

The importance of communicating to the Russian guests in their own language in Finnish hotels

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Degree programme Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management	
Report/thesis title The importance of communicating to the Russian guests in their own language in Finnish hotels	Number of pages and appendix pages 29 + 3
<p>The aim of this thesis was to discover the gap between Russian guests' language expectations and Finnish hoteliers' responsiveness to these expectations. The examined hotels were limited to Helsinki region and examined travellers were limited to incoming Russian visitors in order to achieve deep understanding of the relations between these specific service providers and service consumers, and to be able to give managerial recommendations based on the results of study.</p> <p>The time span of the thesis writing process was six month, a bigger part of which was dedicated to thorough literature review, caused by the lack of relevant literature by the Russian researchers. The theoretical background is built upon the discovered English-language literature, both modern and relatively old, to follow the change of viewpoints throughout the development of hospitality industry. The theoretical review resulted in aims which were implemented in the empirical part.</p> <p>The methods employed in the thesis include literature review for the theoretical framework and statistical analysis, qualitative and quantitative analyses of both hotels' pages and their guests' online comments for the empirical part. These methods helped to detect certain gaps between the Russian guests' language needs and Finnish hotels' response to these needs, giving opportunities to improve service quality.</p> <p>In the end of this work the implications of the findings are provided both for hotel managers and prospective employees. The directions for further research are also suggested, based on theoretical framework and the empirical findings.</p>	
Keywords Helsinki hotels, Russian travellers, Russian language, online reviews.	

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1 Introduction

Russian travellers are known for their poor English language skills when they travel abroad and there are a few reasons for that. First of all, English has not always been the first choice foreign language to learn at school, it may have been German or French instead. Secondly, the teaching level left much to be desired and even starting at an early school age the pupils often reached no significant result by the time they graduated from school; after that they encountered the same torture at the university. So, English-learning left a permanent childhood trauma erasing all motivation a person might have possessed. Thirdly, the iron curtain fell quite recently, meaning that only recently Russian people became able to actually practice their English language skills, and practice is the most important aspect of any language learning. Finally, many big countries, including Russia, are known for their lack of foreign language skills, since they have so many fellow-citizens speaking the same language and they are able to travel a lot within their own countries.

I have encountered many Russian tourists who speak little or no foreign language at all and still they travel abroad. Even though I knew the abovementioned reasons, I used to wonder how someone would go abroad without being able to speak at least English, and thus suffering the risk of getting lost in a foreign city, not being able to get some basic necessities, communicate with a doctor and so on, especially considering that some 10 years ago the mobile Internet with Google Translate and similar tools was not widespread. After a few years of work and studies in hospitality industry my point of view altered: I noticed that most of non-English speakers are extremely pleased when someone abroad speaks, or tries to speak, their language, and Russians are no exception. When someone abroad tries speaking Russian to me – I, too, feel touched with the personal approach I receive, even though I can speak several other languages. So, language is not always a necessity for the guest, but sometimes a pleasant surprise and bonus, an important tool to build a strong competitive advantage and to increase guests' loyalty. I have also discovered quite a few countries, even in Europe, where service in English is not guaranteed, however I travel there myself, not letting language barriers stop me from seeing the world. So, I stopped questioning the sanity of linguistically unable travellers and started thinking how hotels could gain competitive advantage by speaking their guests' language. While I still think it is the traveller's own concern if he or she cannot communicate in a foreign country, I see it as a chance for hotels to stand out by solving this problem and by offering to the guests more personalized service, which would help a hotel to create a long-lasting bond with its grateful guests who, once attracted, will turn into loyal customers thanks to such a personal approach.

Applying such point of view to Finnish hospitality industry seems reasonable since year by year business relations between Finland and Russia are expanding. Even though in 2014 number of Russian visitors dropped by 22%, Russia still remains the biggest foreign market for Helsinki (Visit Helsinki 2015). Naturally, many hotels target Russian customers, seeking different ways to attract them. Some revenue managers keep track of the dates of Russian holidays, during which many Helsinki residents can witness the increase of Russian tourists (for example during the New Year season when most Russians have official 10-14 days vacations), making special offers for Russians for those days. Many hoteliers hire Russian-speaking employees to make the Russian guests feel more welcome and more loyal to their business, which also helps to increase upselling by providing more detailed information about available products and services. And most of those focusing on Russian visitors provide at least some information in Russian in their websites and brochures. Are they however putting enough effort to attract and keep Russian visitors? It's necessary to be able to distinguish potential markets and customer groups, but it's also vital to be able to find a way to attract those customer groups, to answer to their needs and wants and to keep them.

In the scope of this thesis I will analyze existing literature on importance of using guests' own languages in service industry and whether the hotels are paying enough attention to their guests' linguistic needs. Based on the literature review the research problem will aim to detect a possible gap between guests' language needs and hotels' willingness to answer to them. This will be done with the help of two objectives: to examine Russian guests' language needs and expectations by scrutinizing their online reviews and to analyze hotels own webpages. These objectives are addressed in the empirical part leading to a discussion, where implications are provided both for managers and employees and for further research.

2 Theoretical framework

Most literature on service quality assumes that service provider and consumer speak the same language (Holmqvist 2011, 178). It can be either local language for domestic tourists, or the English language for international travellers. In many situations this is indeed the case, and it is easier to ignore the language barrier issues in order to be able to focus on other aspects of marketing communication. However, for this research the cases where the language barrier would negatively affect the experience of the guest will be taken into consideration. There are still not enough studies analyzing the importance of the consumer's mother tongue usage in hotel business, especially with respect to the Russian-speaking guests. Even more surprisingly, being a native Russian speaker, I have found no studies by Russian researchers concentrating on the language barriers experienced by Russian travellers.

According to numerous studies, perceptions of quality by service providers (i.e. hotel employees and hotel owner) and service receivers (guests) tend to differ at times. The biggest gap between guests' expectations and perceptions occurs in the field of communication, while some hotel managers are sure the service quality is high and projects a good image (Juwaheer & Ross, 2003; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). As discovered by Mauritian Ministry of Tourism and Leisure (1999, in Juwaheer & Ross 2003, 105) the service quality perception is impaired by poor language skills of the employees. Juwaheer & Ross (2003, 112) also mention that in general the hotel managers have no clue what their guests consider important.

It is extremely important that hotel managers understand their guests' needs in order to make their business successful, also with the help of their webpages. More and more international visitors are coming to the hotels thus making multilingual sites a necessity. It is recommended for the hoteliers to analyze their guest database and decide which languages they should incorporate into their websites. (Law & Hsu 2005, 495 & 501.)

In the theoretical part of this thesis the gap between guests' linguistic needs and how these needs are met will be researched. First, the studies on the importance of using guests' own languages will be analyzed. Then the existing literature will be evaluated on whether the hoteliers pay enough attention to their guests' needs, including these specific linguistic needs, and whether they aim using guests' own language as means of communication.

2.1 Do the guests appreciate using their own language?

In this subchapter the existing research on the importance of communicating in customers' own language will be analyzed. The survey of Chen and Hsu (2000, 414) reveals that those travellers who perceive language barriers expect to spend less than those who do not. As per Holmqvist's (2011, 178-189) study, if the two parties speak different languages, it might negatively affect the interaction, lack of a common language can place the whole communication at risk. Most customers appreciate it when service-provider speaks their first language and are even more likely to tip more. On the other hand, Holmqvist's study also shows that there exists a smaller group of customers for whom the language does not matter so much. Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012, 433) add that the language of business can determine the guest's choice, since the use of the guest's native language can cause positive emotions and lure the guest to this particular business, even if those guests are fluent in other languages. A similar discovery is made during Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist's (2013, 1286) research: the effort to communicate with a guest in his or hers native language stimulates this guest's tipping behaviour.

Back in XVI century a famous German entrepreneur Anton Fugger says, "Die beste Sprache ist immer jene des Kunden." – "The best language is always the customer's" (Simon 2000, 140). These words are mirrored nowadays by his fellow countryman Minister of Economics, "If you want to buy from us, you don't have to speak German, but if you want to sell..." (Bloch 1995, 16). This fundamental truth has not lost its effect over the years and centuries. Naturally, nowadays both travellers and service providers often speak English and this tendency for internationalization of the English language has been in the air for decades, mentioned by many researchers, for instance by Hauchler (1993, in Bloch 1995, 20). However, first of all "often" is not "always", and secondly, speaking the customer's language enhances their experience, stimulates tipping behaviour and creates loyalty, as proven by Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013, 1278) in their research. On the other hand, some language communities even consider it audacious if someone automatically assumes they are willing to speak English, even if they can indeed speak the language (Shipman 1992, 69; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist's 2013, 1287). It is widely known that non-English speakers favour those who try to speak their own language, they appreciate the effort. Speaking your customers' language will help you to find new customers as well as to keep existing ones. (Van Mesdag 1988, 150.)

Grönroos (1984) describes two aspects of service quality: technical quality, meaning the actual received service, and functional quality, meaning the process of service delivery. Even though described 30 years ago, this division can still be applied to service quality

discussions nowadays: apparently, language skills are present and vitally important in both aspects of the service quality.

According to the study of 2013, Swedish-speaking Finns and Dutch-speaking Belgians appreciate the effort of the staff to speak their guests' native language, especially if that language is not native to the employees themselves. Needless to say, if this is so important for bilingual guests, it is even more important to those whose native language is not the official language the destination country – the effort will be even more appreciated thus positively influencing the image of the establishment. The owners of the service-providing companies are thus recommended to at least provide the printed information in consumers' native language, for example menus. (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist 2013.)

According to Van Mesdag (1988, 151), people from small countries are usually better at learning foreign languages than those from big countries. Russia is exactly the case of a big country with quite modest level of foreign language ability. This is repeatedly proven by the Russian analytical organization Levada-Center (2008). In 2008 only 15% of Russians were able to speak at least one foreign language, the most spoken foreign language being English. Apparently, many of the non-speakers do not travel abroad, so if only the travellers were introduced, the percentage of interviewees speaking English would presumably be higher. This should not, however, give to hoteliers any false hopes, since only 1% considered themselves fluent and only half of the “foreign language speakers” were able to read in the foreign language. The poll held last year (Levada-Center 2014) reveals that the situation is changing and already 30% of Russians speak some foreign language, but only half of them speak a language “more or less” while the other half has significant difficulties speaking a foreign language. English is still the most popular language to speak, leaving far behind German, Spanish and other languages. This tells a lot about the ability of the interviewed people to actually communicate in English and especially to search information in English – naturally the Russian language would be very appreciated by most of the poll-participants.

So, the literature review proves that the result of using the customer's language is either neutral or positive, and the lack of common language of communication can lead to either negative or to neutral results. The natural conclusion would be to use the customer's language to enhance their positive experience and avoid negative impression, or in worst case scenario – to gain a neutral result. Also, the findings of several polls conclude that the majority of Russians are not fluent in foreign languages. The first hypothesis will thus be that for the Russian guests it is important that service providers use the Russian language as a means of communication.

2.2 Do hotels underestimate using guest's own language?

The following subchapter will analyze hoteliers' perception of guests' needs and wants and determine whether these needs and wants are properly addressed. The focus will be also dedicated to specific language needs and whether hoteliers consider it important to use languages other than English in attempts to serve their customers.

For several decades there have been standardization debates. Does the same approach work for all customer groups and nationalities? Almost 50 years ago a Harvard Professor Buzzell (1968, 102-113) was carefully asking his readers whether it was worth turning from multinational to global strategy. 15 years later his colleague Professor Levitt (1983) had no more doubts that globalization must completely oust multinational approach: "Companies must learn to operate as if the world were one large market – ignoring superficial regional and national differences." Levitt blames multinational companies for trying to adapt to national peculiarities insisting that it's cheaper and more efficient to imagine the whole world as one big market; in other words, "multinational corporation is obsolete and global corporation is absolute".

To be fair, 30 years ago globalization may have been necessary for companies to survive, and it quite firmly absorbed all industries, but nowadays history repeats itself and differentiation is needed again to compete. The crucial cultural differences observed in the past (Buzzell 1968, 110) not only remained, but became more significant since the competition grows and everyone tries to get a more precise customer profile. Customer is the key and personal approach is extremely valuable. Globalization and standardization still come in handy thinking about for example standards of chain hotels – something that tourists expect to stay the same when they travel around the world. However, nowadays it is also much easier (and cheaper) to personalize approach than it was before: we have the necessary technology and valuable information. Also, even though some hotels understand the importance of personalized approach, they do not know how to realize it in practice (Messenger & Lin 1991, 31).

The progress of marketing technologies gives various powers, but also endorses more threats to hoteliers: they can never relax, trying to rely on traditions and already earned name and reputation, and let things go with the flow to see what happens – something their predecessors could afford. During a research of 1996 the director of sales in Harvey Hotel in Nevada Jim Van Deusen gives a very peculiar interview on the importance (or rather unimportance) of using the Internet for hotel business:

It [the Internet] does not currently justify the resources necessary to initiate and maintain a presence. It is a toy and at the moment only duplicates the telephone and mail. I waste my time responding to reservation requests that should have come via phone and answering questions about the snow conditions. I am considering removing my e-mail address and inserting our regular 800 phone number. We have very effective systems in place to service customers, and this is not one of them. I believe the current best use of our home page is only as another advertising and marketing medium.

(in Murphy, Forrest, Wotring & Brymer 1996, 71.)

Nowadays it may seem unbelievable that only some 20 years ago the Internet appeared a nuisance and a waste of time, “a toy”, while now it is one of the most efficient marketing tools in hotel business. Actually, in 1996 the author of this thesis did not even know what the Internet is, so this peculiar interview is in no way meant to ridicule the interviewee, but rather to demonstrate the difference between old-school approach and modern tools of hotel business.

Same year Murphy et al. (1996, 79) point out that the most visited websites are those that provide the consumer with relevant and related information in the easiest and most rewarding way. Years later a gap is still noticeable between the customers’ needs and expectations from a website and the contents of the website; in fact half of the consumers are dissatisfied with the website’s contents (Online frustrations 2004, 31). Language differences arise significant barriers to global use of Internet as a distribution channel (Ho 2002, 18), and hotel websites using just a couple of languages seem especially vulnerable in this case. Being able to provide information in guests’ languages brings an enormous advantage to all industry players, no matter how big or small (Ho 2002, 20). Unfortunately, some companies simply do not realize the competitive advantage of foreign languages ability (Swift 1991, 39). Since Internet marketing is a powerful tool for a modern hotel’s success, and according to Van Mesdag (1988, 150), language is a most necessary tool of selling, a lot of effort should be dedicated to minimizing the gap between what customers want to see and what they actually see on a website, including the language barriers.

There has not been enough research on the topic of cross-lingual information retrieval, i.e. using search engines to find information in different languages. However nowadays it has become obvious that the Internet is one of the most powerful tools of marketing, so detection of tourism information in several languages becomes vital. English should not anymore be the only language in which the information available on the Internet. (Li & Law 2007, 777.)

British Tourist Authority also published a report on how important languages are for hospitality industry back in 1990 (in Russel & Leslie 2004, 136). If even an English-speaking

country itself recognizes the importance of paying attention to other languages, all other countries aiming to improve their marketing potential should stop feeling satisfied with mere English translations.

Bloch (1995, 24-25) in his turn regrets that the benefits of using foreign languages in business are still underrated from many perspectives, insisting that “the misconception that English is sufficient should be laid to rest once and for all”. Business people are so happy adopting English as an international communication medium, that they completely forget about their ultimate goal – customers, who nevertheless still expect the most comfortable treatment, including communication in their own language. English-speakers however take it for granted that wherever they travel they will be addressed in English, which is by the way not always the case (Van Mesdag 1988, 150). So, hoteliers should really widen their own horizons and start using their customers’ languages, because even if English is sufficient at times, it rarely is the best option for non-English speaking guests.

So, numerous studies held in the past prove that hotel business owners and marketers do not devote enough attention to their guests’ linguistic needs. On the one hand, there is a gap between the information presented on websites and what the customer actually looks for in a website. On the other hand, most business owners, including those in the hotel industry, assume that English language is enough of a communication medium to attract and satisfy their guests’ communication needs. The second hypothesis will thus be that Finnish hoteliers tend to neglect their Russian-speaking guests’ language expectations.

3 Methodology

For the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2 literature review method was used. To implement this method several scientific journals were studied to find relevant articles, both modern and dated, which shows the development of hospitality business. The variety of international sources allows contrasting and comparing different points of view upon the communication problems existing in the hospitality industry and overall business encounters. The literature review draws a general picture and serves as a foundation for further empirical research.

The empirical part was built with the help of statistical, quantitative and qualitative analyses. For the statistical analysis the data from Visit Helsinki and Statistics Finland were studied to follow the fluctuations in the number of Russian tourists. This statistical study embraced years 2012-2015 with more focus to the year 2014 downturn, tracing its dependency on the Russian national currency, which experienced a record fall in the end of last year.

The second and third subchapters of the empirical part were based upon the analysis of hotels and their reviews from Booking.com and Tripadvisor websites. Tripadvisor was chosen as the biggest online reviews platform and Booking.com was selected as the most popular booking engine used by Russian guests, where they can also leave feedback after visiting a hotel.

Hotels for the thesis analysis were chosen based on their positions on Tripadvisor and Booking.com websites: several hotels were chosen from the top, bottom and middle positions in the ranking. They were then compared and filtered according to the number of the reviews, leaving only those with a significant amount of reviews. As a result 23 hotels were chosen to participate in the research:

- Hotel Fabian (2015)
- Hotel Haven (2015)
- Radisson Blu Plaza Hotel (2015)
- Hotel Kämp (2015)
- Best Western Premier Hotel Katajanokka (2015)
- Next Hotel Rivoli Jardin (2015)
- Klaus K (2015)
- Scandic Paasi (2015)
- Hilton Helsinki Kalastajatorppa (2015)
- Solo Sokos Hotel Tornio (2015)
- Glo Hotel Helsinki Kluuvi (2015)
- Radisson Blu Royal Hotel (2015)
- Helka (2015)
- Crowne Plaza (2015)

- Hotel Avion (2015)
- Hotel Cumulus Kallio Helsinki (2015)
- Hotel Ava (2015)
- Best Western Hotel Carlton (2015)
- Original Sokos Hotel Pasila (2015)
- Hotel Kumulus Kaisaniemi (2015)
- Hotel Arthur (2015)
- Park Hotel Käpylä (2015)
- Original Sokos Hotel Presidentti (2015)

First, the reviews about the hotels were analyzed to check how often the availability of the Russian language products and services had been mentioned. The aim of this analysis was to evaluate the importance of the Russian-language communication for the Russian-speaking guests. The choice of online reviews as a medium of guest's communication to the hotels and to other travellers was determined by the fact that the importance of user-generated content on the internet cannot be overestimated. As proven time and again, nowadays consumers tend to trust their peers' reviews more than those of industry professionals (Creamer 2007, 1; Voight 2007, 16), also when choosing a hotel (Williams, van der Wiele, van Iwaarden & Eldridge 2010, 125). A complication for this part of the analysis was the fact that some Russian-speaking visitors wrote their reviews in English (or possibly in other languages as well). So, for the purpose of this research only the reviews written in Russian were considered, since the authors of those reviews felt more comfortable writing in this language, or they intended their reviews for the Russian-speaking readers.

During the quantitative analysis the general share of language-mentioning reviews was detected: all reviews mentioning Russian language services in the hotel were manually counted in order to understand the importance of communication in their own language for the Russian-speaking guests. To do so phrases containing "рус" (-rus-) were found from the reviews, since this combination of letters is found in all phrases referring to something Russian: the Russian (language, TV-channels), Russian-speaking, in Russian, and so on. The content of the detected phrases was then analyzed and the reviews mentioning the Russian language encounters irrelevant to the aims of the research were not counted, since they do not reflect hotel's language services, for example "There were no other Russian guests in the hotel", "Outside of the hotel we heard a lot of people speaking Russian".

After finding the number of reviews mentioning the availability or unavailability of Russian-language services the qualitative analysis was performed, revealing which products and services were mentioned in the reviews. They were then studied more carefully and divided into several categories to show which aspects of service quality are of the biggest

concern for the Russian travellers and to be able to give practical implications for the management.

In the third subchapter the hotels' own websites and their Booking.com pages were examined with the help of qualitative analysis, to determine the quality and amount of information presented in Russian. The points of analysis were: the availability of Russian version of hotels' own webpages, the amount of information translated into Russian and the availability of Russian-speaking employees as per Booking.com description.

4 Empirical part

The aim of the empirical part was, first, to find out whether Russian visitors still comprise a significant market for Finnish hotel industry, considering the recent political and economic crisis, second, to see whether it is important for the Russian guests to be communicated to in Russian and, finally, to analyze how Helsinki hotels communicate to the Russian guests.

4.1 Are Russian tourists still coming to Finland?

Political and economic situation of 2014, including the destabilized Rouble exchange rate, has led to a decline of Russian outgoing tourism. As shown on figure 1, exactly one year ago the exchange rate RUB to EUR was 49:1, and then it dramatically increased, climaxing at 78:1 in January 2015 – so, twice as much as it was a year ago. It means that all foreign products and services became twice more expensive as well, naturally limiting the purchasing ability of Russians abroad.

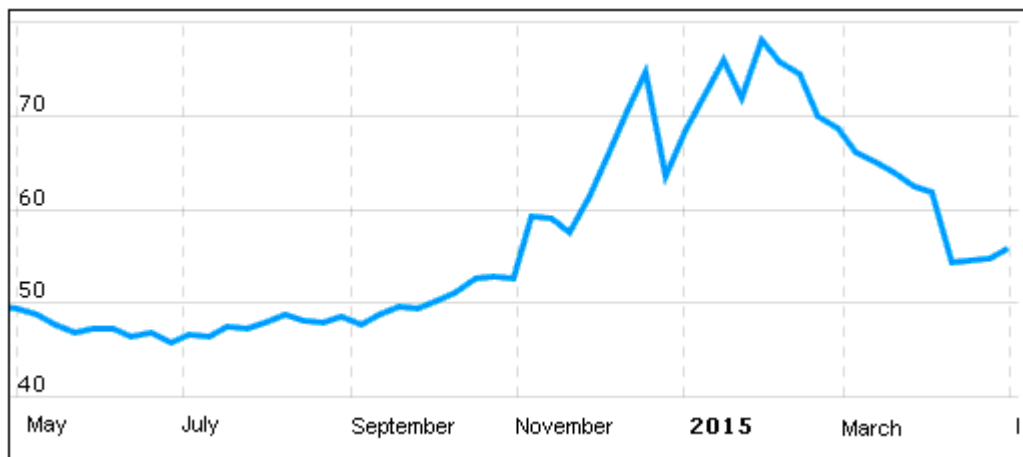


Figure 1. Ruble to Euro exchange rate for the period Apr 2014 – Apr 2015 (based on Banki.ru 2015)

Statistics Finland indeed reveals that the number of nights spent in hotels in 2014 dropped over 20% compared to the year 2013 (Statistics Finland 2013; Statistics Finland 2014). Nevertheless, Russia has managed to maintain its status of the largest market of Finland-bound tourists.

Figure 2 shows that before the recent political and economic crisis Russian incoming visitors amounted to 25% of all foreign tourists, leaving far behind the 3 next biggest incoming tourists groups: Germany, United Kingdom and Sweden.

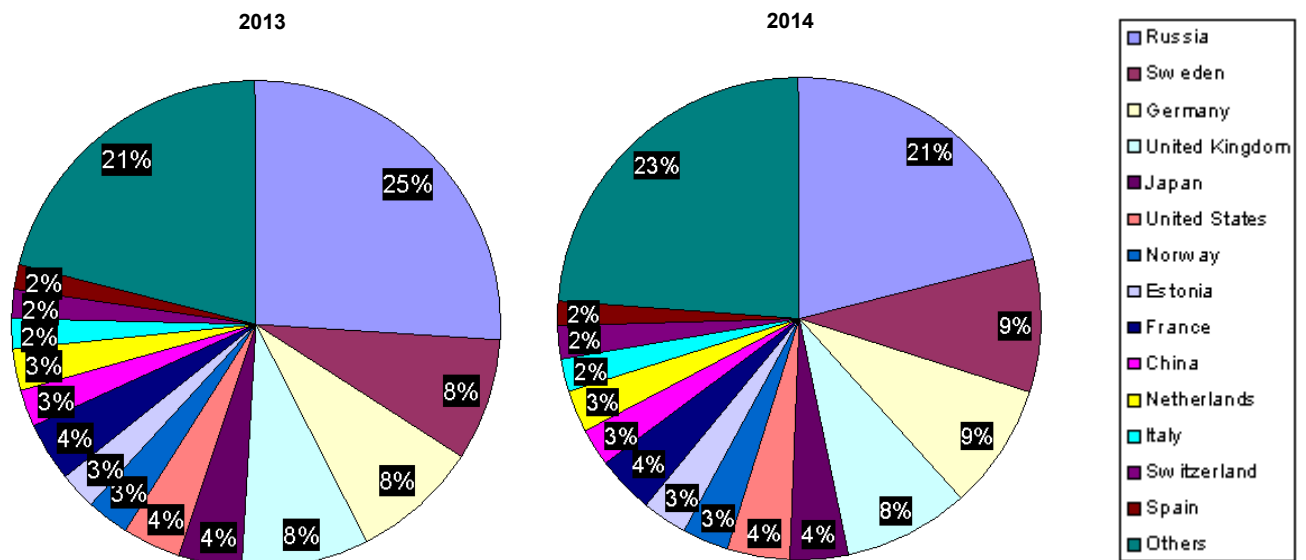


Figure 2. Distribution of foreign visitors by the nights spent in Finnish hotels in 2013 and 2014 (based on Statistics Finland 2013 and Statistics Finland 2014)

After the last year's events the situation has changed, but not dramatically. Even though proportion of Russian tourists has decreased by 4 percentage points, Russians are still the biggest incoming visitor group. Partially the reason for it is that the amount of German and British tourists also decreased compared to previous year, though not so significantly.

The Finnish tourist board tried to compensate the consequences of the projected incoming tourist loss by developing other markets, and as a result a significant increase of Spanish, American and Italian travellers can be witnessed. For instance, the amount of Spanish visitors was 10.6% higher in 2014 compared to the previous year and the amount of travellers from the United States rose by 8.7%. Such increase is indeed significant when projected on a market group, but not so significant on the background of all incoming market groups: a more detailed analysis shows that the share of Spanish market increased from 1,69% to 1,91%, which is not noticeable on a bigger picture. (Statistics Finland 2014.)

So, Russians are still visiting Finland in big volumes and last year comprised one fifth of all foreign visitors, even though expressing a dramatic drop of 20%.

The next study focuses on how the crisis affected Helsinki hotels only. Figure 3 shows that of the past 4 years, Helsinki was visited the least during the year 2014, while the year 2015 began with a most dramatic drop: in January Helsinki was visited by twice as few Russian travellers as during the same periods of 3 previous years.

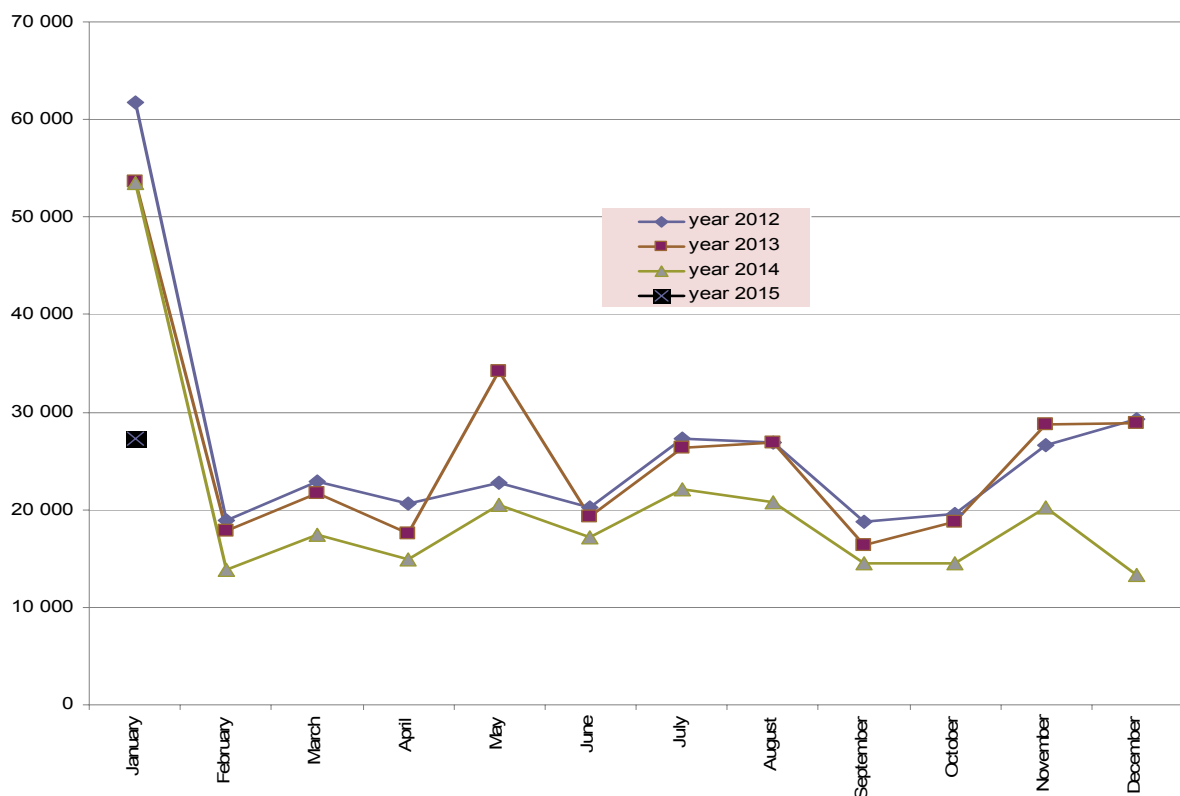


Figure 3. Overnights Russian visitors in Helsinki, years 2012-2015 (based on Tilastokeskus 2015a)

If the whole last year is looked into, the drop of Russian visitors spending nights in Helsinki hotels was almost 68000, or over 20% compared to the year 2013 (table 1). This data corresponds to the overall Finnish hotels statistics. There is also a decrease in the number of visitors from Estonia and France, while the number of incoming visitors from the United States increased by over 10000, or 9%. Despite a significant fall in some foreign markets, the situation was improved also thanks to domestic travellers whose overnights increased by almost 40000, or 2.6% (Tilastokeskus 2015b).

Table 1. Overnight stays in Helsinki by country of residence (Tilastokeskus 2015b)

	2013	2014	Change 13>14	
Foreign countries	1741530	1720995	-20535	-1%
Russia	310243	242532	-67711	-22%
Sweden	119753	123488	3735	3%
Germany	149796	147572	-2224	-1%
United Kingdom	124354	129949	5595	4%
Japan	107901	107472	-429	0%
United States	110514	120695	10181	9%
Norway	47369	51211	3842	8%
Estonia	41136	38597	-2539	-6%
France	52153	49236	-2917	-6%
China	54853	57991	3138	6%
Netherlands	41673	44245	2572	6%

Italy	44810	47054	2244	5%
Switzerland	39521	39864	343	1%
Spain	38742	40690	1948	5%
Others	497454	521089	23635	5%

If the market share of Russian visitors' overnights is analyzed, as in whole Finland, the biggest market share belongs to Russians, although it is less in Helsinki compared to the whole country (figure 4). The market was also affected by the crisis and the share of Russian tourists dropped by 3% percentage points in 2014 compared to 2013.

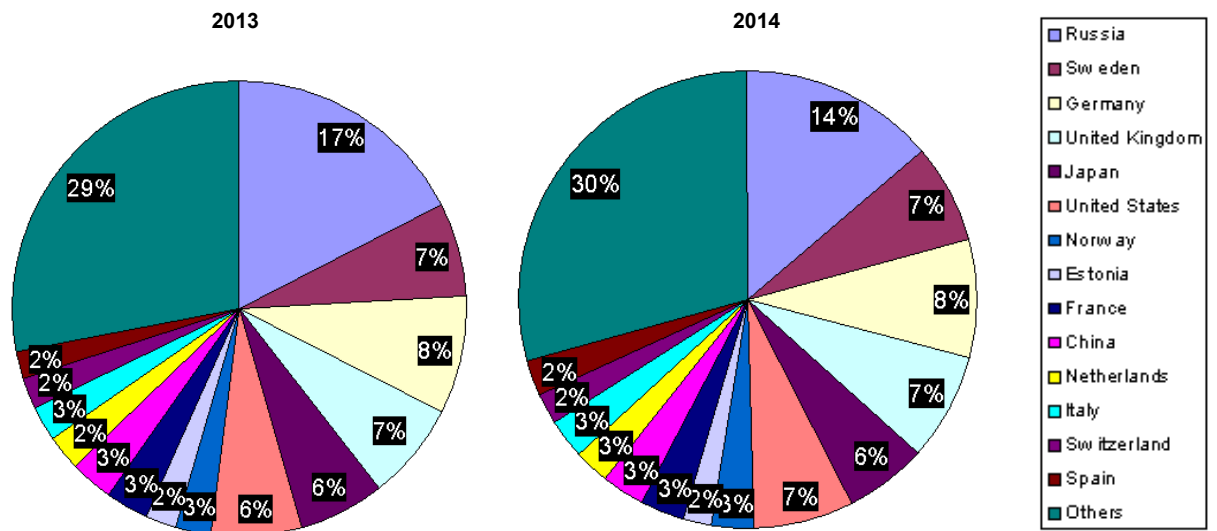


Figure 4. Distribution of foreign visitors by the nights spent in Helsinki hotels in 2013 and 2014 (based on Tilastokeskus 2015b)

4.2 Is it important for the Russian-speaking guests to communicate in their own language?

This subchapter will determine the importance of being served in own language for the Russian guests, and consequently help answering the first hypothesis question. First the general numbers will be presented and then their content will be looked into.

A total of 34449 reviews from Booking.com and Tripadvisor were analyzed during the research (appendix 1), demonstrating that about 10% (3841) reviews for the 23 chosen hotels were in Russian and 1% (343) comments mention the Russian language. This appears to be a tendency, since the abovementioned percentages are correct not only as an average calculation of combined reviews, but they are almost the same when looking at Booking.com and Tripadvisor numbers separately.

If each hotel is analyzed in more detail with the help of figure 5, the picture is quite varied. For instance, Hilton Kalastajatorppa and Rivoli Jardin have a very significant share of reviews written in Russian – 19% each, or almost one fifth, and not far behind them are Radisson Blu Plaza and Ava with 18% Russian language reviews. The least share of reviews written in Russian is found among comments belonging to Hotel Fabian (5.7%), Sokos Torne (6%), Klaus K (6%) and Haven (6.1%).

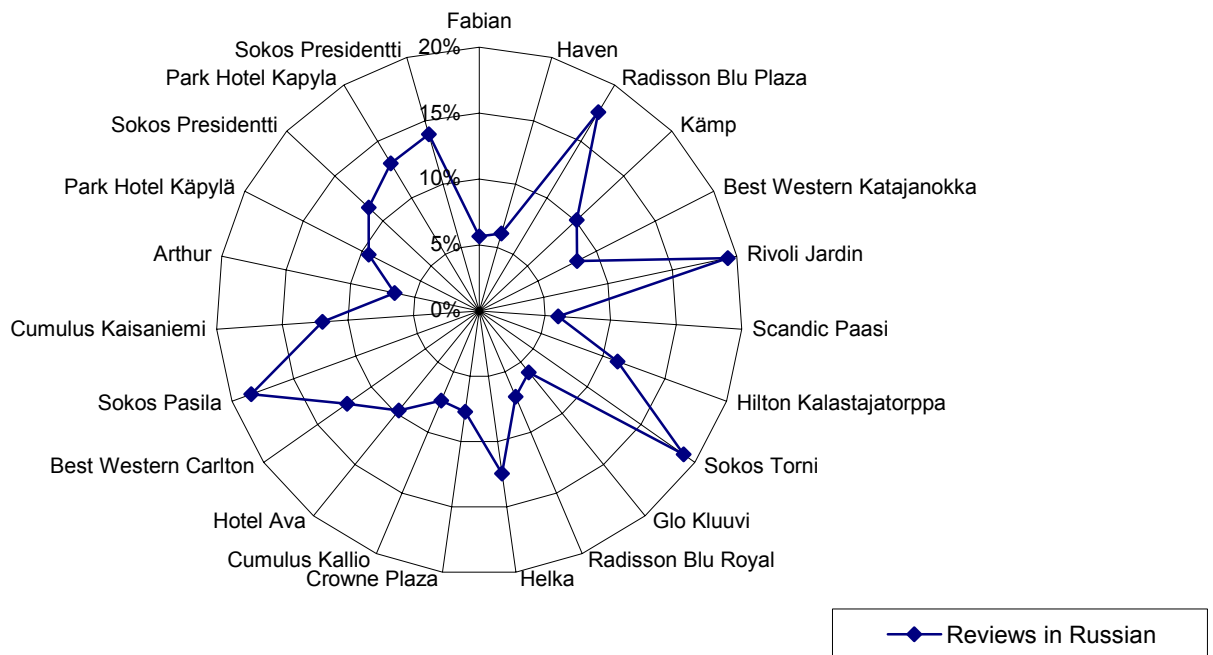


Figure 5. Share of reviews in Russian compared to total reviews of Helsinki hotels (based on Tripadvisor 2015 and Booking.com 2015)

The reviews analysis revealed several categories of comments, presented in appendix 2, referring to the Russian-speaking employees, restaurant menus in Russian, Russian TV channels and printed information in Russian: brochures, maps, newspapers – combined in the category “info”. Hotels Klaus K and Avion had to be excluded from this part of the analysis, since none of their reviews mentioned the Russian language. On the basis of the data acquired during the qualitative analysis the table 2 was composed to show a combined picture, where the final numbers are presented by category, highlighting the amount of positive and negative reviews belonging to each category.

Table 2. Combined reviews mentioning the Russian language, by category (Tripadvisor 2015; Booking.com 2015)

Category	employees		menu		TV		info	
	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
positive or negative reviews								
Fabian	0	8	0	0	2	2	0	0
Haven	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Radisson Blu Plaza	24	20	0	4	13	0	3	1
Kämp	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Best Western Katajanokka	3	1	0	0	2	3	0	1
Rivoli Jardin	2	4	0	0	4	2	1	0
Scandic Paasi	4	10	0	0	5	0	1	0
Hilton Kalastajatorppa	15	7	0	0	2	0	0	2
Sokos Tornio	6	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Glo Kluuvi	2	3	0	0	2	5	0	0
Radisson Blu Royal	14	9	0	2	6	1	0	0
Helka	6	13	0	0	1	4	2	1
Crowne Plaza	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Cumulus Kallio	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Hotel Ava	6	7	0	0	4	3	0	0
Best Western Carlton	8	5	0	0	1	2	1	0
Sokos Pasila	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Cumulus Kaisaniemi	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0
Arthur	3	10	0	0	7	5	1	0
Park Hotel Käpylä	2	3	0	0	0	1	0	0
Sokos Presidentti	5	13	0	0	2	5	1	1
Total positive/negative by category	108	121	0	6	55	36	11	6
Total by category	229		6		91		17	

The combined reviews picture demonstrates that the majority of comments concern the ability of hotel employees to speak Russian. Positive comments included for example: “Luckily, the receptionist at check-in spoke Russian” and “The Finnish girl at reception even tried to speak Russian to us!” Negative comments were the following: “Even though, as stated on Booking.com, there are Russian-speaking employees at the hotel, we met none during our stay”, “None of our questions was answered because the employees spoke only English and Finnish”. Some of the comments were placed into the negative category even though they were found in a positive review: “It was difficult to understand

most information in English, but I think it's not their fault, but mine, since I don't speak English". This review gave very high ranking to all hotel's services, including employees, but for the purpose of this research it was placed into a negative category since the lack of Russian-speaking staff caused certain difficulties for this guest and she shared this information with other Russian travellers, potentially influencing their travel choices. Similarly, some negative comments were placed into a positive category if they did not complain about the lack of Russian-speaking staff, for example: "Finally we found a Russian-speaking girl, but she was indifferent and expressed no desire of helping us". Even though the nature of this comment is highly negative, the Russian-speaking employee was present at the hotel, which confirms the availability of the service in Russian, while personal qualities of this employee are not relevant for this thesis.

The second most numerous category refers to the availability of Russian TV-channels. Positive reviews mentioned the availability of Russian TV channels, while negative complained either about the lack of Russian TV channels, or that their amount was not sufficient, or that they were available only for a fee. The third category combines all printed materials provided by hotels: brochures and travel magazines, maps and newspapers. The least popular category concerns availability of menus in Russian in the hotel's restaurant, all 6 reviews being in the negative column, which means that all guests mentioning the reviews were complaining about the lack of the menus in Russian.

The research allowed making a chart (figure 6), comparing how the positive and negative comments were distributed between different categories on Booking.com and Tripadvisor.

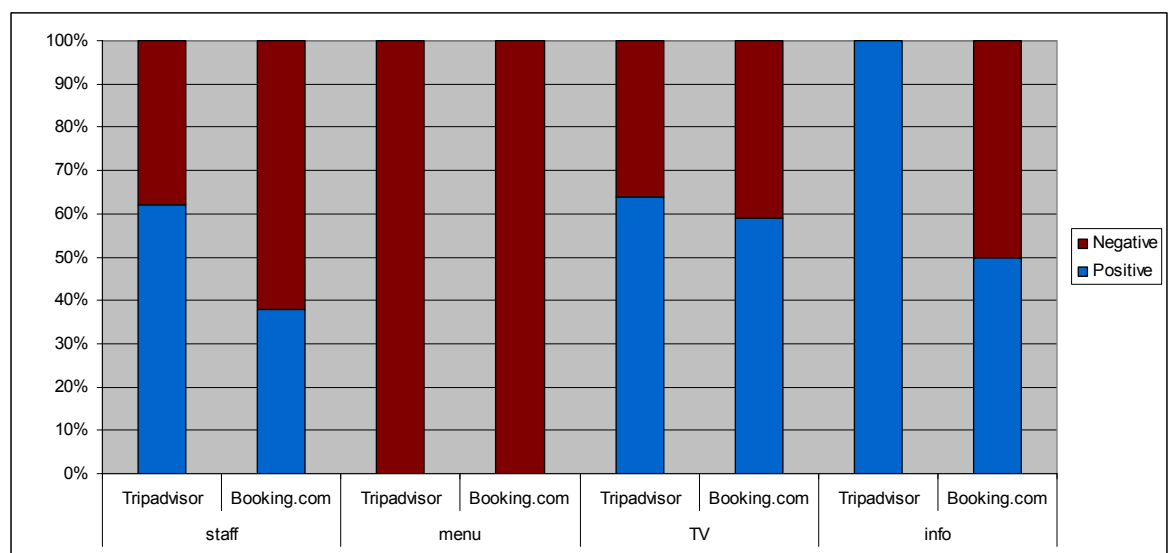


Figure 6. Comparative chart of positive and negative reviews in Tripadvisor and Booking.com, by category (based on Tripadvisor 2015 and Booking.com 2015)

Figure 6 demonstrates that the share of negative comments in Booking.com is significantly higher than that in Tripadvisor: in fact, Tripadvisor has a higher percentage of positive reviews in all categories except for “Menu”, where neither of the websites has a positive review. Apparently, Booking.com visitors are more demanding language-wise than the guests writing comments on Tripadvisor, which is also noticeable from how the guests were evaluating the skills of hotel employees: while 60 % of Tripadvisor reviewers were more generous in compliments towards the Russian-speaking workers, only 40% of Booking.com wrote positive reviews regarding this topic. When writing about Russian TV channels both websites’ guests were slightly more positive about this feature. Commenting on the printed materials all the analyzed Tripadvisor guests were happy to find them in the hotels while half of examined Booking.com comments complained about the lack of such materials in their chosen hotels.

4.3 How do the hotels respond to their guests’ language requirements?

In order to answer to the second hypothesis question and to find out whether the hotels estimate adequately their guests’ language needs their own websites were analyzed. When looking at hotels’ own webpages the focus was given to the variety of translation languages, quality of translations and amount of information presented in the Russian language. The second column of table 3 presents the results of the analysis and the language abbreviations are explained in appendix 3.

Table 3. Analysis of hotels’ own websites and their Booking.com pages

1. Hotels	2. Languages used on own website	3. Languages spoken by employees in hotel’s own description on Booking.com
Fabian	fi,en,ru	fi,en,se
Haven	fi,en,ru	fi,en,se,no,da,de,ee,fr,it,es,ar,tk
Radisson Blu Plaza	fi,en,ru,se	fi,en,ru,se,it,de
Kämp	fi,en,ru,se,fr,es,pt,de,it,cn,jp,ar	fi,en,ru,se,pt,it,fr,ee,es,de
Best Western Katajanokka	fi,en,ru	fi,en,se
Rivoli Jardin	fi,en,ru	fi,en
Klaus K	fi,en	fi,en
Scandic Paasi	fi,en,ru,se,no,da,de	fi,en,ru,se,it
Hilton Kalastajatorppa	fi,en,ru,se,no,da,de,cn	fi,en,se
Sokos Torni	fi,en,ru,se,ee	fi,en,se

Glo Kluuvi	fi,en,ru	fi,en,se
Radisson Blu Royal	fi,en,ru,se	fi,en,ru,se,it
Helka	fi,en	fi,en,se
Crowne Plaza	fi,en,ru,se,de,fr,es,it,jp,cn	fi,en,ru,se,it,ee,es,de
Avion	fi,en,ru,se,de,fr	fi,en
Cumulus Kallio	fi,en,ru	fi,en
Hotel Ava	fi,en,ru	fi,en
Best Western Carlton	fi,en,ru,lv,lt,pl,ee	fi,en,ru,se,es
Sokos Pasila	fi,en,ru,se,ee	fi,en,se
Cumulus Kaisaniemi	fi,en,ru	fi,en
Arthur	fi,en,se,ru,de	fi,en,se,de
Park Hotel Käpylä	fi,en,ru	fi,en
Sokos Presidentti	fi,se,en,ru,ee	fi,en

All but two of the examined hotels have a Russian version available on their official websites. The hotels missing Russian translations are highlighted in grey. The analysis also revealed that many hotels have not only Finnish and English translations, but many more, hotel Kämp being the leader with 12 various languages available on its website. So, over 90% of the represented hotels present information on their websites in Russian.

The content and amount of the information were also analyzed, revealing that the majority of the hotels have enough information about their rooms, facilities, services and booking tools available in Russian. Hilton Kalastajatorppa presents a detailed summary, which seems enough to attract potential guests. Hotel Haven however has only a part of its starting page translated into Russian and the description is presented not as text, but as a image, where neither the image's name nor its HTML description contain Russian words, so there is a risk that it will not be found when putting key words like "hotel" and "Helsinki" in Russian into a search engine. Hotel Rivoli Jardin has 100% of its information translated into Russian, about all hotel features, but when trying to make a reservation it sends to Booking.com pages, which then makes little sense since most hotels are fighting to be booked directly, without any third-party involvement. Several other hotels also lack Russian translation for their booking tools, even though all other information is translated into Russian, thus suffering a risk of being booked through a third party which does have more languages available for bookings.

The third column of table 3 presents the hotels' comments about their own language services on Booking.com website. Booking.com allows hotels to list all languages their employees are able to speak. Hotel Haven is leading in this category, with most multi-lingual employees speaking 12 various languages, but not Russian. It is followed by hotel Kämp with 10 languages, this time including Russian. Naturally, English and Finnish are spoken in all hotels, but Swedish is missing from about a third of all properties, even though being a second national language in Finland. Russian and Italian share the fourth place with 6 hotels speaking these languages, followed closely by German-speaking 5 hotels. So, all in a little more than 25% hotels list Russian as one of their spoken languages.

5 Discussion

The scope of this thesis managed to answer all the questions raised during the theoretical research. The objectiveness of this work is supported by a representative number of Helsinki hotels (23 out of 50 listed in Booking.com) and the thorough examination of all their guests' reviews. Some unsuccessful choices were made in terms of analyzing hotels' own websites: it turns out that most hotels belonging to the chains have the same or almost the same amount of information and choice of languages on their own websites. They do however differ in Booking.com pages and, naturally, in customers' reviews. To improve the hotels representation it would be better to include more varied hotels. The ethical principles of this work were carefully followed, with all the used references and citations provided both in text proper and in the list of sources in the end of this thesis.

The reliability of the analyzed reviews proved to be high, with a representative number of 34449 reviews. Of course, the nature of any online review is subjective, however this does not harm this thesis's objectiveness, since the reviews express the real life concerns of the guests, highlighting the areas for improvement. The number of reviews allows drawing an overall objective picture consisting of many personal and subjective opinions, and the single opinions of numerous guests turn into tendencies. The importance of online reviews is also considered vital since online reviews are available to other travellers and may influence their travel decisions, no matter how subjective they are.

The research proved that Russians still travel to Finland and to Helsinki in big volumes, and despite a significant drop in total overnights by Russian travellers they still form the biggest market share both in whole Finland and in particular in Helsinki. Chapter 3.1 reveals that Russian visitors comprise about 15% of all foreign tourists market in Helsinki, therefore, it is worth addressing this market's needs, including the language needs.

Chapter 3.2 demonstrated that on Booking.com and Tripadvisor about 10% reviews are written in Russian. Moreover, 10% of the Russian language reviews include comments about availability or unavailability of communication in Russian in a particular hotel. So, the first hypothesis is confirmed: for at least 1% of the Russian guests leaving reviews about the analyzed 23 hotels it is important that hotels provide services in the Russian language. The research allowed a more detailed analysis of guests' needs, revealing that absolute majority of guests commenting on Russian-language referred to availability of employees with Russian-language skills. This finding can be useful for hospitality industry employees planning a career in Helsinki and thinking which languages they should learn. This also serves as a managerial implication to arrange language courses for employees

or to hire employees with these language skills. Another finding from chapter 3.2 is that the second most important concern of the Russian guests is the availability of Russian TV channels which leads to a recommendation of including a free Russian TV channel in the list of available TV channels in the guestrooms.

Chapter 3.3 concluded that the second hypothesis is partially confirmed: while majority of Helsinki hotels present information in Russian on their webpages, only about a quarter of them list Russian as one of the languages spoken by their staff and this was the major complaint of the guests leaving their reviews on Tripadvisor and Booking.com. At the same time some discrepancies can be discovered between chapters 3.2 and 3.3 findings: some hotels hired Russian-speaking employees according to their guests' reviews, but did not list this skill on Booking.com – the number of such hotels amounts to 10, which is almost a half of the examined hotels. For example, Hilton Kalastajatorppa had 15 reviews complimenting this hotel on the availability of Russian-speaking employees, which could be actively announced for a higher competitive advantage.

The analysis of websites' contents gives an impetus for possible further research of potential risks caused by insufficient information: not being noticed by search engines if a hotel has no information in Russian; being booked through an agency if a hotel has no booking tools available in Russian; not being able to upsell a package, a more expensive room or an additional facility if a hotel does not have information about those features available in other languages, while sometimes some of these facilities might be a deciding factor for a potential guest. These potential risks could serve as a subject for another research which would give useful managerial implications.

Recommendations for further research also include other Finnish cities, other countries and other fields of business, since the theoretical framework implies the importance of using customer's language without a strict connection to a specific field. For the further research of Helsinki hotels' visitors it is recommended to take into consideration Scandinavian countries, China or other countries appearing to be promising markets, as shown in table 1 of this thesis.

6 Implications for the management

Both the process of this thesis's writing and its findings proved to be of a high educational value to the author: the process helped to improve literature review, time-planning and other educational and managerial skills, while the findings broadened the picture of incoming markets in Helsinki and their needs and resulted in the following managerial implications:

1. Hire the Russian-speaking employees or organize the courses for already hired employees. Even though the labour force is among the highest expenses in the hotel business and this implication is not easily implemented, the language skills are the biggest concern of the Russian travellers, so it seems to be a justified expense.
2. If the Russian-speaking employees have been already hired, advertise their skills. This may seem obvious, but the research proved that 43% of the studied hotels neglected this opportunity to attract Russian-speaking guests.
3. Install Russian TV-programs. This is the second biggest concern of the Russian guests, and at the same time it is much easier implemented compared to the first recommendation.
4. Make sure that the booking tools are available in Russian when translating hotel's website into Russian. Translating the whole website into another language may be costly if using a professional translator, so if this has been already done, the booking part of the website should not be neglected, since the whole purpose of the website translation is to attract the guest to book this specific hotel, and it is preferable that the guest does it directly on the hotel's website to spare the agent fees.
5. Provide menus and printed information about the hotel and its services in Russian. This is the easiest recommendation and even though it was not so broadly mentioned by Russian reviewers, it may bring additional profit to the hotel and partly replace the Russian-speaking employees. Some restaurants are already successfully using the menus in several languages where all the items are numbered, so it is enough for the guest to show the number on the menu to make it clear for the waiter who does not necessarily speak all of those languages. This practice allows guests to take full advantage of the restaurant services, and at the same time increases the restaurants profit.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Analysis of online reviews

	Tripadvisor			Booking.com			Combined		
	Russian language mentioned	Reviews in Russian	Total reviews	Russian language mentioned	Reviews in Russian	Total reviews	Russian language mentioned	Reviews in Russian	Total reviews
Fabian	5	34	666	7	45	731	12	79	1397
Haven	2	30	593	0	44	616	2	74	1209
Radisson Blu Plaza	24	159	967	41	322	1768	65	481	2735
Kämp	2	45	804	5	84	470	7	129	1274
Best Western Katajanokka	2	63	784	8	139	1639	10	202	2423
Rivoli Jardin	3	30	191	10	191	954	13	221	1145
Klaus K	0	36	668	0	64	993	0	100	1661
Scandic Paasi	12	47	489	8	115	958	20	162	1447
Hilton Kalastajatorppa	6	80	561	20	206	948	26	286	1509
Sokos Tornio	4	16	389	4	33	429	8	49	818
Glo Kluuvi	3	63	1155	9	101	1165	12	164	2320
Radisson Blu Royal	12	115	882	20	277	2267	32	392	3149
Helka	16	56	558	11	116	1672	27	172	2230
Crowne Plaza	3	39	603	2	56	683	5	95	1286
Avion	0	3	10	0	13	155	0	16	165
Cumulus Kallio	1	14	73	2	58	514	3	72	587
Hotel Ava	5	36	93	15	206	1219	20	242	1312
Best Western Carlton	4	16	91	13	69	621	17	85	712
Sokos Pasila	0	9	106	2	23	381	2	32	487
Cumulus Kaisaniemi	0	15	155	3	62	662	3	77	817
Arthur	8	91	560	18	324	3053	26	415	3613
Park Hotel Käpylä	0	12	38	6	49	429	6	61	467
Sokos Presidentti	13	168	639	14	67	1047	27	235	1686
Total	125	1177	11075	218	2664	23374	343	3841	34449

(Booking.com 2015; Tripadvisor 2015)

Appendix 2. Analysis of online reviews mentioning the Russian language

Website	Tripadvisor								Booking.com							
	employees		menu		TV		info		employees		menu		TV		info	
Category	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
Positive or negative reviews	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
Fabian		3			2					5				2		
Haven		1				1										
Radisson Blu Plaza	14	1		1	6		2		10	19		3	7		1	1
Kämp	2								4	1						
Best Western Katajanokka					1	1			3	1			1	2		1
Rivoli Jardin	1	1			1				1	3			3	2	1	
Scandic Paasi	4	4			4					6			1		1	
Hilton Kalastajatorppa	4	2							11	5			2			2
Sokos Tornio	3	1							3	1						
Glo Kluuvi	2	1								2			2	5		
Radisson Blu Royal	6	3			2	1			8	6		2	4			
Helka	4	7			1	3	1		2	6				1	1	1
Crowne Plaza	2						1						1	1		
Cumulus Kallio					1					1			1			
Hotel Ava	3	1			1				3	6			3	3		
Best Western Carlton	4								4	5			1	2	1	
Sokos Pasila										1				1		
Cumulus Kaisaniemi										2			1			
Arthur		4				4			3	6			7	1	1	
Park Hotel Käpylä									2	3				1		
Sokos Presidentti	4	4			2	2	1		1	9				3		1
Total positive/negative for each category	53	33	0	1	21	12	5	0	55	88	0	5	34	24	6	6
Total for each category	86		1		33		5		143		5		58		12	

(Booking.com 2015; Tripadvisor 2015)

Appendix 3. Language abbreviations

Abbreviation	Language
ar	Arabic
cn	Chinese
da	Danish
de	German
ee	Estonian
en	English
es	Spanish
fi	Finnish
fr	French
it	Italian
jp	Japanese
lt	Lithuanian
lv	Latvian
no	Norwegian
pl	Polish
pt	Portuguese
ru	Russian
se	Swedish
tk	Turkish