Customer Misuse of Social Media Power in the Hospitality Sector – Threats and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the internet and social media platforms has led to new challenges for businesses keen to protect their reputation. Based on growing consumer empowerment due to the possibilities that the internet and social media incorporate, the customer is now able to actively influence and engage with any business and its products or services. This customer impact is of high relevance, especially when it comes to online reviews and ratings on platforms, such as TripAdvisor.com. Since reviews and ratings have a direct impact onto customers' buying decisions, the challenge for businesses is to deal with the growing threat of the influence of negative reviews on a company's reputation. In the hospitality sector, where reading and writing reviews for consumers is common, this challenge is even more acute. In recent times, diverse businesses within the sector experienced clients misusing their growing social media power. The misuse takes the form of extortion at the cost of businesses with customers threatening to write a negative review, if they are not given a freebie or a favor of another kind. This manner of customers' extorting businesses to their own advantage is labelled social media blackmailing.

This article is concerned with this phenomenon examining the background of blackmailing and investigating strategies on how deal with it. The research was conducted by critically assessing existing scientific and non-scientific literature, enabling a comprehensive approach on the topic of blackmailing. By means of this, a strategic guidance framework was built helping to protect businesses from the threat of blackmailing and helping them with how to handle this occurrence. The framework is supported by findings from two case studies and consequently gives not only theoretical implications but also practical advice for businesses specifically within the hospitality sector.

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Keywords

Reputation Management, Hospitality Sector, Blackmailing, Blackmailing Strategies, Consumer Empowerment, Misuse of Social Media Power, Bogus Reviews, Social Media Review Platforms,

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preface: Introduction to Reputation Management

In the 21st century, organizations realize the great importance of intangible assets to ensure survival in the competing, rapidly changing markets of today (Aras & Crowther, 2010).

A company's reputation, as it is an intangible asset, is frequently seen as the major component or aspect for firms to differentiate themselves against competitors. Corporate reputation is therefore one of the most important ingredients for achieving competitive advantage (Aras & Crowther, 2010; Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Following this, it is pivotal for a firm to build and sustain the best possible reputation, since having a good reputation facilitates and enhances beneficial overall company goals (Aras & Crowther, 2010; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Riel & Fombrun, 2007). These goals are related to for instance the quality of a certain product or service or customer loyalty (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001).

But what happens in times where customers increasingly gain power and have an increasing influence on a firms' reputation by means of using social media (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden 2008)? This change in power relationships is enlightened in this paper, focusing on potential threats for the hospitality sector when customers misuse their (social media) power in order to extort companies to their own benefits. In the worst case the misuse of power by customers leads to a substantial harm of the company's reputation which is a crucial asset of the business to safeguard (Bassig, 2014).

The following subsection provides more information about the given circumstances and the context of the described situation.

1.2 Present Circumstances and Context

By means of the rise of the internet and the emergence of Web 2.0 or commonly referred to as social media, consumers increasingly gain power in influencing businesses and businesses' reputation.

Social media can be seen as the medium through which consumers share their experiences related to businesses (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2014). In addition to that, research has shown that about 67% of consumers being engaged into social media make use of online rankings (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2014), be it only reading or even posting a ranking by themselves. Hence, the internet and especially social media platforms allow for much greater control and power for consumers, which has not only a direct impact on the product or service, but also on the reputation of businesses (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2014; Constantinides, Romero, & Gómez, 2008). Consequently, the consumer is not merely a passive respondent to information provided by businesses, but actively in creates and shares content.

This gain in control through individually spreading information, by means of for instance reviews is known as the principle of electronic word of mouth (eWOM). eWOM can be defined as "as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Accordingly, the rise of the power of the customer and having the opportunity to be actively engaged in social media, meaning spreading eWOM, can be seen as a digital revolution to society (Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007). However, consumer empowerment does not only provide opportunities, but it also creates threats, especially to the hospitality sector.

Given this information, the Dutch Newspaper "De Telegraaf" (29/11/2014), puts emphasis on the downside for the hospitality sector when it comes to consumers gaining more and more power. In the article "Afgeperst op Internet: Klanten misbruiken beoordeningssites als chantagemiddel voor kortingen", CEOs within the Dutch hotel and restaurant sector describe that consumers frequently blackmail businesses for their own advantage. By posting bad reviews and ratings on online platforms such as "Zoover.nl" or "TripAdvisor.com", consumers extort the companies to act to the consumers' convenience, by for instance giving discounts. Otherwise the consumer will harm the reputation of the company with the help of bad reviews or ratings (De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014). As a consequence, the sector feels more and more embattled, facing a potentially frequent misuse of the consumers' social media power (De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014).

Companies already started with developing different strategies in order to react to the problem of consumers misusing their (social media) power, as they are described for instance in the article "Reputation Warfare" (Gaines-Ross, 2010), but these strategies appear not to be sufficient because the problem is still not solved. The lack of sufficient strategies on how to react to blackmailing becomes evident when taking a look at the diverse literature that is existent on the topic of dealing with customer complaints. The "Sales Force Marketing Cloud" (2014), for example provides an overview of five different types of complainers, with each incorporating a tactic on how to best deal with the specific grievance that this type of consumer may have (Appendix A). Hence, most of the given literature is concerned with strategies on how to react to (online) customer complaints, but there is a gap on how to react in terms of customer blackmailing. In addition to that, there is a lack of information on exact numbers of blackmailing. Martin Couchman, who is the deputy chief executive in the British Hospitality Association states that "While it's very difficult to put an exact figure on how widespread the problem is, it is clear that a small minority of online reviews are directly blackmailing – or sometimes subtly blackmailing – blackmailing for their own gain" (Payne, 2014, para. 6).

For that reason, the aim of this research is to investigate existing strategies in case of blackmailing within the hospitality sector in order to provide a comprehensive approach on how to react to the problem of blackmailing and hence consumers' misusage of power.

Given this context, the research question being examined in this research is

"What strategies can hotels and restaurants follow when facing the threat of customers abusing their social media power in terms of blackmailing?"

The stated research question will be answered with the help of related subquestions. These are:

- "What are customers' motives to blackmail businesses?"

- "What sort of business in the hospitality sector is especially vulnerable to blackmailing?"

- "What are the existing strategies followed by businesses in dealing with this problem?"

In order to enable a fluent process, the paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, a chapter devoted to the research methods provides a precise description on how the research was conducted, which sources are incorporated and how the results were gathered. Secondly, the major key concepts are defined to

provide a comprehensive understanding throughout the paper. Each subquestion as stated above is answered within an individual chapter. These chapters are then synthesized in that way that a strategic guidance framework can be presented. This framework, to be found in chapter 5.1, will provide a comprehensive strategic approach, useful to businesses. To support the findings from the literature a chapter dealing with two case studies, one case study taken from an interview with the Radisson Blu Hotel**** and the second one from an interview with the The Iberostar Playa de Muro**** hotel.

Chapter 7 summarizes the findings and concludes about the possibilities that companies have facing the threat of blackmailing. In chapter 8, the implications for future research are stated. In addition to that the chapter incorporates theoretical as well as managerial implications concerned with this topic.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the stated topic, the main information which facilitates a comprehensive answer to the research question is derived by critically reviewing existing literature. This does not only include scientific literature, but also newspapers, blogs and other (online) media, which enriches the diversity of sources in use. Another reason for choosing also non-scientific sources is based on the actuality of the problem. Since the issue of blackmailing and misuse of social media power by consumers is still rising, the incorporation of the most actual sources helps to further specify the solution to the research question. In addition and subsequent to the critical literature review, case studies are derived by means of a survey. The case studies, in an interview format, are designed in a qualitative manner. An interview questionnaire (Appendix B) is presented to two hotels, which are different in scale. The first case to support the findings from the literature review is conducted with the help of the Radisson Blu Hotel**** in Lucerne, Switserland, which is a smaller scale establishment. The second case is given by an interview with the The Iberostar Playa de Muro**** hotel, located on the island Mallorca in Spain, being twice the size of the Swiss hotel. The questionnaire includes seven questions, with mainly open-ended questions. Open-ended questions help in acquiring a more overarching understanding related to pivotal strategies and theories taken from the literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Therefore, open-ended questions within the interviews provide the linkage between the theoretical parts related to the subquestions, whereas the interviews present real life examples to increase the given body of knowledge. In addition to that, case studies play a crucial role for provoking and examining theory (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003). Ergo, a comprehensive approach is provided throughout this paper, allowing for the development of the strategic guidance framework (see chapter 5.1). This framework will be examined by the described cases. That in turn stimulates the solution, as well as theoretical and practical implications and culminates in suggestions for future research. The presented methodology as a result manifests a thorough procedure in assessing the problem.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW
3.1 Definitions of Key Concepts

In order to provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the key concepts, the following definitions and explanations are inevitable. By means of defining major key concepts, the general framework is supported even further and helps to ease the understanding of the entangled problem of consumers' misusing their social media power to their own advantages.

3.1.1 Social Media and Web 2.0

The term social media refers to internet-based tools, creating the opportunity for consumers or users to actively engage in creating content and sharing information through various platforms (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Parise & Guinan, 2008). These platforms or tools involve for example websites such as YouTube or Facebook, but also and in focus here, review platforms such as TripAdvisor.com. Based on the opportunity for users to share content and to post reviews, many businesses face the changing nature of how content and information is generated (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This concept of social media is directly linked to what is called Web 2.0. However, since diverse definitions on this concept exist, for the sake of this article the explanation by Parise & Guinan (2008) is most applicable. They state that the "fundamental principle of Web 2.0 is that users add value by generating content (themselves) through these applications, resulting in network effects among the community of users" (p. 1). Therefore social media and Web 2.0 are directly connected concepts. Relating this back to users having the opportunity to post reviews for instance, the challenge for businesses becomes obvious.

3.1.2 Electronic Word of Mouth

The term electronic word of mouth, (eWOM) can be defined "as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). This also reflects the growing impact of customers, hence consumer empowerment and therefore also the opportunities to blackmail businesses.

3.1.3 Consumer Empowerment

The term "Consumer Empowerment" is derived from what Peter Drucker labelled "consumer sovereignty" during the 1990's (Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002). He stated that "It is the customer who determines what a business is. For it is the customer, and he alone, who through being willing to pay for a good or service, converts economic resources into wealth, things into goods. What the business thinks it produces is not of first importance — especially not to the future of the business and its success" (Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002, p. 7). Based on this statement, the enhanced customer autonomy is accented. Combining this thought with the notion of the rise of the internet, social media, Web 2.0 and eWOM; consumer empowerment, describes the consumers' increased availability to information, for instance via social media, and the consumers' growing competence to assess and distribute this information (Hanna et al., 2008; Pitt et al., 2002; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). For the sake of this paper consumer empowerment mainly relates to the increase in usage of online review platforms by consumers (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2014). On top of that is important to emphasize that the growing consumer power also bears unexpected threats to especially the hospitality sector. The threat is based on the notion of single businesses being incapable to control the information created (here reviews) (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006), which highlights the gap of knowledge concerning applicable strategies against the uncontrollability of intendedly false information provided by users. This misuse of power leads to the term "blackmailing", as explained in the next subsection.

3.1.4 Consumer Blackmailing

Given the fact that social media facilitates consumer empowerment, there is also a drawback for businesses when consumers gain more and more power. The drawback pertains to consumers sometimes misusing their social media power to

extort CEOs within the hotel- and restaurant sector by posting bad reviews on diverse platforms like Holidaycheck.com or Zoover.nl in order to compel discounts or free services for example (Craig, 2013; De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014; Neidlinger, 2013). Therefore, blackmailing can be defined in that way that "customers try to make unreasonable demands and hold hotels hostage by threatening negative reviews" (Travel Reputation Services, 2014, para. 1) or "when a guest threatens the management to post a negative review unless demands like refunds and upgrades are fulfilled" (TripAdvisor LLC, 2015, para. 11). Relating this back to the preface of this paper, blackmailing can lead to a substantial loss of reputation as well as credibility (Aras & Crowther, 2010; Devoe, 2014; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Matyszczyk, 2014; Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

3.1.5 Online Reviewing

Online reviewing is a tool underlying the notion of social media and Web 2.0. Consumers can comment by writing a review or rate (often on a Likert-like rating- scale) in how far they like the purchased product (Chatterjee, 2001). Therefore posting reviews also belongs to eWOM as explained above. Linking the concept of reviewing to the hotel and restaurant sector, it is known that about 67% of users consider online reviewing platforms before buying a travel arrangement or going to a restaurant (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2014; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). In addition to that reviews are usually posted in order to motivate or hinder other peers from buying for instance a travel arrangement at a certain hotel (Sen & Lerman, 2007). The possibility for consumers to write their opinion thus also gives room for drawbacks via blackmailing. Since consumers can freely post on most of the sites, restaurants and hotels frequently feel threatened by consumers who may intend to publish false content in order to extort their own advantages (De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014).

4. CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW DEVOTED TO THE SUBQUESTIONS

4.1 Customers' Motives to blackmail businesses

Based on the notion of consumer empowerment, customers have more access to information and online tools and thus feel more powerful (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). This shift in the relationship of power is increasingly important (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006), especially when it comes to blackmailing, where consumers deliberately post or impend to post negative reviews to online platforms to extort businesses. Linking this to the fact that about 67% of the population read online rankings on a regular basis and the networking effects facilitated through review platforms (one or more times per month) (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2014; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008) the far-reaching impact that blackmailing may have on businesses points out.

But what are the motives for consumers to pressure especially hotels and restaurants for their own advantage?

Nick Whitfield (2014) argues that it is only a minority of people that actually blackmail. But these negative reviews usually stick out on the websites based on the fact that the mass of clients is honest. These honest clients only post reviews when they either have an extremely nice experience, or on the other hand, are very dissatisfied (Whitfield, 2014). Consequently a big mass of clients does not post reviews at all, since these clients were simply satisfied with the service provided, but not to an extreme degree, which would lead them to writing an online review (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Whitfield, 2014). The consequence therefore is that a critical mass of potential

reviews is lost. The notion that honest clients' motivation to review is based on either having a very good or very bad experience is also supported by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). The authors investigated several factors on what motivates consumers to articulate themselves on online review platforms and they provide an overview (Appendix C), which separates the motives for consumers into several categories. The categories that have been found by Sundaram, Mitra & Webster in 1998 appear to be the most applicable ones. They do not only refer to motivational factors for posting positive reviews but also to negative reasons. The negative categories are labelled "Altruism (negative WOM)" and "Vengeance" (Sundaram et al., 1998, para. 25). Altruism (negative WOM) here negatively afflicted, refers to customers who want to hinder other potential customers from experiencing the same dissatisfaction as they did, whereas Vengeance refers to clients who want to take revenge against the business based on their negative experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Sundaram et al., 1998).

However, it is important to differentiate between customers who use online review platforms to articulate their dissatisfaction (Chen, Fay, & Wang, 2011; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Whitfield, 2014) and customers who deliberately post wrong information in order to threaten businesses to derive personal advantages from it (Whitfield, 2014).

As Whitfield (2014) proposes, there are two main motivations behind blackmailing.

The first motive is related to consumers who actually visit a certain business; here a restaurant or a hotel, and who then start threatening the establishment with eventually blackmailing in order to receive discounts or other advantages.

The second motive alludes to people who do not even visit a specific hotel or restaurant; rather they directly post negative reviews on diverse websites, hoping to be offered something for free in exchange for removing the review (Whitfield, 2014). This statement is consistent with what Linnes, Kowalski, Lema, Lam, & Agrusa, (2014) state; The authors explain the same two major occurrences of blackmailing namely that "Examples range from upset guests threatening the property to post a negative comment on the website if they do not receive an appropriate compensation, to guests who post daily on social media (…)" hoping for a freebie (Linnes et al. 2014, p. 62).

Clearly, the second motive bears even more potential to harm businesses as explained by Martin Couchman for the British newspaper "Telegraph". Based on the fact that the establishments may not even immediately take notice of the bad review and hence cannot take instantaneous action (Telegraph Media Group Limited, 2014).

Evident at this point is that the main motivation for clients behind blackmailing grounds in consumers' want for free upgrades of any kind, be it a free meal, a discount or similar (Telegraph Media Group Limited, 2014; Webb, 2014; Whitfield, 2014). Hence, to extort their wants and the awareness of the customers of having more power than ever leads them to jeopardizing the businesses to their own benefit.

Given the fact that only two general motives can be found, the question is on whether there may be more, eventually hidden motives by customers. This may be subject to future research and possibilities to do so are described in chapter 8 of this article.

4.2 Business Types vulnerable to Blackmailing

As social media and consumer empowerment grow bigger and bigger nowadays, the relative influence of a single user on the company's reputation increases extensively (Hanna et al., 2008; Pitt et al., 2002; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006; Vollenbrok, De Vries, Constantinides, & Kommers, 2014).

It is therefore important to examine what kind of businesses, for instance in terms of scale are especially vulnerable to blackmailing attacks by customers. Being able to describe the kind of businesses that are more frequently confronted with blackmailing and the extent to how much harm the businesses' reputation may face, helps to set the strategies, which will be described in the following subsection, in the right context.

Generally speaking, the term blackmailing relates to the topic of handling bad reviews. Whereas blackmailing is a special case and thus must be seen as a subset to businesses being confronted with bad reviews across the board (Craig, 2013; De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014; Matyszczyk, 2014; Neidlinger, 2013). This notion can be applied to what Rob Jekielek, director of the Reputation Institute in New York explains (Matyszczyk, 2014). Namely that "As a general rule, for larger companies it's a big concern if more than 10% of online reviews are negative. For smaller companies, it's closer to 5%" (Matyszczyk, 2014, para. 7). Following this is becomes clear that small scale hotels or restaurants are more vulnerable to blackmailing in terms of their overall reputational loss in comparison to larger scale establishments. This is also supported by Dan Devoe, a blogger of "legalhero.com" who explains that receiving bad reviews be it bogus or not, can be mortal to especially small businesses, because smaller scale companies do not have the resources and the publicity that bigger hotels or restaurants can count on (Devoe, 2014).

Apparently, verified numbers and reliable scientific literature concerning the number of businesses within the hotel and restaurant sector facing severe losses based on bad reviews and blackmailing are missing or scarce. This makes this question a topic for future research. But evident at this point is that all scales of firms within the sector are vulnerable to blackmailing, the major difference on the question when it becomes dangerous for a company's reputation is based on size and relative publicity (Devoe, 2014; Matyszczyk, 2014). Hence, a loss of credibility based on bad reviews is possible for all firms within the sector, with the bigger firms only having more space until they really are in danger (Matyszczyk, 2014).

Relating this information back to the preface of the paper, where it is said that a firm's reputation has a major impact on the ability of that company to defend itself against competitors, the importance of building and sustaining a good reputation is highlighted again (Aras & Crowther, 2010; Devoe, 2014; Matyszczyk, 2014; Riel & Fombrun, 2007). In terms of blackmailing and bad reviews in general this becomes even more essential for small scale businesses within the hospitality sector, since they may lack publicity in comparison to well-known hotels or restaurants (Devoe, 2014; Matyszczyk, 2014).

Taking a critical look on for example the stated percentages by Jekielek (2014), there is the need to say that it remains unclear on what exactly he bases his numbers. Verifying his statement is consequently also a subject to future research, which discloses a lack of reliable and valid data or scientific literature in general concerned with the problem in question.

4.3 Strategies against Blackmailing

Given the danger of losing reputation and consequently overall credibility through blackmailing by customers, the question on what companies within the hospitality sector can actually do to defend themselves arises. This chapter will give insights on how firms are trying to defend and prevent themselves against the threat of fraudulent reviews. It takes into account two main traits, namely and on the one hand different IT-based recording or detection mechanisms for potential blackmailing and on the other hand provides a comprehensive strategic approach on how companies can best deal with the threat described. Further, wherever possible, the mechanisms are distinguished into being either proactive and preventative (IT-based) or reactive and defensive (strategic approach) in terms of blackmailing.

It must be acknowledged that there is also a third trait when it comes to bogus reviews. Namely false reviews based on rating systems, where customers can rate the hotel or restaurant on mostly a five or seven Likert-scale basis, which makes the third trait a quantitative variant (Scott & Orlikowski, 2012). But for the sake of this paper the focus lies on the two main traits as they are mentioned above.

4.3.1 IT-based detection mechanisms against blackmailing – Proactive/Preventative approaches

Since the IT-based detection mechanisms presented here are aiming at preventing bogus reviews from being published, all of these systems can be viewed as being mainly proactive and preventative approaches to possible blackmailing. It is important to notice that these mechanisms are usually not employed by the hotels or restaurants themselves but by the platforms where potential blackmailing may occur.

The most well-known detection mechanism for spotting deceitful posts is the one that is provided by TripAdvisor.com. TripAdvisor hired Reed Meyer to create an algorithm that identifies or detects potential blackmailing (Elliot, 2006). This algorithm works via checking the IP-addresses of reviewers and alerts TripAdvisor whenever a review may be blackmailing (Linnes, Kowalski, Lema, Lam, & Agrusa, 2014). The mechanism therefore detects potential fraud before it is actually published on the website (TripAdvisor LLC, 2015). But still, there is a problem that is concerned with the system of checking for IP-addresses. Since many customers may know techniques to hide their IP-address or change it frequently, some blackmailing reviews may not be detected as such (WordPress, 2011).

How to make this checking for IP-system safer is therefore another subject for future research, in order to prevent blackmailing from being published.

Next to this, there are the mechanisms provided by "Zoover.nl", a Dutch platform, similar to TripAdvisor. Zoover.nl checks potential blackmailing by text analysis, highlighting potentially bogus reviews with a red flag, so that customers are alert to doubt this review. In case of doubt, Zoover.nl requires a booking confirmation from the customer who posted the review in question (De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014). What becomes clear here is that through asking for booking confirmations, the described motive in chapter 4.1., referring to clients threatening businesses by arbitrarily posting bad reviews about hotels or restaurants that they never visited (Whitfield, 2014) gets restricted. This is obviously based on the fact that customers who have not been to a certain establishment cannot provide booking confirmations verifying their stay and hence those arbitrary posts will not be published or directly be removed from the website. The approach provided by Zoover.nl must therefore be seen as a preventative mechanism, but in addition to that it sometimes unfortunately takes hold when the reviews have already been posted. Consequently Zoover.nl's concept must be seen as being proactive and slightly reactive.

Another approach is provided by "Kieskeurig.nl", which is a comparison portal, offering products of different companies. These products can be reviewed by customers (Kieskeurig.nl, 2015). The website is not specialized on hotels or restaurants, but still their approach must be presented here, because it is useful for all kinds of review platforms and thus matches with the context given.

The path followed by Kieskeurig.nl is interesting because they hired a team of 15 people, who are especially engaged with not only checking for IP-addresses but also for controlling for mail (De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014). Therefore the approach of Kieskeurig.nl follows a similar logic as TripAdvisor, with the difference that they do not only rely on checking for IP but also on human resources to control mail texts. One may ask why TripAdvisor does not do the same as Kieskeurig.nl; apparently there exists no literature dealing with this question. But the most meaningful reason is probably related to the different scales of the platforms. TripAdvisor is the biggest network worldwide used by travelers (Elliot, 2006; Linnes et al., 2014; O'Connor, 2010), whereas Kieskeurig.nl is restricted to the Dutch market only. Hence Kieskeurig.nl has less data that needs to be analyzed for blackmailing and can allocate resources such as human capital different than platforms like TripAdvisor, operating on a much larger scale.

"IgoUgo.com" follows a different procedure. The relatively small travelling platform counts only 670 active business travelers as members, but their concept is to set reviews into a given context (Elliot, 2006). This means that they ask for many details of their members, which leads to a loss of the shelter which is given through the anonymity in the World Wide Web (Christopherson, 2007; Elliot, 2006). Hence the temptation to blackmail is automatically reduced. The details are checked regularly by editors, which increases safety potential against blackmailing (Elliot, 2006). According to this, IgoUco.com follows a proactive/preventative approach. However, as with Kieskeurig.nl, small scale platforms can allocate their resources in a different manner and can eventually more easily control the members with their details. Consequently, this approach may not be applicable for larger scale platforms such as TripAdvisor.

A very radical, proactive/preventative approach is in use at "HotelShark.com". They categorize every review as being bogus until it is proven otherwise (Elliot, 2006). This method is surely very effective, but also the reason why HotelShark.com only has 1200 hotels in its repertoire (Elliot, 2006; HotelShark.com, 2013). The reason for that is that most of the reviews simply do not pass the margin to count as blackmail free (Elliot, 2006). Taking a critical look to this radical concept is related to the small number of reviews in total. So many customers may eventually not make use of the site, since they may miss a wider range of other customers' opinions.

Clear by now is, that trying to obtain verified feedback through IT-based mechanisms is very helpful to prevent blackmailing from being published at all, or to at least flag it as potentially doubtful, in case a review has already been published (De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014; Elliot, 2013; Linnes et al., 2014; Whitfield, 2014). The notion of verified feedback is especially highlighted by Whitfield (2014) again, since he states that many clients are actually visiting a certain restaurant or hotel of their choice and then start threatening the owners with eventually blackmailing; or and which is potentially even more harmful for the business, customers leave unsubstantiated feedback hoping to receive freebies on that basis (Whitfield, 2014). The linkage to subquestion 4.1 (see p. 4) is obvious here. Consequently one can say that the motives for blackmailing are directly related to

the given IT-based techniques and can at least to some extent help to curtail the amount of published blackmailing to online platforms.

Since the IT-based proactive and preventative mechanisms are enlightened by now, it is important to investigate the existing strategies that are concerned with what a firm can do if it has to deal with blackmailing.

4.3.2 Strategies on how to deal with Blackmailing – a comprehensive reactive/defensive approach

As Rupish Patel, a hotel owner, entrepreneur and LinkedIn.com member states, "Every hotel professional knows that online reviews such as those published on TripAdvisor can make or break a hotel. Recently, it has become evident that it's not only us in the hotel industry who know this. Guests have come to realize how important social reviews are (…) and how it can be an Achilles Heel for a lot of properties" (Patel, 2014, para. 1) thus, the urgent need concerning applicable strategies against the threat of blackmailing is highlighted again.

The need for such strategies is also emphasized by Craig Savage, who is owner of the Double Barrel Steakhouse and Grill in South Yorkshire. He explains that about 30 out of 100 meals being provided are subject to customer blackmailing (Bassig, 2014). In addition to that, Savage finds the following within his restaurant: "(…) these so-called reviewers will complain about the meal or the service, and when you ask how to put it right, you can guarantee it will be some sort of freebie (Bassig, 2014, para. 6). Savage's statement can be linked to the Gartner Study, which estimates 10-15% of all online reviews to be fake (Gartner Inc., 2012). Even though the study focuses on fake reviews encouraged by competitors with the aim to harm other companies' reputation, it still features the threat of an increase in bogus reviews and consequently also blackmailing.

This subsection is therefore devoted to providing a comprehensive strategic approach applicable for hotels and restaurants of any kind. The strategies available are thus bundled into one overall concept. This overall strategic concept must be seen as mainly reactive and defensive. This is the case because most of the non-IT-based strategies (as discussed in the former subsection) are not really preventative approaches as one can see from the comprehensive approach to be discussed. Of importance here is that the provided approach is usually employed by the companies themselves and must be seen as the company's possibilities next to the IT-based mechanisms which are controlled by the platforms.

Generally speaking, literature concerning reliable strategies is scarce, which results in the fact that the only available strategies, specialized on blackmailing till now are to be found in blogs or similar non-scientific literature. Evidence based, proven strategies are therefore subject for future research.

However, different authors by means of diverse media came to similar approaches when hotels or restaurants are confronted with potential blackmailing. This enables a comprehensive approach which is built upon mainly a combination of what Rupish Patel (2014) advises and what Daniel Edward Craig (2013) proposes. Both authors provide a plan in stages. For the sake of this paper, this approach is labelled "Troubleshooting Approach", because the different steps are linked to certain circumstances.

4.3.3 "Troubleshooting Approach"

As already introduced, this strategy is a stepwise approach. A flowchart can be found in chapter 5.1; it provides a visual overview on what to do when and therefore it also gives practical guidance and provides a framework on how to deal with blackmailing incidents in specific situations.

Whenever a restaurant or hotel is facing the threat of customers trying to blackmail, the very first step is to show benevolence and to take the incident wholehearted (Craig, 2013; Patel, 2014). Within this phase the owner or manager of the hotel or restaurant is required not to get upset. In addition to that it is important to try to ease the situation, but at the same time to make sure that blackmailing is not tolerated (Craig, 2013; Patel, 2014).

Next, it is necessary to evaluate the blackmailing motive. This is based on the fact that when the customer is present at the location, there are other options for troubleshooting than when the customer randomly blackmails in order to extort any kind of freebies (Craig, 2013; Patel, 2014; Whitfield, 2014).

Given the first motive (see chapter 4.1, p. 4), namely that the customer is actually present at the location, hence restaurant or hotel and impends to blackmail; the most applicable options are as follows: Firstly, it must be tried to find a solution to the problem of the customer, in order to obviate the potential incident of blackmailing (Patel, 2014). This must be tried irrespectively of the fact that the customer does only pretend his dissatisfaction in order to extort a freebie. This is based on the notion that if it is provable that the firm cares for the customer, the attacker may eventually not blackmail anymore a guilty conscience (Craig, 2014; Neidlinger, 2013; Patel, 2014).

When no solution can be found, the first option that follows is to send the attacker away (Patel, 2014) showing no tolerance for the incident, again. That may eventually lead to a loss of that customer and a negative review, but staying strict and being confident is crucial when dealing with blackmailing, because as Patel (2014) acknowledges, blackmailers are frequently connected and share their success if they were able to extort a business. By doing so, the hotel or restaurant can prevent to make itself more easily open to attack (Patel, 2014). As one can see here, showing no tolerance helps the restaurant or hotel to control the situation to a greater extent, which is based on the notion of growing consumer empowerment by (online) connectivity (Hanna et al., 2008; Pitt et al., 2002; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006).

The other option is to actively address the blackmailing (Craig, 2013). A perquisite here is that the negative review has already been published, since this option includes explaining (online) that everything is tried to satisfy the customer but that the customer for some reason does not accept the efforts undertaken by the hotel or restaurant (Craig, 2014). Hereby other readers of the post may see that the company has done its best and the harm to the reputation can be limited (Craig, 2014).

If the customer is not present, which means that the second motive of randomly posting bad reviews for receiving freebies applies; the option that has just been described is most appropriate (Craig, 2013). Hence, the blackmailing must openly be addressed and can be added with statements providing potential insights that the customer has not been to the location. For instance the acknowledgement can include statements like 'We are very sorry to hear about your dissatisfaction, but we cannot find your name in any of our reservations, we would welcome it if you contact us so that we can find out what went wrong', through statements like this, the conversation in set private (Aarts, 2014; Neidlinger, 2013). Doing so enables to indirectly warn other customers that the written review might be bogus and additionally if the conversation is set in private, the power of the blackmailer is lowered (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2014; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). Writing an excusing answer to bad reviews is also a matter of available resources (Aarts, 2014) and must be kept in mind when making decisions on how to proceed with the incident.

The problem of available resources will be further discussed at the end of this chapter.

Another option when random blackmailing incidents occur is to simply ignore what has been posted (Bassig, 2014). This approach is not recommended, because it may facilitate more bad reviews and can thus lead to a substantial harm of the company's reputation (Whitfield, 2014). Simply ignoring the incident may only be an option when it is the first time that the company faces blackmailing or when the company lacks resources in terms of staff who can care for the steps to be taken (Aarts, 2014; Bassig, 2014).

Notwithstanding the options that are presented by now, the next step is always to record and document all details of the specific blackmailing occurrence (Bassig, 2014; Craig, 2013, Patel, 2014). This is again based on the notion that blackmailers tend to share their experiences with establishments that have been threatened and recording can provide help to gain more insights on for example the question of what people are more frequently blackmailing or if there are any relations between the incidents (Craig, 2014; Patel, 2014).

The next stage is of high importance, regardless of the motive or if the review has already been published or not. In this stage it is crucial to report the (potential) blackmailing to diverse platforms where it may be published or has been published (Bassig, 2014; Craig, 2013; Patel, 2014). At this step the linkage between the different traits on how to deal with blackmailing is obvious. Whenever a review is reported to for instance TripAdvisor, the IT-based mechanisms are at the starting grid in order to either stop a fraudulent review from being published, to mark a published review as doubtful or to delete it (Craig, 2013; Patel, 2014). Whenever there is the direct threat of blackmailing, the company itself is engaged my means of the approach provided.

On top of that it is recommended that the companies who face blackmailing incidents check for what techniques are in use at the several platforms (Ross, 2014). Doing so helps the business to know more about the policies of the diverse platforms and consequently the firms can react faster and report the blackmailing incident in accordance with the policies given by the platforms (Craig, 2013; Ross, 2014). What becomes obvious by taking a look at the different stages is that the bottom line is not to accept blackmailing at any case.

As the stages are explained by now and the linkage is provided between the IT-based detection mechanisms and the Troubleshooting Approach, the next subsection provides some additional information on what companies can do besides following the stage plan.

4.3.4 Additional Information on how to deal with Blackmailing

As it has already been slightly discussed in the former subsection, it is important to evaluate the available resources as a company when following the provided framework. Some options require more resources, especially human resources than other options, which is the reason why it is important that the company plans its available resources ahead (Aarts, 2014). Knowing how many resources are available in times of an incident is therefore crucial in order to know which path to follow and what options are possible.

Another important issue in terms of how to deal with blackmailing is to provide training to staff and to inform employees about the procedures that need to be followed (Craig, 2013). Here the link between adequate resource planning and the related available options is noticeable. Since a company's employees need to be informed and trained

according to the most applicable way through the provided approach (Aarts, 2014; Craig, 2013). In addition to that it is recommended that after an incident has occurred, the employees are debriefed accordingly. During this debriefing it must be discussed how the blackmailing was handled and what can be done in case another attack takes place (Craig, 2013).

Based on the information foregone, the next chapter presents the visual presentation of the "Troubleshooting Approach" (Figure 1, p.8). It can be used as a framework and provides practical guidance for companies, too.

5. STRATEGIC GUIDANCE

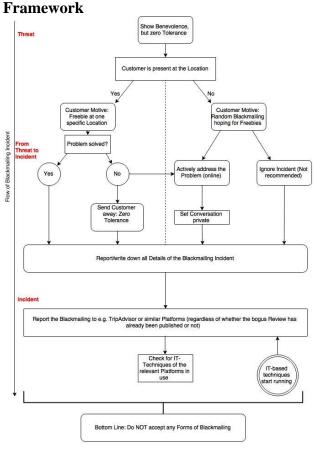## 5.1 Troubleshooting Approach – A Framework

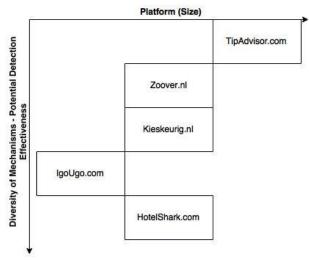*Figure 1:* Troubleshooting Approach – A strategic Framework.

The framework as shown above, provides an overview that is concerned with the in stage plan as discussed in the former section. By dint of this strategic framework, the available strategies are sewed up within a comprehensive approach, which enables a fluent process when it comes to managing blackmailing. The framework must not be seen as being strict or static; rather it should be used as a directory in order to deal with blackmailing problems effectively.

However, it must be kept in mind that the framework is almost entirely built upon non-scientific literature. Therefore it must be used critically by any company.

In addition to that, the framework must not be seen finite, its further development as well as providing scientific background to prove the model are crucial and thus subject to future research.

5.2 IT-based Techniques: The Relationship between Size, Diversity of Mechanisms and potential Effectiveness

In chapter 4.3.1, the different IT-based mechanisms to detect and prevent blackmailing attacks have been presented. In order to set the different mechanisms with their potential detection effectiveness in relation to the platform size, the following graphic has been drawn:

Graph 1: The relationship between platform size, diversity of detection mechanisms and potential effectiveness.

As to be seen in the graphic, TripAdvisor, being the biggest platform provides the smallest degree of diversity to the detection of fraudulent reviews (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Elliot, 2006; Linnes et al., 2014; O'Connor, 2010). The main reason for that, as is has already been stated, is probably that TripAdvisor, based on the large amount of data to be processed may not be able to attach large amounts of human resources. Hence, TripAdvisor is most likely more reliant on IT-based techniques than other, smaller platforms.

The platform that follows is Zoover.nl. Zoover.nl operates on a smaller scale, since they mainly serve the Dutch market (Zoover.nl, 2015), which probably enables the company to incorporate more mechanisms into their detection systems in comparison to TripAdvisor.com.

About the same size, but more engaged into diversity is the Dutch platform Kieskeurig.nl. Kieskeurig.nl, just as Zoover.nl, operates on the Dutch market only, but they provide a 15 people team to analyze mails that may contain potential blackmailing (De Telegraaf, 29.11.2014).

Comparably small in terms of size is IgoUgo.com. The website, only having 670 active members (Elliot, 2006), provides a relatively extreme approach in terms of techniques in use. They ask for a broad range of details from their members in order to restrict the potential intentions of customer blackmailing (Christopherson, 2007; Elliot, 2006).

The most excessive degree of techniques in use is followed by HotelShark.com. HotelShark.com in first instance views all reviews as being bogus, before not proven otherwise (Elliot, 2006). This is eventually the main reason why the platform operates on a rather small scale. Therefore, for HotelShark.com the techniques in use eventually restrict the potential platforms' size.

Highlighted by means of the graphic is that the online platforms' size without much doubt influences the potential for

diversity and related effectiveness of IT-techniques in use. It seems that the bigger the platform is, the smaller the amount of diversity and vice versa.

Nevertheless, this statement must be treated carefully, since scientific evidence concerned with this topic is very scarce, again. Consequently the study of the stated relationship is subject to future research.

6. CASE STUDIES

In order to provide information from the real world, case studies have been conducted. The case studies are analyzed in such way, that the strategic approaches on how the business deals with blackmailing customers are highlighted. The information revealed from that is then compared with the findings concerning the strategies from the critical literature review.

The first case study to be discussed is taken from an interview in collaboration with the relatively small sized Radisson Blu Hotel**** in Lucern, Switzerland. In terms of blackmailing it is important to mention that the hotel itself does not have experience with critical or severe incidents. This leads them to follow a slightly different approach in dealing with provocative, complaining or highly demanding customers, than what has been found within the literature. But still, their approach can to some extend be compared and aligned with the Troubleshooting Approach as described in chapter 5.1.

Since the hotel still needs to deal with complaining customers and faces the threat of receiving negative online reviews, which in turn may lead to a loss of reputation, it follows its universal 'Code of Business Ethics'. The code can be seen is a general guideline on how to treat customers and is thus also applicable for complaining visitors of the hotel.

What has been found in the literature is that whenever facing the problem of potential blackmailing, or in this case, highly demanding or provocative customers, it is important to stay calm and to treat the customer politely (compare with Troubleshooting Approach: Step: "Show Benevolence"). This is also one of the major points within the code of business ethics as it has been reported by the hotel. In addition to that, it has been found that companies must try to find a solution to the problem of the customer, irrespectively of whether the complaint is pretended or not. This step within the Troubleshooting Approach is also applied at the Radisson Blu Hotel. Treating a customer politely is of high importance for the firm. Investigating the step where it is advised to document and write down all details of incidents, the hotel reports to do so, as well. Their documentation happens by means of using software of their own. When comparing the step within the framework that is concerned with reporting the blackmailing incidents to the diverse platforms, as for example TripAdvisor, the company agrees to know about this option, but since they have not experienced severe blackmailing till now, they had no incentive to make use of this tool. Next to this, the hotel generally follows a responding rule in order to deal with written online reviews by clients. They generally try to respond, to both positive and negative reviews posted online. Therefore, the step to actively address reviews is also in use at the Radisson Blu.

Based on the notion of the code of business ethics, the hotel provides trainings for new employees to familiarize them with the guidelines in use. Additional training is also provided on how to deal with customer complaints in specific. This notion can be related to chapter 4.3.4, which is concerned with additional information on how to deal with blackmailing. Thus, the hotel's approach to train staff is also in accordance with what the literature suggests.

When summarizing the information received from the hotel in comparison to the Troubleshooting Approach, one major difference can be found. Namely that since the hotel has not have any critical blackmailing incidents yet; they do not follow a scheme as proposed within the framework. Rather they follow parts of the different building blocks, which are manifested in the company's code of business ethics.

Another important notion is that the company does not really check for the IT-systems in use at the diverse platforms, but this can also be related to the hotel not having experienced the problem of blackmailing per definition.

The second case is derived from an interview with the Iberostar Playa de Muro**** hotel, located on the island Mallorca in Spain. It is about double the size of the Radisson Blu and has, most likely based on its size and eventually related popularity already faced several blackmailing incidents. Employees reported about twenty blackmailing occurrences per week. In addition to that the hotel states that they usually only face incidents from customers being present at the location. This is the starting point to relate their strategy in dealing with blackmailing to the Troubleshooting Approach. From the interview it can be said that within the hotel mainly the first motive for customers to blackmail applies. The hotel reports not to follow a strict scheme when it comes to deal with those incidents, but the similarities of how the hotel handles blackmailing are very much like the presented framework within this paper (see figure 1, chapter 5.1).

Firstly, when the hotel is confronted with an extorting customer, the general rule is to remain calm and to try to find a solution to the given problem. This step is comparable to the "Show Benevolence, but zero Tolerance" in the Troubleshooting Approach. The hotel also states that it is important to them, not to give in to blackmailing, which is also presented in the strategic framework. Whenever the customer does not step back from the improper demands, the Iberostar Playa de Muro reports to not give in to the threat, but in the most extreme cases the blackmailer is sent to the hotel directory. Hence the hotel follows the Troubleshooting Approach to the step where the problem is openly addressed and the conversation is set into private (see figure 1, chapter 5.1). Next, if the customer still contends on his extortion, the most extreme reaction of the hotel is to dismiss the client without giving in. Thus, the hotel follows the approach, but in a relatively radical manner. As to be seen in the framework, the next step is to write down all details of any blackmailing incident. The hotel does so by assigning staff to report the blackmailing within the 'notification handbook'. This is a handwritten writing tablet, which is used to later insert the information found into the hotel's software. This insertion is done by the public relations department of the Iberostar Playa de Muro hotel. In addition to that, the path followed by the hotel also supports the next step within the Troubleshooting Approach. Namely to report bogus reviews to the diverse platforms; the hotel mainly reports any incidents to TripAdvisor.

Therefore, the hotel does follow the scheme of the Troubleshooting Approach as it is provided, which supports the findings at hand. In addition to that, the Iberostar Playa de Muro hotel educates staff in terms of online reputation management for instance by means of how to engage satisfied customers. This statement can be related to the notion of the importance of training, as to be found within chapter 4.3.4. Besides this, the hotel states to always answer negative reviews by means of a management response.

Accordingly, the Iberostar Playa de Muro hotel, even though it is not completely aware of it, does already use the

Troubleshooting Approach that has been provided within this research, which consequently supports the findings and vice versa.

7. CONCLUSION

In times of growing consumer empowerment, as it has been enlightened throughout this paper, businesses especially within the hospitality sector face the threat of losing their reputation based on bad reviews. The focus within the article lies in the special case of blackmailing, since the potential reputational harm is then based on wrong reviews posted by customers in order to extort businesses to their own advantage. The stated research question based on the overarching topic of reputation management was therefore *"What strategies can hotels and restaurants follow when facing the threat of customers abusing their social media power in terms of blackmailing?"*

At the outset it was found that there are two main motives for customers to blackmail in general. The fist intention to blackmail is grounded in the customer actually visiting the specific location, whereas the other motive stems from randomly blackmailing on diverse platforms by consumers hoping for any kind of freebie. Next to this it has been shown that bad reviews, which also include blackmailing, appear to be dangerous in terms of reputational harm for some companies more than for other. For small scale businesses it becomes dangerous at a rate of 5% of negative online reviews, whereas it is 10% for larger scale companies. It can therefore be concluded that blackmailing bears high risks for companies, where the small scale businesses generally are more vulnerable.

Since the threat of reputational harm is evident, different approaches on how to deal with blackmailing have been analyzed and assessed. Firstly it has been found that there are two main traits to cope with blackmailing. The first trait is the IT-based approach, which is mainly used by the platforms, where the incidents are posted themselves; as for instance TripAdvisor, being the market leader. Generally speaking, all platforms make use of detection mechanisms to filter out bogus reviews, but was has become evident during the comparison of several platforms is, that there is a relationship between the platforms' size, the diversity of mechanisms in use and the potential effectiveness of the techniques to prevent from fake reviews. The bigger the platform is, the lower the number of mechanisms in use and hence the lower the potential effectiveness of preventing the release of wrong reviews. This relationship is most probably based on the distribution of available resources. Smaller platforms appear to be more likely to have more human resources available to deal with blackmailing than bigger platforms.

The second trait lays the strategic guidance framework, labelled Troubleshooting Approach. Hotels and restaurants can follow this directory in stages when facing severe cases of blackmailing. The provided approach is therefore a reactive and defensive guiding tool. The business must identify the underlying motive of the blackmailing, namely if the customer is present at the location or not, and can then use the provided scheme to accordingly deal with the threat. The bottom line of this approach is definitely to not tolerate any occurrences of blackmailing. However, it is important to notice that the Troubleshooting Approach is neither static nor finite, it must raster be seen as an iterative, dynamic approach which can be further developed in the future.

Linking the two concepts together, it can be concluded that the IT-based detection mechanisms can go hand in hand with the Troubleshooting Approach, which would enhance the potential level of control by business as consumer empowerment keeps rising. When the companies on the one hand are aware of the available IT-mechanisms by platforms in more detail and on the other hand make use of the framework provided, the threat of substantial reputational harm can be restricted to a greater extend. This is based on the fact that companies feel the need to gain more control in times of consumer empowerment and the described potential misuse of social media power. For example, when a company knows that the diversity of mechanisms is relatively low at a certain platform, it could assign more human resources of their own to solve the blackmailing instance.

The findings from particularly the Troubleshooting Approach are partly supported by the first provided case study, whereas similarities are striking when taking into account the second case.

Even though the Radisson Blu Hotel did not face serious cases of blackmailing till now, they use some stages provided within the framework. Their approach to deal with rude or provoking clients is manifested in the company's code of business ethics, but still, similarities are evident. Playing this thought forward, it seems logical that when the hotel may face its first severe case of blackmailing, to use as similar approach as the one provided. In addition to that, the hotel is aware of the techniques and possibilities provided by online review platforms in terms of handling a bad review. Consequently, the linkage of the two traits is also supported by the case study at hand.

The second case study in contrast and addition to that, almost completely supports the findings for the Troubleshooting Approach. Even though the Iberostar Playa de Muro hotel expressed not to follow a certain scheme when dealing with blackmailing, the similarities are striking. It seems that the hotel almost entirely follows the path provided within the Troubleshooting Approach, with the bottom line of showing zero tolerance for such incidents. Additionally the establishment provides trainings and is aware of the possibility to report blackmailing incidents to, in this case, TripAdvisor. Consequently, the findings from the literature are to a high degree supported by the second case.

As a final assessment of the research question, the provided strategic tools and techniques must be seen as a non-static solution. Even though the research was conducted as comprehensive as possible, future development and gathering more, especially scientific evidence, is crucial.

The next chapter describes the limitations of this research and gives recommendations for future research. In addition to that it gives some managerial as well as theoretical implications.

8. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH – MANAGERIAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Mainly due to a lack of available scientific literature, diverse subjects for future research and related limitations have been found during the research process for this paper.

Firstly, in chapter 4.1 where the motives of customers to blackmail businesses are presented, there exists a clear scarcity of available scientific research. Additionally, the assumption that more motives may be existent seems legit. Therefore, future research should try to prove the stated motives and check for potential new or additional ones.

Taking a look at chapter 4.2, dealing with the question of which business types are more vulnerable to blackmailing the results stated are probably very limited. This is based on the fact that

reliable data concerning the number of businesses within the hospitality sector facing severe losses based on blackmailing are missing. In addition to that it must be admitted that the stated percentages are lacking validity as well as reliability since it is unclear on what Jekielek bases his numbers. Thus the question arises how the author came to the conclusion that it becomes problematic for bigger companies when they face more than 10% of negative reviews in comparison to smaller companies, for which the rate is 5% as Matyszcyk proposes. Therefore future research should also focus on gathering valid data in order to support the findings within this research and to enrich the existent body of knowledge within this topic.

When critically addressing chapter 4.3.1, which is mainly concerned with the IT-based techniques in use for blackmailing detection, it is mentioned that the checking for IP-addresses is eventually not a safe method when trying to detect fraudulent reviews. This is based on the notion that many users nowadays know how to hide or switch their IP addresses. Consequently, it must be studied how the problem of outwitting the checking for IP technique can be solved.

Now, when sternly referring to the most important part of this article, namely the existing strategies available for businesses within the hospitality sector; there appears a major point for criticism. This main problem is definitely related to a lack in scientific literature and research concerning the strategies. Hence, the whole strategic framework (see chapter 5.1) is almost completely built upon non-scientific literature, for instance on blogs or simple websites. In order to be able to approve the findings within this paper, especially the findings from the "Troubleshooting Approach", a scientific research, as for example by means of a field study, must be conducted.

Another interesting field for future research would be to generally define and to research how blackmailing can reliably be measured. Making blackmailing measurable could eventually lead to new techniques in terms of preventive approaches and could thus also help businesses.

Businesses generally could benefit from future research especially in terms of the new power relations between customer and businesses, since consumer empowerment keeps growing and companies fear to lose their influence. Putting this thought forward, if consumer empowerment keeps growing, and eventually also the number of customers who blackmail, businesses' reputations are in danger due to a lack of available tools to defend from bogus reviews.

9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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11. APPENDIX A

12. APPENDIX B

Research Survey on Social Media Blackmailing in the Hotel and Hospitality sector

Have you experienced any type of blackmailing from your customers?

○ Yes

○ No

How often do you experience blackmailing threats? Please estimate an average number (per month or year)

[   ]

To what extend does your business treat those incidents serious?

	1	2	3	4	5	
not at all	○	○	○	○	○	very much

Please briefly explain why.

[text box]

How do you deal with social media blackmailing threats by customers?
Do you have specific procedures? Do you train your employees? etc.

[text box]

Do you have any prevention mechanisms?
If yes, please explain briefly.

[text box]

TripAdvisor has recently introduced a feature where business owners can report any threat so that a flag is put against future reviews which might look suspicious. In how far do you see such systems helpful?

[text box]

[Submit]

13. APPENDIX C

Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster (1998)	Altruism (positive WOM)	the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return
	Product involvement	personal interest in the product, excitement resulting from product ownership and product use
	Self-enhancement	enhancing images among other consumers by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers
	Helping the company	desire to help the company
	Altruism (negative WOM)	to prevent others from experiencing the problems they had encountered
	Anxiety reduction	easing anger, anxiety, and frustration
	Vengeance	to retaliate against the company associated with a negative consumption experience
	Advice seeking	obtaining advice on how to resolve problems