

The online assessment of tourism services. The hotel market from Braşov County

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Abstract: *The online travel communities and tourism agencies have favored the emergence of global assessment alternatives of accommodation units included in the visitors' travel options. This article analyzes the online assessment of the accommodation units from Braşov county and which are the differences between the comfort category of accommodation units according to the national classification system of the accommodation units and the online assessments found on two of the most well known online communities in the field, namely TripAdvisor and Booking.com.*

Key-words: *hotel classification systems, online assessments, online travel communities*

1. Introduction

The online assessments on accommodation units are solutions to evaluate the tourism offer, with informal features, belong to the reservation site and represent a satisfaction assessment barometer after the consumption. In practice, it is well known that when a potential customer chooses an accommodation unit at the desired destination, online reviews represent an important element towards buying decision.

In Romania, the number of accommodation units which conclude distribution contracts with online tourism agencies for selling their own offer is increasing. In equal measure has increased the appetite of travelers to use electronic communication and reservation tools in order to prepare their tourist packages. At the end of the holiday the Website invites the tourist to assess the units visited and to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction of consumption.

2. Online communication for accommodation units

In the hospitality industry, the Internet has revolutionized business operations. It is widely acknowledged that the Internet can serve as an effective marketing tool between suppliers and consumers for its capabilities of information dissemination,

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communication and online transaction (Li et al. 2015, 131). Technology allows the producer to have a close relationship with the buyer and to use personalization strategies for a large number of customers (Boscor 2015, 231). To minimize the buying risk, travelers often rely on official hotel ratings to gain insights into hotel quality criteria, as established by official bodies (e.g. National Tourist Offices) and assessed by trained inspectors (Ekinici 2008, 322). In the recent year trade barriers were reduced, markets have globalized, product life cycle is shorter and the desires of consumers increasingly converge (Brătucu and Boşcor 2008, 25). The development and modernization of the trade, and the marketing diversification intensified the concern of producers and retailers to expand pre-packaging operations (Neacșu 2015, 59). Therefore, modern travelers increasingly rely on peer opinions and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) when booking accommodation services (Casalo et al. 2015, 28).

The decision to purchase a tourism product is taken as a result of either previous experience or a previous communication (Stăncioiu 2004, 148). Online hotel rating lists are perceived as more useful and more credible when they are published by well-known online travel communities, attitudes and booking intentions are higher for hotels that appear in best hotels lists, a well-known online travel community can increase the perceived credibility and usefulness of online hotel rating lists, and also the negative reviews have greater effects overall on travelers' behavior, since consumers work hard to avoid the risk of service failures (Casalo et al. 2015, 33-34).

A greater number of reviews can indicate more popularity for a hotel. Increasing the number of reviews could be beneficial because as far as the number of online reviews increases, the customer evaluation rating is improved (Torres et al. 2015, 82). TripAdvisor (2013) in its proprietary algorithm admits to using the number of reviews as part of its popularity index. At the same time, the number of reviews has a positive impact on the average value per online transaction.

The more reviews a hotel receives, the better quality of booking it will obtain (Torres et al. 2015, 83). At the same time, the proliferation and widespread use of online hotel reviews is, overall, an opportunity rather than a threat to entrepreneurs and managers in the hotel industry and the online reviews could be beneficial for the hoteliers. Positive reviews have a positive impact on consumer behavior, whereas isolated negative reviews have little impact (Vermeulen and Seegers 2009, 127).

At international level there are opinions that the present official classification systems are, in fact, dimensional metric systems which identify physical facilities and services found by guests in accommodation units. Also, a major deficiency of these systems is that they have local, national or regional character, with major differences from one system to the other, which in the case of development of international travels confuses the traveler because the comparisons are not possible.

In Europe there are approximately 30 classification systems (UNWTO, Online guest reviews) which use not only different criteria, adapted to economic, social and

cultural framework but which use different ways of expression, namely stars, letters, crowns, comfort level, etc. In this framework confusions are created and another major deficiency is that it does not reflect the experience acquired after consumption. The assessments are very different between countries, not only because of market performance but also because of cultural and economic differences of consumers (Duguleană and Duguleană 2015, 202). Since tourism services are based on the interaction between customer and provider, it is crucial to underline the importance of human resources in this industry (Madar 2014, 71). A macro-regional strategy assumes that the elements that compose it aim to integrate several strategic areas: economic, social, cultural, energy, transport, environment, sustainable development (Epuran 2006, 103).

Despite recommendations of international organizations to conclude agreements regarding the hotel classification systems, the present achievements contradict such a trend (Lupu 2010, 36). Moreover, we witness the continuous diversification of the accommodation unit typology, classification criteria used are different, so that the consistency of classifications becomes a goal difficult to achieve.

UNWTO together with the Norwegian Accreditation (NA) agency within the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fishing from Norway released in 2014 a document entitled "Online Guest Reviews and Hotel Classification Systems – An Integrated Approach" which shows the predominant role of consumption experience in tourism industry, the growing trend of tourists propensity to search travel information and to make online bookings, so the idea is supported, to include the assessments made by tourists in online field integrally or in the comparative alternative within the existing official classification systems (UNWTO).

The indisputable advantage of online communities is the use of a unique language for all types of analyzed and assessed accommodation units, regardless of location on the globe. In this way, comparisons become possible, and the decision process for the tourist is much easier. Based on the guests reviews, stars or points are awarded, and the more positive comments posted about cleanliness, comfort, location, facilities, staff, or value for money, the more stars or points are granted to the respective accommodation unit (Marinescu and Frincu 2015, 23).

TripAdvisor is the world's largest online travel community. TripAdvisor branded sites make up the largest travel community in the world, reaching 375 million unique monthly visitors, and more than 250 million reviews and opinions covering more than 5.2 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions. The sites operate in 45 countries worldwide (http://www.tripadvisor.com/PressCenter-c6-About_Us.html, accessed 29.09.2015).

Booking.com B.V is one of the biggest online tourism agencies and is part of Priceline Group which holds and operates Booking.com™, the world leader of online hotel bookings. Daily, more than 900.000 nights in hotels are booked on Booking.com (<http://www.pricelinegroup.com/about/>, accessed 29.09.2015).

3. Objectives, materials and methods

The paper presents an analysis of the accommodation offer of Braşov county, regarding the comfort degree of the units in the county and a synthesis of assessments made by Romanian and foreign tourists on TripAdvisor and Booking.com.

In order to achieve this objectives, a quantitative analysis of secondary data available in statistical reports of the Department of Statistics from Braşov was undertaken and there were also analyzed cumulatively the information offered by the two travel communities mentioned above.

4. Results and discussions

In 2014, in Braşov County, the number of accommodation units recorded an increase with 4.5% in comparison with last year. In table 1 is presented the situation of accommodation unit types from Braşov County in the period 2013-2014.

Types of accommodation units (number of units)	2014	2013
Hotels	101	112
Hostels	19	23
Apartment hotels	1	2
Motels	11	8
Villas	80	79
Chalets	28	28
Bungalows	2	2
Holiday villages	1	2
Camping sites	2	2
Houselet type units	1	3
School and preschool camps	1	1
Touristic boarding houses	217	226
Agro-touristic boarding houses	286	299
Total	750	787

Table 1. *Types of accommodation units in Braşov County in 2013-2014*

The data presented reflect the typological diversity of accommodation units from Braşov County, and the fact that touristic boarding houses and agro-touristic boarding houses prevail, representing in 2014, 67% of accommodation offer from the county, followed in this ranking by hotels with a percentage of 13,5%.

Regarding the framing of accommodation on classification categories, the situation for 2014 is presented in table 2.

Types of accommodation units (places)		Total	5 stars	4 stars	3 stars	2 stars	1 star	Unclassified on stars
Hotels	%	3786421 100	327770 8,7	1012593 26,7	1850131 48,9	401507 10,6	157190 4,1	37230 1
Hostels	%	379010 100	-	-	132202 34,9	39068 10,3	207740 54,8	-
Motels	%	157435 100	-	-	26536 16,9	107784 68,5	23115 14,6	
Villas	%	540136 100	-	74994 13,9	331952 61,5	79980 14,8	45910 8,5	7300 1,3
Chalets	%	330324 100	-	-	79953 24,2	108584 32,9	49807 15,1	91980 27,8
Bungalows	%	32120 100	-	-	28470 88,6	3650 11,4		
Holiday villages	%	40880 100				26280 64,3	14600 35,7	
Camping	%	64416 100					64416 100	
Houselet type units	%	30916			336 1,1	30580 98,9		
School and preschool camps	%	18250						18250
Touristic boarding houses	%	1685954 100	18980 1,1	309720 18,4	1051168 62,4	246908 14,6	51830 3,1	7348 0,4
Agro-touristic boarding houses	%	1852640 100	57116 3,1	246940 13,3	1072582 57,9	457206 24,7	18796 1	
Total	%	8919852 100	403866 4,5	1644247 18,4	4573330 51,4	1501547 16,8	633404 7,1	163458 1,8

Table 2. *Tourist accommodation capacity in operation in Braşov County on star grading in 2014*

The hotel market from Braşov County is characterized by the high percentage of three stars accommodation units, in a percentage of 51.4% from the total number of units and 48.9% at the level of hotels in operation. The same situation can be found at hostels, villas, touristic boarding houses and agro-touristic boarding houses. Also, it can be noticed the lower percentage of four and five stars accommodation units, cumulatively representing 22.9% from the total number of existing accommodation units in Braşov County.

Analyzing tourists reviews and assessments for the accommodation units from Braşov County it can be noticed that in september 2015, of the total number of 787 units recorded at the Department of Statistics, on the website TripAdvisor were assessed 773, and on the website Booking.com appear 807 accomodation units, as

registered at 29.09.2015. It is worth mentioning the fact that between these units assessed are also recorded flats and guest houses unclassified in accordance to norms of the NTA and, therefore, are not included in statistical records.

According to information released by NTA, in Brașov County operate 8 accommodation units in the comfort category of 5 stars/flowers, as the case. It is about 3 touristic boarding houses from Poiana Brașov, Aro Palace Hotel from Brașov, 2 touristic boarding houses and a hotel in Predeal and a touristic boarding house in Râșnov. By analyzing guests' assessments after their stay in these units it can be noticed that those units did not reach customers' expectations (table 3).

Location	Average score TripAdvisor (max 5)	Average score Booking.com (max. 10)
Poiana Brașov	4,5	8,5
Brașov	4	8,4
Predeal	3,8	8
Râșnov	3,5	8,2

Table 3. *The average assessments of 5stars/daisies accommodation units from Brașov County*

Regarding the other accommodation units, the situation of assessments is presented in table 4. There are included in the analysis only accommodation units that have on TripAdvisor a number of reviews higher than 50, and on Booking.com were analyzed accommodation units with more than 100 reviews.

Comfort category	Average Score TripAdvisor (max 5)	Average Score Booking.com (max 10)
4 stars	4,37	8,69
3 stars	4,11	8,51
2 stars	4	8,2

Table 4. *Average assessments of 4, 3 and 2 stars/flowers accommodation units from Brașov County*

The average scores calculated cancel, to some extent, the existing differences between classification categories of the assessed accommodation units. Practically, it is found that there are no significant differences of assessment in the classification range 2-5 stars and that the units of 5 stars/flowers have met the lowest average scores, customers' expectations being higher in relation to the satisfaction of effective consumption.

A reverse situation can be noticed at the 2 stars accommodation units where the ration quality/price have exceeded customers' expectations, the average assessments recorded being high compared to the category classification assigned by NAT.

5. Conclusions

Expanding online communication will influence management and future development of tourism companies' activity. The managers of hotels should not ignore the assessments made by their customers and the remedy of negative aspects reported can be made in due time. In equal measure, the lack of ethics behavior of the customers, as ill will or the acceptance of advantages in exchange of favorable comments should be taken into account.

Overall, the online assessments are a barometer for the general provision of services within the accommodation units. The national authorities which coordinate and establish norms for tourism activities should not circumvent this phenomenon, and the inclusion of reviews in official classification criteria does not represent anymore an absolute novelty.

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