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INTRODUCTION

The Internet and social media have given place to what is commonly known as the *democratization of content* and this phenomenon is changing the way that consumers and companies interact. Business strategies are shifting from influencing consumers directly and induce sales to mediating the influence that Internet users have on each other. A consumer review is “a mixture of fact and opinion, impression and sentiment, found and unfound tidbits, experiences, and even rumor” (Blackshaw & Nazarro, 2006). Consumers' comments are seen as honest and transparent, but it is their subjective perception what shapes the behavior of other potential consumers.

With the emergence of the Internet, tourists search for information and reviews of destinations, hotels or services. Several studies have highlighted the great influence of online reputation through reviews and ratings and how it affects purchasing decisions by others (Schuckert, Liu, & Law, 2015). These reviews are seen as unbiased and trustworthy, and considered to reduce uncertainty and perceived risks (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Park & Nicolau, 2015). Before choosing a destination, tourists are likely to spend a significant amount of time searching for information including reviews of other tourists posted on the Internet. The average traveler browses 38 websites prior to purchasing vacation packages (Schaal, 2013), which may include tourism forums, online reviews in booking sites and other generic social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Nowadays, it is difficult to find a traveler that has not used Internet in any stage of their travel. A few years ago, in 2013, Google produced a study that laid out the five major stages of travel: dreaming, planning, booking, experiencing and sharing (Figure 1). These five stages of travel define the consumer's behavior before, during, and after their trip. Internet influences travelers at each of these stages through other travelers opinions, mainly in the form of Social Media and Online Reviews.

Figure 1. The five stages of travel by Google.



Source: (Robertson, 2015).

- **Dreaming:** Travelers are less likely to respond to advertising than to content that entertains, informs, and surprises them. People find travel inspiration on social media, so

businesses can reach the dreamer by encouraging their followers to share their travel stories and interact with their online community.

- **Planning:** The decision is taken, and travelers focus on the logistics: when to travel, how long to spend, how to get there, accommodation, activities, etc... The customer is now in the planning stage where, they'll be visiting around 20-40 different websites and will search for online reviews about almost everything.
- **Booking:** Guests are ready to make their purchase decisions and have reached the right-hand side stages of the diagram in Figure 1. At this point the key aspect that businesses need to look out for is to make the transaction as smooth and seamless as possible. Some people will not make a reservation if they do not read reviews about the service before. Most Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) nowadays include reviews in their hotel profile and the same applied to many other tourism businesses.
- **Experiencing:** Some travelers plan everything previously, but some of them leave minor decisions to the moment when they are already traveling. Examples of this relate to restaurant bookings and/or tickets for visitor attractions, which can be done on the go using a Smartphone or on site, directly. This may allow for certain flexibility, such as when visitors plan for an outdoor activity and the weather is not good. A great customer experience has always been important in tourism to increase loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. However, this is even more relevant nowadays, because customers' opinions will have a wider audience when shared online.
- **Sharing:** Many people may wait until they return home from their holidays before sharing photos and comments in Social Media. However, some travelers may not even wait and will start sharing information about tourism products and services while travelling, perhaps may even do it while they are still consuming them. Regardless of when this happens, this is the stage at which travelers produce the information that will influence others and be used by those individuals going through their dreaming, planning and booking stages.

Although opinions about tourism services and destinations can be shared in social media like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, the focus of the remainder of this chapter will be on tourism-specific review websites; with particular focus on those providing hotel reviews, such as TripAdvisor, HolidayCheck, Booking.com, Expedia and Travelocity. This chapter is divided in several sections that analyze the main points to understand online reviews in tourism marketing:

- Key Terminology related to online reviews, ratings and social media.
- Motivations to write and read reviews on Internet.
- Rating systems features and information management.
- Information reliability and fake reviews.
- Reviews importance.

The final section of this chapter (conclusion) analyzes the implications of eWOM for business management in the tourism industry. Furthermore, it includes a series of practical recommendations to the management of online reviews and reputation.

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Social media has been defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Therefore, Web 2.0, which is a related term, refers to the ideological and technological foundations that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC), which may take the form of text, photos and/or videos. .. Thus,

contrary to the traditional web, also known as Web 1.0, where users were passive viewers of content, Web 2.0 allows users to interact and to collaborate with each other, giving place to virtual communities.

The Web 2.0 ethos focuses on the user, by providing easy-to-use websites (even by non-experts), and facilitating editing, publication and information exchange. Smartphones connected to Internet and applications (Apps) adapted to this devices have increased the number of users and content shared in this way. Social media, forums and reviews websites are the best examples of this concept, that was firstly defined in 2005 (O'Reilly, 2005).

New concepts, like "Tourism 2.0" and "Travel 2.0" have been introduced to describe how the Web 2.0 have influenced the way we travel (Christou, Sigala, & Gretzel, 2012). These terms refer to the business revolution that has taken place in the tourism and leisure industries facilitated by the new generation of technologies, which have changed the way travelers search, evaluate, purchase and consume touristic services.

Following the reference made to UGC in the above mentioned definition of social media by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), UGC can be defined as any type of content that has been created and shared by unpaid contributors. It may take the form of pictures, videos, testimonials, ratings, tweets, reviews, etc.

A fundamental principle of consumer behavior refers to the fact that users have the ability to significantly influence on each other, something traditionally called as "word of mouth" (WOM). When these opinions are shared through the Internet this is called "electronic word of mouth" (eWOM) (Dellarocas, 2003; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). The big difference between WOM and eWOM is that in eWOM, recommendations are typically from unknown individuals. Therefore, personal ties are lacking in eWOM, which may reduce the level of perceived credibility of the sources.

eWOM is formally defined as "*all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods or services, or their sellers*" (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). The characteristics of eWOM tend to be described as:

- a. High diffusion capacity, the user can access opinions of unknown people around the world.
- b. Massive use by users of different ages and collectives, sharing between all the different points of view.
- c. The message can be propagated quickly in several ways: blogs, web pages, social networks, etc.
- d. Multidirectional discussion among users who actively participate with their responses to the information presented.
- e. Durability over time, as discussions are uploaded to the network for current and future reference.
- f. Credibility, for being information offered by users spontaneously and without commercial pretensions.
- g. It is free: users do not get any economic reward for writing content and do not have to pay for read other's reviews.

The phenomenon of eWOM has been extensively researched, including studies focusing on reasons to use eWOM (both in terms of writing reviews and reading); research looking into its influence on consumer choice; and projects supporting the development of methodologies to synthesize the vast levels of information created through eWOM (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2017). Reflecting on the power of eWOM, James Surowiecki proposed the concept of "Wisdom

of Crowds” in his book of 2004 *“The wisdom of crowds: Why the many are smarter than the few and how collective wisdom shapes business, economies, societies and nations”* (Surowiecki, 2004). The author argues that diverse collection of independently deciding individuals is likely to make certain types of decisions and predictions better than individuals or even experts. Related to this term is that one of “Collective Intelligence” suggested by Toby Segaran in his book of 2007 *“Programming Collective Intelligence: Building Smart Web 2.0 Applications”*, (Segaran, 2007). Through this book, this author shows how to mine the enormous amount of data created by people on the Internet, accessing interesting datasets from websites and collecting data from users, which can be very valuable to support managerial decision-making.

Ethnography researchers have also paid attention to opinions about different issues shared by Internet users. Their focus is on data collection and analysis of content in social media and websites that allow consumers participation. To name these new techniques, experts have used different terms, like “Virtual Ethnography” (Hine, 2000), “Netnography” (Kozinets, 2002), “Webnography” (Puri, 2007) or “Ciber-ethnography” (Keeley-Browne, 2011).

MOTIVATIONS TO WRITE AND READ REVIEWS

People spend a lot of time sharing content in social media or writing reviews in different webs or Apps. Incentive hierarchies have been created by a number of websites in an attempt to motivate users to contribute. This is the case of TripAdvisor, for example. They incentivise users by awarding them increasingly higher status on the platform after fulfilling a certain threshold, e.g. if they generate certain number of reviews (Liu, Schuckert, & Law, 2016). Likes on the content shared through Facebook or retweets on Twitter can also be a motivation for people who share their travel experiences. However, overall, sharing content online is ultimately an altruistic behaviour, and entails no economic compensation. This phenomenon can be considered equivalent to that one that takes place offline or in "real life", where consumers also share information about products and services with others with the only desire to help them making informed decisions (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002)..

Motivations behind writing and sharing online reviews have been discussed in the academic literature (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Schuckert et al., 2015). The motivation for posting negative reviews ranges from taking revenge to warning others (Wetzer, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2007). However, some authors argue that contributors are mostly driven by intrinsic and positive motives such as enjoyment, concerns for other consumers or wanting to help rather than vengeance (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008).

The Internet facilitates users voicing their complaints. Zaugg (2006) suggests that this is because the psychological costs of sharing negative feedback are lower online than face-to-face or through telephone interaction. The reason is because immediate distressing reactions can be avoided, thus lowering the threshold to complain. Furthermore, complaining online to the company may reduce both economic and psychological complaint cost for customers (Hong & Lee, 2008). Product and service reviews on the Internet show the best and the worst of people (Whitty & Joinson, 2008). On the one hand, anonymity favors users to give more honest opinions; on the other, that anonymity, encourages some users to lie more than they would in real life and it is a way to show complaints after an unsatisfactory hotel experience (Chiappa & Dall’Aglia, 2012).

Consumers seek the opinions of others online for a variety of reasons. This ranges from basic utilitarian motives such as to get information, to more hedonic motives. Furthermore, it is evident that some of the factors seem more deliberate and planned, while other motivations are more spontaneous in nature. Previous research identified 8 main factors that motivate consumers for seeking opinions online (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006):

Factor 1: Perceived risk: “... so the chances of me making a bad decision are reduced”.

Factor 2: Influence of others: “...because I have seen others successfully seek out information electronically”.

Factor 3: Price consciousness: “...because it helps me find products that are priced the lowest”.

Factor 4: Ease to use: “... because the amount of effort I have to make to find information is small”.

Factor 5: Accidentally: “...because I just come across it when surfing the Net”.

Factor 6: It’s cool: “... in order to be more popular among my friends”.

Factor 7: Saw on TV: “...when I see a TV ad that makes me want to go online and learn more”.

Factor 8: To get information: “...because I can get a variety of information from people who have positive and negative opinions”.

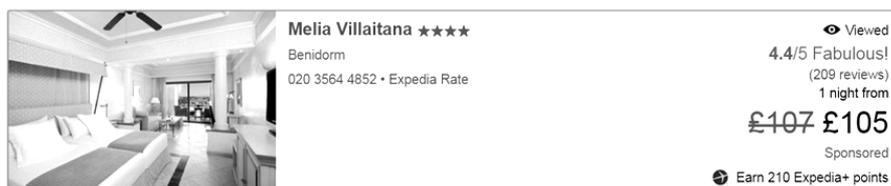
Consumers can be motivated by one or more of these factors, and they may even be others additional factors not registered in this list. Nonetheless, the main point is that they seek for opinions, they trust them, at least to some extent, and their behavior is influenced by the content.

RATING SYSTEMS FEATURES AND INFORMATION MANGEMENT

Online consumer reviews contain comments and ratings (some also contain photos and videos). Comments display reviewers' assessments of the positive and/or negative experiences as voiced in the textual content of reviews (qualitative information). Ratings are numeric summary statistics (quantitative information), prominently shown in the form of five or ten point star recommendations at the surface level of the review. Recent research shows that high priority is given to rating symbols rather than textual material (Aicher et al., 2016).

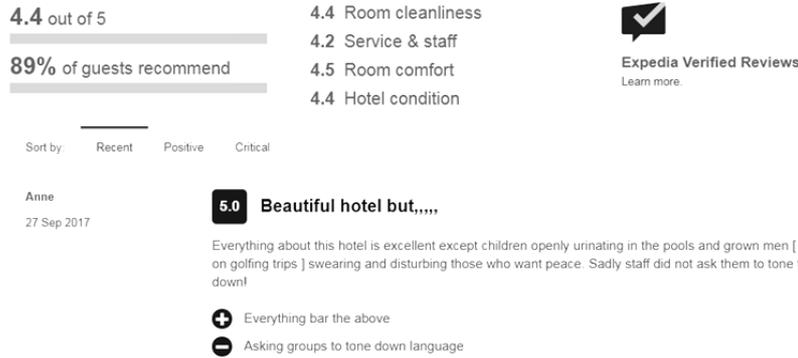
In the case of hotels, when a list of hotels is displayed, this includes quantitative information about hotel ratings and the number of reviews (Figure 2). If the consumer goes to the hotel profile, additional ratings can also be found for single items (e.g. service, location, cleanliness, etc....). Single reviews with individual ratings and text are also provided and can be organised following different criteria (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Hotel information in Expedia hotel list.



Source: www.expedia.com

Figure 3. Reviews information in a single hotel profile (Expedia).



Source: www.expedia.com

The display of just a global rating or 4-8 categories (e.g. “Room cleanliness”, “Service & staff”, etc. in Figure 3) trivialises a very complex issue. As suggested by Zhou, Ye, Pearce, & Wu (2014), many hotel attributes can influence travelers satisfaction, as shown by their research using reviews from Agoda.com in China. The authors identified 6 broad categories and 23 different attributes that influence customer satisfaction (Table 1).

Table 1. Twenty-three hotel attributes that influence customer satisfaction

Attribute category	Attribute category
Physical setting (Room)	Room/bathroom amenities, room size and layout, room cleanliness, additional welcome facilities
Physical setting (Hotel)	Availability of Wi-Fi, public facilities (lounge, lobby, pool, and fitting center), dated level (old/new), noise level, entertainment facilities
Physical setting (Food)	Food variety (including Western food), food quality, dining environment, availability of special food services (room service; vegetarian and glutenfree options)
Value	Room, food and beverage, and other prices
Location	Nearness to attractions, city center, airport/railway stations; accessibility
Staff	Friendliness of staff members, language skills of staff members, efficiency of staff members in solving problems

Source: (Zhou et al., 2014)

The percentage of consumers consulting online review sites prior to their travels is increasing and because of that, there is an emerging research stream examining the effects of online reviews on tourism destinations, businesses and attractions. The existence of hundreds, thousands and even millions of online reviews on certain matters, provides researchers valuable information to learn about individuals. During the last few years, hotel reviews databases have gained great importance, generating a large number of publications on this topic, as a valuable source of information for academic researchers and hoteliers (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014; Kwok, Xie, & Richards, 2017). Whenever applicable, researchers are replacing the data sets collected through questionnaires and interviews by those collected from online services, with Booking and TripAdvisor being the most prominent sources (Stanisic, 2016).

This could hardly be achieved with traditional methodologies, without an extremely important economic cost. Even with a high economic investment, it would be impossible to cover large databases like TripAdvisor (500 million reviews about tourism businesses and places) or Booking.com (130 million reviews about hotels). It allows researchers to extract manually information about hundreds of hotels which include thousands of reviews. By using web data extraction software the process can be automated, allowing researchers getting information about thousands of hotels with millions of reviews, in a fast way.

UGC is easy to access, as it is freely available on the web. However, the large levels of content which is available makes managing it a very complex task. As an example, medium size hotels can easily have more than 1.000 reviews and dozens of new reviews from dozens of websites uploaded every month. This is the case of The Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas which in 2017 had 24,000 reviews in Expedia, 25,600 in TripAdvisor and 13,500 in Google. Major attractions like Sagrada Familia (Barcelona), Eiffel Tower (Paris) or Colosseum (Rome) exceed 100.000 reviews in TripAdvisor, while museums like The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), The British Museum (London) or Musee du Louvre (Paris) range from 45,000 to 80,000 reviews. Restaurants, Natural parks, Amusement parks, Beaches, Outdoor activities or Concerts are also evaluated in this websites.

Online reviews can be examined from different dimensions, such as emotional expressions, helpfulness, framing, reviewers' gender, reviewer' geographical origin, credibility, trust, review valence, review length, review complexity, volume, etc... With such high levels of information researchers need to make use of Big Data solutions to help with the analysis. And this is even the case when analyzing quantitative data like date, valence, reviewer profile, used device, etc... However, content can also be analyzed with a qualitative methodology, focusing on sentiment analysis, natural language processing and machine learning capabilities.

The increased use of Big Data collected from online review websites for research purposes is supported by automatically controlled systems, which acquire information about millions of reviews from thousands of hotels (Radojevic et al., 2015) quickly, cheaply and conveniently. Once this large databases are obtained, researchers attempt to analyze and understand online traveler reviews through the use of sophisticated technologies (Govers & Go, 2004; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009; Ye, Zhang, & Law, 2009). The difficulty to manage such extremely high levels of information is not only of concern to academic researchers, but also relevant to hotel, restaurants, attractions and destinations who need this information to make management decisions. Furthermore, reviews about their establishments are found across dozens of websites, each of them with different scoring systems. Since looking through every single webpage is often unfeasible, a number of systems have been produced to summarize and digest this information. These systems are called "hotel reputation management" software (Reviewpro, Revinat, Olery, etc...) and they help capturing, measuring, and optimizing the guest experience, based on reviews and social media content (Figure 4). According to Hensens (2015), services offered by these companies generally include:

- a. The pulling together of reviews and ratings in one dashboard from different review platforms.
- b. The integration and weighting of scores through an algorithm providing a holistic score, typically on a scale from 1-100.
- c. The comparison of hotel performance within a group, or a competitive set.
- d. Sentiment analysis: Identify positive and negative mentions related to guests' experiences in several categories.

Figure 4. Hotel reputation management brands.



Source: Self elaboration

Although these software solutions were initially developed for hotels, some are also capable of capturing and grouping enough information to be used by tourism destinations under their product “Destination Analytics” (ReviewPro, 2017).

Differences between online reviews databases

There are dozens of webpages that collect comments and ratings on hotels and other tourist services. Although the type of information collected is similar, there are certain differences that must be taken into account when using these databases:

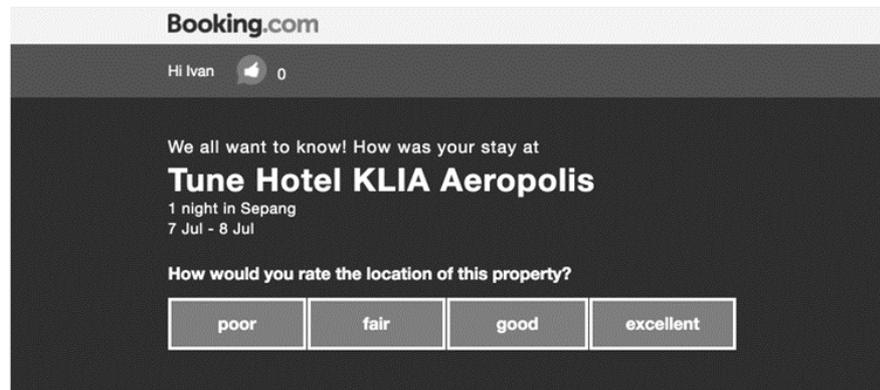
1. **Number of reviews:** Booking and TripAdvisor host the largest number of hotel reviews worldwide, but other websites are also very popular. There are some websites that have limited geographic coverage, such as HRS in the German-speaking market, CTRIP in China or Priceline in North America, but they host a number of reviews similar to Booking or TripAdvisor in their areas.
2. **Delete reviews:** There are also differences depending on the criterion of expiration and deletion of reviews. While there are websites that do not eliminate reviews, even if they are more than ten years old (TripAdvisor), others such as Booking or Priceline proceed to erase reviews after a certain period of time (usually 24 months).
3. **Scales:** Scoring systems used by different websites are not identical. Although systems with a 1-5 or 1-10 scale predominate, there are systems such as HolydayCheck using a scale of 1-6, TravelRepublic (0-10), Agoda (2-10) or Booking (2,5-10).
4. **Collecting reviews:** Some webs only allow travelers who stayed in a property to write a review. They send an email to its clients once they checked-out inviting them to provide their feedback (Figure 5) whereas other websites allow anyone with an account to post a review on whatever hotels. However, this facilitates fake reviews to be posted.

Figure 5. E-mail sent by Booking.com

How was Tune Hotel KLIA Aeropolis?

Booking.com
To: ivik89@gmail.com

Jul 8, 2017 11:11am PDT



Source: <https://www.campaignmonitor.com/blog/email-marketing/2017/08/10-examples-using-email-for-lifecycle-marketing/>

Types of websites where online reviews can be found

Taking into account their differences, websites collecting hotel online reviews can be grouped as follows:

1. **Online travel agencies (OTA):** These companies are emailing its clients once they checked-out with a link inviting them to review and provide their feedback about their stay. We include in this group websites like Booking, TravelRepublic, Priceline, HRS or Expedia.
2. **Online travel agencies using external data:** Some OTAs collect reviews and also include the information provided by TripAdvisor, like Hotels.com. Other OTAs do not collect reviews and show information about reviews and scores from TripAdvisor (B the travel brand, Halcon Viajes) or from TrustYou (Lastminute.com, Rumbo.es).
3. **Online travel portals:** These are websites where anyone can register and give their opinion on different aspects of their trip, including their experience in hotels. Best examples are TripAdvisor, HolidayCheck or Zoover. These websites are not travel agencies themselves, but they provide the possibility to search hotels and link with online travel agencies, even in recent years have incorporated the possibility of making reservations directly on the platform. Although these websites claim to implement control mechanisms to prevent fraud, it is possible to introduce fake reviews.
4. **Metasearch websites (Trivago, Kayak, Skyscanner, HotelsCombined, etc...):** These websites offer a price comparison service, identifying the lowest possible prices for hotels throughout the different booking platforms. Along with price information, metasearch websites show a valuation of the property based on the reviews of guests. This information is extracted by an aggregation of information from the different booking platforms.

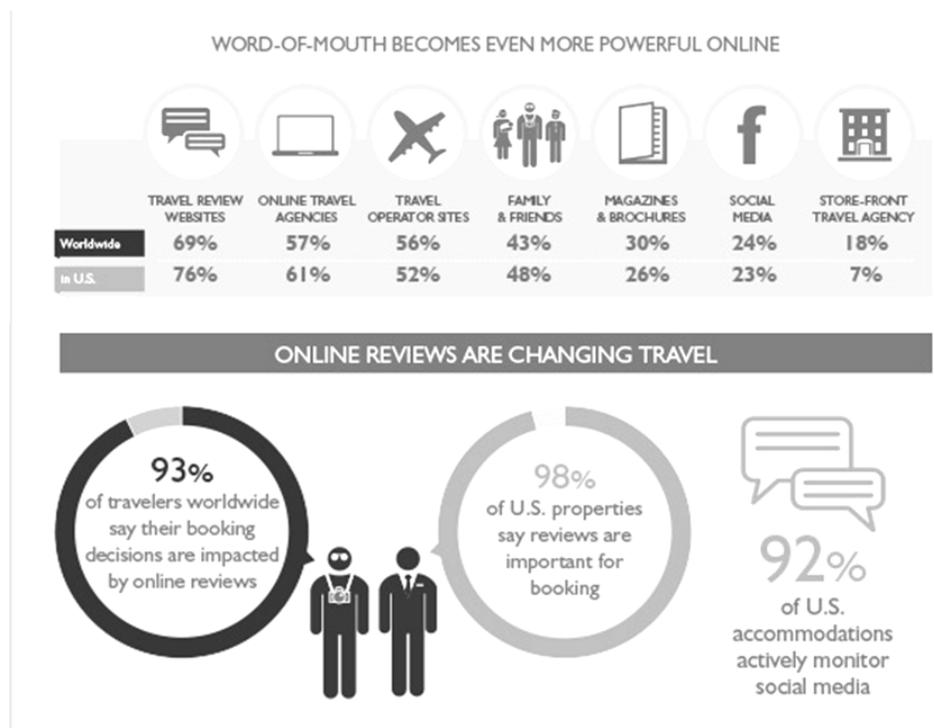
INFORMATION RELIABILITY AND FAKE REVIEWS

Online reviews are just subjective opinions wrote by users (as opposed to those written by professionals) based on their very unique experience and perception. Users may not necessarily collect accurate information, and their reviews can often be full of emotions (Clark, 2013) and biased. However, they are perceived as reducing uncertainty when evaluating alternatives and making a decision to buy (Gretzel et al., 2006). Somehow, users believe that commercial information is not completely honest while online reviews are more neutral and objective (Bray, Schetzina, & Steinbrick, 2006; Fernback & Thompson, 2014; Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009).

Although influenced or stimulated by traditional marketers and marketing activities, eWOM is nonetheless owned and controlled by consumers, and it often carries far higher credibility and trust than traditional media, as explained above these lines. Nowadays eWOM platforms grow and traditional tools lose impact. Around the world, trust levels for each type of advertising format vary (Nielsen, 2015). “Recommendations from people I know” is always the first option but second position is “branded websites” or “consumer opinions posted online”, depending on the geographical area. European and North Americans respondents are most skeptical about advertising formats, showing lower percentages in almost all cases, but still trust in “consumer opinions posted online” with a second position in both cases.

TripBarometer is based on the results of a month-long survey conducted on behalf of TripAdvisor by research firm StrategyOne (Tripbarometer, 2013). It takes into account the responses of 35,042 people, from 26 countries spanning 7 regions. Results show that 69% of travelers rely on travel review websites when they make their travel plans (Figure 6), while 93% say that their booking decisions are influenced by online reviews. Not only are people reading about others’ travel experiences, they’re also sharing their own (51% say that they have written an online review). Hotel managers know how important these reviews are and 81% are now inviting guests to submit reviews. Furthermore, 65% write management responses to negative hotel reviews, while a lower percentage (50%) respond to the positive reviews.

Figure 6. Travel planning is dominated by online resources.



Source: (Tripbarometer, 2013).

In late 2013, on behalf of TripAdvisor, PhoCusWright commissioned an independent study among 12,000 travelers across the globe (TripAdvisor, 2014b). Results showed that more than 80% read at least 6-12 reviews before making their accommodation decisions, and they also think the site makes them feel confident in their travel decisions.

Fake Reviews

UGC may be considered as spontaneous and passionate feedback provided by real consumers, as previously explained. However, this is not always the case. Fake reviews are an important phenomenon which heavily impacts on the fate of tourism businesses (Yoo and Gretzel, 2009). There is growing evidence to suggest the existence of fake reviews, a practice that undermines the credibility of the process (Mayzlin, Dover, & Chevalier, 2014; Simonson, 2016). This phenomenon is observed in the restaurant context using Yelp.com (Luca & Zervas, 2016). A considerable amount of research has focused on the identification of fake reviews (Hu, Bose, Koh, & Liu, 2012; Lappas, 2012; S. Xie, Wang, Lin, & Yu, 2012), but none of the proposed methods is 100% reliable. While OTAs only allow to write reviews to customers who have stayed in that particular hotel, anyone can write a review in websites like TripAdvisor, Yelp or HolidayCheck. This is a controversial issue that doesn't stop users from reading and trusting reviews, despite of where it comes from.

Generic social media websites, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, also has plenty of fake content, usually described as Astroturfing (Lee, Tamilarasan, & Caverlee, 2013). It is used by organizations to give the illusion of genuine public support to their brands. It is easy to buy "packs" of thousands of fake followers, likes or retweets for a reduced price. It is also possible to use that fake profiles with "Bots" (Ferrara, Varol, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2016), which is a software that automatically controls hundreds or thousands of social media accounts. It can autonomously perform actions such as tweeting, retweeting, liking, following or unfollowing.

TripAdvisor is the world's largest travel site: more than 535 million reviews, available in 49 markets and 415 million average unique monthly visitors. The authenticity of TripAdvisor' reviews has often been questioned (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015). This is because any internet user can register on this website (with a real or fake identity) and provide information about hotels where they have been hosted or where they may have never been. Due to these allegations, TripAdvisor has developed a list of guidelines of what would be considered as fraudulent reviews (TripAdvisor, 2014c):

- Writing a review for his/her own property.
- Asking friends or relatives to write positive reviews.
- Submitting a review on behalf of a guest.
- Copying comment cards and submitting them as reviews.
- Pressuring a TripAdvisor member to remove a negative review.
- Offering incentives such as discounts, upgrades, or any special treatment in exchange for reviews.
- Hiring an optimization company, third party marketing organization, or anyone to submit false reviews.
- Impersonating a competitor or a guest in any way

There are cases of hotels that include positive reviews of their establishment, as well as cases of hotels that generate negative reviews about competitors (Dohse, 2013). In addition there have also been cases of guest threatening to write a negative review unless a refund, upgrade, or other type

of request was met by the establishment, which is something recognized by TripAdvisor as fraudulent use of the review website.

TripAdvisor claims to use sophisticated methods of controlling fraudulent content. However, such measures simply hinder and limit the inclusion of fake reviews and do not completely avoid the problem. Some pranksters have conducted experiments, proving that it is possible to include fake reviews on TripAdvisor and even creating businesses that do not really exist. Some of these actions have been successful passed control systems and appeared in mass media:

“Pranksters 'trick TripAdvisor' into naming made-up eatery as an Italian town's top-ranking restaurant” (Mirror).

“Five-star fake! TripAdvisor prankster fools the foodies: Disgruntled user posts spoof reviews in anger at site not being policed properly” (Daily Mail).

“Hostel for the homeless soars to top 100 of TripAdvisor's best places to stay after jokers give it a five-star rating” (Daily Mail).

“Mary Johnston Is Ready For Reviews: Woman Listed As Tourist Attraction On Tripadvisor” (Huffington Post)

It is very easy to create an email account in a free service like Hotmail or Gmail, using a fake name and register in TripAdvisor to write anonymous reviews. It is almost impossible to be detected as a fake reviewer. However, there are certain behaviours which TripAdvisor considers suspicious and may trigger an account to be blocked or examined. For example, when someone tries to repeat this process several times in just one day or a week, TripAdvisor may suspect of such amount of reviews from the same location, using the same web browser and all of them very positive or negative.

For establishments with a low number of reviews, it may be possible to substantially vary their score with a few fraudulent reviews, but it is much more complicated for medium and large establishments. These businesses receive hundreds of reviews from real customers and would have to generate a lot of fake reviews to produce significant variations in overall scores. Such a big amount of reviews could activate TripAdvisor detection systems.

Although it is clear that fake reviews on TripAdvisor exist, the percentage that they represent (of the total 500 million registered reviews in the website) is unknown. TripAdvisor control systems are likely to make it difficult for fake reviews to be included, so their percentage is likely to be minimal. Even if there are one million fake reviews, it would only mean a 0.2% of total number of reviews, and therefore, the remainder 99.8% of the reviews would be real.

When TripAdvisor detects that a hotel may be receiving fake positive reviews, it acts in various ways, as indicated on its own website. The first is *“A property may drop by several pages in the TripAdvisor popularity index”*, the second is *“The property will no longer be eligible for inclusion in TripAdvisor's Travelers Choice awards, Top 10 lists, press releases, etc.”* and finally *“A large red penalty notice, explaining that the property's reviews are suspicious may appear on the listing page.”* (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Red badge on hotel profile

Message from TripAdvisor: TripAdvisor has reasonable cause to believe that this hotel requires guests to transfer their intellectual property rights for any online publications or reviews related to their experiences as a guest to the hotel, which will discourage publicly available online feedback. Please take this into consideration when researching your travel plans.

Trout Point Lodge of Nova Scotia

168 Reviews | #1 of 1 Hotels in East Kemptville

189 Trout Point Rd, East Kemptville, Nova Scotia B5A 5X9, Canada

Save

Source: www.tripadvisor.com

It is very important to note that there is no possibility for the hotel to be removed from the website, even if it proven that this has breached TripAdvisor's regulations, which is exactly what some properties would prefer. The hotel profile will always remain on the website and users will always be able to provide reviews and photographs, even without the business owner agreement.

The focus of the above analysis has been placed on TripAdvisor to illustrates the issue of fake reviews in the tourism industry. However, it is worth note that this issue applies to other similar websites, as previously mentioned.

REVIEWS IMPORTANCE

In the hotel sector, it has been demonstrated that online reviews and ratings have a significant impact on potential consumers and their purchase decisions. Research has demonstrated that the impact of reviews can be noticed on both the number of bookings and possibility of price increment:

- a. A 10% increase in traveler review ratings boosting online bookings by more than 5% (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009).
- b. Higher customer rating significantly increases the online sales of hotels and that a 1% increase in online customer ratings increases sales per room by up to about 2.6% depending on the destination. It also increase prices by 1% in cities like Paris and London (Öğüt & Onur Taş, 2012).
- c. A 1-point increase in a hotel's 100-point ReviewPro Global Review Index™ (GRI) leads up to a 0.89% increase in price (ADR), a 0.54% increase in occupancy, and a 1.42% increase in Revenue per Available Room (RevPAR) (Anderson, 2012).
- d. A 1-point increase in a 1-10 scale is associated to an increase in the occupancy rate of 7.5% (Viglia, Minazzi, & Buhalis, 2016).

Such is the importance of online reviews that the United Nations World Tourism Organization has suggested the need to integrate them into conventional hotel classification (UNWTO, 2014). Otherwise, there have been suggestions that conventional start classifications as they currently stand may disappear (Hensens, 2015).

Star classification systems provide accurate and objective information of accommodation establishments. However, they have drawn critics as the criteria required for each star level varies across countries (Hensens, 2015). Major complaints are that they are widely misunderstood by the public, overly complex, and overemphasize physical amenities over quality service (Schrader, 2013).

Classification systems assess the availability of certain facilities and amenities whereas online guest reviews measure whether establishments meet customers' expectations. Thus guest reviews provide a quality check upon facilities and amenities. Hotel online reviews offer an independent reference on the standard and quality of hotel services. However, the criteria is subjective. Some experts argue that guest reviews and scores are better at providing a benchmark on the quality and

range of services than that star classification systems (Henses, 2015). According to this author, start rating systems as they exist are likely to disappear. And it is true that many travelers, especially of the youngest generations, may even feel that official stars are just a secondary element and pay considerably more attention to guest reviews, location, wifi quality, etc... when making their decisions to book.

The suggestion by United Nations World Tourism Organization to integrate online review ratings into hotel classification (UNWTO, 2014) would serve complementary purposes. This would be done in an attempt to complement the usual objective quantitative measures offered by hotel stars systems with the subjective qualitative information provided by hotel online reviews. Several countries are moving towards integrated models (Australia, Switzerland, Abu Dhabi and Norway) taking a variety of approaches. The main aspect of these models relates to the way the information from the two sources of information is presented. Full integration models imply that the hotel can move up or down a star level depending on its perceived quality, as measured by online guest reviews. However, comparative performance models display online ratings and hotel classification details separately, rather than integrated.

CONCLUSION

After analysing how rating systems work and their importance for the tourism industry, this final section considers the practical recommendations needed to manage them. As a conclusion of the previous sections, it could be argued that management actions should help to improve customers' satisfaction. This would lead establishments to increase their ratings and as a consequence, to increase sales, occupancy, their Average Daily Rate (ADR), etc... However, managing online reputation is not as simple. It requires taking into account multiple factors and implementing changes at the managerial level. Actions can be divided in two main groups:

- Increase ratings in order to get more sales.
- Analyze information in order to improve services and customers satisfaction.

The first group can be addressed through two main strategies, commonly recommended by experts: to obtain more reviews and to respond reviews. The second group includes more complex processes that will allow managers to extract learning out of online reviews and gain value to improve their services.

Encourage customers to write reviews

TripAdvisor popularity Index algorithm is based on three key ingredients: the quality (average score), quantity (number of reviews) and how recent reviews are. It is not easy to increase ratings. However increasing the number of reviews and obtaining recent comments, is relatively easier to achieve, given that it does not require economic investments or significant changes in service protocols.

TripAdvisor recommends hotels to encourage their guests to submit user reviews upon their return home and this recommendation is made with substantial emphasis. There is also a blog entry in TripAdvisor webpage called "More reviews, higher ranking" (TripAdvisor, 2014a) referring to an academic paper with the title "Online Customer Reviews of Hotels: As Participation Increases, Better Evaluation Is Obtained" (Melián-González, Bulchand-Gidumal, & González López-Valcárcel, 2013).

Despite an initial period of tension and lawsuits filed by hotels against websites like TripAdvisor (between 2010 and 2012) regarding the publication of fake reviews, the relationship between

these parties has improved (McEvilly, 2015). Three of the largest hotel groups in the world, Four Seasons, Wyndham and Accor, even encourage guests to write reviews on TripAdvisor after their stay.

It is also very interesting for businesses to have a database as large as possible for statistical reasons. The greater the number of registered reviews, the more reliable the information used for the analysis will be. It can also be a way to protect against possible attacks of fake negative reviews, since its relative weight will be lower if the establishment has more registered reviews.

However, hoteliers should avoid selectively encouraging only the guests they believe will write positive reviews and in some countries, such as the UK, this may even be considered unlawful (CMA, 2016). A common practice of this would be that case in which staff ask guests how they enjoyed their stay as they are checking out, and only if the person had a good experience, they would then be asked to write a review in TripAdvisor. Otherwise, if their experience was negative they would not be asked to post a review. This is fraudulent behavior, which if untracked, may help hotels effectively improving their ratings. However, it is very difficult for TripAdvisor to detect.

Respond Reviews

While, this is not always the case, many websites that collect reviews offer hotel owners the ability to respond to any comment that users post about their establishments. When this is the case, it is sufficient for the owner to be correctly registered in the corresponding website and it does not imply any additional payment. Responding to review may help hotels improving their image. According to a TripAdvisor study, 62% of travelers say that responses to reviews posted by the hotel management make them more likely to book a stay at a hotel (TripAdvisor, 2014b). This shows a substantial level of empathy with managers who reply to reviews, and the likelihood to help minimizing the impact of negative reviews. Several studies have shown that responding to customer reviews improves hotel scores and sales, so it has become an almost imperative issue in online reputation management. The work by Xie, Zhang, Zhang, Singh, & Lee (2016) showed that managerial response leads to an average increase of 0.235 stars in the TripAdvisor ratings and a 17.3% increase in the volume of subsequent consumer.

Responding to all reviews may sometimes may not be possible, as it would require a substantial amount of time for those establishments receiving a high volume of reviews. Furthermore, many of the required answers are likely to be highly repetitive. This is particularly the case of the responses suitable to positive comments.

There are plenty of guides and advice to proceed in writing the answers, although it is not possible to determine exactly how to act in each individual situation. There will be exceptional cases in which experience, sensitivity and common sense will have to be used. Most expert recommendations have a number of common points or general parameters to follow (Brinzan, 2016):

- a. Guests should be thanked and greeted by their name: Even if the review is negative, you should thank them for the time and interest taken. It should not be forgotten that no traveler has an obligation to write reviews.
- b. The name and position of the person replying should identified: This task entails great level of responsibility, so it will have to be performed by a duly trained person with a high degree of independence.
- c. Responses should be posted quickly (and always within 2-3 days). Sometimes it is necessary to carry out a small investigation to identify the client and/or the problem raised.

- d. When the review is negative, the response should include the word “sorry”, even if the problem is not the responsibility of the establishment. This practice would help showing empathy and concern.
- e. The response should include an explanation of the measures to be taken: It is very positive to state that the problem has been detected and that it will be tried to solve. The more details can be given about this, the more satisfied the user will feel and more confidence will generate in those who later read it.
- f. The answer should never include an offer for compensation: Offering a discount or free service publicly can encourage others to include negative reviews in an attempt to also obtain compensation.
- g. Responses should be customised: Using standardized responses should be avoided, as it may give the impression that incidents are not actually read or investigated.
- h. Direct confrontations with customers should be avoided: It does not matter whether we know that *"the customer is not right"*. The answers should always be polite and friendly, even if their aim is to make the client understand that their complaints are ungrounded.

The New Business Management Approach

Businesses, organizations in general and tourism destinations should consider UGC in their marketing plans and communication mix. While managers do not have control over the comments placed online by users, they are able to decide how to act upon these. Business managers and owners may not necessarily agree with the content of the comments placed online, and may even question the knowledge and level of experience of the users posting them. As discussed in a previous section of this chapter, the existence of fake reviews may add further frustration to the already burdensome task of reading, investigating and acting upon the content of reviews by managers. However, ignoring posts is the least effective approach, based on the impact that both reviews and management responses have on bookings, as discussed through a previous section of this chapter.

The importance of responding to reviews for reputation management has already been discussed in a previous section of this chapter. However, there is one more way in which managers may act upon this data. The information that travelers provide through UGC can be, within limits, compared to that one given by traditional service auditors. Furthermore, this information is also comparable to that one that used to be collected through surveys. However, there are some differences that can make the data obtained through UGC even more attractive for businesses than that one given by service auditors and/or customer surveys. First of all, this information is provided for free. Contrary to service auditors and/or surveys, which cost money to run, this information is freely available online. Secondly, it is coming from actual customers, and the customers of establishment. Thus, they provide a detailed insight into the preferences of the type of customer who is likely to stay in that type of hotel are. And thirdly, customers comment on issues that matter to them, rather than on those categories pre-coded by hotel managers when designing their surveys. By collecting and analyzing reviews proactively, businesses can identify and address operational and service-related issues in order to increase satisfaction. This information can help managers making decisions about the “product” they sell and whether this fits the requirements of the market. And based on that, this data may form a very fundamental aspect of the internal audit incorporated in any marketing plan. And while the focus of this analysis has been predominantly placed on the hotel sector, the same applies to destinations, transport, visitor attractions and other tourism organisations.

As explained in previous sections there are companies providing specialized software that captures and measures reviews and social media content. However, little research has been done to investigate the processes by which this information can be turned into knowledge and then

integrated effectively throughout the company. And it is herewith argued that this research is duly needed.

Improving customers' satisfaction is indeed a matter that involves all staff. Thus, it is not enough that information is effectively analysed by managers, but also that efficient processes to share this knowledge with staff need to be developed. From a quantitative point of view, it is possible to keep track of variations in scores over time, and even associate a part of employees salary to scores, as NH and Melia are doing (Delgado, 2014).

In addition, detailed studies can be carried out on the effectiveness of the changes that are introduced. For example, if complaints about coffee or breakfast croissants have been detected and the hotel have changed the suppliers of these products, it is possible to check whether those changes have had a real effect. It is as easy as comparing the percentage of reviews complaining about these aspects before and after making the changes. If we talk about a tourist attraction and the complaints refer to the pre-reservation system, online reviews can also be used to check if the changes made are effective.

This new approach to business management, requires managers to put to a side any preconceptions about what is adequate service, which may be based on their education and/or business experience. The ability to analyze data, its adequate interpretation and the implementation of appropriate actions based on this information, becomes instead a leading role. To take on this new approach it is necessary to be aware of the nature and importance of eWOM, as we have discussed in this chapter.

Finally, consumers' satisfaction is commonly defined as the difference between expectations and performance (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). If marketing communication delivers on the promises (i.e. expectations are met) then consumers will be satisfied but if the company fails to deliver what they promised, consumers will be dissatisfied and write complains, often online. Therefore, this online feedback may also be used to reflect upon the reliability of the promotional material about the establishment.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Big Data: Extreme volume of data coming from a variety of sources that has the potential to be mined and used for business decisions.

EWOM: Electronic Word of Mouth. Any statement made by real customers about a product or service available in the Internet.

Fake Reviews: The practice of falsely representing oneself as a real consumer when writing reviews.

OTAs: Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) are online companies which sell travel related services via the Internet.

Tourism 2.0: Travel sites that use Web 2.0.

UGC: User Generated Content (UGC) is content (text, scores, photos, videos, etc...) that has been created and shared in the Internet by unpaid contributors.

Web 2.0: It refers to the technology currently present in many websites that allows users to create and exchange content in an easy and quick way.