
THE POSSIBILITY TO INFLUENCE THE PERCEPTION OF QUALITY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The innovations in the web and digital technologies have brought the rebirth of the social environment in a diversified way. The sharing economy is the core of most interactions and connections happening at this very moment. Seems like the ‘word-of-mouth’ has a more meaningful impact than any other concept among travelers and quality of services, thus using social media as its primary tool of expansion. It doesn’t matter what the purpose of the travel is, people are more willing to listen to other people’s opinion and feelings about anything. Individuals started to realize that everything is in a relationship with everything else, and started to behave in this way in their daily lives on all levels.

The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge what determines people to choose their next destinations and how they perceive the level of quality, the benefits brought up by the sharing economy, implicitly the human interaction regarding the present needs of people, and future society.

The methodological section of this paper contains a research based on a questionnaire addressed to travelers living in Bucharest.

This research is useful for all travelers, travel companies and all stakeholders involved in the tourism domain or others related.

Keywords

Quality, sharing, connection, people, tourism, emotions, interaction

JEL Classification

D16, Q55, Z32

Introduction

Since the beginning people were social beings, having the need of interaction and belonging, being part of a group or multiple groups, exchanging information, desires, perceptions, opinions, interests etc. This happens due to the cumulus of emotions individuals have, such as admiration, amusement, anxiety, boredom, confusion, calmness, disgust, envy, interest, joy, nostalgia, romance, satisfaction, sympathy, triumph and so on.

With the help of the internet and its tools, people have the opportunity to interact more easily and freely, as well as finding and contacting other people from anywhere in the world with the same interests as they have in order to express themselves and share what they trust and believe in.

The abundance of information has facilitated the growth of intelligence and self-esteem among consumers regarding their desires and needs fulfilled by the received services and products. The consumers became more focused on quality, sustainability, price ratio, feelings and transparency. They are more integral and want to rely on trust. Therefore, alternatives have emerged within the society and economy in order to meet these desires and views, such as the sharing economy. This economic system provides platforms where people can interact and share opinions and emotions. Consumers are searching for the best in order to improve their lifestyle and be happy. In order to keep up and gain trust, providers are forced to increase the quality of what they offer, as well as stay focused on both sustainability and reciprocity.

Quality is the experience of the customer. It is defined in many ways, such as a degree of excellence, conformance to requirements, freedom for defects, fitness for purpose, totality of characteristics which act to satisfy a need and so on.*

In a fast forward world, people are moving towards happiness, connection and balance.

This paper approaches real facts that light up the benefits that the sharing economy brings in facilitating human interaction and improving quality and lifestyles. Although, the sharing economy covers many areas, this research is limited to tourism.

The chain of terms

Tourism

In the current concept of the World Tourism Organization, "tourism covers the activities of a person who travels outside his or her ordinary environment for less than a specified period of time and whose purpose is other than the exert of a paid activity at the place of visit." Tourism is a stimulating factor for the global economic system.†

Tourism is the set of activities whereby an individual spends his spare time in other places or countries than his or her residence. Tourism is considered to be a form of recreation alongside other leisure activities, "the temporary movement of people to destinations, outside their usual residence and the activities carried out at those destinations."‡

The tourist is the backbone of the tourism sector. "All the travelers who engage in travel are described as visitors" (Goeldner, Brent Ritchie & McIntosh, 2000). Goeldner defines visitors as "people traveling to a country other than the one in which they live for a period of maximum 12 months, whose main purpose is other than the exert of remunerated activities within the visited country." There are two categories of visitors: 1 day visitors (excursionists) and tourists.§

Tourism is a dynamic and competitive industry that requires the ability to adapt constantly to customers' changing needs and desires, as the customer's satisfaction, safety and enjoyment are particularly the focus of tourism businesses.**

Social media

Social media has more recently been identified as emergent sites for different discourse and opinion formation that allow for spontaneous discussions. This type of fluid discussion reduces the ability of technology and service providers to control the nature of public

* Sondalini, M.. *What is quality? What does quality mean? How do you know when you have quality?*. [online] Available at: <https://www.lifetime-reliability.com/cms/free-articles/work-quality-assurance/what-is-quality/> [Accessed on 28 January 2018]

† Neguț, S., Vlăsceanu, Gh., Bran, F., Popescu, C., Vlad, L., B., Neacșu, M., C., 2006. *Geografie Economică Mondială*, Ed. Meteor Press, Bucharest

‡ Minciu, R., 2005. *Economia turismului – Editia a III-a revăzută și adăugită*, Ed. Uranus, Bucharest

§ Nur, I., M., R., Saniah, A., Z, Syed, M., H., 2013. *Between tourism and intangible cultural heritage, Cultural sustainability in the built and natural environment*, Ed. Elsevier

** *What is tourism?*, 2017. [online] Available at: <https://www.go2hr.ca/bc-tourism-industry/what-tourism> [Accessed on 11 April 2018]

discourse. Using the example of the comments sections of the video-sharing site YouTube, Kasun Ubayasiri (2006) argues that these places provide an array of spaces for socialisation and interaction because of the high degree of control users have over conversational topics. More recently, Andrew Murray has argued the contemporary internet is a place 'where conversations are more freely to be exchanged between people.'^{††}

Social media have fundamentally changed consumer processes (Hudson & Thal, 2013). The decision cycle that traditionally located in brick-and-mortar services is now shifting towards online agreements for travel. Hudson and Thal (2013) found social media's savvy distribution systems will be the future of emergent brands, with notation this changing digital environment is influencing the entire delivery system of travel services. Hudson and Thal (2013) stated that technology and new channel penetration will drive business applications further into new dimensions of tourism product innovation and tourism economies are currently on the brink of new dimensions and will require cultural effect through innovation. Characteristics of the firm, market, and the range of choices a service delivers will influence international expansion opportunities for hospitality and tourism entities (Philippe & Leo, 2011).^{‡‡}

Website quality measurement

The US Department of Health and Human Services (2006) broadly characterizes website evaluation as the act of determining a correct and comprehensive set of user requirements, ensuring that a website provides useful content that meets user expectations and setting usability goals. In general, prior studies on website evaluation fall into two broad categories: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative studies usually generate performance indices or scores to capture the overall quality of a website. For instance, Faba-Perez, Guerrero- Bote, and de Moya-Anegon (2005) introduced a technique that compares web page measures such as text elements and link formatting. Yeung and Lu (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of the functional characteristics of commercial websites in Hong Kong based on selected quantitative site attributes, and found that the websites were only marginally enhanced after 2.5 years. In qualitative studies, the researchers assessed website quality without generating indices or scores. For instance, Haldal, Sjøvold, and Haldal (2004) argued that the combination of branding, human-computer interaction, and usability could enhance website evaluation. Liang and Lai (2002) used a consumer-based approach to derive functional requirements for e-store design, and the empirical findings based on three e-bookstores showed that the quality of e-store design had a direct effect on the purchase decision making of people. In the context of tourism, Jang (2004) stated that online information search will become a major trend among travelers; with online reservations for travel products and services becoming an important application (Law & Hsu, 2006). Hashim, Murphy, and Law (2007) focused on website design frameworks in their review of articles published from the 1990s to 2006. The authors extracted five dimensions of website quality based on the most researched online features of tourism and hospitality websites: information and process, value added, relationships, trust, and design and usability. They also found that the most popular attributes of hotel websites were reservations, contact information, promotions, and products and services.^{§§}

Human emotions

^{††} Chen, P., J., 2013. Social media, *Australian politics in a digital age*, ANU Press, page 74 [Online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbkkn.11> [Accessed on 12 November 2017]

^{‡‡} Gellatly, J., P., 2016. *A global tourism qualitative descriptive multiple case study of consequences of industry defragmentation*, Ed. ProQuest, U.S.A.

^{§§} Law, R., Qi, S., Buhalis, D., 2009. Progress in tourism management: A review of website evaluation in tourism research, *Tourism management*, Elsevier, pp. 297-298

In recent years, the emotional impact of social media on society has been confirmed by an increasing number of research findings and empirical cases and thus has drawn great attention from a variety of areas such as Internet marketing research, service comments analysis, social mood monitoring, and emergent event management. Professor R.W. Picard at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology proposed in his book 'Affective Computing' that a computer could capture, process and reproduce human emotions, this issue of human emotion recognition and computing has been explored by machine intelligence technologies. Some brain areas are activated when an emotion occurs, which determines people to react in different ways according to their perception.***

People have the greatest sensitivity in connecting with other people. In this fast forward era, individuals seek time to socialize, make new friends, do what they like besides their jobs, families etc. in order to feel more balanced.

Sharing economy

The sharing phenomenon differs significantly from classical trading prototypes. Because it involves interactions between strangers and surpasses a geographically defined community. Exchange is most often monetary, systematized in a business model and facilitated by technology through platforms. The emergence of these peer-to-peer platforms, collectively referred to as "sharing economy", allowed individuals to collaboratively use underutilized inventory through cost-sharing. Consumers have so far enthusiastically adopted the services offered by companies such as Airbnb, Uber, Lyft and TaskRabbit. The rapid growth of peer-to-peer platforms was obviously due to two key factors: technological innovation and demands flexibility. Technological innovations have simplified the market entry process for suppliers, have facilitated search lists for consumers, and maintained low overall transaction costs. Demands flexibility is another distinctive sign of these platforms: Uber drivers can add or withdraw themselves from the available offer of drivers with an application, and similarly other vendors can easily list and remove the selection of goods or services they put at service. These platforms are more trust worthy than any other. By improving their lifestyle, people don't seek necessarily for luxurious hotels regarding their travels, but for the familial luxury within a space that arouses emotions and connectivity. †††

The sharing economy allows people to run their own taxi services, car rentals, hotels, restaurants and, brings many advantages to its players.***

Objectives and questionnaire analysis

The objectives of this research are to acknowledge what determines people to choose their future destinations, the level of the quality of services and how they perceive it, the benefits brought up by the sharing economy, implicitly the human interaction regarding consumers' needs, transparency, and the present social environment. How does the sharing economy change people's perception. The field selected for the research is tourism due to its connection with all other domains.

This section presents a research of the survey type questionnaire answers. This questionnaire was addressed to Romanians living in Bucharest.

In 2017, Romania had a population of 19.644.350 people, from which 1.826.830 people living in Bucharest. 90% of the people in Bucharest used the internet on a daily basis. \$\$\$

*** Dai, W., Han, D., Dai, Y., Xu, D., 2015. Emotion recognition and affective computing on vocal social media, *Information & Management*, Elsevier, pp. 1-3

††† Zervas, G., Proserpio, D., Byers, J.W., 2016. The Rise of Sharing Economy: Estimating the Impact of Airbnb on the Hotel Industry, *Journal of Marketing Research*, U.S.A.

*** Rosa, B., S., 2016. Proposing a measure to evaluate the impact of the sharing economy: A critical analysis of short-term residential rentals, *ProQuest*, pp. 1-2

General information about the respondents

The number of respondents was 408, most of them aged between 26 and 35 years (61%), come from the middle class (87.5%) and being employed (69.9%). The majority of them book 2 – 4 travels per year (52.2%) for holidays.

Information about the steps made before the travels

People like talking about their experiences with family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues etc. especially those acquired on their holidays or when they emanated strong emotions. Sharing is part of the human nature.

In the chart below we can see what determines people the most in choosing their holidays.

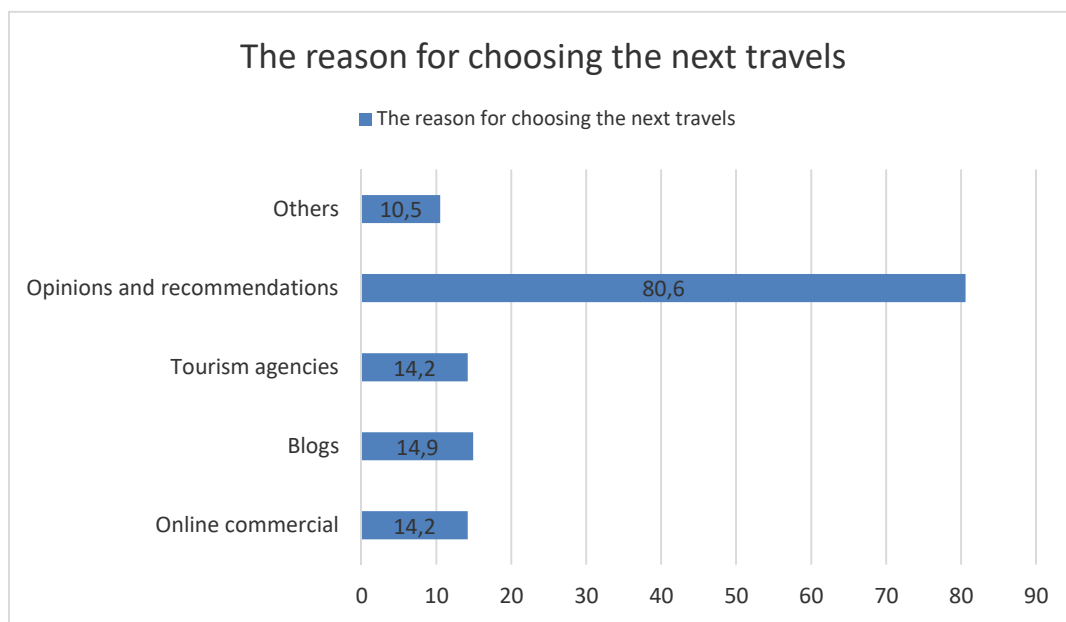


Fig. no. 1 Travels

The opinions and recommendation of friends and acquaintances are more relevant to people than any other stimulant (80.6%). Social beings are searching for other social beings maybe due to the lack of connection in this informational era, people feel the need to interact.

With regards to the informational tools used in gaining a wider vision about the chosen destinations we can observe in the chart below that most people chose the same.

§§§National institute of Statistics, 2017. [online] Available at: < <http://www.insse.ro/cms/ro>> [Accessed on 11 April 2018]

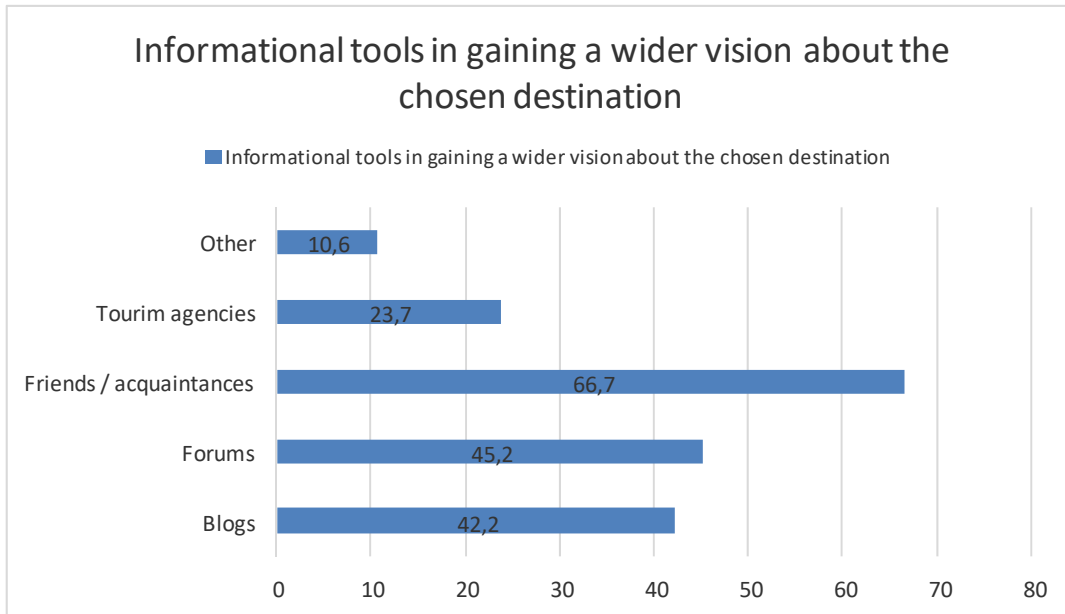


Fig. no. 2 Informational tools

This chart relates that the tendencies for knowing other people’s opinions are obvious, ‘friends / acquaintances’ being most preferred (66.7%), followed by ‘forums’ (45.2%) and ‘blogs’ (42.2%). The internet and all companies that activate in different domains assault people with many commercials, one of the reasons they lost credibility. Hearing and discovering what other people say online or face to face has an increased level of trust. Most of the respondents (71%) use online platforms to book their travels, followed by the ones who book directly at the accommodation units (37.8%), and the ones who contact tourism agencies (25.2%).

The chart below inform us what matters most in a travel.

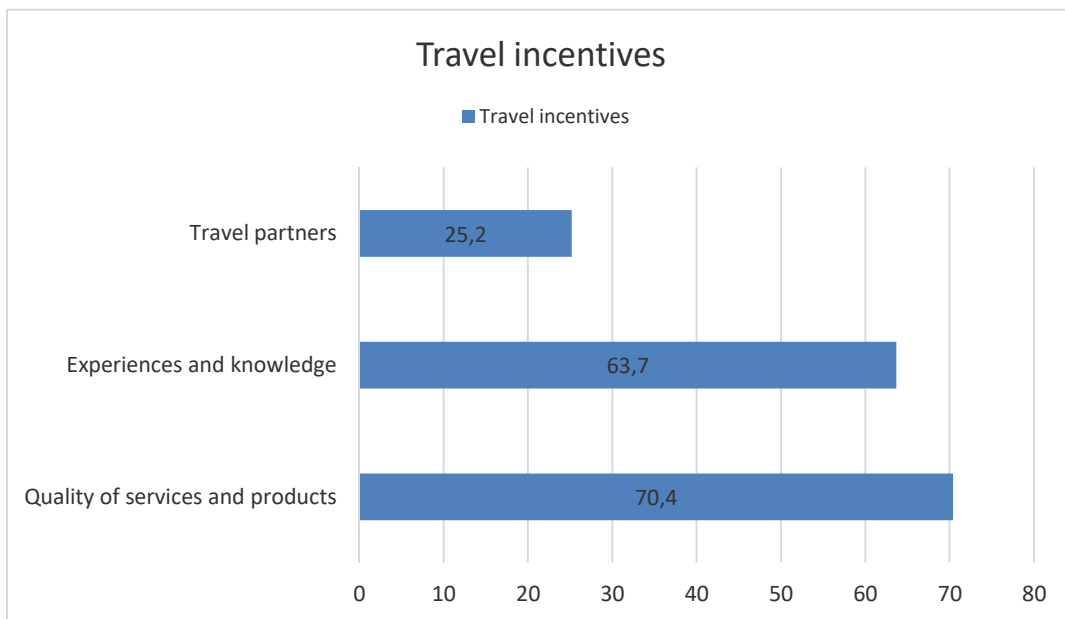


Fig. no. 3 Travel incentives

As we can see in the chart above, in their travels, people focus on the quality of the services and products received firstly (70.4%), followed by experience and knowledge secondly (63.7%), and on their travel partners lastly (25.2%). People want more and more to improve their lifestyle and enlarge their horizons, by choosing higher standards. Regarding their travel partners, there are 2 alternatives. The first may be the increased level of openness, making them sociable with everybody. The second alternative may be the feeling of belonging resulted by the travel group causing people to focus on other things. The chart below relates to what extent the information received before the travel coincided with the reality.

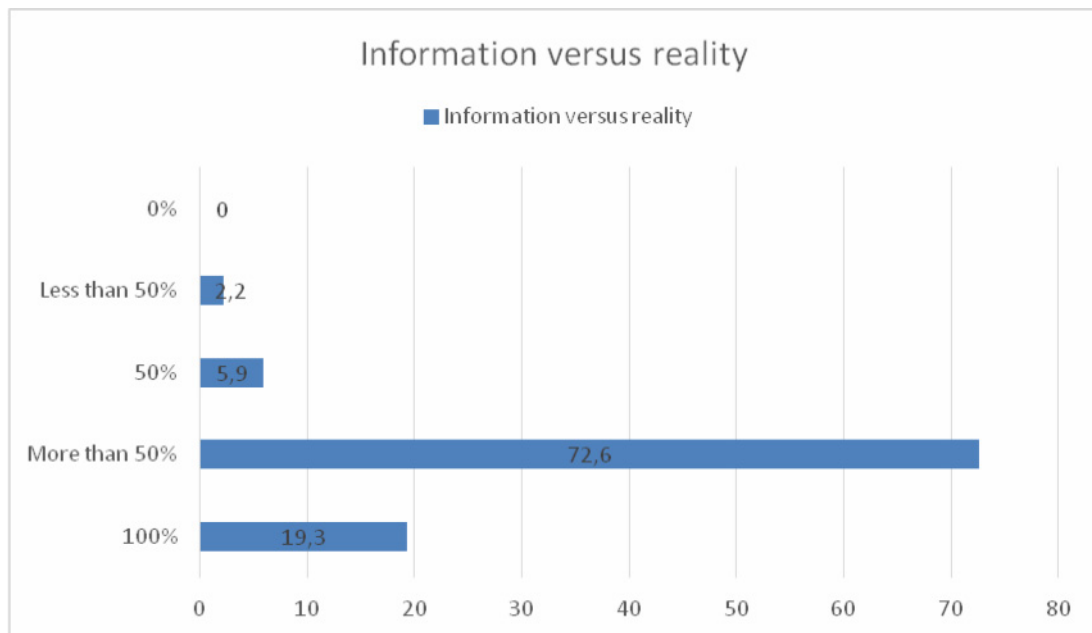


Fig. no. 4 Travel incentives

We can observe that the information received before about the destinations is in the most cases true. This result is due to the difference of perceptions. Even is the reality has nothing to do with the information received, people still follow other people because of trust, openness, respect and need of belonging.

In terms of quality, all respondents chose it, which means that is one of the most important factors regarding a service or product, generating sustainability as well among other beneficial things.

Most of the respondents (86%) confirmed that their perception of quality can be flexible and changeable depending from where they received the information. The higher the degree of trust, the higher the perception of quality is. Those in whom they put their trust measured quality from the senses generated by their exterior experiences. The more positive the senses, the higher the quality was again.

Conclusions

To summarize the responses from the analysis, people tend and seek to listen to other people's opinions and experiences, and are influenced by them, because they choose so, even if they could have a negative experience in their travels. Therefore, the perception of quality can be changed through social media. The need of truth, transparency and

connection is more important than anything else. They want authentic experiences in their travels, less standardized, better quality, wanting to fit their needs and visions. The more the destination is more familiar and recommended, the more the level of quality increase in their minds.

Due to the society and competition in general, the demand for increased quality has risen in most domains, especially in tourism, being an important factor for present life styles, and sustainability. Another reason that the perception over quality could be influenced is the multitude of information available through social media that made it possible to compare services and products between them, forcing providers to offer the best version of they are selling.

The internet gives the opportunity to people all over the world with similar beliefs and tastes to interact instantaneously. This evolution brought the society one step further, forcing the emergence of new interesting and sustainable systems, such as the sharing economy.

People's level of consciousness and knowledge increased and it's in a continuous expansion, so they have higher expectations in general. They emphasize more on quality, happiness, trust, experiences, integrity, sustainability, interaction, connection with other human beings. In this case providers need to improve everything that they are selling in order to be competitive and step up.

Being assaulted by impersonal commercials, consumers prefer trusting real people's opinions, and experiences. This opinions may be from friends, acquaintances or people they do not know in real life, but with whom they could interact through online platforms. The sharing economy offers this opportunity and could shape the future in a better way, focusing on more personalized services, quality and sustainability.

The future trends seem to be more quality and sustainability, due to increased consumer intelligence.

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