	Processes to respond to online reviews
<b>RO3: To understand how online reviews are a significant part of the development of strategic marketing plans of 3-5 star establishments in Cape Town CBD</b>	Do you think NEGATIVE online reviews about your hotel establishment affects future bookings?	Reviews impact future bookings
	How do you differentiate between fake and authentic positive/negative online reviews?	Identifying fake and authentic online reviews

<p><b>RO4: To develop a response management guideline for managing positive and negative online reviews for 3-5 star hotel establishments in Cape Town</b></p> <p><b>(note: the questions on GUIDELINES to respond to online reviews will be NB for this objective too)</b></p>	How would you describe your understanding of positive online reviews?	Perceptions of Positive online reviews
	How would you describe your understanding of negative online reviews?	Perception of negative online reviews
	Please rate the importance of responding to POSITIVE online reviews	Significance of positive online reviews
	Please rate the importance of responding to NEGATIVE online reviews	Significance of negative online reviews
	How often do you receive POSITIVE online reviews about your hotel establishment?	Frequency of positive online reviews
	How often do you receive NEGATIVE online reviews about your hotel establishment?	Frequency of negative online reviews
	Which areas in the hotel's guidelines and procedures for responding to online reviews require improvements?	Areas of improvements (systems and processes)

## APPENDIX E: SNAPSHOT OF TRIPADVISOR: HOTEL MANAGER'S RESPONSE TO ONLINE REVIEW BY GUESTS



eightsgoeast

38 24

### How come everybody here is so nice?

Review of **Kimpton Hotel Monaco Philadelphia**

Reviewed 20 October 2013

Lots of small things add up to the best imaginable hotel stay. A glass of wine for the late arrival after a very long drive. Someone in the elevator lobby to make sure the key card-operated elevator experience works smoothly. Advice on less expensive alternatives to the hotel's valet parking. Never making you feel like you're asking for too much, and dealing with complaints rapidly and thoroughly. Looking really glad to see us. And of course the goldfish.

[Show less](#)

**Date of stay:** October 2013

**Trip type:** Traveled with family

Value

Location

Sleep Quality

Rooms

Cleanliness

Service

[Ask eightsgoeast about Kimpton Hotel Monaco Philadelphia](#)

4 Thank eightsgoeast

*This review is the subjective opinion of a TripAdvisor member and not of TripAdvisor LLC.*

**Jessica L, Manager at Kimpton Hotel Monaco Philadelphia, responded to this review**

Responded 29 October 2013

Everyone is so nice because we have the best guests! And we've figured out what makes every guest happy: coffee in the morning, wine in the evening, and a friendly fish to come home to. Honestly, where are just there to help with whatever you need.

Thanks for the love!

Jessica

Jessica Lavin

Hotel Manager

Jessica.lavin@hotelmonaco.com

## APPENDIX F: SNAPSHOT OF BOOKING.COM: REVIEW POSTED BY A GUEST STAYING IN GERMANY

The screenshot displays the Booking.com Reputation Manager dashboard. At the top, a blue navigation bar contains icons for Dashboard, Setup, Booking Engine, Front Desk, Website, Channel Manager, Social Media, Reports, Reputation Manager, and Misc. Below the navigation bar, a notice states: "Please note that your responses go through a moderation process, so we will publish them once they are processed." The main heading is "Guest Reviews on Booking.com".

Two filter buttons are visible: "+ Without reply" and "+ With reply", both enclosed in a red box. A red line points from the text "Reviews Filter Buttons" to these buttons. To the right, the "Overall Review Score" is shown as a blue square containing the number "9", also enclosed in a red box.

The review is from a guest named "Vreni" from Germany. The title is "Schönes Hostel für Surfer". The review text is: "Disliked - Es gibt nicht viel zu bemängeln, es war ein schöner Aufenthalt. Was etwas ungewöhnlich war, ist dass teilweise den ganzen Tag über niemand an der Rezeption war. Wenn man also ein dringendes Anliegen hat, sollte man etwas Geduld mitbringen." The review is marked as "Liked" with a green checkmark. The text continues: "Das Hostel liegt super nah zum Strand und bietet eigene Surfstunde an. Wir mussten wegen Corona eher nach Deutschland zurück und das Hostel hat uns ohne wenn und aber den kompletten restlichen Aufenthalt zurück erstattet. Wirklich sehr nett und verständnisvoll!"

Below the review, there is a response section titled "Reply - El Gato Rojas Surf Hostel". It features a text input field with the placeholder "Please reply in English" and a blue "Send" button. A tip below the input field reads: "Our top response tips: Keep calm and stay polite. Reply with unique response for each guest. Show that you care. Made any improvements? Let them know."

**APPENDIX G: SNAPSHOT OF TRIVAGO.COM: STAR RATINGS ONLINE REVIEWS OF A HOTEL LISTED ON THE SITE**



**Holiday Inn Washington DC-Central-White House** ★★★★★  
 Washington D.C., 0.7 miles to City center  
 😊 79 / 100 (3250 reviews)

\$172  
[Hotel website](#)

Expedia  
 \$172

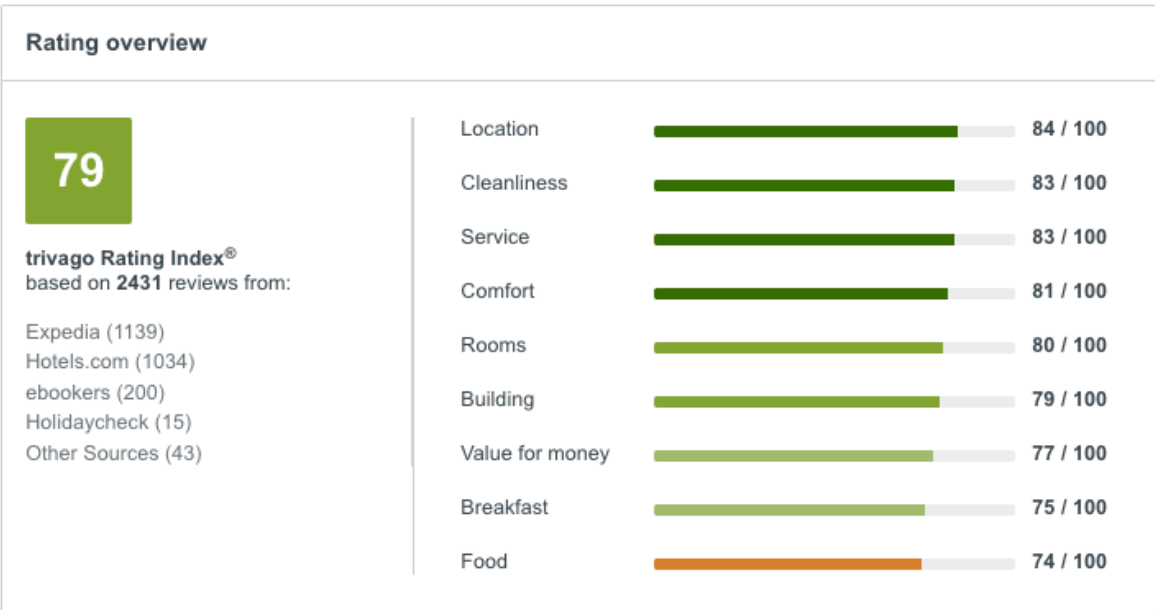
priceline.com  
 \$172

More deals: 21

Booking.com  
**\$172**

[View Deal](#) >

[Share](#) | [Hotel Details](#) ✕



## APPENDIX H: SNAPSHOT OF EXPEDIA: EXAMPLE OF ONLINE REVIEWS OF A HOTEL LISTED ON THE SITE

✕ Guest reviews

### 4.4/5 Excellent

337 verified reviews

Verified reviews ⓘ



#### Traveler type

- Couples
- Solo travelers
- Business travelers
- Families
- Families with small children

### 5/5 Excellent

Morgan

Aug 2, 2022

😊 Liked: Cleanliness, staff & service, property conditions & facilities, room comfort

Yotel in Clerkenwell was a great location and made my work trip easy. There are several options for working in the hotel. The rooms are efficient and beds are comfy! I will definitely be back!

Stayed 18 nights in Jul 2022

👍 0

#### Response from Mission Control Crew on Aug 3, 2022

Dear Morgan, Thank you very much for taking the time to share your feedback. We are pleased to read that you have enjoyed your stay with us and look forward to seeing you again soon. Kind regards,

### 5/5 Excellent

tigist

Traveled with family and small children

Jul 31, 2022

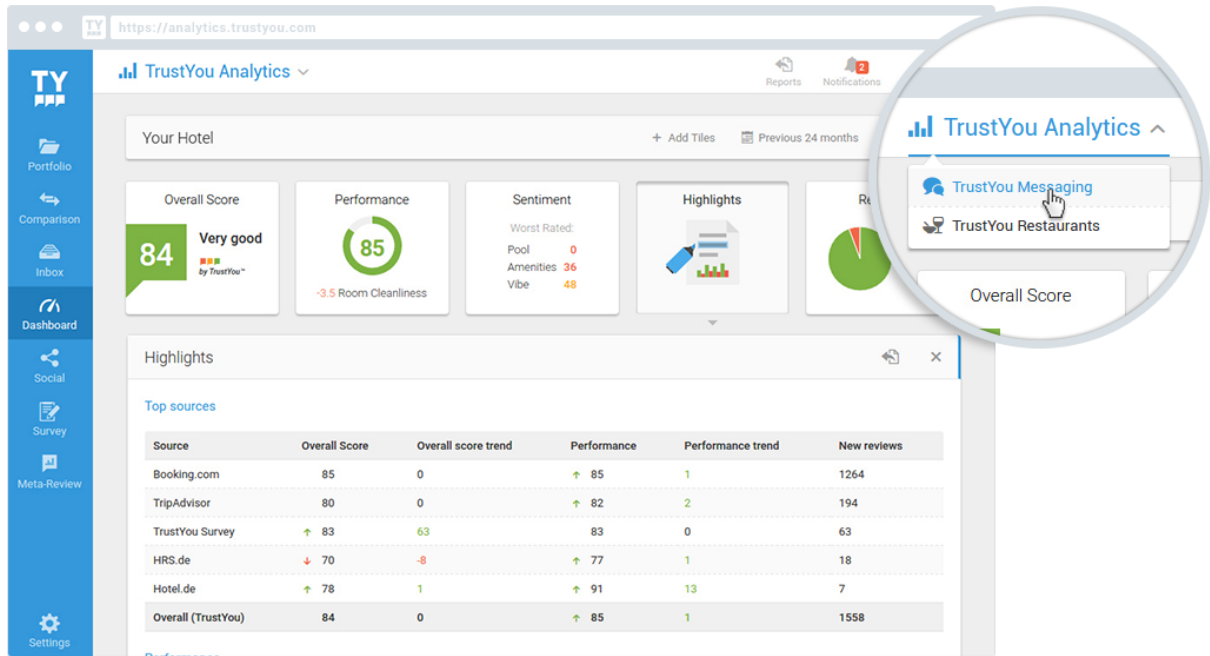
😊 Liked: Cleanliness, staff & service, amenities, property conditions & facilities

Great location and safe to walk around. 5 minutes walk from train station and bus to all attractions about 30 minutes walk to Oxford circle. Traveled with 2 kids and friendly staff.

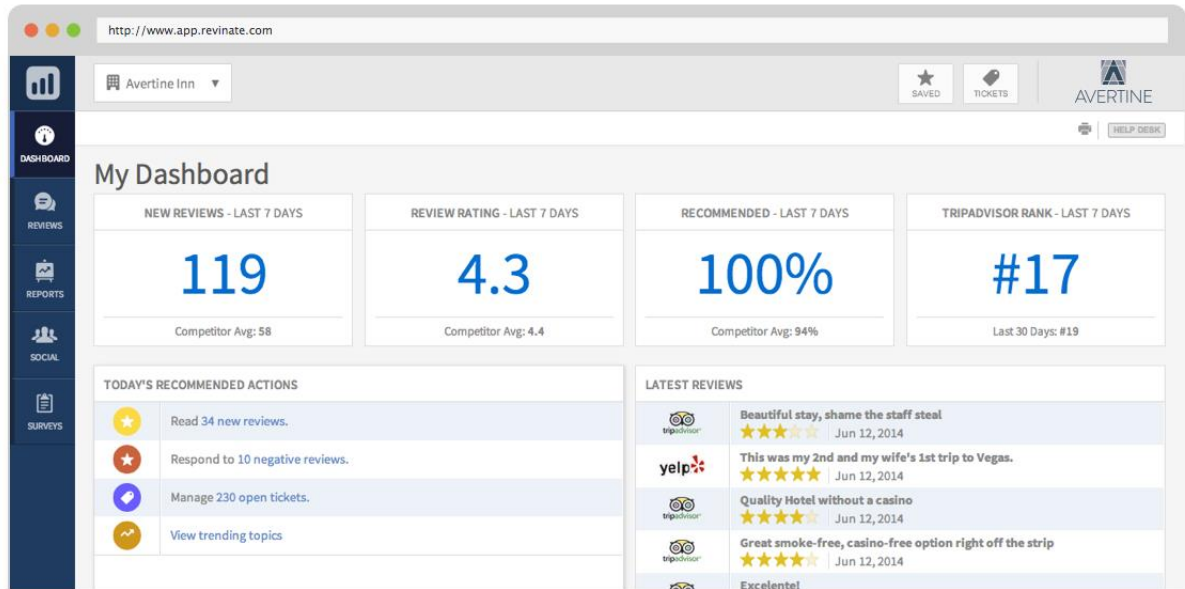
Stayed 4 nights in Jul 2022

👍 0

# APPENDIX I: SNAPSHOT OF TRUSTYOU ANALYTICS AND DASHBOARD FOR HOTEL ESTABLISHMENTS



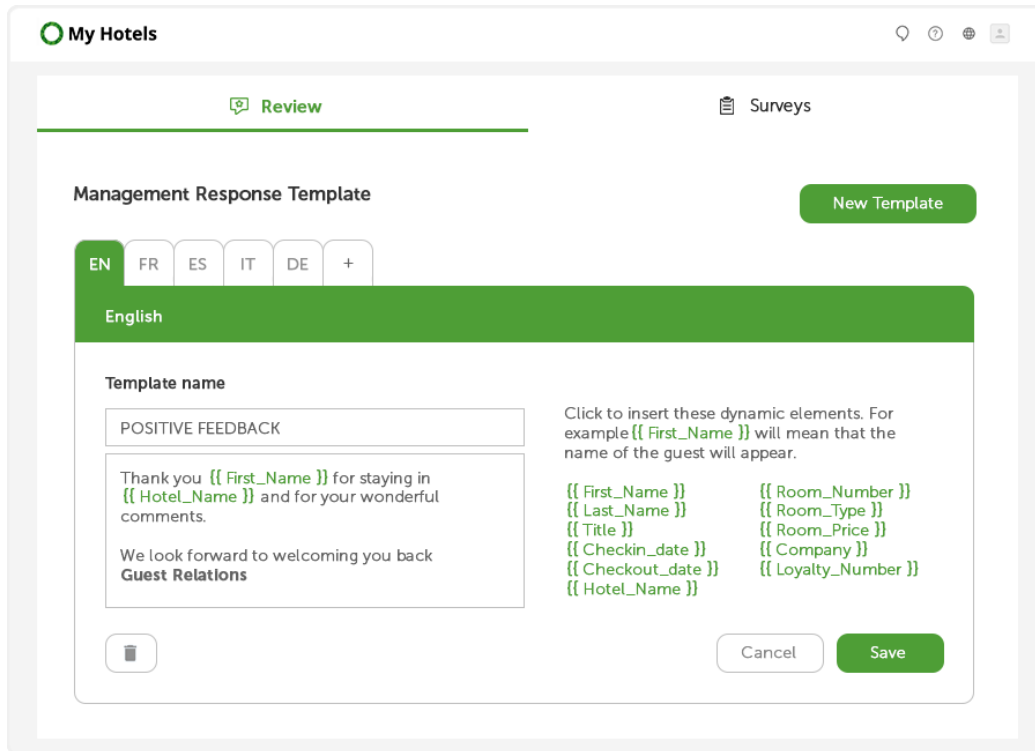
**APPENDIX J: SNAPSHOT OF THE REVINATE DASHBOARD OF A HOTEL ESTABLISHMENT**



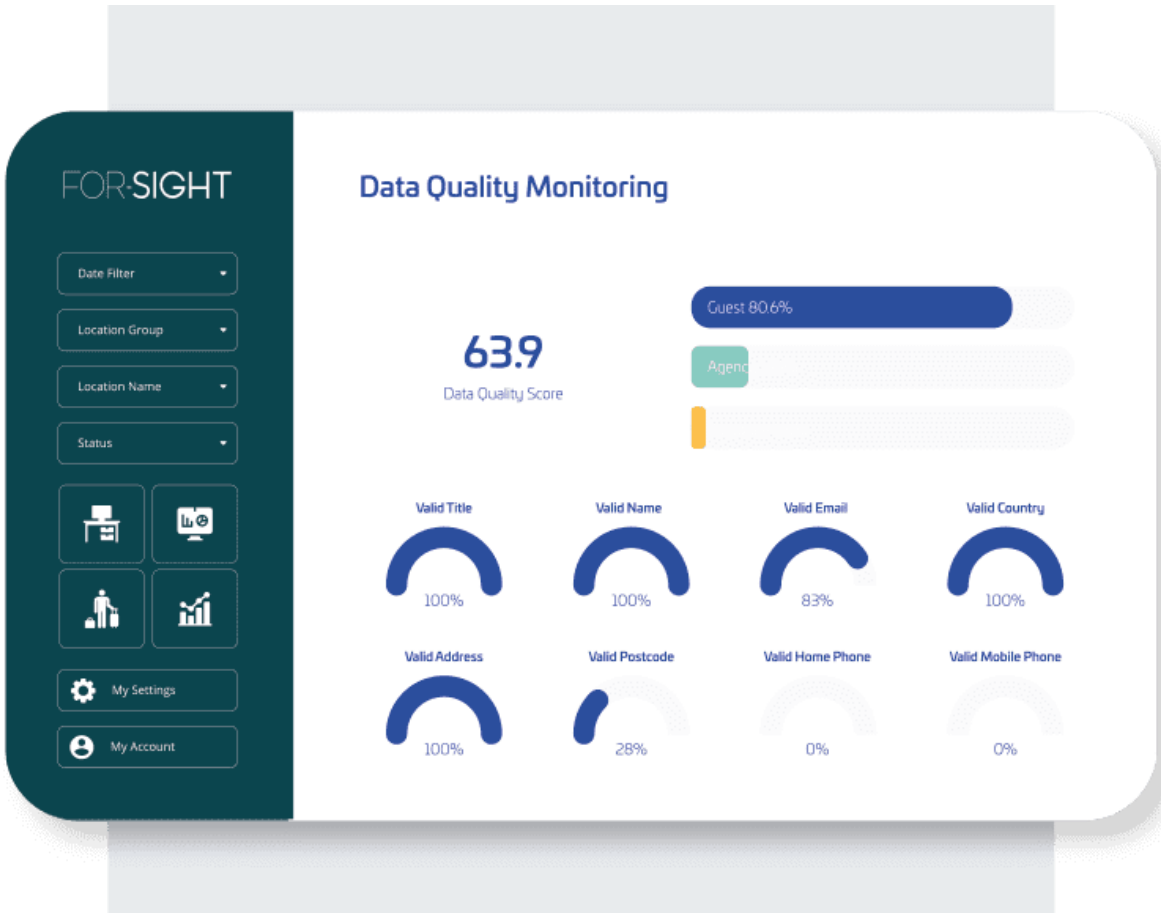
**APPENDIX K: SNAPSHOT OF REVIEWPRO ANALYTIC DASHBOARD FOR HOTEL ESTABLISHMENT**




# APPENDIX L: SNAPSHOT OF THE REVIEWPRO MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TEMPLATE



**APPENDIX M: SNAPSHOT OF FOR-SIGHT DASHBOARD: QUALITY CONTROL MONITORING OF A HOTEL ESTABLISHMENT**



## APPENDIX N: EDITOR'S LETTER



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22 October 2022

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

**RE: LANGUAGE EDITING**

This letter serves to confirm that I have edited the thesis titled:

**ONLINE RESPONSE MANAGEMENT: EXPLORING HOW HOTELS IN CAPE TOWN'S CENTRAL  
BUSINESS DISTRICT (CBD) MANAGE ONLINE REVIEWS**

By  
**ZEA TOMLINSON**

Please feel free to contact me if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely,  
Dr Lee-Anne Roux