

USERS' REVIEWS ON TOURISM SITES: THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE POTENTIAL TOURISTS

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Abstract

Online reviews represent one of the basic functionalities implemented under the Web 2.0 concept. Implementing the functionality of achieving reviews was made on public platforms and became the de facto standard for all web applications involving interaction between service/products providers and Internet users.

Reviews information sources are used differently: first are followed peripherals clues (synthetic evaluation based on stars or ranking) as a stage of information retrieval and, after that, the processing of basic information (reviews) is shaping the person's choosing alternatives.

The study involved the use of exploratory research method. In this research we have undertaken an investigation which used a survey which was completed by 230 heterogeneous people

The research resulted in finding preferred media information and the type of users who use them.

Throughout our paper, the answers to two core questions concerning the approached theme can be found:

- *How important is, for a potential client, the online information, based on reviews published by other clients, made before choosing a tourist service?*
- *How much do the online reviews influence the decision of buying a travel package?*

During the survey challenges have emerged whose solution requires additional research, thus reinforcing the importance of the chosen theme.

Keywords

Online Reviews, Tourism, User Generated Content, Touristic Web Apps, Potential Tourists, Tourism 2.0

JEL Classification

Z32; L83; L86.

Introduction

Online reviews have become an important source of information. They allow customers to look up detailed and trusted information, based on sharing past consumer experiences. According to the report of Vlachos (2012), about 87% of international tourists have used the Internet to plan their own trips and 43% have read reviews made by other tourists. More specifically, almost half of Internet users have mentioned that they actively read and post reviews after completing their experience with certain products and/or services (Santos, 2014). Tourists' reviews are quite important in the purchase of travel services (e.g., destinations, hotels, restaurants) because people find it difficult to assess the quality of intangible products (in this case, tourist services) before consumption. Therefore, consumers tend to rely on online reviews (a form of electronic "word of mouth" communication), which allow them to obtain enough indirect information and experiences of the same services which have been previously purchased by other persons, in order to reduce the level of perceived expectations (Ye, Law, Gu and Chen, 2011). By taking in account the importance of online reviews, several online communities (for example: TripAdvisor, Yelp, Citysearch, Virtualtour, Booking.com, Trivago, Expedia), which offer platforms that provide tourists' opinions, have gained popularity and have become main sources of information in tourism and hospitality industry. It is important to note that, while the online reviews of tourists, the service consumers, which posted in specialized online social communities are abundant (the so-called DIP), it is difficult for them to process and to judge which are the useful ones. More accurately, detailed travel information which are available via social media, allow people to minimize the costs and efforts, thus stimulating the search for online information. However, many persons have a limited capability to handle a substantial amount of information, fact that leads to an information overload (Frias, Rodriguez and Castaneda, 2008). In other words, there is a tendency that manifests, which seeks to reduce the necessary resources in the search processes and to increase the necessary resources in carrying out cognitive processes (Bellman, Johnson, Lohse and Mandel, 2006). A critical issue in the online tourism marketing is identifying the factors which create the perception of usefulness of the online reviews. It is acknowledged that online websites with very useful reviews offer a higher value potential for the customers and help build their confidence in making a purchasing decision (Sussman and Siegal, 2003).

Based on the previously mentioned facts, it is clear that the online environment, with specific applications subsumed under the concept of Web 2.0, provides the premises for the development of a complex process of choosing tourist services focused on the experience element: the experience of those who have benefited from certain services at some point. If traditional services restricted the users' experience drastically to groups of individuals with whom they come in contact, the online environment has altered the limit of who can receive the messages issued by the customers who have already benefited from those services with tourist character.

The perception of the reception phenomenon as well as the orientation component towards finding online messages with informational character in the field of tourist services is in direct coordinating ratio with the availability of an increasing number of clients who become contributors to specialized sites.

Purpose: the influence of reviews in the user behavior in the tourist market.

Goals: In this context the following questions arise to which answers shall be given:

- How important is, for a potential client, the online information, based on reviews published by other clients, made before choosing a tourist service?
- How much do the online reviews influence the decision of buying a travel package?

1 The reflection of the theme in the specialized literature

The consumer confidence in electronic information systems belonging to the traders increases if there is a mechanism to record the feedback (positive and negative). The feedback is designed to reduce the risk of the transactions (Liu and Park, 2015, p. 141).

The information society of the new millennium has fundamentally reshaped the way information related to tourism is distributed, as well as the way people schedule and consume tourist services.

The Internet is an important channel for tourists and travelers who are searching for information. The consumers rely ever more on user-created content, such as online reviews, in order to plan their journeys in terms of destinations, hotels, attractions, activities and experiences.

Mobility. Access to sites has become much easier and more flexible due to technological improvements, such as smartphones' and tablets' development. Along with this development, applications that are easy to use are available for the users of these devices. Also, the expansion of Wi-Fi and the access to data roaming has led to a wider variety of places from where the clients can access information related to the trip, especially during the holiday. For example, in the Netherlands, statistics collected by CBS show that Internet access has increased from 83% in 2005 to 97% in 2013, while in terms of used devices, mobile phones have increased from 11% in 2005 to 72% in 2013 and other devices (mainly tablets) have increased from 4% in 2005 to 64% in 2013.

The ubiquity of the Internet has constantly attracted more users of web information, and Ye, et al. (2011, p. 634) affirm that: "The results of high-volume surveys have showed that investigating and searching tourist information is one of the most popular online activities". In the Netherlands, in terms of information sought on the Internet, the share of tourist information increased from 34% in 2005 to 54% in 2013, making it the second fastest growing type of requested information of all time.

Tourism is an industry with intensive information; therefore, it is essential to understand the changes in consumer behaviors and technology that impact the distribution and accessibility of information related to travels.

Reports indicate that each year hundreds of millions of potential customers of hotels consult these sites with reviews. 88% of these visitors have made choices influenced by information found on those sites (Tripadvisor.com; European Travel Commission, 2009).

According to Compete, Inc. (2009), the weight of recommendations of hotel sites made through social networks is growing fast (up to 151% since February 2008). We will return to this issue later on.

An interesting observation is that the conversion rate of the recommendations from the social networks towards hotel websites exhibits a tendency of multiannual similar growth, in ratio of 98% per year. Combined, these results indicate that social networks are becoming more and more a source of traffic for hoteliers.

Web 2.0. In the field of tourism, more and more information platforms are based on online data continuously generated by persons. Tourists are both co-creators and users of this type of online content throughout the entire tourist experience: before, during and after the trip. **User-created content** is a phenomenon of electronic communication available through Web 2.0, the second generation of web-based services, which allows people to collaborate and share information online (Cox, et al., 2008). Because of the experiential nature of tourist services of whose quality cannot be previously established, WOM, and more recently, eWOM¹, are frequently invoked by potential tourists to create an image. Therefore, user-created content serves as a source of information for potential tourists.

¹ eWOM = acronym for the expression „electronic Word-of-Mouth" (meaning the transference of information from a person to another, in the online environment). The acronym comes as an extension to WOM (Word-of-Mouth), already existing in the specialized activity.

In the tourism field, **Web 2.0 and Tourism 2.0 have transformed the travelers into well-informed travelers who apply the socializing concept in the tourism industry.** Technology has been a major factor of importance in terms of the way the travelling experience has been modeled. Computerized reservation systems, Global Distribution Systems, creating packages with specialized software assistance, multimedia, mobile technologies, augmented reality, and, more recently, the “wearable” technology and intelligent tourism have added new functionalities and have expanded the possibilities in ways that seem irreplaceable for contemporary tourists.

An important symbol of the Web 2.0, the boom of social websites has also increased the global marketing with regards to tourist destinations. Through social networking sites, tourists can post and share feelings in real time, as well as reviews, opinions and personal experiences during the travels.

Social networking websites. Right now, there are two major tendencies. On the one hand, the so-called social-media sites, representing various forms of user-created content, such as blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks, collaborative labeling and media content shared on sites like YouTube and Flickr, have gained substantial popularity among the tourists who use the Internet. Many of these social media sites help the consumers post and share travel-related comments, opinions and personal experiences, which are used later as information for other users.

At the same time, the Internet also mediates ever more tourist experiences while tourists use these social media sites to portray, rebuild and relive their journeys. On the other hand, due to the large quantity of available information, reputation has become an essential factor. A recent study has shown that search engines serve as the number one information source for American and European families in the context of holiday planning (European Travel Commission, 2013).

Since there is no formal definition of “social media”, it can be generally understood as being a set of Internet-based applications that help the transport of user-created content, which include “media impressions revealed by the consumers (informed, contributors with data usually obtained through personal experience) and archived or distributed online, in order to be easily accessed by other impressionable users” (Tuominen, 2011, p. 4).

As Pasi Tuominen mentions (2011, p. 5), online tourist reviews represent a significant amount of social media for touristic purposes. In this context, the success of sites such as TripAdvisor or Zagat may be mentioned.

The spectacular growth of social media content and user-created content on the Internet provides a vast amount of information that allows the access of an inexperienced user to knowledge about the experiences, opinions, and feelings of other tourists or clients.

The improvement of a site’s the social presence can be achieved by the presence of useful reviews.

In the field of tourism, most authors agree on the importance of user-created content in constructing tourist destinations images through the eWOM effect and associate the travel blogs, online tourist or product consumer reviews, with rich sources of user-created content. In the field of tourism and hospitality, a **relative decrease of travel blogs** can be seen, alongside of **an extraordinary increase in sites with online reviews**, particularly in the hospitality sector. For example, in January 2015, TripAdvisor stated that it has reached more than 200 million reviews and opinions, Trivago has reached 140 million user comments about hotels, Booking has collected 43 million verified reviews (meaning that the users had been in referred location) and Expedia has gathered 11 million user reviews. Taking these numbers into account, user-created content must be identified as a valuable source of data, which is useful for managing intelligent cities and intelligent tourist destinations.

Word of mouth. Consumers use more and more eWOM to share opinions and experiences about products and services. On the Internet, we can find a huge amount of content about entertainment and the supply of reviews on products and services, such as business, restaurants and hotels. Along with the spread of Internet use, virtual interactions between consumers have become something usual, which has led some tourism researchers to point out that eWOM plays an important role in transposing and maintaining the consumers in an era of electronic commerce.

With the help of the Internet, the information is no longer controlled solely by mass-media, news agencies or large enterprises. Everybody can share their thoughts with millions of Internet users and can influence the decisions of others through eWOM.

The eWOM influence applies directly in tourism and hospitality, as Pan, et al. (2007) have stated that user-created online reviews are an important source of information for travelers. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) have also stressed that tourist reviews are often perceived to be more prone to provide current, pleasant and reliable information, in comparison to the content posted by travel service providers. Even more, Goldenberg, et al. (2001) have showed that the decision-making process of a consumer is strongly influenced by WOM.

In comparison to the traditional “word of mouth”, specific features of eWOM include: great and fast spread of information, within a short time, centered on the anonymous character and the transcendence of time and space (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004).

User-created content, influenced by eWOM, significantly determines the crystallization of the image related to the tourist destinations. This is mentioned in several studies.

eWOM has reached a new level, thanks to technological advance, often associated with the term Web 2.0 that allows each consumer who holds a computer to publish opinions or evaluations regarding products and services.

Furthermore, these “comments published by the consumers on the Internet are available to a great number of consumers, fact that is expected to lead to a significant impact on the success of goods and services” (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2004). Based on the nature of the Internet, these comments and reviews of consumers are archived and are available to other (potential) consumers for a long period of time - regardless of time and space. Online available information plays an important role in the processes of gathering information and making decisions. Online user reviews about destinations, hotels and travel services have become important sources of information for travelers. Every year, hundreds of millions of potential visitors consult these online reviews (TripAdvisor, 2012). Academic investigations are also interested in studying this behavior. Goldenberg, et al. (2001) have observed that decision-making processes are strongly influenced by WOM from other consumers. In addition, Gretzel and Yoo (2008) have also noticed that the reviews provided by other tourists are often perceived by readers as being current, pleasant and more reliable than the information provided by the service providers. In particular, when it comes to intangible products, such as the tourist services, consumers are using more and more others’ online reviews and recommendations for advice (Schemmann, 2011, pp. 2-5).

- In 95% of the chosen sources we can talk about “free-style text and structured text”.
- In 95% of the chosen sources evaluations/ratings have been found.
- In 56% of the chosen sources recommendations made by consumers have been found.
- In 29% of the chosen sources pictures and videos have been found.
- In 24% of the chosen sources buttons have been found under reviews showing if the review is helpful – “Ratings of helpfulness”.
- In 64% of the chosen sources characteristics have been found of the reviewer.

Reviews. Without facing the hotel or the chosen destination, tourists have a limited opportunity to evaluate the quality of service, in order to see if their expectations will be fulfilled. Holidays are intangible goods that are produced and consumed in the same time and are, therefore, difficult to assess before being consumed.

The information sources of reviews are used in a differential mode: firstly, the peripheral indications are monitored (synthetic evaluation based on stars or ranking) as an information searching phase, then the basic information processing is the one that decisively influences the person’s alternatives

Online users perceive positive or negative evaluation (based on stars, one star - five stars) as more useful than moderate evaluation (three stars) (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, et al., 2009).

A research in the field of online complaints concerning the Hong Kong hotels showed that most of the complaints were related to the service provision, representing 54% of the cases of registered complaints. These complaints have involved aspects of the staff behavior as being rude or excessively slow, as shown in the consumer complaints. Also, another study found that the most common complaint in online of hotel guests were related to rude behaviors of employees, low quality of service, as well as the lack of services.

Positive online reviews significantly contribute to an increase in hotel bookings and lead to a positive attitude towards the less known hotels, while negative reviews are leading the consumers towards a negative attitude concerning the hotel. The balance between the positive and the negative reviews of a product or service that are presented on a web site might influence consumers' assessments. Negative reviews seem to have a greater impact when compared to the positives because the service errors, described in the negative comments, are perceived as losses and receive a negative assessment from a consumer. Also, some researches have revealed that the reviews with more content also have a positive effect over the perception of usefulness of reviews.

Ye, et al. (2011) have evaluated the impact of user-created content on the business’s performance, using data from a major tourism agency from China. The results indicate that the purchasing decisions of tourists are strongly influenced by online reviews of travelers.

A recent study for the tourist sector from Germany shows that 62% of the 2,000 interviewed Germans claimed that the online reviews and the comments of other consumers have had an impact on their holiday-related decisions (Schemmann, 2011). Especially when it comes to choosing a hotel or a destination, consumers rely very much on user reviews published on the Internet (idem). The products offered in the tourism sector are mostly services and, therefore, are intangible in nature. Intangible assets are, usually, hard to describe and, therefore, “[...] consumers tend to rely on data transmitted from mouth-to-mouth from an experienced source in order to reduce the risk of uncertainty and perception” (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008, p. 36).

By mentioning the identity of the author of the message, trust is developed concerning the information of the review, assert Liu and Park (2015, p. 142).

The author's reputation. Online information provided by an expert are considered to be more useful, and seem to have a greater influence on the attitude towards the product/service and purchase intent, compared to those provided by non-experts.

Along with the expertise, the author’s reputation is an essential indicator, which distinguishes one author from another. Helm and Mark (2007) stated that by reputation do the readers assess how honest, concerned about others and constant over a long period of the time is the review’s author.

More sites with tourism and hospitality specificity (Yelp.com, TripAdvisor.com) have established an online system based on the author's reputation online to assist the respective site's users to find, distribute and amplify the feedback associated with the previous behavior of reviews' authors in online community.

From psycho-social perspective, the effect of reputation signalizes mostly a social validation and improves the credibility (Cialdini, 2001). Therefore, consumers can use the reputation as an indicator of the quality of information in order to reduce the uncertainties regarding this issue. Gueguen and Jacob (2002) assert that due to the online environment, which limits interaction compared to the face-to-face communication, reviews created by authors with a privileged status can create a better understanding in online groups, so that reputation can be used as an heuristic indicator (self-determination).

The next natural step was to evaluate the reviews, as it happened in the case of articles from magazines, that have made a name for themselves for spreading verified information that were, of course, credible and high-quality. The system for evaluating the usefulness of the reviews (peer reviewing systems) has led to the separation of the important reviews from the rest and to suggestions that are offered so that the users might be able to filter the numerous reviews in order to be efficient in taking the desired decisions. From the perspective of re-sellers (retailers), the usefulness of the reviews can be used as a primary method in analyzing how consumers assess a review.

Last but not least, the perceived pleasure and degree of understanding of reviews are analyzed as measurable elements of the posts' quality.

The results of this research (Liu and Park, pp. 147-149) reveal that reviews with authors who reveal their identities are evaluated as being more useful. Unlike reviews ratings, empirical results also imply that the message recipients perceive the longer reviews as more useful than the shorter ones.

From the perspective of utility, it has been highlighted that positive reviews are perceived as being more useful than negative or moderate ones, as well as other way around: a negative review is deemed to be more credible than a positive review. Moreover, some researches have revealed that along with the increasing percentage of negative reviews, the negative attitude of consumers also escalates (Lee, Park and Han, 2008).

The legibility of the text reflects the social status, level of education, and the social hierarchy of the author. Therefore, reviews the high legibility are treated as being more trustworthy than reviews with low legibility, in other words, the source is more reliable. By contrast, reviews which have not been rated as useful have been deemed to be too emotional or biased or don't provide enough information. Korfiatis, García-Bariocanal and Sanchez-Alonso (2012) supported the fact that the legibility of a review has a great influence than its length. The same thing is seconded by Liu and Park (2015): "The legibility of a review has a positive effect regarding its usefulness".

Positive attitude promotes trust in the online environment. If a reviewer usually posts negative reviews (his rating is below the average), writes a good review, readers will form different opinions, such as "If even such a reviewer recommends this tourist attraction, it must be pretty interesting!"

Support Applications. The performance of the products/services in the field of tourism seems to be influenced by online reviews. According to Collie (2014), 65% of leisure travelers search information online before they decide on a tourist destination, and 69% of their plans are determined by the comments of other users online. Previous research (Fang, et al., 2016) also stated that tourists take into account reviews of other tourists who have visited a particular destination, to plan a vacation.

TripAdvisor has implemented a characteristic feature called "*Was this review helpful?*" to help travelers to quickly identify the most useful comments of all reviews. To evaluate the review, readers can press a button labeled "Yes". Through this feature, travelers can easily find the most voted comments by other users as being useful.

For a hotel evaluation, the reviews' content is less important, because its quality can be mostly assessed through the stars and score for different aspects, such as cleaning, the environment, etc. Reviews' content relating to the hotels is more likely to provide details and support the previous ratings.

Economic implications. Many travel companies have also acknowledged the importance of including user-generated content created by consumers on their websites, usually in the form of edited testimonials (e.g. VisitPA.com and Sheraton.com). This is a pretty speculative form of using reviews, but their attention directed to draw attention to the phenomenon of forming views and decision making based on this type of information.

Regarding the international tourism, in countries in which this industry is developed, it has been noticed that there is a substantial relationship between the number of reviews and the average daily rate and revenue per available room, the correlation being greater than 0.6. The result has also showed that the number of online reviews can significantly increase the level of occupancy of a hotel but linear correlation between these variables was not clear, the correlation being 0.5 with significant variation between cities (Tuominen, 2011, p. 8).

Relying on the assumption that the number of reviews per room of a hotel corresponds to the sales per room, Ogut and Tas (2012) have evaluated the effect of evaluation scores and ratings with stars not only on selling hotel rooms, but also on their price. The study found that while the star ratings do not affect sales, improving customer evaluations increases the sales and the price of hotel rooms. Ye, et al. (2011) have investigated a website with

online reviews and have noticed that a 10% increase in tourism reviews rating can increase the number of online hotel reservations by more than 5%.

A relatively recent study from the United Kingdom has revealed that consumers tend to trust in websites with reviews rather than professional guides and travel agencies (Hidalgo Alcázar, et al., 2014). Similarly, Oellrich and Bauhuber (2007) showed that online reviews of users have a high credibility rate among consumers from Germany and Austria. Furthermore, a study on the users of the website Tripadvisor found that checking reviews, comments and blogs related to tourism was the most popular activity online (Hidalgo Alcázar, et al., 2014, p. 2).

Recently, the credibility and the trust rates of consumers concerning comments began to be questioned in the specialized literature, while the false reviews seem to become increasingly more frequent.

2 Methodology

The research method used is exploratory research.

Exploratory research represents an initial study, with different levels of complexity, meant to clarify, define and identify the basic aspects of a theme or a marketing opportunity. It allows a deeper understanding of concepts and the essence of the respective processes and phenomena, providing, therefore, quality information

The used method of obtaining the data in this exploratory research is investigation, and to obtain the data we have used a questionnaire.

The questionnaire, presented in Annex 1, has been distributed online to a test-group, made up of local people, who use tourist services.

The test-group consisted of 230 subjects with different ages, occupations and levels of training.

The questionnaire has 15 questions, which were grouped in several chapters, after a previously made analysis of the field's specialized literature:

- Sources of information used by the respondents (questions 1-4)
- Rating systems (questions 5-8)
- The behavior of the respondents in terms of reviews(questions 9-11)
- Identification and classification of respondents (questions 12-15).

The questionnaire consists of 14 closed questions and one combined question.

The conception of questions has been a distinctive activity with the target being their quality. Several rules and principles that exist in the specialized literature have been taken into account (Cătoiu and Bălan, 2002):

- the questions are short, having, in most cases, only one subject and one predicate;
- the chosen words are simple and clear, in order to avoid any ambiguity;
- the words that have been used in the questions are taken from the basic vocabulary of the respondents, not the researchers';
- the questions are formulated in specific ways, as not to lead to a certain answer
- the words used are specifically chosen in order to avoid the distortion of the answers;
- the questions have a neutral tone.

The questionnaire was completed by checking one or several options of answer.

The research period was between March 21 and April 4, 2016 and has been conducted online, data being automatically collected through Google-Forms.

The used scale types are: nominal scale and ordinal scale. The scaling method chosen for this research is the semantic differential.

Data processing was performed on a personal computer, connected to the Internet, using Google-Forms and Microsoft Office Excel. In order to achieve an analysis as complete as possible, the graphic observation has also been observed. For this reason, the synthetic numeric data have been represented in the form of diagrams. These charts are presented in the content of paper.

3 Results

Out of the total of 230 respondents, it has been recorded that 75% of the respondents were females. From the point of view of age, 58% are young, less than 25 years old, 12% are between 26 and 35 years old, 22% are adults between the ages of 36 and 50 years of age, while 8% are adults over the age of 50.

The level of training of the respondents was as follows: 32% with secondary education, 50% with undergraduate education and 18% with post-graduate studies. The respondents fall into the following categories of income: 34% are without income, 28% have an income of up to RON 1,500, 28% have an income between RON 1,501 and RON 3,000, while 10% have an income greater than or equal to RON 3,001.

Having in mind to emphasize how important is the online information, for a potential client, based on reviews published by other clients, made before choosing a tourist service the very first question is centered upon which is the more trustworthy information environment. To this first question multiple responses were allowed.

From the test-group, we can see that the respondents have more trust in the direct communication (face-to-face/by telephone), and then in the Internet. It should be noted that there are 92 respondents who have chosen only the "Direct Communication" answer, 61 respondents who have chosen only the "Internet" answer, but there are also 32 respondents who have chosen both options. Also, it can be observed that the respondents have chosen, in most cases, a single information environment which they consider reliable. In Fig. 1 the weight of the answers is presented, as a graph, for the first question.

To the question "Which are the information sources that you trust when choosing a hotel?" respondents were allowed to select multiple answers. From the answers to this question it can be seen that the respondents have the most trusted persons, when choosing a hotel, are the family/friends/acquaintances - 167 options, which we can assume that it was expected. The respondents also have much trust in reviews. Among reviews, the more reliable reviews are considered those of online users, or independent authors. It is interesting to observe that in terms of trust when choosing a hotel, the advertising information category is on the last place.

Following to discover at what extent are the respondents influenced by the reviews of consumers from tourism sites, it can be seen that most of the respondents are influenced in a great fashion by the reviews provided by other users on the tourism sites.

It can be seen from the answers to the question number 6 that the respondents, who are influenced by the reviews of consumers, are influenced to the same extent by consumer comments. In the methodology of the questionnaire it has been taken into account the examination of answer correctness of the respondents, through some questions with very similar values. The questions were placed in different places in order to eliminate the effect of remanence (automatically giving a certain answer, determined by a previous question's formulation).

The number of answers from "to a small extent" to "a big influence" is very high for the respondents aged less than 25 years old. This phenomenon is directly related to the large number of respondents that fall into this age category, as can be seen in Fig. 4. Unlike the first age category, the respondents aged between 26-35 years tend to have a balance from the point of view of the options expressed for the same options described above.

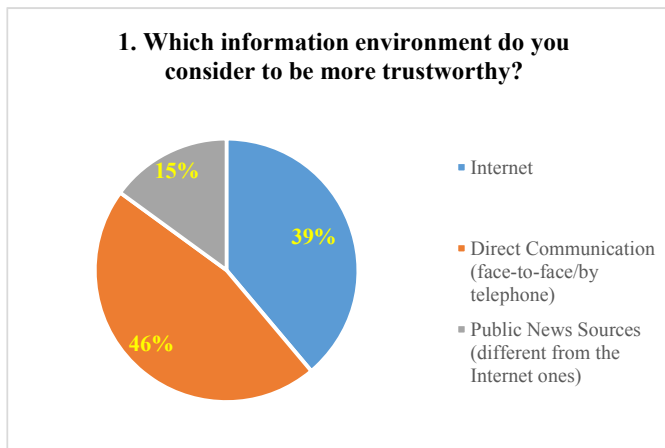


Figure no. 1: The weight of answers by options for question 1
 Source: based on research conducted by author

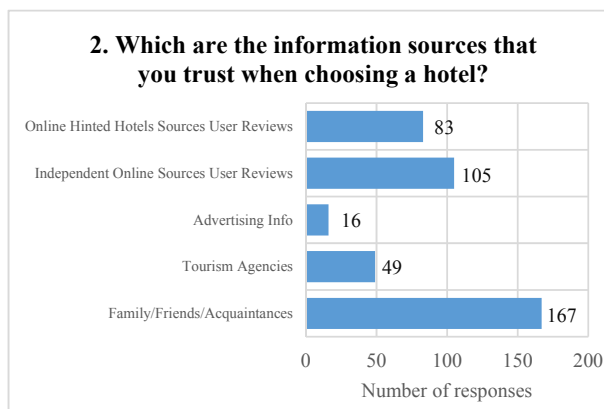


Figure no. 2: Answer diagram by options for question 2
 Source: based on research conducted by author

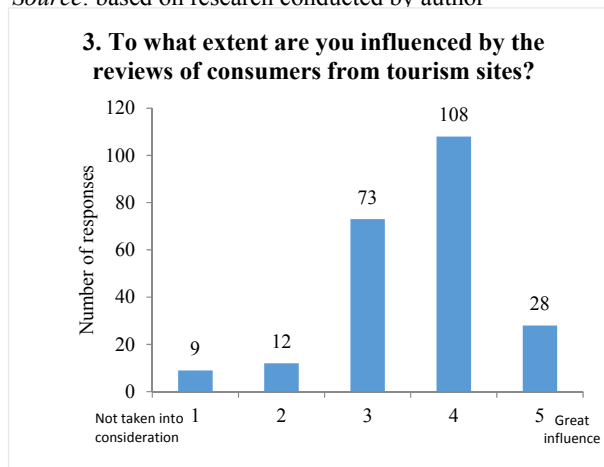


Figure no. 3: Histogram of the answers by options for question 3.
 Source: based on research conducted by author

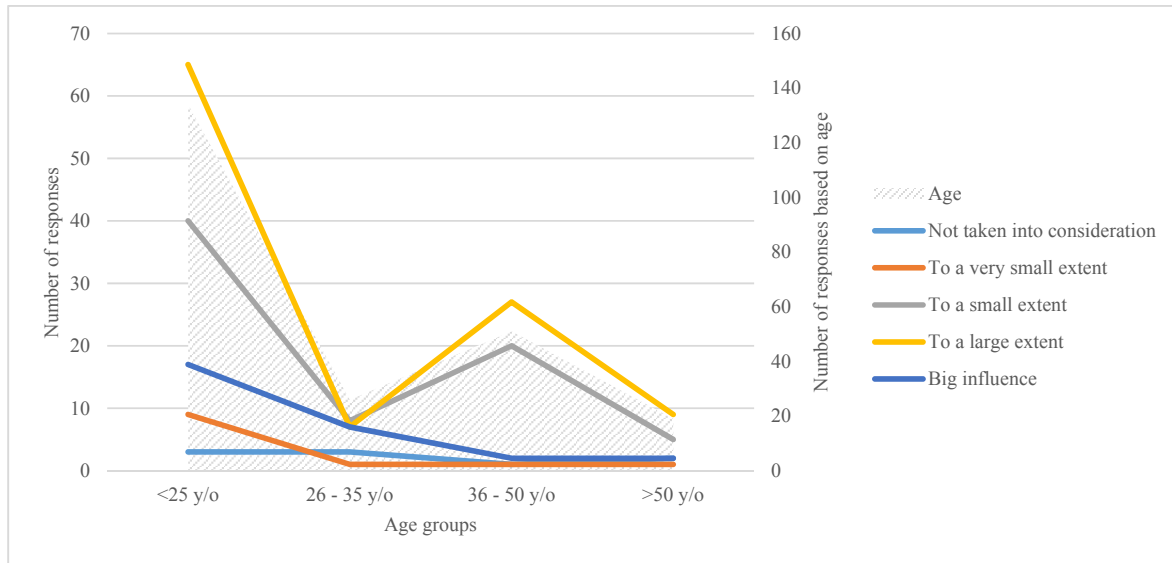


Figure no. 4: Complex diagram representing the extent to which the respondents are influenced by reviews, based on age

Source: based on research conducted by author

Particularly interesting is the fact that in the category of 36-50 years the presence of a conservatism phenomenon can be observed, which makes the answers of extremes negligible.

Analyzing the answers to question 3 (Figure 5), in the context of separating the respondents based of their education level, we can notice a balance (the lines do not overlap) that increase along with the level of education of the respondents. The descending arc made towards post-graduate category can be explained by the fact that the number of respondents who belong to this category was relatively low.

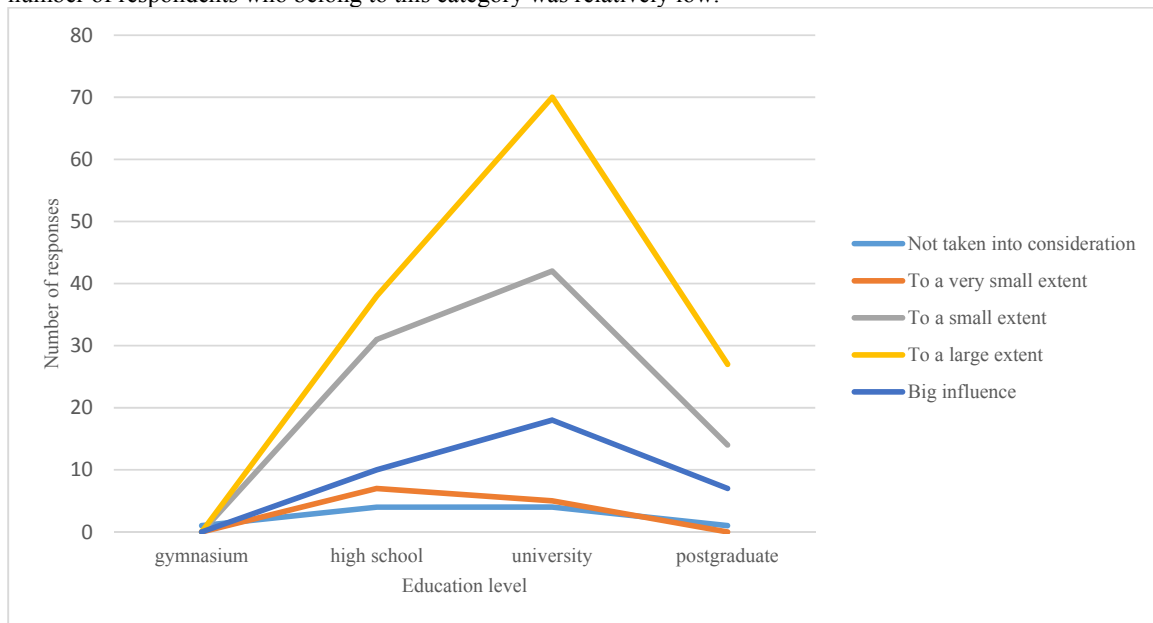


Figure no. 5: Complex diagram representing the extent to which the respondents are influenced by reviews, based on the education level.

Source: based on research conducted by author

Based on the analysis of the correlation between the gender of the respondents and the extent they are influenced by the reviews of consumers from tourism sites, it can be seen that there are no differences in terms of the answers given by the persons of different gender. There is no association between variables, the test value that indicates 2.045 for 4 degrees of freedom, for $\alpha = 0.05$.

The target of the question “*Which of the following sources have you consulted?*” is to find out which are the most consulted sources in terms of online hotel reservation platforms. By having the option of multiple-variants, the respondents have created, through their answers, the next hierarchy:

- Booking - 157 answers (68.3%)
- TripAdvisor - 74 answers (32.2%)
- Trivago - 57 answers (24.8%)
- Virtual Tourist - 16 answers (7%)
- Others - 15 answers (6.5%)

A positive aspect is the fact that the respondents have come up with proposals for new sources (platforms) of which mostly are Romanian: Infoturism.ro; Amfostacolo.ro; Infopensiuni.ro; Infoturist.ro; Vola.ro; Vacantereduse.ro; Turist.info etc.

The answers to question “*To what extent do you use online sources of information in the field of tourism, compared to any other sources?*” are in correlation with the answers given to question number 2, concerning the sources of information which are considered as more trustworthy when choosing a hotel. A majority of respondents (65%) largely use online information sources, as compared to other sources, which is a good sign.

As mentioned, when the questionnaire had been made, the question number 6 was linked with the question number 3.

Based on the answers to number 6 question (*To what extent are you accustomed to take into consideration user comments on blogs and websites of online trading?*), particularly, it can be noticed that the number of “To a very great extent” answers is moderate. The maximum number of responses was recorded for the variant “To a great extent” - 94 (over 40%).

Regarding which rating system believe the respondents to be more useful (in question number 7), had to be answered by a single option and the respondents have deemed the next rating systems as useful, with the respective rate:

- 42.6% - both systems (comments and by stars/grades);
- 38.3% - rating system based on comments;
- 17% - synthetic rating system (stars/grades).

From these answers, it can be seen that most of the respondents prefer rating systems that offer more information regarding tourist services, information which cannot always be deducted from the stars-based rating systems. The potential users of tourist services must be very familiar with the synthetic rating system itself

Searching the answer to an important question regarding how much the respondents rely on the synthetic rating system (stars) of the services quality of a hotel, we found that a significant percentage (40%) of the respondents to this question was in the middle range in terms of the extent to which they rely on a synthetic evaluation system provided by users. A linear tendency of growth towards the rating of “To a very great extent” can be observed.

The answers given by respondents to question “*Do you contribute with reviews after your personal experience with an accommodation tourist service?*” are interesting, namely the fact that a percentage of 10% always contribute with reviews after having used a tourist service, and 8% contribute with reviews, if they were unsatisfied, 5% if they were satisfied. As anyone can see (Fig. 6), basically, less than one-quarter of respondents contribute with reviews after their personal experience with a tourist service. The category of those who sometimes contribute with reviews should not be left aside, 56%, who might turn into users who might always offer reviews.

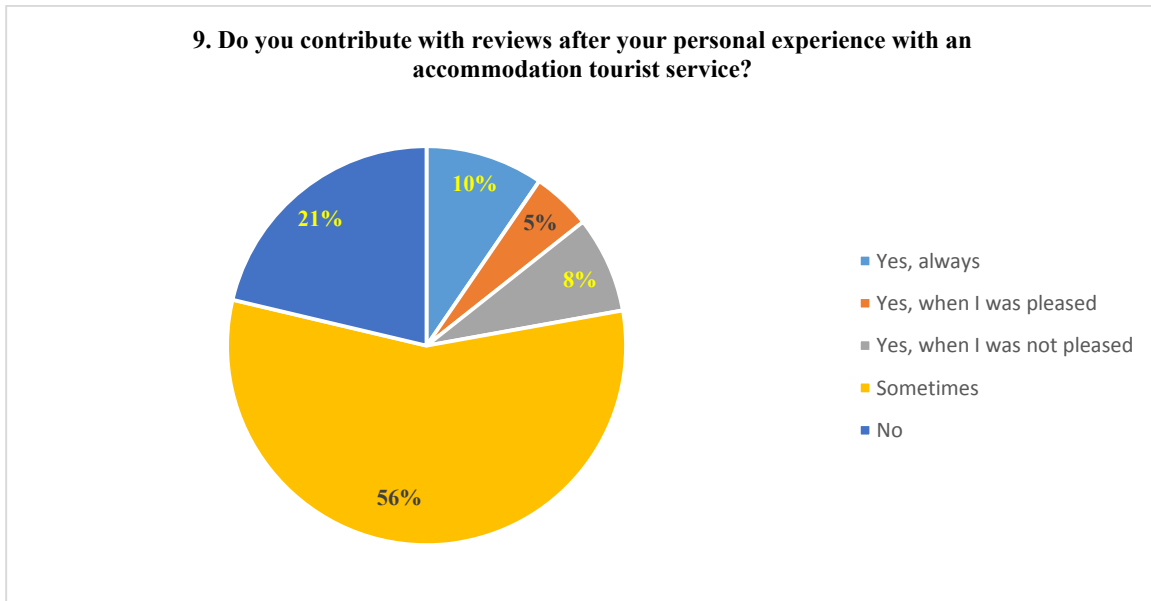


Figure no. 6: The weight of the answers by options for question 9.

Source: based on research conducted by author

The vast majority of respondents (94%) consider that the comments sections are easy to access on the tourist sites. Analyzing how accessible respondents consider that the *comments section* (reviews) is on the tourist websites we can see that this majority does not correlate with the number of those who use these platforms or with the number of those who contribute with reviews.

According to the feedback of the participants in the study, independent sites ratings determine the choice of a hotel to a significant extent. This is also supported by the amplitude of linear trend (Fig. 7).

It is very likely that the respondents who have opted for “To a very small extent” and “To a small extent” to belong to the category of respondents who use the Internet less and rely more on other sources in making decisions. It should be point out that the number of answers for the “To a great extent” option is also pretty low.

Both observations lead to the conclusion that there is a need for training in the field of making decisions on the information plane and even with regard to information culture.

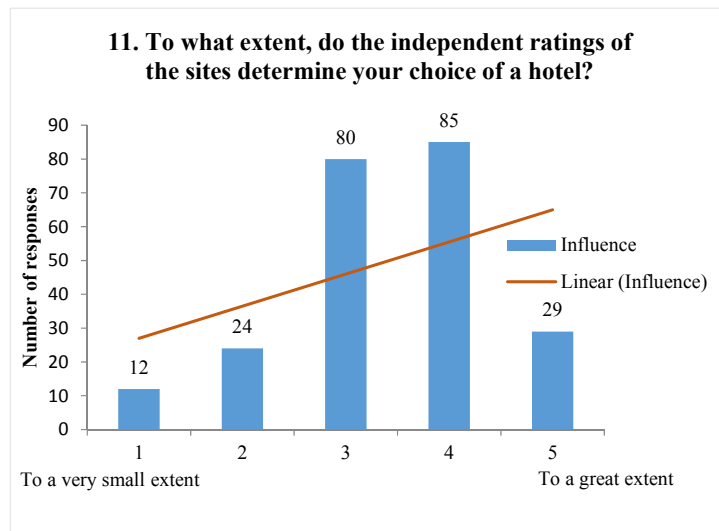


Figure no. 7: Histogram of the answers by options for question 11

Source: based on research conducted by author

Conclusions

The current research confirms the initial hypothesis which was that the tendency to use technology in the information field for making decision is increasing, along with the increasing complexity, determined by the users' requirements.

User requirements also derive from the complexity of professional systems, which, as they evolve, they go from a strictly professional commercial area, used by specialized agencies, to the public information area, with free access to an amount of specific information. Examples in this regard are the sites for information aggregation and web publishing for public, such as *skiplagged.com* (Digi24, 2016).

In Romania, both commercial applications, which are operated by private tourist sector and from the interdisciplinary fields and applications with free access for users, available on the Internet, are used. The users do not fully trust these resources, on the one hand because the platforms/applications do not have complete databases of all the service providers of touristic and related interests, and, on the other hand, due to their own training deficiencies and a low degree of specialized information, which originated in the lack of information culture in the context of formal education. The previous statements also support the observation according to which the respondents to the questionnaire trust, in a percentage of 46%, in direct communication-in person or by telephone (Figure 1).

A future alternative with a potential catalyst might be the applications produced by neutral agents (individuals or organizations that do not have commercial interest) (BVAU, 2016) that can overcome the limitations of current systems in which participation is conditioned by enrolment and/or exploitation costs. This is also proven by the answers of the respondents to questions 2 and 5, which show that 65% use, to a great extent, online sources of information.

From the perspective of the second proposed goal of the present research, it can be said that there is a rising availability which is based on the popularity of online platforms that offer the right to the users to express their opinions and become content contributors in the field of interest and/or expertise.

Online reviews are currently a market phenomenon that is evolving, and **play an important role in the decision-making process**. This aspect is well represented by Liu and Park (2015, p. 149).

One's contribution through review represents a communication-type social component from one to many, and the action of a tourist basing his decision on the reviews made by those who had been before him in a location or have received a particular service represents a social-economic component (targets the quality of the tourist's life, as well as an economic efficiency). The fact that reviews can be made by specialized organizations, not just individuals, should not be ignored.

The greater the degree of the use of review applications of web functionalities, the more effective will the information process be. The consequence will be an enhanced granulation (greater attention towards details) concerning the clients' requirements addressed to the tourism and interdisciplinary service providers. Another aspect that will be determined by this process is the way the operators will conceive the tourist products and services in the future.

We can conclude by stating that online reviews have a social-economic influence with a market effect.

Future research possibilities. At the end of this research, many questions have emerged, which might take shape in further researches.

It would be useful for the study to be extended in order to find out how many of those who relied on favorable reviews have found the same conditions and services as the ones from the assessments, when arriving at their destination. In this context, one of the framework questions must be: "Did you find the researched reviews to be true when you have arrived at your destination?" Therefore, the topic of a future research may focus on researching the degree of impact the online reviews have on travel services.

Also, an additional area of interest, is researching the degree of uniformity in the implementation of synthetic evaluation scores in different web applications in profile. This additional research ought to also address a comparative study of the terms and conditions stipulated by the different providers of tourist services on their online platforms.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Users' Reviews on Tourism Sites Study: Their Influence on the Potential Tourists

Dear Sir / Madam,

Please take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire, which is helpful for conducting scientific research in the Faculty of Business and Tourism (Academy of Economic Studies).

Some questions allow multiple responses.
Completion of the questionnaire is anonymous.

*Mandatory

1. Which information environment do you consider to be more trustworthy? *

- Internet
- Direct Communication (face-to-face/by telephone)
- Public News Sources (different from the Internet ones)

2. Which are the information sources that you trust when choosing a hotel? *

- Online Hinted Hotels Sources User Reviews
- Independent Online Sources User Reviews
- Advertising Info
- Tourism Agencies
- Family/Friends/Acquaintances

3. To what extent are you influenced by the reviews of consumers from tourism sites? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not taken into consideration Great influence

4. Which of the following sources have you consulted? *

- TripAdvisor
- Booking.com
- Virtual Tourist
- Trivago
- None of the above
- Others: _____

5. To what extent do you use online sources of information in the field of tourism, compared to any other sources? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all To a very great extent

6. To what extent are you accustomed to take into consideration user comments on blogs and websites of online trading? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all To a very great extent

7. Which of the following rating systems do you believe to be more useful? *

- Synthetic rating system (stars/grades)
- Rating system based on comments
- Both systems (comments and by stars/grades)
- None of the above

8. To what extent do you rely on the synthetic rating system (stars) of the services quality of a hotel rated by users? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all To a very great extent

9. Do you contribute with reviews after your personal experience with an accommodation tourist service? *

- Yes, always
- Yes, when I was pleased
- Yes, when I was not pleased
- Sometimes
- No

10. How accessible do you consider that the comments section (reviews) is on the tourist websites? *

1 2 3 4 5

Very easy to access Very hard to access

11. To what extent, do the independent ratings of the sites determine your choice of a hotel? *

1 2 3 4 5

To a very small extent To a great extent

Statistical Data

12. Gender *

- Female
- Male

13. Age *

- Less than 25 years old
- Between 26 and 35 years old
- Between 36 and 50 years old
- Over 50 years old

14. What is your monthly NET income? *

- Without income
- Up to RON 1.500
- Between RON 1.501 and RON 3.000
- Greater than or equal to RON 3.001

15. What is your education level? (last graduated studies) *

- Gymnasium studies
- High school studies
- University studies
- Postgraduate studies

SUBMIT