

Article

Gap Analysis of the Online Reputation

Manuel Rodríguez-Díaz ^{1,*}, Crina Isabel Rodríguez-Voltes ² and Ana Cristina Rodríguez-Voltes ²

¹ Department of Economics and Business, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 35001 Las Palmas, Spain

² ICSE, 35007 Las Palmas, Spain; crinarvoltes@hotmail.com (C.I.R.-V.); cristinarvoltes@hotmail.com (A.C.R.-V.)

* Correspondence: manuel.rodriguezdiaz@ulpgc.es

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Abstract: Online reputation is a strategic element of firms' competitiveness. Companies need to manage their reputations and the image that they communicate through the Internet. This paper proposes a model to determine the main aspects that define a competitive online reputation: coherence, veracity, and intensity. The traditional methods that have been used to determine service quality must be adapted to new digital developments and their effects on customers' behavior. Therefore, a gap analysis is performed to define the key aspects that must be managed in order to create and maintain a powerful reputation and image in the companies' communication. Since this subject is too complex to be implemented in distinct sectors and ambits, different lines of research are proposed to expand this new critical line of study.

Keywords: online reputation; gap analysis; service quality; perceived value; online customer review; lodging

1. Introduction

Digital technology has had an impact on the methods used to manage and define the communication strategies of firms, especially in industries such as hospitality and e-commerce, where companies require new tools to assist analysis and decision-making processes [1–4]. Companies' performance increasingly depends on the reputation transmitted through social media [5–8]. Therefore, this is a new age where it is necessary to redefine the traditional way to evaluate service quality [9], customer satisfaction [10–14], and perceived value [15–18].

Moreover, the new technological environment has modified the conventional methodologies that have been used to establish and evaluate processes and activities designed to achieve a competitive advantage based on the continuous improvement of the products and services offered to customers [19–23]. Whereas service quality and customer satisfaction were previously measured by means of internal procedures, and followed well-defined quality standards in order to obtain certification, a large part of today's client evaluations are available on the Internet [1,2,24].

In this new intercommunicating world, a new concept appears to define customers' opinions: the firm's reputation [25,26]. When shared over the Internet, this reputation is called the online reputation [27–29], and it has a direct influence on the purchasing behavior of customers in industries where communication through the Internet is essential in developing the main business [30,31].

Furthermore, the sales strategy and the organization and control of the processes and activities in these types of companies are based on the quantitative and qualitative reviews of customers [2,3,32–34]. Therefore, there is a controversial situation for the organization, because a certificate procedure is applied to measure customer results, but the customers themselves are writing about and evaluating critical aspects such as the constructs of service quality, perceived value, and satisfaction. Moreover, managers are modifying their information from customers to include opinions shared by customers over the Internet, which have direct and immediate effects on companies' revenues [35].

As online reputation is becoming a critical factor for the level of income of companies, it is necessary to develop a communication strategy to achieve the economic sustainability of tourism or e-commerce firms [36,37] and tourist destinations [38,39]. At present, it is necessary to consider the model for measuring the quality of customer service due to technological and communications development. While the method for measuring quality has been based on internal surveys of companies carried out among their customers [9], the rise of opinion portals on the Internet has led to a new way of measuring the quality of service in an open way and shared with other users. In addition, the impact on demand is so high that it is critical for managers to guide their decisions to improve their online reputation [3,5,7].

The objective of this study is to propose a model to determine the gaps that managers must take into account to achieve an effective reputation on the web. This methodology is designed to improve the analysis and decisions made by practitioners and serve as a source of information for researchers. The methodology and evaluations proposed can be applied to sectors with high Internet communication activity, such as hospitality and e-commerce. In order to achieve this objective, the next section presents a literature review with the aim of formulating a model for gap analysis of the online reputation in the methodology section. Finally, the main conclusions and future research focused on developing this line of research are presented.

2. Literature Review

The online reputation of a company is an open process where customers share their evaluations and opinions about firms through social media, which is available on the Internet [24,26]. These opinions form an image of a certain company, product, or service, and they have the ability to develop an emotional state that influences customers' purchasing behavior [25]. The evaluations can be transmitted through quantitative measures or qualitative comments where the customers write their experiences, circumstances, and explanations about the product or service acquired [40].

Torres [41] (p. 663) establishes that "service quality is typically analyzed in terms of very specific items, whereas satisfaction is viewed more as an overall evaluation". Rust and Oliver [17] determined that the main differences between service quality and consumer satisfaction are as follows. (1) The dimensions to measure service quality are rather specific, whereas satisfaction can be established by any dimension (quantitative or qualitative). (2) The expectations of service quality are related to customer perceptions of excellence, whereas satisfaction is created by a large number of variables not related to quality. (3) Service quality perceptions do not require previous experiences, whereas satisfaction is the result of different experiences. Thus, service quality is a measure, which is usually quantitative, of a firm's performance, whereas satisfaction is based more on qualitative evaluations of the experiences and the emotions of customers.

Since the SERVQUAL multi-items scale was formulated by Parasuraman et al. [9] to measure service quality, researchers have based their studies on quantitative scales [42–46]. For Parasuraman et al. [9], the service quality scale comprises five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

The online reputation of lodgings measured by websites through quantitative variables evaluates two constructs: perceived service quality and perceived value [1,2]. Scales used by online portals have few variables, because it is very difficult to obtain information from customers through long questionnaires [29]. Thus, one of the main differences between the classic methods for measuring service quality and the current scales for determining the online reputation of firms or brands is the number of variables that are evaluated.

Therefore, the reduction in the scale dimensions requires all of the variables to be closely linked to the main attributes of the assessed service, rather than to the theoretical dimensions established in the academic literature. Furthermore, the managers of companies in certain sectors (e.g., tourism, e-commerce) formulate their communication strategies, image, sales, and quality control based on the reduced scales available on the websites [31,47]. This implies a redefinition of the procedures that

ought to be followed internally in companies in order to achieve the objectives of quality service and customer satisfaction.

A more pressing case is the measurement of perceived value, which usually only has one determining variable. Value is a subjective concept that is related to the perceptions and attitudes of customers [15,48]; according to Zeithaml [16], it can be analyzed from four points of view: low price; what a client wants in a product or service; the quality obtained for the price paid by a customer; and, finally, what a client gets for what he/she gives.

Thus, value is directly related to the utility generated by the service quality provided to customers, and inversely related to the disutility of the price that the client must pay [10,17,49]. On tourism websites, the concept evaluated by customers is the perceived value, which is defined by Prebensen et al. [50] (p. 254) as “the process by which a tourist receives, selects, organizes, and interprets information based on the various experiences at the destination, to create a meaningful picture of the value of destination experience”. Hospitality is the main industry of a destination, and, consequently, the value perceived by customers of these firms has a direct influence on the final perceived value of the destination [29,40].

Prebensen et al. [50] establish that perceived value has been measured on a single-item scale as “value for money”, although some authors argue that this scale does not address the whole concept [51,52]. However, in order to obtain more surveys of online customer reviews, tourism opinion webs normally use scales focused on the most important variables. Therefore, the measurement of perceived value is usually based on a single-item scale that is closely related to the quality, the utility received, and the price paid by customers.

The gap model to achieve the total quality in the management of services proposed by Parasuraman et al. [53] is based on reducing the difference between the expected and perceived service by customers. Customer expectations are influenced by word-of-mouth communication, personal needs, and the client’s experiences. In this new digital era, personal needs and experiences continue to behave in a similar way. However, websites on the Internet are focused on sharing customer feedback and evaluations [54], thus promoting word-of-mouth on the web (E-WOM) [55–60].

The information transmitted on the Internet determines the expected service and companies’ results [30]. Currently, companies’ (internal) communication has to act on the online reputation, which is constantly being created and modified. In this situation, a new figure appears: the community manager, who is in charge of managing all of the information and contents that appear in the network through different channels, such as tourism websites (e.g., TripAdvisor, Booking.com, HolidayCheck, Expedia, Trivago, Hotels.com), social media (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter), blogs written by people who have a great impact on their followers, and the company’s own website [4].

The expected service generated, taking into account the information available on the Internet, is conditioned by the evaluations of competitors and the quality standards desired by customers, depending on the price and category of the product, service, brand, or company. Therefore, it is a much more complex process due to the amount of information and the communication channels that are available on the web [4]. This also means that the internal communication process has to be opened up, so that the service expected from a given good or service coincides with the needs of customers and competitors.

At this point, questions arise. Does the information available on the Internet give an image and assessment based on what a company really offers? Does the competitors’ information match what they are offering, or is it biased? Is the service expectation generally reasonable, taking into account the price and category of the products and services offered? These questions lead to the need for companies to have trustworthy and credible information on the Internet [28,61].

In this context, the study carried out by Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez [29] demonstrated that the quantitative information available on the tourist opinion portals Booking.com, TripAdvisor, and HolidayCheck is statistically reliable and valid. However, they discovered that only the Booking.com website had the capacity to differentiate between destinations, accomplishing this

through a new validity of the similarity or differentiation of products and services proposed by these authors [29,40].

Moreover, qualitative information can be examined through content analysis, which evaluates the relationships between the main attributes that are evaluated by customers and the type of review shared by clients (e.g., positive, negative) [30,62,63]. This is a valid method to determine the customers' level of satisfaction that considers the experiences, emotions, and qualitative opinions about the service provided [17,41].

Taking into account the special circumstances created by the Internet in companies' communication, this study aims to develop a methodology to identify the main gaps that need to be considered in order to effectively manage a company's reputation through online channels and social media. The need to update the tools that companies must use in order to achieve effective Internet communication is what motivates the development of the proposed methodology.

The aim is to promote communication that affects the service expected by customers based on the service that is actually provided. To achieve this, it is necessary to include new concepts related to the coherence, veracity, and intensity of the online reputation, in order to obtain customer satisfaction and high competitiveness. These concepts will form the basis for the proposed model, in such a way that, as long as the gaps proposed can be reduced, the service quality objectives defined by the company can be achieved.

Based on these three concepts, a model is formulated with seven gaps that must be managed in order to obtain a competitive online reputation with a great impact on customers. The first gap refers to the process of constant evaluation that companies must make of their online reputation that is communicated on the Internet. The second gap focuses on analyzing the coherence of the communication received by customers. The third gap determines the veracity of the online reputation that is communicated through the Internet. The fourth gap analyses the intensity of the communication issued by the company in relation to its visibility and positioning on the Internet. The fifth is the traditional gap in the service quality model proposed by Parasuraman et al. [53]. The sixth focuses on measuring the gap in perceived value for customers, as it is a construct that is often evaluated in online reputation. The seventh and final gap is aimed at assessing the competition, because the Internet provides up-to-date information on competing companies.

As can be observed, a large part of the service quality evaluations of companies are being carried out spontaneously by customers, and are shared over the Internet. This represents a radical change in the traditional methodology of service quality evaluation that companies carry out internally without having a direct external impact. Traditional word-of-mouth has been replaced by E-WOM, which has a greater and more immediate impact on customer expectations and business results. Hence, there is the need to formulate a new gap analysis model that is focused on online reputation, as a new method for measuring the quality of service provided by companies. To the extent that firms know how to apply a management model that allows them to achieve a coherent and veracious online reputation that reaches the intensity required to have a relevant impact on customers, they will be more competitive and achieve greater customer satisfaction.

3. Gap Online Reputation Model

The proposed gap online reputation model consists of three parts (see Figure 1). First, there is the company that carries out this analysis. In addition, there are competitors, and at the center of the model, there are customers. All of the interrelationships among these actors take place in the media available on the Internet. This communication is dynamic and constantly updated, forcing companies to maintain agile communication on the different online channels and social media. To this end, it is necessary to control the key aspects affecting the Internet communication process.

The focus of the model is the client, who makes decisions based on personal needs and experiences [53,64]. In the Internet environment, word-of-mouth communication is carried out through E-WOM [55–60], which has the special feature that it is based on a constant flow of information

from consumers and firms. These aspects shape an online reputation in the minds of customers about a certain product, service, brand, or company, which is related to the mental image that is created. This image generates a subjective assessment by the clients about the concepts of the expected service [9] and the expected value [15].

The configuration of this mental image in consumers about certain goods or services, which is based on extensive information, implies a competitive positioning of companies in a particular market. This is the essential point where service companies have to apply their influence in order to make their communication as effective as possible. If the communication channels do not distribute a consistent and truthful reputation with suitable intensity in relation to their competitors, their customer demand may be affected.

The company is organized internally in this digital context through its external communication with consumers. One of its essential functions is to evaluate the quality of the goods and services that it offered to customers. However, in the present day, it is also necessary to carry out an evaluation of the real reputation that the company should have. In addition, the firm also has to continuously analyze how the online reputation is being communicated through the different channels and social media, as well as the situation of its competitors. This information is used to define the specifications for quality standards that companies must meet in order to perform the services demanded by customers. Competitors apply a similar communication process, as Figure 1 shows.

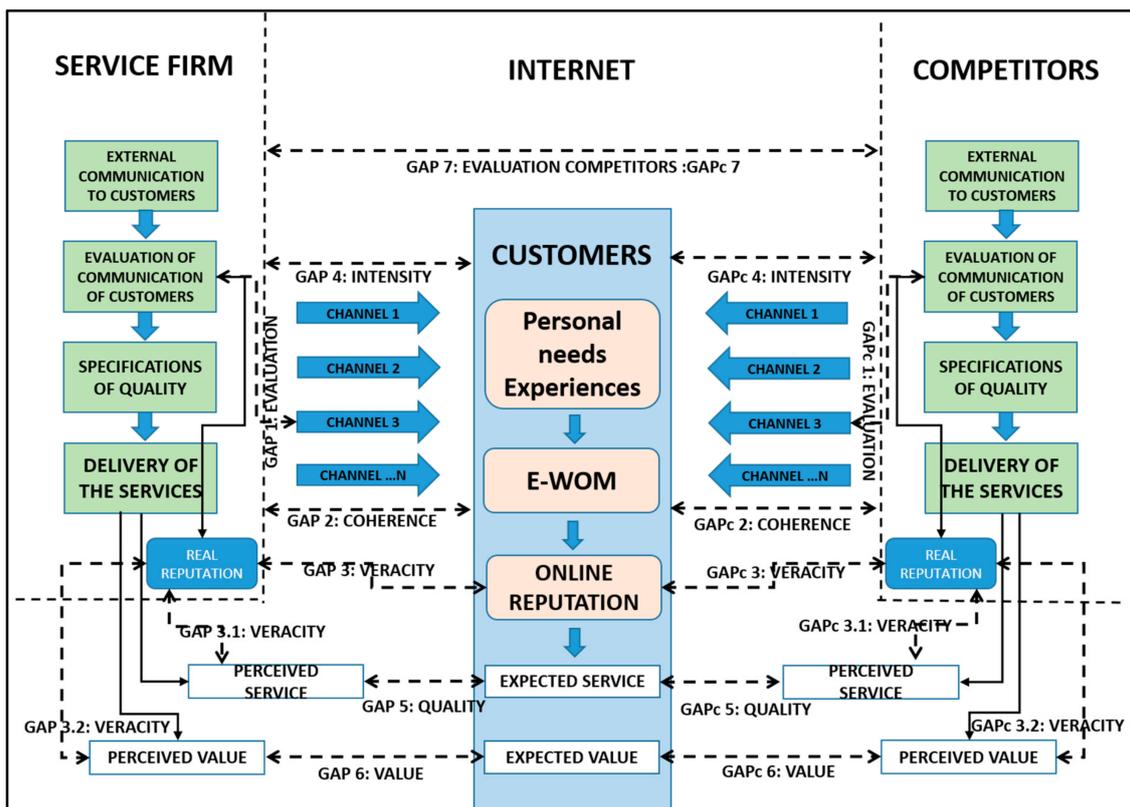


Figure 1. Gap analysis of the online reputation.

3.1. Coherence, Veracity, and Intensity

The process of assessing companies' communication is focused on four basic aspects: (1) the online communication that reaches customers; (2) the measurement of real reputation; (3) the evaluation of the quality perceived by customers; and (4) the assessment of competitors' communication and online reputation. In this context, three key aspects need to be analyzed: (1) coherence of communication

between online channels; (2) veracity of communication in relation to the reputation and delivery of service to customers; and (3) intensity of communication.

Coherence is considered by Rodríguez-Díaz et al. [65] to be the degree of similarity of information transmitted through different channels of a product, service, brand, or firm. These authors propose rating the online reputation balance as a means of measuring the degree of consistency of quantitative information that is shared by customers over the Internet through different channels. This is the case of shared information about tourist lodgings on websites such as Booking.com, TripAdvisor, or HolidayCheck, for example. However, part of the online reputation is shaped by qualitative evaluations, such as opinions, experiences, emotions, or comments. Qualitative data should be analyzed by means of content analysis, which makes it possible to detect the extent to which different channels transmit similar comments and experiences, whether positive or negative, as well as the intensity with which they are transmitted.

Rodríguez-Díaz et al. [65] pointed out that one of the main problems in determining the consistency between online channels is that they use different measurement scales for quantitative ratings. Variables do not always coincide across online platforms, and the scales often differ in the number of possible alternatives the consumer can choose. As far as qualitative assessments are concerned, it is necessary to detect the keywords that are used by customers in order to guide their opinions in a positive or negative way. From this base, the intention in evaluating a service and the degree of impact on the customer must be determined.

Veracity is one of the basic concepts of the proposed model, because the online communication transmitted by companies has to be based on the customers' true assessment of a certain product, service, brand, or company. One of the main problems is that the online reputation does not always match reality, because dissatisfied customers tend to comment more than satisfied ones. In addition, some opinions may be intended to reinforce or worsen the image of a product, service, or company [28]. Gössling et al. [61] (p. 4) establish that "trust and credibility are key aspects of online evaluations, because trust, [which is] defined [. . .] as the belief that online content is reliable, and credibility, that is, the condition of being considered honest, are closely related to consumer choices".

It is essential to test veracity through scientific methods in every company. It should be a complementary task in the evaluation of the service quality offered to customers following conventional procedures [9]. For this purpose, the quantitative measurement scales that are found in the main online opinion portals should be used. Qualitative evaluations must be analyzed from the perspective of the assessed attributes and the degree of positive or negative opinions of the clients.

Veracity is determined by conducting customer surveys, which previously involved choosing a representative sample. The objective is to have an evaluation of the company's reputation that is as objective as possible in order to determine the level of convergence or divergence in opinions shared on the Internet by customers or users. This indicator of a service company's real reputation is critical to an effective communication strategy. The degree of reliability and validity of different social media should be detected using scientific methods in order to establish which one best reflects the image and reputation of service companies [29,40]. Depending on the level of convergence or divergence, corrective decisions should be made.

The concept of intensity is related to the level of visibility, impact, and responsiveness of a product, service, brand, or company in online channels and social media communication. The concept of visibility is related to the public presence of a product, service, brand, individual, or company in the media [66]. In this model, visibility is regarded as the positioning obtained by a good, service, or brand on the Internet through the implementation of actions aimed at obtaining a relevant presence in different social media and online channels, as well as the extent to which a search carried out on related topics leads to its appearance at the top of browsers or specialized pages. Therefore, visibility is related to the actions carried out by the company to obtain competitive positioning, the variety of social media and online channels where it is active, and the level of positioning in browser searches or specialized web pages.

Visibility begins with actions that have been designed by companies to obtain relevant positioning on the Internet. The actions focus on designing a website with impact and interest for users, the implementation of promotional actions to obtain high customer engagement, and the design and implementation of a communication strategy that is designed to achieve a high level of online activity with customers or users. These actions can focus on the company's own website, promotional or stimulus actions carried out in social media and online channels, and the strategy that is followed to obtain high rankings in browsers related to the topics or promotional actions. When a person enters a specialized website, such as Booking.com, and searches for a hotel in a specific tourist destination, the first lodgings that appear are more likely to be chosen. Moreover, the customers' appropriate selection of the keywords used to perform their online searches is essential in obtaining competitive visibility. These actions represent a competitive advantage that produces a higher level of sales, loyalty, and impact in attracting potential clients [66].

It is also possible to call on influencers who, through their blogs or comments, can influence consumer buying behavior. Obviously, communication that is spread through more online channels or social media is more likely to gain greater visibility. However, there may be highly specialized companies that achieve their visibility objectives by focusing their communication actions on certain channels or social media. Some of the actions that can be carried out in the web pages or social media of a certain product, service, brand, or company consist of visual identity in the form of images, the design of the home page, and the username to make it easy to carry out promotional actions, the contents that describe what is being offered, or the interactive nature of the website so that clients can obtain the information and make the purchase that they want. Other key aspects such as the description of the goods or services, the location where they can be purchased, contact details, etc., are essential for achieving competitive visibility on the Internet.

Furthermore, the impact of visibility is a concept that determines the extent to which a given product, service, brand, or company achieves a high level of traffic in social media or online channels and, specifically, in transactions with customers. A company may be ranked in the first positions in a browser, but it also needs to obtain a result related to its own objectives and those achieved by competitors. Therefore, the impact of visibility has to be measured in comparative terms related to the sales potential or customer relationships of its competitors. For example, the analysis of two competing hotels with a significantly different number of rooms and beds has to consider this relative potential in order to assess their real impact. In this context, the hotel with the highest capacity should have more comments, followers, or online sales, but by relativizing this information, the percentage impact of the lower-capacity hotel could be much higher.

The definition of visibility proposed in this model is different from the one formulated by Yang and Kent [66] (p. 563), who consider that "social media visibility refers to how frequently social media users discuss an individual, organization, or related issue". In the proposed model, this definition is more related to the impact of visibility than to the definition of visibility presented here, and it refers to the actions, positioning, and degree of notoriety and presence of a product, service, brand, or company on the Internet. Therefore, the concept of visibility is fragmented into three parts: (1) actions to design and carry out the communication and promotion strategy on websites, online channels, and social media; (2) visibility as the positioning in a search engine; and (3) the impact achieved by this positioning in social media and online channels.

The impact of visibility can be measured in different ways. Technology also allows new indicators to be created that can be measured in real time. For example, the techniques available in Google Analytic are a source of information that allow companies to analyze the traffic of a given page or web portal. Likewise, the organic traffic, paid traffic, number of backlinks, number of likes, and activity are other ways to measure the impact of visibility. However, there are other indicators, such as engagement, that measure the level of people's interaction with the product, service, or brand demanded, compared with the number of people who visit a given channel, social media, or website. Chahal and Rani [67] (p. 314) state that "social media brand engagement refers to the participation of customers—physically

or psychologically—in varied brand-building activities that impact their decision-making”. This is the case of Ryanair, Booking.com, and HolidayCheck, where the number of sales is determined in relation to the number of visits received on the page of a given lodging. You can also determine engagement on Facebook pages by relating the number of people who interact on a page to the number of followers.

In the tourism industry, for example, the impact of visibility is determined through the lodgings’ own websites and the places they occupy in searches in the main browsers or web portals. When a person performs a search in a particular browser such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo, if a specific lodging appears among the first ones listed, this will determine its impact. The same is true when a lodging company is commercialized through specialized portals, such as TripAdvisor or HolidayCheck, where reaching the top of a particular tourist destination is essential for achieving a high level of occupancy. The number of comments on the portals is another way to determine the impact on customers [68]. As far as the main social networks are concerned, the impact is measured according to the number of followers and people who interact on social media. They are not the only means or indicators, but they can be considered the most important ones that are currently applied in online business activities. In this context, each product or service company must determine the indicators that provide enough information to maintain an adequate competitive positioning.

The third factor that determines the intensity of online communication is the companies’ response to their customers or followers. This response is related to two aspects: (1) whether the company responds and (2) the response time. In relation to the former, companies may or may not reply to comments from customers or followers. However, they can also opt for intermediate strategies such as answering only negative comments or evaluations. The response percentage in relation to the number of comments received is an indicator of the degree of interrelationship maintained by the company. It would also be necessary to determine whether the answers are mechanical or adapted and customized to each comment. Finally, response time is another key dimension in establishing the degree of company involvement in online communication with customers or the market.

Since online communication is generated not only by the company but also by its competitors, the information available on the Internet allows a constant study of the communication strategy of other companies that compete in the same market. This makes the online market dynamic and constantly updated, which means that companies have to evaluate their strategies and reconsider them, if necessary, at all times. In the case of the tourism industry, lodgings are constantly evaluating their demand and reputation online, and at the same time, assessing the decisions of their competitors in order to establish their prices. Airlines are a similar case, because they are constantly assessing the demand using mathematical algorithms to modify prices. A unique case consists of specialized websites (e.g., Ebay) where manufacturers sell their products through auctions to determine the optimal price at all times. This circumstance makes it necessary to include the constant evaluation of competitors in the online reputation model in order to obtain and maintain a competitive advantage.

3.2. Gap Analysis of Online Reputation

The gap model of the online reputation of companies points to seven possible deficiencies that must be taken into account to achieve a competitive online positioning. As Figure 1 reveals, the model analyzes the deficiencies of both the firm under study and its competitors. In this dynamic digital market, the competitive references must always be well defined in order to make decisions aimed at improving positioning, visibility, and impact in the different channels and social media. The following is a description of the seven deficiencies to be assessed by each firm, and the symmetrical deficiencies to be analyzed in competitors.

GAP 1: EVALUATION OF CUSTOMER ONLINE REVIEWS. Market dynamics that are highly linked to digital activity on the Internet force companies to constantly capture and analyze the information uploaded to the network. This deficiency focuses on the ratings and opinions that customers share in online or social media channels. This flow of information determines the expected online reputation settings of potential customers and influences the creation of a mental image of what

the quality of the product or service and its expected value should be. Therefore, this deficiency has the purpose of analyzing the time taken to obtain online information from customers as well as its characteristics. The ability to capture, analyze, and react to customers' online actions is a source of competitive advantage, as well as a great tool to achieve customer loyalty. Addressing this deficiency is a preliminary step in analyzing and counteracting the other deficiencies that are defined in the model. First, companies must have a customer-generated communication information system to carry out the preliminary analyses and then identify the remaining deficiencies linked to this information. Therefore, a dynamic system for capturing and analyzing market data can be implemented, but neither the consistency of the channels nor the veracity of the information, for example, is determined. The assessment of this deficiency in competitors is complex, because it is very difficult to estimate their system for analyzing their customer information (GAPc 1). However, experts or responsiveness rates may provide an estimation of the extent to which competitors are involved in this communication task.

GAP 2: COHERENCE. Coherence determines the level of convergence or divergence that exists in the online reputation and is transmitted through different online channels or social media. It can be based on clients' quantitative or qualitative evaluations. It may happen that in a given website, the clients have given a company, service or product a high score, while in another specialized website, the rating is medium or low. This is where consistency is based, in determining whether customer ratings across different communication channels are similar, which would mean that they are balanced, or not. This is a fundamental problem to be solved in the external communication of companies in order to obtain a competitive online reputation. When a company has an unbalanced online reputation because it has significant differences in customer ratings depending on the medium they use, it has a very serious online communication problem that needs to be resolved. However, when competitors have an unbalanced online reputation, it is an opportunity for the company to consolidate its position in the market (GAPc 2). If competitors have a more balanced online reputation, it must be inferred that the service company has a communication problem that is generating a competitive disadvantage.

GAP 3: VERACITY. This possible deficiency is an essential obstacle to effectively managing the online reputation of a service company. It consists of carrying out a scientific study of the clients of a particular product, service, or brand in order to determine what its real reputation should be. These data are contrasted with the online reputation that exists on the Internet, and if there are significant differences, it is necessary to correct the deficiency. If the real reputation is superior to the online reputation, it means that users who are sharing their evaluations and comments are giving an underrated image of the acquired product, service, or brand. In the opposite situation, expectations would be created that exceed the quality that the customer will find. In both cases, corrective measures must be taken. The actual reputation of competitors is very difficult to determine, because empirical studies with competitors' customers would have to be carried out (GAPc 3). To fill this gap, objective experts or statistical and content analyses should be used in order to detect whether there are opinions that are skewing the online reputation of competitors [29,40]. This deficiency in veracity can also be applied to service and expected value.

GAP 3.1: VERACITY OF PERCEIVED SERVICE. Companies have to constantly measure the level of service that is being perceived by customers in order to determine whether their objectives are being met. This consists of a scientific study that is recognized by the academic literature on service quality, and it is necessary to obtain recognized quality certificates. The customers' perceived service ratings have to match the real reputation determined by the same scientific procedures. Any discrepancies between them should be corrected in order to achieve a greater impact on E-WOM and the creation of customer expectations that are as close to reality as possible. The veracity of the perceived service of competitors is difficult to determine, because it should be based on an empirical study aimed at their customers (GAPc 3.1). However, experts could be consulted, or the variables that measure service quality on specialized websites could be analyzed.

GAP 3.2: VERACITY OF VALUE PERCEIVED. The online reputation often measures the value perceived by customers. Websites dedicated to marketing and rating lodgings, such as Booking.com

and TripAdvisor, include variables that ask customers about “value for money” or the “quality–price relationship”, which are variables that measure the perceived value construct. This variable is directly related to the quality of a product or service, and is inversely related to the price of lodging. Since it is a decisive variable in customers’ decision-making, it is interesting to have a real evaluation by means of scientific methods. The gap would be determined by the difference between the real and online evaluation. On the other hand, the veracity of customers’ perceived value would be determined by direct surveys of competitors’ customers (GAPc 3.2). As this is a very difficult task, experts could be called upon to assess the deficiency, or a study could be carried out to determine the level of bias between the perceived online value of competitors and the actual perceived value. In other industries, customers’ online evaluations may be based on other relevant constructs. In this case, it is possible to modify this gap, or extend it with the new constructs.

GAP 4: INTENSITY. This deficiency is linked to companies’ online positioning and visibility. It means that intensity is a factor that is directly related to the presence and notoriety of competitors’ communication on the Internet (GAPc 4). A particular company can overlook its competitors in the short term if it is achieving its sales, satisfaction, and customer loyalty objectives. However, this is an extreme and abnormal situation, and so it is always necessary to establish the intensity of the company’s communication in competitive terms. Visibility, the impact of visibility, and the responses are aspects that can be evaluated using specialized media or websites, where key dimensions of the positioning and impact of goods, services, brands, or companies are determined. Google Analytic tools and websites such as Likealizer or HowSocialable.com [69] provide useful information to determine the extent of this deficiency. There are also online booking engines that provide information about the behavior of the market, the company itself, and its competitors, which is related to essential aspects such as prices, attracted demand, occupancy level, closing sales, etc.

GAP 5: SERVICE QUALITY. The online reputation influences the service expected by customers. Parasuraman et al. [53] establish that the deficiency between expected and perceived quality is what measures the quality of the service delivery by a company. This is the basic gap on which the quality of service model proposed by Parasuraman et al. [53] is based. Therefore, to the extent that customer expectations resemble perceived service, it is possible to provide high-quality service. A higher status is given if the perceived quality exceeds customer expectations. In this case, superior satisfaction will be achieved, and the customer’s assessment of service quality will increase. The model proposed in this study maintains the deficiency proposed by Parasuraman et al. [49], because online reputation plays an essential role in shaping customer expectations. The difference is that when Parasuraman et al. [53] proposed the quality of service model, the main source of communication between customers was word of mouth. Today, however, E-WOM has a greater influence on customer expectations and decisions [70], with the notable difference that service companies can interact in a dynamic communication process through the Internet. The measure of expected quality according to Parasuraman et al. [9,53] was based on presenting a questionnaire to customers and asking them about the quality that they expected to receive in one or more competitive companies, which could determine the quality standard that needed to be achieved. From this perspective, the same method can be used to measure this deficiency and determine the potential deficiency of its competitors (GAPc 5).

GAP 6: VALUE. Value is one of the variables that is measured on certain specialized customer opinion websites, such as those discussing tourism. It is a construct that must be considered in the evaluations of companies, because it is related to the quality of service and price. In this context, price is also another determining variable in customer decision-making and the competitive positioning of companies. Therefore, it is a construct that must be included in companies’ evaluations of their customers’ opinions, as well as in the evaluation of the expected service quality. This deficiency consists of determining the difference between expected and perceived value, as in the fifth deficiency that was proposed by Parasuraman et al. [53]. The expected value can be determined at the same time as the expected quality of service, because it is related to what a customer expects to get for the price

he or she pays for a service. This measure of expected customer value can also be used to establish the deficiency of competitors (GAPc 6).

GAP 7: EVALUATION OF COMPETITORS. In a market as dynamic as the digital one, it is necessary to constantly capture and analyze a large flow of market information [43]. This deficiency indicates the extent to which the service company is involved in constantly obtaining information from its competitors and customers, and processing it in order to make decisions. Companies that have a community manager should have this deficiency covered. However, the amount of information (number of competitors analyzed and number of valued customer opinions) and the degree of analysis performed should be determined. The ability of competitors to analyze and process online market information can be measured through the study of the time and type of reaction of competitors to actions promoted by the firm (GAPc 7). For example, when an airline company decides to change its prices on the Internet, it is possible to check competitors' reactions. When a competitor does not act or does so late, an opportunity arises.

The gap analysis of the proposed online reputation can be used to define effective, dynamic, and competitive corporate communication management. The concepts introduced in the model make it possible to organize and structure the different types of information and actions to be taken in order to maintain a competitive and truthful image on the Internet. It is a model that takes into account the competitive dynamics of the markets, where all of the companies are focused on satisfying the needs of customers and obtaining their loyalty. However, it is a model that can be expanded in terms of the indicators and definitions of practical methods to measure the main variables that companies must control. Thus, it will be possible to develop tools that are specific to each sector and display a great deal of online communication activity, depending on their characteristics and the way that the customers evaluate.

4. Conclusions

Today, online reputation is a key factor in companies. It takes place in the open environment of the Internet, where customers share their opinions about the goods, services, or brands acquired. The information transmitted through online channels and social media directly influences customers' buying intentions, the company image that is transmitted, and customer expectations. It is in this context where the gap model of companies' online reputation is formulated, in order to propose a tool that facilitates the identification of the main problems that companies have in managing their online reputations. The digital age is establishing intense communication activity where customers share their opinions and evaluations of the companies that compete in the market. Through these phenomena, online customer valuations are in some ways replacing the traditional model for measuring service quality. This online reputation has a direct impact on customer expectations and company revenues. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a new gap analysis model of online reputation that allows companies to transmit an image to their customers that is in line with the level of quality of service they are really offering. For this reason, the dynamics of online communication determine the formulation of competitive models through which companies evaluate themselves and their main competitors. All of this activity is focused on customers, who are at the core of the online reputation management model.

The proposed model is based on three basic concepts that determine the level of competitiveness of companies' online reputation: coherence, veracity, and intensity. The online communication of companies is conducted through different channels and social media, and so the image and assessments transmitted through them can converge or diverge. Thus, this model proposes that a competitive online reputation needs to maintain a high level of consistency in order to converge in a similar assessment in different online channels. Otherwise, the image of the product, service, brand, or company could have customer identification problems. Coherence must also be measured in relation to the main competitors, because online communication is dynamic and complex.

The veracity of information is another one of the axes on which the online reputation must be based. The problem with Internet communication lies in determining the extent to which it is

biased, either positively or negatively. The model proposes that the online reputation should be similar to the actual reputation, which is determined by scientific methods through information from customers. The extent to which they differ is a competitive problem. If the online reputation is inferior to the real one, an underrated image is being communicated that can influence sales. By contrast, an overrated online reputation can generate customer expectations about the service to be received. Then, when customers find that the perceived quality is inferior, they will deduce that the quality is low. Therefore, determining the real reputation is fundamental to defining the actions that need to be taken to achieve a competitive online image and make sure that the service and expected value are appropriately balanced with what the customers perceive.

The intensity determines the degree of visibility and impact that a product, service, brand, or company has on the different online channels and social media. The proposal of the model presented is that companies that carry out actions aimed at providing an effective communication strategy through their own website, online channels, or social media will have greater visibility. These actions focus on providing content, promotions, and competitive graphic designs. However, this necessary condition is not sufficient if it is not possible to be active on different online media and achieve notoriety through the positioning on specialized websites and browsers. On the other hand, the impact of visibility is measured through different indicators that establish the extent to which the company is achieving the visibility objectives set. Interaction with customers is also essential in order to achieve tangible results. Therefore, companies' responses to customer feedback and response time are key aspects of accomplishing a competitive online reputation. Based on the above, intensity is a concept that is linked to visibility, the impact of visibility, and the response to online feedback and evaluations.

This is a new line of research that should be explored from different perspectives. First, empirical studies are needed in order to validate the proposed model. However, this study specifies how such research should be conducted in order to determine potential gaps in online reputation. Qualitative assessments are more difficult, because procedures need to be identified in order to establish their consistency, veracity, and intensity. However, methods and applications are being developed that focus on content analysis, where qualitative customer valuations can be analyzed in great detail. With regard to quantitative customer ratings, statistical procedures of proven effectiveness have already been developed. Nevertheless, new techniques can be developed that measure the different dimensions of online reputation more efficiently and quickly. There is no doubt that expert systems and artificial intelligence can be applied to online reputation in order to make immediate decisions when faced with changes in the environment or competitors' strategies. Another key factor to study is the measurement of the effectiveness of actions that have been taken to enhance online reputation, in terms of sales and financial performance.

Second, these investigations must be carried out in different sectors that require online communication in order to achieve their business objectives. In this context, the tourism activity has extensive quantitative and qualitative information that facilitates internal and competitive studies of online reputation. However, other sectors may have different variables or measurement scales, and qualitative assessments may have a somewhat different orientation. The adaptation of this model to these sectors should be considered in future research.

Finally, indicators to determine the coherence, veracity, and intensity of the online reputation are subject to technological development. In this context, the indicators collected in this study should be applied using a structured approach. The possibility of including new indicators that appear depending on the technology applied should also be analyzed. It is necessary to keep in mind that this model is integral, due to including the competitive factor, and it is a development of the gap model of service quality proposed by Parasuraman et al. [53]. In this context, the dynamic imposed by the digital era, with intense communication through the Internet, has generated the need to propose a new model that is more adapted to current needs and characteristics. To the extent that information technology dynamics continue to evolve, this model should be re-examined and updated in order for it to stay relevant.

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