

The perception of tourists regarding the use of social networks to choose and book a hotel

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ABSTRACT

The internet, and in particular social networks, has transformed the relationship between the consumer and the hotel industry, increasingly imposing itself as an alternative to traditional means in choosing and booking a hotel.

The hotel sector, recognizing the importance of social networks, has increased its commitment in promoting its services through them. The main objective of this study is to verify the perception of the consumer regarding the use of social networks to choose and book a tourist accommodation.

Our research is based on data from a quantitative online survey, with a descriptive and inferential analysis of the data collected.

The findings reveal that the importance of hotel establishments being present online is unavoidable today, as the analysis of information collected online about accommodations, user comments, as well as publications made by influencers, are a decisive factor when choosing and book a hotel establishment.

Keywords: Social Media; Tourism; Hospitality; Travel Plan.

1. Introduction

Social networks have transformed the relationship between the consumer and the hotel industry. Currently, this sector is faced with a generation of guests, increasingly informed and with a higher level of education and aware of their rights as consumers (Starcevic e Konjikusic, 2018).

Solomon (2008) argues that the internet has come to influence consumer behavior by offering easier access to products and / or services. According to Buhalis and Law (2008), if previously the tourist planned his/her trip through a tour agent, who worked as an intermediary, now consumers started to assume this role, in the planning of the trip and choice and reservation of their accommodation.

One of the deciding factors in the choice and reservation of the hotel by consumers is the comments of other consumers available on websites and social networks (Chen e Peng, 2014; Law *et al.*, 2014). The sharing of opinions, videos and photos (e-WOM) of hotel establishments increasingly assumes a crucial role when choosing where to stay.

Therefore, it is important to understand the perceptions of tourists regarding the use of social networks to choose and book a specific hotel unit, in order to enhance its use.

2. Literature Review

Social networks has changed consumer behavior and business and marketing strategies in the tourism and hospitality sector. This transformation has transferred the power of decision to customers, since they can now search and share information online, largely due to online word-of-mouth (e-WOM), as shown by studies by Xiang and Gretzel (2010).

Social networks have allowed Internet users to take on the role of suppliers and no longer need intermediaries to choose and buy stays in different hotels.

Currently, the hotel industry is increasingly aware of the importance of its online presence, investing not only in the quality of its website, but also in the interaction with customers through social networks.

According to the Digital 2019 Portugal study, the main e-commerce activities are the online search for a product or service to buy (85%); visiting an online store (77%) and purchasing a product or service (59%). About 44% of consumers do so using a desktop or laptop computer and 33% using a mobile device.

The category where the most money was spent was on travel (including accommodation), where US \$ 2.226 billion was invested, which is equivalent to € 2.05 billion. Compared to the previous year, this number increased by 11%.

Social networks have a fundamental role in stimulating the purchase of goods and services, given their more active and dynamic character (Helge, 2013), which allows the exchange of information between users and the possibility of generating content.

If, on the one hand, e-WOM can be beneficial for companies and more specifically for the hotel industry, on the other hand the possibility of negative and harmful contents arising for the company's image is the biggest problem that companies face (Badawy,

2009; Ayeh, 2013; Tham et al. 2013).

In this regard, Bolotaeva & Cata (2011) state that the lack of monitoring of user-generated content can become problematic for companies.

Currently, consumers have at their disposal through social networks, a large amount of information related to promotions, offers, description of hotels, comments, and other content generated by the user, such as photos and videos, which allow the sharing of experiences between consumers. and help in the decision making and booking of a specific hotel establishment (Sparks, 2013; Xie, 2014).

In this sense, it is important to understand what factors interfere in the consumer purchase process.

For Kotler and Keller (2012), consumer buying behavior is influenced by cultural, social (reference groups, family, social roles and status), personal factors (age and stage in the life cycle, occupation and economic circumstances, personality and self-image, lifestyle and values) and psychological. For the authors, cultural factors have the greatest and deepest influence.

The purchase decision is the result of several factors related to the consumer himself and the external influences to which he is subject (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2002).

Kotler and Keller (2012, p. 166) highlight that “the family is the most important organization for the purchase of consumer products in society, and its members constitute the most influential primary reference group”. Samara and Morsch (2005, p.71) also state that reference groups are “one of the most powerful sources of persuasive pressure and influence on behavior”.

In this sense, the purchase decision is based on five stages: (1) recognition of a problem or need, (2) search for information about the product or service, (3) evaluation of alternatives, understanding of how the consumer elaborates the information until choosing a brand and (4) the purchase decision itself. From there, the consumer classifies the alternatives according to the importance given to each of the evaluated attributes and the process ends with (5) the post-purchase, which is related to expectations and perceived performance, that is, satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Kotler, 2000).

Swarbrooke & Horner (2007) also highlight the importance of internal and external factors in the decision to purchase tourist products. According to these internal factors concern personal motivations, financial availability, health, family commitments, personality, past experiences, hobbies and interests, and lifestyle, attitudes, opinions and perceptions.

The external factors are related to aspects such as the availability of suitable products, the travel agent’s advice, the information obtained about destinations, tourism organizations

and means of transport to carry out the trip, the recommendation of friends and family, the existence of special promotions or the mood of the target region.

Several authors (Norman, Buhalis and Law, 2008) also show the importance that tourists attribute to online comments from other tourists, as determining factors in the decision and purchase process. Sharing travel experiences and staying at certain hotel establishments is essential when the consumer is booking his/her trip and stay.

Most of the services offered by the hotel industry are experience goods, in which their quality can only be measured after consumption. (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Thus, online comments become more important, because if they are trusted, consumers choose to purchase the service.

In fact, most of the services and products offered by the hotel industry are experience goods, for which quality is only known after consumption. For the hotel sector, this e-WOM can be an advantage, since it allows having a real knowledge of the image that is transmitted from your hotel establishment, allowing to improve and solve existing problems, increasing customer satisfaction, through product improvement and services offered (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008).

3. Methodology

To conduct this study about the role of social networks in the choice and reservation of the hotel establishment, a questionnaire survey was applied. The survey was distributed in different Tourism forums and on several Social Networks: Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and LinkedIn. The questionnaire was made available between April and June 2019, having obtained 233 responses.

A first version of the questionnaire was analyzed by four professors of Higher Education, tested with two elements from the same universe of the respondents and altered according to the suggestions collected and difficulties detected in completing it.

The survey aimed to record quantitatively aspects related to the use of social networks in the planning and booking of hotel establishments.

Descriptive statistics were performed using Excel and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26.0.

Sample Characterization

Of the 233 respondents, 70.5% were female and 29.5% were male. The age group with the highest percentage of respondents was [40, 49], with 31.3% of responses; followed by the age group [31, 39], with 24.7% and “50 years or more”, with 15%.

When asked about academic qualifications, it was found that 33.5% of respondents said they had a degree, 26.9% said they had completed Secondary Education, 15.4% said they had a doctorate degree and 13.2% a degree master.

Regarding the professional situation, 66.1% of the respondents were self-employed, 12.3% were students and 10.6% were self-employed.

With regard to gross monthly income, 24.2% of respondents received a salary between € 1001 and € 1500 and 23.3% received a salary between € 501 and € 1000. It was also found that 15.9% earned a salary of up to € 500, although 13.7% earned a salary of between € 1501 and € 2000 and 10.6 earned more than € 3000.

4. Findings/Results Discussion

This section describes the results obtained in this study.

Analyzing the results of the questionnaire, we observed that:

- the fact that the HE (hotel establishment) has an online page, in addition to its presence on social networks, gives more confidence in the choice of accommodation;
- respondents make hotel reservations online for convenience (comfort, time savings ...);
- travelers do not feel the need to obtain information from a physical travel agency before booking HE on the Internet;
- the opinion of family and friends is more relevant than comments on social networks;

We can also observe that the vast majority of respondents say that:

- if the criticisms on social media are higher than the positive comments, they do not choose that hotel;
- online customer support makes it easier to book at that hotel;
- they prefer to buy online because it allows to compare more hotel establishment.

Table 1 - Results of individual survey

Question	Mean (1 to 5)	Median	Moda	St. Deviation
Social networks are the main means I use to decide which hotel establishment to stay in	2.92	3	3	1.45
If there is more criticism on social networks than positive comments, I will not choose that hotel establishment	3.86	4	4	1.09
If the hotel establishment has an online page as well as has social network pages it gives me more confidence to choose it.	4.02	4	4	0.99
I do not stay at a hotel establishment that I haven't read all the comments, seen all the photos and videos	3.28	3.5	4	1.41
The comments on social networks are more relevant than the opinions of family and friends	2.38	2	2	1.26
I share comments, photos and videos on social networks about the hotel establishment after my stay	2.90	3	4	1.67
The fact that the hotel establishment is on social networks gives me more confidence to stay there	3.45	4	4	1.14
Having online customer support makes me book at the hotel establishment	3.76	4	4	0.85
I prefer to get information at a travel agency first then after book the hotel establishment online	2.16	2	1	1.59
There is no need to go to a travel agency if I can find all the information online	3.60	4	4	1.54
I prefer to buy online because it allows me to compare more hotel establishments	3.93	4	4	1.05
I make online reservations for a hotel establishment because of the convenience (comfort, save time...)	4.06	4	4	1.12

5. Conclusions

The importance of hotel establishments being present online is now unavoidable.

Customers no longer feel the need to go to a traditional travel agency to search for information, choose and book a hotel.

The confidence in the information and in the process of choosing and booking HE through the internet has been gaining supporters.

This fact is due to factors such as convenience, expressed by comfort and time savings, as well as the possibility of comparing different hotel establishments, in order to choose and book the one that meets your preferences or suits what the customer wants, such as the price of the stay or the availability of wi-fi.

At the same time, the presence of HE in more than one digital platform offers a greater guarantee of trust, which increases the likelihood of choice and reservation at this hotel. The greater the online presence, which corresponds to the presence on its own website and different social networks, the greater the confidence for choosing and booking this hotel.

Online customer support through the HE website and social networks also contributes to increasing confidence in the HE reservation, as customers feel that there is someone on the other side, to help them, clarify doubts and provide all kinds of information that they need it, a role that was previously done by the travel agent at their traditional agency.

This study confirms the importance of WOM, expressed through comments on social networks and recommendations from friends and family.

Also Starcevic and Konjikusic (2018) concluded that the analysis of the information collected online about the accommodations, the comments of the users, as well as the publications made by influencers, present themselves as a decisive factor in the moment of decision-making.

For Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Zhou et al. (2014), the comments and customer satisfaction present in rankings available on social networks and websites oblige hotels to permanently manage their reputation, which implies a need for adaptation and proactivity of HE in the online environment.

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