How Travelers Choose Accommodation Online

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The accommodation industry nowadays offers a wide range of lodging alternatives for travelers. Despite the purpose of travel, sometimes it might seem confusing to choose the right place to stay. On the other hand, it is a challenge to stand out from the competition for the accommodation providers as well. Researching and understanding the customer needs can help to facilitate the sales and marketing processes for hotels.

The core aim of this research-oriented bachelor's thesis was to understand the consumer behavior in tourism in terms of accommodation selection online. First, the accommodation industry, its structure and operational environment were investigated. Additionally, the notion of sharing economy applied to accommodation sector was discussed. Second, the commissioning party of the thesis was described. Finally, the theoretical framework presented the studies about decision-making processes of travelers, the main factors influencing their choices and the modern interpretation of a customer journey.

The research was done mostly online in a form of a survey on Webropol, as well as distributed on paper in April 2017. The questionnaire was created for this purpose and it consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions to gather more comprehensive data. Altogether there were 193 answers collected from travelers of various age groups and travel habits. The data was analyzed and presented in figures and tables. The results showed the factors which influence decision-making of leisure and business travelers, in addition to their preferences in hotel selection online.

The paper ends with the discussion of the results and suggestions for the commissioner. The recommendations were based on the survey results, theoretical framework and author's observations. On the one hand, the suggestions were mostly focused on the business travelers, as they were the main target group of the company. Several ways were suggested to improve sales online and attract more business travelers. Also, the need for business facilities in the premises was discussed. Conversely, the leisure travelers seemed more price sensitive, which allowed a company to consider a price strategy to attract them. Moreover, leisure tourists were looking forward a possibility to stay with their pets in the hotel. However, the commissioner did not have appropriate pet policy, which can be improved. All in all, the aim of the thesis was reached, though there is a space for further exploration. The research findings helped the author to get an insight into the subject, and the data will be also used by the commissioner to improve the services.

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1   Introduction

Accommodation is a fundamental part of travel and tourism and an essential element of the tourist's experience. However, searching for a suitable place to stay can be frustrating due to the vast selection of accommodation options from a camping ground to a luxury suite. How can the hotels stand out in such a competitive environment? How do different travelers find a "perfect match" for their needs in the Internet, being miles away from their future lodging? The following report is a research-oriented bachelor thesis aiming to study how diverse groups of travelers choose accommodation online.

The main aim of the thesis was to research the factors influencing travelers' decision-making on accommodation. From a traveler's viewpoint, the hotel market is overwhelmed by many similar, usually interchangeable lodging offerings. This can be challenging for an individual hotel to contrast with its opponents. This issue may be solved by anticipating clients' needs. Consequently, understanding consumer behavior will allow to plan more effective marketing processes.

For the entrepreneurs offering the lodging for guests, either tourists or business travelers, it is vital to know what exactly the customers are looking for. This research is commissioned by Stranda – a group of bed-and-breakfast hotels in Finland. The main objective for the commissioning party is to understand the expectations of diverse types of travelers for accommodation. The commissioner will use the data collected during the thesis process to forecast consumer demand and improve existing services in relation to consumer behavior. In other words, the company aims at making the lodging more attractive for new clients according to their needs. Moreover, the company is willing to expand and also to attract more tourists to apartment type of accommodation through Airbnb.

The research questions discussed in the thesis are focused on the key factors for choosing a place to stay for travelers online. Since the growing popularity of Airbnb and the interest from the commissioning party, this online platform was also considered in the research. Furthermore, it is researched if there is dependence of the choice of accommodation type and purpose of travelling nowadays. Finally, yet importantly, the survey identifies types of travelers and their most preferred features in a hotel/apartment.

The data for the research is collected mainly through the online survey which consists of open and closed ended questions. The respondents are previously staying at Stranda hotels and are reached by email and similar tools and asked to participate in a survey. In addition, the copies of questionnaire form are distributed to the new guests staying at B&B at

the time of research. The travelers' opinion about the subject is also asked in social media groups related to the topic. Some amount of information is gathered from the customers of a travel agency. The aim is to get at least 100 answers.

The report has six entities and can be conditionally divided into two larger parts: theoretical and empirical parts. The thesis begins with the introduction which presents the aims of the research. The following is the chapter explaining the context to which the research can be applied – the accommodation industry. It also opens up the notion of sharing economy, as well as describes the commissioning party.

The chapter number three is dedicated to the theoretical approach of the research. It is discussed how the consumers make decisions from the psychological point of view, and it is illustrated with figures. Under the scope, the notion of consumer decision-making is investigated, as well as travel decision-making. The works of several authors are used to get a deeper understanding of the concepts.

The second part of the thesis starts with explanation of the research process, including methodology, data collection, reliability and validity of the research. In the next chapter, the research findings are shown in tables and figures, followed by the data analysis and presentation of the results. The paper ends by the discussion on the work done.

2 Accommodation sector in travel and tourism

The learning objectives of this chapter include getting an overall understanding of accommodation types, studying hotel type of lodging in more details, as well as its operational environment, special characteristics and principal challenges that accommodation sector faces. Afterwards, the phenomenon of" sharing economy" within the scope of accommodation industry is introduced. The description of thesis commissioner concludes the chapter.

2.1 Classification of accommodation

As stated by Jones (2002, 25), accommodation sector is considered to be a spine of hospitality industry providing lodging and other services to guests. Due to the huge variety of accommodation types it might be challenging to divide all of them into precise categories. Thus, Sharpley (2006, 61) suggests several ways to classify accommodation: commercial (serviced), commercial (non-serviced), non-commercial (serviced) and non-commercial (non-serviced). In the thesis, I have focused mainly on the commercial tourist accommodation.

Moreover, accommodation can be categorized by markets: business and leisure markets, domestic and international, which defines the location of the lodging and the services provided. Likewise, hotels can be categorized by location: resort hotels, city center hotels, airport hotels and rural hotels, etc. (Sharpley 2006, 61-62).

Holloway & Taylor (2006, 272) agree that the lodging classification is blurred due to its diversity and the fact that some forms of accommodation can include characteristics of different types of lodging, and suggests the structure of commercial tourist accommodation as illustrated below (figure 1).
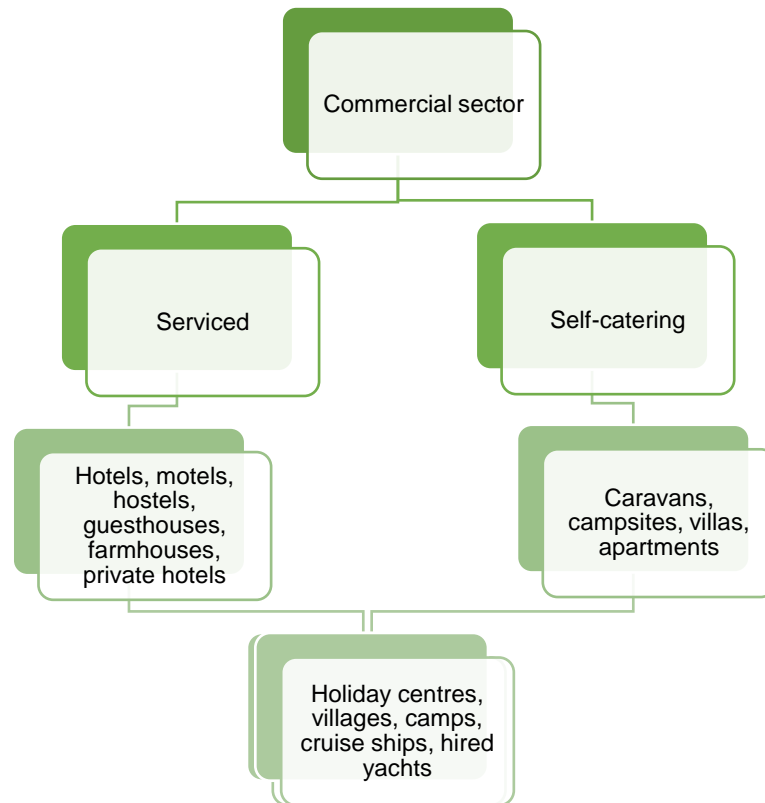
Figure 1. Structure of commercial tourist accommodation (Holloway & Taylor 2006, 272)

2.2 Hotel type of accommodation

One of the most widely recognized types is hotel accommodation. Jones & Lockwood (2002, 19) define a hotel as "an operation that provides accommodation and ancillary services to people away from home". Beech & Chadwick (2006, 377) discuss that tourist accommodation of any type does not only serve to fulfill a rudimentary need for shelter and comfort for customers. The hotels usually provide lodging for a short period of time with offering a service which is not limited to managing reservations, housekeeping and taking payments. They provide accommodation with a high level of privacy, food and beverage services that vary from basic to refined, and other. Since the hotels normally operate to make a profit, they charge customers for usage of all the services and facilities according to relevant regulations.

The type of a hotel depends on the quality of services provided, as well as on the selection of services and facilities, according to (Beech & Chadwick 2006, 380). Consequently, the more sophisticated customer service and facilities we get, the more upscale the hotel category is. The authors distinguish three large hotel categories: luxury hotels, midscale and budget. Each of them has specific features which differentiate it from others.

- Luxury hotels: usually offer spacious premises (private rooms and common areas), exclusive design aiming to meet individual requirements, personalized approach to every customer, advanced range of facilities and high level of service.
- Midscale hotels: combine functional design with elements of luxuries, accommodate tourists and business travelers according to their special needs, high standards of amenities and catering with extra features, and professional customer service.
- Budget hotels: more limited space allowances than in midscale hotels, simple design, usually offer private bedrooms with shared washrooms, and restrained meal allowances which can be not offered at all.

In addition, the authors note that guesthouses and bed-and-breakfast hotels can have features from different hotel categories. They are usually run by family members and may be located at the same premises as the owners reside, which makes the facilities quite small and limited. However, they can offer tailored customer service and some additional features upon request (extra cleaning, meal, etc.). Holloway & Taylor (2006, 292) describe staying at B&B and guesthouse type of accommodation as an experience for foreigners that allows to get closer to the locals and culture. There is usually informal and welcoming atmosphere at the house. It is also underlined that B&B can cater for tourists as well as for business travelers.

In travel and tourism there are different forms of hotel organization. A comparatively small organizational form is an independent hotel. Usually there is one person in charge who is the owner and managed at the same time and he hires a small number of staff. The family members can also be employed in this business. However, individual hotels can be large depending on the owner's ambitions and resources. A hotel chain is an organization that consists of two or more hotel units which are linked to each other on a corporate level. The management of each hotel in a chain has the same objectives and strategies of operation (Beech & Chadwick 2006, 390-391).

2.2.1 Hotel operations

The hotel can be considered as an organization or system which encompasses some number of employees, depending on the size of the company, who work together to achieve common goals. Usually, a typical hotel organization consists of departments that are linked to each other and enable the customer service through hotel operations.

Largely, all hotel departments can be divided into front-office and back-office (operations which interface with guests or not). One of the key departments is room division which can cover reservations, reception, housekeeping and security. In some hotels, this department also includes maintenance services. Following sector is food and beverage, which provides food production and food service, and cater for the customers from room service to banquets. Marketing and sales department is responsible for promotion and increasing sales through various channels. Next, the human resource department, which belongs to the back-office operations, ensures the employment and retention of the suitable candidates for the positions in all departments. It is also responsible for staff development and well-being. Accounting department oversees financial records, presentation of reports and operating results to the managers (Mensah 2013, 58-68).

Regardless the form of accommodation, all of them encounter similar operational challenges, even though the importance of each varies from type to type. Sharpley (2006, 64-65) introduces some core difficulties in operation which the hotels encounter. First, there is a tendency in accommodation sector to have high fixed costs and variable costs. Thus, the lodging providers have to keep occupancy rates on a high level to minimize *economic issues*. However, the increase in occupancy means an increase in costs, so providing ancillary services can enlarge the income. The well settled room rates and revenue management can affect positively the occupancy and viability of the hotel.

Furthermore, the location of the lodging has an impact on *demand* as well as the immobility of premises and seasonal fluctuations of tourist arrivals. Additionally, the rank of a hotel depends on the *quality* and range of the services available. Since the tourists are conscious of value for money and the quality of the product they get, the quality management plays a vital role in the operational success.

Taking advantage of *technology* in hospitality industry broadens the horizons for operations. In accommodation sector the revenue management systems support the occupancy and productivity levels, whereas global distribution systems and online reservations increase the demand. Last but not the least, is taking *environmental issues* into consideration. Being aware of ecological footprint and applying sustainability practices to the business of hotel operations supports the productivity (Sharpley 2006, 64-65).

2.2.2   Characteristics of services

As it was mentioned above, the hotel provides not only lodging to guests, but also a range of services to make one's experience complete. However, we need to consider special characteristics of hotel "products". To begin with, the hotel services are *perishable,* unlike

other products, which are usually created, stored and consumed after. For instance, if the occupancy rate on a specific day is low and some rooms were not booked, it is impossible to stock them for later use. The same principle works if there is a surplus demand for lodging. Thus, the services are produced and purchased at once (Jones & Lockwood 2002, 11).

Next, the hotel provides *intangible* services – they cannot be experienced or tested beforehand. It can be related to atmosphere in the hotel, the quality of customer service and so on. Connected to that, another feature of the services is *heterogeneity.* The service provided at the hotel varies from customer to customer. This can happen depending on the type of traveler or staff preferences regarding different customers, for example. Consequently, it creates challenges for setting quality standard for service.

Moreover, the hotel products are *contact dependent,* which means that the customer have to interact with the service provider (hotelier) and be physically present at the hotel to experience the service. The product cannot be displayed or assessed in advance, as it was discussed earlier.

Lastly, unlike other products we can purchase, hotel accommodation facilities always remain a property of a hotelier, though they are considered as hired by the customer for the time of stay at the hotel. Hence, the traveler can use the amenities he paid for, but it does not give him any *ownership* rights (Jones & Lockwood 2002, 11).

2.3   The sharing economy in accommodation industry

During recent years, the concept of collaborative consumption or "sharing economy" became extremely popular. The modern technologies made it possible for this social and economic phenomenon to appear. The leaders of this new business are Uber and Airbnb platforms, which change the transportation and accommodation industry. The main idea of those is to provide short-time rentals, or exchanges of items or services by matching the consumers' needs with providers' offerings via the Internet. People are supposed to rely on the software to handle the money transactions, and the system builds a reputation for every user, so that strangers can trust each other. Moreover, there is a belief that participating in the sharing economy changes the community from materialistic consumers, to more open and helping each other kinds of people. Anyone can start their small business by becoming a host on Airbnb or by renting some item they no longer use, for instance. Thus, they can earn a bit of money and save someone else's time on searching for the item (Slee 2016, 9-12).

European Commission (2015, 3) defines collaborative economy as a system of services or possessions that are available for temporary use based on interactions through online platforms. The authors state that this type of economy offers larger choices and lower prices for clients and possibilities to grow for start-ups and existing companies in their home country and abroad. Correspondingly, it leads to employment growth and gives benefits for entrepreneurs by flexible schedules, from unprofessional jobs to part-time businesses. Also, it develops more efficient resource consumption, which enhances productivity and sustainability. However, the report also discusses that appearance of new business models is regularly affects current markets. Goods and services providers are concerned about consumer protection uncertainty, regulation of taxation, licensing, safety and security, and employment protection rules within the sharing economy.

Besides, there is an opinion that collaborative economy should comprise transactions only between two peers (consumers), but not business-to-consumer transactions. In addition, only physical assets can become a part of the exchange and for some period of time. Thus, the consumer can access, but not own an item after the exchange (Frenken, Meelen Arets & Van de Glind 2015).

Concerning the accommodation industry, Airbnb is currently the most widely spread way for people to have income from their spare apartments. It is an online platform where anyone can list, discover and reserve accommodation. Airbnb's founders have made this service unique due to genuine hospitality and reasonable prices by the hosts. Originally, the idea was that guests could get to know the city from a local perspective which is making their experiences authentic and unforgettable through this type of lodging (Dervojeda, Verzijl, Nagtegaal, Lengton, Rouwmaat, Monfardini & Frideres 2013, 4-7).

2.4   Guesthouse Stranda

The thesis was commissioned by Guesthouse Stranda. It is a group of bed-and-breakfast type of hotels in Porvoo and Helsinki aiming at providing a cozy and friendly place to stay for any kinds of travelers. It all started in 2013 from a small apartment in the outskirts of Porvoo which any tourist could rent. In the beginning of 2014 the owner and the only employee at the same time has registered her business under the name of Guesthouse Stranda. Originally, the travelers stayed at owner's home which consisted of several rooms with shared washing rooms. Later, the owner changed the premises of the guesthouse to more B&B type of accommodation with the reception, breakfasts, five private bedrooms and shared bathrooms. Next year the company expanded and started to offer apartment type of lodging to tourists, a holiday home and a new hotel was opened in Helsinki as well (image 1).

Image 1. Guesthouse Stranda (Guesthouse Stranda 2017)

For now, the company employs four people as staff, along with seasonal workers for peak seasons. It offers rooms for solo travelers, families and business people (and to anyone who needs lodging) with shared or private restrooms, opportunity to order a home-made breakfast (also suitable for special diets) and special equipment for families with small children. Nevertheless, the target groups are as follows: business travelers – 80%, tourists – 15% and others (cyclists, wedding guests, VFRs, etc.) – 5%. Due to increasing competition, one of the company's goals is to adapt the hotels' premises to serve different types of tourists.

Although Stranda is quite new to the market, it has already been noted for individual approach to every customer, good facilities and its atmosphere "like at home". It is ranked #2 of 11 B&Bs in Porvoo on TripAdvisor (TripAdvisor 2017), and #2 in top 5 B&Bs in Porvoo according to Booking.com (Booking.com 2017).

For sales and marketing purposes the company uses various channels. The following figure (figure 2) shows the most popular channels and platforms for making bookings among customers of Stranda. The company has its own website, where the customers can find all necessary information about the lodging with pictures and availability and book the room at the same time.
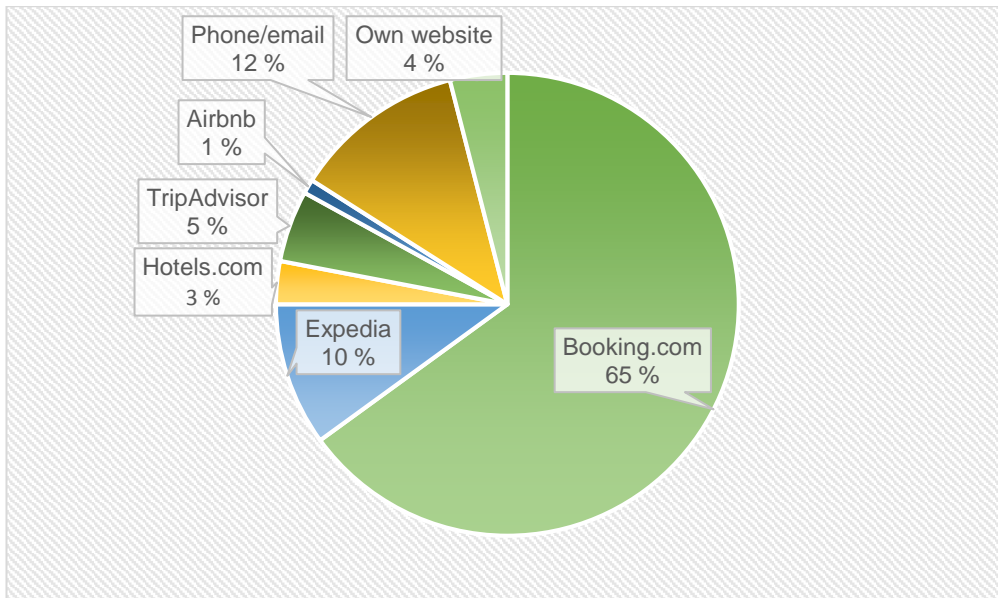
Figure 2. Popular channels for booking among Stranda guests (Stranda 2017)

However, most of the travelers tend to use platforms as Booking.com, Expedia, etc. to make a reservation. Also, some clients book premises by phone or email. As for advertising, Stranda uses only Facebook and Instagram pages at the moment.

3   Consumer behavior in tourism

Chapter three aims at introducing the concept of decision-making process applied to consumers in tourism sector. Studying purchase decisions is valuable as they allow companies to sell their products and services effectively. The consumer decisions are unavoidable for travel and tourism. However, the purchase itself is only the tip of the iceberg (Decrop 2006, 5). The main objective of this section is to understand how and why the tourists behave in particular way during all the stages of consumption process. The variables which influence the behavior of travelers are presented under three subchapters, starting from traditional view of customer behavior in tourism and ending with the modern approach.

3.1   Consumer decision-making

Consumer behavior process as a general notion can be identified as a process performed by a consumer who makes a decision of purchasing, using the product or service and disposing it. Besides, it includes the choices before and after these activities (Bowen & Clarke 2009, 125-127). The same process in tourism can explain the reasons for purchasing certain tourist products and the decision-making processes. To understand the concept of consumer behavior it is vital to consider psychological characteristics of the buyer from the pre-purchase to post-purchase phases. In addition, consumer behavior is referred to a process which aims to satisfy needs and wishes of an individual consumer or of a group through selection, acquisition, consumption and disposal of the goods or services (Swarbrooke & Horner 2016, 5).

Brunsson (2007, 1-2) suggests a point of view where decision is a rational process and can be described as an institution (however decision and choice are typically considered as synonyms). He explains that people usually use a common pattern for decision-making behavior: reflecting on the desirable, planning possible actions, and selecting one of them. Whilst, some decisions should be made according to certain rules, for instance in the parliament, others are guided by our intentions. In order to accomplish our intentions in the most efficient way we need to consider wisely our expectations, all the choices, compare them and be aware of the possible consequences before making a final decision. Thus, the decision will be rational.

However, not all of the researchers agree that travel decisions are always carefully planned. To illustrate this, Hyde & Lawson (2003, 13-20) discovered that travel purchase behavior can include planned, unplanned and impulsive decisions. In the same way,

(Bargeman & van der Poel 2006, 718) summarized that for a frequent traveler purchase behavior becomes more routine and the decision-making processes are less extensive.

There are number of scholars who represent the classical theories of consumer decision-making, in which the consumer is introduced as a risk reducer, a problem solver or an information processor. The consumers which are described as "risk reducers" tend to expect that their actions or obtaining a product can result in risks such as loss of money, undesired product performance or psychological risks. They limit the information search to avoid risks unless it helps to reduce them to satisfactory level. Another tactic includes repeating purchase of products or services from one seller or from recognized brands (Decrop 2006, 5)

The view of consumer as an "information processor" assumes that he combines continuous information search with rational decision making. Although he has limited resources for dealing with big quantity of information, he is looking for it and processing for better the alternatives and his choices are influenced by personal attitudes, motives, etc. Afterwards the there is a post-purchase evaluation (Sirakaya & Woodside 2005, 187).

Another theory portraits a consumer as a "problem solver"– a rational decision-maker, who encounters a problem based on his needs and wishes, however, he resolves the problem with several steps. Usually, such consumer researches about the product, evaluates the substitutes, makes a decision and measures the outcomes after the purchase. This theory follows the pattern of rational decision-making described by Brunsson (2007, 1-2). However, Swarbrooke & Horner (2016, 97) point out that rational decision-making is not always inherent to a group travel, since each traveler is likely to have his own determinants which may positively or negatively affect the final decision of the whole group.

In contemporary theories, the authors paid attention to consumers who are now overwhelmed with information sources, considerable number of competitors and substitute goods. This resulted in new perception of consumer decision-making. Hedonic consumption refers to a desire of experiencing a product on multisensory level. Contingent decision-making is influenced by a number of factors influencing the way a consumer chooses a product (social factors, prior knowledge, expertise, etc.). The garbage can decision-making perspective incudes unclear preferences and problem definition, which are changing, and the choice can be not made at all as there are too many alternatives or problems (Decrop 2006, 5-7).

3.2 Determinants in travel decision making

The following section examines the major factors influencing a traveler's behavior through stages of decision-making: decision process, post-experience and future decision-making. It also includes a study on motivational approach for various groups of tourists, as well as typology of vocation decision items are discussed. Besides, the study explains the differences between leisure and business travelers, their priorities and factors influencing their decision-making. These determinants are important for comprehension of the research findings that are described in the next chapters.

There are four main factors which influence decision-making of a traveler or a group. They are named "contextual factors" and represented by groups of factors: environmental, social, cultural and geographical, which are all interconnected. In turn, there are more groups of sub factors as these major factors unfold, as illustrated in the following figure (figure 3). Besides, they make an impact on the final decision about any of the vocation items, also influenced by other decision-making variables, which will be discussed later.
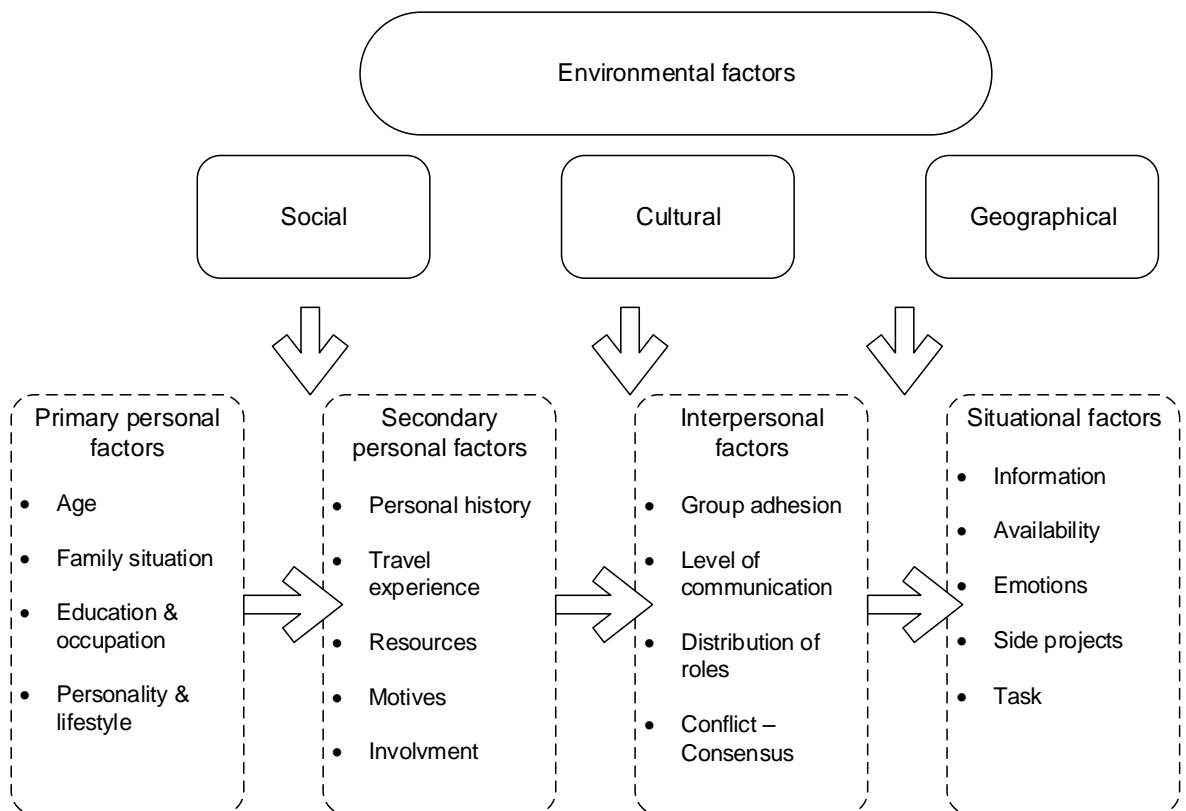

Figure 3. Contextual factors in vocation decision-making. Adapted from Decrop (2006, 72).

As the author explains, the environmental factors encompass all the variables and influence the decision-making directly and indirectly. For instance, legal aspects of travel such as visas and taxes, may have a significant impact on choice of destination. Swarbrooke & Horner (2016, 97) agree that tourist's behavior is shaped by various determinants. As for environmental (external) factors structure, the authors include political factors (similar to ones discussed by Decrop 2006), the media and tourism organization marketing. The media affects decision-making processes through channels like travel media, non-travel media and social media, where travel features, destinations, news, etc. are discussed and displayed. Tourism organization marketing can also spread awareness about any travel units via advertising campaigns, brochures, promotions, special offers and so on.

The social determinants are not only the source of travel information, but can also determine the purpose of travelling, for example vising relatives abroad. Moreover, these factors can refer to a group travel, which can lead to different travel plans, as was mentioned before. In addition, the cultural background of a holidaymaker plays an important role in destination preferences. Geographical factors are usually understood as physical factors such as climate of the destination or a distance from a traveler to a destination, and can affect positively or negatively the decision upon the trip (Decrop, 2006, 69).

3.2.1 Personal variables

Personality of a traveler also plays one of the key roles in decision-making. Most consumers reflect on alternatives for travel options, evaluate them and make a decision according to their personal traits (Chon, Pizam & Mansfeld 2012, 43-45). The personal factors can be divided into primary and secondary, so that the first ones are the origins from which the later factors arise (Decrop 2006, 67). The author believes, that the age and family status of a traveler form the family life cycle factor which plays a crucial role in vocation decision making. He distinguishes following types of travelers based on their family life cycle: younger single, younger couple, younger family, mid-life family, single-parent family, older couple, older single, group of friends. Swarbrooke & Horner (2016, 80) briefly explain that younger people seek relaxation, high social interaction, pleasure, while senior travelers prefer nostalgic and peaceful activities, and parents are willing to make sure their children are enjoying the holiday, as well as to take a break from parental responsibilities for some time.

However, regardless the family situation, the decision-making processes are mainly influenced by personal traits and motivations of each traveler. Decrop (2006, 70) suggests dividing the travelers according to their personality and lifestyle. Adventurous or cautious

traveler: in decision-making processes, emotional travelers tend to make impulsive, un-predictable decisions and use improvisation. On the other hand, careful travelers are more organized, trying to avoid risks. Active or passive travelers: active people prefer not staying at home for leisure time, but to take a trip, whereas passive ones can enjoy "staying at home vocation". Avaricious or prodigal travelers: money-saving type of vacationer and lack of saving type. Bowen & Clarke (2009, 203) distinguishes also introverts and extroverts: these traits differentiate travelers who limit personal contact, act more confident from those who prefer crowded places and more social interaction.

Personal motives encourage travelers to make purchase decisions on particular products. A basic typology of tourist motivators is highlighted by Swarbrooke & Horner (2016) and is shown in the following figure (figure 4).
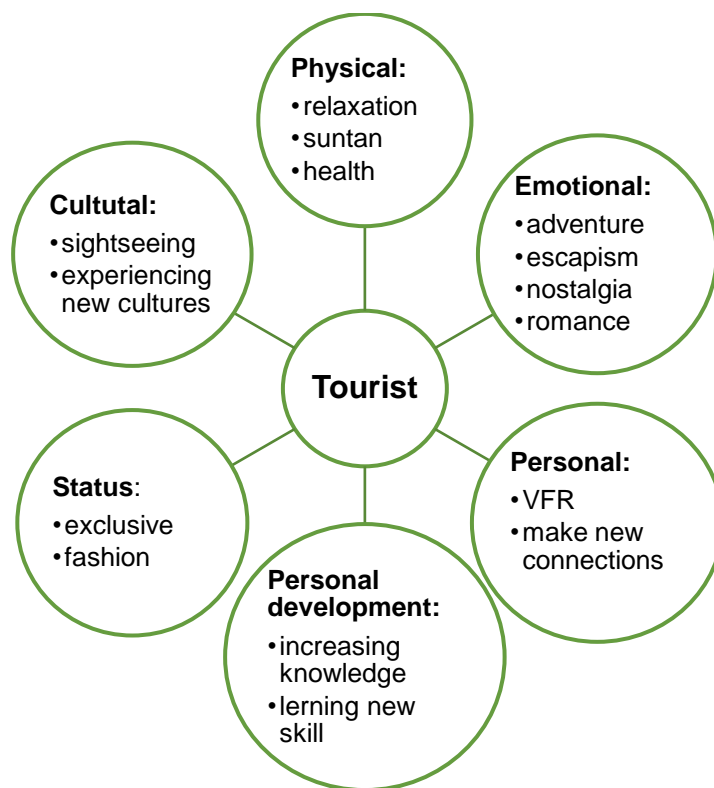
Figure 4. Typology of tourist motivators. Adapted from Swarbrooke & Horner (2016, 76)

Furthermore, tourist's behavior is usually influenced by several motivators at the same time. In the final decision, the dominant stimulus will prevail whether others will be partly satisfied. However, most travelers can find a concession between multiple determinations. Besides, voyagers can have "hidden" motivations. For instance, we are not always ready to share our real motives for travelling with others, or we cannot always recognize them, as they are subconscious motives (Swarbrooke & Horner 2016, 78-79).

The push and pull concept is widely applied to explain tourist's motivations. Tourists are motivated by their emotional desires to travel and attracted by destination characteristics (Yoon & Uysal, 2005, 50-56). Decrop (2006, 79-82) also combines traveler's personal motivators and destination's or product's attractiveness for a tourist into push and pull factors. He presents the motives in three major groups of push factors, which drive the travelers to go on vacation. The author describes tourism as a perfect example of solution to a need for *escape in time.* This need is urgent mainly for working professionals since "if there is work, there is a holiday". It means that the principal motive for such people is to escape everyday schedules and stress and to enjoy their time in relaxation away from work environment.

Escape in space is considered as other important motive for travelling. People tend to travel out of the country if they think that going on vacation in their own country does not give the feeling of a holiday. A desire to experience new cultures, climate or language push them to travel abroad. However, many tourists are afraid of the phenomenon of cultural shock and it is enough for them to travel within their home country. In addition, for city-center residents it might be enough to change the surroundings into countryside for a while to fulfill the need for escapism. Also, the gender and occupation of voyagers will affect the decision-making. For instance, the more time people spend doing the household activities (non-working women) the more they want to escape their duties and such environment for the time of travelling (to stay at a serviced type of lodging, abroad) and they usually prefer active type of travelling.

In his research findings, the writer discusses also that the determinants of one's travel involvement has a dynamic perspective: it changes as the life cycle of an individual progresses. The family situation of a tourist has an impact on every decision-making item, from the purpose of travelling to the choice of meal in a hotel. The progress in career, for example, can eliminate some travel constraints (working professionals can spend more money on travelling than students). Also, retired individuals get more time for decision-making processes than business people, for instance. Transition from one age group to another leads to ability or disability of using special discounts (restriction on youth discounts) as well as possible health problems can affect vacation decisions.

Besides the basic situations mentioned above, there are other determinants affecting traveler's behavior. Along with progress in their daily lives, the tourists grow their travel experience. Yet, the total number of trips does not always reflect the quality of experience. To illustrate that, the person who travels every time to the same destination for the same pur-

pose is likely to have less valuable experience in travelling than the one who chooses various destinations. The first traveler can explain his behavior as brand loyalty, when the other seeks novelty in every trip he takes (Decrop 2006, 84-87). In tourism, loyalty and trust is a result of key antecedents, like satisfaction, and consequences, like positive word-of-mouth (Sparks & Browning 2011, 1310-1320).

Decrop (2006, 87-89) describes the "brand supporters" as travelers who are concerned about quality of their trip, whereas "explorers" tend to accumulate variety of travel experiences. Both of the types have knowledge as their motive, but explorers are willing to obtain more superficial knowledge, compared to brand loyalists, who are getting deeper knowledge through repeating exploration of the same travel item. Last, but not least, the growing experience can lead to the change of expectation level. The more a traveler has experienced the more demanding on quality or quantity of services he becomes.

3.2.2 Situational variables

The factors of decision-making, which differs from personal characteristics of a traveler, but still affect the travel behavior can be referred to situational factors. These determinants can either facilitate or restrain decision-making process. According to Belk (1975) there are five types of such factors as described in table below (table 1).

Table 1. Types of situational variables in decision-making. Adapted from Belk (1975, 158)

Type of variable	Definition
Physical surrounding	The weather, geographical location, design, sounds, light, smells, tangible signs and displays of products. For example, the climate at the home country can encourage the travelers to experience different climate zone.
Social surroundings	Community, its characteristics, roles and communications. For example, people living in crowded cities tend to spend their holiday in open spaces where they can rest and be alone for a while.
Time-based perspective	The time period, time constraints, and anticipated time. For example, many travelers are limited by the period and by the available time for travelling.
Task definition	The direction, intent, role or frame of a person, through which certain aspects of the environment may become relevant. For example, the voyager is not likely to use the same criteria in selecting a city trip for oneself and as a gift for one's parents.

	Momentary moods or conditions, which define the perception, evaluation and acceptance of the present environment. For example, a traveler tired after family hardships chooses a club vacation, though he usually goes for more educational holiday.
Emotions	

Intertwined with personal and situational variables, the technology can facilitate the information search, which is also one of the major stages of travel preparation. The source of data, its quality and availability can impact one's decision-making on every service or product in tourism, which are presented in the next section. There is a number of information sources which are most likely to be used by a tourist.

The social networks, which can include all the acquaintances of a traveler from family members to strangers, who can shape one's opinion on travel and act as information source Decrop (2006, 106). Moreover, social media nowadays can be considered as one of the major influencers on consumer behavior. Using social media tourists can share information and experiences during all stages of the travel (from trip initiation to post-travel evaluation) (Xiang & Gretzel 2010, 179-180).

Commercial sources can also guide an individual in the jungle of tourist information and act as a trustworthy source. They can be presented by travel agencies and their marketing materials, embassies, various tourist organizations, etc. Travel books and guides as well as maps issued online or in print are also another source. Moreover, tourists can get data from news and other media channels like movies, radio, posters, or they can get knowledge from special courses and classes they attend. (Decrop 2006, 106).

However, the phenomenon of information overload is a result of the surplus of tourist information available due to technology. The data, online or offline, can be not only big but also inconsistent (Inversini & Buhalis 2009, 381-390). Last, but not least, the personal experience in travel has an impact on decision-making, as it was mentioned before.

The power of influence of these sources depends on personal variables of a traveler. For instance, McCarthy, Stock & Verma (2010, 12) conducted a research in which some of the results were dedicated to the most important hotel information sources for business and leisure travelers. Thus, the primary sources for professionals were identified as recommendations from work environment, search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing, etc.) and metasearch websites (Expedia, etc.). On the other hand, leisure travelers tend to trust family and friends, travel websites and hotel reviews online, according to the results.

3.2.3　Business travel

Business tourism can be defined as a travel within one's work time for business purposes, related to their occupation, rather than for a holiday. Nevertheless, a business trip can be intertwined with leisure if the traveler takes family members with him, or continues the trip with the vacation type of travelling afterwards. Business purposes are referred, but not limited to meetings, conferences, conventions, exhibitions, training courses, product launches, incentive travel, etc. (Swarbrooke & Horner 2016, 4-5).

The determinants influencing business travelers' decision-making can differentiate from leisure travelers' since these two groups usually have different motives and purposes for travelling. To begin with, the budget constraints for business travelers might not affect their travel for the reason that the employer or association typically pays for the trip. Even though business tourists tend to spend more on lodging than leisure tourists because they often require better quality services and ancillary services. However, in case of self-employed travelers, they pay for the trip themselves.

Next, for the business traveler the destination is normally decided by the employer as well, depending on the location of the meeting/conference, etc. Also, the destination is normally an industrial center of a city or town, but some meetings or trainings can be held in remote locations, and incentive travel locations can resemble holiday destinations. Moreover, some corporate trips are made on very short notice, compared to leisure travelers who book the trips months in advance (Davidson & Cope 2003, 6).

According to Swarbrooke & Horner (2001, 49-56), venues, transportation and accommodation are the most essential elements in a business travel. The business events take place at the venues, for example, a meeting in a hotel. However, sometimes the organizers are trying to make an event memorable and choose more unusual venues, for instance, museums or cruise chips. The transportation is certainly a vital part of business travelling. All means of travel can be used for this purpose from a taxi to an airplane, nevertheless, airlines are probably investing the most into special needs of business travelers. For accommodation, most travelers use commercial lodging, but still some of them can stay with friends or relatives. For many hotels, the major income comes from the business travelers and they are trying to attract them by offering outstanding services, premium variety of facilities and ancillary services, and famous brands. As was mentioned previously, the hotels can also cater for a business traveler not only as a place to sleep, but also as a venue for an event.

Despite the differences between leisure and business travel, Davidson & Cope (2003, 7-8) find several ways they can overlap. When the business event is ending, the business representative can become a leisure traveler for the rest of the trip. Also, such events regularly provide some leisure activities for the participants between the sessions. Besides, the travelers can go with their families who are not on business trip. Last, but not least, incentive travel can be compared with leisure travel by its nature.

3.2.4   Travel choices

When the travel decision processes are getting to the final stage, there are several decision products which a traveler can include in his travel choices. Decrop (2006, 68) suggests a typology of decision items, illustrated in the table below (table 2). The items are put in the list in the order of importance for tourists, according to a research conducted by the author.

Table 2. A typology of travel decision products. Adapted from Decrop (2006, 68)

The major importance	Other
Destination	Attractions
Accommodation	Formula
Period	Meals
Transportation	Organization
Activities	Purchases
Budget	Route
Accompaniment	Tour
Duration	Vacation style

On the other hand, (King & Woodside 2001, 67-86) proposed a model where the travel is understood as purchase-consumption system and has three levels. The first includes early stage decisions on travelling: destination, sightseeing and activities. The second consists of travel routing and lodging choices. The third stage decisions are made during the travel and can include shopping, dining possibilities, etc.

3.2.5   Post-experience processes

The decision-making process does not finish with the purchase of a product or service. Product appraisal takes place during and after consumption and satisfaction or dissatisfaction strengthens the future behavior of a tourist. It was researched that expectations for travelling are shaped through former experiences, personal (recommendations) and non-

personal (marketing campaigns) information sources, personal traits (gender, occupation), opinions and motives (March & Woodside 2005, 203-211).

An individual can compare his experience to the previous ones, which resulted in a set of standards for travelling. Now the holidaymaker can evaluate his travel as beyond or under his expectations. Moreover, situational factors can impact one's attitude towards the overall travel. For example, a plane delay. All in all, there are three possible attitudes: disappointment (travelers are displeased if some or most of their hopes have not been satisfied), surprise (they are satisfied because of unforeseen, pleasant product performance that was not expected), indifference (no positive or negative experiences during the travel) (Decrop 2006, 130-133).

The significances of customer's contentment or disappointment are illustrated in the figure below (figure 5). As a rule, dissatisfaction changes the attitudes and behavior of a traveler, while satisfaction can turn the customers into brand loyalists and stimulate them to repeat a purchase. Besides, dissatisfied travelers will most probably spread a negative word of mouth or complain, which can be a significant issue for service providers in tourism.
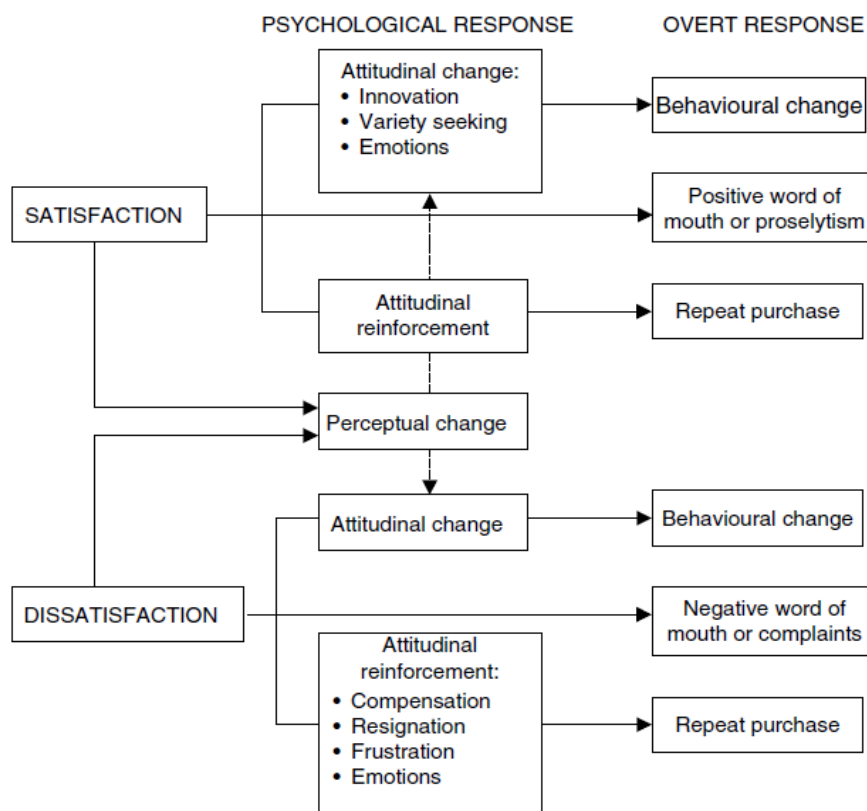
Figure 5. Consequences of tourist's attitude (Decrop 2006, 139)

On contrary, the satisfied customers will spread a good word to their acquaintances and give positive reviews, and these channels are known as important source of information

for many travelers. Then again, satisfied consumers can also impact upcoming performance of a company in the form of income, positive market image, etc. By studying satisfaction and its processes, vendors can gain valuable data and use it in strategic decisions, for example, in targeting or marketing mix (Morgan & Ranchhod 2010, 265).

3.3   A modern customer journey

The sections above present more traditional points of view on consumer behavior in tourism. However, the widespread of technology used in travel, changes and shapes the tourist behavior nowadays. The modern trends of searching and sharing information online can facilitate and develop travel experience. Thus, the travelers' behavior online appears somewhat different, yet bound together with fundamental knowledge of travel behavior. As was already mentioned before, social media tools can provide information for tourists which can direct their customer journey online and influence the results of decision-making process. Pan & Crotts (2012, 73) present social media as the digital version of word-of-mouth, where the data can be stored and retrieved online. In addition, Munar & Jacobsen (2013, 5) explain the success and constantly growing popularity of social media platforms due to their specific features:

To begin with, such platforms, for example Facebook, support online chatting and simultaneous photo sharing privately and to public. Another feature is that media can instantly reach massive coverage after posting something online. This can be destructive (a negative review) or beneficial (a positive feedback) for any company. Ye, Law, Gu & Chen (2011, 634-639) demonstrate empirically that online reviews generated by previous customers affect the online sales positively or negatively and make an impact on booking intensions of future clients.

Also, the online content can be stored and copied for later use. Moreover, this media is user-friendly and very interactive which engages users to participate much more, comparing to traditional media (television, radio, newspaper). The authors also conclude that increased social media involvement leads to the fact that digital word of mouth is close to traditional word of mouth phenomena and can be considered as vital information source for travel planning and decision-making process (Munar & Jacobsen 2013, 5).

Tussyadiah (2015, 3-5) highlights the change in tourists' behavior since they trust the technological advances usually during initiation stage of travel planning and after the trip as occur online. The travelers can browse and familiarize themselves with alternatives for the vacation and make a decision on-site, for instance. Similarly, they are able to post real-time reflection on the travel service or product using social networks. However, Hsu,

Ju, Yen & Chang (2007,158) argue that individuals are willing to share their thoughts online depending on their own perception and social influence.

Such technology as smartphones assist travelers in travel planning as well as improve their experiences. The smart mobile devices help to access the information and understand it, to navigate in any area, to stay in touch with social networks, to find entertainment and many more. So to say, modern technology allows individuals to stay connected, up-to-date and fully prepared for travelling (Tussyadiah, 2015, 1-2).

The customer journey of present generations can be considered as more circular that linear, as illustrated in the figure below (figure 6). Domke-Damonte, Damonte & Loftus (2008, 299-302) suggest the several stages of the journey: dream, search, book, experience and share. First, the voyagers get *inspiration* online: from the destination in general to very specific details of their trip. They browse blogs, photo streams, watch related videos and analyze comments on various travel items. Vieira (2016) called this stage a "dreaming stage".

Figure 6. A modern customer journey. Adapted from Domke-Damonte, Damonte & Loftus (2008, 299-302)

Next, the most time-consuming stage is *planning:* the travelers try to limit their options and come to a conclusion on travel items. People tend to use more and more of their smartphones and tablets instead of desktop devices for searching (Vieira 2016). As it was mentioned previously, Kim, Mattila & Baloglu (2011, 399-406) also agree that consumers

consider online reviews as an "electronic word of mount". They point out that travelers might not proceed to the booking stage without consulting tourism related forums to minimize risks.

The *booking* stage frequently involves searching for the best online travel agencies and purchase the services, however, there are still a lot of travelers who do not book everything before the trip. They continue some searching and booking online also during their travel. Murphy (2014) adds that holidaymakers prioritize price deals while booking, whether people on business trips pay attention to possibility to collect reward points/miles. Also, business travelers prefer booking through the mobile applications rather that the website compared to leisure travelers.

Last, but not least, the *sharing and reviewing* stage concludes the customer journey, however this stage will be a beginning of one more journey for another traveler who is looking for inspiration (Domke-Damonte, Damonte & Loftus 2008). It was researched that 97% of Millennials are using social media while travelling, and up to 52% of travelers are influenced by recommendations found on social media, according to Vieira (2016).

4   Research implementation

The chapter discusses research methods which could be used for data collection, their distinctive features and justification of the method choice. Moreover, the implementation of research methods is presented, and the processes of data collection and data analysis are described. Finally, the question about reliability and validity of the research is considered.

4.1   Methods

In order to decide which research method to use, it is important to understand the connection between the study objectives and the method, as well as advantages and disadvantages of each possible method. Quantitative and qualitative research approaches are debated further and the selection of one is presented.

Quantitative research includes data collection which can be interpreted and presented in numbers, percentages and statistics. Normally, it allows to research some phenomena and get large-scale statistics from population. It shows the general views on the subject, the tendency or the averages of opinions. However, to measure the opinions in more detail it is possible to offer more alternatives of answers to choose from. The more data is collected, the more reliable a research would be. The main quantitative tools of research involve gathering data through surveys, questionnaires, and interviews (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad 2010, 5-6).

On contrast, qualitative research focuses on smaller groups of people, with the aim to understand in detail their perceptions, behaviors, experiences, etc. The smaller sample is enough to get qualitative data and study some phenomenon. The accent is made on the depth of the answers and the freedom of expressing one's opinion rather than amount of answers. The methods used for data collection can include, but not limited to observation, interviews and focus groups. The evaluated data is usually presented in a form of text (Walter 2003, 20).

Quantitative research was selected as the main approach for data gathering for this thesis. The aim was to collect information from more than 100 travelers within a month about their online behavior towards accommodation bookings. Since the goal was to get a large amount of data in short period of time, quantitative research was the most appropriate. Thus, the survey method was used to collect the answers. The respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire online or on paper. The reasoning for choosing questionnaire as a method of information collection is discussed next.

The questionnaire is suitable for straight-forward questions which can be easily understood and do not require additional instructions other than written. Also, the questionnaire can be distributed to a larger sample and it is quite simple to analyze the results compared to interviews answers, for instance. Furthermore, some respondents can be more motivated to answer and to give frank responses because of the anonymity of the questionnaire. This method is usually used for random sampling. Questionnaires are not appropriate if complex in-depth data need to be collected. Besides, the researcher cannot control how careful the respondents fill the questionnaire. (Williamson 2002, 237-239).

The questionnaires can be managed in two ways: researcher-administered (face-to-face, by phone, by Skype, etc.) or self-administered (can be completed by the respondent online, on paper, etc.). Self-administered questionnaires require the least time and money contribution. Moreover, the respondents are not influenced by a researcher in any way. However, this method can get low reply rates, more missing answers and possible misunderstanding of questions. Alternatively, researcher-administered questionnaires allow to minimize misinterpretation for the respondents and make more flexible questions. Nevertheless, the answers can be less reliable if the respondents get influenced by researcher's behavior or presence (O'Gorman & MacIntosh 2015, 166).

4.2   Description of process

The earlier stages of the study included a survey design which was based on theoretical framework. First, however, the respondents were asked to provide a general information about themselves, their age group and the gender, correspondingly. The study was anonymous, so no names or personal details were asked in the questionnaire.

The sample of respondents was further requested to evaluate the frequency of its travelling for leisure purposes, the information sources used for the search for accommodation and to rate the importance of a range of factors on decision-making and to give individual opinions in the open-ended questions. The same pattern is used to get understanding of their behavior as business travelers. The advantage of open-ended questions is that the respondents can express their point of view as they are not limited by certain categories of answers (Williamson 2002, 238).

Other questions had a few answers to choose from, as well as the option "other" with a text box to ensure any feasible alternative reply will be captured. Moreover, the participants who had various experiences could select several answers in the questions with multiselection option. The advantage of these type of questions is that they set the frames

to guide participants' replies. This may help to understand the questions in more detail and clarify the approximate answers sought. Also, the data is easy to analyze (Williamson 2002, 239). Thus, the researcher was able to get quantitative data with the elements of qualitative study to get familiarized with different points of view.

The target group of the study involved tourists of any nationality and gender traveling for leisure and business purposes or any of those two. The only limitation was for the age groups of minors who the author tried to avoid since they are more unlikely to make independent purchase decisions on travelling. The researcher was aiming at getting data from people of various age to avoid bias, as well as to reach audience aged from 25 to 55, which can be most probably presented by both business and leisure travelers. Furthermore, to stay away from random sampling which can include people who do not travel or do not fit the criteria of the target audience in any other way, the questionnaire was distributed to the former and present guests of the hotel, as well as to the travel agency. Also, the survey was posted on travel-related forums, but with the remark that its preferable for the respondents to be at least 18 years old with an experience of online booking of accommodation.

The survey was created and published through Webropol. There were a brief introduction and instructions for the participants to follow, as completion of the online survey can be considered as self-administered. Additionally, depending on the answer, the system directed a participant to the next question or to the next part of the questionnaire. For example, if the respondent has never taken a business trip before, he would skip all the questions about business travel decisions and be directed to the next section.

Moreover, a certain amount of answers was collected offline with the printed version of the questionnaire. The researcher introduced the project to the respondents and answered the possible questions. This survey can be called a researcher-administered and it was also offered in Russian language whenever required. The questionnaire in English and Finnish can be found in appendices (appendix 1 & appendix 2).

After a month, the survey was closed, and there were 193 answers collected altogether. Data analysis included comparing the answers of different people on the same question to find out if there was any tendency or pattern. The quantitative data is presented in figures to illustrate the results better. The answers to open-ended questions were examined separately: they were translated and put into groups according to similarity of the answers to avoid repetition. For instance, the Internet connection was named as "Wi-Fi, Internet, data

connection, Internet connection" and appears in the report findings only as "Internet connection".

4.3 Reliability and validity

Reliability is defined as consistency of the data collected. In other words, it shows that the research can be repeated and the same answers can be obtained. However, any research of the phenomena can contain a certain amount of errors. Thus, the test for reliability may be applied after the research (Cargan 2007, 233-235). Alternatively, validity shows whether the results of the reserch meet the requirements of the measuring method and whether the data is collected from the suitable sample (Finn, Walton & Elliott-White 2000, 28-29).

The goal of the research was to be conducted within the principles of validity and reliability. First, the sample of respondents consisted of the actual guests of the hotel, which ensures that they had fresh memories about booking and travel experiences at the moment of the study. Next, the previous guests of the hotel also participated in the survey and that ensures that the respondents had previous experiences in accommodation booking and travelling. Moreover, some participants were reached through the travel agency which ensures that they are tourists, not random individuals. Last, but not least, the author was able to get a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, which increases the validity of research.

On the other hand, the number and the pattern of answers show that there were enough participants to get insight of the subject of the research. However, not all of them participated in every question which could reduce the total reliability of the answers. Moreover, the research was conducted only once and the potential future studies might not lead to the same results. Also, the experiences and personal beliefs of the respondents are changeable with time. Finally, the research was conducted also with the ethical principles. All the participants were treated respectfully. The data was collected anonymously and used only for the research within reasonable time and destroyed afterwards.

5   Findings

The key results of the study are presented in the following chapter. It starts with the back-
ground information about the participants and follows by the sections about leisure and
business travelers' preferences and the information from both is compared. In those sec-
tions, the travelers' online behavior is examined and the results are presented in figures
and tables.

5.1   Respondents' background information

The total amount of answers is 193. The ratio of both genders participated in the research
is relatively equal: 43% of respondents are males and 57% are females. All the partici-
pants have answered the question since it was an obligatory question. In the next compul-
sory question the respondents were asked to provide their age group (figure 7). According
to the results, most of the answers were collected from the target group. The age distribu-
tion is as follows: most respondents (41%) are between 35 and 44 years old, 27% are
from 25 to 34 years old, 18% are from 45 to 54 years old, less than 11% are people from
18 to 24 years old and the smallest groups are 55 to 64 years old (2%) and 65 or older
(1%) accordingly. There were no participants younger than 18 years old.
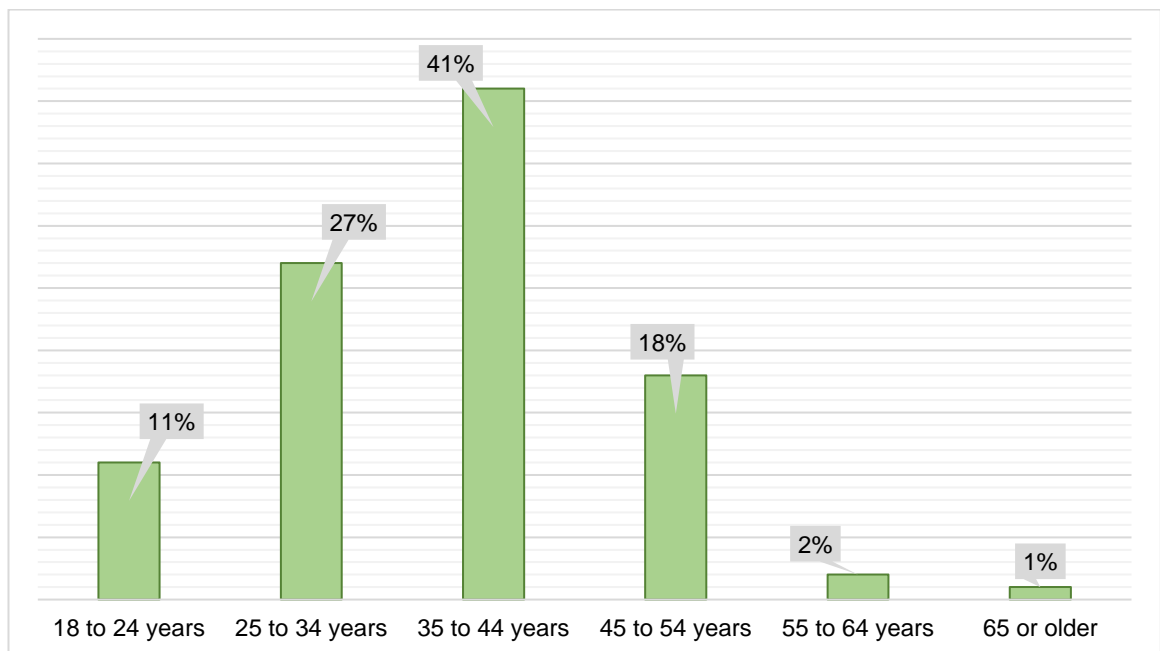
Figure 7. Age groups of the respondents (n=193)

Furthermore, the participants who answered that they do not travel for business in the
question "How many times per year do you travel for business purposes?", were consid-
ered as leisure travelers only. Those, who make trips for leisure and business could an-
swer both parts of the questionnaire. Thus, from all the respondents 11% never travel for

business. Most of the remaining travelers go on business trips quite often (1-2 or 3-5 times), which is a reliable source of data. From the figure below (figure 8) you can see the ratio of two types of travelers and their frequency of travelling.
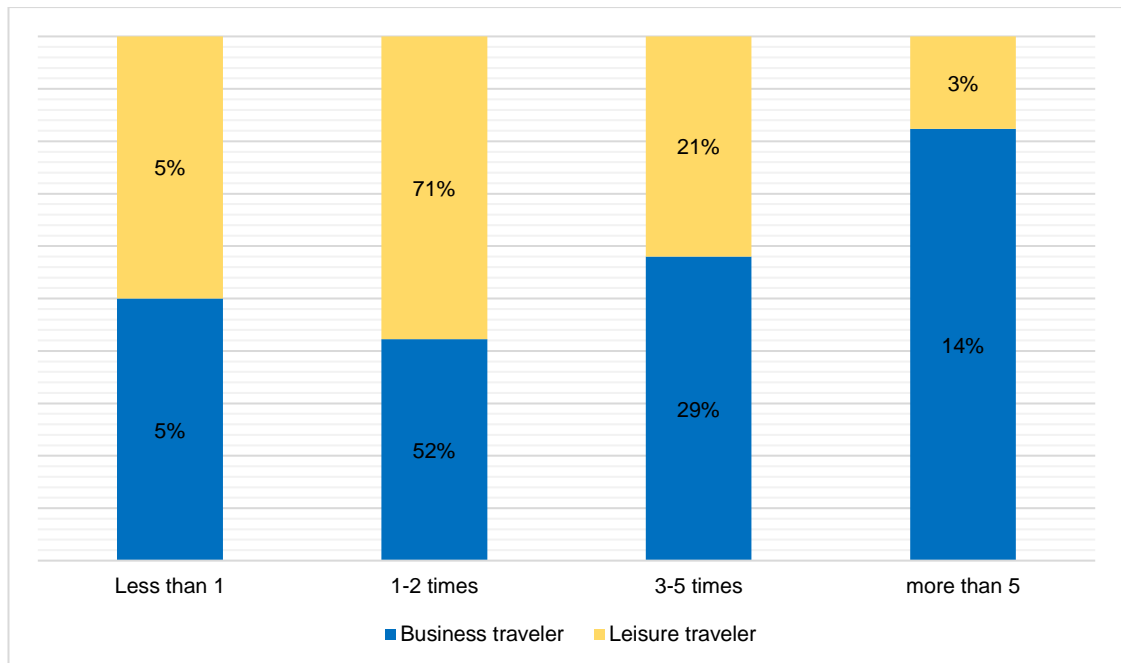
Figure 8. Frequency of travelling (n=193)

5.2 Information search preferences

In this section, the data represents online decision-making preferences of both types of travelers. The participants were asked about information sources they consult when searching for accommodation and the frequency of sources used. Also, the importance of such factors as hotel location, price, etc. were investigated. Apart from the predetermined multiple-choice answers for some questions they could indicate an alternative answer in the field "other". Moreover, the voyagers were asked to participate in describing some preferences in their own words. None of the questions were obligatory to answer in this section.

The answers for the question "How often do you use following sources of information when searching for accommodation for a leisure travel?" are illustrated in the figure below (figure 9). People were asked to rate the information sources according to the frequency of usage from always to never. The most common sources which are used always or often: the search engines (94%), friends and family recommendations (90%), travel-related websites (64%) and hotel reviews (79%). The tourists tend to ask sometimes for recommendations on accommodation from their organization (workplace, university, ect.), however, they check online travel agencies more often (60% compared to 22%). Only 5% of

respondents indicated other sources of information, which were travel-related books, magazines, news, YouTube and offline travel agencies.
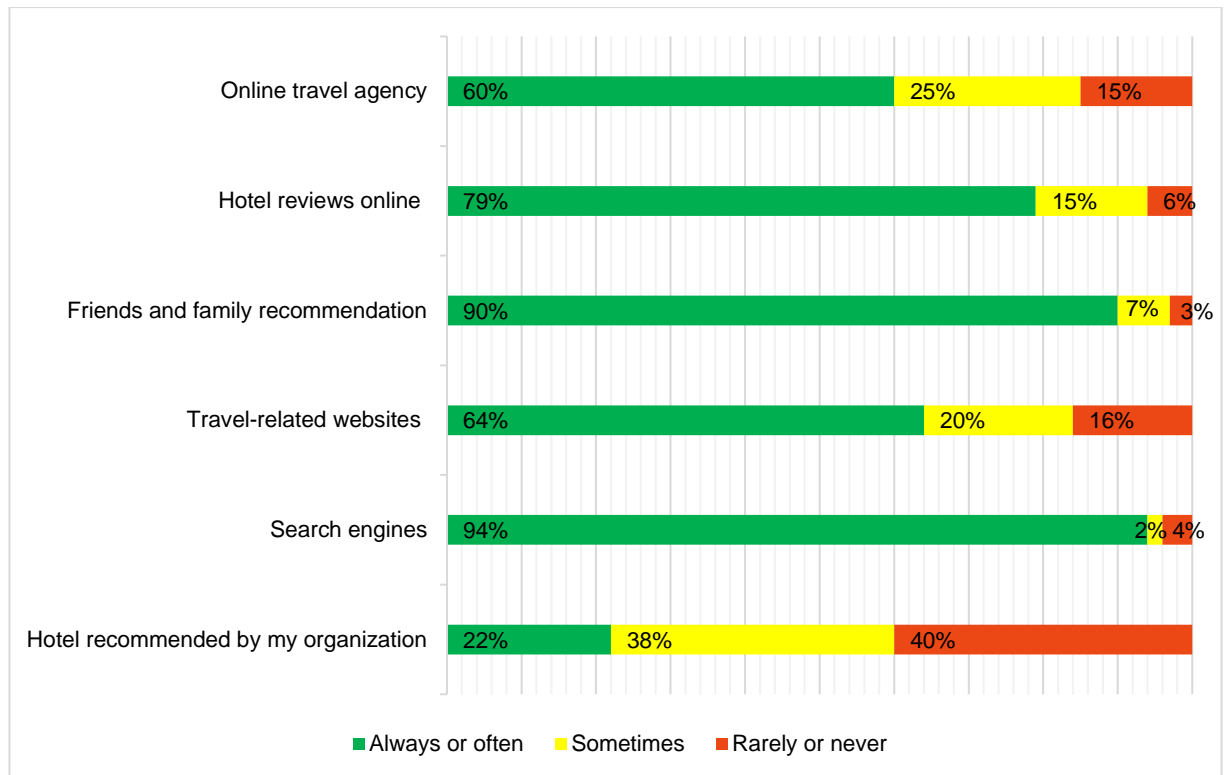
Figure 9. Sources of information about accommodation for leisure travel (n=190)

Form 172 respondents who ever travels for business 28% do not book accommodation by themselves and they did not participate in this question. For the remaining participants, the most common information sources which are used always or often: hotel reviews online (88%), search engines (80%) and online travel agencies (75%) as shown in the figure 10. Recommendations from workplace are also popular among business people – 54% of responses. Sometimes or even rarely they use travel-related websites and ask their friends and family for advice. Just a few participants mentioned other source of information they often use – a hotel website.
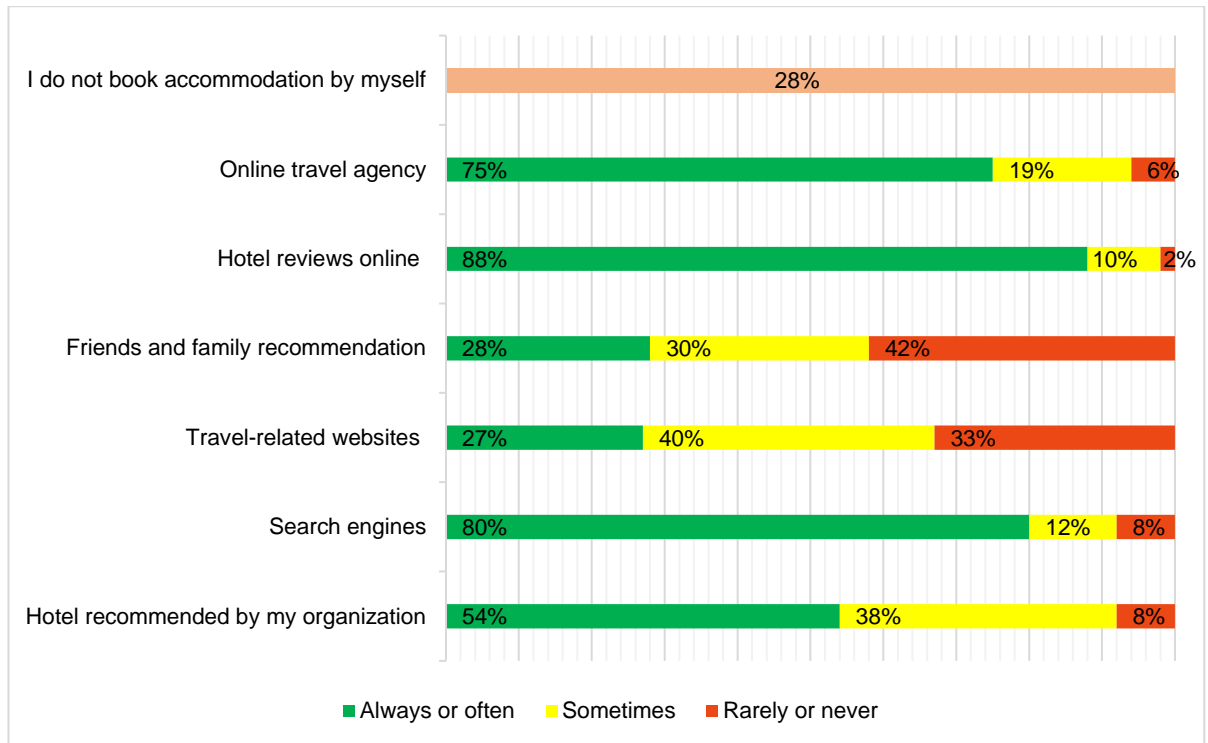
Figure 10. Sources of information on accommodation for business travel (n=124)

The next question was about factors which influence the hotel choice. People were asked to rate the importance of each factor from not important to very important with the multiselection option. The figure 11 illustrates the percentage of people who marked the following factors as "important" or "very important" for their hotel choice. Other options included "moderately important", "slightly important" and "not important". It can be concluded that the location is a core factor for both types of travelers with more than 80% of replies.

However, leisure travelers pay more attention to the price than business travelers: 88% to 61% correspondingly. Previous experience appears more significant for business travelers as they are probably more likely to return to the same hotel on their next trip within the same area. Hotel rank seems moderately or slightly important for both types of travelers, whether the hotel facilities are considered by most of the business travelers and more than half of leisure travelers. Safety, cancellation policy, languages spoken by the staff and negative reviews online were mentioned as other crucial factors influencing the decision.
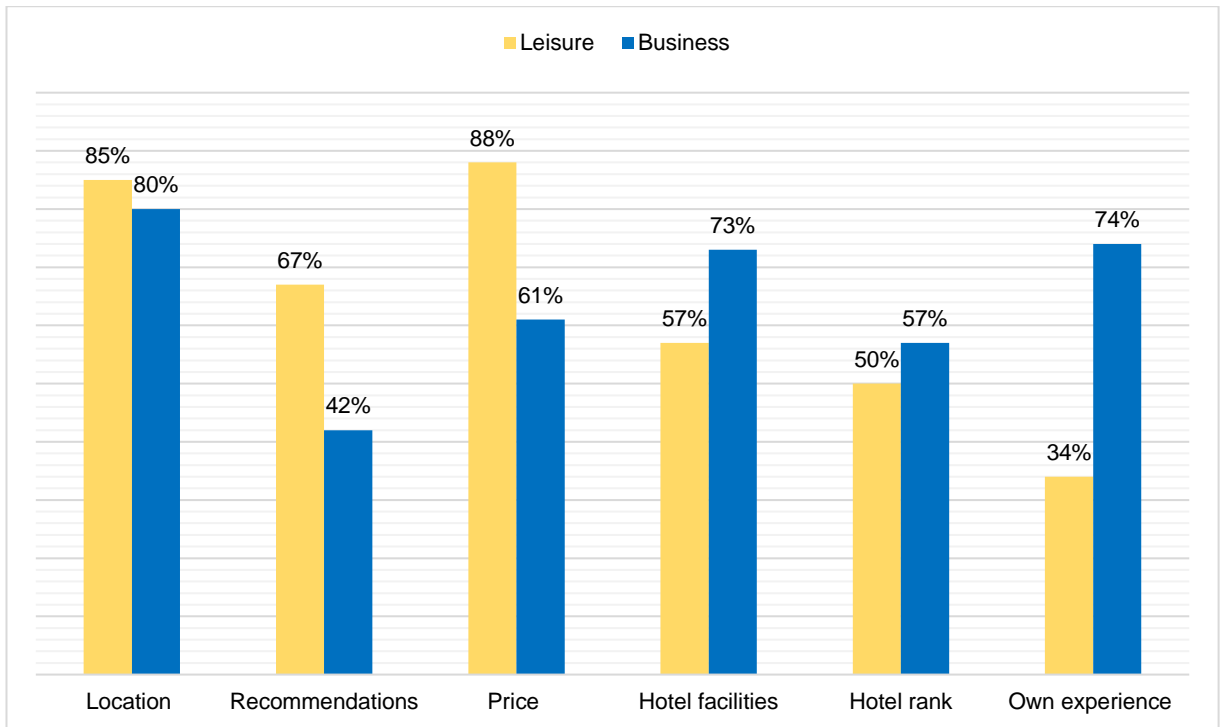
Figure 11. Factors influencing a hotel choice (n=141)

Finally, the travelers were asked to choose only one information source which plays a decisive role in the final choice of accommodation. Participants could answer this open-ended question regardless the purpose of their travel. More than 40 % of people consult the hotels' website before they decide to book it, whether almost 30% read the reviews by previous guests. And still, quite many tourists consider recommendations from people they know. Some participants also indicated that they search for cheaper deals and contact the hotel directly rather than book it through online travel agency. The top five information sources are shown in the figure 12.
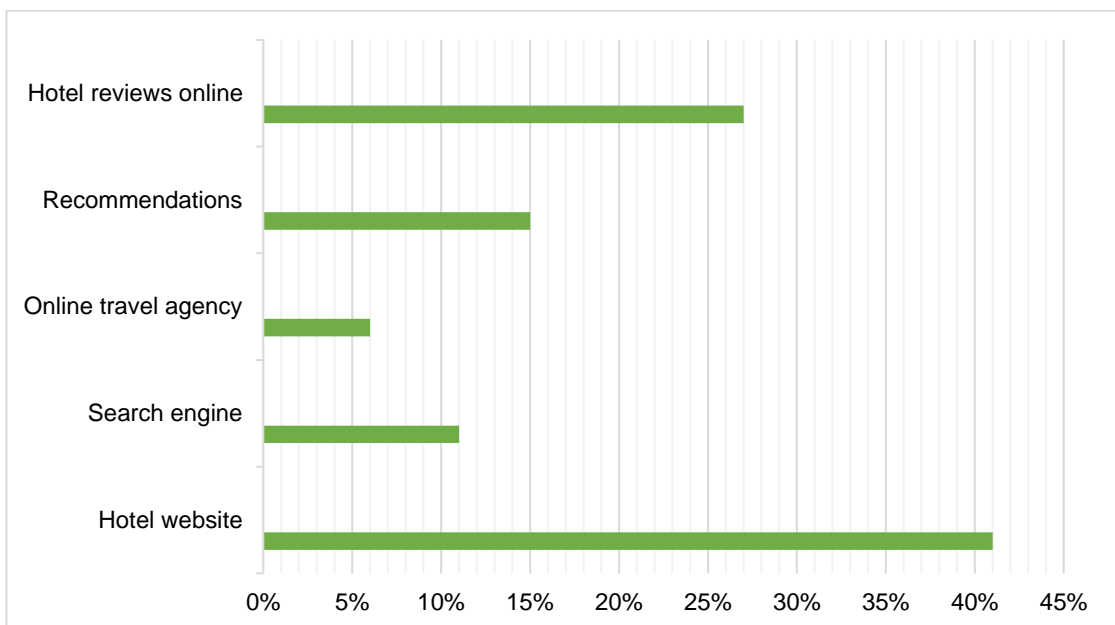
Figure 12. Information source which plays a decisive role (n=181)

5.3 Hotel preferences

In this section, the respondents we asked to reflect on type of accommodation which could be the most suitable for their travel. Also, they were asked to describe the services which they prefer to have during their stay or possible features of the lodging. The figure below (figure 13) presents the responses from both leisure and business travelers who were asked to choose one best accommodation option for travel.

For most of the leisure tourists (38%) would stay in a mid-scale hotel like bed-and-breakfast, and 31% of them prefer budget accommodation (motel, hostel). That is quite logical since 88% of leisure tourists picked price as one of the key factors while choosing a place to stay in previous questions. The third most preferred answer was "rented apartment or house" with 20% of replies. Luxury accommodation got only 11% of responses. The option "other" was chosen by less than 1% of respondents and included "camping grounds" and "famous chain hotel" as answers.
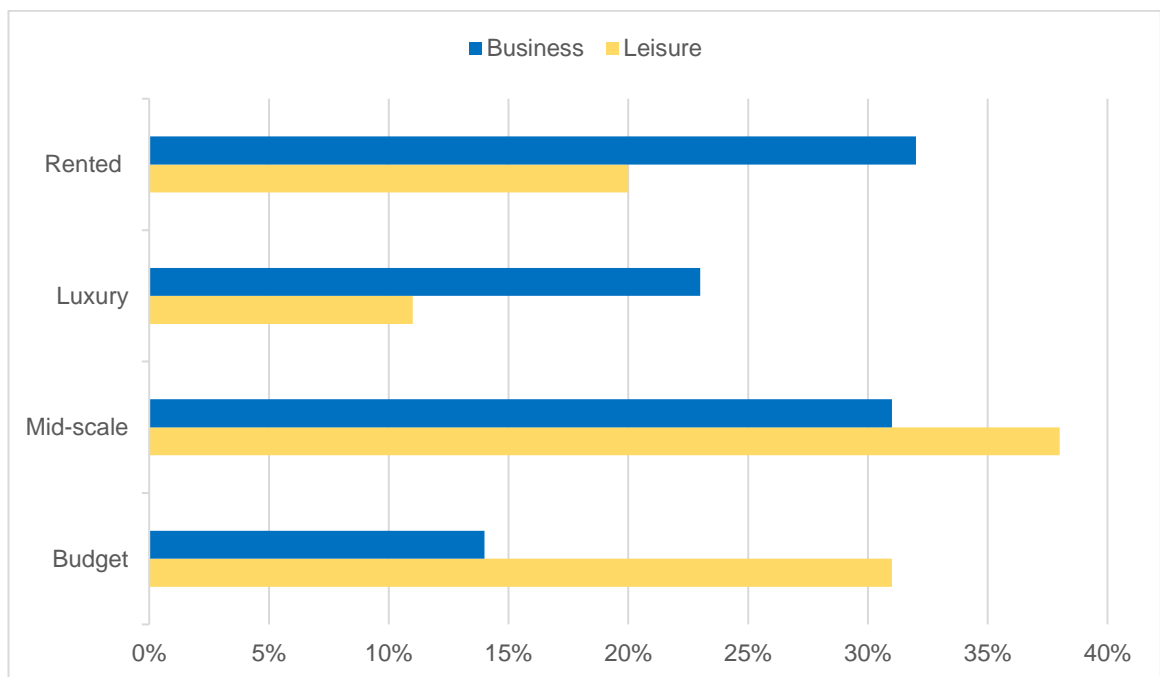
Figure 13. Most preferred type of accommodation for travel (n=190)

On the other hand, business travelers' favorite lodgings are mid-scale and rented with 31% and 32% of answers accordingly. Luxury accommodation is preferred by 23% of voyagers, and budget by 14%. Again, the option "other" got less than 1% of replies and was explained as "the lodging type depends on the trip".

As was concluded before, both types of travelers consider rented properties as a second or third popular place to stay. Further, the participants answered the question "Have you

ever booked accommodation through Airbnb platform?". From 193 respondents 57% replied "yes" and 43% "no". To understand what type of travel is the most common among Airbnb users, people we asked to choose all suitable options in the next question or to indicate their own answer (figure 14).
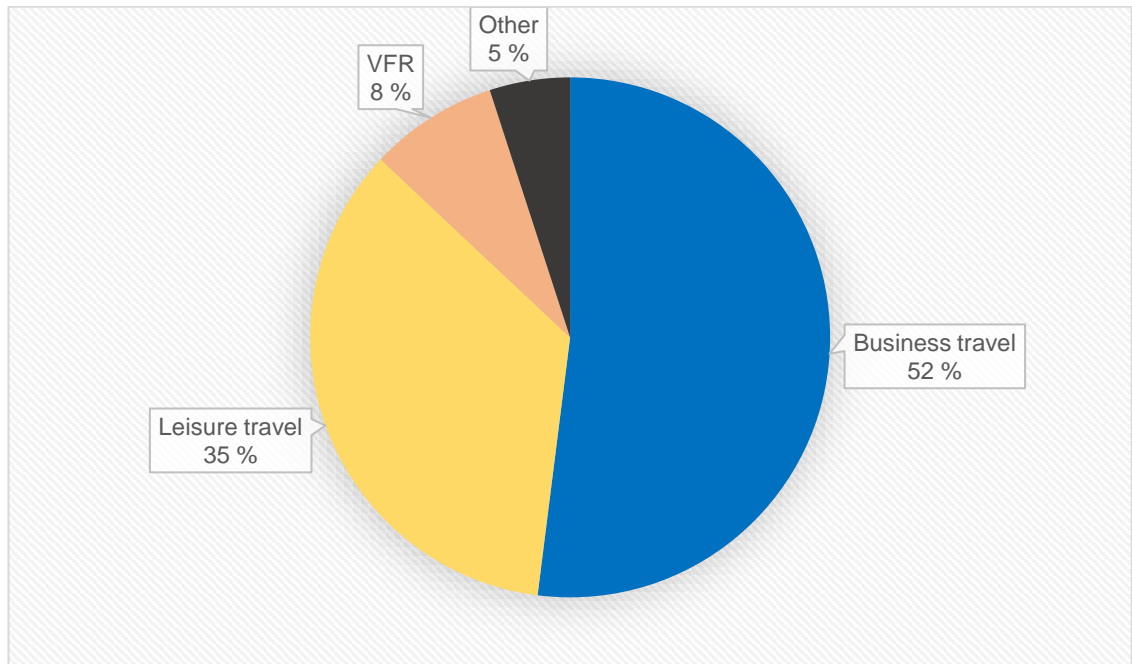
Figure 14. Accommodation booked through Airbnb (n=110)

It can be clearly seen that accommodation booked through this online platform is favored by people on business trips with 52% of replies. Also, it is quite popular place to book for leisure travel (35%). Airbnb, however, is not so common to look for an apartment if you are visiting friends and relatives. Other alternatives included: attending courses/ seminars, lodging for students, who haven't got a place in student apartment yet, attending dog/ cat shows and resting during a stopover flight.

Next question was about additional services which travelers prefer in a hotel during their stay. The most common answers (mentioned more than 10 times) for leisure travelers were: flexible check-in, pet policy, childcare facilities, 24-hours reception, multilingual staff, high speed Internet connection, breakfast included in price, free cancellation, airport transfer and bike rental. Other replies included: private kitchen, spa, laundry services, daily cleaning, tour guides, computer room and sport equipment rental.

For business travelers, the most preferable services were: high-speed Internet connection, parking, complimentary amenities, laptop workspace, in-room kitchen facilities, childcare services, early/ late check-in, bar, possibility to make hot drinks in a room, transfer and laundry/ ironing services.

Afterwards, the travelers were asked to describe in three words the best hotel for each type of travel in their opinion. The most common answers are presented in the table below (table 3). It can be concluded that leisure tourists seek for a "home away from home" type of accommodation with personal contact with staff/ owner, who can provide useful tips on traveling in that area. They also want to feel welcomed and sleep in clean and cozy rooms and have a breakfast when they wake up.

Whereas business travelers prefer the hotel which can be easily found and accessed, self-check-in out of business hours, and get ready for the work day in a quiet room. It is also vital for them to have a laptop workspace and stay always connected with complimentary and high-speed Internet connection. Breakfast is important for starting their day as well.

Table 3. Description of the best hotel for both types of travel (n=146)

Leisure travel	Business travel
Home-like atmosphere	Quiet
Clean	Modern
Cozy	Accessible
Welcoming	Comfortable
Internet connection	Business facilities
Free breakfast	Safe
Friendly staff	Free and fast Internet connection
Tourist information	Self-check-in (out)
Personal contact	Breakfast

The last question was aiming to investigate the participants' willingness to post a review online after negative and positive experience of a hotel. They were asked to rate the probability of reviewing the lodging from 1 to 5, where 1 is unlikely and 5 is likely. The figure below (figure 15) states that both experiences will be shared, however, likelihood of publishing one's negative thoughts about the accommodation is still higher.
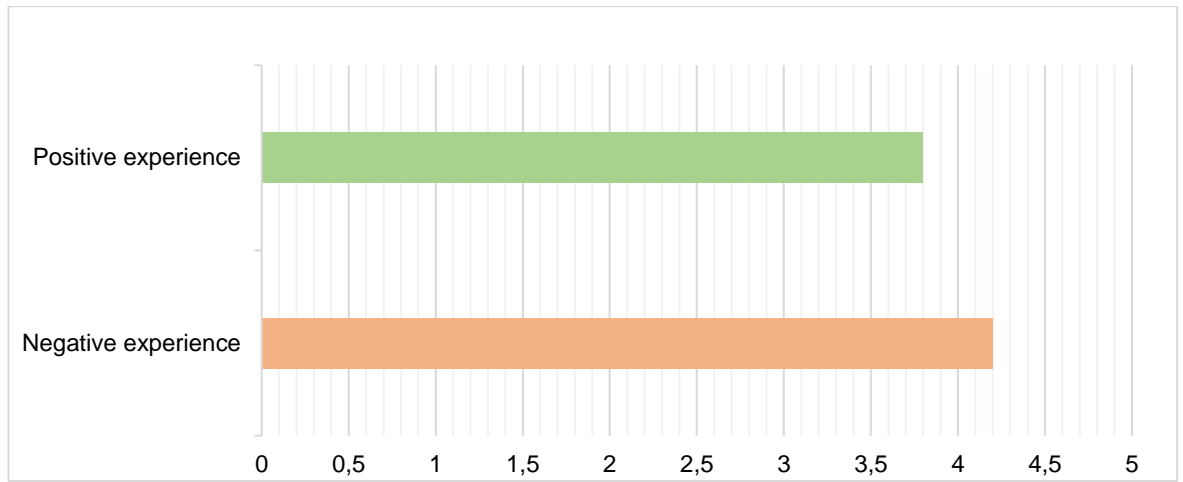
Figure 15. Likelihood of posting a review online (n=192)

To sum up, the data collected through the survey showed clearly the preferences of both types of travelers and outlined their decision-making processes on accommodation online. The analysis of the survey results was compared to the theoretical framework to create development suggestions, which can be applicable to Stranda or be used as guidelines for similar businesses. The suggestions are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

6 Discussion

The aim of the research was to understand how travelers choose accommodation online. 193 answers were collected altogether through the survey and are represented by qualitative and quantitative data. The research findings were analyzed and presented to the commissioner who will use them to adjust the services and range of facilities of the hotel according to guests' needs, where possible. The author believes that the research findings will pay a significant role in understanding the current situation in the company and become a foundation for the probable improvements in services.

The participants of the survey were divided into two main groups according to their travel habits: leisure tourists and business travelers. The business travelers are the largest target group for the commissioner – about 80% of all guests. For some of them, the process of searching for accommodation and booking is not a necessity as their organization is taking care of it, others shared their experiences through the survey. Table 4 shows the summary of development suggestions applicable to business travelers: *what* can be developed and *how* it can be done.

Table 4. Development suggestions (business travelers)

What	How
Sales	Register all premises in major OTAs, make sure hotel description can be easily found online, list all the premises in Trip Advisor to collect feedback.
Sales through website	Update website, make mobile-friendly and user-friendly booking system.
Customer loyalty	Loyalty program for regular customers.
Business facilities	Make sure there are rooms at least with a laptop workspace and high-speed Internet connection.
Flexible check-in (out)	Take payments and make registration remotely the ensure flexibility in time.
Airbnb	Expand to apartment type of accommodation as was intended because of the interest from business travelers.
Reviews online	Encourage to leave feedback, manage negative reviews.

Business travelers tend to use search engines, online travel agencies and hotel recommendations online as sources in the early stage of a hotel purchase decision. Thus, to improve sales in future, the commissioner needs to make sure that all the premises can be found by typing their names in Google, for instance, as well as registered in major online travel agencies (OTAs). Moreover, the company might want to list all the remaining lodgings in Trip Advisor, so that the guests can leave their reviews after the stay.

In the final stage of hotel search process most of the travelers claim to consult the hotel's website. However, the commissioner usually receives less than 4% of bookings through the website. Therefore, it should be updated more regularly, contain all necessary information and have a user-friendly booking system. Moreover, the mobile version of the website must be as convenient as desktop version, since the popularity of mobile bookings, especially among business travelers.

On the other hand, according to the results, majority of business and leisure travelers consult the online travel agencies always or often while choosing the hotel. Anderson (2010) conducted a study, which revealed that hotels can increase amount of reservations on their own websites if they are listed on online travel agencies.

Besides, the business travelers are more likely to become regular guests in case the hotel has met their criteria. Subsequently, he commissioner might want to pay attention to loyalty of business guests. Probably, offering a loyalty program which includes special offers or complimentary services is an opportunity to keep those travelers return to the hotel for their business trips. In addition, the location is one of the key factors for both types of travelers. As Stranda is aiming to expand, the company needs to consider the best location for future hotels.

Furthermore, it is not a surprise that the hotel facilities play a significant role for business guests. To start with, the Internet connection in a hotel nowadays should be a must, especially for business travelers who need to be always connected. The quality of the connection should be also considered to meet the requirements of business guests. Business facilities onsite should include at least a laptop workspace in every room and flexible check-in (out). For the author, it was interesting to find out that business travelers often do not require personal contact with the staff. Consequently, it can be a promising idea to start managing payments, check-in and out remotely to facilitate and speed up the service for business guests.

The research showed that the business travelers prefer mostly mid-scale hotels and rented accommodation for their trips. Thus, Stranda is on the safe side as it provides both types of lodging. The willingness of the guests to stay in a rented apartment or house gives a green light to the company to expand in this direction. Also, the significant percentage of business travelers booking their lodging through Airbnb is a sign to update company's Airbnb account and promote it more actively.

Since the reviews by previous guests are another criterion for choosing a hotel in the final stage of decision-making, the commissioner might benefit from providing an appealing guestbook and encouraging satisfied guests to share their thoughts online, as well as dealing well with negative experiences before they are posted online.

The following table (table 5) presents the highlights of development suggestion applicable to leisure travelers. Leisure travelers' decision-making on accommodation follows the scheme described in the theoretical part. They start with getting inspiration and information from search engines, travel agencies, and travel-related websites. However, they trust recommendations from their closest ones the most. The commissioner might want to become more active in social media to capture attention of those travelers who are in a "dreaming stage" of their vacation. As the purchase decision process is circular, it can be useful to ask the guests to share their experiences in social media and leave a feedback for future guests to get inspired. Additionally, providing some bonuses for those who recommended the hotel to a friend can be other practical method for the hotel to get more business.

Table 5. Development suggestions (leisure travelers)

What	How
Attract leisure travelers	Be active on social media, encourage guests to share their experiences online, offer bonuses for guests who recommended the hotel to a friend.
Price policy	Last-minute deals, special offers, etc.
Inexpensive lodging	Reserve several rooms for hostel type of accommodation
Pet policy	Allow pets in certain premises or during certain time of the year

Contrasting with business travelers, leisure tourists are more price sensitive. According to Google's Traveler Study (2014), they decide more thoroughly on the most suitable hotel

option and look for possible deals. Similarly, the research showed that for 88% of leisure travelers price is very important factor. Thus, the commissioner might want to introduce some last-minute deals or special seasonal offers for tourists to compete with other accommodation providers. Also, it is vital to point out that a lower price does not mean a lower service.

Apart from the mid-scale accommodation, leisure travelers prefer inexpensive lodging. It might be a competitive idea to reserve several rooms for hostel type of accommodation. Moreover, it was a surprise to learn that a possibility to stay with pets is in high demand. Normally, in Stranda hotels it is prohibited to bring pets along. However, the commissioner might want to reconsider this policy and allow pets in certain premises for the time of pet shows, for instance. This could be another competitive advantage, since most of the hotels prefer guests without pets as well. From 11 B&Bs in Porvoo only one allows staying with pets (TripAdvisor 2017).

It is clear that regardless the types of travelers, they are choosing a hotel which can propose the best value under a limited budget. Researching the guests' preferences and needs can facilitate the challenge of defining the best value proposition for them. Once it is studied and understood, another challenge is to prioritize the new services which can add more value to ones already existing in a hotel.

As for the own learning, the thesis process was a valuable tool to acquire a deeper knowledge of the chosen subject. Moreover, it tested my time-management skills and ability to solve problems. In addition, I developed my critical thinking and analytical skills while choosing the right source for theory chapter. I selected to write a research-oriented thesis because the results can be unpredictable within my topic, even though there was a lot of previous research done by others.

The most challenging about this type of thesis was to get enough reliable data, to combine it and to make conclusions from the results. Sometimes people were difficult to approach due to the fact that they were not interested in answering the survey. However, it was a good idea to select multiple channels for survey distribution. And in the end, it was curious to notice how the participants' answers match with the theoretical framework of the thesis, yet bring some individual and unexpected details which cannot be found from books.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire in English

Dear respondents,

This survey is a part of my thesis process aiming to study how travelers choose accommodation online. Your answers will be collected anonymously, and the results will be used by the commissioner to enhance the guests' experience at the hotel. Moreover, they will help me to understand better the tourists' behavior and purchase processes in accommodation industry. The survey consists of 19 questions about your previous experience in choosing accommodation, and will take around 15 minutes to complete. I appreciate your time and opinion on the subject. Thank you for your contribution!

1. Gender:
Male
Female

2. Age group:
18 to 24 years
25 to 34 years
35 to 44 years
45 to 54 years
55 to 64 years
Age 65 or older

3. How many times per year do you travel for leisure purposes?
Less than once per year
1-2 times per year
3-5 times per year
More than 5 times per year

4. How often do you use following sources of information when searching for accommodation for a leisure travel?

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Hotel recommended by my organization	○	○	○	○	○
Search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing or other)	○	○	○	○	○
Travel-related websites (Travelocity, Kayak, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
Friends and family recommendation	○	○	○	○	○
Hotel reviews posted on TripAdvisor, Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, etc.	○	○	○	○	○
Online travel agency (Booking.com, Expedia, Hotels.com, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
Other sources (specify) [_____]	○	○	○	○	○

5. Please rate the importance of following factors while choosing a hotel for a leisure travel

	Very important	Important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not important
Location	○	○	○	○	○
Recommendations (from people you know)	○	○	○	○	○
Price	○	○	○	○	○
Hotel facilities	○	○	○	○	○
Rank of a hotel (budget, mid-scale, luxury)	○	○	○	○	○
Reviews (by previous guests)	○	○	○	○	○
Own experience	○	○	○	○	○
Other [_____]	○	○	○	○	○

6. What type of accommodation for a leisure travel would suit you most?

Budget hotel (hostel, motel)

Mid-scale hotel (B&B, guesthouse)

Luxury hotel (5-star, boutique)

Rented apartment/ house

Other_____

7. What additional services of a hotel do you prefer for your leisure travel? (for ex. breakfast, transfer, etc)_____

8. Describe in 3 words the best hotel for a leisure travel _____

9. Have you ever booked accommodation through Airbnb platform? (it is an online marketplace for renting short-term lodging including vacation rentals, apartments, homes, hostel beds, or hotel rooms.)

Yes

No

10. For what type of travel have you booked accommodation through Airbnb? (multiple choice)

Business travel

Leisure travel

Visiting friends and relatives

Other _____

11. How many times per year do you travel for business purposes?

I don't travel for business

Less than once per year

1-2 times per year

3-5 times per year

More than 5 times per year

12. How often do you use following sources of information when searching for accommodation for a business travel?

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Hotel recommended by my organization	○	○	○	○	○
Search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing or other)	○	○	○	○	○
Travel-related websites (Travelocity, Kayak, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
Friends and family recommendation	○	○	○	○	○
Hotel reviews posted on TripAdvisor, Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, etc.	○	○	○	○	○
Online travel agency (Booking.com, Expedia, Hotels.com, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
I do not book accommodation by myself	○				

13. Please rate the importance of following factors while choosing a hotel for a business travel.

	Very important	Important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not important
Location	○	○	○	○	○
Recommendations (from people you know)	○	○	○	○	○
Price	○	○	○	○	○
Hotel facilities	○	○	○	○	○
Rank of a hotel (budget, mid-scale, luxury)	○	○	○	○	○
Reviews (by previous guests)	○	○	○	○	○
Own experience	○	○	○	○	○
Other _____	○	○	○	○	○

14. What type of accommodation for a business travel would suit you most?

Budget hotel (hostel, motel)

Mid-scale hotel (B&B, guesthouse)

Luxury hotel (5-star, boutique)

Rented apartment/ house

Other_____

15. What additional services of a hotel do you prefer for your business travel? (for ex. breakfast, transfer, etc) _____

16. Describe in 3 words the best hotel for business travel _____

17. Which information source usually plays a *decisive* role in the *final* choice of the hotel?
_____

18. How likely would you post a hotel review after a negative experience?

(unlikely) 1   2   3   4   5 (likely)

19. How likely would you post a hotel review after a positive experience?

(unlikely) 1   2   3   4   5 (likely)

Appendix 2. Questionnaire in Finnish

Hyvä vastaaja,

Tämä kysely on osa opinnäytetyötäni, jossa tavoitteena on tutkia, kuinka matkailijat tekevät verkossa valintoja majoitukseen liittyen. Tulosten avulla pyritään ymmärtämään matkailijoiden käyttäytymistä ja ostoprosessia majoituksen varaamisessa ja sitä kautta parantamaan asiakaskokemusta hotellissa. Kysely sisältää yhteensä 19 kysymystä aiemmista kokemuksistasi majoituksen valinnassa ja sen täyttämiseen menee noin 15 minuuttia. Vastaukset kerätään nimettömänä. Arvostan aikaasi ja mielipidettäsi – kiitos osallistumisestasi!

1. Sukupuoli:

Mies

Nainen

2. Ikä:

18 - 24 vuotta

25 - 34 vuotta

35 - 44 vuotta

45 - 54 vuotta

55 - 64 vuotta

65 tai enemmän

3. Kuinka monta kertaa vuodessa matkustat vapaa-ajan matkalla?

Alle yhden kerran vuodessa

1-2 kertaa vuodessa

3-5 kertaa vuodessa

Yli 5 kertaa vuodessa

4. Kuinka usein käytät seuraavia informaatiolähteitä, kun etsit majoitusta vapaa-ajan matkallesi?

	Aina	Usein	Joskus	Har-voin	En kos-kaan
Oman organisaationi suosittelema hotelli	○	○	○	○	○
Hakukoneet (Google, Yahoo, Bing tms.)	○	○	○	○	○
Matkailuaiheiset sivustot (Travelocity, Kayak, jne.)	○	○	○	○	○
Ystävien ja perheen suosittelu	○	○	○	○	○

Hotelliarviot esim. TripAdvisorissa, Facebookissa, Twitterissä, Blogeissa jne.	○	○	○	○	○
Verkossa toimivat matkatoimistot (Booking.com, Expedia, Hotels.com, jne.)	○	○	○	○	○
Muu lähde, mikä?	○	○	○	○	○

5. Arvioi, kuinka tärkeänä pidät seuraavia tekijöitä, kun valitset hotellia vapaa-ajan matkallesi:

	Erittäin tärkeä	Tärkeä	Jossain määrin tärkeä	Ei juurikaan tärkeä	Ei ollenkaan tärkeä
Sijainti	○	○	○	○	○
Ystävien, tuttavien ja perheen suosittelut	○	○	○	○	○
Hinta	○	○	○	○	○
Hotellin palvelut	○	○	○	○	○
Hotellin taso (budjetti, keskiluokka, luksus)	○	○	○	○	○
Muiden asiakkaiden arvostelut	○	○	○	○	○
Omat kokemukset	○	○	○	○	○
Muu, mikä?	○	○	○	○	○

6. Minkä tyyppinen majoitus sopii sinulle parhaiten vapaa-ajan matkalla?

Budjettimajoitus (hostelli, motelli)

Keskiluokan majoitus (B&B)

Luksusmajoitus (5-tähteä, boutique)

Vuokrahuoneisto/-talo

Muu, mikä?

7. Mitä lisäpalveluita haluat hotellin tarjoavan vapaa-ajan matkallasi (esim. aamupala, hotellikuljetukset jne.)?_____

8. Kuvaile kolmella sanalla, millainen on mielestäsi paras hotelli vapaa-ajan matkailuun liittyen:_____

9. Oletko koskaan varannut majoitus Airbnb:n kautta?

Kyllä

Ei

10. Minkä tyyppiselle matkalle varasit majoituksen Airbnb:n kautta?

Liikematkalle

Vapaa-ajan matkalle

Ystävä-/sukulaisvierailua varten

Muu matka, mikä? _____

11. Kuinka monta kertaa vuodessa matkustat liikematkalla?

En matkusta liikematkoilla.

Alle yhden kerran vuodessa

1-2 kertaa vuodessa

3-5 kertaa vuodessa

Yli 5 kertaa vuodessa

12. Kuinka usein käytät seuraavia informaatiolähteitä, kun etsit majoitusta liikematkallesi?

	Aina	Usein	Joskus	Harvoin	En kos- kaan
Oman organisaationi suosittelema hotelli	○	○	○	○	○
Hakukoneet (Google, Yahoo, Bing tms.)	○	○	○	○	○
Matkailuaiheiset sivustot (Travelocity, Kayak, jne.)	○	○	○	○	○
Ystävien ja perheen suosittelu	○	○	○	○	○
Hotelliarviot esim. TripAdvisorissa, Facebookissa, Twitterissä, Blogeissa jne.	○	○	○	○	○
Verkossa toimivat matkatoimistot (Booking.com, Expedia, Hotels.com, jne.)	○	○	○	○	○
Muu lähde, mikä? [____]	○	○	◉	○	○
Minä en varaa mukautumista itse	○				

13. Arvioi, kuinka tärkeänä pidät seuraavia tekijöitä, kun valitset hotellia liikematkallesi:

	Erittäin tärkeä	Tärkeä	Jossain määrin tärkeä	Ei juurikaan tärkeä	Ei ollenkaan tärkeä
Sijainti	○	○	○	○	○
Ystävien, tuttavien ja perheen suosittelut	○	○	○	○	○
Hinta	○	○	○	○	○

Hotellin palvelut	○	○	○	○	○
Hotellin taso (budjetti, keskiluokka, luksus)	○	○	○	○	○
Muiden asiakkaiden arvostelut	○	○	○	○	○
Omat kokemukset	○	○	○	○	○
Muu, mikä? [ ]	○	○	○	○	○

14. Minkä tyyppinen majoitus sopii sinulle parhaiten liikematkallasi?

Budjettimajoitus (hostelli, motelli)

Keskiluokan majoitus (B&B)

Luksusmajoitus (5-tähteä, boutique)

Vuokrahuoneisto/-talo

Muu, mikä?

15. Mitä lisäpalveluita haluat hotellin tarjoavan liikematkallasi (esim. aamupala, hotellikuljetukset jne.)?_____

16. Kuvaile kolmella sanalla, millainen on mielestäsi paras hotelli liikematkailuun liittyen:_____

17. Minkä informaatiolähteen perusteella teet yleensä viimeisen päätöksen hotellin valinnassa?_____

18. Kuinka todennäköisesti annat palautetta negatiivisen hotellikokemuksen jälkeen? (epätodennäköisesti) 1 2 3 4 5 (todennäköisesti)

19. Kuinka todennäköisesti annat palautetta positiivisen hotellikokemuksen jälkeen? (epätodennäköisesti) 1 2 3 4 5 (todennäköisesti)