

The Influence of Social Media Engagement on Positive E-WOM and Customer Loyalty in Agritourism Green Hotels

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Abstract

The importance of social media has indeed grown over the last decade in several industries, including hospitality context. A lot of research establishes the role of social media in hotel industry, however, little is known about how social media engagement might relate to electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and customer loyalty in the agritourism green hotels. Therefore, the aim of this study is empirically examines the influence of social media engagement on customer loyalty in the green hotels at Huaihai Economic Zone. It also investigates the mediating impact of positive E-WOM on the relationship between social media and customer loyalty. A survey with 303 respondents was carried out. Convergent and discriminant validities of latent variables were confirmed. The relationships among them were tested using Partial least square Modeling(PLS). The findings reveal that social media engagement and positive eWOM have significant influence on customer loyalty. it also shows that positive eWOM mediates the relationship between social media engagement and customer loyalty. This study advances our understanding of the between social media engagement, eWOM and customer loyalty the agritourism green hotels. Hoteliers can gain benefits by understanding how social media engagement can enhance customers' eWOM, and thus leads to customer loyalty.

Keywords: Agritourism- Customer loyalty - Green hotel- Huaihai Economic Zone - Positive E-WOM- Social media engagement.

1. Introduction

Due to the importance of social media engagement in the hospitality industry, it is necessary to understand the factors which influence the development of the hotel industry, such as past experience, friend talks, service quality, service rate, location, hotels' indoor environment (Gnanapala, 2014). In order to face the competition, they must use social media as a strategy in the agro-tourism sector to increase customer loyalty by creating a positive E-WOM, such as publishing their experiences to achieve customer loyalty and gain new customers. Green Hotels needs to use social media as a strategy to enhance its image and create a positive image (Ge et al., 2018) and to create customer loyalty and attract new customers as a result of a positive E-WOM.

Previous studies discussed social media with E-WOM (Ismagilova et al., 2016 ;Jalonen & Jussila, 2016) and others discussed the relationship between customer loyalty with social media engagement in the travel industry (van Asperen et al., 2018a; C. Cheung et al., 2011) . (Dijkmans et al., 2015) demonstrate a positive relationship between airline company reputation and social media engagement . (Shu & Scott, 2014) shows that social media content has a positive impact on the desirability of perceived travel destinations . Mangold and Faulds found that customers feel more engaged with products and companies when submitting responses, which increases engagement and increases the likelihood of interaction through social media or E-WOM like it or sending it to friends (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). While other researchers as (Husnain & Toor, 2017; Ogbuji & Papazafeiropoulou, 2016) discussed it with performance of business, and said there is need to study other factors which affect social media engagement on customer loyalty such as positive E-WOM, so that we studied the E-WOM as a mediator.

Therefore, this study will examine the relationship between social media engagement and customer loyalty via E-WOM as a mediator to fill the gap in literature in hotel industry , also this study will bring many benefits to decision-makers and hoteliers, showing them the significance of social media and the

effectiveness of creating customer loyalty via E-WOM, to select the right strategy for them, such as focusing on talking to customers directly and answer their questions and comments directly to make them gratified and loyal (van Asperen et al., 2018a; C. Cheung et al., 2011).

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Social Media Engagement and Customer Loyalty

Social media is the exact platform that technological basics of Web 2.0 which bearing the promotional activities professionally link with the directed consumer and obtain information for growing choices about brands/products (Harrigan et al., 2017; Ngai et al., 2015), it is also used by administrators as a strategic means to keep the advantages and support with good decisions (Cai et al., 2019). Social media shows a progressively significant role in the tourism industry , as hotels that use social media activities, improve online effectiveness and interact with customers to achieve the loyalty of customers(Mohammed & Al-Swidi, 2019). Therefore, this study proposed the following hypothesis:

H1: Social media engagement positively impact customer loyalty.

2.2. E-WOM and Customer Loyalty

The term E-WOM has been completely revised and divided into two research types: effects of E-WOM and precedents of E-WOM (King et al., 2014). E-WOM indicates any positive or negative statement of potential, the actual or obsolete product of the company that is available online to a wide range of individuals and organizations. Consumer engagement in literature research has repeatedly discussed the impact of customer engagement on E-WOM (Venkatesan, 2017). For decades, hotel and hospitality researchers have studied the difficulties of the factors which influence booking decisions (Radojevic et al., 2015; Y. Yang et al., 2016). When making a hotel reservation decision online, people will use the consumer rating as a marker to evaluate the experience of former customers of the hotel (Vinzencz, 2019). Currently, the hotel's sustainability efforts are an important additional standard that is a factor influencing customer booking behavior (Vinzencz, 2019). We choose Positive WOM because it has more effect on customer loyalty (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). Customer preferences for products increase with the number of online reviews (Viglia et al., 2014). The impact of E-WOM on customer behavior is even more important for the service industry (Hu & Kim, 2018).

Consumer engagement on social media can lead to getting more information about the product and is more likely to have brand characteristics (Habibi et al., 2014). In addition, online reviews and scoring products generated by brand-to-consumer interactions will always develop E-WOM (Yan et al., 2018). Social media is promoting E-WOM, and brands have found strategies to engage consumers and talk to others and interact with their products (Kotler et al., 2014). According to (Litvin et al., 2008), loyal customers are more inclined to express positive E-WOM and branding. However, it can also be said that the customer's intention to disseminate a positive E-WOM is best influenced by his/her perception of the brand's reputation. Xie and Li claim that E-WOM is common in today's accommodation market and may influence consumer decision-making (Xie et al., 2011). Brands are trying to attract consumers to join their social media platforms to encourage them to share a positive E-WOM (Gvili et al., 2018). Goldsmith and Pan found that interpersonal influence and WOM were listed as the most important sources of information when consumers made purchasing decisions (Litvin et al., 2008). These effects are particularly evident in hotels and tourism, and their intangible products are difficult to assess before consumption. In their research, Ye Law showed that positive ,online reviews can significantly increase the number of hotel reservations (Ye et al., 2009). According to previous discussions, this research proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: Social media engagement has a positive influence on positive E-WOM.

H3: Positive E-WOM has a positive influence on customer loyalty.

H4: Positive E-WOM mediates the relationship between social media engagement and customer loyalty.

Therefore, the conceptual model will be illustrated as it shown in Figure1.

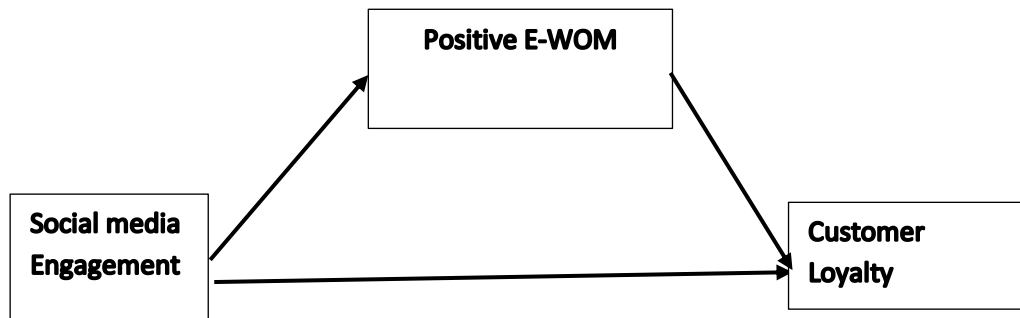


Figure1: Conceptual model

3. Methodology

An electronic questionnaire about the green hotel in agritourism destination was designed and shared by using the "Questionnaire Star website", with a number of 303 responds.

The questionnaire was completed with questions dealing with demographic aspects (sex, age, country of residence, etc.). The questionnaire's languages were English and Chinese. foreign and Chinese customers of green hotels have been selected, which they visited green hotels, in Jiangsu Province, China. The study uses the quantitative approach to test the hypothesis, sample size, measurement items for each variable then choose nine items to measure the customer loyalty and seven items to measure social media engagement, were taken from study of (van Asperen et al., 2018b), measurement items of E-WOM choosing four items were taken from the study of (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012).

3.2.1 Data Analysis

For the purpose of analyzing the collected data, the statistical package for social sciences (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), SPSS 25, and SmartPLS3 were used, and for the purpose of data entry to the computer according to the (Likert five-point) used to measure trends.

The sample most participants are female, representing 54.5% of the total, while the number of male participants with 45.5%.

Variable Category		N	(%)
<i>Gender</i>			
	Male	165	54.5
	Female	138	45.5
<i>Age</i>			
	18-25	110	36.3
	26-35	104	34.3
	36-45	53	17.5
	46-55	29	9.6

Greater than 55

7

2.3

Most study sample are concentrated in the age group (18 - 25 year), representing 36.3% of the total. The number of sample in the age group (26 -35 year) comes in second rank with 34.3%. The number of sample in the age group (36-45year) comes in third rank with 17.5%. The number of sample in the age group (46-55year) comes in fourth rank with 9.6%. The number of sample in the age group (Greater than 55year) comes in fifth rank with 2.3%. In order to analyze the research model, we used SmartPLS3 software (Ringle et al., 2015, p. 3). We followed the two-step procedure suggested by (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Firstly, examine the measurement model (validity and reliability of the measure) then examine the structural model (testing the hypothesized relationships).

3.2.2 Analysis of Measurement Model

To evaluate the measurement model two types of validity were being examined - first the convergent validity and the discriminant validity. The convergent validity of the measurement is generally ascertained by examining the Loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and also the Composite Reliability (Hair et al., 2011). The loadings were all higher than 0.708, the composite reliabilities were all higher than 0.7 and the AVE of all constructs was also higher than 0.5 as recommended in the literature, see table 2.

Constructs	Items	Statement	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR
Social Media Engagement	IACT-ENG1	Engaging in conversations on the Wechats' moments of this hotel.	0.904	0.95	0.79	0.96
	IACT-ENG2	Sharing hotels' posts on my own Wechats' moments.	0.923			
	IACT-ENG3	Recommending hotels' Wechat moments to my contacts.	0.914			
	IACT-ENG4	Uploading product-related video, audio, pictures, or images of this hotel.	0.870			
	IPAS-ENG1	Watching videos on the Wechats' moments of this hotel.	0.888			
	IPAS-ENG2	Viewing pictures on the Wechats' moments of this hotel.	0.908			
	IPAS-ENG3	Reading hotels' posts, user comments or product reviews.	0.837			
Positive E-WOM	MEWOM1	I am willing to let other internet users know that I am a customer of this hotel.	0.923	0.95	0.88	0.96
	MEWOM2	I am willing to provide more positive online information about this hotel available to other internet users.	0.949			
	MEWOM3	I am willing to positively discuss this hotel with other people on the internet.	0.949			
	MEWOM4	I am willing to share positive information about this hotel with others on the Internet.	0.937			
Customer Loyalty	DAFCT-LO1	This hotel means a lot to me.	0.914	0.96	0.81	0.97
	DAFCT-LO2	I am very attached to this hotel.	0.921			
	DAFCT-LO3	It would be difficult to change my beliefs about this hotel.	0.831			

DAFCT-LO4	Even if close friends recommended another hotel, I would not change my preference for this hotel.	0.890
DCON-LO1	I would recommend this hotel to people who seek my advice.	0.922
DCON-LO2	I would tell other people positive things about this hotel.	0.924
DCON-LO3	I would recommend this hotel to my friends.	0.908
DCON-LO4	I would use this hotel again.	0.911

Table 2 Convergent Validity Test.

Discriminate Validity -Variable Regression- Root square of AVE.

Examining the correlations between the constructs. And the construct must be correctly different from other concepts by experimental criteria, if a specific construct shows more correlated with another construct than with its own measures, this means, there is possibility that the two concepts share the similar kinds of methods and they are not theoretically different (Esposito Vinzi et al., 2010).

Table 3 Discriminant Validity and Correlation Test.

	Customer Loyalty	Positive E-WOM	Social Media Engagement
Customer Loyalty	0.90		
Positive E-WOM	0.88	0.93	
Social Media Engagement	0.89	0.88	0.89

In order to ensure that the variables do not overlap with each other, there is a test of the correlation according to the method of (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), criterion where it is to verify the value that corresponds to the variable, which must be the highest value with itself, and other variables, from the table 3 Customer loyalty with itself was (0.90) as well as the value of the variable positive E-WOM with itself was (0.93) and is considered to be higher than its value with other variables, and also the value of the variable social media engagement with itself was (0.89) it is also higher than the previous two variables. This indicates that the variables are not overlapping, which is what we are looking for it.

3.2.3 Analysis of Structural Model

The predictive power of the research model was measured on the three main criteria's:

R square, predictive relevance, and importance of the path coefficients (Chin, 2010) (FERNANDES, 2012). R square indications the variation of internal variables shown by external variables (Chin, 2010). Results presented in table 3 show that 79% of positive E-WOM was explained by social media engagement, while 0.84% of customer loyalty was explained by social media engagement and positive E-WOM. Based on the (Chin, 2010) criterion which supposed that a ratio of more than 0.67 is high and significant (Chin, 2010), the results were significant and high, shows that the influence of the variable involved in the research to explain customer loyalty is significant. The quality prediction valuation was executed via using Blindfolding approach in SmartPLS3, with outcomes that shown in table 5. The cross-validated redundancy value is greater than 0, that lights the edge suggested by Fornell and Larcker, (1981). Therefore, we can conclude that the research model has an acceptable predictive quality as it shown in table 4.

Table4 Predictive Quality Testing.

Variable	² R	Cross-Validated Redundancy	Cross-Validated Communality
positive e-wom	0.791	653	721
customer loyalty	0.840	635	712

Subsequently the reliability and validity of the research, hypotheses were estimated and assured, the hypothesized relations among the research variables were verified by running the SmartPLS algorithm and bootstrapping. The results are presented in Figure 2 and table 5 which indicates that social media engagement substantially related to customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.554$, $t = 7.197$, $p < 0.000$) showing that hypothesis 1 approved. In addition, social media engagement significantly associated with positive E-WOM ($\beta = 0.889$, $t = 60.505$, $p < 0.000$), supporting H2. Equally, positive E-WOM significantly associated with customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.389$, $t = 4.986$, $p < 0.000$) approving hypothesis 3. T-statistics was analyzed using bootstrap algorithm. When calculated t-value for each hypothesis was higher than 4.986, the significance of the constructs is confirmed and the hypothesis will be confirmed.

The bootstrap algorithm outcome is depicted in Figure 2.

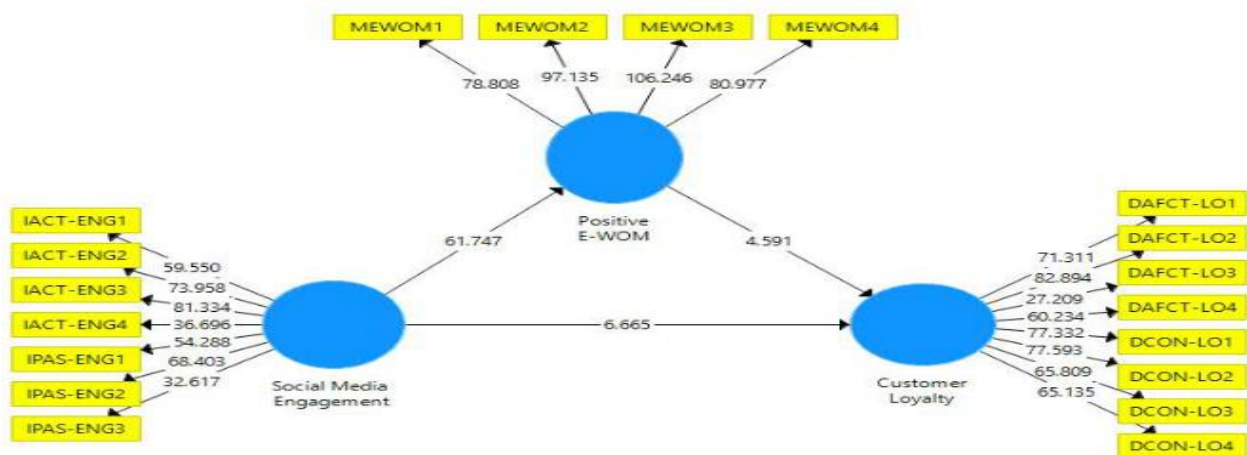


Figure 2 T-Statistics Using Bootstrap Algorithm

The PIS algorithm was employed to estimate the standard path coefficients of the hypotheses.

The standardized coefficients between the dependent variable and independent variable reveal that to what extent the dependent variable’s changes are due to the independent variable.

The standardized coefficients of paths regarding to each hypothesis are shown in Figure 3.

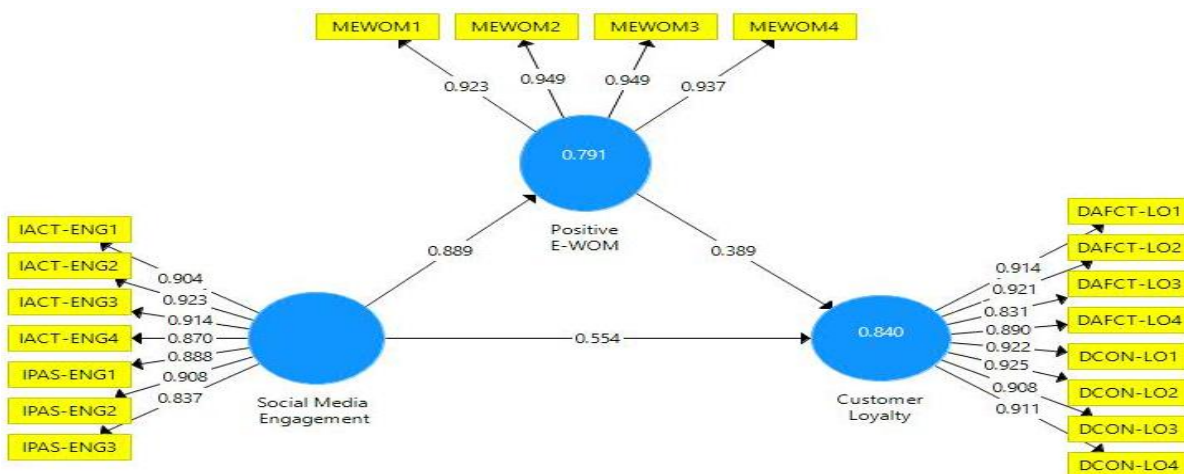


Figure 3: Standardized Coefficients for the Hypothesis

Table 5 Hypotheses Testing.

H. No	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	T- value	P-value	Decision
H1	Social media engagement → Customer loyalty	0.554	0.077	7.197	0.000	Supported**
H2	Social media engagement → Positive E-WOM	0.889	0.015	60.505	0.000	Supported**
H3	Positive E-WOM → Customer loyalty	0.389	0.078	4.986	0.000	Supported**

Significant at P**= < 0.01, p* < 0.05

3.2.4 Mediation test

For analysis of the mediator using Preacher and Hayes, we will use two ways (Preacher & Hayes, 2008)

3.2.4.1 *Bootstrap the Indirect effect (Total effect)*. The relationship between IV and DV via mediator must be significant P-value must be less than (0.05).

Table 6 Mediating Test.

Total Effects					
Mean, STDEV, T-Values, P-Values	Std. Beta (O.S)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T-Values	P-Values
Positive E-WOM -> customer Loyalty	0.389	0.384	0.078	4.986	0.000
Social Media Engagement -> customer Loyalty	0.899	0.900	0.015	59.967	0.000
Social Media Engagement -> Positive E-WOM	0.889	0.889	0.015	60.505	0.000

From table 6 which shows the relationship between variable (IV) and variable (DV) via a mediator, is significant because the P-value is (0.000) which is less than (0.05), this is the first condition. The results show that social media engagement has a significant indirect influence on customer loyalty through positive E-WOM ($\beta=0.346$, $T= 4.951$, $P<0.000$). These results also indicate the confidence interval of the indirect influence of social media engagement on customer loyalty ($\beta =0.346$, 95% CI= 0.316 to 0.375) did not include zero, showing that positive E-WOM mediates the correlation between customer loyalty and social media engagement considerably. Based on the standard of (X. Zhao et al., 2010) positive E-WOM is a full mediator on this correlation as the indirect influence $a*b$ is significant.

3.2.4.2 *Bootstrapped Confidence Interval (Lower and upper level) are shown in table 7.*

Table7 Lower and Upper Level Test.

Original sample = standard beta						
IV--> Mediator	Mediator --> DV					
Path a	Path b	Indirect Effect	S.E	t-value	95% LL	95% UL
0.889	0.389	0.346	0.015	23.055	0.316	0.375

In the bootstrapped confidence interval, we focus on the lower level and upper level to know if there is a mediator or not, so the lower level is (0.316) and the upper level is (0.375) which mean there is a mediator because lower level and upper level should not pass 0 in the middle.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Concluding thoughts

This study reveals the influence of social media engagement and positive E-WOM on the customer loyalty of green hotels in Huaihai Economic Zone (Xuzhou, Lianyungang, Huai'an). It shows the mediating influence of positive E-WOM on the relationship between customer loyalty and social media engagement. The results reveal that social media engagement is contributing to customer loyalty. This conclusion is consistent with previous studies, such as researches of (Dholakia & Durham, 2010; Brodie et al., 2013; X. Y. Leung & Bai, 2013). However, positive E-WOM was discovered as a mediator between customer loyalty and social media engagement. This suggests that social media engagement has significant direct and indirect effects on customer loyalty via positive E-WOM. Within the framework of this research, it is concluded that more attention should be paid to positive E-WOM by green hotel managers in Huaihai Economic Zone in order to influence social media engagement. For the direct effect of social media engagement on positive E-WOM, the outcome approved that social media engagement is the strongest influence of the research variables. This consequence is in the line with previous frameworks that approved the important relationship among positive E-WOM and customer loyalty (Chu et al., 2019; Chan et al., 2014; C. M. Cheung et al., 2011; Y. Zhao et al., 2016). It is concluded that positive E-WOM is a significant factor, which is a prerequisite because it has an important direct impact in addition to the mediation impact that explains the relationship between social media participation and customer loyalty.

4.2 Theoretical contribution

This study has theoretical contributions to which practitioners and academics should focus on them and pay more attention. Investigating the combined influence of social media engagement and positive E-WOM on customer loyalty is a fundamental contribution, rarely found in the literature (Ismagilova et al., 2016; Jalonen & Jussila, 2016; Husnain & Toor, 2017; Ogbuji & Papazafeiropoulou, 2016; van Asperen et al., 2018a; C. Cheung et al., 2011). More importantly, examining the mediating effect of positive E-WOM as a variable that explains the relationship between social media engagement, and customer loyalty is an important contribution to the field of strategic management. Grounded on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), this research studied the interrelationships between the research variables (social media engagement and positive E-WOM) as strategic directions and possibilities used by green hotel management to increase achievement and gain a sustainable competitive advantage. This is one of the few experimental kinds of research conducted in the field of agritourism and the hotel industry. It thus enriches the literature on agritourism and hotel industry. It is also the first study to be conducted in Huaihai Economic Zone (Xuzhou, Lianyungang, Huai'an) in this area.

4.3 Practical contribution

Consumer engagement on social media can lead to getting more information about the product and is more likely to have brand characteristics (Habibi et al., 2014). We choose Positive E-WOM because it has more effect on customer loyalty (Lovell & Wirtz, 2004). Customer preferences for products increase with the number of online reviews (Viglia et al., 2014). The impact of E-WOM on customer behavior is even more important for the service industry (Hu & Kim, 2018). In addition, online reviews and scoring products generated by brand-to-consumer interactions will always develop E-WOM (Yan et al., 2018). Social media is promoting E-WOM, and brands have found strategies to engage consumers and talk to others and interact with their products (Kotler et al., 2014). According to (Litvin et al., 2008), loyal customers are more inclined to express positive E-WOM and branding. Practically, the results are advantageous for the managers and decision-makers in a green hotel to have a loyal customer for their organizations by applying innovative strategic orientations such as social media engagement and through positive E-WOM characteristics and behaviors. Specifically, positive E-WOM guides them to the market and entrepreneurship by getting loyal customers and gaining a competitive benefit.

4.4 Limitations and future research

This research enhances the range of knowledge, there are still chances for future studies. For instance, the theoretical context of the research can be studied in diverse fields, or in the same fields but in other countries. Future study findings in other countries can compare similarities and variances with these study

findings. For the situation of Huaihai Economic Zone (Xuzhou, Lianyun Gang, Huaian), a long approach can be used to confirm the study results.

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