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Are hotel classification systems still relevant
and is there a need for new more personalised tool?

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The tourism industry, as a dynamically growing socio-economic sector, directly influences on hospitality. Such demand requires the hotel industry to be organized in order to assure standardization and promise qualitative service to the guests.

This research-oriented non-commissioned thesis strives to analyse hotel classification systems and critically discover customers' attitude towards them, as well as to give a suggestion of how potential alternative tool could look like.

The theoretical framework focuses on the exploration of various classification systems and finds out there is no unity of geographical application, assessment methods nor criteria which mainly focus on the evaluation of tangible aspects. Systems' relevancy is also questioned due to consumers relying more on word-of-mouth. Also, the credibility of evaluation is doubted, since service is intangible & inseparable in its nature and assessment significantly varies on one's perception & expectations, therefore the concept of service quality is highly subjective.

The research was conducted through the quantitative method with non-probability sampling. Its results demonstrated that hotel category is an influential factor for the hotel decision-making process. However, consumers are unsure of what evaluation stands for and how in general systems operate. In addition, customer behaviour is changing and travellers prefer online ratings with user-generated content which they find more trustworthy. On the flip side, reviews sometimes miss context and judgment, as well as not always reflect enough about the reviewer so that potential consumers could trust him/her. For this reason, the solution is to provide customers with more credible and personality-reflecting evaluation from travellers with alike backgrounds, e.g. culture & travel experience, and needs, e.g. purpose of stay & travel mode. By receiving assessment based on not only others' perception of service but own expectations, customers would get more reliable information and make a better choice, so the overall satisfaction from the experience would be more probable.

Keywords
Hotel classification system, Online rating, TripAdvisor, Service quality, Perceived quality, Expected quality

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1   Introduction

Nowadays, tourism industry is one of the most dynamic economic sectors, since it represents 9% of the world's gross domestic product (UNWTO, et al., 2015). Travelling has become a major socio-economic activity which as of 2019 accumulated 1,5 billion arrivals to numerous destinations across the globe (UNWTO, 2020). This demand has also boosted hospitality industry and in particular accommodation sector which consisting of 700 000 hotels and offering in total more than 4 million rooms, earned $840 billion on hotel stays in 2019 (Condor, 2020). Such a market diversity and constantly growing purchasing power definitely requires the accommodation industry to be organized and classified in order to provide customers with systematic choice which could assure standardization and promise qualitative service (ICAO, 2020; UNWTO, 2015; UNWTO & IHRA, 2004).

That leads the discussion to the hotel classification systems whose various types strive to bring order to the lodging business operations and guarantee quality by providing common standards & conducting evaluation (UNWTO, 2015; UNWTO & IHRA, 2004). Such rules were enough years back when the market of the hotel industry was not that massive (Nobles, 2009). Now, however, these systems are becoming outdated and often criticized by professionals for lack of unity, transparency & credibility and even for bringing confusion to the consumers (Callan, 2000; Núñez-Serrano, et al., 2014). Their operational principles are not able to keep up with changing customer behaviour, since travellers find travel-themed websites, such as TripAdvisor, with the user-generated content more trustworthy (Litvin, et al., 2008; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Yet, both classification systems and online ratings are questioned in their ability to properly evaluate service and measure service quality due to the intangible nature of product and subjective attitude during assessment which is based on personal factors (Zeithaml, et al., 2009; Callan, 1990; Parasuraman, 1985).

1.1   Justifications of topic choice

The author herself had high interest in the topic of classification systems long before getting to professionally know hospitality industry. During her own travelling experience, she has noticed unclear diversity of quality within hotels. Throughout the studies, she learnt that there is still no worldwide system and each country operates on its own. Besides that, while working in the hotels, the author faced various clients who, for example, once visited a 5-diamond hotel in the USA, started to apply the same standards to a 5-star hotel in Europe. Also, some guests coming from different countries and coming with different purposes could have quite opposite attitude towards the same kind of service.

Thus, personal interest, observations during the work and discussions within professional industry have encouraged the author to choose this specific topic. She also believes it would greatly demonstrate her knowledge gained throughout the studies at Haaga-Helia as well as ability of critical thinking.

Not only that, but author considers the topic to be highly relevant to professional industry, since classification systems and their future have been actively discussed during the recent years (Núñez-Serrano, et al., 2014; López Fernández & Serrano Bedia, 2004; Martin-Fuentes, 2016). In addition, throughout the preparation of theoretical framework and literature review, the author has not encountered any researches or other publications which analysed the issue from three aspects together – current classification systems, online ratings and concept of service quality. In fact, most papers approached the matter by only comparing classification systems to online ratings, or just by questioning the credibility of these systems (Dioko, et al., 2013; Callan, 1995; 2000). That is why she believes this work could be beneficial for the industry.

1.2 Objectives & research questions and methodology

Therefore, the topic of the thesis is to analyse some main hotel classification systems and the aim of the thesis is to critically discover their nature and customers' attitude towards them, as well as give suggestion of how potential alternative tool could look like. The thesis does not involve any commissioning party and it is research-oriented, as it strives to investigate a question rather than develop a product. The author also focuses more on creating applied research which would be more practical and business-oriented, as well as could potentially make a change.

The main objective is to answer two major research questions:

- What is customers' attitude towards hotel classification systems?
- How does modern customer behaviour create a need for new and more reliable tool?

These would be reached with the support of several subobjectives, research subquestions:

- What is the customers' attitude towards hotel classification systems? Are they familiar with how they work?
- What is modern customer behaviour? What is the role of online ratings in it? What is customers' attitude towards them?
- Do any systems and ratings represent service quality?
- What could be a new, more reliable and personality-reflecting tool?

The author would reach these objectives and answer research questions through data collection executed by quantitative research, namely survey, targeted at travellers and hotel

customers. The quantitative method collects numeric data and provides statistics, therefore it builds systematic empirical investigation which would be summaries in the practical solution for the industry (Wang & Park, 2016). Regarding the population, as hotel industry is used by great variety of people, the research would try to target as many socio-demographical and cultural groups as possible in order to receive a holistic picture from different perspectives.

1.3 Key concepts and definitions

To continue, it is essential to understand key concepts, which are three: Classification systems, Online rating and Service quality, and give definitions to these concepts, along with the definitions to some other related subjects. Note: the definitions given in this sub-chapter are brief and provided for a general reader's understanding; more detailed definitions and deeper analysis of each are presented in the corresponding chapters.

- Classification system or rating system – ranking tool used in accommodation-providing industry which categorizes establishments by evaluating their facilities and services according to set standards (UNWTO, 2015; UNWTO & IHRA, 2004).

- Online rating – ranking created by travel-themed websites and online travel agencies, OTAs, according to customers' evaluation and reviews, which are also known as user-generated content (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

- Customer behaviour – concept representing all customer's actions and activities related to a product/service purchase and usage (Kardes, et al., 2011). It also includes customer journey – path of multiple interactions with product/service, and decision-making process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Puccinelli, et al., 2009).

- Word-of-mouth or WOM – "person-to-person communication between a non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand/product/service offered for sale" (Arndt, 1967). Thus, electronic word-of-mouth, eWOM – same sort of communication but happening in the Internet (Hart & Blackshaw, 2006).

- Quality – "the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements" (ISO, 2015).

- Perceived service – subjective acceptance and evaluation of the service received (Parasuraman, et al., 1988).

- Expected service – objective predictions and subjective desires of what service should be (Johnson & Mathews, 1997).

1.4 Structure and outline

Talking about the structure and outline of the thesis, as mentioned previously, this thesis is research-oriented and does not have any commissioning party involved, as well as it is deductive, so theory-driven, and follows traditional structure, also uses Harvard referencing style. The thesis begins with Introduction. Then it continues with Theoretical framework module, which consists of three chapters: Classification systems – which explores

the current state, describes some systems and debates over their usage; Online rating – which looks into modern customer behaviour and analyses TripAdvisor's principles of work; and Service quality and its subjectivity – which investigates service nature and how guests perceive service and build expectations. After that comes the Empirical module, which also includes three chapters: Methodology – which discusses chosen research method & technique and describes the process of implementation; Results – which discovers respondents' profiles and investigates their answers; and Discussion – which summaries the results, reflecting them against theory, as well as provides suggestion to the industry & for future research and evaluate the research work. Finally, the thesis ends with Conclusion.

2   Classification systems

From now on starts the Theoretical framework module which will consist of three chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to the existing classification systems, so it will tackle the following topics: meaning and origin of classification systems, their current state and some opinions over its usage, also after looking into various types of the systems, two of them would be analysed in more details and compared, finally the chapter would end with some debates on the possible benefits & disadvantages as well as with overview of potential challenges for these systems.

2.1   Meaning and origin

Throughout the years, as both domestic and international tourism was developing, many parties involved in the industry, including travellers, arose the question of how to search for the accommodations and how to compare them, therefore the need to organize and classify them became significant (UNWTO & IHRA, 2004).

To start the discussion about the classification systems, it is important to define in more details what they are and what purpose they have, as well as to know their history.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2015), classification systems are a ranking tool widely used within the accommodation-providing industry that breaks establishments of the same type into categories according to their physical facilities and service characteristics with the reference to some guidelines, which will be listed later, and therefore indicates the standards which are offered by an individual accommodation establishment. Within the purposes of the systems, the following could be distinguished:

- for the consumers, to assure the level of service;
- for the intermediaries, a party standing in between the customer and service provider and distributing the offer of the latter, to demonstrate the quality of service;
- for the accommodation unit themselves, to serve as a marketing tool to promote the quality of the offer.

As a nomenclature, these systems mostly use Stars, yet some other symbols are Diamonds, Crowns, Suns, also the majority utilizes the ranking from 1 to 5 (Callan, 1995).

Talking about the origin and history of the classifications, one of the first seems to be the American Automobile Association, often referred as AAA, which was founded in 1902 in the USA by motor clubs with the mission to create maps. Among the further specializations of the company was an idea to provide travellers with useful information regarding lodging units and restaurants – that is how the travel guides were born. Later, in 1937, the

AAA Diamond Programme was created – a system inspecting properties to evaluate facilities & services and approving only the best ones to stay & dine. (AAA, 2016; 2020.) Another one to be among the pioneers was Mobil Travel Guide, which is currently under the brand of Forbes and known as Forbes Travel Guide. It was also established in the USA by the motorist but later – in 1958. And it is claiming itself to be the creator of original Five-Star rating system. (Forbes Travel Guide, 2020.)

2.2   Current state

Now, once origin and mission are clear, it is necessary to discuss the current state of classification systems. These rankings were originally created to educate consumers and form understanding of the quality level of facilities & services; however, now they do completely the opposite and even bring confusion to the regular travellers. The main issue is the absence of united holistic system which would be approaching the hotel sector all over the world. (Petrone, 2009.) That would give some consistency for the customers choosing between accommodations to stay. Many classification systems are implemented on the national level, yet there are countries without any at all (UNWTO & IHRA, 2004). That, referring to the opinions of the industry professionals, may lead to manipulating with ratings with marketing purposes. For example: hotels can grade themselves; or some recognize their services as 6 or 7-star, even though it is "nothing more than an attempt to market some unknown perception of a higher standard". (Petrone, 2006.)

But what kind of systems assessing accommodations are utilized in the industry? These guidelines could vary significantly: they could be mandatory or voluntary, official or non-official, international or national or regional, issued & run by the public governmental authorities or independent private associations, oriented towards consumer or provider (Martin-Fuentes, 2016; Minazzi, 2010). The following overview is based on the joint study of United Nations World Tourism Organization and International Hotel & Restaurant Association (2004) and represents the parties involved in evaluation process and responsible for classification:

- National hotel associations.
  They usually are run by government and are there in order to provide official information on the level of standard in particular country and to control the grading criteria.

- Regional schemes.
  These are the systems responsible for a certain region within a country, e.g. Catalonia in Spain, or few nations joining together within the same geographical region, e.g. Nordic classification scheme with Sweden and Denmark.

- Tour operators.
  They inspect hotels according to their own criteria in order to represent products in promotional material, e.g. Thomas Cook.

- Hotel guides.
  They provide reliable information on hotels' facilities and service quality and used as a reference by travel agents and consumers. Initially were represented as book publications listing premises, nowadays more as Programmes and Unions, e.g. AAA Diamond Programme.

In the following two subchapters, there will be a deeper discussion about work principles of National associations on the example of several countries as well as three Hotel guides.

2.2.1   National hotel associations

Talking in more details about one of the types of classifications which is implemented via National hotel associations: currently, out of 108 countries analysed, only 83 have official hotel classification systems. While, in 32 countries establishments can operate without being classified; in 55 countries, they have to obtain just permission in order to operate; and only 46 must have a classification. In fact, many industry representatives link the classification with the legal & taxation aspects, rather than with the question of quality standards. (UNWTO & IHRA, 2004.)

However, if to discuss the matter of evaluating accommodation units with the purpose to represent quality for the consumers, it is vital to compare the process and criteria of grading. Below, the Table 1 represents how the process is executed in 11 different Countries from various regions; Organisation – the party responsible for assessment, Frequency – how often the inspections are done; N of criteria – total amount of criteria evaluated during the check; Top criteria – top three important areas by their total percentage criteria where R - room, B - bathroom, S - services, F&B - food & beverage, FD - front desk; Grading – numeric scale and additional categories, if any; and Symbol – nomenclature used. So, looking at this table, it is clear that the methods vary significantly, for example: in Italy there are only 55 criteria, while in South Africa 947; in the UK and Sweden inspections are executed annually, while in Spain only upon opening and during the change of ownership; the majority of countries grade on 1-5 scale, while some have additional grades.

Table 1. Evaluation processes of national hotel associations (adapted from UNWTO, 2015)

Country	Organisation	Frequency	Criteria, N	Criteria, top	Grading	Symbol
Australia	Star Ratings Australia via Australian Auto Club	3 years	216	R, B, S	1-5	stars
France	Regional prefecture	5 years	246	R, FD, S	1-5 & Palace	stars
India	Ministry of tourism and hotel associations	5 years	144	R, F&B, S	1-5 & 5 Deluxe	stars
Italy	Regional authorities	depens on region	55	R, FD, S	1-5 & 5 L (Deluxe)	stars
Portugal	National tourist board	4 years	139	R, B, F&B	1-5	stars
South Africa	Tourism grading council	1 year	947	R, F&B, S	1-5	stars
Spain	Regional governments	initial & change of ownership	261	R, B, S	1-5 & 5 GL (Deluxe)	stars
Sweden	Hotel & restaurant association	1 year	270	R, B, S	1-5	stars
UK	National tourist board	1 year	498	R, F&B, S	1-5	stars

In addition to that, it is essential to mention that in each country, the organisation responsible for the evaluation also selects the method. It usually distinguishes between these three:

- Internal auditor. Some countries' systems allow accommodations to run a self-assessment with an internal auditor.
- Advisor. Throughout the process, the hotel is not only rated but also given some advice for potential improvement and development.
- Inspector. The grading is performed according to the standards, usually anonymously, and without any recommendations. (UNWTO, 2015.)

Having that said, it is crystal clear that the processes within each national classification system vary hugely, especially the frequency, criteria and methods of assessment which do not seem to provide equality, as well as the representation of the grading. Concerning, these rating could make no sense if the assignation varies dramatically. (Núñez-Serrano, et al., 2014; Callan, 2000.)

2.2.2 Hotel guides

When one type of classifications – National hotel associations is explained, it is necessary to discuss another one – Hotel guides which, as was mentioned before, are often used as a reference by travel agents and consumers, and therefore ought to be analysed as well.

As it was previously discussed the first Guide was Diamond Programme by American Automobile Association, AAA, created in 1937. Now, AAA is the largest travel organization in the USA and Canada serving 56 million members. The travel services include tour & package tour arrangements, reservations of hotels & air/rail/road transportation and sale

of cruises & travel insurance. Even though, the Diamond Programme guide has the US origin, nowadays it covers United States, Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, which are 13 sovereign states and 17 dependent territories, evaluating nearly 27 000 premises. The rating is proceed referring to 200 criteria and carried out by AAA's inspectors in anonymous manner. (AAA, 2016; 2020.)

Another popular Guide founded in 1958 in the US is Mobil Travel Guide, now Forbes Travel Guide. Calling itself "global authority on luxury hospitality", Forbes Travel Guide evaluates hotels, restaurants and spas all around the world. The Guide covers more than 70 countries with almost 2000 establishments. Its process is based on 900 standards of its Star Ratings which concern not only objective check of facilities but emphasizes service & experience, also is implemented anonymously. (Forbes Travel Guide, 2020.)

In addition to the previous Guides, it is essential to mention another system covering Europe. On the European level, the hospitality industry is represented by HOTREC organisation which is an umbrella association of hotels, restaurants & cafes and includes approximately 1,8 million businesses (HOTREC, 2020). Back in 2009, under the patronage of HOTREC, the HotelStars Union, HSU, was created. The HotelStars Union is aiming "to provide a harmonised and comparable hotel classification system in Europe". (HOTREC, 2016.) Its catalogue consists of has 270 mandatory & optional criteria for transparent evaluation of hotel facilities and services (HotelStars, 2015). As of 2020, the HotelStars Union has more than 22 000 hotels. Currently, the Union includes 17 members and 8 observers. The map below in Figure 1 represents in blue – members: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland; and in green – observers: Azerbaijan, France, Georgia, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain.
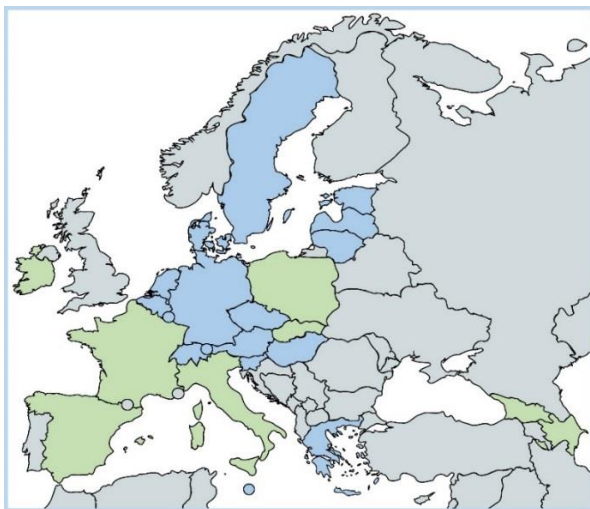

Figure 1. Map of HotelStars Union participants (adapted from HotelStars, 2020)

In order to summarize the comparison of each Guides' details, below the Table 2 below represents these three Hotel Guides' Coverage of region, N of counties & N of hotels; Frequency; N of & Top criteria; Grading; and Symbol. For example, Forbes has 900 criteria, while HotelStars and AAA much less – 270 and 199; Forbes covers 70 countries, while others – two times less, yet HotelStars and AAA work with 10+ times more hotels; also, the nomenclature varies within Stars and Diamonds.

Table 2. Evaluation processes of hotel guides (adapted from HotelStars, 2015; 2020; Forbes Travel Guide, 2020; AAA, 2020)

Guide	Coverage, region	Coverage, N of countries	Coverage, N of hotels	Frequency	Criteria, N	Criteria, top	Grading	Symbol
HotelStars Union	Europe	25	22 000	depends on a country	270	R, B, S	1-5 & Superior	stars
Forbes Travel Guide	World	70	2 000	frequent	900	N/A	1-5	stars
AAA Diamond Programme	Americas	30	27 000	frequent	199	R, B, S	1-5	diamonds

As with the National hotel associations, here it is also possible to say that the process varies significantly, especially the coverage, but also criteria and nomenclature. Besides that, some guides are often criticised for lack of classification & criteria transparency (Núñez-Serrano, et al., 2014). In addition, since many evaluations are done in anonymous manner, many people question the ability of inspector to have "pure" perception of operations, which is not influenced by professional familiarity, and do the assessment from the customer's point of view (Callan, 2000).

2.2.3   Role of branding

As explain before National hotel associations as well as Hotel guides play a vital role in evaluating hotels according to their own standards and criteria. However, in addition to these, it is necessary to distinguish another group while talking about classifying hotels – international chains. These chains while positioning their hotels at the markets emphases much not on the classification systems of a specific country where the accommodation is located, but rather on the role of the brand itself. For sure, in order to be allowed to operate, these hotels are granted the classification by a National hotel association referring to each country specifics. However, the brands are aiming not only to meet the local criteria, but to provide a global approach in delivering certain level of standards stated by the brand. (UNWTO & IHRA, 2004.) Therefore, the Smith Travel Research analytics firm in hospitality industry, along with other characteristics, defines the hotels and hotel brands by class, e.g. economy/midscale/upscale/luxury, by location, e.g. urban/airport/resorts, and hotel type, e.g. all-inclusive/conference/boutique/etc. (Smith Travel Research, 2019.)

In addition to the chains with their sub-brands, there are also Collections, so-called Quasi Chains or Soft Brands – groups of mostly independent hotels coming together to perform under a bit parent company as so-called. That company, in fact, demands meeting common Collection's standards. For example, the Autograph Collection by Marriott or the Luxury Collection by Starwood. (Van Rossem, 2018.)

With that being said, it is clear that if the hotel is under a certain hotel or collection brand and if it positions itself belonging to a certain type, then besides national/programme/guide's, there will be additional criteria which should be followed in order to equally perform in all locations covered by the brand.

2.3 Debates and summary

To crown it all, the first chapter of Theoretical framework module looked into the nature of classification systems, investigating their variety, especially National hotel associations, Hotel guides and Brands, and overviewing and comparing their main principles of work. Within the obvious benefits, all systems set common standards for the establishments to follow, aim towards an objective assessment of the premises to indicate the quality level for consumer and intermediaries, and serve as a promotion tool. However, each system's geographical application and criteria vary significantly. So, it is clear that the overall approach of evaluation is missing unity and holisticness. (Martin-Fuentes, et al., 2018.)

However, since the benefits have been mentioned, what are the disadvantages of the current classification systems? And what criticism does it receive? Some industry representatives think that the era of travel/hotel guides is soon to finish. Harry Nobles (2009), a former head of AAA Diamond system, believes that the demographics using those systems "are dying out". He also explains their end referring to the way they are sponsored - either by members or through the sales of guides, while it ideally ought to be supported by the industry. On the other hand, some professionals consider system such as HotelStars Union a great example of "bottom-up initiative" in the hospitality industry which was designed considering all the diversity of European markets to provide a clear comparison of accommodation offers – and therefore should be growing (HOTREC, 2016).

Besides that, one of the greatest challenges for these systems is the ever-growing number of travel-related websites which constantly produce consumer-generated content and show dynamic accommodation rating (Nobles, 2009). Studies show that these online travel agencies and guest reviews sites are better in keeping up with the rapidly changing consumer behaviour (UNWTO, 2015; UNWTO, et al., 2015). The subject will be explained in more details in the second chapter "Online rating" of the Theoretical framework module.

In addition to the threats coming to the classification systems from the online reviews sites, a lot of criticism is also given to the criteria used during the evaluation (Martin-Fuentes, et al., 2018). Some in general question the quality standards, since the service being intangible in its nature is difficult to evaluate (López Fernández & Serrano Bedia, 2004). Also, the systems are believed to lose the credibility due to being outdated, due to their criteria being claimed not up-to-date, as they are not evolving consumer expectations (Martin-Fuentes, 2016; Torres, et al., 2014; Núñez-Serrano, et al., 2014). The matter will be described more detailed in the third chapter "Service quality and its subjectivity" of the Theoretical framework module.

Thus, summarizing the first chapter of the Theoretical framework module, it could be said that despite the good intention of setting standards and providing evaluation, the current classification systems are obviously not perfect yet, because there is no joint geographical approach, neither the unity of assessment methods and criteria. Therefore, despite this mechanism is "the most common customer segmentation pattern in the hotel industry", in fact, many researches showed that hotel customers do not have a clear idea about the specifics of the ratings (Dioko, et al., 2013; Denizci Guillet & Law, 2010).

3   Online rating

In the finale of the previous chapter, travel-themed websites and online travel agencies, OTAs, with their numerous guest reviews were mentioned as a challenge for the nowadays classification systems, since they are considered to be more dynamic and easily adjustable towards customers, their behaviour and needs, thus more relevant for today's consumer.

Therefore, to investigate this question, in this second chapter of the Theoretical framework module, there would be a deeper look into: customer behaviour which has changed a lot recently and the role of word-of-mouth in it, as well as the most popular WOM website – TripAdvisor, its principles of work, debates over its credibility and discussion of how customers there evaluate services thought reviews analysis.

3.1   Customer behaviour and word-of-mouth

In order to understand why these travel-related websites, e.g. TripAdvisor, are more relevant than classification systems, it is necessary to analyse: what the customer journey, customer decision-making process, purchasing or buying process and in general customer behaviour of the nowadays traveller are.

To start with the customer journey, it is necessary to define the concept: it is a multidimensional scheme which describes customer path through certain steps and his/her relations via multiple touchpoints with the company/product/service/etc, and which also specifies a holistic nature of consumer's physical, social, subconscious & other interactions with that company/product/service/etc (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef, et al., 2009).

Furthermore, within the customer journey, many also distinguish one particular phase - customer decision-making process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Some, however, divide customer journey into three stages – pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase (Puccinelli, et al., 2009). Either way, before the actual purchase is done, the customer goes through the steps of need recognition, shaping a want, forming a demand, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and finally satisfying these needs/wants with a purchase itself (Pieters, et al., 1995).

Marketing specialists particularly emphasize on the "information search" & "evaluation of alternatives" moments, as the potential consumer is carefully seeking for the information through various sources in order to study the offer & other options, reduce the product uncertainty and understand the quality (Hoyer, 1984; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). When

talking about the tourism industry, initially, the consumers were quite limited in the way of collecting information – they could only refer to brochures, guides and travel agents (Hu & Wei, 2013). Now, in the era of the Internet, people's access to various data has expanded and the pre-purchase information search has become significantly easier (Kasavana, et al., 2010). Recently, the decision-making process related to the choice of accommodation is more and more switching from the traditional sources, which were mentioned before, towards the user-generated content, so now travellers can guide each other decisions (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Fotis, et al., 2012).

That lead the discussion to the phenomenon of word-of-mouth communication, WOM. It was once defined as "person-to-person communication between a non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand/product/service offered for sale" (Arndt, 1967). Therefore, "where traditional word-of-mouth is limited by the size of a social network, «word-of-Web» can include a social network that spans the globe" – this is how electronic word-of-mouth, eWOM, could be explained, as it refers to the same communication happening in the Internet (Hart & Blackshaw, 2006). The main benefit of eWOM is in the ability to involve much more people into the discussion of the product & its tributes, as well as to reach more potential customers with the insights generated by past-consumers (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Not only that, but also eWOM now appeals to be reliable and even key source for many people (Litvin, et al., 2008). On the other hand, the WOM is often questioned of being reliable feedback (Torres, et al., 2014). Other researches claim that too many reviews and messages on those platforms bring difficulty for the travellers to find useful ones (Lee, et al., 2018). In addition to that, negative reviews can change the attitude towards a hotel, so some believe these customer-to-customer interactions are a challenge for the companies, as the feedback is often based on emotional & personal aspects (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Libai, et al., 2010). However, despite these facts, user-generated content is perceived to be "honest" & "non-biased" and show "true nature" of the hotel through the reviews, comments, photos & videos (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Not only OTAs and guest reviews websites, but also social media are praised to be a useful tool to get an insight, regardless, if it is positive or negative. The latter as well mentioned to have more trustworthy content rather than "official" sources. (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017.) The last but not least, the WOM is extremely important when the product is more of an experiential rather than tangible nature and it is hard to objectively evaluate it prior experiencing it (Kim & Lee, 2015; Koernig, 2003).

3.2 TripAdvisor – operation principles

Once it is clear how today travellers' customer behaviour changed in the era of Internet and how the word-of-mouth communication influence on the hotel guests' decision-making

process, it is time to have a particular look on the WOM websites with guest reviews and their principles of work.

Nowadays, travel/hospitality industry is greatly represented online, including metasearches, e.g. Trivago & Skyscanner, online travel agencies/booking platforms, e.g. Booking.com, Expedia, Hotels.com, Agoda, and guest reviews websites, such as TripAdvisor. Before making a hotel reservation, in average, consumer makes 9 travel-related searches and visits 14 themed websites (UNWTO, et al., 2015). All websites mentioned before has high popularity among travellers, yet most used one is TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor was founded in 2000 as a search engine for travel with the idea to connect consumers and the product/service providers (Statista, 2020). Now, it is considered to be the world's largest travel platform, and its competitive power is strong enough to remain a leader even if Google comes to the travel reviews market (Schaal, 2010). TripAdvisor assists 463 million people each month with their decisions and consists of some 859 million reviews and recommendations on travelling, staying, dining & etc in more than 8 million accommodation units, restaurants, experiences and others listed on the platform (TripAdvisor, 2020).

TripAdvisor's mission for the traveller could be divided into two main aspects: search and share. For searching: people can visit the platform without registration and search for the accommodation through a huge variety of characteristics, especially, comparing to the regular classification systems (Hensens, 2010). It allows visitors to filter the search of hotel by: geographical area and more specific location; price and type of deal; amenities; property type, such as hotels/hostels/resorts/villas, and brand; traveller rating [rating of TripAdvisor users], hotel class* and style, e.g. luxury/budget/etc. (TripAdvisor, 2020.) *Hotel class is demonstrated in star-rating and "indicates the general level of features and amenities to expect; the ratings are provided to TripAdvisor by third-party partners" which refer to each country systems (TripAdvisor, 2020).

Also, for sharing: here, people are required to sign up in order to share the information, such as leave reviews and rate premises. When evaluating any experience, a person is asked to: overall rate the property – terrible, poor, average, good, excellent; write a review*; indicate sort of trip – business, couple, family, friends or solo; indicate time of travel; rate separately service, room, cleanliness, quality of sleep and location; answer "How expensive is the hotel?" – budget, mid-range or luxury; add photos, if any. *The review is mandatory part of the rating which also must not be shorter than 200 characteristics, since "adding details really helps travellers". (TripAdvisor, 2020.)

As well, for sharing: when signing up, visitors automatically create a profile which has user's information. It demonstrates archive of reviews, ratings, forum posts and photos which amount to number of "contributions". Also, it keeps record of one's visited places via "travel map". As for the personal information, user is only asked for the email, name or nickname and city & country of origin during the registration. All mentioned could be seen below in Figure 2 & 3 in an example of @Kauai-Biz-Traveler profile who is awarded as the TripAdvisor's Hotel Expert of 2016 (TripAadvisor, 2016):
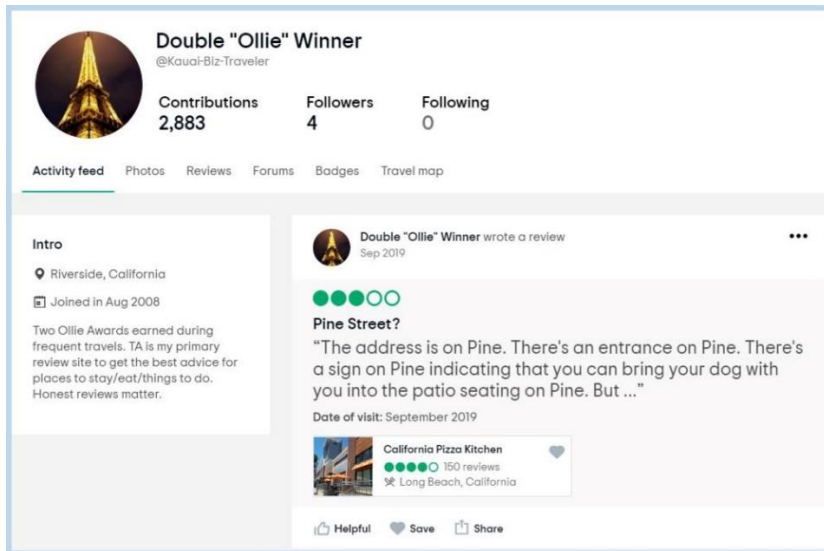

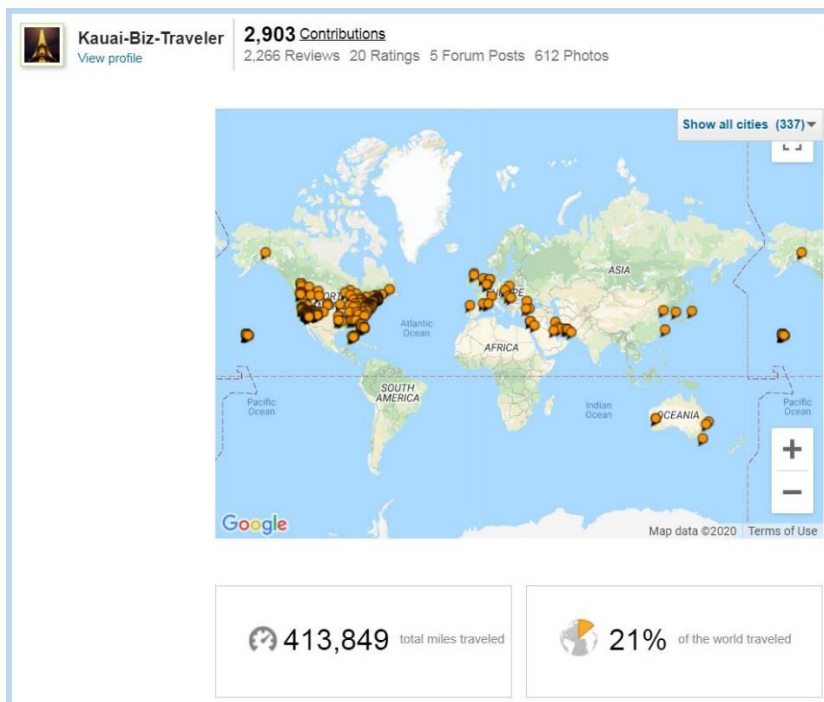Figure 2. TripAdvisor user profile, 1 (TripAdvisor, 2020)

Figure 3. TripAdvisor user profile, 2 (TripAdvisor, 2020)

Thus, by sharing, travellers support each other's searches and general forming of the ranking. And even though the exact algorithm of TripAdvisor is only known to its senior and programming staff, some insights have confirmed the importance of the following factors: freshness – recent reviews "weight" more than older ones; and number of reviews – if two accommodations have same average rating, but one has more reviews, it will be ranked higher. (Hensens, 2010.)

3.3 TripAdvisor – debates and reviews analysis

As now the nature and operating principles of the biggest travel-related WOM website TripAdvisor are clear, it is essential to continue with the debates. This subchapter will research the benefits of TripAdvisor and its possible disadvantages through some criticism, as well as analyse the nature of reviews and answer whether it is a trust-worthy assessment of such a subjective matter as service (Callan, 1990).

To start, among the main advantages some studies have demonstrated that, first of all, as TripAdvisor is a word-of-mouth platform, it contributes significantly to the decision-making and purchase processes of travellers, which follows from the chapter 3.1 "Customer behaviour and word-of-mouth". Moreover, for the companies, it provides useful feedback on the weaknesses to develop their offers and improve performance. Also, it is a great marketing stimulation, especially for independent hotels. As well as, it represents reliable statistical information of the market which might be beneficial for the industry itself and governmental authorities (Hensens, 2010).

On the flip side, sometimes, TripAdvisor's anonymity of reviews is a subject of criticism, since everyone may post a review on the hotel's page, even including the hotel itself to higher the ranking or the competitors to lower it (Hensens, 2010). In response, company representatives say TripAdvisor is protected from that by having a team of specialists who monitors the posts and assures that suspicious ones are taken down (Elliott, 2009).

In addition to that, some criticism is aimed towards the travellers' reviews, questioning their validity. To describe that, foremost, it is essential to explain the nature of the services at accommodation establishment: overall experience combines tangible elements – hotel facilities, room, amenities, etc, and intangible ones – service delivery (Callan, 1990). Following that, Hensens (2010) divide consumers' feedback and criteria used for the evaluation into three categories:
- Objective tangible. These refer to "hard factors" of elements which could be measured easily and objectively. For example: size of the room, availability of certain facilities e.g. pool, and etc.

- Subjective tangible. These represent subjective assessment of objective tangible element. For instance: comfortability of a bed, cleanliness of hotel area, and so on.
- Subjective intangible or service delivery. That criteria are totally subjective and almost impossible to evaluate, as it means the experience of each independent guest.

And according to the same research, the TripAdvisor evaluation is completely subjective, as the primary focus is on subjective intangible, then subjective tangible and only then on objective tangible. While, in comparison, the focus of regular classifications systems is absolutely vice versa: firstly on objective tangible, then subjective tangible and only then on subjective intangible.

Besides that, guests' reviews could be also divided into:

- Valuable judgment. Guest explains his/her evaluation with particular examples, e.g. "The restaurant at the hotel was great as it offers wide selection of meats and local dishes".
- Comment with context. Client refers to his/her own personal situation, e.g. "The bed mattress was very-very soft, I liked it as I have problems with my back".
- Comments without context. Customer does not explain the rating, e.g. "Well-deserved 4 stars, the service is really good".

When the writer of a review is drawing the situation and various conditions, other travellers are able to understand better the reason for positive or negative evaluation.

In addition to these two aspects, there is another tendency within reviewers. Before starting to write the feedback itself, travellers slightly introduce themselves. As it was mentioned before, TripAdvisor user profile does not have much of personal information, so when a person goes through the hotel page and read previous guests' reviews, he/she only sees writer's origin and number of "contributions" & "helpful votes". Therefore, travellers in the review introduction outline their past backgrounds and current experience (Hensens, 2010). The former may include where they are from, how much they travelled, e.g. "I am German, have traveller all around Europe…" or "I am quite often staying at W-hotels…". While the latter could be about the purpose of stay and their company, e.g. "We chose this hotel with my wife for a romantic getaway…". By providing this information, customers slightly share their "travel status" and what their expectations were for the stay and later in evaluation review whether these expectations were met by service (Zeithaml, et al., 1993).

3.4 Summary

Hereby, the second chapter of the Theoretical framework module looked into the topic of customer behaviour and customer journey and explained how pre-purchase decision-making process has evolved because of the Internet. Now, information search and choice of accommodation is highly influenced by word-of-mouth and user-generated content. The travel platform TripAdvisor plays the biggest role in that by supporting searches with what

others share about accommodations. This feedback mostly focuses on service delivery evaluation which makes it subjective. It is also often given without a "valuable judgment" or any "context", which again emphasizes the subjectivity. Yet, reviews oftentimes draw their background and experience, as TripAdvisor profiles themselves do not provide much personal information, in order to shape their own expectations and therefore help others.

What draws the most attention in the outcomes of this chapter is, first of all, the customers' subjectivity. Evaluation of hotels is always related to one particular personality and his/her emotions, thus different customers expect, experience and consequently rate everything differently (Burkeman, 2008). And the second aspect is how personal factors, such as background and previous experiences influence on travellers' expectations and therefore satisfaction (Zeithaml, et al., 2009). These matters will be discussed in more details in the third chapter of the Theoretical framework module – "Service quality and its subjectivity".

4 Service quality and its subjectivity

At the end of the previous chapter, customers' subjectivity as well as personal factors influencing on travellers' expectations were mentioned as the aspects challenging the accuracy of customer feedback and in particular TripAdvisor reviews. Also, in the summary of first chapter "Classification systems" of Theoretical framework module, quality standards were questioned, since the service being intangible in its nature and difficult to evaluate (López Fernández & Serrano Bedia, 2004). In order to understand this issue, it is necessary to clarify the nature of the services, service quality and why it is subjective, how customers perceive [evaluate] services and how their expectations impact on the perception/evaluation process.

4.1 Service nature and perceived service

To start, it is important to define what quality is. Some state that "there are many, many definitions of quality", yet "there are no universal definitions" (Crosby, 2006; Kara, et al., 2005). The most widely accepted definition is given by ISO: "the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements" (ISO, 2015). However, the definition of quality hugely varies between industries (Wicks & Roethlein, 2009).

Therefore, diving into the hospitality industry in particular, the product of an accommodation unit, as mentioned in chapter 3.3 "TripAdvisor – debates and reviews analysis", consists of tangible elements – hotel facilities, room, amenities, etc, and intangible ones – service delivery (Callan, 1990). When it comes to assessing tangible aspects, it is relatively straightforward (Callan, 2000). However, knowledge about quality of goods is insufficient to understand quality of services (Parasuraman, 1985). The difficulty of assuring service quality is connected to the difficulty of evaluating services which, according to Parasuraman (1985), could be explained by the three main characteristics of service nature:

- Inseparability. Production and its consumption of service always go together, so quality appears only during its delivery (Núñez-Serrano, et al., 2014).
- Heterogeneity. Service involves "high labour content", that means even if there is a uniform approach, still performance varies from one staff to another.
- Intangibility. As service depends on delivery and provider, the overall process cannot be measured and verified in advance (Callan, 2000).

However, despite the uncertain nature of services, Grönroos (1984) in his Service Quality Model distinguished three main dimensions of service quality, which are:

- Technical quality or instrumental performance.
  This represents what is done. Client receives the service and most important is the result of an action. E.g. a customer was transported from A to B.
- Functional quality or expressive performance.
  That means how it is done. Customer receives the service in a certain manner which relates to guest-provider interactions.

Grönroos also believes that functional quality is the most important side or service, as it may greatly differentiate offers from each other even when the technical offer is the same.
- Image.
  It refers to the promises which were given by the service provider during its marketing activities and which shaped customer expectations, and therefore these promises influence on quality perception and ideally should be met.

On the other hand, Parasuraman (1988) himself also analysed the most essential aspects of service and thus developed SERVQUAL model whose five dimensions assist in understanding service quality. And these dimensions are:
- Tangibles. Physical facilities and appearance of staff.
- Reliability. Accurate performance of what was promised.
- Responsiveness. Desire to assist customers and provide service.
- Assurance. Knowledge, politeness and trustworthiness of personnel.
- Empathy. Personalized attention and care towards clients.

Comparing these two models, Grönroos's Image could fall into Parasuraman's Reliability, while Technical quality could consist of Tangibles & Responsiveness, and Functional quality could include Assurance & Empathy. Either way, despite both authors have diverse opinions, both believe that these dimensions form and help to analyse & evaluate such a concept called Perceived Service Quality – one's subjective acceptance, attitude and judgment of the service received and its quality.

Furthermore, some researchers developed a formula of service quality which is based on comparison between expectations and perception (Kotler, et al., 2006; Parasuraman, et al., 1988):

Service Quality = Perceived Service Quality – Expected Service Quality

Therefore, the level of customer satisfaction is calculated based on whether perception exceeds the expectations or not (Zeithaml, et al., 1990):

Perceived Service > Expected Service, => Quality Surprise

Perceived Service ~ Expected Service, => Satisfactory Quality

Perceived Service < Expected Service, => Unacceptable Quality

4.2 Expected service and influencing factors

Now, when the concept of perceived service quality is explained, it is clear why evaluation is so subjective and totally depends on each customer. Moreover, in order to fully comprehend service quality, besides understanding perceived service quality, it is vital to explore the concept of expected service, or as it is often referred – expectations. In the previous chapter "Online rating" talking about TripAdvisor, there also was a discussion regarding personal factors, such as background and previous experiences, influencing on travellers.

Thus, the questions of the current subchapter would be: How do customers build their expectations? And what factors influence on forming the expectations?

To start, expectations could be identified as subjective desires or more objective predictions which play an important role in service evaluation process in comparison to actual experience/perception (Johnson & Mathews, 1997). Below there would be a description of some factors which may have potential impact. These factors are divided into three categories of market segmentation: socio-demographic, geographic and behavioural (Dolnicar, et al., 2018).

A) Socio-demographic:
1) Gender.

This factor may have influence on assessing quality due to the differences in "decoding ability" & processing information and importance placed on various moments of services (Ganesan-Lim, et al., 2008). Some researches say men value more the final result and efficient service, while women more concern about sense of comfort and personal attention (Mattila, et al., 2003; Kniatt, 1995). Other claim men in general have higher expectation on hotel hospitality (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012).

2) Age.

According to some literature, age powerfully determinates customer behaviour, in terms of tastes and purchasing ability (Neal, et al., 2002). Others, however, find no significant correlation (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012). Yet, some suggest more mature travellers emphasize value for money and appreciate thoughtful service (Ganesan-Lim, et al., 2008). However, many link importance of age-factor with demand of physical environment being convenient for elders (Callan & Bowman, 2000).

3) Income.

Income is considered another factor shaping expectations. Older research finds people with higher income more engaged in information search during decision-making process; now, however, information is more available to everyone thanks to the Internet (Scott & Shieff, 1993; Kasavana, et al., 2010). More recent publications say upper-income customers demand more personal attention. While lower-income ones are less critical towards the service, therefore are more likely to rate it higher. (Ganesan-Lim, et al., 2008)

B) Geographic: Culture.

Here, culture would represent one's country of origin, or country where a person grew and lives. Many researches prove that cultural background influence on behaviour (Kozak, 2001; Reisinger & Turner, 2002; Atsutsey & Tandoh-Offin, 2013). One of the

most famous studies was conducted by Hofstede (2001): he analysed nations with their cultural values to develop some behavioural patterns which were measured through 6 dimensions: power distance – human inequality & its acceptance, uncertainty avoidance – tolerance towards uncertainty & stress-handling, individualism/collectivism – "integration of individual into groups", masculinity/femininity – division of emotional roles between men and women, long/short-term orientation – preference for stability and orientation towards future/present. People belonging to certain nation have different indexes of these aspects, therefore act differently, so their attitude towards service and satisfaction varies, too (Huang & Crotts, 2019). As an example: nations with high power distance index are more demanding and want more personal attention; with high individualism – report higher level of satisfaction; with high uncertainty avoidance – always seek for conversation trying to avoid conflicts (Radojevic, et al., 2017). However, some publications argue that besides customer's own culture, the for the service performance, it is important to consider also service provider's culture and the destination country itself (Furrer, et al., 2000; Beydilli & Kurt, 2020).

C) Behavioural:

1) Previous experience.

Experience-based expectations summarize previous travellings, stays and received services (Grönroos, 1984). Past experiences form current predictions and desires from alike services and their performance, as well as shape customer's own habits and preferences (Smith & Swmnyard, 1983; Liu, et al., 2013). Also, comparative expectations should be pointed out: when consumer uses the example of past services and compares them to current ones (Zeithaml, et al., 1993). Some researches show that, for example, people with more than 10 travel experiences care more about "value for money" rather than less experienced people (Liu, et al., 2013).

2) Service promise.

The importance of keeping promises has already been highlighted in previous subchapter as Grönroos's (1984) and Parasuraman's (1988) service quality dimensions. These promises could include statements given by the service-providing organization by any type of communication through various channels mainly during the marketing activities. They give certain "clues" to the consumer of how the service experience would look like. (Zeithaml, et al., 1993.) Sometimes people also perceive higher price of the service as a promise for good quality (Parasuraman, et al., 1991).

3) Purpose of stay.

Customer's personal needs and reason for stay determinates his/her choice of particular hotel (Rajaguru & Hassanli, 2018; Jani & Han, 2014). Purpose of stay usually only distinguish in business and leisure. However, often it might be connected with type of

tourism, among which the following could be named: business, MICE – meetings, in-centives, conferences, events, VFR – visiting friends and relatives, recreational, cul-tural & historical, adventure & active, sport, medical & health & wellness, environmental & nature & wildlife, culinary & enotourism, honeymoon, and etcetera. Therefore, the ho-tel which might be convenient option for a traveller with one purpose might not fit needs of another. (López Fernández & Serrano Bedia, 2004.)

4) Travel mode.

This concept represents the company a person is travelling with. It is also claimed im-portant, as based on the company some aspects may be more valued than others. The modes can vary between solo, couple, with family, with friends, group. Research on cleanliness, for example, shows that solo-travellers have higher expectations than other types. (Liu, et al., 2013.)

Thus, all these factors, including one's socio-demographics, culture or country of origin, as well as previous experience and details of current trip, have a huge impact on the expec-tations of the customer. So, it proves that the nature of expectations and therefore Ex-pected Service Quality is totally subjective and depends on each customer.

4.3 Summary and conclusion

Thus, summarizing the third and final chapter of the Theoretical framework module, it could be confirmed that service quality is extremely subjective matter which could be ex-plained, first of all, by characteristics of service which is intangible and cannot be assured before actual performance, secondly by individual perception, and thirdly by basing the evaluation on expectations which themselves are based on many personal factors.

Moreover, it is essential to draw the **conclusion** for the whole Theoretical framework module with its three chapters. In the first one, there was an exploration of Classification Systems. Initially, it aimed to provide common standardization for the accommodations and represent quality for customers. However, the current state as well as analysis of na-tional hotel associations and hotel guides demonstrated lack of unity and holisticness with high diversity & non-transparency of criteria, doubtful assessment methods and no joint geographical approach. Industry representatives question the credibility of criteria and ability to measure intangible service quality, and in general, criticise the systems for bring-ing confusion to the consumers. They also mention dynamic ratings of travel-themed web-sites as a challenge. Furthermore, the second chapter investigated how customer behav-iour has changed and that consumers now prefer to check Online rating and trust user-generated content. Main eWOM website, TripAdvisor, plays huge role in it. However, the evaluation is often focused on subjective intangible (service delivery) aspects and given

without any context/judgment. Also, in TripAdvisor, reviewers' profiles are not detailed which bring others difficulty to rely on the feedback; yet, some travellers tend to outline their background and experience in the review. Finally, the third chapter discussed <u>Service quality</u>. It provided the service quality formula which is based on comparison of perception and expectations and confirmed the subjectivity of both, since the former is related to intangible service nature & customer personality and the latter depends on many individual factors.

5 Methodology

Thereby, the discussion is brought to the Empirical module which will consist of three chapters – Methodology, Results and Discussion. The first chapter is dedicated to Methodology of research, therefore it will tackle the following topics: objectives and research questions, then research method and sampling, where author would justify her choice, and finally – implementation which explains how chosen method was created and distributed.

5.1 Objectives and research questions

The investigation conducted in the Theoretical framework module about current state of classification systems, customers switching more towards online ratings and overall subjectivity of service quality evaluation leads the discussion to the aim of this thesis which is to discover customers' attitude towards classification systems, as well as give suggestion of how potential alternative tool could look like.

Therefore, the main objective is two research questions:
- What is customers' attitude towards hotel classification systems?
- How does modern customer behaviour create a need for new and more reliable tool?

And they would be reached with the support of several subobjectives, research subquestions:
- What is the customers' attitude towards hotel classification systems? Are they familiar with how they work?
- What is modern customer behaviour? What is the role of online ratings in it? What is customers' attitude towards them?
- Do any systems and ratings represent service quality?
- What could be a new, more reliable and personality-reflecting tool?

The first questions are based on the "Classification systems" chapter, second ones – on "Online rating", while third and fourth ones correspond to the "Service quality and its subjectivity" chapter.

5.2 Research method and sampling

These research questions lead towards the evaluation of various research types and choice of appropriate one. The methods of research could vary between qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative type usually brings broad questions, seeks for meanings and aims towards understanding the nature of the problem. By providing non-numeric data, it helps to observe patterns of behaviour, as it is better at answering the question "why?". (Seale, et al., 2004.) While quantitative research focuses on systematic empirical investigation

which in the end provides structured summary about certain matter. By collecting numeric data and statistics, it helps to measure the results easier; also it gives answers to direct "what?" and "how?" questions. (Gray, et al., 2007.) That is why the author has selected exactly the quantitative method, as the aim of the thesis not to understand why customers prefer or do not prefer hotel classification systems, but to analyse their general attitude – whether they use it or not, know how they work or not, rely more on online ratings or not, and want an alternative tool or not. Because quantitative method is better known for "examining attitudes & behaviours and documenting trends". On the other hand, it may not discover insight on why people think/feel/behave in certain way, which sometimes could be a disadvantage. (Goertzen, 2017.) However, it potentially can reach a larger number of respondents, as the author is willing to approach wide population. As well as another benefit is that such studies are more reliable for an application, which is also another author's goal. (Wang & Park, 2016.)

Speaking regarding the population, the author strives to target as many socio-demographical and cultural groups as possible, since hotel industry is used by huge diversity of people. This would make the results provide a holistic picture from different perspectives, so more reliable data.

Consequently, since the population is relatively wide, it is important to find the right sample representing this population. Sampling methods of quantitative research involves probability and non-probability types. The author has chosen non-probability method, as sampling groups are selected based on non-random manner and not everyone has an equal chance to participate. Once again, the idea is to reach many socio-demographical and cultural groups, therefore, firstly, the researcher chooses a group of members to participate, and secondly, using "snowball" technique, members nominate additional members. (Gray, et al., 2007.) Speaking about the timescale, the research was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, so it is conducted at one point, since the aim is to understand the attitude of customers, not to analyse the change/development of their behaviour (Elahia & Dehdashti, 2011).

Through the research, due to the method and sampling technique, there might be some limitations. They mainly are related to author's inability to control respondents, since members themselves "assign" other members. Also, there may be some members who would not forward the survey at all. Another potential risk could be that respondents would only represent one or two main socio-demographical groups, so the results will not demonstrate multiple perspectives and be diverse.

5.3 Research implementation

To support the quantitative research, survey was chosen as a tool, since it is praised to be effective at data collection (Walliman, 2010). The survey was created online using Google Forms. The author's goal was to make the questions simple and easy to understand & answer for a regular traveller/hotel customer. The survey, which could be found in "Appendix 1. Survey" consists of in total 37 questions. The questions vary between: closed – where respondent can choose one or several options, and scale – namely "likert" ones, where a person shares on the scale from 1 to 5 about his/her agreement with statement & frequency of use. The survey includes the following 6 parts:

- Introduction. There is explanation of survey's aim to inform the respondent. A question about relation to hotel/hospitality/tourism industry to understand during the analysis the percentage of people who might have insight knowledge and mislead the statistics. A question regarding travel/hotel experience to see one's involvement in the industry. And a question about factors influencing hotel's choice.

- Classification systems. This part mainly reflects the first chapter "Classification Systems" of Theoretical framework module. The 8 questions strive to see customers' familiarity with the systems, such as geographical application, evaluation and criteria, as well as the attitude towards systems, by asking about importance.

- Online rating. It corresponds with the second chapter "Online rating". Some 10 questions ask about customers' usage of these ratings and trustworthiness, as well as compare classification systems versus online ratings, also explore attitude towards various styles of reviews.

- Perceived and expected service. Here, the theory from the third chapter "Service quality and its subjectivity" is used. The 12 questions are aimed to understand how people expect and perceive services and whether they would trust more people with alike background and experience.

- Profile. This part collects respondents' data about gender, age, country of origin and income.

While conducting research, ideally, the survey should be tested, so the pilot could uncover the weaknesses and help to improve it (Altinay, et al., 2016). For this purpose, the author contacted 5 people in order to have video conference and test the survey. These people were clearly selected, so they represent diverse socio-demographical & cultural groups. There were 2 males and 3 females from 23 to 55 years old representing Russia, Spain, Germany and the US, and having different travel/hotel experience (one person is even directly related to the hotel industry). While on conference, the participants were sent a link to fill the survey and at the same time to think out loud, expressing their understanding of the questions, concerns, comments. During completion, the author did not communicate with them, only listened and took notes. These comments along with the other provided feedback helped author to develop and improve the survey.

After testing, the survey, namely the link to Google Forms, was distributed, as previously mentioned, with non-probability method and was sent via author's personal social media accounts & messengers to her international network, trying to reach as many countries as possible and asking to forward the survey to various people, which is "snowball" technique. Talking about the number of respondents, as the minimum requirement is 100 people, author thought surpassing it by ~20% would be sufficient, therefore the goal was to get around 120 answers. This number, to be specific – 123 answers, was reached within 5 days, then the survey was closed for the analysis.

During the analysis, the author used two tools: Google Forms and Microsoft Office Excel. As Google Forms was utilised for the data collection, it also demonstrated in the "results" section the summary for each question which were used for the general primary analysis. Then the table with each respondent data was downloaded. And Microsoft Office Excel was used for the deeper analysis, so its pivot tables, filter options and formulas helped to find commonalities, correlations and dependencies.

6   Results

Now, when the methodology of the research and its process are clear, it is necessary to discuss the results of survey. This chapter would describe the profiles of respondents, as well as the answers to each of the three survey parts, namely Classification systems, Online rating and Perceived & expected service.

6.1   Respondents' characteristics

To start the discussion about the research results, it is necessary to describe the profiles of respondents, namely their socio-demographical factors and country of origin, as well as experience in travel/hotels.

First of all, among those 123 respondents, 54% were females and 46% were males. Also, the majority in total of 41% were representing people from 21 to 30 years old, while 31-40 amounted to 24%, and 41-50 & 51-60 groups had almost equal shares of 16% & 12%, respectively, and some 6% were under 20, as demonstrated below in Figure 4. Secondly, participants were asked about their monthly income to see afterwards the correlation of income with travel/hotel habits. So, around a third reported € 2001-3500 income, 23% – € 1001-2000, 19% – € 3501-5000, 16% – below € 1000, and 8% – more than € 5001, as represented in the chart below in Figure 5.
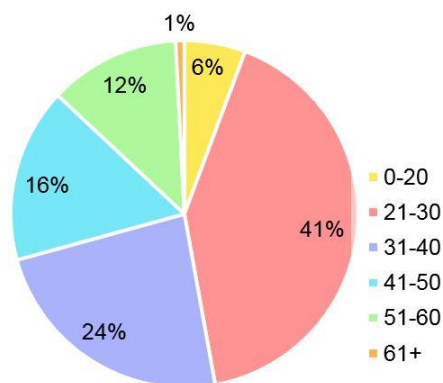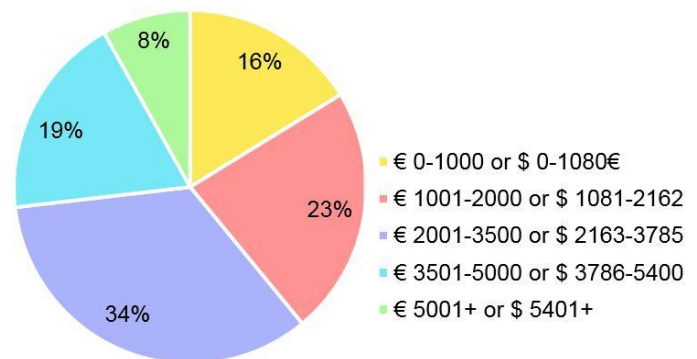
Figure 4. Respondents' age   Figure 5. Respondents' income

Thirdly, regarding the geographics, 123 participants represented 41 counties from all parts of the world. The countries with the smallest number of respondents, just 1-3 people, amount to 46% of total and marked as "Other" in the chart. Among the biggest countries were Russia with 18p, Finland – 8p, and Germany & United States – 7p each. The major counties and their percentages are demonstrated in Figure 6.
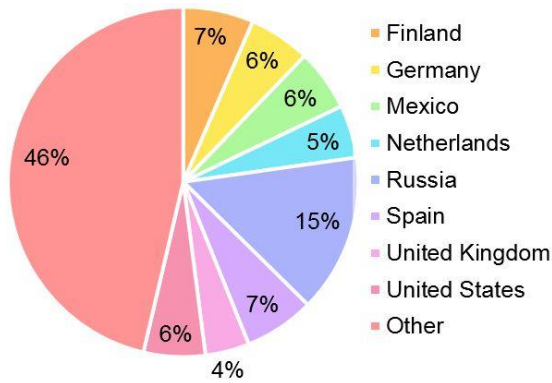
Figure 6. Respondents' countries

Finally, speaking about how frequently respondents get to stay in hotels, the statistic showed the following: almost a half of participants does it every 6 months, people going to hotels once in 2-3 months and once a year amounted to 25% each group, then 4% stays monthly and 2% - once in 2-3 years, as it is demonstrated in Figure 7.
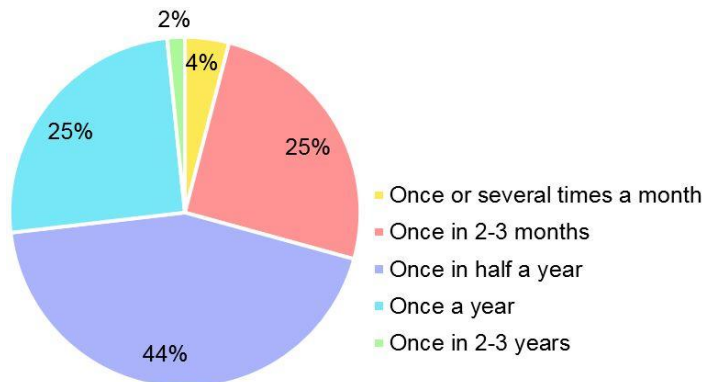

Figure 7. Respondents' frequency of hotel stays

In addition, it is important to mention that 13% which is 16 people of the respondents answered that they are somehow related to the hotel/hospitality/tourism industry through the work or education. So, this information was taken into consideration during analysis of travellers' familiarity with hotel classification system, as having insight knowledge could potentially mislead the statistics.

6.2   Attitude towards classification systems

Prior starting to talk about the classification systems, the respondents were asked which two factors influence their choice of hotel the most. As shown in chart in Figure 8, the most important aspects turned out to be customer reviews with 64 points, online rating with 57 and only then hotel category with 48, which was referring to classification systems. Shortly after, with 3 points less, there is hotel image perceived through website & channels, then affiliation with certain brand/chain with 31, and personal recommendations with 10.
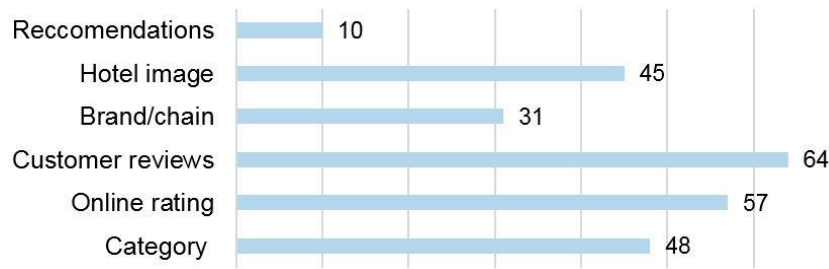
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Figure 8. Factors influencing hotel choice

Talking about the classification systems themselves and the 1st question of this part, the majority of 51% believes that they are quite important and for 17% very much important, while 24% & 8% gave the middle 3/5 and low 2/5 answers, and no one said they are not important at all. However, in the 2nd question, asking whether people believe they know what X stars mean, only 12% gave firm "agree" answer, while total of 72% was either quite agree, either not sure. In the 3rd question which asked more in-depth whether a person knows an exact difference between 4-star hotel versus 3 & 5-star hotel, the number of people who are sure dropped, so only 4% said they know, while 30% were quite agreed, the majority 35% were not sure, and another 30% quite disagree that they know. Also, in 2nd & 3rd questions, there was no correlation found between one's experience and X-stars knowledge, so possible proposal that more experienced people know more could not be confirmed.

Regarding the 4th questions which talked about whether standards of 5-star hotel would be the same in different countries, the main number of respondents 40% quite disagreed and 36% were not sure, while only 13% quite agreed with the statement. Tackling the 5th question referring to the customers' preference of staying in 4-star hotel of familiar international chain rather than in local 4-star hotel, "quite agree", "not sure", "quite disagree" answers received approximately equal shares of 30% each, when only 8% they would absolutely prefer familiar brand. Analysing the correlation between these two questions, people who believe standards are not the same across the countries are more likely to prefer hotel of familiar international brand for a stay; and secondly, referring to participants' profiles, these answers mainly represent a group of frequent travellers, who stay in hotel every 2-3 months or every half a year, the majority is from the UK, US or Russia; the same people in the question about factors influencing their hotel choice also marked brand/chain and hotel image as high importance factors. Those who believe that hotel standards do not diverge much in different countries were consequently more open to staying in local hotels.

At the end of part about classification systems, respondents were tested on general knowledge and familiarity with operations principles of the systems. Questions N6 asked

which factors systems' criteria are more focused on during evaluation – objective tangible (presence of facilities), subjective tangible (characteristics of facilities) and subjective intangible (services). In the chapter 3.3 "TripAdvisor – debated and reviews analysis", it was mentioned that systems are more aimed towards assessment of tangible matters. In the responses, participants highlighted the right answers about tangible aspects (facilities) which earned 93 points, while 111 points were given to guest satisfaction and service quality, which are not included in criteria that much. In the 7th question, majority 76% thought the statement that some hotels could evaluate themselves is false, while 24% were not sure or quite agree, and no one said it could be true. Finally, in the 8th question about geographical application of the classifications systems, the biggest number of votes, namely 90, were given to "there are several main systems in the world", as well as 5 votes went to "united world system" and 14 to "each continent has a system", which all are false. While the correct answers "some counties share a system", "each county has its own system" and "some counties have, some do not" got 46, 28 and 8 votes, respectively. Thus, the chart in Figure 9 illustrate total number of right and wrong answers given to these three questions. In addition, it is essential to note that more experiences respondents as well as people, who marked category as influencing factor for hotel choice and said stars are important, had slightly more correct answers, yet common mistake was about presence of "several main systems in the world" and "guest satisfaction" being evaluated by criteria.
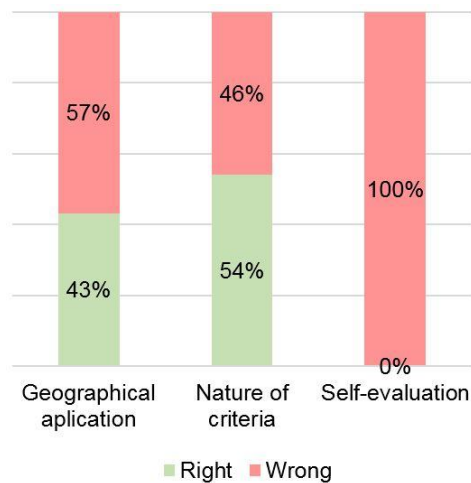

Figure 9. Familiarity with classification systems

6.3   Role of online rating and reviews

Opening the part of survey dedicated to online rating, in the 1st question, respondents were asked if in general they use travel-related websites to gather information and choose the hotel. Total of 88% said they refer to these websites either always - 45%, either very often - 43%, also some 10% use it occasionally, then 1,6% and 0,8% rare and never, re-

spectively. There was no correlation found between a preference not to utilize the websites and respondent's age, neither travel frequency. In addition, statistics of the 2nd question shows that almost half of participants only use these websites to search, while 34% mainly search & sometimes share, and 21% equally search & share. Moreover, in the 3rd question almost 87% said online ratings influence much - 60%, and very much - 27% on their choice of hotel, while only 13% reported average influence. For the 1st and 3rd questions, a slight relation was found to respondent's main factors influencing the hotel choice: for people who never, rare or occasionally use these websites, as well as those who consider online rating medium-influential, a more important role is played by hotel category, brand/chain or hotel image.

Afterwards, in 4th question, asking to agree or disagree with the statement "I trust online ratings more than hotel's category", as seen in the chart in Figure 10, the majority of 42% are not sure, while 49% trust more online ratings and 10% would prefer to trust category. Here, also some connection was found with the age: people who are 41+ have less trust in online ratings and on the contrary, 21-40 age group gave strong "agree" answers. Another question comparing classification systems and online rating, N5, suggested participants choose between hotel A with 4 stars & 4,8/5 online rating and hotel B with 5 stars & 3,8/5 rating: 78% of respondents chose hotel A. In addition to that, in the 6th question, 28%, 25% & 29% replied that they often, occasionally & rare filter hotel search on these websites by number of stars, while 7% do it always and 12% never do. The results of both these questions demonstrate higher importance of online rating and quite average of categories.
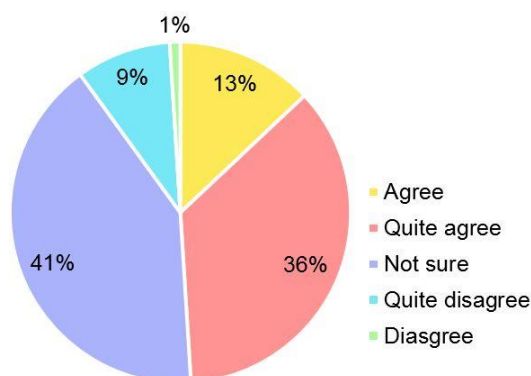

Figure 10. Trust towards online ratings rather than classification systems

Moving towards the part analysing reviews, in the 7th question, 63% agreed or quite agreed that feedback and reviews on the travel websites are credible and trustworthy, some 32% gave middle answer, being not sure, and only 5% quite disagreed that they are trustworthy. Speaking in-depth about the content of reviews and referring to various types

of these reviews described in the chapter 3.3 "TripAdvisor – debated and reviews analysis", in the 8th question, respondents highlighted that they would value more the reviews about subjective tangible (characteristics of facilities) – 63%, objective tangible (presence of facilities) – 28%, and subjective intangible (service delivery) – 9%. And according to results of 9th, travellers also would value more reviews with so-called valuable judgment (with explanation and description) – 45%, then without a context (general evaluation) – 32%, and with context (personal situation) – 23%. Also, referring to 10th question data, 80% agreed and quite agreed that they would value more review which starts with the personal introduction and outline writer's past background & current experience. Thus, the summary chart representing how valuable these three review aspects for the customers could be seen below in Figure 11.
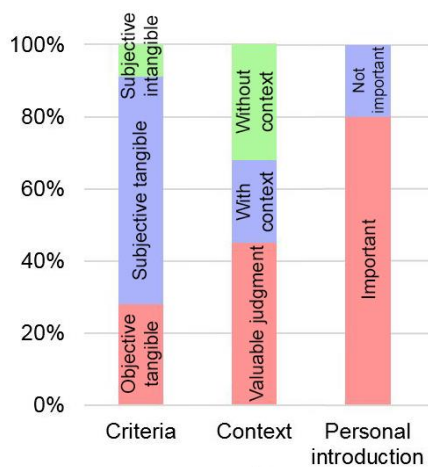

Figure 11. Preference of reviews content

6.4   Perceived and expected service

Moving onto the last part of survey dedicated to service perceptions and expectations, firstly, respondents were asked whether they think their service evaluation is subjective, and here, 52% agreed and quite agreed, while 43% were not sure. Also, in the 2nd question, asking whether one's expectations of service depend on personality, 51% were neither agree, neither disagree while total of 37% was more inclined to agree. Then, in the 3rd question, referring to expectations being based on previous experience, the majority of 44% and 40% agreed or quite agreed, and only 15% not sure. In addition, there was no strong correlation found between answers on these three questions and respondent's profile. Moreover, results of the 4th question, which tried to find out if hotel image and promise have influence on one's expectations, exactly a half of participants reported they quite agree with the statement and a third was strongly agree, while only 15% were not sure. Here, some correlation with the age was found: younger people within 21-30 group perceive hotel image and promise as factor shaping expectations. Besides that, participants who emphasized in the very beginning of the survey hotel image and/or hotel brand/chain

as important factors for choosing a hotel in that question gave mainly "strongly agree" answers.

Several next questions were focused on what factors could potentially make reviews more trustworthy for readers. To start, in the 5th question, 73% reported that they never or really rarely check profiles of reviewers, while 20% do it occasionally, and only 6% together often and always. The questions N6-12 were asking whether respondents agree with the following statement: "I would trust the review & reviewer more if we are/have same… 6 - gender, 7 - age, 8 - financial wealth/income, 9 - cultural background/country, 10 - travel experience, 11 - purpose of stay, 12 - travel mode/company of people". The chart below in Figure 12 represents summary of results to these six questions. And the following chart in Figure 13 demonstrates only total percentage of only "agree" and "quite agree" answers, so it is easier to monitor which factors are bringing more trustworthiness.
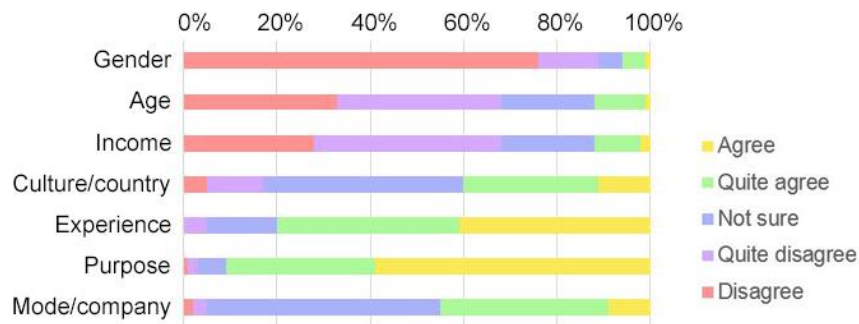

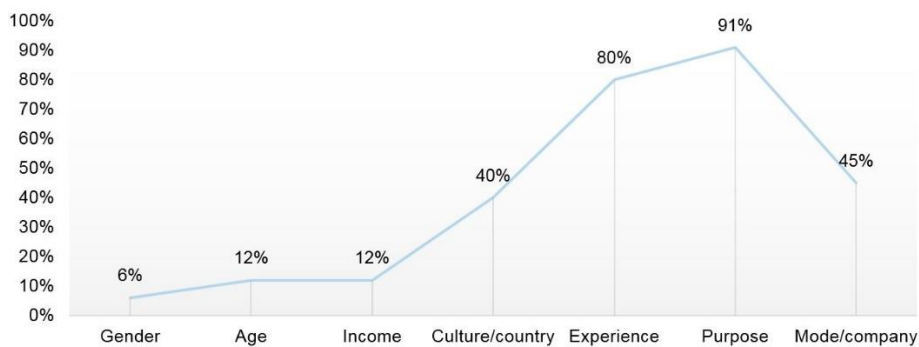Figure 12. Factors influencing on trustworthiness of review, overall

Figure 13. Factors influencing on trustworthiness of review, top

Thus, gender-factor turned out to be the least useful, having only 6% mentioning it, while 76% disagreed. The age-factor received 12% participants saying it would make them trust reviewer more, while 69% said it would not. Also, there is interesting aspect that mainly people of 51+ group and some from 41-50 group reported that they would trust more the feedback of same age people. Then, the income-factor also received 12% of agreed people and 68% disagreed. And again, the majority of answers considering income as significant factor were provided by people with higher income. The next was cultural factor which gained not only 40% "agree" and "quite agree" answers but also 44% at "not sure"

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which mean people were doubting its importance but not denying. Here, no evidence was found that some counties perceive cultural factor as more influential one; however, those who believed cultural background is not essential at all are young people belonging to 21-30 age group. Afterwards, experience-factor received 80% agreed votes and the rest 15% doubting its importance, which makes it 2nd important factor. In this question, the main number of 5/5 answers were given by respondents who are frequent travellers & stay in hotels every 2-3 months and who in the 3rd question of this part also reported their own expectations being based on previous experience. The next factor related to purpose of stay became absolute leader with 91% people thinking that the review from person who had same trip purpose would be more trustworthy. And finally, the last question related to travel mode/company received 45% "agree" answers, along with other 50% not denying but doubting factor's significance; thus, these percentages provide this factor with 3rd top position.

7   Discussion

Hereby, once all the results of survey are discovered, it is essential to continue with the discussion. Therefore, this chapter will start with summary of the results and their reflection against the Theoretical framework, along with the answers to research questions. It will afterwards be followed with some suggestions to the industry and possible solution from the author. In the end, some recommendation for future research will be given, as well as author will evaluate validity & reliability of the research and reflect on the ethical consideration throughout the whole research process.

7.1   Results summary and reflection on theory

Firstly, evaluating customers' attitude towards classification systems, it is safe to say that hotel category is one of the top, namely 3rd, most influential factor for travellers while choosing the hotel, and many consider the category important. Since as it is mentioned in the theory, for the consumers, it is a tool assuring certain level of service (UNWTO, 2015). On the other hand, even though customers quite sure what certain category stands for, the majority, even experienced ones, were doubting whether they could properly differentiate 4-star hotel versus 3 & 5-star hotels. Not only that, but respondents agreed standards are not the same across the countries. So, referring to the chapter 2.2.1 "National hotel associations" and 2.2.2 "Hotel guides", it is pretty hard to know all the standards, since some comparison tables confirmed that assessment methods vary significantly, especially in quantity & main focus of criteria and frequency of inspections. For that reason, quite a few participants said they would prefer to stay in a hotel of familiar brand/chain, as from the chapter 2.2.3 "Role of branding", it is known that such brands/chains are not only oriented towards meeting criteria of local associations but also focused on providing more global approach in delivering certain level of service (Van Rossem, 2018; Smith Travel Research, 2019). Moreover, trying to assess customer' familiarity with classification systems' operational principles, many thought that systems' criteria are more focused on customer satisfaction and service quality, while in reality it is more oriented towards evaluating tangible aspects, so facilities (Hensens, 2010). Also, respondents did not know some hotels could evaluate themselves, as mentioned in theory by UNWTO (2015), some countries allow internal audit, and according to Petrone (2006), some hotels try to market themselves with higher category. Lastly, the most common mistake was about geographical application that there are few main systems in the world, while referring to Martin-Fuentes (2016) and Minazzi (2010) they hugely vary between numerous parties and mostly country-based.

Secondly, speaking about customer behaviour and role of online ratings in it, the results demonstrated that both hotel rating and WOM, which are feedback and reviews, are top factors influencing decision-making process of hotel stay. That confirms the idea of Hudson (2013) that customer search has more stitched to online sources nowadays. In addition, as it was proved by statistic in Theoretical framework module, survey also reported travellers to be almost always using various travel-related websites. As well as trust level towards online ratings was slightly more than systems, especially for younger people. Also, the majority uses the websites to search, rather than share; however, among many previously mentioned filters of e.g. TripAdvisor, customers only occasionally filter hotels by star category. These findings support Foris's (2012) opinion that user-generated context is more reliable and has more influence, so helps customers to decide. Moreover, most travellers find online feedback credible, which also supports Litvin's (2008) point of view.

Talking in particular about the "share" aspect, TripAdvisor mostly focuses on subjective intangible which is service delivery, then subjective tangible, and then objective tangible (Hensens, 2010), while research showed customer would prefer more assessment of subjective tangible aspects. Also, with the context of reviews, which varies between valuable judgment which is descriptive, comment with context which draws personal situation, and without context which is general (Hensens, 2010), customers mainly prefer more detailed explanations with valuable judgment. As well, when reading the reviews, many highlighted importance of some introduction and knowing reviewer more, since bigger number of respondents never check travellers' profiles while reading. These last three aspects are the areas which could potentially be improved to make reviews even more useful and reliable for travellers – this matter will be described in more details in the following chapter.

Thirdly, talking about nature of services, the research demonstrated that people are more inclined to think they evaluate services in a subjective manner, which totally corresponds with many other researchers, e.g. Callan (1990; 2000) and Parasuraman (1985; 1988), who also claim that service perception is subjective. Referring to Grönroos's (1984) technical and functional quality dimensions of perceived service, results show hotel customers value more functional, so "how service is done", rather than technical, so "what is done", as in hypothetical situation, respondents chose to stay in a hotel with better service delivery and fewer facilities rather than poorer service delivery and wider variety of facilities. Furthermore, discussing expected services, according to the research hotel image and promise have direct influence on one's expectations, and the same is stated in Parasuraman' SERVQUAL model (1988). Also, respondents reported personality factors, e.g. gen-

der, age, income as non-important when it comes to building expectations, despite researches mentioned in the chapter 4.2 "Expected service and influencing factors" named these socio-demographical factors influential. On the other side, among behavioural factors, previous travel/hotel experience was concerned as essential aspect impacting one's expectations. They also mentioned if reviewer's purpose of stay, travel mode, experience and slightly culture are similar to theirs, such review would be more valuable in building expectations.

Thus, in order to crown it all, it would be essential to answer research questions with short statements representing core ideas and research results.

- <u>What is the customers' attitude towards hotel classification systems? Are they familiar with how they work?</u> Nowadays, consumers perceive classification systems which assign categories to the hotel as an important factor which impacts their choice. However, customers mostly do not know how they work & what standards are, and often prefer to rely on travel websites with online ratings. But so far, this tool is still "the most common customer segmentation pattern in the hotel industry" (Dioko, et al., 2013).

- <u>What is modern customer behaviour? What is the role of online ratings in it? What is customers' attitude towards them?</u> Now, customer behaviour is more stitched to various travel-related websites whose word-of-mouth hugely influence on decision-making process. Online ratings are considered more reliable due to their user-generated content are trusted more than classification systems.

- <u>Do any systems and ratings represent service quality?</u> Service quality is comparison between perception and expectations (Kotler, et al., 2006; Parasuraman, et al., 1988). Therefore, since, according to research, perceived service remains subjective depending on each customer and expected service is also built corresponding to one's background and needs, then the overall service quality is also personal and cannot be properly represented by any systems or ratings.

- <u>What could be a new, more reliable and personality-reflecting tool?</u> From theory, it is known that systems and ratings are more focused on representing hotel services and one's perception of hotel services, respectively, while none actually involve expectations. Research demonstrated customers would trust the review more if they knew that former guest had similar expectations – background, experience and needs, thus he/she could rely on such expectations & personality-reflecting tool more. The matter will be explained in more details in the following chapter.

7.2   Suggestions for the industry and possible solution

As previously mentioned, the author was striving to create applied research which could be practical and potentially could bring benefit to the industry, therefore it is essential to give some suggestions based on the data collected and propose a possible solution.

Firstly, speaking about the classification systems, for sure there is no need to cancel the systems completely, since they operate not only for consumers, but they also service for the whole accommodation industry, including hotels themselves and other intermediaries, as well as they work for some legal and economic purposes (UNWTO, 2015; UNWTO & IHRA, 2004). However, for the customers operational principles remain unclear. Therefore, author's suggestion would be to in a way educate travellers and at least make the whole process more transparent, when it comes to methods of assessment and various criteria. Ideally, for sure, would be to follow the example of HotelStars Union which by uniting several European countries, established a harmonised hotel classification system with common procedures and shared standards and criteria, which also are not kept in secret and are available for any customer (HOTREC, 2016; HotelStars, 2015). But, thinking critically, the author understands that such a process could take a very long time due to the number of countries and diversity of regulations in each national hotel association.

Secondly, referring to the online ratings and especially TripAdvisor, as it is already a leader among the travel-related websites, the author would suggest to implement some soft guidelines or advice/hints for travellers on how to write reviews and make it more beneficial for others, as the result of the research reported the majority would prefer more descriptive feedback supported by valuable judgment instead of general review with no context provided.

In addition, there is another suggestion regarding online ratings but now including the concept of service quality and in particular expectations. The model below in the Figure 14 represents the mechanism.
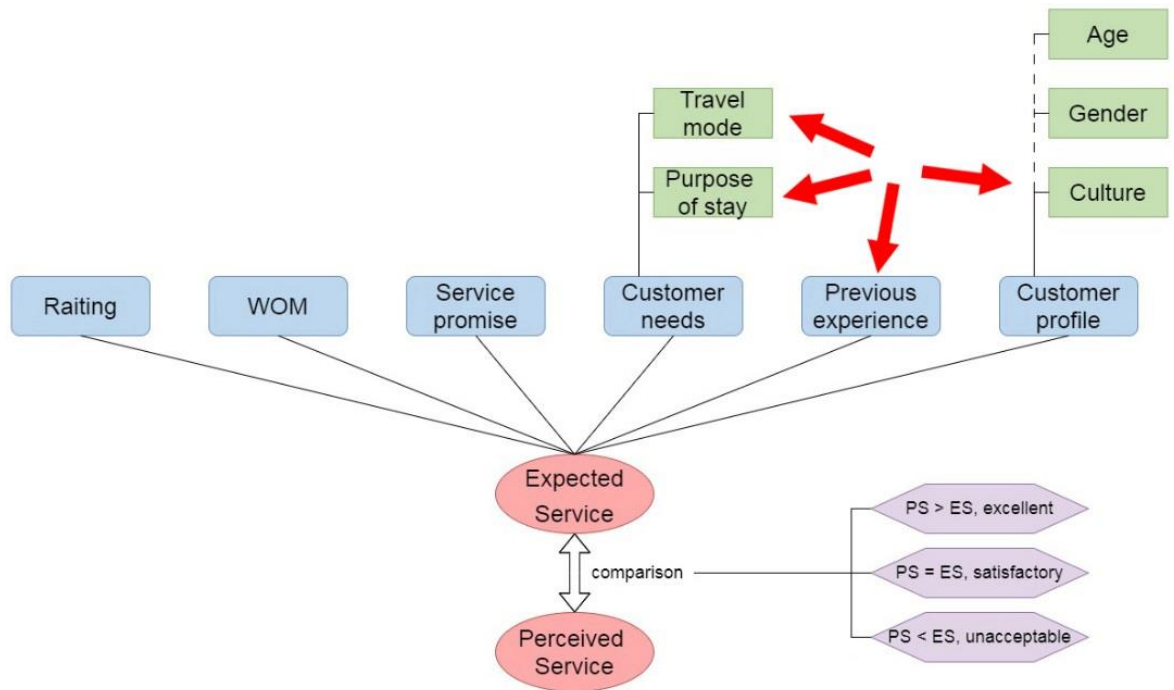
Figure 14. Service quality model involving expectations (created by author based on the research and partly adapted from Kotler, et al., 2006; Parasuraman, et al., 1988; Zeithaml, et al., 1990)

In the middle at the bottom, there is service quality known from the theory as a comparison of expectations and perception, where exceeded expectations mean excellent service quality (Kotler, et al., 2006; Parasuraman, et al., 1988; Zeithaml, et al., 1990). At the very bottom, there is perceived service which is delivered by the service provider. And currently, this is the only part where evaluation is focused on, in case of classification systems thought the prism of inspector and in case of websites – former guest. While author's proposal is to develop a dynamic and personality-reflecting tool which would also consider one's expectations, namely the factors influencing the expectations, which are in the upper part of the model in blue and green. In simpler words: when a person comes to the website with online rating, he/she could not only filter the hotels by location, facilities, rating and etc, but he/she can also filter them by personal needs (purpose of stay and travel mode), then the rating would be calculated based on the evaluation of the guests who went there with the similar needs. And the same should apply to a particular hotel page: when reading reviews, there should be filters not only of rating and language, but additional filters which are pointed out by the red arrows – purpose of stay, travel mode (more detailed one), travel experience and culture/country. Because research proved that consumers find more valuable reviews which start with introduction of background & experience, as well as they trust more people who are alike to them in their travel background and customer needs. Thus, by receiving evaluation based not only on one's perception but on personal expectations, customers would get more reliable information, thanks to

which they would be able to make a better choice, and therefore the overall satisfaction from experience would be more probable.

7.3 Suggestions for future research

Now speaking about some suggestions for possible future research, the author thought it would be interesting to explore how classification systems around the world could be developed for consumers' better understanding. Also, whether it would be feasible to integrate opinion of customers and/or online rating into evaluation of classification systems themselves, so not only professionals but guests might influence on assessment. As well as, more detailed research would be needed to explore impact of expectations on customers' evaluation of accommodation in order to potentially make the integration of "expectations tool" previously suggested by the author more beneficial for consumers.

7.4 Evaluation of reliability & validity and ethics

In order to confirm the trustworthiness of the research, it is necessary to evaluate two key concepts – reliability and validity. Reliability stands for consistency of information, so the data collected and results are stable. (Wang & Park, 2016.) It also means that if the research is repeated and conducted again, regardless of the circumstances, the outcomes should be nearly the same. While validity refers to accuracy of results and their ability to meet objectives and answer research questions. Also, the finding of the research ought to be logical, coherent, meaningful, correct and giving ability to generalize and make conclusion. (Creswell, 2012.) Therefore, evaluating reliability of this thesis, it could be said that the author was consistent in her research process, used scientific approach during the work, referred to credible literature and other sources for theoretical data collection. As well as, the respondents chosen as a sample of population represented quite diverse socio-demographical group; author also ensured that answers are not biased by asking in the survey whether respondents are related to hospitality industry. Assessing validity of the thesis, author tends to believe it is quite high, since the research met the objective and answered questions, and quite all the findings reflect theory. However, it is not perfect: first of all, due to author's inability to control respondents, as "snowball" was a sampling technique; secondly, because of participants number, which even though surpassed the minimum required number, still is not enough to represent the opinion of all hotel customers across the world; and thirdly, because the majority, 65%, of respondents was from 21-40 age groups, on the bright side – they represented 30 out of total 41 countries, so their profiles still could be called diverse.

In addition to that, it is essential to speak about various ethical considerations referring to the whole thesis and research process. To start, the research was conducted with respect to the industry, it also did not disclose any confidential information, neither it aimed to create any conflicts of interest. The information for theoretical framework was thoughtfully selected and objectively represented, involving opinions of many authors and supporting discussion with source debates, where possible. Author gave the acknowledgement of other authors' works by referencing the information according to Harvard citation style. Talking about the conducted quantitative research, all respondents participated in the survey voluntarily, and their answers are kept anonymously without any connection to emails or other profiles, as well as author conducted analysis of the results carefully with no misinterpretation. Finally, author herself is fully responsible for all the work contribution and there was no intellectual contribution of others, unless stated otherwise with a citation. This self-evaluation is based on Bryman's (2007) and All European Academies's (2017) ethical considerations.

8 Conclusion

To crown it all, classification systems are surely one of the key concepts of the hospitality industry with numerous purposes and benefits for both internal operations and customers. However, despite being an influential factor during the hotel choice, travellers are quite doubting what they stand for and not much familiar with how they work. In addition, consumers quite often prefer to rely on travel-related websites with online ratings, since they consider user-generated content more trustworthy. However, reviews sometime could miss judgment and not always be reflecting on what potential consumers want to know. Also, as service quality and its perception were proved to be subjective, the industry ought to focus more on how customers could receive more credible evaluation from travellers with alike backgrounds and needs, so they would build the expectations better and more realistic. Thus, the probability of meeting these expectations by the service-provider and bringing satisfaction to the guest would be higher.

Moreover, finalizing the thesis process, the author believes it was pretty challenging but interesting work. It was difficult sometimes, since the author does not have much experience at research, especially such an academic type, so it took a lot of time to figure out many aspects and understand how to execute them properly. On the bright side, since the topic was not so much familiar to the author, through days and nights with different literature, she gained many new knowledge. All in all, the author brought many efforts into the thesis, so she hopes it would be beneficial.

Finally, drawing the conclusion not only to the thesis but also to the whole Bachelor degree, the author would love to express the words of gratitude, first of all, to Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences for numerous opportunities of personal development and to all the teachers for bringing the light of knowledge; secondly, to CETT, University of Barcelona for giving a chance to go on exchange semester; thirdly, to Masha, Varya and Vika for sincere friendship and sharing experiences throughout the university life; and finally, to parents for continuous support along this unforgettable four-year adventure.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey

Hotel Rating Systems

This research supports my thesis of Bachelor's degree in Hospitality Management. I am conducting the survey to find out the attitudes of customers towards various classification and rating systems used in accommodation (hotel) industry. The survey will take around 10 minutes. All the respondents and data collected remain anonymous. I appreciate your help!

* Обязательно

Are you related to the hotel/hospitality/tourism industry through your work or education? *

○ Yes

○ No

How often do you travel and stay in hotels? (Think about your life before quarantine) *

○ Once or several times a month

○ Once in 2-3 months

○ Once in half a year

○ Once a year

○ Once in 2-3 years

Try to remember the last time you were choosing a hotel. Which of these factors influenced your choice the most? (Select max 2) *

- [ ] Personal recommendations
- [ ] Brand & hotel chain
- [ ] Customer feedback & reviews
- [ ] Hotel image (though its website and other channels)
- [ ] Category (e.g. "5 stars")
- [ ] Online rating

Classification systems

Classification systems represent hotel category (e.g. "5 stars" or "4 Diamonds"). This 1st (out of 3) section aims to evaluate customer's familiarity with these systems and attitude towards them.

Do you agree with the statement: "When choosing a hotel, for me, it is important how many stars/diamonds it has"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "I know what X-number of stars/diamonds means"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "When I go to the 4-star hotel I know exactly how it will be different from 3-star and 5-star hotels"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "5-star hotel in one country will have the same standards and quality level as in another country"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "When I go to an unfamiliar country, I would prefer to stay in a 4-star hotel of familiar international brand instead of in 4-star hotel of local brand"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Classification systems criteria are more focused on evaluating... (Select 2 most relevant) *

☐ Presence of facilities

☐ Characteristics of these facilities

☐ Presence of services

☐ Characteristics of the services

☐ Guest satisfaction

What do you think about the statement: "Hotels can evaluate & classify themselves"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
It is false	O	O	O	O	O	It is true

Select the statements which you believe are correct. *

☐ There is one united system in the world evaluating hotels.

☐ There are few main systems in the world.

☐ Each continent has own system.

☐ Some counties team up to share one system.

☐ Each country has its own system.

☐ Some counties have systems, while some do not have any.

Online rating

This 2nd (out of 3) section aims to understand how customers use travel-related websites and their ratings.

Do you use travel-related websites (e.g. TripAdvisor or Booking) to gather information about hotel? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

In case you use these websites, do you use it more to search for hotel or share feedback about hotel?

○ Only search

○ Mainly search, sometimes share

○ Equally search and share

○ Mainly share, sometimes search

○ Only share

How much online ratings influence on your choice of hotel? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Do not influence at all	○	○	○	○	○	Influence very much

Do you agree with the statement: "I trust more online ratings rather than hotel's category (e.g. "5 stars")? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Hotel A has 4 stars and 4,8/5 online rating. Hotel B has 5 stars and 3,8/5 online rating. Imagine, both have same price, location, facilities... Which one will you choose to stay? *

○ Hotel A

○ Hotel B

In case you search for hotel on travel websites, do you filter the search by number of stars?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

Do you agree with the statement: "The feedback and reviews on these websites are credible and trustworthy"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Which review would you value more? About... *

○ Presence of facilities & amenities

○ Comfort/convenience/quality of facilities & amenities

○ Service delivery

Which review would you value more? *

○ Evaluation with example and description, e.g. "The restaurant at the hotel was great as it offers wide selection of meats and local dishes".

○ Evaluation with personal context, e.g. "The bed mattress was very-very soft, I liked it as I have problems with my back".

○ General evaluation without context, e.g. "Well-deserved 4 stars, the service is really good".

Would you consider more trustworthy review which starts with personal introduction, e.g. "I am German, have traveller all around Europe" or "We chose this hotel with my wife for a romantic getaway"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Perception of services

This 3rd (the last) section aims to explore how people expect and perceive service.

Do you agree with the statement: "The way I evaluate services is subjective"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "My expectations of service depends on my PERSONALITY"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "My expectations of service depends on my PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "Hotel image and what it promises influence on my expectations"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

When reading feedback, do you check profiles of reviewers? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	O	O	O	O	O	Always

Do you agree with the statement: "I would trust the review more if I know that me and reviewer are the same GENDER"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "I would trust the review more if I know that me and reviewer are the same AGE"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "I would trust the review more if I know that me and reviewer have similar FINANCIAL WEALTH (income)"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "I would trust the review more if I know that me and reviewer have the same CULTURAL BACKGROUND"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "I would trust the review more if I know that me and reviewer have similar TRAVEL EXPERIENCE"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	O	O	O	O	O	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "I would trust the review more if I know that the reviewer went to this hotel for e.g. a business trip or honeymoon, and I plan to go for the same PURPOSE"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Do you agree with the statement: "I would trust the review more if I know that the reviewer went to this hotel with wife/friends/family, and I plan to go with the same COMPANY OF PEOPLE"? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Your profile

Last detail - share you information. All the answers are anonymous.

Gender *

○ Male

○ Female

○ Prefer not to say

Age *

○ 0-20

○ 21-30

○ 31-40

○ 41-50

○ 51-60

○ 61+

Country of origin *

Выбрать ▾   64

Income (or other financial means) per month *

○ € 0-1000 or $ 0-1080

○ € 1001-2000 or $ 1081-2162

○ € 2001-3500 or $ 2163-3785

○ € 3501-5000 or $ 3786-5400

○ € 5001+ or $ 5401+