

# Hotel Rating through Guest Feedback

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## Volume 1: Thesis

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## Declaration

I, Wouter Hensens, declare that this thesis entitled “Hotel Grading through Guest Feedback” is my own work, that all sources used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references, and that this thesis has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at any other university.

.....

Signature

.....

Date

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Mouton (2005) argues that a doctoral thesis is probably the loneliest project one will ever undertake. He is correct in that during the course of this research many hours were spent in isolation. There are, however, several individuals who made my journey feel like a team effort as much as an individual undertaking.

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## ABSTRACT

Hotel rating refers to the process where the comfort and services of a hotel are assessed and classified, usually in five categories, using stars as symbols. Conventional hotel rating systems are generally operated by governments or independent parties. However, with the growth of social media and customer-review sites, guest review platforms became an important source of information. The main aim of this study is to establish whether guest feedback can determine hotel ratings more accurately than conventional methods and whether a social media platform such as TripAdvisor can provide the necessary data to do so. The customer-review website, TripAdvisor, has grown rapidly and made a strong impact on the tourism and hotel industry. This study identifies the nature of TripAdvisor, its reliability, how its ratings compare with conventional ratings, and what criteria are used in guest reviews on TripAdvisor when assessing the quality of a hotel. These findings were triangulated with findings from the conventional rating systems of the 11 destinations that were sampled for this study to identify the value of TripAdvisor.

Two samples were taken from TripAdvisor of 110 and 33 hotels, respectively. From the latter, ten guest reviews were gathered and analysed per hotel, resulting in a total of 330 reviews that were analysed.

The study's findings indicate that TripAdvisor is the largest guest feedback platform for hotels and its data can be considered to be reliable. The TripAdvisor ratings were not connected to the conventional ratings of the sampled hotels. The criteria used in TripAdvisor reviews focused more on service delivery than on the objective tangible elements used in most hotel rating systems. The rich context found in most guest reviews makes the information presented on TripAdvisor valuable. There is no evidence that conventional-rating system controls are linked to the comments found in TripAdvisor reviews. The results facilitated the identification of the delight and frustration factors in services marketing for the hotel industry. A new theory to include guest feedback in hotel ratings is developed and proposed. The study further presents two future scenarios, the most likely one of which predicts the demise of conventional rating systems as a result of the success of guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This study focuses on hotel rating through guest feedback. Hotel rating is a method of quality assessment that categorizes hotels, generally in five categories with stars as the most commonly used symbol. In most countries such systems are operated by the government, or independent parties such as automobile associations, and are referred to as conventional rating systems in this study. The quality assessment is generally conducted through hotel inspectors who visit the hotels and assess their infrastructure and quality. With the growth of social media in general, and customer review sites in particular, the customer review website, TripAdvisor, has grown quickly in both size and impact on the tourism and hotel industry. This study aimed at exploring to what extent the information provided by TripAdvisor as a guest feedback platform can add value, or perhaps even replace the conventional rating systems in providing accurate information to prospective travellers.

This chapter outlines the motivation for the study, elaborates on why the researcher chose this particular area of study, and explains why it is relevant and how it may contribute to the body of knowledge in this area. Next the preliminary theoretical framework that was reviewed by the researcher to come to a specific research problem and questions to study the phenomena is presented. This preliminary theoretical framework was extended to a full theoretical framework, presented in chapter two. Thereafter the research problem and its accompanying research questions are outlined. Chapter 1 concludes with a full outline of the thesis describing the content of each chapter.

### **1.2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY**

Hotel rating is a concept that has received little academic attention, whereas its practical systems have frequently been subjected to differences of opinion as to what it is that guests want or need, and how this can objectively be measured (Lopez and Serrano, 2004; World Tourism Organisation, 2004). From the early stages of rating – then commonly referred to as

classification - it was non-guests (hotel inspectors) who determined the quality of a hotel. Although hotel rating is a rather young concept, its practice has grown rapidly.

The initial purpose of hotel rating was to inform travellers of the basic facilities that could be expected. Subsequently, hotel rating focused on a tourism destination as a whole. Hotels and other kinds of lodging have a major impact on the tourist experience resulting in government involvement in hotel rating in more than half of all countries worldwide. Initially the focus of rating systems was limited to minimum criteria that were objective in assessment, that is, room size, facilities, and availability of services. Later hotel rating systems showed an increase in focus on the more subjective areas of the guest experience, such as cleanliness, state of maintenance, and staff competencies. Contemporary systems have moved a step further and focus on service quality as it would be experienced by the guest (Mintel, 2004).

This focus on service quality as experienced by the guest seems to overcome the limitations of earlier hotel rating systems that measured only a minor part of the guest experience (Mintel, 2004; Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2009). Since one of the main objectives of hotel rating systems is to provide an accurate view of what the prospective guest can expect, this is a positive development (Mintel, 2004). Many contemporary systems seek to measure service quality criteria by means of 'mystery shopping', where a hotel inspector visits the hotel pretending to be a guest and rates the guest experience. Alternatively, some systems such as the South African system (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2009b), have started to use real guest feedback for their rating decisions.

Applying service quality theory (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2006; Zeithaml, *et al.* 2009) to the concept of hotel rating, one can argue that the most accurate representation of the guest experience can only be supplied by real guests having real experiences. With the rise of social media, different platforms have been created that allow hotel guests to write reviews about their hotel experience and quantify their satisfaction at the same time. Through these platforms, guest feedback dictates the hotel rating. Service quality theory holds that quality is the outcome of guest perception of a delivered service. It could be argued that this is the most accurate way to provide potential travellers with a realistic expectation.

This research therefore seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge in the area of hotel rating by presenting findings of the quality of data that may be expected from guest reviews on contemporary social media platforms using the guest review platform, TripAdvisor.

### **1.3 PRELIMINARY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The researcher conducted a preliminary theoretical review on the concept of hotel rating, which showed that the number of academic publications on hotel rating is limited to isolated case studies (for example, Callan, 1994b, 1995a, 1998, Hensens, 2001, Lopez and Serrano, 2004, and Su and Sun, 2007). The number of travel trade publications in this field, on the other hand, is substantial, with many travel trade journalists, experts, and business representatives criticising the limited effectiveness of conventional rating systems (for example, Hewitt, 2008, Maternovski, 2003, Napier, 2006, Pascarella, 2005, Ryan, 1998, Travel Assist Magazine, 2001, Vine, 1981, and Wyatt, 2008).

A theoretical review of service quality literature outlines that the quality of services cannot be defined in a similar way to the quality of products, and that a wide range of authors has contributed to exploring how service quality should be defined and measured (for example, Kotler *et al.* 2006, and Zeithaml *et al.* 2009). The trend of focusing on services has continued to grow in strength from the early 1980s. Scholars argue strongly that customer satisfaction derives from a customer's service experience evaluated against the expectation that customer had of the service (Zeithaml *et al.* 2009).

A review of hotel rating systems indicates that the above trend has been adopted by those organisations responsible for hotel ratings, who have consequently attempted to also set standards and measure service quality in hotels. Several authors have attempted to measure the use of service determinants in rating systems (for example, Su & Sun, 2007), or the effectiveness of hotel rating systems in creating a realistic expectation for potential travellers (Lopez & Serrano, 2004). The results of these studies indicate that conventional rating systems cannot be said to be very effective in providing an accurate expectation for potential travellers.

A third area of focus is how guest experiences have been used to measure service quality and the extent to which they may be used to create expectations for guests that follow. With the rapid growth in the use of the internet in general, and of the social media in particular, the researcher hypothesised that consumer generated content could be valuable in creating a more accurate expectation for travellers booking a hotel. TripAdvisor was identified as a potentially attractive forum as it boasted a relatively large coverage of hotels and consumer generated reviews on those hotels.

From the three areas reviewed and synthesized, the question arises whether a social media platform such as TripAdvisor is able to provide a more accurate overview of quality than conventional rating systems?

The primary objective of this study is therefore to investigate the social media platform of TripAdvisor to see whether the data on hotels it provides is more accurate than that given by conventional rating systems. To reach this primary objective of this study, the secondary objectives were:

- To understand how TripAdvisor allows guest to review hotels on their social network platform;
- To determine how reliable the guest reviews and ratings are on TripAdvisor and whether these provide a true picture of the guest experiences of the hotel.
- To explore how the guest ratings on TripAdvisor differ from the ratings of conventional hotel rating systems.
- To analyse the quality criteria that are presented in the guest reviews on TripAdvisor and compare them with the criteria used to measure conventional systems.
- To establish if social network platforms such as TripAdvisor provide information that conventional systems do not.
- To develop a new theory to explain how hotel ratings through guest feedback may add to the existing information provided by conventional hotel rating systems.

## 1.4 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS

The main question to be answered in this research is

*Can guest feedback determine hotel ratings more accurately than conventional methods and thus contribute to a more representative overview of the quality of hotels?*

The word 'representative' in this research problem refers to the smallest possible discrepancy between guest expectation and guest experience.

The following research questions provided the information to answer the research problem.

- I. *How does TripAdvisor allow guests to review hotels?*
- II. *How reliable are the guest reviews and ratings on TripAdvisor in providing an accurate picture of guest experiences in a hotel?*
- III. *How do TripAdvisor hotel ratings differ from the ratings these hotels receive from conventional systems?*
- IV. *What quality criteria are represented in the qualitative guest reviews and how do these relate to criteria measured by conventional systems?*
- V. *To what extent is TripAdvisor valuable in providing information that conventional systems do not?*

## 1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND STRUCTURE

The first phase in this study was an analysis of TripAdvisor and how it provides a platform for guest feedback through reviews and ratings.

As the research was found to be explorative in nature, the researcher conducted a pilot study to obtain an indication of the quality of data that could be expected. This step can be considered phase two of the research. The pilot study provided enough information to define a final sample for analysis. An overall sample of 11 international destinations was created to facilitate research with an international scope and to limit cultural bias.

Within this sample the conventional rating systems that applied to each destination were gathered and compared.

To research the data from TripAdvisor, two samples were identified. The first, referred to in this study as the 'top 10 sample', focused on the top ten hotels in each destination based on the TripAdvisor ranking. All ratings that these hotels received from TripAdvisor were analyzed and compared with those of the conventional rating systems for that specific destination.

The second sample, referred to in this study as the 'spread sample', focused on the highest, middle and lowest ranking hotels, according to TripAdvisor. From each of these hotels, the ten most recent reviews in English were downloaded, printed, coded and analyzed following several steps that our outlined in detail in chapter three.

Content analysis was applied to both the conventional rating systems as well as the two samples from TripAdvisor. The Top 10 Sample was complemented by statistical analysis.

## **1.6 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS**

This thesis is presented in seven chapters covering the theoretical background, methodology, results, triangulation, conclusions and recommendation.

Chapter two presents a theoretical framework in the areas of hotel rating, service quality and social media. Through a synthesis of these three areas, the researcher developed a conceptual framework of the field of study which is presented at the end of this chapter.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology used, beginning with the pilot study and elaborating on how this resulted in the final research design. The chapter describes the research methods used over five phases, and provides details of the sampling and coding techniques. Different graphs and tables provide clarity on how the researcher conducted the process.

Chapter four presents the results of the study on TripAdvisor and its reliability in providing accurate information on hotels. After an outline of TripAdvisor's organisation and how it

facilitates guest ratings, different areas of its reliability are explored. These areas were selected based on criticism of the reliability of TripAdvisor, outlined in chapter two.

Chapter five presents the results of the main study, namely, research questions three and four, which focused on the TripAdvisor ratings and reviews and how they compared with conventional rating systems. The answers to these questions are presented through a triangulation of data from TripAdvisor and the conventional hotel rating systems from the 11 destinations in the sample.

Chapter six synthesizes the results of chapters four and five, thereby presenting an answer to the sixth research question, namely, the extent to which TripAdvisor is valuable in providing information that conventional systems do not. In addition, this chapter depicts a new conceptual model and theory based on the triangulation.

Chapter seven presents the conclusions and answers to the research problem, the limitations of the study, and how it has contributed in creating new knowledge. In addition, it makes recommendations for the hospitality industry, conventional rating bodies and consumer review platforms as well as suggestions for future studies.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF HOTEL RATINGS, SERVICE QUALITY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this study was to investigate hotel ratings through guest feedback. It was thus important to have a good understanding of hotel ratings and guest feedback. To this end it was necessary to develop a conceptual model to show how guest feedback can be incorporated into hotel ratings. As guest feedback was explored within the context of social media, this concept also required further elaboration.

First, definitions surrounding the concept of hotel rating will be given. Thereafter, the historic development of conventional rating systems worldwide will be outlined, as well as the different bodies involved in rating hotels through conventional systems and how this information is shared. This outline is followed by a discussion on the importance and advantages of well administered rating systems. Then, links are established between conventional rating systems and the concept of quality from a services marketing perspective. This is done by exploring services marketing theory and its implications for the definition of quality, followed by a review of literature that explores to what extent historic and contemporary systems have attempted and succeeded in measuring the quality of the hotel experience. This is followed by a description of the guest's role in shaping conventional systems. Thereafter the concept of social media, the different social media channels available, the power of social media on companies and industries, motivations for consumers to engage in social media, and a review of discussions on the reliability of social media in general, and TripAdvisor, in particular, are presented. The chapter is concluded by using a conceptual model to suggest how guest feedback may be linked to conventional rating systems to provide information to shape the expectations of potential travellers.

## 2.2 DEFINITIONS

There are strong parallels in the development of the concept of hotel rating and its associated definitions. From the initial purpose of informing travellers what basic hotel facilities they could expect, the objective of hotel rating expanded into a focus on the hotel experience as a whole. Simultaneously, definitions of the concept evolved, from 'classification' to 'grading' to 'rating'. Classification was an appropriate term for the first rating systems where the focus was on the tangible facilities and services to be found in hotels. As the lodging experience is a combination of both tangible (room, facilities, availability of services) and intangible (service delivery in all its facets) elements, many rating systems fell short in attempting to manage the entire guest expectation (Callan, 1990, 1995b, 1998). Over the last thirty years, many studies in the field of services management and services marketing management (for example, Zeithaml *et al.* 2009; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Kotler *et al.* 2006) indicate that guest satisfaction is a result of the guest experience weighed against the guest expectation of the product or service. In addition, services are inseparable, variable and perishable (Kotler *et al.* 2006, Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007), which makes it impossible to measure or assess the quality of services up front.

Vine (1981) attempted to clarify the confusion that arose between classification and grading. Vine defined classification as the '*breakdown of different types and ranges of accommodation*' and grading as '*denoting quality assessment*'. He also clarified the concept of 'registration', as many national systems use hotel rating as part of their legislative efforts to control the tourism product (for example, India Ministry of Tourism, 2003). Callan (1994a) supports the distinction between hotel classification and hotel grading; however, he states that grading is used as a general term, and sometimes means classification. Most independent systems are referred to as 'rating' systems, while national systems are more frequently referred to as rating or grading systems (for example, Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2008).

Academics (for example, Ingram, 1996; Callan, 1998; Hassanien, 2007) use the terms classification, grading and rating throughout their writings to indicate the same concept. On the other hand, most contemporary textbooks on hospitality management use 'classification' to refer to the type of hotel, and 'grading' to refer to hotel class, or quality (for example, Ismail, 2002; Kasavana & Brooks, 2005; Vallen & Vallen, 2005). When used to indicate the type of hotel, hotel classification usually includes size, location and product type.

The classification of hotel sizes and product types is subject to differences of opinion. Rutes, Penner & Adams (2001) define a small hotel as a hotel with less than 100 rooms, whereas Ismail (2002) defines a small hotel as a hotel with less than 150 rooms. The definition of what constitutes a boutique hotel also varies. Rutes *et al.* (2001) and Vallen & Vallen (2005) attribute the term to Ian Schrager and his late partner, Steve Rubell, who coined it [the term] with their dramatic design makeover of 'The Morgans' hotel in 1984, from a small, dilapidated, midtown building, into an independent, high-style hotel. Rutes *et al.* (2001) describe a boutique hotel as usually smaller than 100 rooms, but indicate that the term 'boutique' hotel transcends the earlier definitions and bridges multiple hotel classifications from small to large, luxury to affordable, urban to resort, modern to traditional, renovation to new construction, and, with the creation of the 'W brand' of Starwood (a unique hotel concept replicated worldwide) from independent to a rapidly expanding segment of a major chain. Vallen & Vallen (2005) indicate 20 to 40 rooms, but then also refer to a second generation of boutique hotels that are large and part of a brand, using the New York W with 722 rooms as an example. Powers & Clayton (2006) typically tie in soft attributes, such as image and atmosphere, with boutique properties.

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used.

#### **I. Boutique Hotel**

A hotel with fewer than 150 rooms with unique decor and a high standard of personalised services.

## **II. Hotel Rating**

The process of assessing the comfort and services of a hotel resulting in a categorisation referred to as a rating. The rating usually comprises five categories where stars are used to indicate the level of comfort and services.

## **III. Hotel Rating System**

A system that governs the hotel rating process.

## **IV. Conventional Rating System**

A hotel rating system in which hotel inspectors or experts, announced or unannounced, conduct a physical inspection to determine a hotel's rating. This system may be supported by national legislation.

## **V. Guest Feedback Platform**

A platform where travellers can provide feedback on their hotel experience through written reviews and ratings.

## **VI. Guest Ratings**

Ratings provided by guests based on their hotel experience.

## **VII. Hotel Ranking**

The position of a hotel in the overview of a destination. On TripAdvisor, the hotel ranking is influenced strongly by the guest ratings.

## 2.3 HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF CONVENTIONAL RATING SYSTEMS

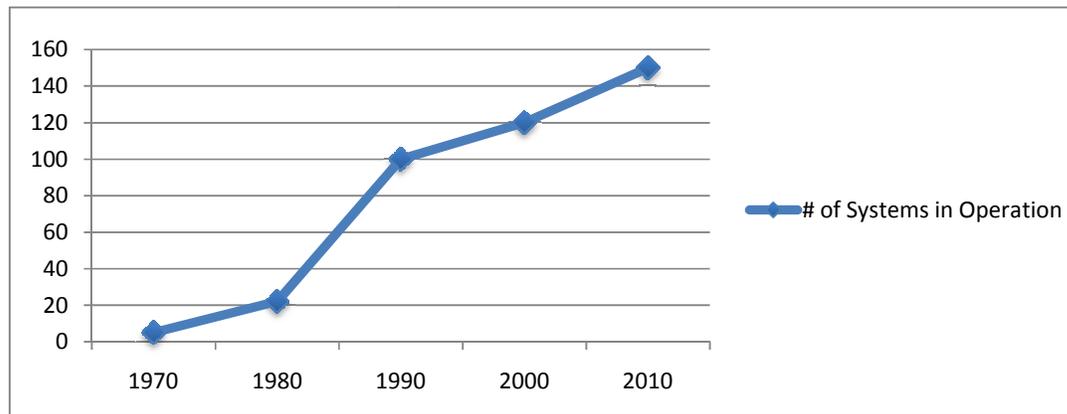
Hotel rating is a concept that has received little academic attention over time, whereas its practical systems have frequently been subjected to differences of opinion as to what it is guests want or need, and how this can objectively be measured (Penner, 1993; Callan, 1995a; Napier, 2006; Rahn, 2006; Hewitt, 2008). From the early stages of rating, it has been non-guests (hotel inspectors) who determine the quality of a property. The Cyclists' Touring Club was the first to link inn-keeping with tourism. In the 1880s, wayside inns began to display the club's familiar sign of its members' approval (Vine, 1981). In 1900 the Michelin Tyre Company began publishing a guide which introduced pictorial symbols to indicate the range of facilities at establishments providing good accommodation (Vine, 1981; Gee, 1994). The purpose of this booklet was not much different from that of rating systems, as indicated when Lottman (2003) quotes from this little red book:

*"We promise to strike from this book without pity all hotels reported to us as having poor food, inadequate rooms or toilets, deficient service... On the other hand, we shall add to our listings hotels and dealers appreciated by our readers."*

The American Automobile Association followed the Michelin tire company in 1937 when it hired the first inspectors to inspect lodging providers (American Automobile Association, 2008).

In 1970 only five European countries had national rating schemes, namely, Belgium, France, Greece, Norway and Spain. By 1980 the five schemes had risen to 22, used by 60 countries worldwide (Vine, 1981). Ingram (1996) estimated over 100 systems in operation in 1995 and contrary to Vallen and Vallen's (2005) estimate of less than 100 systems in 2005, a current count by the researcher reveals over 116 national systems and several dozens of independent systems run by Automobile Associations, Tour Operators and Internet booking websites, bringing the estimated total number of systems in operation in 2009 to over 150. Figure 2.1 outlines the growth in the number of conventional rating systems.

Figure 2.1 Estimated growth of the number of hotel rating systems in operation



Source: *Researcher's own model using data from the World Tourism Organisation (2004) supplemented with own findings.*

Figure 2.1 indicates the growth in the number of rating systems that were started in the 1970s, accelerated from 1980 to 1990, and continued over the last decade. This growth may however have reached a turning point as regions seek harmonization in criteria and systems. The World Tourism Organisation's (2004) joint study with the International Hotel and Restaurant Association on hotel rating describes the multiple initiatives of countries to join in regional schemes. An example is the Nordic / Baltic Rating scheme where the Danish hotel rating system is the basis for the systems in Sweden, Iceland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. However, in all member countries the criteria are adjusted to the local conditions (see for example, the Northern Baltic Rating Board, 2008). Harmonization is also sought on a national level, with Russia and the UK being recent examples. In 2003, Russia went from four systems and 30 star awarding organisations to one system, executed by one organisation (Maternovski, 2003). The United Kingdom launched one harmonized system in 2006 trying to put an end to decades of disputes (Napier, 2006).

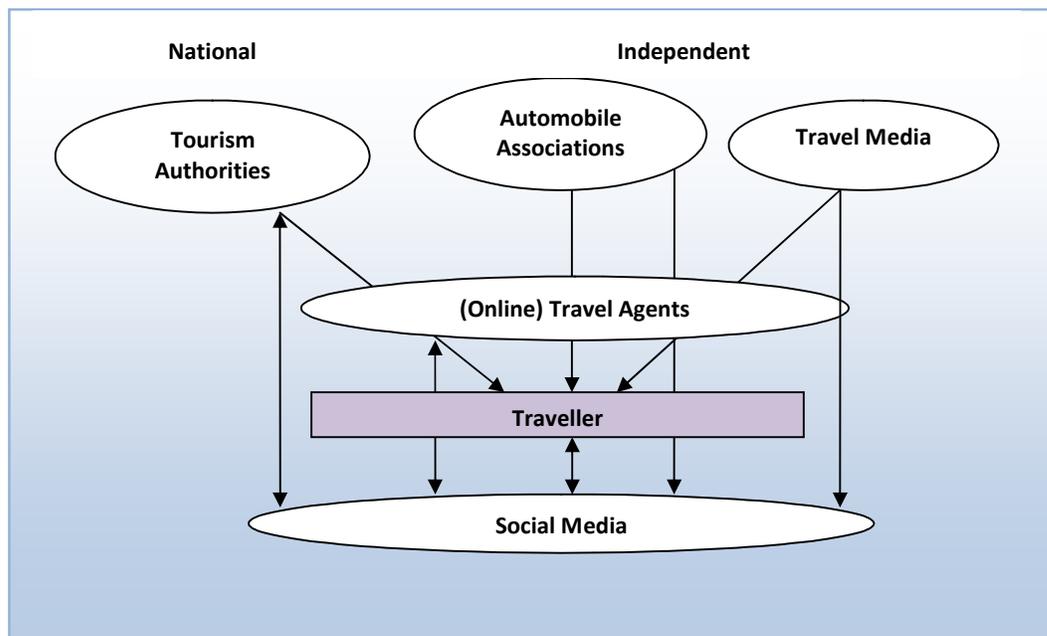
## 2.4 ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN HOTEL RATING

Over the last 30 years, a multitude of organisations have become involved in hotel rating. These organisations can be divided into two categories, namely, national and independent.

National organisations can be defined as bodies run by, or for a national government, usually in the form of national tourism authorities (for example, Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2008).

Independent organisations can be further categorised into four groups, namely, automobile associations, travel media, online travel agents and social media. Independent rating organisations are generally ‘for profit’ organisations that use the ratings they create for travel publications that can be sold (automobile associations and travel media), to classify their offerings (online travel agents), or to generate income from referrals to online travel agents (social media). Figure 2.2 outlines how these organisations feed their information to the prospective traveller.

Figure 2.2 Organisations involved in hotel rating



Source: Researcher's own model.

Figure 2.2 displays a wide variety of communication lines through which the information of hotel rating systems is shared and fed to prospective travellers.

The execution of a national system can be facilitated through an appointed Tourism Authority, for example, in Qatar, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi, an industry representation body, in

The Netherlands, independent consultants, and in Puerto Rico, structures in between. National Tourism Organisations generally run hotel rating systems as part of a strategy to increase and control the quality of its tourism product and may use tourism by-laws to enforce their efforts.

Automobile associations such as the American Automobile Association, Mobil, and Michelin have an historic presence in the hotel rating market resulting from a need they filled during the early days of motoring (Vine, 1981). The largest player in the independent market is the American Automobile Association, which grades almost 40,000 hotel properties worldwide (American Automobile Association, 2008). The American Automobile Association is one of the few systems that has not sought any harmonization and is frequently quoted in hospitality and tourism textbooks as the World's most respected system (Chon & Sparrowe, 2000; Ismail, 2002; Kasavana & Brooks, 2005; Vallen & Vallen, 2005; Stuts & Wortman, 2006; Hayes & Ninemeier, 2007).

North Star Travel Media is currently the largest provider of conventional hotel ratings with over 45,000 hotel properties in its database (North Star Travel Media, 2009). It feeds its hotel information to major global distribution systems and online travel agents and as such assumes an important position in the market (Schaal, 2007).

Traditionally such agents were travel agents with office presence who helped travellers identify the best products and services to suit their requirements. This role has been largely taken over by online agents who provide electronic access and structure to the entire tourism supply chain, allowing travellers to build their own holidays. Online travel agents such as Expedia and Orbitz have aggressively entered the market with their own rating systems (Expedia, 2009; Orbitz, 2009). As more and more travellers book via online travel agents, the use of their ratings becomes more important. Online travel agents frequently use the ratings of national systems, automobile associations, or travel media for their ratings. Travelocity receives its ratings from North Star (Schaal, 2007), Orbitz uses industry ratings, such as the American Automobile Association and Michelin (Orbitz, 2009), and Expedia uses up to 12 points of data for their ratings, including that of other rating systems (Expedia, 2009).

Perhaps the largest threat to the existing rating organisations is the growth of websites that focus solely on traveller reviews, providing an independent platform for guest feedback, which categorises them as social media (see for example, Zarella, 2009). TripAdvisor is the market leader in this segment, offering over 35 million guest reviews on over 450,000 hotels. These reviews provide both a rating (1-5) and qualitative feedback through narratives (TripAdvisor, 2010).

There is also an exchange of ratings between social media organisations and tourism authorities, automobile associations and travel media. TripAdvisor also seeks to display conventional ratings on its website and categorise hotels accordingly (TripAdvisor, 2009). In like manner, tourism authorities display an interest in the data available on TripAdvisor and link it to their websites (for example, Thomas, 2007). Automobile associations and travel media do not yet seem to use information from social media such as TripAdvisor.

## 2.5 THE IMPORTANCE OF HOTEL RATING

The rapid growth in hotel rating systems results from the realization that tourism lodging has had a major impact on the tourist experience. As the objective of most governments is to develop and grow the tourism sector, they must ensure tourists are satisfied and delighted to spread positive word of mouth about the destination (World Tourism Organisation, 2004). Such claims go hand in hand with contemporary service management theories, such as Reichheld's (1996; 2006) arguments concerning customer loyalty. Although customer satisfaction is readily associated with hotel rating, there are other reasons why governments, specifically, have become involved. Vine (1981) mentions six benefits of a well planned and administered rating system:

- i. It assists government planning by supplying authoritative and reliable statistical data for different types of accommodation.*
- ii. It helps to identify the need for developing certain categories of establishments.*
- iii. It improves marketing strategies by enabling tourist board promotion of hotels in particular geographical locations (e.g. resort, city, riverside, mountain).*

- iv. *It allows the travel trade and visitors to identify more easily and accurately the types of hotels they are seeking.* This benefit is referred to by other authors as facilitating segmentation of visitors (Ingram, 1996; Federation of Hong Kong Hotel Owners Limited, 2000).
- v. *It encourages hoteliers to improve standards and the range of facilities by pinpointing weaknesses in operational services.*
- vi. *It eliminates poor hotels which harm the good reputation of the better hotels.*

Other benefits mentioned are

- vii. *Coping with the age of information technology since contemporary guests base their purchasing decisions on information published on websites* (Federation of Hong Kong Hotel Owners Limited, 2000). Today's traveller does not require a knowledgeable travel agent to tell him / her which hotel to visit, as this information is available on the internet. A rating system generally provides a brief but comprehensive overview of what the guest could reasonably expect from a property.
- viii. *Increasing opportunities for local, independent hotels* (Federation of Hong Kong Hotel Owners Limited, 2000). Since local, independent hotels commonly do not share the advantages of their international counterparts in terms of access to international travellers, they need an authoritative means to communicate the quality of their offerings. Brands such as the Hilton, Marriott, Sheraton, Ritz Carlton and others have the advantage of standardized services under a recognised brand that attracts international travellers (Rowe, 2002).

All these benefits (i to viii) can be summarized into three areas where a destination and its industry will benefit under a well managed system.

### **I. Quality Control**

An effective rating system will eliminate poor hotels that may hurt the name of the destination / industry, thereby protecting the consumers and the destination (Vine, 1981;

Gee, 1994). In addition, the rating criteria and inspections are likely to stimulate hoteliers to improve (Hassanien, 2007).

## **II. Marketing**

An effective hotel rating system will provide an overview for potential visitors and the travel trade, levelling the playing field for local hotels that need to compete with international brands, and facilitate the travel trade in creating packages (Hassanien, 2007; Su & Sun, 2007).

## **III. Business Development**

Hotel rating may stimulate business development as it assists in tourism planning and facilitates hotel investors in positioning their properties in the market by outlining the requirements before they start building (Vine, 1981; Hassanien, 2007). Dr. Aidi, chairman of the International Hotel and Restaurant Association as quoted by Wyatt (2008) argues:

*'Grading systems should be used out of respect for the people who invest heavily in a first class hotel and do not want to have another property, which doesn't have any credentials or services, sharing the same rating'.*

A logical question that follows is how rating systems measure quality and to what extent this is representative of the quality experience of the guest.

## 2.6 HOW QUALITY IS MEASURED IN RATING SYSTEMS

Although rating systems may create different advantages for the industry and the destination, the overall purpose is to supply potential travellers with a realistic expectation of what they can look forward to when they visit the property. The nature of this expectation appears to have evolved in line with the concept of quality in general, and service quality, being part of the services marketing field of study, in particular.

### 2.6.1 *The concept of service quality in services marketing*

Up to the 1980s, quality was generally defined as a conformance to requirements or specifications (Crossby, 1979). For example, a car may show good quality in the way it starts, runs, drives, manoeuvres and brakes as per its specifications. With the introduction of service quality, this perception changed. Services can be defined as 'an act or performance offered by one party to another' (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007), or as 'deeds, processes, and performances' alone (Zeithaml *et al.* 2009). Such broad definitions do not create a uniform paradigm on which to base service expectations. Consequently, in order to understand the implications of managing services, scholars have chosen to describe services based on their differences with regard to basic goods establishing the basis of the services marketing paradigm.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985) argue that due to the heterogeneity, intangibility and inseparability of services, service quality is determined by customers based on their expectations in relation to their experiences, which also includes the process (manner) in which the service is delivered. These basic differences in services with tangible goods have been discussed by several authors and, with the addition of perishability, are standard issue in every introduction chapter of service management and marketing textbooks (for example, Grönroos, 1990; Kotler *et al.* 2006; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). The four characteristics of services and their implications, as opposed to goods, are outlined in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Four features and implications of services as opposed to goods

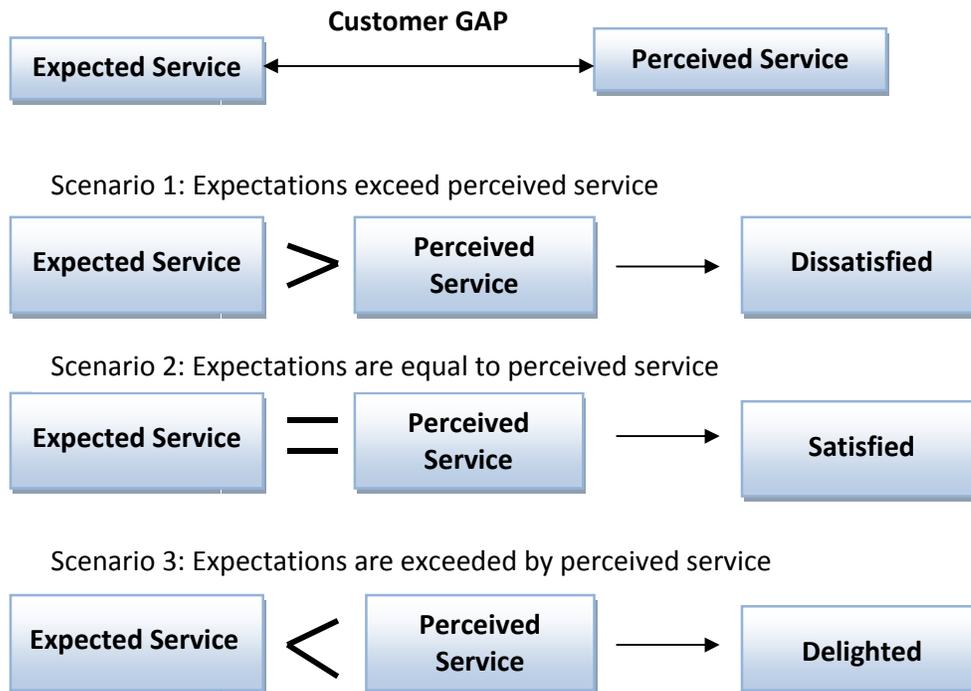
Feature	Implications
<b>Heterogeneity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Service delivery and customer satisfaction depend on employee actions.</li> <li>- Greater variability between inputs and outputs.</li> <li>- Services are difficult to plan and promote.</li> </ul>
<b>Intangibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Customers do not obtain ownership</li> <li>- Services are difficult to evaluate by customers.</li> <li>- Intangible elements may dominate value creation.</li> </ul>
<b>Inseparability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Customers participate in service delivery.</li> <li>- Customers affect each other</li> <li>- Mass production is difficult.</li> </ul>
<b>Perishability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Services cannot be stored.</li> <li>- Demand and supply are difficult to manage.</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from: Kotler et al. 2006; Zeithaml et al. 2009

From Table 2.1 it follows that the definition, management and marketing of quality of service is different as a result of these four features (Zeithaml et al. 2009). Quality can no longer be defined as an objective feature (e.g. freedom from defects), but needs to be defined in terms of customer satisfaction (Kotler et al. 2006).

Customer satisfaction is the result of a service's perceived performance in delivering value relative to a customer's expectations (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Zeithaml et al. 2009). If the performance falls short, the customer is dissatisfied; if the performance matches expectations, the customer is satisfied. If performance exceeds expectations, the customer is delighted. Zeithaml et al. (2009) refer to this equation as the customer GAP. This GAP and its three potential consequences are illustrated in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3 The customer GAP and three possible consequences.

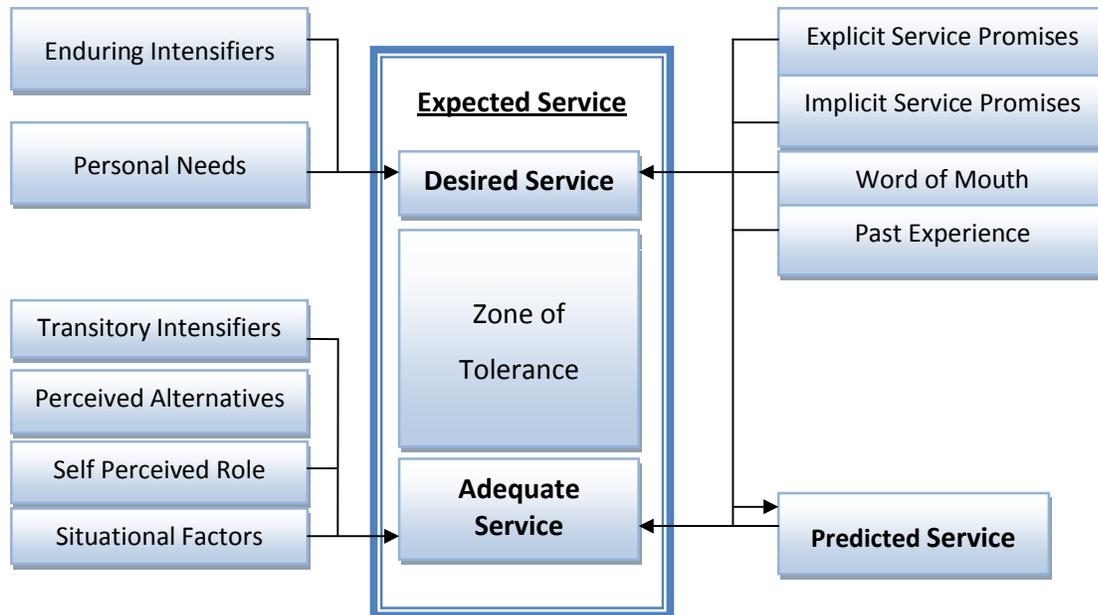


Source: Adapted from: Kotler et al. 2006; Zeithaml et al. 2009

From Figure 2.3 it follows that in order to satisfy or delight customers, the expected level of service must be met or exceeded by the level of perceived service.

The expected level of service can be further divided into a level of 'desired service' (the level of service the customer would like to receive), and a level of 'adequate service' (the level of service the customer will accept) (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1993). Both are influenced by factors that arise from the customer's unique situation or from external sources that apply to all customers. Figure 2.4 presents the model by Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) adapted by Lovelock and Wirtz (2007) on the nature and determinants of customer expectations of service.

Figure 2.4 Determinants of customer expectations of service



Source: Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Zeithaml et al. 2009

Figure 2.4 argues that desired service is a result of both enduring (service) intensifiers and personal needs. Enduring service intensifiers are individual, stable factors that lead the customer to a heightened sensitivity and can be subdivided into ‘derived service expectations’ (representing the expectations of a whole group), and one’s unique personal service philosophy. Transitory intensifiers (temporary factors that lead to a heightened sensitivity of an individual’s expectations), perceived alternatives to the service, an individual’s self perceived role, and unique situational factors influence the level of service that is defined as ‘adequate’ by the individual. On the right hand side of the figure, explicit and implicit promises by the company, word of mouth, and the past experience of the customer influence both the desired and predicted service that in turn influence the adequate service.

Of the many factors influencing customer expectations, only implicit and explicit promises appear to be under some form of organizational control. The other factors may be

influenced to a very limited extent, or can simply be studied and learned from (Zeithaml *et al.* 1993).

In terms of perception of service quality offered, different categorizations of a product / service offering have been proposed. Initially, Grönroos (1982) distinguished two types of service quality, namely, technical quality (the outcome) and functional quality (the process). Lehtinen & Lehtinen (1991) distinguish three quality dimensions that define the experience, namely, the physical quality (e.g. equipment), the corporate quality (corporate image), and the interactive quality (interaction between contact personnel and customer). These dimensions were extended by Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) through focus group research, resulting in ten criteria customers use to evaluate the quality of experienced services. In later research the ten were consolidated into five dimensions (Lovelock & Wirtz; 2007; van Iwaarden, van der Wiele, Ball, and Millen 2003, Zeithaml *et al.* 2009) displayed in Table 2.2.

*Table 2.2 Dimensions of assessment of service quality*

Dimension	Definition
<b>Reliability</b>	Ability to perform dependably and accurately
<b>Responsiveness</b>	Willingness to help and provide prompt service
<b>Assurance</b>	Employees' competence and ability to inspire trust and confidence
<b>Empathy</b>	Individualized and caring attention
<b>Tangibles</b>	Appearance of physical environment, personnel and tangibles

*Source: Adapted from Zeithaml et al. 2009*

It is important to note that the dimensions indicated in Table 2.2 are not solely responsible for customer satisfaction, as they merely define the service quality. In addition to service quality, it is argued, product quality, price, situational and personal factors influence a customer's satisfaction (Zeithaml *et al.* 2009).

Oliver, Rust & Varki (1997) suggest that customer delight is the result of three components, that is, unexpectedly high levels of performance, arousal (surprise), and positive affect. Since

the difference between satisfaction and delight is the unexpected pleasure of the customer, Lovelock and Wirtz (2007) question whether it is possible to continuously delight customers in mundane services, and suggest that creating delight may increase expectations to a level where during a next service encounter, it becomes nearly impossible to create delight by exceeding expectations.

However, conventional rating systems do not need to deal with the dilemma of delight, as their purpose revolves around communicating minimum expectations of what one may expect in a hotel.

### 2.6.2 Criteria used in conventional rating systems

The features that distinguish services from goods create many problems during the objective assessment required for hotel rating. In the first rating (then called classification) systems, service quality as a concept was still largely to be explored. It is therefore not surprising that hotel rating was then practiced using a product quality approach. Vine (1981) argues

*“The basic purpose of classification, however, is to group together those hotels which provide a minimum range of services and facilities”.*

At the same time Vine (1981) realises the implications of the strong service element in the hotel product, questioning whether hotel rating is an art or a science.

Due to the growth and diversification of services offered by hotels, it appears obvious that focusing on a product definition and assessment of quality is not satisfactory in assisting the potential guest to create a realistic expectation of a certain hotel. In terms of this expectation and the limited influence one can exercise in managing it, one would expect that rating systems would cover as many explicit and implicit service offerings as possible to facilitate realistic expectations from consumers.

One might also assume that the range of grading criteria would cover the five dimensions proposed by Zeithaml *et al.* (2009), as these seem to provide tangible focal points in subject matter that has relatively few. When one analyses the foci of criteria used in historic and contemporary rating systems, this assumption proves incorrect.

Conventional rating systems may focus on minimum criteria, or use a combination of minimum criteria and optional criteria that create a score per criterion where a minimum total score needs to be attained to obtain a certain rating. When a system is based solely on minimum criteria, for example, the old HORESTA system in Denmark (HORESTA, 2002), each rating has a range of criteria that must be fulfilled. If one of these criteria is not fulfilled, it results in the hotel not being eligible for that rating. The vast majority of conventional rating systems operational today require a hotel to fulfil a combination of minimum criteria supplemented with a total score generated by optional or supplementary criteria. In The Netherlands, for instance, a hotel must adhere to a certain number of minimum criteria, and would then need to score a certain number of points that can be attained through a multitude of differentiation possibilities in order for that hotel to receive a certain grading. For example, a four star hotel would need to provide double rooms that measure at least 22 m<sup>2</sup>. Should the rooms exceed 26 m<sup>2</sup>, then five points are earned that contribute to the required 70 that need to be attained in the optional norms (Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering, 2008).

In terms of the foci of these criteria, hotel rating system bodies commonly present two categories of criteria - quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative criteria refer to those that can be quantified and are thus easily measurable. Qualitative criteria generally refer to the state of maintenance, cleanliness and quality of materials used in a hotel. A third category that has been established in more conventional rating systems in recent years is service quality.

As the wording used in each system is different, the researcher defined the three groups of criteria referred to in this study as follows, Objective Tangible Criteria, Subjective Tangible Criteria, and Service Delivery Criteria. These criteria will now be discussed.

### **I. Objective Tangible Criteria**

The first national rating systems focused mainly on minimum criteria, that is, room size, facilities and available services, with some deviations focusing on price, quality of management, or size of hotel (Vine, 1981). These criteria are also referred to as 'hard

factors' as they refer to tangible services and facilities that can be measured objectively (German Arab Tourism Organisation, 2007). With regard to facilities, such criteria apply to the size of a room, the size of a bed, or the simple presence of a certain facility such as a television. With regard to services, objective, tangible criteria apply to the availability of a certain service in general, and the timing or accessibility of that service in particular. The availability of room service is an example of an objective, tangible criterion, although the fact that room service is offered 24 hours a day does not reveal anything about the quality of that service. Objective, tangible criteria are easy to measure, but often difficult to change, as a hotel cannot easily increase the size of its rooms or its lobby.

The challenge when using only objective, tangible criteria is that the fulfilment of criteria does not automatically lead to guest satisfaction. Vallen and Vallen (2005) describe the weakness of such criteria when they state,

*"If there is a pool on the premises, it will meet [certain] standards whether or not it is clean".*

## **II. Subjective Tangible Criteria**

The focus on subjective, tangible criteria resulted from a perennial problem of hotel rating, namely, that objective, tangible criteria do not necessarily guarantee a level of comfort (as argued by Vallen & Vallen, 2005). An example is the quality of the carpet in a hotel room. An objective, tangible criterion would be that a hotel room needs to have floor covering such as a carpet. However, as the hotel room is used, the carpet will wear out and get stained. If it is not replaced in time, it will not display the level of comfort it initially provided, although it will meet the criterion that the floor is covered.

Subjective, tangible criteria generally focus on the quality of objective, tangible criteria and seek to measure the cleanliness, maintenance, quality of materials used, or any other element that influences the guest impression of facilities. These criteria are still tangible in nature; however, their assessment may be subject to interpretation. The criteria may be general descriptions, or they may be scored on a scale of one to ten where higher scores are required for higher ratings. South Africa's rating system, for example, presents basic norms for all hotel categories with some special requirements for four and five star ratings (Tourism

Grading Council South Africa, 2009a). These norms can be considered the objective, tangible criteria. The system presents 46 criteria where a hotel can score between one and ten points. A five star hotel would need to attain an overall score of 95 to 100 percent, in other words, nine-and-a-half to ten points (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2009b). Systems recently launched in Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Dubai all have a strong focus on qualitative criteria (SRI International, 2006, German Arab Tourism Organisation, 2007; Qatar Tourism and Events Authority, 2007; Arabianbusiness, 2008; Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority, 2008). The Dutch system also includes qualitative factors as its optional criteria that are expected to contribute to a minimum score per rating (Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering, 2008).

### **III. Service Delivery Criteria**

Service delivery criteria focus on the guest experience from a service quality perspective. As these criteria are nearly impossible to measure during a hotel inspection, this area of the hotel experience would in most systems not be measured, be measured indirectly through criteria that may influence service delivery, be measured through a mystery shopping assessment, or through feedback from travellers who have visited the hotel.

Most conventional rating systems do not measure service delivery, or do so indirectly. Indirect criteria would focus on areas such as training of staff, the quality of the hotel's management, or systems the hotel has in place for dealing with customer complaints (see, for example, India Ministry of Tourism, 2009).

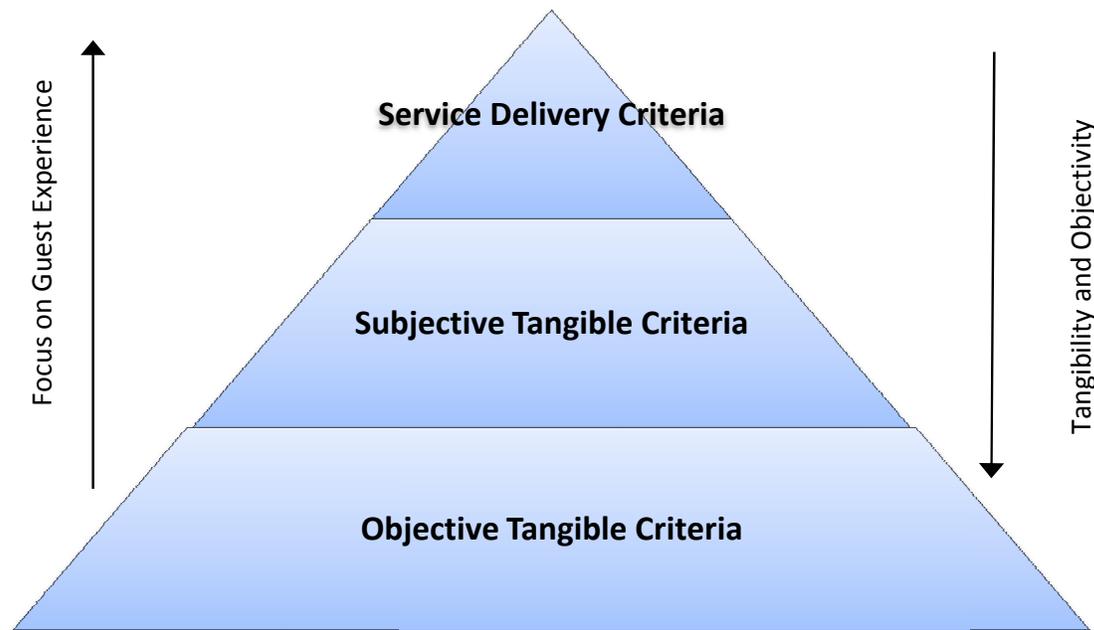
Automobile associations and other independent rating organisations seek to assess service delivery through mystery shopping assessments. During a mystery shopping assessment, service delivery criteria are assessed by inspectors (mystery shoppers) who visit a hotel pretending to be guests. To ensure a certain level of consistency a huge number of criteria are checked, frequently over 500 (Mobil Travel Guide, 2008b) and up to 1500 (Leading Hotels of the World, 2009). As the inspection process is very elaborate – a typical mystery shopping assessment of a five star property can easily take up to three days – it is used in only a handful of systems worldwide. The American Automobile Association, Mobil, and Michelin systems are well known for this practice (American Automobile Association, 2008;

Michelin, 2009; Mobil Travel Guide, 2008a). Some national systems are implementing the practice as well. Recently updated systems in The Netherlands and Austria have incorporated a mystery shopping assessment for the four and five star categories (Fachverband Hotellerie, 2007; Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering, 2008). In 2007 Qatar launched a rating system that provides hotels the opportunity to undergo a mystery shopping audit that may result in either bronze, silver, or gold stars after the actual number of stars (one to five) is first defined by a combination of hard and qualitative factors (Qatar Tourism and Events Authority, 2007).

A third method of assessing service delivery is through the feedback of guests who have stayed at the hotel. In most of these systems, guest feedback is used only on a 'critical incident' basis where complaints would be redirected to the inspector who may decide to call for an extra inspection of the property. Michelin (2009) indicates that it uses more than 45,000 letters received from guests annually as critical incidents that may justify an additional inspection. Expedia (2009) claims to use guest feedback as a weighing factor in their ratings of properties listed. The South African Tourism Grading Council has established a web-based feedback format to allow guests to feed back on their lodging experience, although this appears to be only critical incident based (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2008).

Figure 2.5 outlines how the three groups of hotel rating criteria differ in terms of focus on the actual guest experience and the objectivity with which they may be measured.

Figure 2.5 Three groups of hotel rating criteria in conventional rating systems



Source: Researcher's own model

Figure 2.5 displays a pyramid shape as this is generally how the different criteria are represented in conventional rating systems. Firstly, objective, tangible criteria commonly provide the basis of rating systems, using the minimum criteria focus outlined earlier. Those criteria appear to also constitute the highest number of criteria in contemporary, conventional rating systems. Next, a range of subjective, tangible criteria need to be fulfilled, either through a minimum description (see, for example, Fachverband Hotellerie, 2007), or through a weighted system (see, for example, Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2008). The service quality criteria generally form the smallest category in terms of the number of criteria used.

Zeithaml *et al.* (2009) refer to service encounters and moments of truth as “*the building blocks of both satisfaction and quality*”. On the other hand, the tangibility and objectivity of an assessment would decrease as one rises up the pyramid, as these criteria would be subject to personal (biased) interpretation. It is therefore not surprising that most

contemporary conventional rating systems seek to 'play it safe' and focus on the lower region of this pyramid.

### **2.6.3 The effectiveness of hotel rating criteria in conventional systems**

Assuming that service delivery impacts most on the guest experience, an important question that arises is to what extent hotel rating criteria actually reflect guest expectations, thereby contributing to the perception of quality in a hotel. This section will now discuss the effectiveness of rating criteria as well as the limitations imposed through a lack of uniformity in standards worldwide.

#### **I. The effectiveness of criteria in conventional rating systems in assessing quality**

The main disputes challenging the earlier systems focus on criteria that are too detailed to allow hoteliers to innovate or position their properties in their own unique market segments (Ryan, 1998; Travel Assist Magazine, 2001). Also the use of size (number of rooms), room price, quality of management, and other features of a hotel that do not relate directly to the quality offered have led to controversy (Callan & Fearon, 1997; Hensens, 2001; Mintel, 2004).

A number of studies of the UK systems focus on what hotel attributes prospective guests use to select hotels (Callan, 1994a), the actual utilization of hotel grading schemes by different target groups (Callan, 1995b), and the importance of different hotel attributes to guests (Callan, 1998). Callan's conclusions frequently reveal discrepancies between the systems and what the guests actually use, want, or value. Ingram (1996) also focused on the UK systems and used the service attributes of Berry, Zeithaml & Parasuraman (1990) to define guest satisfaction. Su and Sun (2007) applied the idea of Berry *et al.* (1990) to the Taiwan national system, and used the five dimensions of service quality to discover that although most criteria are covered, 'empathy' can only be measured by mystery shopping that is not part of the system presently. Lopez and Serrano (2004) applied a more direct approach in Spain where they used four categories that linked closely to the previously mentioned service

dimensions, that is, reliability, characteristics of personnel, tangible elements, and complimentary offerings. Their findings are staggering; only in one star hotels are the overall expectations exceeded by the perceptions of guests.

## **II. The lack of uniformity between conventional rating systems worldwide**

Another point of criticism from academic authors and the travel trade alike, are the apparent differences between conventional rating systems that are argued to result in a confused traveller (Davey, 2008 and Marvel, 2004). The World Tourism Organisation has been driving the process of international standardisation since 1962, but has not progressed much further than agreeing on five classification categories and the use of stars as symbols. After much dispute it was agreed in 1969 that certain objections to an international system could not be overlooked and that it would be better to proceed by attempting to obtain approval for regional systems (Vine, 1981). Different attempts since this initiative have all met resistance, also from the travel trade itself. Both HOTREC and the International Hotel and Restaurant Association, two very influential industry bodies, have strongly opposed using identical criteria in different countries and attempted to develop an international rating system (HOTREC, 1994; International Hotel & Restaurant Association, 1997). As Luthe (n.d.) argues,

*'Most accommodation markets are dominated by domestic guests, particularly in Germany, France and Italy as well as in Japan or the USA. Therefore it is desirable and economically correct that national rating systems focus on the specific preferences of domestic guests and other regional/local conditions.'*

As a result, the only successful initiatives for harmonisation have come from the operators of systems. Despite several successful initiatives for harmonisation such as those mentioned in section 2.3, many new systems still seek to differentiate rather than to harmonise. Greenwood (2008) argues that with the launch of new rating systems in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi, travellers' confusion will only grow, especially as these systems will not automatically be adopted by tour operators and online travel agents. In the 'bigger and better' race, not even the five star category is sacred, as certification company SGS has created a voluntary

rating criterion called 'SGS 7 stars' (Wyatt, 2008) and Dubai created a sixth category to facilitate the Burj Al Arab Hotel (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2010a).

As criteria have become more flexible, the focus has turned more towards consistency among different parties and regions, and the question of whether quality is actually measured. When hoteliers or the travel industry do not believe in a system, the result may be a boycott of that system, or a focus on another system that is more lenient. Jensen (2008) describes how the Australian Hotel Association predicted that many of their members would cancel their ratings with the Automobile Association and move to accommodation websites where they could post their own ratings. The scale on which this happened is not clear. In Bulgaria the new rating standards launched in 2004 challenge the current ratings of international brands such as the Hilton, Kempinski, and Sheraton. These are brands that need to adhere to group standards and should therefore also be in line with international standards. This has resulted in strong controversy between the State Agency for Tourism and the Hotel industry (Rahn, 2006). From this results the question whether conventional hotel rating systems have passed their due date (Sharkey, 2009a).

The developments of regional systems that seek integration (outlined in section 2.3) seem to counter these problems, although the strong growth of online travel agents and social media platforms presents an additional problem. The internet has facilitated the comparison of ratings and brought certain discrepancies to light, particularly those involving the new independent rating providers, namely, online travel agents. Pascarella (2005) finds that although the definitions of the different ratings among different online travel agents are fairly aligned, their ratings are not. Hewitt (2008) analyses travellers' reviews, as opposed to formal ratings of two hotels, using the online travel agents Expedia, Travelocity and Orbitz. The discrepancies among the three websites are apparent and so are the differences within each website with regard to the website rating versus the traveller rating.

It thus becomes clear that generally one can state that conventional rating systems have not been very successful in assessing the quality of hotels in a way that provides a realistic expectation to prospective travellers. This ineffectiveness may be partially due to the limited

input of the actual guest in the development and execution of rating systems. The guest's role is described in section 2.7.

## 2.7 THE ROLE OF THE GUEST IN CONVENTIONAL RATING SYSTEMS

Service quality theory dictates that the most important indicator of service quality is guest satisfaction (Zeithaml *et al.* 2009). This section seeks to explore how consumer expectations and perceptions are measured in historic and contemporary rating systems as well as the role of the internet in providing a platform for such assessment.

Although 54 out of 65 responding countries in the World Tourism Organisation (2004) study indicated that *"classification is justified by consumer concerns"*, there is very little evidence to support this claim. Neither in the development of systems, nor in the provision of feedback on hotels that have been rated does guest feedback appear to have been used substantially.

Out of 27 responding countries in the World Tourism Organisation study (2004), only two countries (the Slovak Republic and Switzerland) indicated that a consumer's association (a body representing the travellers) had been used. In very few other conventional hotel rating systems are consumers seen to be involved in the development of the system directly. Austria claims that *"The rating criteria are based on current market research results and reflect the guest expectations for the respective categories"* (Fachverband Hotellerie, 2007), although it is not apparent what this market research involved or when it was conducted.

In terms of guest feedback on a specific hotel, the researcher has not come across a conventional system where it was established that such feedback truly influences the rating. Although the Tourism Grading Council South Africa (2008) has established an impressive website and infrastructure for guests to provide feedback, there is no data to suggest that this feedback is actually used in rating decisions.

The independent hotel rating systems claim to do better. From the first publication of its little red book, the Michelin company claimed that it based its ratings and descriptions on guest feedback and that since those early days it has also provided a means to do so through

feedback cards in the same little red book (Lottman, 2003). However, since to date Michelin has been very secretive in sharing its systems and criteria for rating, it is impossible to verify these claims. This lack of transparency can also be applied to organisations such as Mobil, the American Automobile Association, and even online travel agents such as Expedia. Although Expedia (2008) claims that it may use up to 12 points of data - ranging from independent rating systems, post-trip surveys of customers, media recognition, etcetera - it becomes obvious while browsing the site that not all of the 80,000 hotels represented are currently rated.

With regard to the national rating bodies, there is no reason why guest feedback would not be effective in improving existing systems, as this would likely result in higher traveller satisfaction with positive spin offs for any destination as a whole. The main reason why national rating bodies have been reluctant to gather guest feedback could be the labour and cost involved.

With the growth of the internet, labour and cost have been reduced: more and more consumers have access to the internet and seem willing to share feedback on their hotel experiences. Section 2.8 explores the characteristics and development of the social media, and how they are being used to review and rate hotels.

## **2.8 SOCIAL MEDIA**

This section explains the concept of social media and its power, the main contemporary platforms for hotel ratings, and consumers' motivation to provide feedback on their experiences, and concludes with a discussion on the reliability of social media in providing accurate information.

### **2.8.1 The concept of social media**

Social media is a relatively young concept that covers many different angles of interpretation and use. Although definitions may vary between authors, there is general consensus on the

key features of the concept. These features focus on conversational media, sharing of content, and consumer control.

Safko & Brake (2009) define social media as *“activities, practices and behaviours, among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions using conversational media”*. As part of this definition, conversational media are referred to as media that provide two way communication (Safko & Brake, 2009), whereas traditional media such as television, newspapers and magazines, are defined as one way, static broadcast technologies (Zarella, 2009). The term ‘communities’ in the above definition refers to networks of people who know each other, or share a common interest and are thus related. These communities are not new, as social networks have existed as long as there have been people to create them (Safko and Brake, 2009). The study of such networks dates back as far as the 1920s when the phrase ‘six degrees of separation’ was coined (Carrol, 2009). This phrase refers to the idea that any two persons on Earth are connected to each other through five relations with other people, creating a maximum of six steps between any two persons.

Sharing of content is another characteristic of social media. Anyone can create and distribute their own content to be shared with others (Zarella, 2009). This content is referred to as ‘electronic word-of-mouth’ and is focused on an experience with a product, service, or organisation (Hennig-Thurau, Gwiner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Electronic word-of-mouth is not a new concept either, although the speed and scope of the internet are said to have brought about a word-of-mouth revolution (Delarocas, 2003; Gretzel, 2007). The popularity of electronic-word-of mouth is suggested to be the result of increased self-disclosure opportunities, due to the greater anonymity offered by the internet (Sun, Youn, Wu & Kuntaraporn, 2006).

Evans (2008) perceives social media as facilitating natural, genuine conversation between people about something of mutual interest built on the thoughts and experiences of the participants. Benkler (2006) refers to social media as ‘feasibility spaces for social practice’, and Evans (2008) defines them as a *‘collaborative process through which information is created, shared, altered, and destroyed’*. Social media may also be referred to as conversational media, or consumer generated media (Topper, 2009).

Hammock (2009) argues that social media are nothing more than one of three phenomena - the way people take control of their online identity, the way people express themselves online, and the way people connect with one another online. He argues that these phenomena are not new; however, the internet platform, and therefore the influence, is. The influence of social media grows daily, as consumers believe their friends and neighbours and also complete strangers when they endorse a product or service or a restaurant or hotel. Evans (2008) refers to a 'voting process' as an inherent feature typically accompanying social media, where consumers either give their written opinion on a product, or rate it on a numeric scale. Word-of-mouth networks provide an ancient solution to the timeless problem of social organisation, that is, the elicitation of good conduct in communities of self-interested individuals who have short-term incentives to cheat one another (Dellarocas, 2003). Guernsey (2000) suggests that people increasingly rely on opinions posted on web-based feedback systems to make a variety of decisions ranging from what movie to watch to what stocks to invest in, based on anecdotal evidence. A minimum degree of participation in word-of-mouth communities is required before reputation effects can induce any cooperation. Once this threshold of participation is reached, however, the power of reputation springs to life and high levels of cooperation can be expected to emerge (Dellarocas, 2003). Rubinson (2009) suggests,

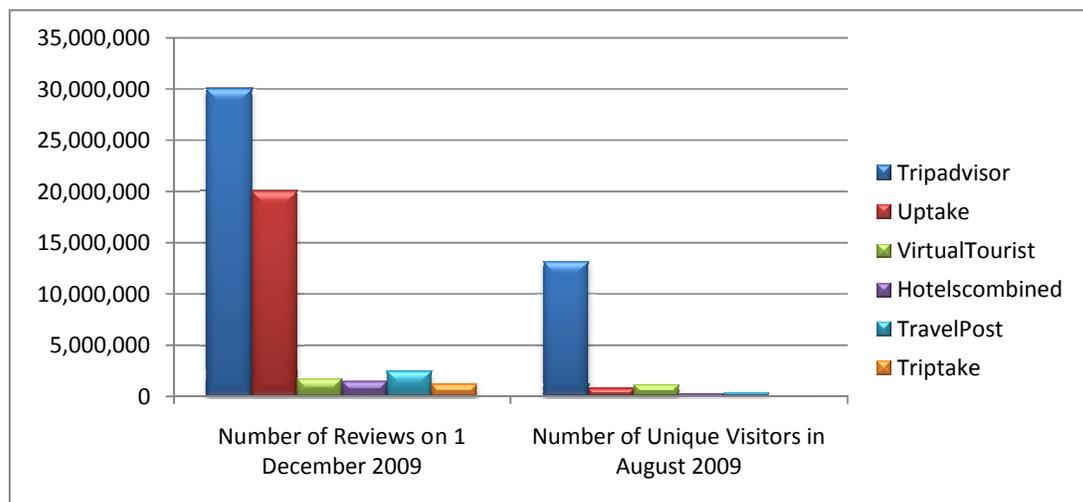
*"The human is now in control in an 'always on' world of long tails of media and purchase choices, and where social media lead to information and opinions spreading like wildfire".*

As such, social media have created an alternative source of information to mainstream mass media, replacing our societies' traditional dependency on the "*wisdom of the specialist*" with the "*knowledge of the many*" (Dellarocas, 2006, p.1577), or as TripAdvisor (2009, p.1) suggests, the "*Wisdom of the crowds*". In the context of this study, 'electronic word-of-mouth platforms' are referred to as 'guest feedback platforms' to align the concept with the service quality and hotel rating paradigm being investigated.

## 2.8.2 Guest feedback platforms for hotel rating

In defining guest feedback platforms for hotel ratings, one could argue (referring to the features of social media in section 2.8.1) that any website that allows consumers to create a profile and post reviews on hotels would provide such a platform. However, this is not the case as some platforms can only be considered to allow partial creation of guest feedback. Online travel agents do not include all hotels in the market as they generally tend to cater to large hotels, or hotel groups. Therefore they are not considered as guest feedback platforms in the context of this study. Additionally, the feedback or rating option on websites such as [www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com) is used less frequently (in terms of number of reviews per hotel) and does not allow the range of options for feedback which websites that focus fully on providing a platform for guest feedback do (see for example, Expedia, 2008 and TripAdvisor, 2009). Most importantly, online travel agents generally use a combination of input factors to determine a hotel rating and are therefore grouped under conventional rating systems in this research. Their role was described in the discussion on conventional rating systems earlier in this chapter. Figure 2.6 shows the number of reviews posted on the main platforms that provide guest feedback.

Figure 2.6 Number of reviews and unique visitors on the main hotel review websites



Source: *Researcher's own model using review data from TripAdvisor (2009), Uptake(2009), VirtualTourist (2009), Hotelscombined (2009), TravelPost (2009), Triptake (2009) and Compete (2009).*

Figure 2.6 clearly shows that TripAdvisor is the market leader, with a strong lead in terms of both reviews and unique visitors. Uptake, Hotelscombined, and TravelPost are 'hotel metasearch sites' that primarily synthesize data from other sites (Jenkins, 2009). It should be noted that the discrepancy between the number of reviews posted on these websites and the number of unique visitors is large, especially in the case of Uptake. TripAdvisor not only leads in size, but also in growth. During 2008 the number of members on TripAdvisor increased from five million to nine million, and in 2009 another three million members joined, creating a total of 11 million members in November 2009 (TripAdvisor, 2009). In August 2010, the TripAdvisor media network recorded over 20 million members (TripAdvisor, 2010). Shank (2009, p.1) suggests that competing with this figure will be difficult for the other hotel review websites owing to the network-effects of TripAdvisor's hotel review business, also referred to as the Ebay-effect (Schaal, 2010c, p.1):

*"I want to post reviews where the most readers are, and I want to read reviews where the most posted reviews are".*

TripAdvisor's competitive power is expected to enable it to maintain its market leader position for years to come even if other internet giants such as Google move into the travel and guest review market (Schaal, 2010a).

### **2.8.3 The power of social media**

Social media have created an impact on the marketing paradigm of companies as they realise that push marketing turns into pull in the blink of an eye (Rubinson, 2009). This is mainly due to the trust that consumers place in information from social media as opposed to information gained directly through company marketing. Consumers are influenced by opinions posted in online forums before they make purchasing decisions (Dellarocas, 2006).

Statistics on how many consumers trust online reviews vary greatly. Jeff (2008b) states that between 23 and 49 percent of respondents claimed to trust online recommendations. The Centre for the Digital Future (2006) claims that only 11.5 percent of users find that information posted on web sites by individuals is accurate. Research on TripAdvisor users conducted by Gretzel (2007) found that online reviews are extremely or very important in

deciding where to stay (78 percent). Thomas (2009) found that 46 percent of the business travellers surveyed (N=100) were influenced by consumer reviews in their hotel selection and 41 percent decided to change their original hotel choice after reading other traveller experiences. It must be noted, however, that as these respondents were all users of TripAdvisor before being surveyed, one may assume they belong to the group of consumers who use and therefore trust such platforms. Nonetheless, there is an apparent trend in the growing number of consumers placing their trust in a stranger's online recommendation. Davies (2010, p.1) argues,

*“People also trust complete strangers over recommendations from the travel industry, according to the research which claims that the holiday industry is facing a social media revolution.”*

Hotels have adopted this trend and many hotel trade magazines and websites encourage hoteliers to actively participate in social media. A survey conducted by Market Metrix and TripAdvisor revealed that 90 percent of the responding hotel managers think reviews are very important and 81 percent visit review sites at least weekly (Barsky & Nash, 2009). Sharkey (2008, p.1) warns,

*“The online review is not going away and we need to get smarter with customer service because we will be caught out if not”.*

Kennedy (2009) suggests that the key factor in a traveller's booking decision will not be based on the hospitality and guest services measured by an inspector from the American Automobile Association, Mobil, the hotel brand, or the State health inspector, but by online reviews posted by the actual guests who have visited the hotel. Nassaure (2010) reports that several hotels have started to monitor social media feedback around the clock, and try to respond as quickly as possible to ensure the hotel brand is positively represented on social media platforms.

The awareness that, through social media, the consumer is now in control also seems to be growing among consumers themselves, reinforcing this trend. As early as 2001, Locke *et al.* described this awareness and the new paradigm it produces in their Cluetrain Manifesto

which argues that the role of the customer is no longer that of a passive consumer, but an active and engaged individual with an opinion to share.

Companies realise that online consumers are more powerful than one influential reporter, inspector or other specialist. Yu (2010) argues that hotels take guest reviews extremely seriously and have incorporated measures to monitor and manage user generated content. Benston (2010) discusses that hotels with good traveller reviews attract more bookings than hotels with a similar, or higher, conventional rating but with mediocre traveller reviews. The choice of the United Kingdom's Tourism Board's VisitLondon and VisitBritain sites to directly post TripAdvisor reviews is testimony to this (May, 2009; Thomas, 2007).

One can therefore conclude that the hotel industry is taking the social media seriously. This has given rise to a new area of business, namely, companies consulting on social media. An example is Brand Karma that serves this market by providing technology services that inform hoteliers on guest feedback (Circos, 2009). The consulting companies argue that the data generated by social media is extremely valuable as it is posted by consumers of their own free will (Circos, 2009).

An important question that arises is what defines the 'free will' of the consumer. Section 2.8.4 answers this question by reviewing what motivates consumers to engage in social media.

#### **2.8.4 Motivation for consumers to engage in social media**

The reasons why travellers are motivated to share their opinions on hotels and other experiences of their travels do not differ much from the reasons they had before social media platforms provided this opportunity. General motivators mentioned are a desire for social interaction, economic incentives, a concern for other consumers, and the potential to enhance one's own self word (Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004). Gretzel (2007) reports a concern for other consumers and a need for extraversion and positive self-enhancement in a study on online travel reviews using a TripAdvisor sample (N=1480). In addition, Gretzel (2007) found that helping a travel service provider is a motivator that most respondents agreed with. Other motivations agreed with, however not as strongly, are extending the experience,

social benefits (making friends) and the fact that social media provide a greater impact than a direct complaint to the travel service provider (Gretzel, 2007). Gretzel's findings do not agree with the study of Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004), as only a small percentage of the respondents indicated that economic incentives motivated them to write reviews (Gretzel, 2007). Gretzel (2007) concludes that motivations to write travel reviews are to a great extent intrinsic, and therefore companies should focus on removing barriers to posting reviews, making it easy for consumers to contribute. Such barriers would include elaborate registration forms, or identity checks, before a consumer is allowed to post reviews.

Consumers who post and express their feelings strongly owing to their negative experience with an organisation also tend to act from an intrinsic motivation. Ward and Ostrom (2006) studied specific protest websites and found that their creators were motivated by a feeling of public betrayal of the company, thereby projecting their own experience to the wider public.

The main discussions regarding social review websites in general and TripAdvisor in particular, however, do not question the motivation of the consumer who writes a review, but rather the reliability of reviews in a system that is open for anyone to post their comments. Section 2.8.5 presents the different arguments surrounding the reliability of social media review websites in general and that of TripAdvisor in particular.

### **2.8.5 The reliability of social media**

A strong argument exists for the use of social media to provide accurate information on services and products. As reviews on social media platforms are generated by real consumers who give ratings out of their free will, one could argue that this is an extremely reliable form of quality assessment from a service quality perspective. Nonetheless, there is much controversy about the reliability of review sites in general, and TripAdvisor in particular. The very features that should make social review sites objective, namely, the large scale of reviews and relative anonymity of the reviewers, make it relatively easy to manipulate the information on such websites (Dellarocas, 2006).

TripAdvisor has been criticised on its reliability. The main arguments behind this criticism are that TripAdvisor allows anonymous reviews (ABC News, 2008; Gulliver, 2009; Elliott, 2009; Frommer, 2009; O’Neill, 2009), that TripAdvisor declines to publish reviews or censors hoteliers’ responses to reviews (Jeff, 2008a; McReady, 2010; Phil, 2010), that TripAdvisor suffers from a conflict of interest as it is owned by Expedia and is dependent on referral and advertising income (Jeff, 2008b, 2009), and furthermore, that consumers are not objective in their assessment of quality (Craig, 2009; Hewitt, 2008; Weyel, 2008). These criticisms will now be discussed.

### **I. TripAdvisor allows anonymous reviews**

The fact that reviews can be placed anonymously is perhaps the biggest criticism of TripAdvisor, as it is of other social media. Once a hotel appears on TripAdvisor, anyone may post a review, including the hotel itself to increase its ranking, or one of its competitors to decrease the ranking. Frommer (2009) argues that it is only logical for a hotel to post false reviews as this drives its business, and therefore predicts that TripAdvisor will fall victim to its own successful model.

Jeff (2009) identified warnings by TripAdvisor that postings on a certain hotel were fraudulent and therefore questions TripAdvisor’s reliability. The following message appears on TripAdvisor’s website alongside hotels that TripAdvisor believes have received false reviews (TripAdvisor, 2009):

*“...TripAdvisor has reasonable cause to believe that either this property or individuals associated with the property may have attempted to manipulate our popularity index by interfering with the unbiased nature of our reviews. Please take this into consideration when researching your travel plans.”*

TripAdvisor spokesperson, April Robb, responded to Frommer’s (2009) comment by outlining three reasons why the integrity of TripAdvisor is generally protected (Elliott, 2009):

- Each review is screened prior to posting and suspicious reviews are investigated by a team of quality assurance specialists;

- Proprietary automated tools help identify attempts to subvert the system; and
- The large and passionate community of more than 25 million monthly visitors help screen the content and report suspicious activity. When a review is suspected to be fraudulent, it is immediately taken down, and measures are put in place to penalize businesses for attempts to game the system.

It is questionable whether these measures are sufficient to prevent fraudulent reviews from being posted on TripAdvisor. Walsh and Swinford (2006) argue that several hoteliers in the United Kingdom are interested in receiving assistance in falsifying reviews. Certain authors (for example, Haslam, 2009 and Starmer-Smith, 2010) argue that hoteliers are being approached by companies promising to post positive reviews in ways that circumvent the measures put in place by TripAdvisor; however, these accounts are generally limited to hearsay and are from hoteliers who wish to remain anonymous. HOTREC (2009) proposes 10 conditions for review sites, which include a verification of the reviewer, and editorial control by the review site, of all reviews before they are posted. Although TripAdvisor does the latter, it does not verify reviewers. TripAdvisor has responded to these accusations by arguing that it is aware that companies post false reviews and has them 'under the radar' (Fox, 2010). TripAdvisor argues that the potential tarnishing of a hotel's reputation by being caught posting false reviews is a strong deterrent. In addition, TripAdvisor points out that writing false reviews is illegal, according to the European Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (European Commission, 2009) in the United Kingdom, and in 23 other European countries where the directive has been transcribed into the national law (Fox, 2010).

However, it can be argued that TripAdvisor will not be able to claim 100 percent reliability as long as it allows anonymous reviews. It can also be argued that the actual number of fraudulent reviews is such a small proportion that it does not influence the overall reliability of the forum; Jeff (2009) identified 92 hotels on TripAdvisor that had the fraud warning above their reviews, which, as a percentage of the total number of hotels reviewed on TripAdvisor at that time (that is, 400,000) (TripAdvisor, 2009) represents only 0.023 percent of all hotels on the platform. After researching a sample of London hotels, O'Connor (2008) concluded that the belief that the TripAdvisor system is compromised by false reviews is unfounded, as little evidence was found of those characteristics that typify false reviews.

From the above, it appears that it is perhaps more possible that TripAdvisor reviews may be manipulated, than that this actually happens on a large scale that poses a potential threat. From the research available it is not possible to quantify the number of false reviews with certainty. The argument of false reviews has, however, not limited the growth of TripAdvisor, notwithstanding that in June 2009 the number of articles and Blogs questioning TripAdvisor's reliability was at its peak (Gulliver, 2009; Elliott, 2009; Frommer, 2009; Hraba Hospitality Consulting, 2009; Jeff, 2009; O'Neill, 2009). TripAdvisor finds it undesirable to ask reviewers to use their real names as this may result in feedback being biased due to travellers being afraid of being blacklisted by hotels (Gulliver, 2010). Furthermore, TripAdvisor argues that with approximately 300 reviews per hotel, ignoring the best and worst reviews of a property (just over one percent of reviews are ignored), still leaves many reviews from which to form an objective opinion (Ross, 2010).

## **II. TripAdvisor censors reviews and responses from hoteliers**

Jeff (2008a) notes that TripAdvisor refuses to post negative reviews. TripAdvisor clearly states that reviews are screened, and if found offensive, or when fraud is suspected, it refuses to publish them (Elliott, 2009; TripAdvisor, 2009). Part of Jeff's (2008a) argument is that TripAdvisor refuses to give a reason for its rejection. In addition, McReady (2010) and Phil (2010) argue that hoteliers' responses are frequently censored or not published at all, which gives the hoteliers no fair chance to respond to false reviews of their hotels.

It is perhaps not the above arguments, but more the perceived arrogance of TripAdvisor that has influenced hoteliers and travel trade over time. This perception is fed through TripAdvisor's lack of response to hotelier queries and complaints (McReady, 2010; Phil, 2010).

## **III. TripAdvisor has a conflict of interest as it is owned by Expedia**

Jeff (2008b) and McReady (2010) argue that TripAdvisor is owned by Expedia, and would therefore have an inherent corporate conflict of interest. This argument is supported by the fact that TripAdvisor has set up as a commercial enterprise and seeks to attract revenues

primarily from visitors it can refer to online travel agents, Expedia included. Therefore its value is largely driven by the number of reviews posted and it would thus not want to refuse too many reviews (Sharkey, 2009b).

There is however no additional evidence presented in any sources reviewed by the researcher that TripAdvisor would, for instance, favour hotels that have business dealings with Expedia, or any other travel brands owned by Expedia. TripAdvisor claims that many high ranking hotels on the website have no relationship with Expedia (Schaal, 2010b).

#### **IV. Consumers are not objective in their assessments**

With the growth of social media, the question is regularly raised to what extent a consumer has an objective opinion. Different consumers can be expected to have different expectations and therefore, ratings and reviews can differ dramatically. Hewitt (2008) makes a direct comparison with the online bookstore, Amazon, when he argues that the personal taste of a traveller influences the objectivity of a review, which reduces its information value for prospective travellers. Consumers can also be said to suffer from a 'horns' or 'halo' effect, where one initial positive or negative impression may influence the entire experience. Weyel (2008) describes a review on TripAdvisor that starts very negatively and concludes that the hotel was not 'that bad' and that the traveller in question had had a bad trip as she was robbed. Burkeman (2008) warns that consumers are unrealistic and emotional in their evaluation of their hotel experience. On the other hand, Hewitt (2008) argues that the same applies to an appointed hotel inspector; the inspector could have a 'bad day'.

Verghese (2007) adds to the argument of subjective consumers by outlining examples of consumers who use social media as a tool for blackmail, requesting discounts, or even free accommodation, and threatening to post negative reviews otherwise. Although such incidents undoubtedly occur, they appear to be limited.

The question of whether consumers are fit to review services effectively lies at the heart of this study. Hewitt's (2008) argument on personal tastes, as well as the other arguments concerning why consumers are unfit to rate hotels should be overcome when the number of reviewers is high enough.

## 2.9 DEVELOPING A THEORETICAL CONCEPTUAL MODEL

This section provides an overview of the main findings of the theoretical review. It further presents a holistic, theoretical framework by means of a conceptual model of how social media could contribute to hotel ratings through adding to the status quo of conventional bodies providing ratings to prospective travellers.

### 2.9.1 Synthesis of theory

The existing body of academic knowledge on the concept of hotel rating provides insight into the

- a) Fundamentals and features of different hotel rating systems including comparisons between different systems (Gee, 1994; Baker & Huyton, 2001; Ismail, 2002; World Tourism Organisation, 2004; Kasavana & Brooks, 2005; Vallen & Vallen, 2005; Stuts & Wortman, 2006; Cser & Ohuchi, 2008).
- b) Challenges of systems and how they should be organised (Vine, 1981; Callan, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1995b; Callan & Fearon, 1997; Hensens, 2001)
- c) Extent to which systems fulfil their role in presenting an accurate perception of the (service) quality that may be expected (Callan, 1990, 1998; Ingram, 1996); Lopez & Serrano, 2004; Su & Sun, 2007).

The findings of some of these studies challenge the effectiveness of current hotel rating systems, and suggest the involvement of guest feedback (Callan, 1998; Su & Sun 2007). This suggestion is supported by a number of non-academic authors (World Tourism Organisation, 2004; HOTREC, 2005; Hotel Management, 2006; Hewitt, 2008; Weyel, 2008) and carefully practiced by a handful of rating bodies (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2008; Michelin, 2009; Expedia, 2009).

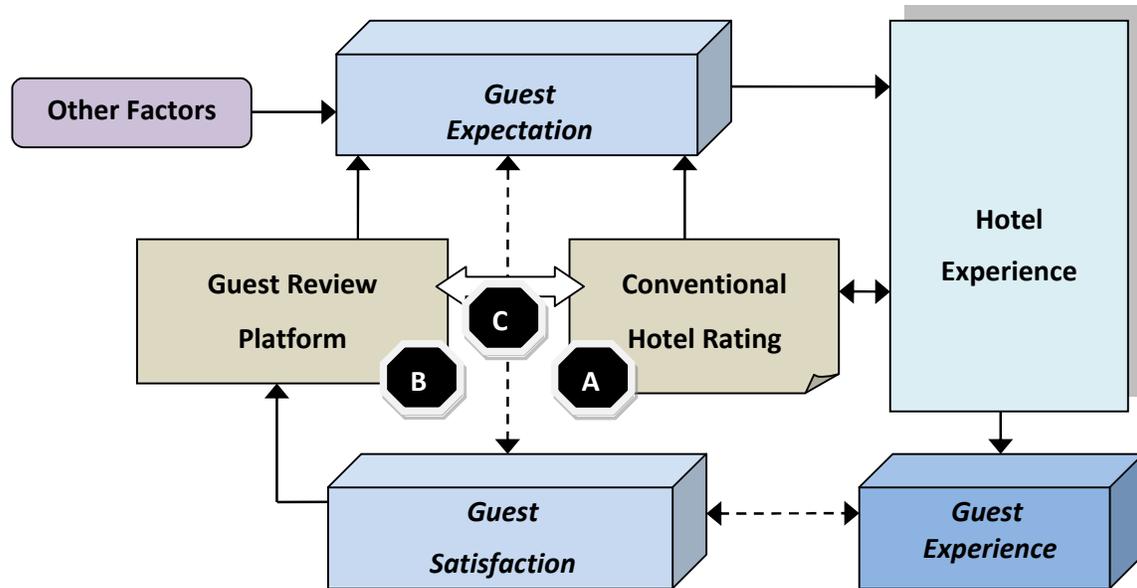
At the same time, there is a strong growth and influence of social media platforms that allow consumers to rate and review their experiences in a hotel. With over 35 million reviews, TripAdvisor is the market leader (TripAdvisor, 2010). Although TripAdvisor's methods are subject to regular criticism, its growth does not display any limitations on its popularity and

use. From a service quality perspective, authors (Berry *et al.* 1990, Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Kotler *et.al.*, 2006) agree that quality is what the guest perceives it as being. Development appears to be reaching a new stage in hotel rating evolution – the guest dictates the level of quality and therefore the rating. This development will ease the job of hotel inspectors and place the judgement where it belongs - with the guest.

### 2.9.2 Conceptual model

The phenomenon of TripAdvisor can be summarized in the conceptual model depicted in Figure 2.7, where guests play an active role in creating a realistic expectation for future guests who visit a hotel. The assumption is that via continuous feedback, a realistic expectation of the lodging experience is created for future guests. This may result in higher satisfaction experienced by future guests, which would benefit not just the traveller and the hotel, but the destination and the distribution channel as well.

Figure 2.7 Conceptual model of the Guest Feedback cycle of Hotel Rating



Source: Researcher's own model

Figure 2.7 provides a framework for further explorative research and is based on two assumptions:

- a) Guest satisfaction is the result of whether guest expectations were met or exceeded by the guest experience (Berry *et al.* 1990, Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Kotler *et al.* 2006).
- b) A published hotel rating or review influences an expectation by the guest (Lopez & Serrano, 2004).

The model further proposes that guest expectation of a hotel stay may be influenced by the conventional hotel ratings. Other factors will also shape the expectation of a hotel stay (see Figure 2.4 of this chapter). During the hotel stay, a guest will experience different products and services. Based on the nature of the expectation of that guest, the guest experience will lead to a certain level of satisfaction. Through social media, for example, TripAdvisor, this satisfaction may be shared with other travellers and may shape the expectation of these travellers.

This research focuses on exploring the way in which conventional rating systems rate hotels, (a) in a non-random sample, (b) in the way guests may provide feedback and the nature of that feedback, and (c) in the congruity of conventional rating systems and a guest feedback platform.

The essence of service quality is meeting or exceeding guest expectations; it is therefore incredible that over 100 years of hotel rating evaluation has managed to largely exclude direct guest input. Hotel Management (2006) is probably not incorrect when it predicts that although guest feedback platforms are partial, subjective, and occasionally unfair; they may ultimately short circuit the guest with regard to international rating standards. Through this study the researcher explored to what extent this claim hold true.

## 2.10 SUMMARY

This chapter explored the three concepts that lie at the heart of this study. First the concept of hotel ratings was explored. Secondly, a theoretical overview of service quality was provided, and thirdly, the concept of social media and how it may help in the process of hotel ratings was explored based on existing studies and materials.

The concepts of hotel rating and service quality were linked in section 2.6. In section 2.8, the researcher outlined how social media may contribute to the feedback mechanism, and the pros and cons enumerated in studies and opinions published to date. These were synthesised in a conceptual model shown in section 2.9.2.

To summarise, it appears that although rating systems have grown in number and scope, their effect in measuring and incorporating the expectations of travellers has been questionable.

Service quality theory dictates that quality is what the guest perceives it to be. This presents a dichotomy considering the way in which conventional rating systems operate.

Social media may present a solution to this dichotomy by allowing travellers to review and rate their hotel experiences directly. Although there is general consensus on the power of social media, their reliability is questioned.

From these conclusions, the research problem and related questions were established. Chapter 3 presents the methodology the researcher applied to answer these questions.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 2, the need for further research on the phenomena of online hotel reviews and ratings and how such data may complement conventional rating systems, or replace them entirely, became apparent. Hotel rating was a controversial subject throughout the last century, mainly because it seeks to measure something that cannot be objectively measured. Using online guest feedback may overcome the quality paradox inherent in hotel rating (Intel, 2004) if the reliability of guest opinions could be established. Another question that derives from the theoretical review is to what extent there is overlap, complementarity, or even conflict of hotel data presented by conventional rating systems and by web based feedback platforms. The limited amount of literature available in this area indicates a large disparity between the two (for example, Hewitt, 2008 and Pascarella, 2005).

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and explains how, through obtaining data on the methods used by TripAdvisor, research question one (How does TripAdvisor allow guests to review hotels?) was answered. Next it describes how the pilot study was used to identify further directions for the study, and elaborates on the collection, coding and analysis of the resultant data. Next follows an outline of how data was collected over the three samples and how it was coded for analysis. Then follows a description of how the data from the different samples was analysed and combined. Lastly, the chapter presents conclusions on the research design.

#### 3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Relatively few studies have focused on the rating of hotels, or the phenomenon of guest feedback on accommodation services. This research is explorative in nature, and focuses on the phenomenological paradigm of hotel ratings. The researcher deemed a qualitative

approach necessary for studying these phenomena. The research is inductive, aimed at building theory rather than testing it (Mouton, 2005; Veal, 1997).

Content analysis was used to obtain the data on the rating systems, and the ratings and reviews from the hotels in the sample from TripAdvisor. The data was gathered from the TripAdvisor website and the websites of bodies operating conventional rating systems using judgemental sampling techniques. The coding process of the data analyzed was peer reviewed monthly to limit bias. In addition, the researcher applied a quantitative analysis to part of the data to strengthen the insights on the relationships between ratings supplied by conventional systems and those from TripAdvisor. All data was then brought together to build a theory on how the data obtained from TripAdvisor could provide insights that are not provided by conventional rating systems. Table 3.1 outlines the specific research design applied to each research question.

*Table 3.1: Research design for the research questions and aims*

Research Question	Research Design
1. How does TripAdvisor allow hotel guests to review hotels?	a) Content analysis of the TripAdvisor website cross-checked with a TripAdvisor manager. b) Researcher's own use of TripAdvisor.
2. How reliable are the guest reviews on TripAdvisor in providing an accurate picture of guest experiences in a hotel?	a) Content Analysis of TripAdvisor rankings and reviews. b) Researcher's use of TripAdvisor.
3. How do hotel ratings on TripAdvisor differ from ratings these hotels receive from conventional systems?	a) Confirmation of the conventional ratings published on TripAdvisor b) Content analysis of ratings on TripAdvisor and triangulation with conventional ratings. c) Statistical analysis of the relation between conventional ratings and TripAdvisor ratings. d) Content analysis of hotel rating documentation.
4. What quality criteria are represented in the guest reviews and how do they relate to criteria measured by conventional systems?	a) Content analysis of TripAdvisor reviews b) Triangulation of criteria in TripAdvisor reviews with conventional rating criteria.
5. To what extent is TripAdvisor valuable in providing information that conventional systems do not?	Theory building.

Source: *Researcher's own model*

Different procedures were used to obtain and analyse the data. Sections 3.3 to 3.7 (below) describe the five phases of the research process to explain how the research questions were answered in this study.

### **3.3 PHASE 1: OBTAIN DATA ON THE METHODS USED BY TRIPADVISOR**

The research question: *“How does TripAdvisor allow guests to review hotels?”* was answered through a content analysis of the TripAdvisor website. During a visit to the E-tourism Africa summit on 1 and 2 December 2009, the researcher was able to cross-reference the data gathered by attending a presentation by Maud Larpent, a Business Development Executive from TripAdvisor. An informal interview with Ms. Larpent provided additional information on the operations of TripAdvisor. In addition, the researcher subscribed to TripAdvisor and from August 2009 to July 2010, posted several reviews to experience firsthand how the website operates. The overview of these reviews and ratings is presented in Appendix 16. To avoid any form of bias, the researcher reviewed hotels in only those destinations that were not included in the sample.

### **3.4 PHASE 2: PILOT STUDY**

To confirm the reliability of the data, the sampling and coding strategy for the TripAdvisor analysis was preceded by a pilot study that was completed in September 2009. The purpose of the pilot study was to

- I. Confirm that TripAdvisor was the website of choice in terms of size and accessibility of data;
- II. Establish a research design and coding strategy suitable for analyzing the data to answer the research questions in the most reliable manner;
- III. Establish a sampling strategy that provided an international perspective on the research and facilitate the reliability of data through saturation; and

- IV. Provide initial insight into the reliability of guest reviews as this finding determined the future course of the research.

The pilot study was conducted using the following process.

- a) A search for other guest review websites was conducted: the number of monthly visitors, the number of hotels displayed, and the number of reviews were used as indicators of market share and usability of TripAdvisor for the study.
- b) The 10 best hotels in four destinations (Amsterdam, Johannesburg, London, and New York) were analyzed to identify discrepancies between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings. These destinations were selected based on the knowledge of the author (Amsterdam and Johannesburg) and the number of tourist arrivals (London and New York). The top 10 hotels were further analyzed based on features that appeared important for identifying trends, and the algorithm used to create the rankings on TripAdvisor.
- c) Three hotels were non-randomly selected from TripAdvisor from the available hotels in Amsterdam, that is, the highest ranking hotel, the middle ranking hotel and the lowest ranking hotel. The highest ranking hotel was the hotel that ranked number one in the TripAdvisor ranking. The middle ranking hotel was selected by dividing the total number of hotels for Amsterdam by two. The lowest ranking hotel was selected as the hotel that scored lowest, but had at least 10 reviews not dating back further than 2008. These 10 reviews were printed and colour coded to identify satisfaction (green), dissatisfaction (pink), or a general experiential comment (yellow). The comments were then inserted in a spreadsheet and categorized as experiences. The three categorizations of hotel rating criteria were objective tangible criteria, subjective tangible criteria, and service delivery criteria.
- d) The findings were compared with the conventional rating systems in place in Amsterdam, Johannesburg, London, and New York.

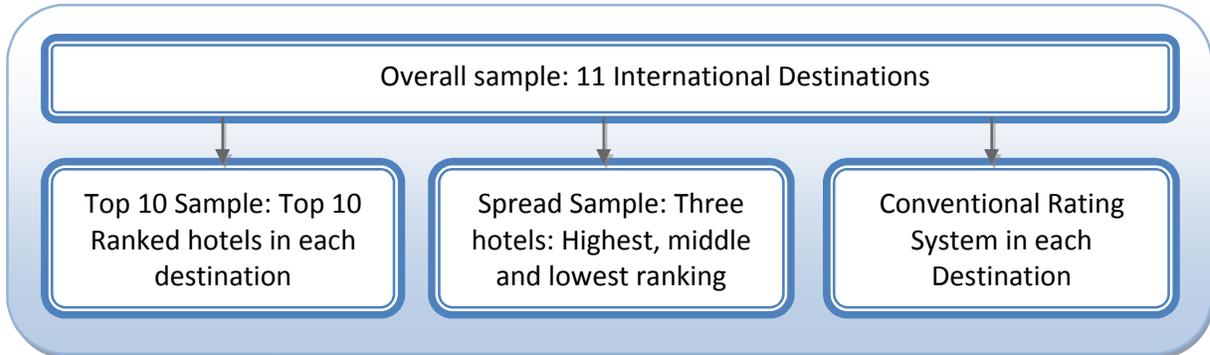
The pilot study resulted in the following findings that were peer reviewed on 10 October 2009 and used to further define the methodology of the study.

- i. TripAdvisor was the market leader in hotel reviews and was therefore the preferred platform for further analysis.
- ii. The TripAdvisor 'ranking' was not identified strictly by the average rating given to that hotel by reviewers, as the 'freshness' (in date) and the number of reviews also appeared to be taken into account. Generally, the TripAdvisor ranking did not appear to differ strongly from the average ratings and as such, provided sufficient means for non random sampling.
- iii. There was no apparent relation between conventional hotel ratings and TripAdvisor ratings.
- iv. The reviews on TripAdvisor appeared to be based on the expectations of both the conventional hotel ratings and prior reviews studied by the traveller.
- v. The reliability of reviews from the first sample appeared satisfactory when looking at consistency through overlap in comments and standard deviation in ratings. The standard deviation of ratings appeared relatively low for the highest and lowest ranking hotel, and higher for the middle ranking hotel. Also the reviews of the middle ranking hotel appeared to be less consistent. To confirm these trends, the sample size needed to be increased to more destinations.
- vi. Ten reviews appeared to be the requisite number to achieve a saturation of data when analysing the guest feedback on a hotel.
- vii. The grouping of keywords with colour coding appeared effective as an initial step for content analysis of the guest reviews on TripAdvisor.
- viii. Due to the abundance of data, the need to focus the research became apparent.
  - The selection of the best, middle, and worst hotel provided sufficient data for analysis, although the number of destinations needed to be expanded to minimize cultural bias as well as regional trends. Therefore the sample was set for 11 destinations in total - Amsterdam, Bangkok, Cape Town, Dubai, Hong Kong, London, New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Rome, and Sydney. Cape Town replaced Johannesburg as this destination provided more data.

- The top 10 analysis of each destination provided useful data for comparing TripAdvisor ratings with conventional systems, as well as insights into what real guests consider excellent service. Therefore it was decided to also collect a sample of the top 10 ranked hotels on TripAdvisor for the study.

The final sample of 11 destinations is depicted in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Samples to gather data



Source: *Researcher's own model*

The following objectives were adhered to when selecting the destinations:

- The destination received more than one million travellers annually;
- The hotels in a destination were represented on TripAdvisor to the extent that further sampling of hotels and reviews was feasible. This was quantified to a minimum of 70 percent of the hotels of that destination on TripAdvisor to have received reviews.
- The destinations together covered all continents.

For each of the 11 sampled destinations, the top 10 hotels based on the TripAdvisor ranking were selected to provide an additional analysis of the relation of TripAdvisor ratings to conventional ratings. The interest for this sample was established during the pilot study, as the researcher found strong discrepancies between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings. This sample presented a total of 110 hotels and is referred to as the Top 10 Sample.

To gather data for the reviews, a different sample was selected. The hotel with the highest ranking was also the number one in the top 10 hotels of that destination, according to the TripAdvisor Popularity Index. The popularity index ranks hotels in a destination based on traveller ratings and other sources that determine traveller satisfaction (TripAdvisor, 2009).

The middle ranking hotel was identified by dividing the total number of hotels available on TripAdvisor by two and then selecting the first hotel that fulfilled the criterion of providing sufficient usable reviews. The pilot study revealed that a minimum of ten reviews provided saturation, and to avoid the influence of changes in the hotel's operations, the researcher established that the reviews should have been posted after 1 January 2008. The lowest ranking was selected by identifying the first hotel that fulfilled the criteria; this was also imposed on the middle hotel, using the inverted selection criteria for hotel ranking on TripAdvisor. This sample is referred to as the Spread Sample.

A third sample comprised the conventional rating systems that were in place in each of the 11 destinations. As not all destinations had conventional government imposed rating systems, an independent system that rated the most hotels in that destination was used. A prerequisite for any system to be included is that it must comply with the following conditions:

- i. The system must be based on quality criteria;
- ii. The system must categorise hotels based on these criteria; and
- iii. The categorisation must be based on a physical inspection.

When a governmentally run or endorsed system was in place in a destination, this system took preference over other systems that were in place.

The samples displayed in Figure 3.1 were thus generated using the non-probability sampling approach of judgemental sampling where the researcher selects sample members to conform to a criterion (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). The Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample were drawn from the TripAdvisor database that represents over 400.000 hotels and over 40 million reviews covering hundreds of destinations (TripAdvisor, 2010). The conventional rating systems represent an estimated seven percent (11 divided by 150) of the estimated total number of hotel rating systems in operation.

### 3.5 PHASE 3: COLLECTION OF THE DATA

The samples outlined in Figure 3.1 provided three sources for data collection. This section outlines what data was collected from each sample and describes the data collection process.

#### 3.5.1 Top 10 Sample: Collection of TripAdvisor ratings

The Top 10 Sample was used to gather data on how the TripAdvisor ratings related to conventional ratings. All ratings supplied by reviewers on TripAdvisor from the top 10 hotels in each destination, were collected. This was a simple process as TripAdvisor provides an overview of the number of reviewers who have rated a hotel one, two, three, four, or five points. From this overview, the total number of reviews was verified, and the average mark and the standard deviation per mark were calculated using Microsoft Excel. Per hotel this resulted in an overview such as depicted in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Calculation of total ratings, average rating, and standard deviation per hotel

Rating (A)	Number of Ratings (B)	a x b (C)	(D)		
5	96	480	10.35	<b>Total (E)</b>	<b>102.00</b>
4	4	16	3.57	<b>Average (F)</b>	<b>4.89</b>
3	0	0	0.00	<b>Standard Deviation (G)</b>	<b>0.20</b>
2	1	2	2.89		
1	1	1	3.89		

Source: *Researcher's own model*

The total number of ratings, average rating and standard deviation of ratings for a hotel were calculated as follows:

- The rating (A) and the number of times it had been allocated (b) were supplied by TripAdvisor. The total number of ratings was calculated by adding all the rows of the number of ratings (B); in this example the total number of ratings adds up to 102.

- By multiplying the rating (A) and the number of ratings (B) one is able to identify a weighted score. By adding the weighted scores, and dividing the outcome by the total number of ratings (E), the average rating for the hotel is calculated.
- The standard deviation was then calculated by identifying the absolute difference of the average score (F) for each rating (A) and multiplying this outcome by the number of times this rating was given (B). The weighted standard deviations (D) were then added, and divided by the number of ratings to identify the standard deviation.

The data were captured on 11 spreadsheets to prepare them for analysis (see Appendix 1). Additional data on the percentage of reviewers who recommended the hotel, the room price, the number of rooms, the hotel brand, and the type of visitors according to the TripAdvisor segmentation were also captured on each spreadsheet.

The Top 10 Sample was prepared for statistical analysis to explore the relation between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings statistically over this sample. This was done by identifying the TripAdvisor rating and the conventional rating per hotel in an Excel file that was then exported to Statistica.

The data on each hotel's conventional rating is in most cases published on TripAdvisor; however these ratings did not always prove to be correct in the pilot study. Therefore, each rating was cross-referenced with the conventional rating system database of the specific destination, and if a discrepancy was noticed, the latter was adopted. If no conventional rating was found in the database, the conclusion was drawn that this hotel did not have a conventional rating even if TripAdvisor indicated that there was one.

### **3.5.2 The Spread Sample: Collection of TripAdvisor reviews**

The Spread Sample was used to gather reviews from TripAdvisor. The reviews on TripAdvisor are organized in alphabetical order by review title, and capital letters are given preference. From each of the 33 identified hotels, using the 'my Trip' function on the website, the researcher selected the 10 most recent reviews in the English language from the website, after which the 10 reviews were printed in a PDF file. This resulted in 33 files each with 10

reviews, providing a total of 330 reviews. Appendix 2 presents all reviews that were gathered.

The researcher chose to also use this sample to compare ratings, using the data capturing technique outlined for the Top 10 Sample in this section, calculating the average rating, and the standard deviation of ratings. The conventional ratings in the Spread Sample were cross-checked in a similar fashion to those of the Top 10 Sample.

### **3.5.3 Collection of conventional rating systems in the sample**

The data on hotel rating systems was collected through an inductive method that started with the World Tourism Organisation study (2004) and the study of Mintel (2004), which provided information on the basic features of most of the systems in the 11 destinations. The researcher attempted to obtain an English version of the system and its criteria through web-based searches, and by contacting the rating organisation responsible. When a system could only be retrieved in a foreign language, the researcher had it translated by a native speaker of that language with a background in the hotel industry. Using this method, the conventional rating systems in nine of the 11 destinations could be retrieved and translated. The system of Bangkok was not translated nor was the system in Rome. However, as these systems were described in different studies and elaborated on the website of the respective bodies, the information required could be retrieved.

## 3.6 PHASE 4: CODING THE DATA

The data from the Spread Sample and the conventional rating systems were required to be coded for analysis. Section 3.6.1 describes how this was done for the Spread Sample and section 3.6.2 describes how the criteria from the conventional rating systems were coded.

### 3.6.1 Coding of the reviews from the Spread Sample

As the Spread Sample consisted of written reviews, additional coding was required to prepare this data for analysis. These reviews were initially coded with coloured markers, after which the data was inserted in spreadsheets, using a categorization that followed from the categorization of criteria in conventional rating systems that was reviewed in section 2.6.2 (objective tangible criteria, subjective tangible criteria, and service delivery criteria). The data was then coded further, identifying the specific criteria used in the review, after which it was quantified in another spreadsheet. The following process was used to code the data and ready it for analysis.

- i. For each selected hotel, the researcher chose the ten most recent guest reviews written in the English language and printed them in their entirety (see Appendix 2). Each printed review was then analysed and colour coded according to four categories.
  - Yellow was for comments that expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction without pinpointing a criterion that caused that emotional state.
  - Green was for comments that expressed satisfaction with a criterion.
  - Pink was for comments that expressed dissatisfaction with a criterion.
  - Blue was for comments that could not be placed in the former three categories, but gave the impression of being important for further analysis.
- ii. After coding the data in colour, the review comments were broken down into four categories on a spreadsheet, each with a positive and a negative column, presenting eight options for categorization. Per review, the following additional data was captured,
  - The title of the review,
  - The date of the review,
  - The home country of the reviewer, and

- The rating given to the hotel (one to five points).

Table 3.3 outlines these categories and the researcher’s definition for each category.

*Table 3.3 Coding of guest reviews based on quality criteria and experience*

Experience		Objective Tangible Criteria		Subjective Tangible Criteria		Service Delivery Criteria	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Expressions of (dis)satisfaction without pinpointing a hotel criterion. As the perceived quality of a hotel’s location was found to be highly subjective, comments on the hotel’s location, accessibility to points of interest, and the hotel environment are grouped in this category.		Expressions of (dis)satisfaction with the availability and size of facilities or services.		Expressions of (dis)satisfaction with the state of facilities, cleanliness, state of maintenance, and the environment in the hotel. The environment includes items such as décor, view, functionality, and other items that are tangible, but subjective in assessment.		Expressions of the quality of service delivery in the hotel. Food quality was grouped in this category as it links closest to the concept of service quality.	

Source: *Researcher’s own model.*

It is clear from Table 3.3 that a total of eight categories were used to code the data. The coding process resulted in 33 spreadsheets of data (Appendix 4). Through a count function in the spreadsheet application, the researcher then quantified the comments per category, which resulted in the quantified overview of hotel rating categories and experience depicted in Appendix 5.

To further specify the quality criteria mentioned in the comments, an additional spreadsheet was created where the comments relating to criteria, and also experiential comments that had no place in any of the three groups relating to hotel rating systems, could be quantified further. This resulted in a quantified overview of hotel rating criteria in TripAdvisor reviews (Appendix 6).

The quantitative overviews created in the content analysis of reviews were then ready to be compared with the criteria that came from the conventional rating systems analysis.

### 3.6.2 Coding of the rating criteria from the conventional rating systems

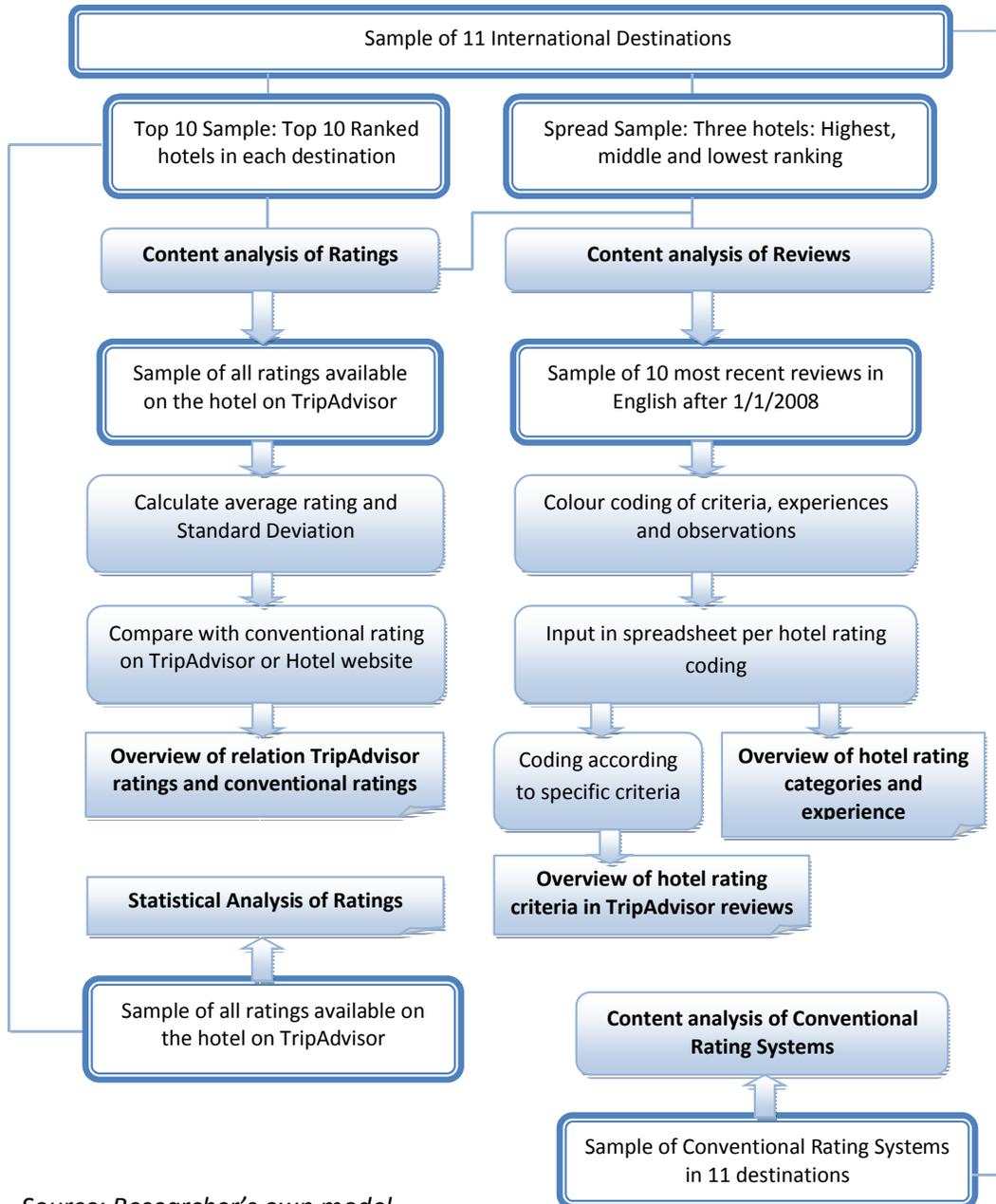
To allow for triangulation of data of the criteria mentioned in TripAdvisor reviews and the criteria from the conventional rating systems in the 11 sampled destinations, the three groups of criteria presented in section 2.6.2 were applied to the criteria in conventional rating systems. First the number of criteria in the different sections of the system was counted. Then the researcher placed each criterion into one of the three categories (objective tangible criteria, subjective tangible criteria, and service delivery criteria) and added these criteria to arrive at an overview of the total number of criteria in each category for the specific system in the destination.

As the number of criteria differed strongly, the researcher then decided to express the focus of the different criteria in a percentage of the total number of criteria for that system. The system in place in Paris at the time of this study included only 27 criteria, whereas the system in place in Hong Kong (the Forbes Travel Guide system) included over 750 criteria due to the many criteria in its mystery shopping assessment. The coded data from the conventional rating systems in the 11 sampled destinations is presented in Appendix 14.

### 3.7 PHASE 5: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The three samples provided both quantitative and qualitative data. This section will outline how the different types of data were analysed to answer the research questions outlined in paragraph 1.4. Figure 3.2 provides an overview of how the sampling, data collection, and coding provided data for analysis.

Figure 3.2 Data sampling, collection, and coding



Source: Researcher's own model.

Figure 3.2 illustrates how the three samples were used for different forms of data collection, coding and analysis. The Top 10 Sample was used for content analysis of the TripAdvisor ratings to identify to what extent TripAdvisor ratings differ from those of conventional systems (research question 2) and to establish to what extent the standard deviation of ratings provides insight into the consistency and therefore reliability of guest ratings (research question 3). The ratings were additionally subjected to a statistical analysis to further explore the relationship between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings. The data obtained from the Top 10 Sample was tested for significant relationships using the software Statistica to confirm the findings from the content analysis. This process involved comparing the TripAdvisor ratings with the conventional ratings through a T-test with the full sample (N=110).

The data from the Spread Sample was also used for the content analysis of ratings for research questions 2 and 3. The main focus of this sample, however, was the content analysis of guest reviews on TripAdvisor.

In analysing the qualitative data the researcher acknowledges the fallibility of his own interpretation. Although the researcher is convinced from the research that platforms such as TripAdvisor present an unprecedented amount and richness of guest feedback data on the hospitality experience, a weakness remains that these opinions need to be interpreted to quantify and compare the data to other findings. This interpretation presents a weakness, as it is not always clear from the text what exactly the reviewer intended to say. The researcher has attempted to minimize this bias by keeping reviewer comments as close to their original text as the coding process allowed. Additionally the researcher attempted to analyze the content of a review in the context of the entire review. For example, when a reviewer describes the hotel room and then adds separately, 'it was clean', this was interpreted as 'the room was clean'.

Research question three was answered through content analysis where the researcher compared findings on TripAdvisor with claims for and against reliability found in articles discussed in chapter two. This analysis focused on:

- The consistency of reviews per hotel and the expressed agreement or disagreement between reviewers,
- The standard deviation of each hotel analyzed from the Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample,
- The context provided in reviews that allows the reader to understand why a reviewer expressed a satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the hotel experience,
- Any anomalies the researcher encountered in the writing style of the review, and
- An analysis of the procedures used by TripAdvisor and the interview with Ms. Larpent on 1 December 2009.

The analysis of the conventional rating systems took place in conjunction with the analysis of the Spread Sample. Based on the findings on conventional rating systems in chapter 2, the researcher sought to identify the unique features of the system, its criteria, and its execution in the destinations, and triangulate trends to the data from TripAdvisor's Spread Sample data using the coding strategy that was outlined in section 3.6.1

### **3.8 SUMMARY**

This chapter discussed the methodology of the study that consisted of five phases.

The first phase involved obtaining data on the methods used by TripAdvisor. This data was obtained through interviews with a TripAdvisor executive and the researcher's own use of the website over the period of a year.

As the study was explorative in nature, the second phase involved a pilot study where four destinations on TripAdvisor were used to further define the methodology of the study.

The third phase consisted of data collection from three samples covering 11 international destinations. The first sample consisted of the top 10 ranking hotels per destination on TripAdvisor and was called the 'Top 10 Sample'. The second sample consisted of the highest ranking, middle ranking, and lowest ranking hotel per destination and was called the 'Spread Sample'. The third sample consisted of the conventional rating system and supporting documentation of each of the 11 destinations.

The fourth phase involved the coding of the data from the Spread Sample and the sample of the conventional hotel rating systems. The data from the Spread Sample consisted of reviews that were printed, colour coded, broken into categories, and quantified. The data from the conventional rating systems was quantified in categories.

The fifth phase consisted of the analysis of the data. Content analysis was applied to all samples after which the data was triangulated. The comparison between ratings of the Top 10 Sample and the conventional rating system sample was supported by a T-test.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the first two research questions: (1) “How does TripAdvisor allow guests to review hotels?” and (2) “How reliable are the guest reviews and ratings on TripAdvisor in providing an accurate picture of guest experiences in a hotel?”

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS FROM TRIPADVISOR TO INVESTIGATE ITS RELIABILITY

#### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 provided an overview of the methodology of the study. The results of the study are presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6. This chapter will present the findings on TripAdvisor and discuss its reliability. Chapter 5 will discuss how ratings on TripAdvisor differ from those presented by conventional rating systems, what quality criteria are presented on TripAdvisor and how these criteria relate to the criteria used in conventional rating systems. Chapter 6 will discuss the value of TripAdvisor in presenting information to prospective travellers that conventional rating systems do not.

This chapter will first present the findings on TripAdvisor as a platform for guest feedback. The first section describes the website known as TripAdvisor, the traveller services it offers, and the process through which ratings, reviews and rankings on TripAdvisor are established. Then the findings regarding TripAdvisor's reliability will be presented by means of the TripAdvisor screening algorithm, the number of ratings and reviews in the Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample, the standard deviation of the ratings in these samples, the consistency of the reviews, the context of the reviews, the credibility of writing styles in reviews, and the types of hotels found in the Top 10 Sample. This is followed by a discussion on the reliability of TripAdvisor. The chapter is concluded with a summary.

## **4.2. TRIPADVISOR AS A PLATFORM FOR GUEST FEEDBACK**

This section describes TripAdvisor's organisation, the services it provides to travellers, and how it allows travellers to post reviews with ratings on the website for other travellers to read. These results were gathered from the 'about us' section on the TripAdvisor website, a presentation by and interview with a TripAdvisor executive, and through the personal experiences of the researcher while posting and reading reviews on the TripAdvisor website.

### **4.2.1 TripAdvisor's organisation**

TripAdvisor Media Network is part of the Expedia Group, a public company trading on the NASDAQ stock exchange. TripAdvisor was founded in 2000 by Steve Kaufer as a vertical search engine for travel that sought to sell its destination content and licensing to internet portals such as Yahoo, and to Global Distribution Systems such as Sabre (Sabre Travel Network, 2007; Schaal, 2010b). As such it was mainly intended to connect consumers with the different suppliers in the travel industry. With the incorporation of a guest review option its focus changed from business to becoming a forum for guest feedback. Currently, TripAdvisor operates sites in 21 countries, including the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Spain, India, Japan, Portugal, Brazil, Sweden, The Netherlands and China, that allow travellers to post reviews and ratings online concerning their hotel stay (Schaal, 2010a; TripAdvisor, 2010).

Although travellers may access the website hosted in their own language, guest reviews appear to be collected on and distributed from a central database, as they can be found in different languages and are the same on the different sites. This was verified with a cross check between [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com) and <http://nl.tripadvisor.com> in September 2009.

TripAdvisor is the largest platform for consumer travel feedback with over 11 million members and more than 30 million reviews in December 2009 (TripAdvisor, 2009). A comparison of the number of reviews per hotel for the top 10 hotels in Amsterdam on 4 October 2009 revealed an average of 249 reviews on TripAdvisor, compared with an average of 78 reviews on Hotels.com (2009). Appendix 8 outlines this comparison.

TripAdvisor has been growing since its inception and this growth does not seem to have slowed down: in November 2009 the researcher observed that the number of reviews

posted on the home page of TripAdvisor.com had increased from 25 million to 30 million (TripAdvisor, 2009). In July 2010, the website boasted 35 million reviews and 34 million unique monthly visitors, making it bigger than Expedia and the top five airlines in terms of traffic (Schaal, 2010b). Despite the relatively large numbers of site visitors and reviews posted on the website, the organisation is relatively small with an estimated number of staff of just over 300 in December 2009.

The slogan up until November 2009 was '*Get the truth, then go*', after which it was changed to '*World's most trusted travel advice*' (TripAdvisor, 2009). The researcher assumes the change was related to criticism of TripAdvisor's objectivity and the reliability of its ratings (Elliott 2009; Frommer, 2009; Jeff, 2009; O'Neill, 2009).

TripAdvisor generates income through advertising and referrals. Its main source of income is referrals to online travel agents that pay per click (PPC). When a visitor to the website clicks to establish rates, or to acquire more information on the facilities of the property, the visitor is referred to one of the online travel agents that TripAdvisor has an agreement with, such as Expedia.com, Bookings.com, Hotels.com, Splendia.com, EasyToBook.com, and Fastbooking.com (TripAdvisor, 2009). Group reservation systems such as Marriott.com, Intercontinental.com and others also appear in this reference.

A second source of income is through banners that are posted on the TripAdvisor website. These banners may refer to hotel brands, destinations, or other travel related content.

A third source of income that was launched in November 2009 is 'business listings' where hotels can pay for having their contact details and a direct link to their websites displayed on TripAdvisor (TripAdvisor, 2009). This is expected to create additional revenues from hotels that are currently not distributing their rooms through Online Travel Agents or Global Distribution Systems. At the end of April 2010, almost 12,000 properties had signed up for this service (May, 2010).

#### 4.2.2 Traveller services offered on TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor claims it seeks to provide: “*recommendations for hotels, resorts, inns, vacations, travel packages, vacation packages, travel guides and lots more*” (TripAdvisor, 2009). The website provides information on flights, hotels, and restaurants, and also travel tips and free travel guides. With the acquisition of Flipkey in 2008 and HollidayLettings in 2010, it is expanding its hotel services to vacation rentals as well (Schaal, 2010b).

The TripAdvisor website allows visitors to create a unique profile where information can be stored, and exchanged with other travellers. Once a profile has been created, guests can write reviews, rate hotels and restaurants, create a travel map of destinations visited, build ‘trips’ that store information on destinations, hotels and restaurants, and communicate with other travellers .

TripAdvisor displays a range of hotels that appears to be more comprehensive than statistics made available by tourism boards, or organisations that seek to provide travel statistics on a commercial basis. For example, the City of Amsterdam (2008) listed 357 hotels, whereas, on 1 November 2009 TripAdvisor listed 360 hotels, 151 B&Bs / Inns, 67 Special Lodging properties, and 203 vacation rentals for Amsterdam. A similar comparison shows Dubai listing 352 hotels on 5 May 2010 (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2010b) compared with TripAdvisor’s 379 on 8 May 2010. This disparity is likely due to the fact that TripAdvisor allows travellers to suggest hotels to be added to its database by both hoteliers and reviewers. TripAdvisor also includes certain accommodation in the ‘hotel’ category that governmental authorities may classify as ‘guest house’ or ‘tourist apartments’.

When searching for a hotel, TripAdvisor offers a comprehensive filter that allows travellers to narrow their search. In November 2009, this filter included

- i. A geographical area using Google maps or a specific neighbourhood;
- ii. A price range;
- iii. The Hotel Class, derived from a conventional rating system (one to five stars);
- iv. Amenities that are available (for example, ‘free high speed internet’);
- v. The Hotel Brand; and

- vi. Recommendations to different target groups.

The filter options 'amenities that are available' (iv) and 'hotel brand' (v) appear to derive from actual guest feedback, as the researcher was asked about these items when writing a review and rating a hotel. The filter option 'recommendations to different target groups' was expanded in December 2009, and provides a parallel menu of popularity for business hotels. TripAdvisor's ranking of properties is categorized by destination and is referred to as its 'popularity index'. The TripAdvisor website (TripAdvisor, 2009) explains the popularity index as follows:

*"The TripAdvisor Popularity Index incorporates Traveler Ratings, guidebook entries, newspaper articles and other web content to determine traveler satisfaction. Emphasis is placed on the most recent information. We calculate the Popularity Index using an algorithm that takes into account not only individual Traveler Ratings, but also opinions from other content sources on the web (such as guidebooks)."*

#### **4.2.3 The process of registration, reviews and ratings, and rankings**

Travellers need to be registered with TripAdvisor to be allowed to write reviews and rate hotels in TripAdvisor's database. A traveller needs to provide a username, email address, and a town of residence in order to create a profile. Other information, such as name and age is optional. The registration process is verified by email.

When a hotel is not yet listed on TripAdvisor, the traveller may recommend the hotel for inclusion using a form on the website. TripAdvisor then sends verification to the traveller that the hotel has been included (see below). The researcher received a verification after submitting the Town Lodge hotel in Midrand, South Africa, for a review on 2 December 2009:

*"Dear TripAdvisor Member,*  
*We'd like to let you know that the property you submitted is currently listed on TripAdvisor.*  
*Please click here now to write your review or add photos:*  
[http://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel\\_Review-d1597877](http://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-d1597877)

*Near the top of the page, just below the property's name, click "Write a review." Or if you would like to add photos without writing a review, click the green "Add photos" button.*

*Thank you again for contributing details about this property, and we look forward to your review.*

*Best regards,*

*The TripAdvisor Support Team"*

When rating a property, the traveller is first asked to rate his or her overall experience on a five point scale denoting 'Excellent', 'Good', 'Average', 'Poor', or 'Terrible'.

Next the reviewer is asked to provide a similar assessment for a number of specific criteria. These criteria appear to be altered regularly. In March 2010 the fixed categories were 'Value', 'Rooms', 'Location', 'Cleanliness', 'Service', and 'Sleep Quality'. 'Sleep quality' appeared as a new criterion in reviews from February 2010. Fixed criteria used earlier include 'Check in / Front Desk', and 'Business service (e.g., internet access)'.

The final quantitative assessment that is required from the traveller is a yes / no answer to the question: *'Would you recommend this hotel to a friend?'*

In terms of qualitative input, the traveller is asked to provide a title that summarizes the review, as well as a full review of at least 50 characters about the hotel stay.

In addition to an assessment of the property, the traveller is asked about the demographic conditions of the trip, the trip's purpose, that is, whether it was business or leisure, and who the reviewer travelled with, that is, colleagues, friends, family, or solo. In addition, since early 2010, the traveller is offered 17 options concerning the purpose of his or her trip.

A review is frequently posted within 12 hours, but may be 'flagged', indicating that a moderator from TripAdvisor is required to go through the review manually, which may take up to two weeks. A message is flagged due to insulting language, or characteristics that may indicate fraud. TripAdvisor uses an electronic algorithm for screening. The algorithm is not disclosed, but appears to screen the text of the review as well as the IP address of the computer from which the review was posted. The researcher experienced this delay from early 2010, after which TripAdvisor indicated that all reviews are screened by a TripAdvisor staff member (Gulliver, 2010). When a message is approved, it will appear on the website

with the date, username and location of the traveller who has posted it, including a direct link to the profile of that traveller.

Larpent (2009a/b) provides more insight into TripAdvisor's algorithm, although the exact weighting is only known by the senior staff and programming staff of TripAdvisor. Ms. Larpent confirmed the following weighting factors:

- i. Freshness - newer reviews are weighted stronger than older ones;
- ii. Number of reviews - a property with more reviews, but the same average score will be ranked higher in the popularity index.

Initially TripAdvisor used to adjust the first few ratings given with reviews. If a hotel received a first review, it was moderated upwards when it was very low, or downwards when it was very high to avoid the hotel suffering, or benefiting in extreme measure. The researcher became aware of this when he rated the Waterfront Guest House in Parys, South Africa, with a score of two out of five: later this rating appeared on TripAdvisor with a score of three out of five (see Appendix 9). However, from December 2009 this practice seems to have changed, as hotels with only a handful of ratings do not appear to receive a visible overall rating unless a sufficient number of ratings confirm the initial ones. This was found to be the case with, for instance, the Stellenbosch Lodge Country Hotel in Cape Town, South Africa, that received two ratings in December 2009, but displayed no average rating on the overview screen (see Appendix 10).

Hotels that have not been rated tend to be ranked below properties that have been rated in the popularity index, although how this occurs remains unclear. The impression is that hotels without TripAdvisor ratings, which have received exposure in other media, may be placed above hotels that have received very poor ratings.

The researcher found that the ratings drive the rankings, which means, for example, that when hotel A scores higher in its reviewer ratings than hotel B, it will receive a higher ranking. This is visible in the average ratings of the top 10 hotels in the destinations displayed in Appendix 1. The ranking is used to define the sequence in which TripAdvisor presents hotels in a destination. This means that the hotel that ranks number one in a destination will be at the top of the list and the number two hotel below that hotel, and so

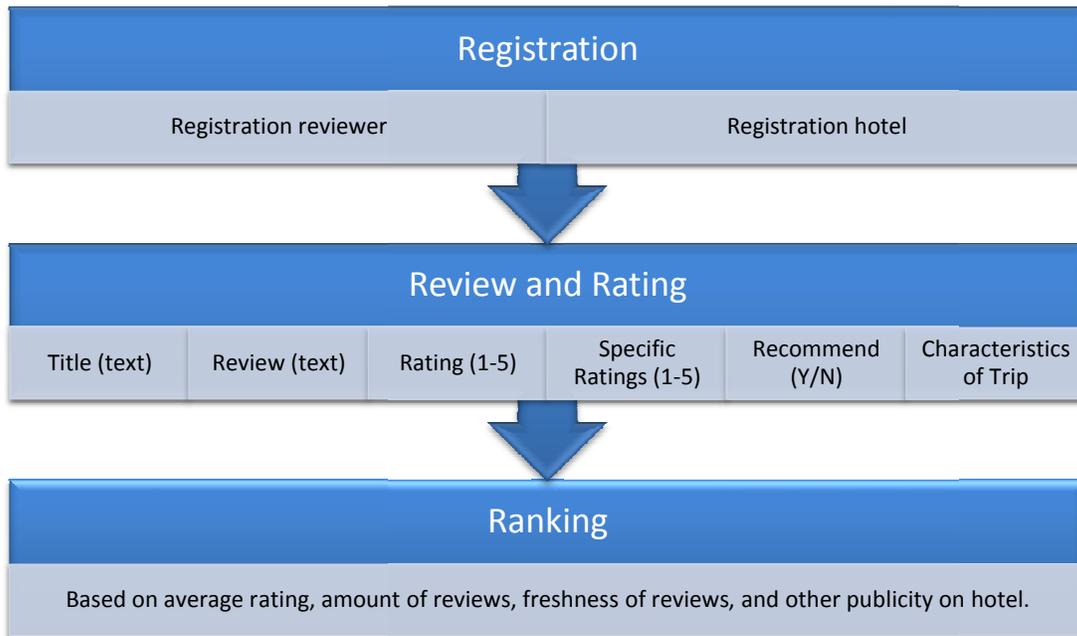
on, unless the user of the TripAdvisor website uses the filter function, limiting results to a certain geographical area, price, or other filtering option offered on TripAdvisor.

The TripAdvisor website also presents the number of ratings that each hotel received for each of the scores from one to five. The demographics of the different reviewers who have rated the hotel and how many reviewers recommended the hotel are expressed as a percentage, and there is also a summary of the latest reviews. When the reader selects a review, all the details of that review and the reviewer are presented, that is,

- i. The demographics of the reviewer,
- ii. The total rating given by this reviewer as well as the ratings for the fixed criteria, and
- iii. Whether this reviewer recommends the hotel.

Appendix 9 provides an impression of how a full review is presented on TripAdvisor. The process of registration, reviews, ratings, and rankings is summarised in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Process of registrations, reviews, and rankings on TripAdvisor



Source: *Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor (2009) and the researcher's use of TripAdvisor.*

### **4.3 THE RELIABILITY OF TRIPADVISOR**

Section 2.8.5 presented a theoretical review of the discussions on the reliability of social media in general, and of TripAdvisor in particular. This section seeks to present the empirical data the researcher retrieved to clarify these discussions. TripAdvisor's reliability was criticised on four points:

- i. TripAdvisor allows anonymous reviews of hotels and restaurants to game the rating system (ABC News, 2008; Gulliver, 2009; Elliott, 2009; Frommer, 2009; O'Neill, 2009).
- ii. TripAdvisor declines to publish reviews (Jeff, 2008a) and censors feedback from hoteliers (McReady, 2010; Phil, 2010);
- iii. TripAdvisor suffers from a conflict of interest as it is owned by Expedia and is dependent on referral and advertising income (Jeff, 2008b, 2009); and
- iv. Consumers are not objective in their assessment of quality (Hewitt, 2008; Weyel, 2008).

In the following sections, the findings on the TripAdvisor screening algorithm, the standard deviation of the Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample, a study of the consistency of traveller reviews in the Spread Sample, and the types of hotels found in the Top 10 Sample are presented. The types of hotels found in the Top 10 Sample are used to test the accusation of TripAdvisor's preferential treatment of hotels. Lastly, there is a discussion of the findings in response to the four areas of criticism.

#### **4.3.1 The TripAdvisor screening algorithm**

As noted above, TripAdvisor developed a screening algorithm in response to accusations concerning its reliability (Elliott, 2009). In personally using TripAdvisor, the researcher explored the algorithm's effectiveness. Further clarity was gained during a presentation by and interview with Maud Larpent, Business Development Executive of TripAdvisor, on 1 and 2 December 2009.

Between August 2009 and July 2010, the researcher reviewed 18 hotels in South Africa and The Netherlands, and explored the process of writing reviews as well as the way in which

TripAdvisor deals with them. The researcher found several warnings on the review screen while posting reviews (see Appendix 11).

All the researcher's reviews and ratings were accepted and posted as they were written, usually within a day. However, on 2 February 2010, the researcher wrote a review on the Fish River Sun Hotel in Port Alfred. This was also the indicated home town of the researcher at the time, as this location was used for a corporate teambuilding exercise. The review's publication took several days. Therefore, the researcher assumes that this review was selected by the screening algorithm and later found to be in order by a TripAdvisor staff member.

The screening algorithm selects potentially false reviews based on

- i. The Internet Protocol (IP) address. When this address is close to or at the hotel it may be likely that the review was posted by a member of the hotel staff.
- ii. The writing style of a review that appears to directly promote the hotel, for example, by making excessive use of the hotel name, as well as other factors that are not shared by TripAdvisor.
- iii. Language that may be deemed insulting and
- iv. Other variables that are not disclosed by TripAdvisor.

Larpent (2009b) explained that the screening algorithm is continuously fine-tuned and is only known to the senior management of TripAdvisor. When a review is selected by the algorithm, the TripAdvisor staff member needs to make a decision whether to accept or reject it.

#### **4.3.2 Number of ratings and reviews in the Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample**

An argument that has been used by TripAdvisor to establish its reliability is the number of reviews and ratings posted per hotel (Elliott, 2009). The rationale behind capturing the number of reviews is that when this number is relatively high and the number of false reviews relatively low, the distortion of the average rating and therefore, the ranking, by these false reviews would be minimal. The researcher chose to capture the number of

reviews of each hotel in the Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample to identify how many reviews and rating these hotels received. Table 4.1 illustrates the number of reviews per hotel of the Top 10 Sample as well as the average for the Top 10 hotels per destination.

*Table 4.1 Number of reviews per hotel in the Top 10 Sample*

Ranking	Amsterdam	Bangkok	Cape Town	Dubai	Hong Kong	London	New York	Paris	Rio de Janeiro	Rome	Sydney
<b>1</b>	102	592	73	207	839	165	94	117	146	103	104
<b>2</b>	304	94	380	661	320	211	927	32	111	163	196
<b>3</b>	121	303	41	753	189	307	555	292	82	536	172
<b>4</b>	167	31	273	291	230	417	667	186	34	90	30
<b>5</b>	91	351	43	111	133	63	1540	373	105	361	120
<b>6</b>	299	172	74	461	144	399	364	137	19	17	135
<b>7</b>	402	121	35	270	266	893	26	454	127	114	208
<b>8</b>	343	373	152	147	171	623	441	635	69	307	91
<b>9</b>	159	656	147	21	130	536	151	162	28	32	298
<b>10</b>	347	59	7	205	218	157	1118	132	68	464	236
<b>Average</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>588</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>159</b>

*Source: Data collected from TripAdvisor between 11 October and 15 November 2009.*

Table 4.1 displays large differences in the number of reviews per hotel. These differences are likely to be the result of the extent to which travellers to a destination use TripAdvisor. New York shows the highest number of reviews per hotel among the Top 10 hotels: the Sofitel New York, ranked number five, received 1540 reviews on 25 October 2009. With so many reviews, one could argue that it would be almost impossible to influence this hotel's ranking with false reviews.

However, Table 4.1 also displays a hotel with only 7 reviews. It could be argued that the ranking of Cape Town's Kensington Place (ranked number 10, as per data collected on 15 November 2009) would be easy to manipulate by fabricating 10 false reviewers, namely, the close family and friends of an hotelier, and having them place extremely positive or negative reviews.

The Spread Sample displays similar deviations. Table 4.2 illustrates the number of reviews and ratings posted for each hotel in the Spread Sample.

*Table 4.2 Number of reviews per hotel in the Spread Sample*

Ranking	Amsterdam	Bangkok	Cape Town	Dubai	Hong Kong	London	New York	Paris	Rio de Janeiro	Rome	Sydney	Average
<b>Highest</b>	105	613	78	207	839	165	95	117	146	103	104	<b>234</b>
<b>Middle</b>	52	28	50	57	169	25	132	91	96	226	47	<b>88</b>
<b>Lowest</b>	40	31	15	16	90	71	145	63	27	201	37	<b>67</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>130</b>

Source: *Data collected from TripAdvisor between 31 October 2009 and 2 January 2010.*

Table 4.2 illustrates that the average number of reviews in the Spread Sample is 130. Besides large deviations in the number of reviews posted for the different hotels in the different destinations, Table 4.2 displays a trend, namely, that the higher ranking hotels have more reviews than the middle and lower ranking hotels. This trend applies to seven of the 11 destinations and is also visible in the average scores per ranking of the destinations. It is important to note that extremes are not represented, since the hotels in the Spread Sample were selected based on a minimum number of 10 reviews and rankings in the English language not dating back further than 1 January 2008.

From this one can argue that the hotels with lower rankings tend to be easier to manipulate as the number of reviews on these hotels tends to be lower.

### 4.3.3 Consistency of ratings

The consistency of ratings indicates to what extent there is agreement on the quality of the hotel experience. From the TripAdvisor website, the researcher was able to collect and calculate the standard deviation of all hotel ratings from the Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample. The reason for using the standard deviation as a means to identify reliability is that it gives the impression reviewers are in agreement when they rate a hotel from one to five

points. A high standard deviation can also indicate that one or more reviews is false, as one can assume that false ratings would deviate strongly from average ratings should a hotelier seek to influence the rating.

After calculating the standard deviation, the ratings of the Spread Sample were screened for consistency of ratings, by isolating ratings that differed by more than two points from the calculated average of all the ratings of the particular hotel.

### I. Standard deviation in the Top 10 Sample

The top 10 hotels in each destination (the Top 10 Sample) showed relatively low Standard Deviations. Table 4.3 presents the average standard in the Top 10 hotels according to the TripAdvisor rating.

*Table 4.3 Average standard deviation in ratings of the Top 10 Sample*

<b>Destination</b>	<b>Average SD</b>	<b>Highest</b>	<b>Lowest</b>
Amsterdam	0.52	0.65	0.20
Bangkok	0.45	0.58	0.28
Cape Town	0.18	0.49	0.00
Dubai	0.47	0.69	0.24
Hong Kong	0.53	0.64	0.42
London	0.47	0.64	0.32
New York	0.51	0.61	0.18
Paris	0.48	0.59	0.25
Rio de Janeiro	0.73	0.88	0.55
Rome	0.39	0.58	0.00
Sydney	0.66	0.83	0.25

*Source: Calculated from data collected from TripAdvisor 11 October and 15 November 2009 (data per hotel is displayed in Appendix 1).*

Table 4.3 shows that all hotels in the top 10 of the 11 sampled destinations had a standard deviation lower than one. Two hotels had only 5 point ratings and thus a standard deviation of zero (the 2Inn1 in Cape Town and Spalletti Trivelli in Rome).

## II. Standard deviation in the Spread Sample

The Spread Sample displays different trends in the standard deviation of the ratings per hotel. Table 4.4 shows the standard deviation of the three hotels sampled in each of the 11 destinations.

Table 4.4 *Standard deviation in ratings of the Spread Sample*

Ranking	Amsterdam	Bangkok	Cape Town	Dubai	Hong Kong	London	New York	Paris	Rio de Janeiro	Rome	Sydney	Average
<b>Highest</b>	0.23	0.43	0.00	0.41	0.50	0.32	0.18	0.25	0.62	0.32	0.25	<b>0.32</b>
<b>Middle</b>	1.09	1.07	1.15	0.99	0.78	1.33	1.06	1.13	1.12	0.83	0.87	<b>1.04</b>
<b>Lowest</b>	0.74	0.66	0.69	0.94	1.04	0.82	0.63	0.76	0.86	1.00	0.89	<b>0.82</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>0.68</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.77</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>0.87</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>0.67</b>	

Source: *Calculated from data collected from TripAdvisor between 31 October 2009 and 2 January 2010 (full overview available in Appendix 3).*

In Table 4.4 it can be seen that the standard deviation shows more variation with the Spread Sample. The standard deviations of the middle ranking hotels on TripAdvisor are relatively high, with an average standard deviation of 1.04. The trend that applies to eight out of the 11 destinations is that the standard deviation is lowest with the highest ranking hotel, and highest with the middle ranking hotel. This also occurs when calculating the average standard deviation of the hotels per ranking over all the destinations.

## III. High deviations from the calculated average

It was assumed that the deviation of a rating of more than 2 points from the calculated average is an indication that the particular rating is inconsistent with the other ratings given to a hotel in the sample (on a five point scale, two points represent a 40 percent deviation). Table 4.5 provides an overview of the hotels that presented ratings with such deviations for the highest, middle and lowest ranking hotels in the sample.

Table 4.5 Ratings that deviate more than 2 points from the calculated average in the Spread Sample

Ranking	Amsterdam	Bangkok	Cape Town	Dubai	Hong Kong	London	New York	Paris	Rio de Janeiro	Rome	Sydney	Total	Positive Deviation	Negative Deviation
Highest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Middle	0	1	3	0	0	1	1	1	1	3	0	11	1	10
Lowest	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	2	6	6	0

Source: Calculated from data collected from TripAdvisor between 31 October 2009 and 2 January 2010.

Table 4.5 shows that a total of 17 ratings in the sample deviated by more than two points from the calculated average. As before (Table 4.4), the middle ranking hotels stand out with 11 such ratings, of which one deviates positively and ten deviate negatively from the calculated average. All six deviating ratings on the lowest ranking hotels deviate positively from the calculated average, which may be expected as a negative variation of two points is impossible when the average ratings are below two points.

Section 4.3.4 explains the results of the consistency analysis of the written reviews on the hotels in the Spread Sample.

#### 4.3.4 Consistency of reviews

The Spread Sample resulted in 330 reviews from travellers to 33 hotels in 11 destinations. The researcher analyzed these reviews for consistency by identifying the reviews required for saturation, the overlap in comments in reviews of the same hotel, the expressed agreement and disagreement between reviewers, and inconsistencies between the written review and rating of one reviewer.

## I. Reviews required for saturation

During the pilot study, the saturation number of reviews was found to be 10 reviews. During the capture, coding and analysis of the full sample of reviews, the researcher frequently experienced this saturation point to be lower. After going through the 10 most recent reviews of the three selected hotels in each destination, the researcher found no new information. In certain cases later reviews presented new facts; however, these facts appeared to be in line with the impression created by the first few reviews of the hotel's offerings and quality. For example, the highest ranking hotel in Cape Town, the *2Inn1*, had very elaborate reviews on the exceptional hospitality of its owners and staff. In this case, the researcher's image of the hotel created through the first review was not altered at all by the reviews that followed, although the image created by the middle ranking hotels generally proved to be more controversial.

The middle ranking hotel in Rome, the Hotel American Palace, is used to illustrate the saturation process. (The full reviews for this hotel are shown in Appendix 2.)

In the first review by 'tenCA951', the reader learns that the hotel is located in the suburbs, quite far from the city centre, although the metro seems to overcome this problem. The rooms are described as 'bland' and small, as is the décor. The air-conditioning is said to be faulty. The restaurant is described as good, but overpriced, and the breakfast as standard. The first reviewer is happy with the service as the staff gave plenty of good suggestions.

The second review by 'nukoshka' starts with complaints concerning the room size, and this reviewer elaborates on the décor and the state of maintenance, particularly the state of the bathroom. The new information the reader acquires from this second review is a detailed account on the lack of upkeep. Additionally the reader learns that the central ventilation of the hotel is shut off at 22:00, an elaboration on the 'faulty air-conditioning' of the first reviewer. The second reviewer adds that it is too noisy to sleep with the windows open at the front of the hotel, and concludes that the hotel rating should be two or three stars and not four.

The third reviewer, 'bergyl001', is very happy with the location because it is close to the metro that takes you to the city centre. This is not new information from the first review,

just a different evaluation of the same phenomenon. The reviewer then complains about the front desk staff, which is new information. The reviewer compliments the restaurant food, but complains about the price, as did the first reviewer. This reviewer concurs with the first reviewer that the breakfast is standard, and specifies what is available. The reviewer adds that the hotel was very clean, yet comes to the same conclusion as the second reviewer that the hotel should not have four stars, but at best, three.

The fourth reviewer by the name of 'Shaps2' describes the staff as polite, but not 'warm and fuzzy' and indicates that there were no issues with bad staff attitude, unlike reviewer number three. This reviewer compliments the hotel's location as it is close to the metro and, referring to previous reviews, argues that the breakfast is varied enough.

The fifth reviewer with the name 'jesterius' presents a very short review in which he indicates that the staff was very rude, the rooms unclean, and the amenities nonexistent.

The sixth review, written by 'happywanderer0', is negative, describing the hotel as the 'worst 4 stars hotel stayed in'. This reviewer emphasizes that the rooms were unclean and that the bathroom needed refurbishment. This reviewer also comments on the negative attitude of the staff. Effectively this reviewer presents no new information to the reader.

The seventh reviewer, 'Nosh10', also presents no new insights, besides examples of how the staff was unhelpful in not supplying an iron when requested and not being willing to serve drinks during daytime hours.

New information presented by the eighth reviewer, 'thezackman' is that the hotel also has parking, the walls in the room are thin, and the breakfast high in sugar.

The ninth reviewer, 'Boxfish', emphasizes the lack of upkeep of the room, and that there was no wifi service in the hotel, only a computer in the lobby that was expensive to use.

The tenth reviewer, 'Ella35', is very positive about the location and finds the hotel clean and comfortable. This reviewer elaborates on the fact that she saved money on the rate, which could then be spent on other activities.

Although the opinions on whether to visit this hotel in the future differ strongly, saturation is reached after the fifth review, since the sixth and seventh reviews present no new

information. Although the eighth and ninth reviews present new facts, the information presented by these reviewers does not seem likely to change a reader's opinion on the hotel. The tenth review is very positive, but again no new facts are presented to the reader, only another paradigm. From this it becomes apparent that although the reviews differ, the perspective that builds in the mind of the reader is not likely to change after five to ten reviews.

## **II. Overlap in comments**

In the sampled reviews there was almost no discrepancy in descriptions of facilities and available services (objective tangible criteria), although different guests may value their presence, or absence differently. In terms of the quality, décor, cleanliness, and state of maintenance of the hotel and its facilities (subjective tangible criteria), opinions were found to be more diverse, although in most hotel reviews it was easy to pick up trends in these areas. For instance, in no hotels from the sample did any guest claim the hotel was well maintained, while one argued that the hotel needed urgent refurbishment. Similarly, with regard to service experience (service delivery criteria), the researcher found few inconsistencies concerning the quality of service delivery.

The researcher was able to quantify this overlap by coding the review data in a spreadsheet that distinguishes three different experiential comments, 24 objective tangible criteria, 27 subjective tangible criteria, and 35 service delivery criteria, presenting a total of 90 different areas of comment (see Appendix 6). Despite this high number of criteria, and bearing in mind the diverse range of people with unique expectations visiting these hotels, the average number of times that a similar comment was made was 2, representing 20 percent of the sample of each hotel (10 reviews).

Specifically, comments on location, value for money, helpfulness of staff, size of room, and cleanliness of the room were extremely frequent; respectively 55, 35, 30, 28 and 28 percent of all reviews sampled mentioned these elements.

Besides the above elements that are frequently mentioned by guests, it was found that factors which surprised, or shocked the traveller appeared to be mentioned more

frequently. The steep stairs in Hotel Hoksbergen in Amsterdam were mentioned by nine out of the ten reviews sampled. The noise from the nightclub in Ramee Royal Hotel in Dubai was mentioned by eight of the 10 reviewers. Pleasant surprises also displayed overlap. The excellent advice on tourism attractions in Rome from the owners of The Welrome Hotel was mentioned by all ten reviews sampled for that hotel.

Large discrepancies between comments or opinions caught the attention of the researcher, which gives rise to the question whether the reviewer's perception of what constitutes a good hotel experience is unique, whether the person was just lucky, or unlucky, or whether the review is false. The largest discrepancy identified is in the eighth review of the Ramee Royal Hotel in Dubai. Nine out of ten reviews were very negative, and then reviewer 'fereidooni' was positive, and rated the hotel four out of five points. This particular review was also identified as being inconsistent in terms of rating, as the score of 4 points deviates from the calculated average by 2.25 points.

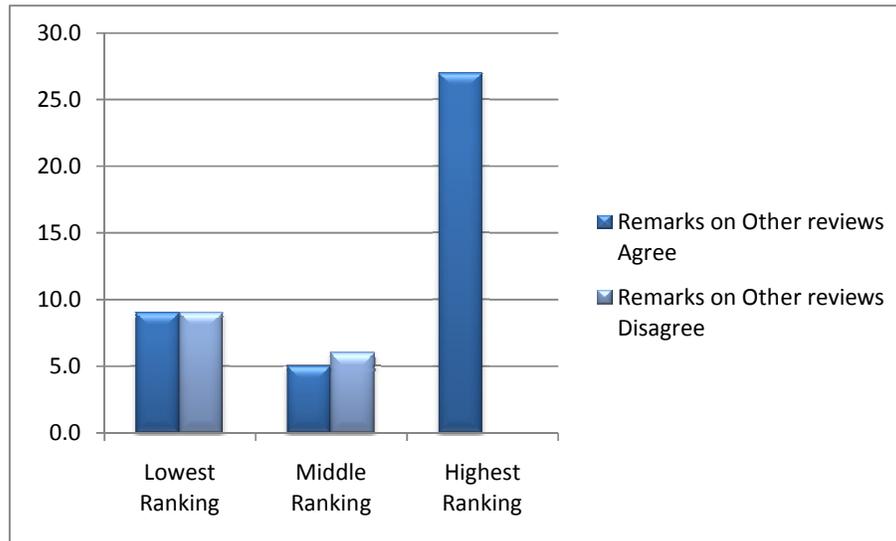
### **III. Expressed agreement and disagreement between reviewers**

A third observation that provides insight into the consistency of reviews is that reviewers often mention earlier reviews and agree or disagree with them. It is argued that both expressions of agreement and of disagreement serve the discussion on consistency, as the researcher found that when reviewers openly disagreed, they tended to argue their case with specific examples from their experience, as well as the context in which they viewed their experience, thereby frequently contributing to the reader's understanding of what might be expected from the hotel concerned. When reviewers read and respond to other reviews, a form of peer reviewing takes place that increases context for readers of those reviews. A frequent comment made in reviews of lower ranking hotels is that travellers must not expect too much when booking a budget hotel; 'you get what you pay for'. As the reviewer, 'Persevaara', of the lowest ranking hotel in New York put it,

*"Hey, when I travel I spend my time in the City not in hotel. Bed and bathroom is all I need for the night and that's what I got with reasonable price. This is New York you people! Book in PlazaHotel or stay home if you can't stand a little roughness..."*

Figure 4.2 illustrates the number of statements per hotel category of the Spread Sample with regard to agreement, or disagreement with other reviews.

Figure 4.2 Number of comments on agreement or disagreement with other reviews



Source: *Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor reviews from the Spread Sample.*

In Figure 4.2 it can be seen that the most open agreement occurred among reviewers of the highest ranking hotels. No comments were found in the reviews of the highest ranking hotels that disagreed with other reviews. This consistency is much lower with middle ranking hotels where the number of comments that disagreed with other reviews exceeded the number of comments where reviewers agreed with other reviewers. The lowest ranking hotels presented an equal number of statements (nine) agreeing and disagreeing with other reviews. Appendix 13 shows the number of statements of agreement and disagreement with other reviews per hotel in the Spread Sample.

#### **IV. Inconsistencies between the written review and rating**

Another inconsistency the researcher analysed in the ratings was the relationship between the written review and the rating that the reviewer gave to the hotel. The researcher conducted this analysis by reading the review first and then quantifying this opinion in a rating from one to five. A review would be defined as inconsistent with its rating if the actual rating differed by more than one point from that of the researcher. Only one review was found to be inconsistent with its rating. The review posted by 'DesertLoverVictoria' on The Grand Moov Hotel in Dubai is extremely negative:

*"This is rated a 4 Star hotel, in their dreams. We arrived hot and tired and received a less than enthusiastic welcome after being dumped outside by the travel company. There were no views except a car park and we were on the 7th floor. What we weren't told was, there is a nightclub on the 8th floor that goes until 3am, every night, we had no sleep that night and changed rooms the next morning. There was only one restaurant and it served Sri Lankan food only. There was no bar and in our room there was no mini-bar, the only way to get a beer was via room service at \$8au a can and we had to ask for bottled water. The place is a dump."*

The researcher predicted a rating of one point; however, the reviewer posted three.

#### **4.3.5 Context of reviews**

The extent to which reviews are written clearly and placed in context so that the reader understands why something may be assessed as good or bad appears to be an important contributor to the credibility and usability of such reviews. Gretzel (2007) touches on this concept when he describes how review readers focus on the length of the review and the detailed descriptions included in the review when judging credibility. The researcher chose to define this as 'the context' of the review. Without a context, a review may appear immature, and detract from the perceived reliability of the review and the reviewer.

The context may include the background of the reviewer and the trip, the use of criteria applied to come to a value judgement of the hotel, or the traveller in the hotel experience itself. A small number of hotel reviews were found to present no context whatsoever.

### **I. Background of the reviewer and the trip**

Many reviewers introduce themselves in terms of their travel habits, likes and dislikes. This presents a framework for the reader to identify with. 'Deaman' in a review on the Peninsula Bangkok, the highest ranking hotel in Bangkok, introduces the review with a paragraph on his travel habits:

*"I'll start by saying that I have stayed in some of the best 5 stars in the U.S., Middle East, and Africa. I'm partial to Four Seasons (primarily because I know what to expect). I chose the Peninsula because of reviews here and other places."*

Other reviewers outline the background to their trip, which presents the reader with a framework for the comments that follow. For example, 'Jollyjacktar321', provides the reader with a personal outline of his trip in his review on the 2Inn1 Kensington in Cape Town:

*"This vacation was a chance for me to take a break from a very stressful occupation and to share my first time in Africa with my wife. I have never had the opportunity to travel alone with my wife in our 18 years of marriage and frankly was a little nervous on how things would turn out."*

Providing this type of framework allows the reader to identify from what paradigm (for example, a romantic getaway) the hotel is experienced. Some reviewers indicate their expectations more clearly by describing the nature of their Trip, for example, 'Cultural\_Tyke' who reviewed the Grande Ville Hotel in Bangkok:

*"We stayed at the Grande Ville on the first night of our honeymoon; we flew to Saigon the next day, so simply needed a cheap hotel which gave a chance to sample some of the many sights that Bangkok has to offer."*

The reader now knows that the expectation of this traveller was not for a luxurious environment and that the remainder of the review should be read in that context.

Context created by the travellers' background, may also be presented directly when evaluating an element of the hotel and provides a clear reason why they liked, or disliked something. For example, 'tenCA951' writes in a review on the American Palace in Rome,

*"We have travelled through Europe plenty to know that European rooms are smaller but this was smaller than expected." Wow! This room is the size of a toilet! Or that's the impression I get. Ha, ha.*

Frequently one encounters a criticism which is then placed into the wider context of the destination. 'Ellis40' writes in a review on the middle ranking hotel in Amsterdam, Hotel Hoksbergen,

*"I would stop here again but I do think it's a little overpriced for what you get (which I guess is true for the entire destination)."*

Although the reader learns of the disappointment of the reviewer concerning the price, it also becomes clear that hotels in the destination (Amsterdam) may be perceived as overpriced by travellers and that this may be an undesirable element of any trip to Amsterdam.

## **II. Examples of criteria applied to come to a value judgement**

Reviewers also provide readers with context by indicating what criteria they used to rate an element of the hotel experience. An example is a review by 'Kin12ch' on the Porto Bay Rio Internacional Hotel in Rio de Janeiro that presents an outline on the breakfast:

*"The breakfast was amazing with many different types of fresh tropical fruit, cereals, scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and coffee."*

From this, the reader is presented with an outline of what constitutes an 'amazing breakfast' to this reviewer (fresh tropical fruits and scrambled eggs). Reviews do not need to be lengthy to give the reader a clear impression of why a guest was satisfied or not. 'Omern' provides a

brief review titled *'One of the lousiest hotels ever!'* on the Whiteleaf Hotel in London using only five sentences:

*"The rooms are tiny and filthy. Breakfast is very very poor and cheap. Location is good, but it don't compensate for how bad this place is. The bed was tiny and the sheets were not clean. The towels seemed like they were used several time and were'nt washed at all."*

From this brief review it becomes absolutely clear that this reviewer was not happy with the hotel experience.

### **III. Comments placed within the context of the traveller's experience**

In addition to comments on background, trip and criteria applied, several reviews provide context by describing a good or bad experience unique to the reviewer's own situation, allowing the reader to evaluate whether this might apply to them were they to visit the hotel.

'KristaZ', in a review of Hotel Hoksbergen in Amsterdam, places the discomfort of the bed in context in the following paragraph:

*"The bed was hard as a rock. If you like hard beds then I guess that's a good thing but we like a little more give and had a hard time sleeping each night. Who knows, maybe other rooms had different mattresses but Room 10 has a very hard bed."*

The reviewer, 'ley87', in a review of the Grand Ville hotel in Bangkok provides context after mentioning several disappointing elements of the hotel room:

*"Whether we were allocated an older room due to being part of a tour, we don't know. Other rooms may be better."*

'Rolling\_Rock45' is very negative on the Anglo Americano in Rome, referring to the first night as 'unforgettably miserable'. However, this reviewer immediately added,

*'To be fair, perhaps the jet lag amplified the effect'.*

Another example is provided by '13black' in a review on the Quay Grand Suites in Sydney:

*“On our third night, we found a 2.5 inch cockroach in the kitchen. This was dealt with immediately by the night manager and this was the only incident we had observed. In fairness to the Hotel, the patio door to our balcony had been left open by the cleaners, which may explain this.”*

#### **IV. Reviews without context**

Reviews without context were found, although in limited numbers. An example is the review of ‘autolux’ on the Grand Moov Hotel in Dubai:

*“I travel alot and this is one of the worstest hotels that i’ve ever seen. Don’t go there, you’ll throw your money away. Very bad room service. Very Very bad food.”*

Besides the poor spelling in this review, it instils little confidence in the reviewer as it does not indicate what the problem was with the room service, and why the food was rated ‘bad’. Another review that was found to lack context was posted by ‘Tomobama’ and reviews a stay at the Da Vinci Hotel in New York City.

*“Very convenient location right off Broadway. Definitely not a plush hotel but adequate”.*

Although the location description is specific, the reader does not learn anything about the hotel experience besides that it is considered adequate. As the reader knows nothing about the reviewer, the usefulness of this review should be considered low. All reviews that were identified as lacking context were relatively short reviews. However, it does not follow that all short reviews lack context. An example of a short review that provides a fair amount of context is by ‘ChocolateRain’ on the Hotel Anglo Americano in Rome:

*“It’s rated 4 stars which is completely wrong! The hotel is in need of complete refurbishment. Everything is old. Carpet is old and stained. Staff are rude. Avoid! Its location is the only good thing as you can walk to most tourist sites.”*

From this brief review, it becomes clear that the reviewer was disappointed by the lack of upkeep, or that he or she expected more based on the conventional rating. The reader also learns that the attitude of the staff was disappointing to this traveller.

The total number of reviews without context encountered in the sample was low: only six out of 330 reviews provided no context. This represents 1.8 percent of the total sampled reviews (see Appendix 12).

#### 4.3.6 Credibility of writing styles

Almost all reviews in the sample present a writing style that comes across as sincere and credible. Besides certain reviews that appear to be written in haste and many reviews that present spelling errors, some reviews in the sample attracted attention through their writing style. The researcher identified two styles with dubious credibility. The first the researcher defined as 'a marketing oriented writing style'. In this style it appears that the reviewer is writing on behalf of the hotel, instead of from the perspective of a traveller who has visited the hotel. This style is referred to by Craig (2009) as 'the Shill' as it gives the impression to be written by the marketing department of the hotel. Two such reviews were identified in the sample, both on hotels that had the highest ranking. The review from 'Nobby74' on the Dar Al Masyaf at Madinat Jumeirah in Dubai begins as follows,

*"So, your thinking about Dubai? Your thinking about the palm maybe? Or around the Marina? Or Downtown? So you like noise and construction?"*

Another review that appears to have been written in a marketing style is one by 'tforjaz' on the Porto Bay Rio hotel in Rio de Janeiro:

*"The beachfront Porto Bay Hotel, which has recently changed hands, clearly shows the benefit of renewed enthusiasm for excellence and is the best compromise I have found for value I have in Rio de Janeiro. The crew's hospitality seconds only the prime location and view whereas the clean and impeccable decoration make you feel right at home."*

Two other reviews that stand out from the sample are reviews in which the reviewer is excusing himself, displaying insecurity about whether he / she is being perceived as objective and unbiased. 'Garyorient' starts his review on the Menzies Prince Regent Hotel in London as follows:

*“This is a difficult review to write for me. Look at my previous reviews and you will see that I am not a habitual TripAdvisor moaner and try to give honest assessments”.*

The review is ends in the same tone:

*“I know a lot of my grouses might seem a bit churlish, but as I say, read my other reviews, I am not overly fussy by nature and try to give honest reviews every time.”*

Another review where the reviewer deems it necessary to defend his/her objectivity is one by ‘hydonian’ on the Whiteleaf Hotel in London. This review starts with the following sentence:

*“I can only write a review of how I see this hotel and will be completely honest.”*

The last sentence comes across as equally defensive:

*“I am totally impartial and nothing at all to do with the hotel”*

Such statements raise the question why the reviewer feels the need to defend his/her review, therefore creating concern about its objectivity.

#### **4.3.7 Types of hotels in the Top 10 ranking**

The Top 10 Sample was analysed to identify possible preferential treatment by TripAdvisor, as one may assume that hotels receiving preferential treatment would want to claim a position at the top of the rankings, as outlined in section 2.8.5. The argument was that hotels that deal with Expedia would receive preferential treatment on TripAdvisor. A factor in this analysis was whether TripAdvisor or its parent company, Expedia, would give a hotel preferential treatment for financial gain, as both companies are profit oriented. To receive preferential treatment a hotel would have to be

- i. Part of an international hotel brand that would have the economies of scale to ‘sponsor’ a ranking; or
- ii. A large hotel or hotel group that would generate substantial business through referrals to online travel agents.

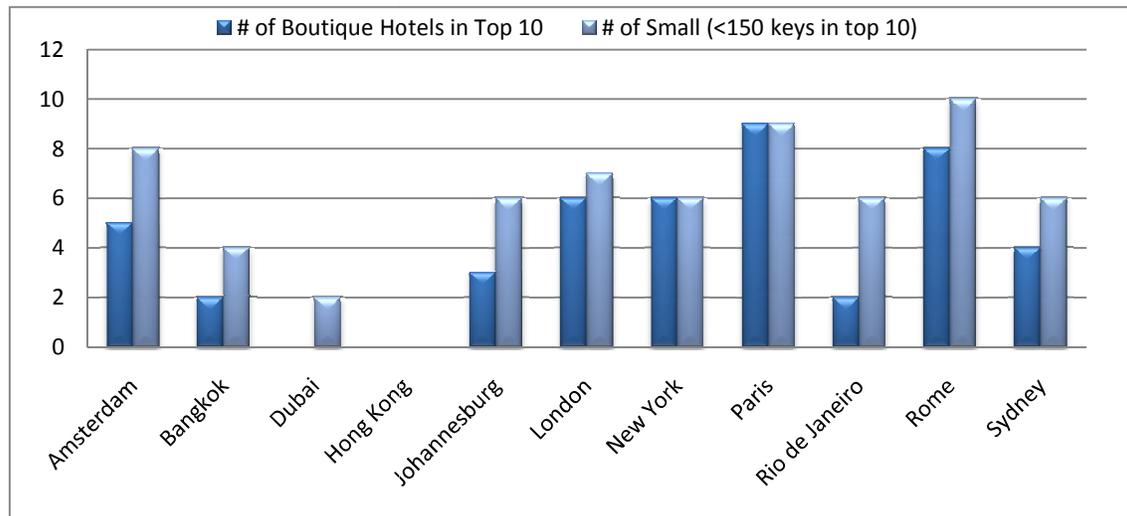
From this one can deduce that hotel groups, or large hotels would be most likely to receive preferential treatment and end up high in the rankings.

The findings from this study indicate almost the direct opposite: the top 10 ranking on TripAdvisor is dominated by small and boutique hotels that do not have the financial means to 'sponsor' TripAdvisor, and would usually not distribute their rooms via online travel agents as the commission is too high, and do not usually have the number of rooms to be an attractive client for online travel agents.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose to define small and boutique hotels as similar in size, identifying them as properties with less than 150 rooms. As there is no uniform definition of what constitutes a boutique hotel, the researcher applied the size criterion combined with a reference from the hotel reviews confirming the hotel's status as boutique hotel. Furthermore, boutique hotels' unique design is more likely to classify them in the luxury segment than the budget segment of hotels. A boutique hotel is defined as a small hotel in this study, but a small hotel is not automatically a boutique hotel.

For example, the number one ranking hotel in Rome in November 2009 was the Welrome Hotel, which boasted seven rooms, but should further be described as an 'economy' hotel as it carried only two stars, and with a room rate of \$85 per night, was three times cheaper than other hotels in the top 10 ranking of Rome. Figure 4.3 shows the number of boutique and small hotels in the top 10 ranking of the 11 destinations researched.

Figure 4.3 Number of boutique hotels per destination in the Top 10 Sample of the study



Source: Researcher's own model, data from TripAdvisor (2009).

From Figure 4.3 it becomes apparent that all European destinations sampled feature a relatively large number of small and boutique hotels in the top 10 ranking. In Amsterdam, the top three hotels are all boutique hotels with respectively, four, ten, and nine rooms only. Rome and Hong Kong feature no boutique hotels, only two small hotels can be found in Dubai, and none in Hong Kong.

During the research, several observations were made with regard to boutique hotels featured on TripAdvisor. Boutique hotels are unique in style and décor. The Fusion Suites hotel in Amsterdam is a prime example, and almost each guest review of this property takes note of this. Second, boutique hotels are individual in the sense that they do not belong to international or national brands. In addition, they are usually not connected to many of the leading Online Travel Agents but take only direct bookings. Third, *boutique hotels offer highly personalised service*. Guest reviews of the hotels defined as boutique tended to show appreciation for the personal touch. A review from 'sharuss' on the Jays Paris hotel in Paris describes this experience as follows:

*“This is a fantastic small and intimate hotel run by staff who really understands what customer care means. From the moment my husband sent the first e mail to enquire about a booking to when we stepped over the door to leave we were looked after.”*

A frequent observation is that guests actually remember the first names of their hosts and refer to them in their reviews. Another review of the Jays Paris hotel by ‘GOMIZZOUTIGERS’ begins as follows:

*“I can't say enough about the service at this terrific boutique hotel. Stephen and Kersey were great and did everything possible to make our 5 night stay a memorable one.”*

With some boutique hotels such reviews even thank the management or owners personally. A review on Fusion Suites in Amsterdam by ‘3DJs\_dad’ reads:

*“Alex and Sharmila made this the perfect home away from home for us and we're looking forward to our next stay ... I mean, where do you find a hotel where the management team get up at 6am to say goodbye and help you on your way? Thank you Alex and Sharmila!”*

From these reviews it is understandable why boutique and small hotels are consistently rated high and are therefore also ranked high.

To reiterate, it is clearly evident that TripAdvisor is not biased in providing its rankings, as there is no apparent gain for TripAdvisor in ranking these small and boutique hotels highly.

#### **4.3.8 Discussion of findings on the reliability of TripAdvisor**

In this section, the findings on the reliability of TripAdvisor are compared with the four arguments presented in the theoretical review that led to questioning of this reliability. These arguments will be explored using scenarios applying the findings above.

## I. TripAdvisor allows anonymous reviews

The primary argument against TripAdvisor's reliability is that it allows for the possibility of posting false reviews (ABC News, 2008; Gulliver, 2009; Elliott, 2009; Frommer, 2009; O'Neill, 2009). The researcher's experience when using TripAdvisor confirms this argument as it does not appear difficult to circumvent the screening algorithm. However, perhaps the main discussion should not evolve around the question whether or not it is possible to post a false review, but whether this has, or may have an impact on TripAdvisor's reliability. Perhaps the strongest countermeasure that TripAdvisor can present is the number of reviews per hotel.

It was found that the hotel ratings that rank higher in the TripAdvisor popularity index are not easily affected by fraudulent reviews as they have high numbers of reviews. It is difficult to stipulate an exact number of reviews that would make a hotel immune to false reviews.

The potential distortion of ratings can be quantified by outlining a fictive scenario where an hotelier manages to organise ten friends, staff members, or relatives, to post false reviews that would all be extremely positive (five points). Table 4.6 displays the distortion that such action would have, given that the hotel would also have received ratings of three points by different numbers of reviewers.

*Table 4.6 Scenario of potential distortion through false reviews*

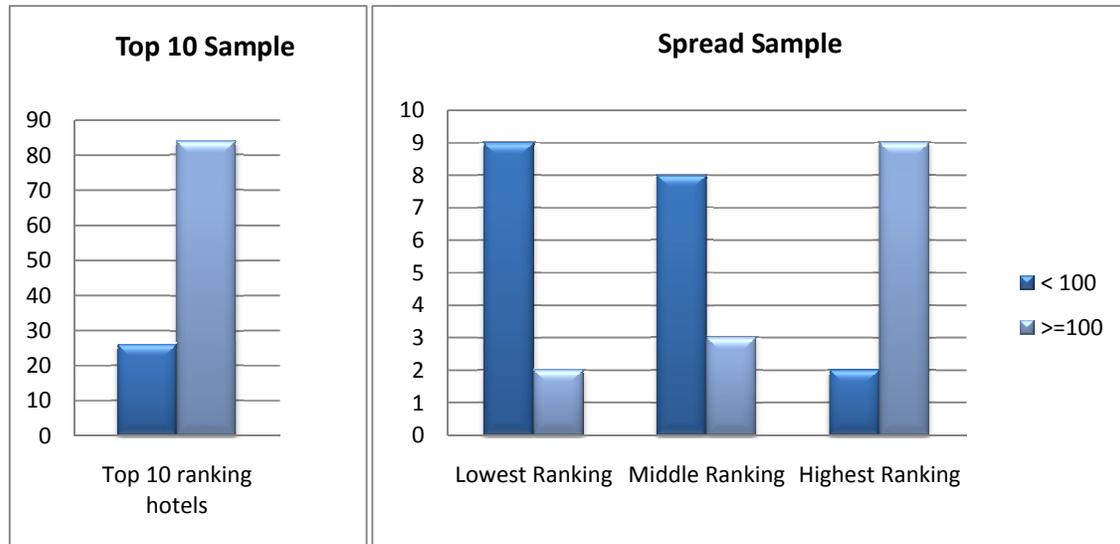
<b>Number of 'honest reviews'</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>1000</b>
Weight of real ratings	30	60	90	120	150	300	600	1500	3000
Weight of false ratings	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	51
Average real rating	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Average distorted rating	4.0	3.7	3.5	3.4	3.3	3.2	3.1	3.0	3.0
<b>Distortion from real average rating</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>0.67</b>	<b>0.50</b>	<b>0.40</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.18</b>	<b>0.10</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>0.02</b>
Distortion in %	33%	22%	17%	13%	11%	6%	3%	1%	1%

Source: *Researcher's own model.*

From Table 4.6 it follows that when ten false reviewers each post ratings of five points when the average real rating is three points, it influences the ratings strongly when the number of reviews is limited. When a hotel only has 10 real ratings, the distortion would be a full point, representing 33 percent of an average score of three points. The turning point for this distortion appears to lie at 100 ratings, and higher when the distortion becomes smaller than 6 percent. This means that hotels with more than 100 ratings will not be influenced strongly

by 10 false reviews. Figure 4.4 presents the number of hotels in samples 1 and 2 that feature less than 100, and more than 100 reviews.

Figure 4.4 Hotels with more or less than 100 reviews in the TripAdvisor samples



Source: *Researcher’s own model based on data from TripAdvisor.*

Figure 4.4 illustrates that the hotels from the Top 10 Sample are generally insensitive to fraudulent reviews using the scenario where an hotelier is able to organise 10 false reviews. The same applies to the highest ranking hotels in the Spread Sample (these hotels are also represented in the Top 10 Sample). However, the majority of both the lowest and the middle ranking hotels may be affected by false reviews, as only two of the lowest ranking and three of the middle ranking hotels featured more than 100 reviews, representing respectively 18 and 27 percent of the hotels.

The researcher further identified two main scenarios when it would be most likely that an hotelier or a relation of an hotelier would post a false review. Although other scenarios may be identified, their detection within the sample is unlikely, which is why these have been ignored. For instance, a hotel who has just opened may want to quickly rise to TripAdvisor’s higher rankings and thus invite many false reviews. Another scenario would be that a hotel wishes to strengthen its ranking and would therefore invite or create false reviews that carry

the same message as the ones already posted on the hotel. However, reviews of this nature could not be detected within the scope of this research.

The first scenario that could be detected within the scope of this research is that a hotel that ranks poorly on TripAdvisor due to bad reviews, may seek to increase its ranking by posting, or having someone else post a false review that is more positive than the existing reviews. A second scenario is that an hotelier would like to bring down the ranking of a competing hotel by posting, or having someone post, a false review that is more negative than the existing reviews.

The researcher identified three characteristics of reviews that create suspicion from the perspective of these two scenarios, taking into account the initial screening algorithm of TripAdvisor:

- i. An inconsistent rating that deviates from the calculated average with more than two points and an accompanying review that conflicts strongly with other reviews.
- ii. A deviating writing style that makes the review read like a corporate marketing message, or that creates suspicion as the reviewer deems it necessary to stress that the review is an objective review; and
- iii. A lack of context on the trip, the reviewer, the reviewers travel experience, or criteria applied to come to a value judgement.

To further identify whether or not a review is false, the researcher identified that a single of these characteristics does not provide conclusive evidence that a review must be false. A rating and its accompanying review may be inconsistent with other ratings and reviews, but examining the context of the accompanying review may explain why the rating is inconsistent. For example, a guest who suffers from jet lag may rate the experience in the hotel much lower than the majority of guests visiting that hotel. Therefore, deviations in any of these three areas need to be looked at by means of triangulation.

In terms of inconsistent ratings, 17 reviews were identified (see Appendix 12 and Table 4.5) spread over 11 hotels in the sample. Seven of these hotels are middle ranking hotels and five are the lowest ranked hotels on TripAdvisor. The quantification in positive and negative

deviations from the average rating is not surprising. All deviations in the lowest ranking hotels are positive and all but one in the middle ranking hotels is negative. From a statistical viewpoint one may have expected more variation in the deviation of the middle ranking hotels, but if one takes the average rating for a hotel on TripAdvisor as 3.74 into account (Larpen, 2009a), the only possible deviation of more than two points on a five point scale is a negative one for hotels that rank in the middle.

The Breakwater Lodge in Cape Town, South Africa received three reviews of one point each, written by 'Ellie06Hampshire', 'Bayliss1', and 'Samats', where the rating deviated more than 2 points from the calculated average. However, each of these reviews provided context in terms of criteria mentioned that were consistent with the other reviews on this hotel. 'Littlehippie' rates the Menzies Prince Regent Hotel in London very low - only one point. When studying this review, the reader learns that this reviewer only had lunch at the hotel and that this was very disappointing. The context for the low rating therefore, is understandable for the reader. The reviewer, 'ILoveNudeYork', rated the Da Vinci Hotel in New York one out of five. However, this reviewer provided a lot of context on the hotel experience and explained the low rating. 'Persevaara' disagrees openly with the other reviewers of the New York Inn hotel, explaining the high rating of four points as follows,

*'Hey when I travel I spend my time in the City not the hotel. Bed and bathroom is all I need for the night and that's what I got with reasonable price'.*

'Yanuser' gives the Hotel Saint Louis Marais a one point rating against a calculated average of 3.75. In this review context was again provided as this traveller claimed that extra value was charged to his/her credit card which caused strong dissatisfaction.

All further inconsistencies in ratings found in the sample may be explained by similar context provided. The review that caused the strongest suspicion of being false due to an inconsistency in its rating is from 'fereidooni' on the Ramee Royal hotel in Dubai. This review is inconsistent in that the reviewer rates the hotel with 4 stars where the calculated average rating is only 1.75. Furthermore, the author of this review appears to have visited an entirely different hotel from the other reviewers because this reviewer is one of two out of ten reviewers who did not seem to be affected by the noise of the night club, and is the only

reviewer who felt that the hotel staff were friendly. The context provided in this review was limited - to the extent that the researcher classified the review as lacking in context.

In terms of writing style, two reviews in the sample read like a marketing message, and in two others the reviewer insisted that s/he was not biased and that the review was objective. Although these deviations initially created concern because of their reliability, these ratings generally do not show a strong deviation from the hotel average. Table 4.7 shows the rating consistency for the four reviews.

*Table 4.7 Rating consistency of reviews with deviating writing styles*

Hotel Name	Destination	Ranking of Hotel	Rating by Reviewer	Average Rating	Deviation	Standard Deviation	Variation from Standard Deviation
<b>Dar Al Masyaf at Madinat Jumeirah</b>	Dubai	High	5	4.76	0.24	0.41	-0.17
<b>Menzies Prince Regent</b>	London	Middle	2	3.24	1.24	1.33	-0.09
<b>Whiteleaf Hotel</b>	London	Low	4	1.45	2.55	0.69	<b>1.86</b>
<b>Porto Bay Rio Internacional Hotel</b>	Rio de Janeiro	High	4	4.52	0.52	0.62	-0.10

Source: *Researcher's own model based on data from TripAdvisor*

From Table 4.7 it is clear that only one review's rating deviates from the average with a figure higher than the standard deviation. This means that with reference to the two scenarios proposed where a false review could be established, it is highly unlikely that three of these four reviews could be false. The remaining review on the Whiteleaf hotel in London is accompanied by a rating that is much higher than the average, and that deviates from the standard deviation of all ratings on this hotel by 1.84. It is not surprising then that this reviewer's attitude was defensive.

When the three characteristics that may indicate a false review are combined, two potentially false reviews remain. The review by 'fereidooni' on the Ramee Royal hotel in Dubai deviates strongly in rating and lacks context and the review by 'Hydonian' on the Whiteleaf hotel in London deviates in rating and draws attention through its defensive writing style.

Assuming that these two reviews are false, the next step, as indicated earlier, is to define the influence the false reviews have on the ranking of these hotels and the potential influence on visitors to TripAdvisor. The Whiteleaf hotel in London and the Ramee Royal hotel in Dubai are the lowest ranking hotels in their destinations that fulfilled the sample criteria and carry an average rating of 1.45 and 1.75, respectively. It is therefore highly unlikely that a visitor to TripAdvisor would be tempted to look at, let alone be influenced by, these potentially false reviews. From the perspective of the entire sample, two potentially false reviews identified from a total of 330 reviews represent 0.6 percent of the reviews analysed.

## **II. TripAdvisor censors reviews and feedback from hoteliers**

The second argument identified in the theoretical review is that TripAdvisor declined to publish his review (Jeff, 2008a), and does not allow hoteliers to provide responses on reviews (McReady, 2010; Phil, 2010).

In terms of interaction with hoteliers, Larpent (2010b) indicated a strong willingness on the part of TripAdvisor to work with hotels and encourage them to contribute. The number of hoteliers' responses to reviews appears to be substantial and growing, although this has not been quantified. Furthermore, the TripAdvisor 'hate site' (McReady, 2010) appeared to be attracting little support in August 2010.

In terms of censoring reviews, all 18 reviews submitted by the researcher from August 2009 to August 2010 were posted on TripAdvisor. This drives the conclusion that censoring of feedback does not happen on a scale to limit the intended communication between TripAdvisor, hoteliers and reviewers.

## **III. TripAdvisor suffers from a conflict of interest due to being owned by Expedia**

The third argument against TripAdvisor's reliability is its conflict of interest, as it is owned by Expedia which makes money by selling hotel rooms online. It would thus follow that TripAdvisor would be more likely to favour hotels that deal with Expedia— and thus rank them higher - over those that do not. No evidence of this was found in the study. The results

presented in section 4.3.7 suggest a model that works the other way around. The researcher found many small boutique hotels and guest houses that rank in the top 10 of destinations, yet these hotels do not appear on Expedia or on the websites of other online travel agents. They therefore cannot enrich TripAdvisor financially. Therefore, there is no support for the above criticism of TripAdvisor in the data that was analysed.

#### **IV. Objectivity of consumers in their assessment of quality**

The fourth argument outlined in the theoretical review was that consumers are not objective in their assessment of quality (Hewitt, 2008; Weyel, 2008). The researcher tested this argument by looking at the consistency of the reviews and their accompanying ratings. Findings on the context of the reviews were also taken into account as context provides an indication of why reviews and their ratings were either positive or negative.

In terms of the consistency of reviews and their accompanying ratings, the data from the Spread Sample presents different results based on the ranking of the TripAdvisor hotels. The reviews on the highest ranking hotels showed very little deviation in ratings, with an average standard deviation of 0.32 among the 11 highest ranking hotels, as displayed in Table 4.4. With regard to the consistency of reviews, there was no disagreement with other reviewers from the sample, as displayed in Figure 4.1. Reviews on the middle ranking hotels displayed the highest deviation in ratings with an average standard deviation of 1.04. Nine out of the 110 reviews on these hotels disagreed openly with the other reviews, and nine had clear expressions of agreement with the other reviews. The ratings in the reviews of the lowest ranking hotels in each destination showed a standard deviation that lies between that of the highest ranking and the middle ranking hotel. The average standard deviation of the ratings is 0.81.

The internal consistency of reviews, meaning the extent to which the written review is consistent with its accompanying rating, was found to be very strong, with only one inconsistent review out of the total sample of 330 reviews.

However, the researcher found that the context provided a clear indication of the consumer's interpretation of quality despite differences in the value judgement of that

quality. The results presented in section 4.3.5 indicate that most reviews are rich in context that facilitates the reader's understanding of how the reviewer came to his or her value judgement of the quality of the hotel experience. Only ten reviews were found to lack sufficient context for the reader to understand how the reviewer came to his or her assessment; this represented three percent of the total sample of 330 reviews.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that there is more agreement in the reviews and ratings of the highest ranking hotels and that this agreement decreases with the lowest ranking hotels and is lowest with the middle ranking hotels. The high deviation in ratings in particularly the middle ranking hotels seems to support the argument that consumers are not uniform in their assessment of the quality of the hotel experience. However, the rich context presented in most reviews combined with TripAdvisor's continuous growth appears to make them useful to other consumers.

#### **4.4 SUMMARY**

In this chapter, the findings on research questions 1 and 2 are presented. The findings indicate that TripAdvisor is highly dynamic and growing rapidly. With over 35 million reviews, TripAdvisor is the market leader, not only in the total number of reviews and members, but also in featuring the highest number of reviews per hotel featured on the website, compared with other review sites and online travel agents. TripAdvisor's growth appears to be facilitated by a constant innovation in traveller services, which during the time of the research were regularly adapted and extended. TripAdvisor allows travellers to post reviews and ratings and uses the ratings, combined with other factors, to provide hotels with a ranking. The ranking represents the quality image of a hotel and results in strong exposure on the website.

TripAdvisor's reliability was explored through the number of reviews per hotel in samples 1 and 2, an analysis of the screening algorithm, the consistency of ratings in the Top 10 Sample, and the consistency, context and credibility of writing styles in reviews in the Spread Sample, and the hotel types that ranked in the top 10 of the 11 destinations. The four arguments that were presented in section 2.8.5 that challenge the reliability of TripAdvisor

have been used to structure and triangulate the findings. The following conclusions can be drawn with regard to these four arguments.

The argument that TripAdvisor allows anonymous reviews and that fraudulent reviews may be posted is true to the extent that the data showed that this could be possible if certain measures were taken to circumvent the screening algorithm of TripAdvisor. The number of hotel reviews in the sample appears to be too low for the majority of the middle ranking and lower ranking hotels to claim that their rating cannot be easily influenced. However, a screening of the 330 reviews in sample two against two scenarios in which three characteristics of potentially fraudulent reviews were tested revealed that only two reviews out of the sample appear to be potentially false. Given that these two were on the lowest ranking hotels in their destinations, the conclusion is that within the sample tested, fraudulent reviews do not appear to influence the hotel rankings on TripAdvisor. Notwithstanding that a hotel offers poor quality, it seems almost impossible to change the image of the hotel by posting false reviews, as the inconsistency between reviews would cause readers to take notice. A hotel that offers exceptional quality cannot be easily tarnished by competitors for the same reasons.

The data provides no indication that TripAdvisor censors reviews, as all 18 reviews written by the researcher over an eight month period were accepted as they were. Furthermore, no substantiation of the argument that hoteliers' responses are censored was found, although this was not researched in depth.

Regarding the argument that TripAdvisor may be biased as it is owned by Expedia, the researcher found the opposite, The assumption was that TripAdvisor would favour branded hotels and hotel groups; however, the top 10 rankings in European destinations featured a large number of small and boutique properties without any affiliation and commercial value to TripAdvisor.

The argument that consumers are not objective in their assessment was found to be partially true. The reviews and ratings for the middle ranking properties of the sample, particularly, displayed differences of opinion, This did not hold true for the highest ranking hotels where the reviews were characterised by a large amount of agreement, overlap, and a low

standard deviation in the ratings. With regard to the middle ranking hotels, the context provided in most reviews presented readers with a paradigm which allowed them to place the reviews in context. However, agreement should not be mistaken for objectivity, particularly in an industry that is dominated by service which, by its very nature, is subjective.

It can thus be concluded that although it is possible to post false reviews on TripAdvisor and, for the majority of the lower ranking and middle ranking hotels, alter the hotel's rating and ranking, no evidence was found that this happens on a scale that influences the ranking of the hotels in the sample. Furthermore, no evidence of censorship or a conflict of interest was established, and although reviewers do not always agree, the context in the majority of the reviews allows for readers to identify the quality of a hotel to a very detailed extent. One can therefore conclude that TripAdvisor provides a rich source of information for travellers and that its reliability is clearly not jeopardized by false reviews.

Chapter 5 presents the findings on research questions three and four, namely, "How do ratings of hotels on TripAdvisor differ from ratings these hotels receive from conventional systems?" and "What quality criteria are represented in the qualitative guest reviews and how do these relate to criteria measured by conventional systems?" These findings focused on exploring the relationship between the ratings provided on TripAdvisor and those of the conventional rating systems in the sample destinations, and the connection between the criteria referred to in the guest reviews on TripAdvisor and the criteria represented in the conventional rating systems in the sample destinations.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **RESULTS OF RATINGS AND REVIEW CRITERIA ON TRIPADVISOR**

#### **5.1. INTRODUCTION**

In chapter 4 TripAdvisor's organisation and the reliability of the data presented on its guest feedback platform were explored. The conclusion was that TripAdvisor provides a reliable and rich source of information for travellers. In this chapter, the results of how TripAdvisor's ratings and reviews compare with information presented by conventional rating systems are given. First, the findings on the conventional rating systems in each destination are presented. Second, the conventional ratings of the hotels in the top 10 and the Spread Sample are compared with the conventional ratings these hotels have received in the destination. This comparison is supplemented with a statistical analysis of the relationship between the TripAdvisor ratings and the conventional ratings of the Top 10 Sample. Thirdly, the results of the criteria mentioned in the reviews on TripAdvisor are presented. Then a comparison of these criteria is made with criteria in conventional rating systems. The chapter concludes by answering research questions four, evaluating to what extent TripAdvisor ratings differs from the ratings of conventional systems, and to what extent the quality criteria mentioned in reviews relate to the criteria of conventional rating systems.

#### **5.2. CONVENTIONAL RATING SYSTEMS IN THE SAMPLE DESTINATIONS**

Each destination in the sample shows a unique, local conventional rating system providing testimony to the many claims in the theoretical review of the variations in rating systems worldwide (Davey, 2008 and Marvel, 2004). In this section, the data on the rating bodies and the structure and criteria of the conventional rating systems executed by these bodies will be presented. First a background is provided on each destination's rating body and system. Second, the control and scope of each system is presented. Third, the structure and criteria of each system are outlined and presented in the context of the other systems.

### 5.2.1 Organisation of conventional hotel ratings in each destination

In the sample a multitude of variations were identified concerning the organisation that is responsible for the hotel ratings. In some destinations, conventional hotel rating is regulated by the government in a strict manner; in others the responsibility is given to the hotel association, and in still others there is no governmental control, leaving the conventional rating of hotels to independent organisations such as automobile associations. In this section, a general overview of each destination is presented after which the details of the grading organisation in each destination, its coverage in the number of hotels that participate in the system, and the methods it uses are summarised and compared.

#### I. Amsterdam

Amsterdam, the capital of The Netherlands, falls under the Dutch classification system. This system has been developed and is executed by the Association of Hotel and Catering Associated Companies by means of a regulation which makes the system obligatory for lodging providers who want to use the name 'hotel' (Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering, 2010). The association is advised by the Committee of Hotel Classification that includes a representative of the Dutch Automobile Association, "Algemene Nederlandse Wegen Bond (ANWB) and the travel industry association, "Algemene Nederlandse Vereniging van Reisagenten" (ANVR), to ensure that consumer interests are well represented (Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering, 2010). Therefore, all organisations that use the name 'hotel' in The Netherlands, have to be rated as at least a one star hotel. The system followed the Benelux rating system that had been in place since 1985 and had a similar legal grounding to the new system. The rating system was last updated in 2008 when a mystery check was added to the criteria of the five star rating (Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering, 2009). The system allocates one to five stars to rate hotels, providing five categories of classification.

The Dutch rating system generally incorporates objective tangible criteria, although some criteria are subjective, such as cleanliness and maintenance, class and image (Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering, 2008). The service quality experience is covered by indirect criteria for the one to four star hotels, and by means of a mystery check for five star hotels. The criteria

are divided into ‘basic standards’ and ‘optional standards’. Basic standards can be considered minimum criteria that a hotel has to comply with to be rated in a category. These standards present more elaborate criteria for the higher ratings. A minimum score needs to be obtained by fulfilling optional standards (Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering, 2008). This allows the hotel to position itself in relation to a certain target group (Table 5.1).

*Table 5.1 Allocation of ratings in the Dutch hotel rating system*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Requirements</b>
<b>1 Star</b>	Comply with basic standards for a 1 star hotel.
<b>2 Stars</b>	Comply with basic standards for a 2 star hotel and obtain 45 points with optional standards.
<b>3 Stars</b>	Comply with basic standards for a 3 star hotel and obtain 51 point with optional standards.
<b>4 Stars</b>	Comply with basic standards for a four star hotel and obtain 73 points with optional standards.
<b>5 Stars</b>	Comply with basic standards for a five star hotel and obtain 90 points with optional standards.

*Source: Translated overview from Bedrijfschap Horeca en Catering (2010).*

From Table 5.1 it can be seen that a one star hotel only needs to comply with basic standards, but if the hotel wishes to increase its rating, the number of optional standard points increases. The mystery shopping requirement for five star hotels is incorporated in the basic standards for a five star hotel.

## **II. Bangkok**

In 2004 Thailand launched its rating system. Collaboration between the Thailand Hotel Association, the Thailand Tourism Authority and the Association of Thai Travel Agents was formalized through a non-profit organisation, "The Foundation of Standard and Human Resources Development in Service and Tourism Industry" (Tourism Authority Thailand, 2009). The buy-in to this initiative appears limited. The Thailand Hotel Association (2010) indicates that in the city of Bangkok a total of 53 hotels are rated. This represents only 10

percent of the 530 hotels that TripAdvisor lists on its website. Hotels are rated from one to five stars.

In terms of criteria, the Tourism Authority Thailand covers objective tangible criteria, subjective tangible criteria and service experience criteria, according to a variable scoring system outlined in Table 5.2.

*Table 5.2 Criteria in the Thai hotel rating system*

	Five Star	Four Star	Three Star	Two Star	One Star
<b>Standard of construction and facilities</b>	359	284	163	72	53
<b>Standard of maintenance</b>	305	270	225	205	180
<b>Standard of services</b>	374	320	301	169	150
<b>Total</b>	1,052	896	699	451	383

*Source: Adapted from the table supplied by the Tourism Authority Thailand (2009).*

Table 5.2 shows that a hotel rating in Thailand is dependent on a minimum score that needs to be attained using three different areas of criteria. For higher ratings, the required scores increase, although this increase is more apparent in construction standard and facilities than in the maintenance standard.

### **III. Cape Town**

Cape Town is subject to a national rating system executed by the Tourism Grading Council South Africa established in 2000 (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2010a). However, the concept of hotel rating in the country is much older, as the 'Hotelraad' started rating hotels as far back as 1965 (Mornet, 2010). The Tourism Grading Council falls under South Africa Tourism, which is part of the Department of Tourism. As such it is fully governmentally controlled. However, the system is voluntary, resulting in only half of the hotels being enrolled on this system, approximately 8000 properties (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2010b). The system rates hotels from one to five stars and can be seen as quite progressive, since it allows for guest feedback on individual properties via the grading council's website (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2010a). Guest feedback is used to monitor customers' expectations and guide the system, ensuring that the best-established

practices are followed and advising establishments on improvements when required. It is, however, not clear to what extent guest feedback influences the hotel rating decisions of the TGCSA. A revision of the system planned for October 2010, started with an international consulting company's (KPMG) review of the current system, after which all stakeholders were invited to comment on the proposed new system on the website (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2010a).

The standards in the South African rating system focus on objective tangible criteria, subjective tangible criteria, and service delivery criteria. The objective tangible criteria are generally the same for all rating categories; only for four and five star ratings do more extensive criteria apply. The subjective tangible criteria and service delivery criteria are assessed on a score from one to 10 where a score of one represents 'unacceptable' and 10, 'excellent'. This score is based on the assessor's experience and guest feedback (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2009b). The rating is then applied to the hotel based on the structure displayed in Table 5.3.

*Table 5.3 Allocation of ratings in the South African hotel rating system*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Requirements</b>
<b>1 Star</b>	Comply with basic standards set out in the minimum criteria. Obtain an overall score on grading criteria of 51-60 percent with no scores below three and all service elements to score higher than seven.
<b>2 Stars</b>	Comply with basic standards set out in the minimum criteria. Obtain an overall score on grading criteria of 61-70 percent with no scores below three, a maximum of two items to be scored a five and all service elements to score higher than seven.
<b>3 Stars</b>	Comply with basic standards set out in the minimum criteria. Obtain an overall score on grading criteria of 71-84 percent, a maximum of two items to be scored a six and all service elements to score higher than eight.
<b>4 Stars</b>	Comply with basic standards for a four and five star hotel. Obtain an overall score on grading criteria of 85-94 percent, a maximum of one item to be scored a seven and all service elements to score higher than eight.
<b>5 Stars</b>	Comply with basic standards for a four and five star hotel. Obtain an overall score on grading criteria of 95-100 percent, and a maximum of one item to be scored an eight.

*Source: Researcher's own model based on data from Tourism Grading Council South Africa (2009a).*

From Table 5.3 it is clear that the subjective tangible criteria and the service delivery requirements for the higher ratings are considerable, with a five star hotel being required to score 95 percent of the maximum number of points in these areas. For all ratings, service quality criteria need to score high in order to obtain a rating.

#### **IV. Dubai**

In the United Arab Emirates, Dubai developed its own unique hotel rating system established through by-law in 1998, which falls under the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2001). A revision of the system was announced in 2008 (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2008), to be implemented in 2010 (UAE Interact, 2010). The new system presents three sub-categories for a five star rating (silver, gold, and platinum), different hotel concept categories (business, beach, desert, and heritage) and has a stronger focus on subjective tangible criteria and service standards (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2010b).

The current system requires a number of criteria to be fulfilled as part of the basic licensing system including, among others, cleanliness and maintenance, minimum room size, the availability of a storage room for luggage, uniforms for staff, air conditioning, and a night porter. The actual rating criteria are all focused on objective tangible criteria and provide five categories of stars for hotels and an additional category called 'special class'. This category is not included in the rating system and has only been allocated to one hotel, The Burj Al Arab Hotel (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2010a).

#### **V. Hong Kong**

Although China launched a national hotel rating system in 2004, this system does not apply to the region and city of Hong Kong as it is autonomous in its governance (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2010). In Hong Kong the only organisation that executes a conventional rating system is the Mobil Travel Guide, rebranded as the Forbes Travel

Guide in October 2009 (USA Today, 2009); however, the systems and criteria have been kept. This system and its ratings are however not used by the Hong Kong Tourism Board (2009). Forbes Travel Guide allocates hotel ratings based on an elaborate inspection process that consists of a facility inspection for one to three star ratings, and an additional service evaluation for four and five star ratings (Forbes Travel Guide, 2010b; Mobil, 2008a). The facility inspection focuses on objective and subjective tangible criteria and the service evaluation on service delivery criteria, where more than 550 service standards are assessed. Similar to the American Automobile Association, the four and five star ratings from Mobil are rarely given as the standards are extremely high. The list of those hotels fortunate enough to achieve a four or five star Mobil rating are published separately each year (Forbes Travel Guide, 2010b). Forbes Travel Guide rates over 8 000 hotels worldwide with over 300 in the Hong Kong and Macau district.

## **VI. London**

The United Kingdom showed much controversy in its hotel rating system by having a number of different bodies involved in providing conventional ratings. At the beginning of 2006, a new scheme was introduced by VisitBritain in conjunction with VisitScotland, VisitWales and the Automobile Association (Quality in Tourism, 2009; VisitBritain, 2009). It sets out a uniform set of criteria that is used by the different rating bodies, with hotels divided into five categories using stars as an indicator of quality. The assessment service, Quality in Tourism, handles the administration of the national quality assessment schemes on behalf of VisitEngland (Quality in Tourism, 2010).

An analysis of the rating schemes of both Quality in Tourism (2009) and AA Hotel Services (2006) confirms that the same criteria are used in the two systems. The system determines the star ratings based on three elements. First all minimum requirements for a certain rating must be fulfilled (minimum criteria). The minimum requirements span over 10 areas and cover 81 criteria of which almost 70 percent focus on objective tangible criteria. The other two elements required for a star rating are derived from a quality score where all aspects of accommodation and service are given a score expressed in a percentage. The first of these

two elements requires a hotel to achieve an average percentage score for quality in the quality band of the desired rating. The second requires the hotel to score in relation to the relevant standard of quality in the key areas of cleanliness, service, food quality, and bedrooms and bathrooms. The right scores must be attained for at least three of these five areas. Two of the five key areas may score one quality band lower. Table 5.4 outlines the requirements of the quality score in the conventional rating system in the United Kingdom.

*Table 5.4 Quality bands of the conventional rating system in the United Kingdom*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>1. Minimum entry requirements</b>	<b>2. Percentage Score Required</b>	<b>3. Key area score</b>
<b>One Star</b>	Fulfil all one star requirements	30-46%	Fulfil minimum quality standards
<b>Two Star</b>	Fulfil all two star requirements	47-54%	Two quality key areas on one star level.
<b>Three Star</b>	Fulfil all three star requirements	55-69%	Two quality key areas on two star level.
<b>Four Star</b>	Fulfil all four star requirements	70-84%	Two quality key areas on three star level.
<b>Five Star</b>	Fulfil all five star requirements	85-100%	Two quality key areas on four star level.

*Source: Researcher's own model adapted from the quality band table from AA Hotel Services (2006) and Quality in Tourism (2009).*

From Table 5.4 it can be seen that all three elements required must be fulfilled to obtain a rating. This means, for example, that a three star hotel must first comply with all the minimum entry requirements for the three star rating, second, it must achieve an average score of 55 percent or higher in the quality band, and third, it must score in three of the five key quality areas on a three star level (over 55 percent) and in a maximum of two of these areas on a two star level (over 47 percent). From this it follows that although the majority of criteria included in the minimum entry requirements may focus on objective tangible criteria, a rating depends as strongly on subjective tangible criteria and service delivery performance. This means that the conventional rating system in the United Kingdom has a strong element of subjective tangible and service delivery criteria.

## **VII. New York**

The United States of America does not have any government involvement in hotel ratings. The main reason is the historic presence of independent rating bodies, of which the largest are the American Automobile Association that rates over 38 000 hotels in the USA, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean, and the Forbes Travel Guide which rates over 8 000 properties internationally (American Automobile Association, 2008; Forbes Travel Guide, 2010b). As these associations receive such a large amount of coverage and maintain similar - or even more elaborate -assessment procedures than governmental bodies involved in hotel rating, they should be considered the conventional rating body of the United States of America.

For an American Automobile Association rating, hotels can choose to join the scheme that works with five categories of diamonds to reflect the quality of a hotel. These diamonds are copyrighted by the association (American Automobile Association, 2008). The system requires hotels, regardless of the desired rating, to comply with American Automobile Association approval requirements that reflect the minimal acceptable conditions the association has established through consumer surveys and feedback from the association's members (American Automobile Association, 2008). The actual rating criteria cover both objective and subjective tangible criteria, with a strong emphasis on the latter. The criteria are minimum criteria, although generally descriptive in nature. For the four and five diamond ratings, the association conducts an anonymous hospitality evaluation to assess service delivery that incorporates a review of 12 critical service areas and measures over 300 guest interaction points. The four and five star ratings represent less than four percent of all approved properties, with the five star categories representing less than one third of one percent (American Automobile Association, 2008). The association claims that negative guest comments may result in a hotel being disapproved immediately.

Forbes Travel Guide applies a similar approach to the Automobile Association. As its standards are the same internationally, the system and criteria applied in Hong Kong are the same as those applied by Forbes for hotels it has rated in New York.

## **VIII. Paris**

A government-led conventional hotel rating system has been in force since 1942, although norms were only established by decrees of 1964, 1967, 1969, 1972, and 1974 (Mintel, 2004). The initial system was replaced by a new system on 1 January 2010 (France a la carte, 2009). The old system is a minimum criteria system with only 27 criteria that focus solely on objective tangible criteria, and has only four star categories where the fifth category is 'four star luxe' (Mintel, 2004). The new system is much more extensive and works with a point structure similar to the Dutch system (Ministrère de l'économie, de l'industrie et de l'employ, 2009). As the data on TripAdvisor was gathered before 2010, the old system's criteria and ratings were applied for the comparisons. Hotel rating in France is voluntary with 55 percent of the French participating in 2003 (Mintel, 2004).

## **IX. Rio de Janeiro**

In Rio de Janeiro, hotel ratings fall under the responsibility of the ministry of sport and tourism that has developed a system in cooperation with the national hotel association (Brazilian Association of Hotels, 2010). The system uses stars as symbols and the five star category has an additional 'super luxury' designation, creating a sixth category. The list of rated hotels is very limited and the system is not commonly known (Slob & Wilde, 2006). Only 20 hotels were rated in Rio de Janeiro in April 2009 and none of the sampled hotels in this study were on the list provided by the Brazilian Association of Hotels (2010). A reason may be the extreme detail and rigidity of the system. The system criteria focus strongly on indirect service criteria, such as staff competencies, staff training, the use of crystal glasses, and policies and procedures. Furthermore, criteria focusing on health and safety, access for disabled guests and environmental management are relatively extensive. Many criteria refer more to licensing than to rating, as they apply to all categories.

## **X. Rome**

In Italy there is an obligatory conventional rating system that is executed on a regional level. The different regions and autonomous provinces enforce one of two systems (The European Consumer Centres' Network, 2009). The first and oldest system allocates scores to the availability of services and facilities, where the total score results in a rating in one of six categories. Similar to Brazil, the sixth category is a five star with a 'deluxe' designation. The second system was developed in the 1990s and integrates the first system with a minimum of criteria per rating category.

Both systems focus on objective tangibles only whereby some are basic service criteria such as the frequency by which the linen is changed. This basic focus of criteria strongly resembles what one finds in France (Mintel, 2004).

The second system is currently being used in 12 regions and autonomous provinces, including the area of Rome.

## **XI. Sydney**

In Australia, hotel rating is executed by AAA Tourism, a company owned by the Auto Clubs (AAA Tourism, 2006). Although it has no legal affiliation, AAA Tourism operates similarly to most governmental bodies responsible for hotel rating, with physical inspections of the hotels to be rated; the difference is that rating is not obligatory.

AAA Tourism uses stars as symbols and half stars to indicate additional comfort or facilities. The rating process is defined by a small number of entry requirements that focus on accessibility, privacy, and safety and security. Hotels need to comply with four additional 'category requirements' (AAA, 2010a). Furthermore, the scheme presents several minimum criteria for four and five star hotels. Hotel rating comprises a total score that needs to be gathered using objective and subjective tangible criteria. How this score results in a rating is depicted in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5 Star rating points table AAA Tourism

Rating	Required Score in Points
Five stars	910-1000
Four-and-a-half stars	830- 890
Four stars	740- 810
Three-and-a-half stars	670- 720
Three stars	600- 650
Two-and-a-half stars	530- 580
Two stars	450- 510
One-and-a-half stars	380- 430
One star	310- 360

Source: AAA Tourism, 2010a

Table 5.5 shows that AAA Tourism rates hotels over nine categories with ‘marginal zones’ between categories. The highest score for the two star category, for example, is 510 points, whereas the two-and-a-half star category requires a minimum of 530 points. When a hotel scores in a marginal zone, it retains its existing star rating. For example, when a two star hotel scores a total of 440 points, it retains its two star status.

## 5.2.2 Control and scope of the conventional rating systems

All but one of the 11 rating systems use stars to indicate quality; the American Automobile Association uses diamonds. In addition, all systems work with five basic categories, although Italy and Australia use half stars as well, so in effect they have nine categories.

Eight of the 11 rating systems in the sample are controlled by government, or have government support. This does not mean that rating is obligatory in the majority of the destinations. Only in Dubai and Italy does the government indicate that it is impossible to operate without being rated (DCTM, 2009a, World Tourism Organisation, 2004). In The Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the name ‘hotel’ is only allowed to be used when one is rated as a hotel. The extent to which rating bodies can exercise influence on hotels in the other destinations is limited to the controlling body’s access to marketing.

One could argue that the more influence that can be exercised by the rating body the more hotels will join the system. This would create a high coverage of hotels by the system, which in turn would validate the system. Examples of systems with a very low coverage are Brazil

and Thailand whose databases of rated hotels are limited to several dozen. Dubai's system, through its strict legal enforcement, appears to have full coverage of the hotel industry. The history of the rating systems also plays a role. Systems that have been in place for longer periods seem to have a higher coverage of hotels. An example is the coverage of the systems in Thailand and Brazil compared with the French system.

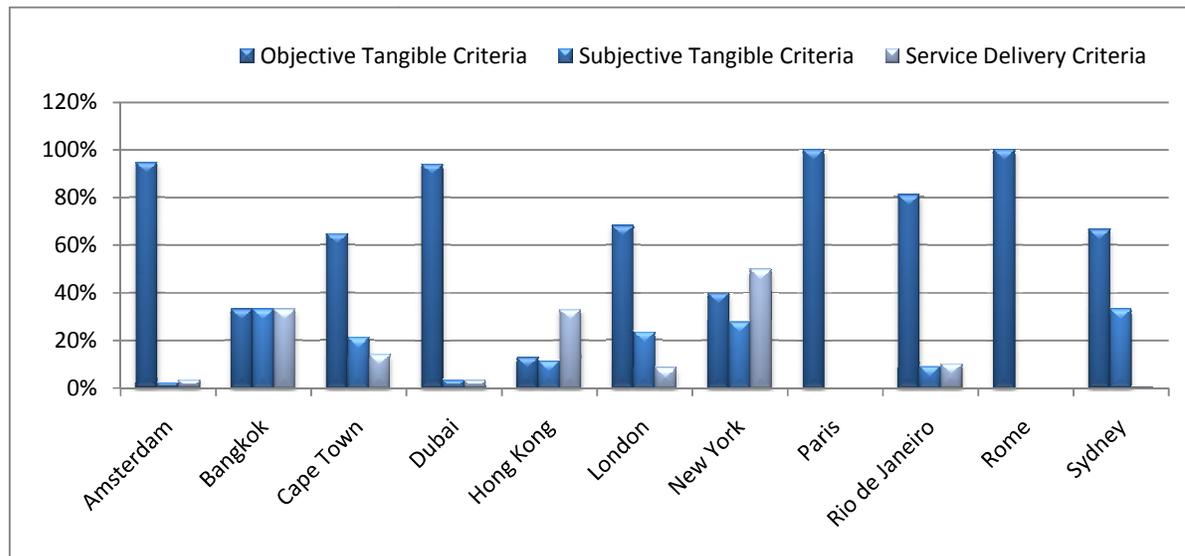
It thus becomes clear that in the sample destinations, the general assumptions on conventional hotel rating systems (see chapter 2, sections 2.3 to 2.6) apply; however, the coverage of most of the systems is low. This is reflected in the number of hotels in the sample that do not have a conventional rating. Dubai appears to be the only destination that approaches 100 percent rating coverage of the hotels in the destination. The specific findings for hotels that do not have conventional ratings are presented in section 5.3.1.

### **5.2.3 Structure and criteria of the conventional rating systems**

With reference to section 5.2.1, it is clear that the conditions for conventional ratings in the 11 destinations are similar in some cases, but very different in others. With regard to structure, almost every destination uses a different system to allocate the conventional rating.

All conventional hotel rating systems in the sample contain objective tangible criteria that should generally be fulfilled first. Some systems, through point or percentage structures, include subjective tangible criteria. Service quality criteria are only measured in certain systems, and only the rating bodies in the United Kingdom assess service quality for all categories through mystery shopping. Figure 5.1 presents the number of criteria, expressed in a percentage of the total number of criteria for each of the three criteria categories (that is, objective tangible criteria, subjective tangible criteria and service delivery criteria) per destination.

Figure 5.1 Representation of criteria groups in the conventional rating systems



Source: *Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data*

According to Figure 5.1, all systems in the sample include objective tangible criteria. Subjective tangible criteria are not in place in Paris and are scarcely represented in Dubai, Amsterdam, Rome and Rio de Janeiro. Cape Town, London and Sydney present a relatively high number of subjective tangible criteria. The independent systems in Hong Kong and New York have a high number of service delivery criteria compared with the other systems in the sample. Although most systems make reference to service delivery criteria, this is only assessed by mystery shopping in Hong Kong, New York, Amsterdam and London. With the exception of London, this mystery shopping assessment is obligatory for only four and/or five star ratings. Although six of the 11 systems refer to using guest feedback in their ratings, there is no means to verify this.

In terms of the level of quality measured, it is difficult to quantify which systems would have higher standards than the other systems in the sample. Judging from the extensive list of service delivery criteria and the low percentage of four and five star rated hotels in the American Automobile Association and Forbes Travel Guide systems, it can be argued that these systems are not fully comparable with the other systems in the sample with regard to these categories. For example, a typical five star hotel in Rome is not likely to receive a five

diamond rating from the American Automobile Association and may even struggle to obtain a four diamond rating.

#### 5.2.4 Cross check of conventional ratings

Through cross checking the conventional ratings shown on the TripAdvisor website and the websites of the hotels with rating lists of the bodies responsible for the conventional ratings, it was found that the conventional ratings that TripAdvisor displays are not accurate. This was found in destinations where hotel rating is not obligatory by law and where there is nothing to prevent a hotel from ‘making up’ its own. In addition, there appears to be a legal void when it comes to online travel agents and the ratings they choose to display on their websites, as the bodies responsible for conventional ratings have no say over them.

From the findings on the bodies responsible for conventional ratings in each destination, the researcher identified different databases to verify the ratings. Organisations use the databases to communicate the conventional rating system from the body appointed to administer the conventional rating system in the destination. The databases and deviations found in the Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample are depicted in Table 5.6.

*Table 5.6 Findings of the comparison of conventional ratings*

Destination	Conventional Rating Database	Number of Adjustments in Top 10 Sample (N=10)	Number of Adjustments in Spread Sample (N=3)
<b>Amsterdam</b>	Netherlands Board of Tourism and Conventions (2010)	3	1
<b>Bangkok</b>	Thailand Hotel Association (2010)	7	0
<b>Dubai</b>	Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (2010a)	0	0
<b>Cape Town</b>	Tourism Grading Council South Africa (2010b)	3	2
<b>Hong Kong</b>	Forbes travel Guide (2010a)	8	3
<b>London</b>	VisitLondon (2010)	2	1
<b>New York</b>	American Automobile Association (2010) Forbes Travel Guide (2010a)	2	2

<b>Paris</b>	Paris convention and visitor's centre (2010)	7	1
<b>Rio de Janeiro</b>	Brazilian Hotel Association (2010)	10	3
<b>Rome</b>	Italian Government Tourism Board (2010)	4	1
<b>Sydney</b>	AAA Tourism (2010b)	7	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>16</b>

*Source: Researcher's own model based on findings from conventional rating system databases. See Appendix 15 for an overview per hotel.*

Table 5.6 shows that a total of 53 conventional ratings of the Top 10 Sample are inaccurate. This represents 48 percent of the total sample size. The Spread Sample displays a similar number of inaccuracies (16 out of 33 ratings representing 48 percent of the sample). In Rio de Janeiro none of the hotels in the Top 10 Sample could be retrieved from the Brazil Hotel Association's database. In Hong Kong almost all ratings from the Forbes Travel Guide database were different from the ones indicated on the TripAdvisor website.

While conducting the cross check, the researcher discovered that the conventional rating of a hotel by its national rating body is the most difficult to find. On the other hand, one easily comes across ratings supplied by online travel agents, or other independent parties that do not base their ratings on rating criteria and a physical inspection.

The only destination in which hotels did not display any inaccuracies was Dubai. This may be the result of the strict legal framework that surrounds hotel rating that does not allow hotels or its representatives to communicate a different rating than that allocated by the government (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2001).

Therefore, generally a prospective traveller attempting to retrieve a hotel rating using the internet will be likely to come across an inaccurate rating that was not supplied by the conventional rating body of that destination.

## **5.3 RELATIONSHIP OF TRIPADVISOR RATINGS AND CONVENTIONAL RATINGS**

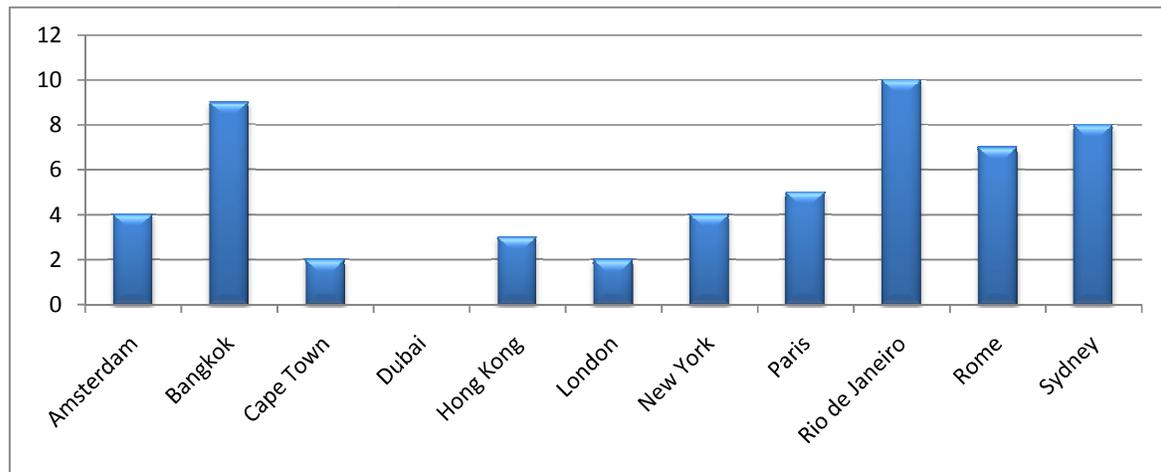
In this section the findings concerning the relationship between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings are presented. Then the results of a comparison between the TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings for hotels in the Top 10 Sample are revealed. These results are substantiated by a statistical analysis of the TripAdvisor ratings and the conventional ratings in this sample. Next, the ratings from hotels in the Spread Sample are compared with the conventional ratings. The section concludes with a discussion of the findings.

### **5.3.1 Relationship between ratings in the Top 10 Sample**

The Top 10 Sample contains the top 10 hotels in each destination, based on the TripAdvisor ranking. As outlined in section 4.2.3, these rankings are mostly defined by the average ratings that these hotels received. The findings presented in this section will focus on the number of hotels without a conventional rating, and the conventional ratings in relation to the average calculated TripAdvisor rating.

A number of hotels in the top 10 ranking of each destination lack a conventional rating as outlined in section 3.5.1. Figure 5.2 shows the number of hotels without a conventional rating per destination of the Top 10 Sample.

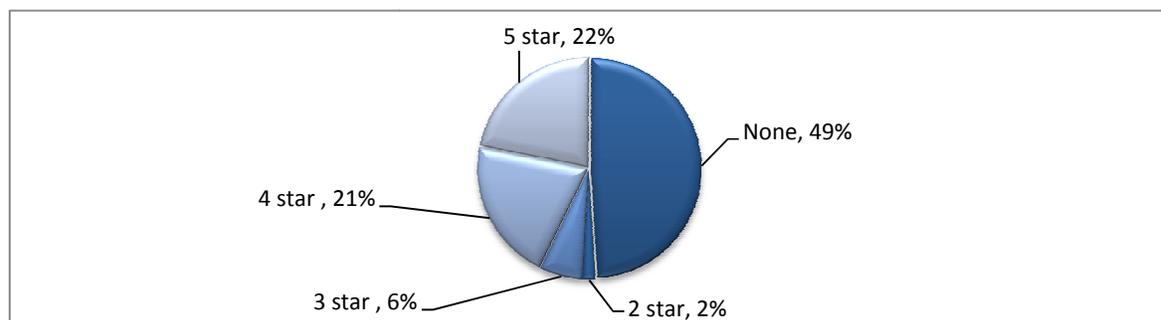
Figure 5.2 Number of hotels without a conventional rating in the Top 10 Sample.



Source: *Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data gathered between 11 October and 15 November 2009.*

According to Figure 5.2, all hotels in Dubai in the TripAdvisor top 10 ranking have conventional ratings. Rio de Janeiro has the highest number of hotels without a conventional rating (ten), since none of the hotels in the TripAdvisor top 10 ranking appears in the Brazil Hotel Association database. Bangkok is not much different with only one hotel in the top 10 showing a conventional rating. The average number of hotels in the TripAdvisor top 10 ranking without a conventional rating in the Top 10 Sample is five hotels. Figure 5.3 shows the frequency of each conventional rating in the Top 10 Sample.

Figure 5.3 Frequency of conventional ratings in the Top 10 Sample .



Source: *Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data gathered between 11 October and 15 November 2009.*

According to Figure 5.3, 49 percent of the hotels in the Top 10 Sample do not have a rating. Hotels with four and five star ratings present the largest group, followed by the hotels with no rating (21 and 22 percent, respectively). The number of three and two star ratings is much lower, and no one star rated hotel appears in the sample.

The average TripAdvisor rating per hotel in the Top 10 Sample ranges from 3.97 to 5.00. Table 5.7 shows a comparison of the average TripAdvisor rating and the average conventional rating for each destination.

*Table 5.7 Differences in conventional and TripAdvisor ratings in the Top 10 Sample.*

	<b>Average Conventional Rating</b>	<b>Average TripAdvisor Rating</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Amsterdam	3.50	4.63	-1.13
Bangkok	5.00	4.71	0.29
Cape Town	4.38	4.89	-0.52
Dubai	4.90	4.70	0.20
Hong Kong	4.43	4.64	-0.21
London	4.50	4.69	-0.19
New York	3.67	4.65	-0.98
Paris	4.00	4.67	-0.67
Rio de Janeiro	-	4.31	-
Rome	3.00	4.75	-1.75
Sydney	4.81	4.50	0.32
<b>Average</b>	<b>4.22</b>	<b>4.65</b>	<b>-0.43</b>

*Source: Researcher's own model based on data from TripAdvisor gathered between 11 October and 15 November 2009.*

From Table 5.7 it is clear that on a five point scale, in seven of the 11 destinations the average TripAdvisor rating is higher than the average conventional rating. In Rome, New York and Amsterdam, particularly, there is a substantial difference, with a relatively low average conventional rating. In Dubai and Sydney the average TripAdvisor rating is lower than the average conventional rating. On average, the TripAdvisor ratings are 0.43 higher than the conventional ratings in the Top 10 Sample.

### 5.3.2 Relationship between ratings in the Spread Sample

The Spread Sample includes three hotels in each destination with the highest, middle and lowest TripAdvisor rankings, thus presenting a cross section of hotels in the 11 destinations. In the results for this sample, the number of hotels without a conventional rating is apparent. Out of the 33 hotels in the sample, 16 (48 percent) do not have a conventional rating. The number of hotels lacking a conventional rating is highest in the lowest ranking category (9 out of 11). The middle ranking category lacks three ratings, and the highest ranking category lacks four ratings. Table 5.8 shows the conventional ratings and the TripAdvisor ratings for each of the hotels.

Table 5.8 *TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings in the Spread Sample.*

	Highest Ranking		Middle Ranking		Lowest Ranking	
	Conventional Rating	TripAdvisor Rating	Conventional Rating	TripAdvisor Rating	Conventional Rating	TripAdvisor Rating
<b>Amsterdam</b>	none	4.88	2	3.54	none	1.53
<b>Bangkok</b>	5	4.74	3	3.14	none	1.94
<b>Cape Town</b>	none	5.00	2	3.14	none	2.53
<b>Dubai</b>	5	4.76	4	2.96	4	1.56
<b>Hong Kong</b>	5	4.67	none	3.55	none	2.23
<b>London</b>	5	4.82	4	3.24	none	2.51
<b>New York</b>	3	4.90	2	3.48	none	1.40
<b>Paris</b>	none	4.86	none	3.39	none	1.55
<b>Rio de Janeiro</b>	none	4.52	none	3.10	none	2.15
<b>Rome</b>	2	4.81	3	3.01	4	2.04
<b>Sydney</b>	5	4.86	3.5	3.20	none	1.78
<b>Average</b>	<b>4.29</b>	<b>4.80</b>	<b>2.94</b>	<b>3.25</b>	<b>4.00</b>	<b>1.93</b>
<b>No rating</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>9</b>	

Source: *Researcher's own model based on data from TripAdvisor and the hotel websites.*

Table 5.8 indicates that the average conventional rating is highest for the highest ranking hotels on TripAdvisor. The average conventional rating for the lowest ranking hotels is, however, higher than the average conventional ranking of the middle ranking hotels.

For certain destinations in the sample the relation between the conventional rating and the TripAdvisor rating is not apparent. The highest ranking hotel in Rome has only two stars

according to its conventional rating, whereas the middle and lowest ranking hotels both have four stars according to their conventional ratings. Furthermore, Rio de Janeiro presents no apparent relation as all three hotels in the sample feature the same conventional rating.

### 5.3.3 Results from the statistical analysis of the Top 10 Sample

To further investigate the relationship between the average calculated TripAdvisor ratings and the conventional ratings of the hotels in the Top 10 Sample, the researcher conducted a T-test with all ratings of the top 10 sample (N=110). This was not possible for the Spread Sample as the number of missing conventional ratings was too high for the sample size.

Table 5.9 indicates the results of the T-test for the TripAdvisor and conventional ratings of the Top 10 Sample.

*Table 5.9 T-test for TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings of the Top 10 Sample*

Variable	T-test for Dependent Samples Marked differences are significant at $p < .05000$									
	Mean	Std. Dv.	N	Diff	Std. Dv. Diff	t	Df	p	Confidence -95.000%	Confidence +95.000
TA RATING	4.698571	0.129551								
CV RATING	4.232143	0.808839	56	0.466429	0.795305	4.388794	55	0.000052	0.253444	0.679413

*Source: Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data analysis in Statistica.*

From Table 5.9 it is clear that there is a statistically significant difference between the TripAdvisor ratings and the conventional ratings, since P is 0.00005. This confirms the findings elaborated on in section 5.3.1 from a statistical viewpoint.

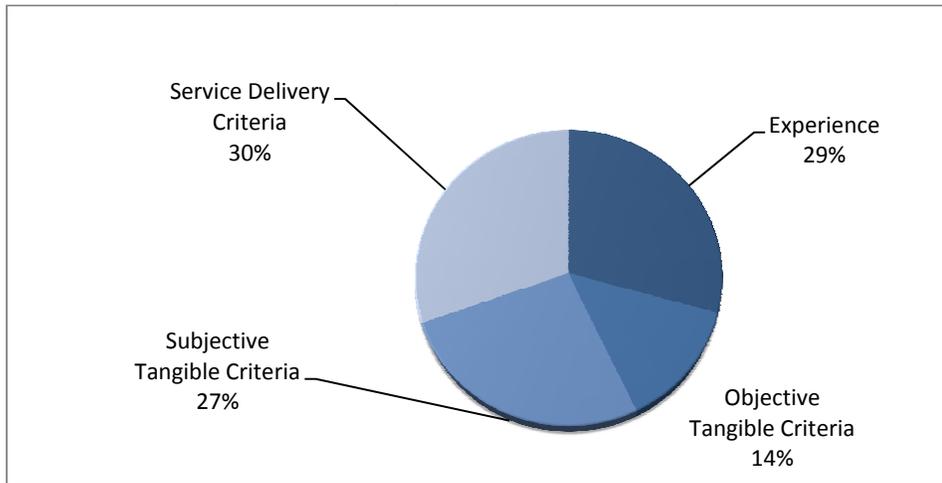
## 5.4 CRITERIA COMMENTED ON IN TRIPADVISOR REVIEWS

In this section the results from the content analysis of the Spread Sample are presented. Each review was gathered, coded and analysed as outlined in sections 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7. First the types of criteria mentioned in the reviews will be examined using the categorization presented in Table 3.3. Then the criteria are further explored per category to identify trends in what guests focus on.

### 5.4.1 Categorisation of criteria in TripAdvisor reviews

The comments in each review were coded into four main categories following the structure depicted in Table 3.3. Each category was further divided into positive and negative comments resulting in a total of eight categories for coding. Comments that bore no connection to the hotel experience were ignored. Appendix 5 presents a complete overview of the number of comments made in each category. Each review in the sample represents an average of 9.6 comments within the eight categories. Figure 5.4 outlines the frequency of these comments within the four main categories.

Figure 5.4 Average number of comments per review in each coding category

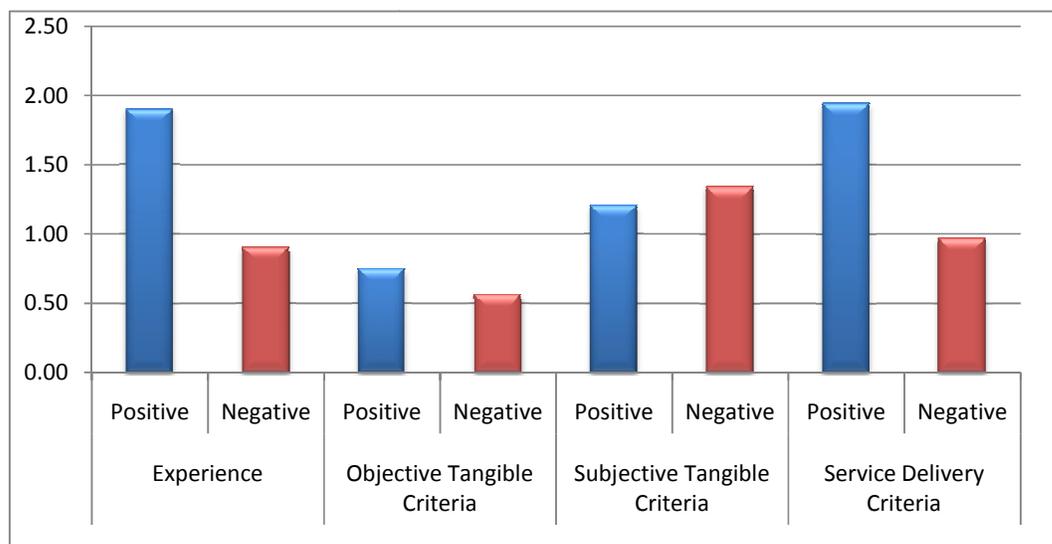


Source: Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor reviews from the Spread Sample

Figure 5.4 shows that the majority of comments in the reviews referred to service delivery criteria with an average of 2.9 comments per review. The second highest average number of comments referred to experiential expressions on the hotel that cannot be linked to a particular hotel feature. (2.8 of such comments were made per review.) The third highest frequency was for comments that referred to subjective tangible criteria. An average of 2.5 such comments was made per review. Objective tangible criteria were on average referred to the least (an average of 1.3 comments per review).

When these comments are further broken down into positive and negative comments, the average review presents 5.8 positive comments and 3.8 negative comments. However, this trend does not apply to the four main coding categories equally. Figure 5.5 indicates the average number of positive and negative comments per main coding category.

Figure 5.5 Average number of positive and negative comments per main coding category

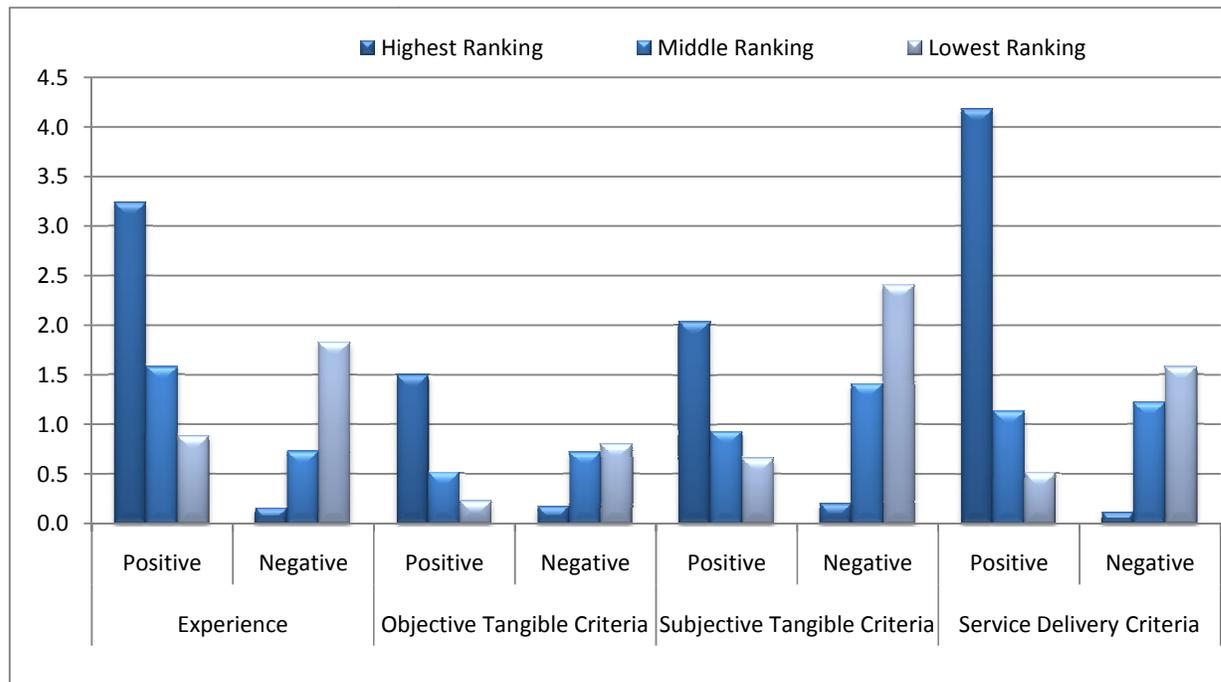


Source: *Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data.*

Figure 5.5 indicates that the positive tendency of comments does not apply to subjective tangible criteria as the average number of negative comments (1.3) in this category exceeded the positive comments (1.2). Furthermore, it is apparent that the most frequently mentioned comments refer to a positive service quality experience.

However, this trend does not apply to the different hotel types in the sample equally. Figure 5.6 presents the frequency of each category per hotel type in the sample, that is, best ranking, middle ranking, or lowest ranking.

Figure 5.6 Frequency of criteria in reviews per ranking group.



Source: Researcher's own model from data from TripAdvisor (Spread Sample). Appendix 5 presents a detailed table of this data.

According to Figure 5.6, the highest ranking hotels received the most comments on a positive service delivery (4.2), followed by a positive expression on the hotel experience that cannot be linked to the criteria specifically (3.2). The third highest frequency is comments showing a positive assessment of subjective tangible criteria (2.0). Among the positive comments, objective tangible criteria are mentioned the least frequently. The number of negative comments on the best ranking hotels is much lower, which was to be expected since they are the best ranking hotels. Among the highest ranking hotels, the average number of negative comments is 0.2 each for experience and objective tangible and

subjective tangible criteria. The average number of negative comments on service delivery for these hotels is 0.1.

The middle ranking hotels showed a different trend. Here, most comments referred to a positive experience (1.6), followed by a negative assessment of subjective tangible criteria (1.4) and a negative assessment of service delivery (1.2). In all three categories that focused on hotel criteria (objective tangible and subjective tangible criteria, and service delivery), the average number of negative comments exceeded the average number of positive comments, although the number of positive comments on the experience exceeded the number of negative comments in this category.

This dichotomy is not present in the data of the lowest ranking hotels where the number of negative comments exceeded the number of positive comments in each of the four main categories.

#### **5.4.2 Criteria mentioned in reviews**

Within the four main categories, reviewers mention different criteria relating to their hotel experience. The next section discusses the most frequently mentioned criteria in each category and explores trends in positive or negative comments. The data sheet for these criteria is depicted in Appendix 6.

##### **I. Comments on experience**

Three types of comments on experience were identified that could not be allocated to specific hotel performance, but appeared important with regard to the guest assessment of the hotel experience.

Firstly, 28 reviewers did not agree with the star rating of the hotel. This represents eight percent of the total sample. Twenty two of these comments (seven percent of the total sample) were negative; the reviewer expressed dissatisfaction with the hotel experience in comparison with the expectation that was created by the star rating. Thirteen of these

comments were made in reviews of the lowest ranking hotels. The Anglo Americano Hotel in Rome received four out of ten comments that its four star rating was not accurate.

Secondly, 180 reviewers (55 percent) mentioned the 'location' of the hotel in their review. Location it thus the most frequently mentioned item in the sampled hotel reviews. One hundred and sixty one of these comments on location are positive and 19 are negative. Although most of the negative comments were made to the lowest ranking hotels, no other trends were visible in terms of the hotel ranking on TripAdvisor and the mentioning of location by reviewers.

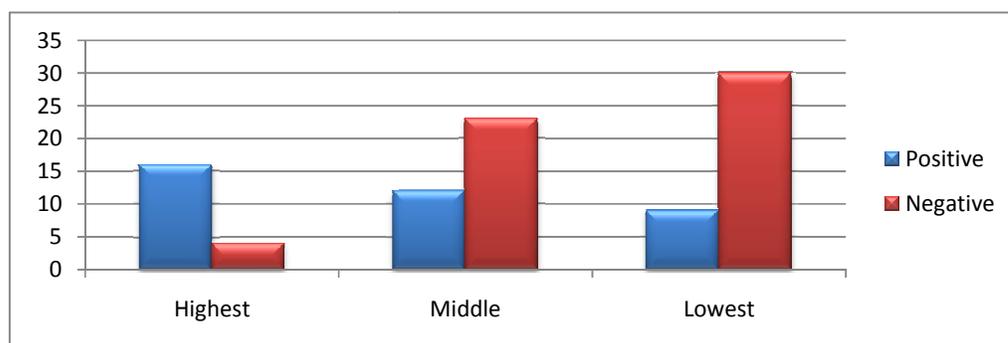
Thirdly, 114 reviewers (34 percent) mentioned 'value for money' in their review; the majority were positive (81) and the minority (33) negative.

## II. Comments relating to objective tangible criteria

Twenty four comments were related to objective tangible criteria. Comments made by 33 or more reviewers (10 percent of the sample) focused on room size, facilities in the room, and the range of choices of breakfast.

Ninety four reviewers (28 percent) referred to room size: 37 comments were positive and 57, negative. Figure 5.7 displays the division of these comments over the different hotel types according to the TripAdvisor ranking.

Figure 5.7 Comments on room size per the three hotel types



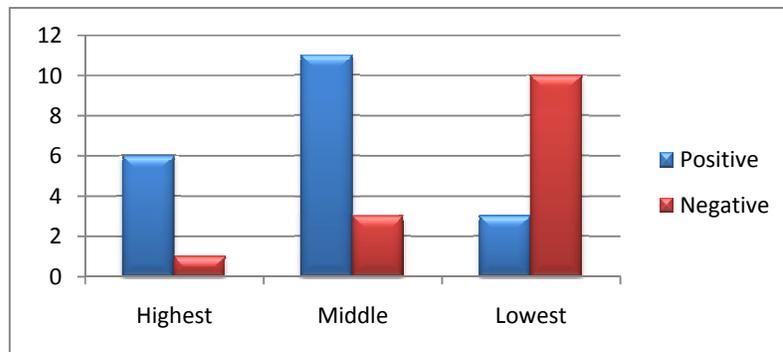
Source: *Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data (Spread Sample). Appendix 6 displays a comprehensive overview of the data collected.*

Figure 5.7 indicates that the satisfaction with the room size per hotel type in terms of ranking, follows a logical flow from the highest ranking hotels (highest number of positive comments on the room size) through the middle ranking hotels (higher number of negative comments and lower number of positive comments) to the lowest ranking hotels in the sample (highest number of negative comments and lowest number of positive comments).

The facilities in the room were commented on by 33 reviewers (10 percent of the total sample). Seventeen of these comments were positive and 16 were negative. Similar to the comments on room size, the number of positive and negative comments is balanced over the hotel types, with the highest ranking hotels receiving only positive comments and the lowest ranking hotels receiving almost only negative comments.

Thirty four reviews mentioned the range of choices for breakfast and the majority of these comments were positive. Figure 5.8 shows the frequency of these comments over the three hotel types in the Spread Sample.

Figure 5.8 Comments on the range of breakfast choices per three hotel types



Source: *Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data (Spread Sample). Appendix 6 displays a comprehensive overview of the data collected.*

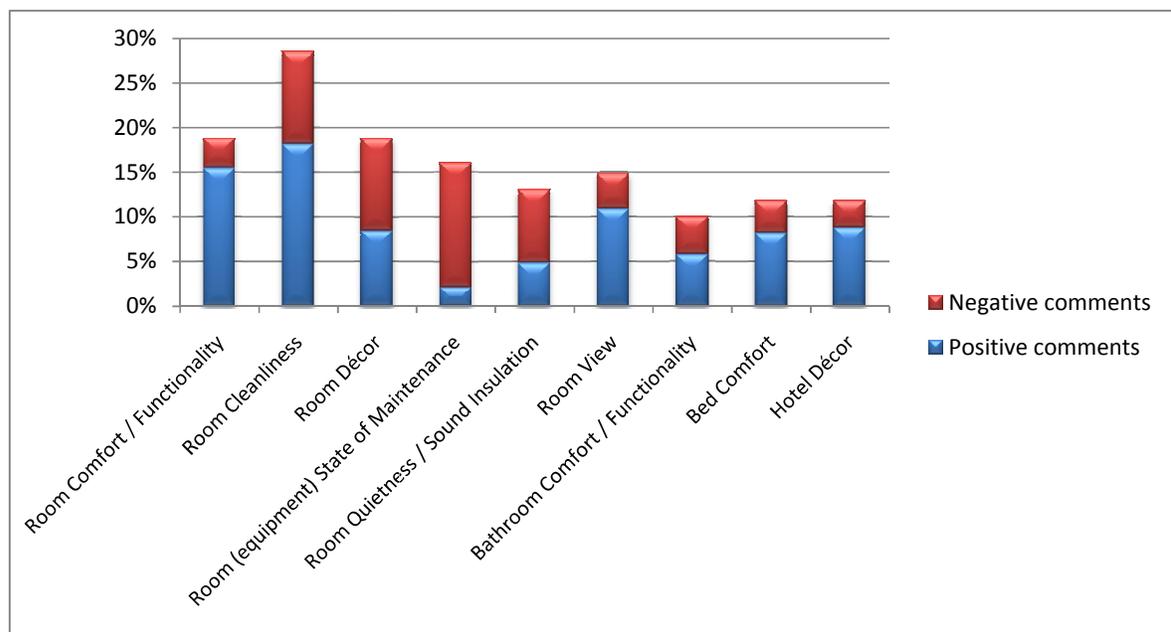
Figure 5.8 shows that the middle ranking hotels received the highest number of positive comments on the range of choices for breakfast. Furthermore, the division is as was

expected, that is, the highest ranking hotels received more positive comments than the lowest ranking hotels.

### III. Comments relating to subjective tangible criteria

Twenty seven different subjective tangible criteria were identified from comments in the reviews. Nine criteria were mentioned in more than 10 percent of the reviews (see Figure 5.9).

Figure 5.9 Subjective tangible criteria mentioned in more than 10 percent of the reviews



Source: Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data (Spread Sample). Appendix 6 displays a comprehensive overview of the data collected.

Figure 5.9 indicates that room cleanliness was the most frequently mentioned subjective tangible criterion (28 percent of the reviewers in the sample). The majority of these comments were positive. Room comfort and functionality and room decor were both mentioned by 62 reviewers, representing 19 percent of the total sample. Most of the nine

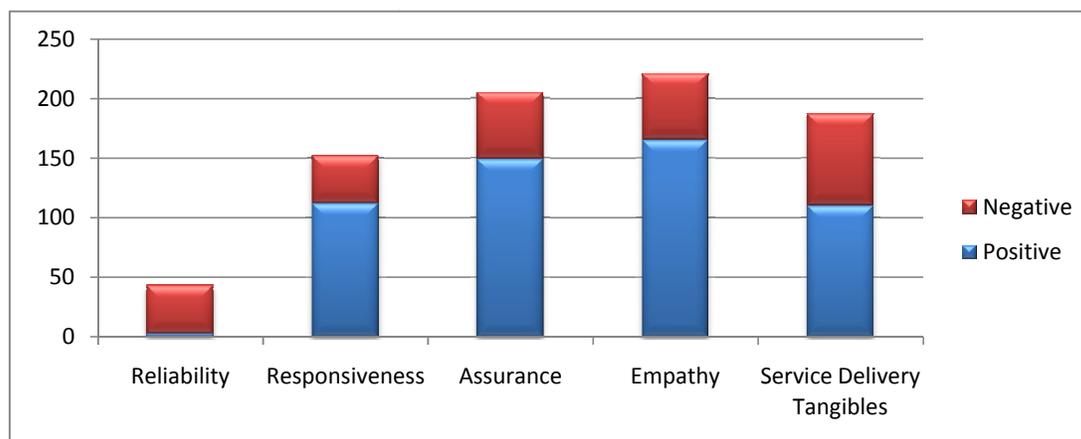
mentioned criteria reveal a tendency towards either negative or positive comments. Room decor received 28 positive and 34 negative comments. The state of maintenance of the room and its equipment was mostly referred to in a negative manner; in other words, if the maintenance was satisfactory, it was not referred to. With comments on the view from the room (room view), the opposite applied; generally the room view was only mentioned if it was positive.

Similar to the objective tangible criteria, the subjective tangible criteria displayed differences based on the hotel ranking types in the sample. Generally these differences were logical in connection to the ranking (outlined in Figure 5.6). However, certain subjective tangible criteria displayed a different pattern. Room cleanliness, for example, received a high number of positive comments in the middle ranking hotels (32 comments compared with 14 for both the highest ranking and the lowest ranking hotels). Room decor shows the opposite pattern where the middle ranking hotels received the highest number of negative comments (19) compared with the lowest ranking hotels (14). The same pattern occurred with comments on the comfort of the bed.

#### **IV. Comments relating to service delivery criteria**

According to Figure 5.2, most comments in the reviews of the Spread Sample relate to service delivery criteria. Thirty four different service delivery criteria were identified. As part of the coding process, these criteria were categorised using the five dimensions of service quality assessment identified in section 2.6.1 (Zeithaml *et al.* 2009). Figure 5.10 displays the total number of positive and negative comments per dimension.

Figure 5.10 Number of comments per dimension of assessment of service quality



Source: Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data (Spread Sample).

From Figure 5.10 it is clear that most comments on service delivery (221) can be categorised in the empathy dimension. Assurance and tangibles were also mentioned frequently (205 and 187 comments, respectively). Four dimensions (responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and service tangibles) received more positive than negative comments, whereas comments on reliability were mostly negative.

Within the categories, nine comments on service delivery criteria were made by more than 10 percent of reviewers. These comments are summarised in Table 5.10 where they are categorised according to their respective service quality dimension.

Table 5.10 Service delivery criteria mentioned by more than 10 percent of reviewers

Service Quality Dimension	Comments	Comments as a percentage of total
<b>Reliability</b>	-	-
<b>Responsiveness</b>	Helpfulness of staff	<b>31%</b>
<b>Assurance</b>	Staff professionalism	<b>16%</b>
	Tourist information / recommendations	<b>11%</b>
	Service errors	<b>20%</b>
<b>Empathy</b>	Courteous staff	<b>16%</b>
	Warmth and friendliness of staff	<b>26%</b>
<b>Tangibles</b>	Quality of the breakfast	<b>16%</b>
	Quality of food and drinks	<b>12%</b>
	Complementary food, drinks, services	<b>10%</b>

Source: Researcher's own model based on data from TripAdvisor (Spread Sample).

Table 5.10 clearly shows that the 'helpfulness of staff' was the most frequently mentioned service delivery criterion, followed by 'warmth and friendliness' of staff. In line with the overall tendency towards positive and negative comments presented in Figure 5.4, the majority of the comments depicted in Table 5.10 are positive. Comments on service errors appear balanced: only comments on the courtesy of staff are mostly negative.

Section 5.5 presents the findings of the triangulation of the data presented in sections 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 in order to identify to what extent findings can be explained in terms of the rating systems in place at the different destinations.

## **5.5 TRIANGULATION OF FINDINGS**

The findings of the conventional rating systems were triangulated with the findings on the relationship between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings and the criteria commented on in TripAdvisor reviews.

First, the ratings of TripAdvisor were triangulated with the conventional rating environment in each respective destination to identify if the control executed by a conventional rating affects TripAdvisor ratings. Second, the criteria mentioned in TripAdvisor reviews were compared with the criteria covered by the rating bodies.

### **5.5.1 Conventional rating systems and TripAdvisor ratings**

Almost half of the conventional hotel ratings in the sample were not correctly represented on TripAdvisor, as the databases of the conventional hotel rating bodies presented different ratings. Furthermore, almost half the number of the hotels in the sample did not have a conventional rating. One would expect that the six percent of reviews in the study that did not agree with the perceived conventional rating would be a consequence of the above findings. For example, if a three star hotel is depicted incorrectly on different websites as a four star hotel, the traveller is expecting four star standards and would very likely be disappointed and share this in the review. However, hotels with a correct rating that the reviewers simply did not agree with are also included in the six percent. The destinations

that received the most comments that disagreed with the conventional ratings are Rome (six), Rio de Janeiro (five) and Amsterdam (four). In the case of Rome, the comments all referred to the Hotel Anglo Americano, rated four stars by the Italian Government Tourist Board (2010); however, four reviewers disagreed with this. The comments in Rio de Janeiro come as no surprise as none of the hotels in the sample was rated by a conventional rating system, although TripAdvisor ranked all hotels in the Spread Sample as three star hotels. In Amsterdam, four comments focused on Hotel Acca van Gogh that carries no conventional rating according to both the Netherlands Board for Tourism and Conventions (2010) and TripAdvisor, although reviewers indicated that their impression was that the hotel is a three star hotel.

Since 49 percent of the hotels from the Top 10 Sample that featured in their respective destination's top 10 did not have a conventional rating, one may conclude that overall there is little control by the rating organisations on the hotels in their respective destinations. Dubai is the exception, since all hotels used in this study had been rated. This appears to be the only destination in the sample where the conventional rating system is controlled, as there were also no incorrect ratings in the sample. From the findings on this destination, the question arises whether the lack of overlap between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings is not simply due to a lack of control of conventional rating bodies over the hotel market in their destinations. If more control was in place, the TripAdvisor ratings might be more closely aligned with the conventional ratings.

Dubai is also an interesting case in terms of the relation between the rating categories, as the difference between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings is smallest in this destination (only 0.20 points difference in favour of the conventional ratings). The high conventional ratings of the middle ranking and lowest ranking hotel in Dubai (both four star rated), do however contradict the assumption that more control by the conventional rating body might lead to a stronger correlation between the conventional ratings and those of TripAdvisor.

This study found a statistically significant difference between TripAdvisor ratings and conventional ratings in the Top 10 Sample. The most obvious example is Rio de Janeiro, where none of the hotels in the Top 10 Sample featured a conventional rating. The average

TripAdvisor rating of the Top 10 Sample for this destination is the lowest of all destinations (4.41 points), which is 0.34 below the average TripAdvisor rating for the entire sample. However, the same did not apply to Bangkok where only one conventional rating was allocated to the top 10 ranked hotels on TripAdvisor, but where the average rating over the Top 10 Sample was above the average TripAdvisor rating for the entire sample.

Among the hotels that had been rated, the four and five star hotels were most frequently represented in the Top 10 Sample. However, this finding also presents exceptions. Welrome, the number one ranked hotel in Rome, is a two star, budget / family hotel with little frills. It appears to be ‘value for money’ combined with personalised service that allows this hotel to be ranked number one in Rome on TripAdvisor. A similar situation occurs in Amsterdam where the top 10 includes one two star hotel that is ranked number two on TripAdvisor.

Whether the conventional rating system focuses more elaborately on service quality also appears to be irrelevant. Table 5.11 indicates the number of criteria focused on service delivery, the average TripAdvisor rating in the Top 10 Sample and the destination rating based on the average TripAdvisor rating.

*Table 5.11 Conventional rating system service focus and average TripAdvisor rating*

	<b>Number of Service Delivery Criteria</b>	<b>Average TripAdvisor Rating</b>	<b>Destination rating based on average TripAdvisor rating</b>
<b>Amsterdam</b>	5	4.63	8
<b>Bangkok</b>	0	4.71	3
<b>Cape Town</b>	22	4.89	1
<b>Dubai</b>	2	4.70	4
<b>Hong Kong</b>	252	4.64	9
<b>London</b>	8	4.69	5
<b>New York</b>	95	4.65	7
<b>Paris</b>	0	4.67	6
<b>Rio de Janeiro</b>	19	4.31	11
<b>Rome</b>	0	4.75	2
<b>Sydney</b>	1	4.50	10

*Source: Researcher’s own model based on TripAdvisor’s Top 10 Sample and conventional rating systems in the sampled destinations. See Appendix 14 for a complete breakdown of the conventional rating systems.*

Table 5.11 shows that the destinations with rating systems that focused more on service delivery and thus presented more criteria in this area, did not have a higher average rating in the TripAdvisor top 10. From this one can conclude that although reviewers focus more on service delivery criteria, the control by a conventional rating body of these criteria does not influence the quality of the top hotels in the destination. A reason for the differences in rating may lie in TripAdvisor's reviewers' perceptions of service, since the above service delivery criteria do not correspond strongly to those used in conventional rating systems, notwithstanding that those systems include service quality assessment.

### **5.5.2 Criteria mentioned in TripAdvisor reviews and conventional rating criteria**

The majority of conventional rating systems analysed for this study include a relatively high number of objective tangible criteria and a lower number of subjective tangible criteria. Service delivery criteria are only included for all rating categories in London. Control by these rating systems is highest on objective tangible criteria, lower on subjective tangible criteria, and lowest on service delivery criteria.

Figure 5.3 presented the opposite trend in the TripAdvisor reviews, where the highest average number of comments focused on service delivery and the lowest number on objective tangible criteria. Therefore, in terms of positive and negative comments, the highest proportion of negative comments should have been received for those areas not controlled by most rating systems, namely, the subjective tangible criteria and the service delivery criteria. Figure 5.4 indicated that this was not the case, as the number of negative comments in connection to the number of positive comments is highest for the subjective tangible criteria, followed by the objective tangible criteria. The number of positive comments that focus on service delivery criteria exceeded the number of negative comments. The service dimension 'empathy' was referred to most and also received the highest number of positive comments. However, this dimension was not present in any of the rating systems, even those that included mystery shopping assessments.

It thus becomes apparent that the number of comments in TripAdvisor reviews on a criteria category increases when the control of the rating systems decreases. Although there is an

overlap between conventional rating criteria and criteria commented on in TripAdvisor reviews, the focus of the latter is more on the subjective tangible and service delivery elements that are generally underscored in the rating systems of the conventional hotel rating systems sample.

The number of negative comments is only higher where subjective tangible criteria are mentioned and not where service delivery is concerned. Therefore, the assumption that areas not controlled by conventional rating systems would perform worse in terms of guest satisfaction is not supported by the data.

## 5.6 SUMMARY

This chapter has presented the findings of the ratings and criteria of TripAdvisor and has compared them with the structure and criteria of conventional rating systems of two samples of hotels in 11 international destinations.

Although all of the destinations showed an operational conventional hotel rating system, 48 percent of the hotels in both the Top 10 Sample and the Spread Sample had no such rating. Furthermore, almost half of the conventional ratings sampled from TripAdvisor proved to be incorrect. Although the rated hotels in the top 10 on TripAdvisor are mostly four and five star hotels, exceptions are apparent. It can thus be concluded that conventional hotel ratings and TripAdvisor ratings show a very weak relation. However, the limited control by rating bodies cannot be said to be the cause, as the one destination that seemed to provide full control showed a weak connection with TripAdvisor ratings in the Spread Sample. This may be the result of a different criteria focus used by the reviewers of TripAdvisor in contrast with the criteria used in conventional rating systems.

In reviews, 30 percent of the comments referred to the experience of the reviewers where they shared their satisfaction/dissatisfaction without referring to specific criteria. Among those comments relating to criteria, most (30 percent) focused on service delivery. Subjective tangible criteria were referred to in 26 percent of the comments; the criteria referred to least were the objective tangible criteria (14 percent). The rating systems in the 11 destinations in the sample showed the opposite trend: most attention focused on

objective tangible criteria and least on service delivery. This trend is in line with the theoretical review of rating systems presented in section 2.6.2. TripAdvisor's reviews and ratings cover an area of the hotel experience that is largely not controlled by conventional rating systems.

The satisfaction of reviewers does not however seem to depend on whether a criterion is controlled by a rating system. Although the level of satisfaction in reviews concerning subjective tangible criteria is low, service delivery criteria in general, and the empathy dimension in particular, are most frequently mentioned positively, yet these areas are controlled least by the rating systems analysed in this study. Also no apparent differences were noted between hotels that were rated and hotels that were not rated in the sample.

Chapter 6 presents a further triangulation of results to identify the value of TripAdvisor. Two scenarios of expected future developments in the connection between conventional rating systems and guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor are discussed.

## CHAPTER 6

### A NEW THEORY TO INCLUDE GUEST FEEDBACK IN HOTEL RATINGS

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 5 the relationship between TripAdvisor and conventional rating systems was explored. The conclusion was that the ratings on TripAdvisor are weakly related to those of conventional hotel rating systems and that the criteria mentioned in TripAdvisor reviews focuses more the subjective tangible and service delivery criteria. The conventional rating systems in the sampled destinations showed a stronger focus on the objective tangible criteria. In this chapter the findings of chapters 4 and 5 are further triangulated to define the value of TripAdvisor in providing information that conventional rating systems do not provide. The chapter thereby seeks to answer the fifth research question of this study (To what extent is TripAdvisor valuable in providing information that conventional systems do not?) and to build a theory on the value that guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor may offer.

First, an additional categorisation of quality criteria is presented that suggests that different criteria have a different influence on the guest's assessment of quality, since some criteria in this study were responded to only in an almost entirely positive or negative way.

Next the value of information generated by TripAdvisor will be explored. First the weaknesses of conventional rating systems will be identified, and then it will be shown how information supplied by TripAdvisor relates to those weaknesses and provides information that well organised conventional rating systems are expected to provide.

Two potential developments are mapped for conventional rating systems. The first takes a negative approach, arguing that the information derived from guest review platforms such as TripAdvisor will further devalue conventional rating systems resulting in their future demise. The positive approach presents a conceptual model that outlines how information from platforms such as TripAdvisor can be used in conjunction with conventional rating

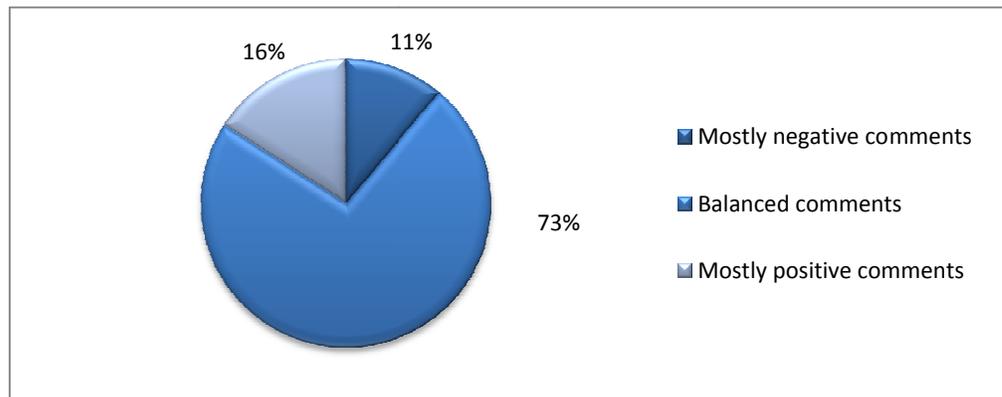
systems to add value to travellers, hotels and tourism destinations alike. Several conditions are required for such a model to work (outlined below).

## **6.2 A CATEGORISATION OF QUALITY CRITERIA BASED ON FRUSTRATION AND DELIGHT OF GUESTS**

The analysis of TripAdvisor reviews in the Spread Sample presents a number of criteria that have a tendency to be commented on only in an almost entirely positive or negative manner, regardless of the destination, hotel ranking, or conventional hotel rating. To further explore these criteria, the researcher isolated the criteria that were commented on in three groups based on the connection between the number of positive and the number of negative comments. A criterion is considered predominantly positive or negative when 80 percent or more of the comments received were either positive, or negative, creating two groups. The third group consists of criteria that were commented on in a more balanced manner.

In further exploring these three groups, criteria that were commented on by fewer than 10 reviewers (three percent with N=110) were ignored so as to eliminate comments that were made by very small numbers of reviewers, which may not therefore present an accurate division between negative and positive comments. Using this process of elimination and also excluding comments on experience, a total of 63 criteria were selected out of a total of 86, representing 73 percent of all criteria commented on. Figure 6.1 depicts how the three groups were divided over the 63 criteria.

Figure 6.1 Three groups of criteria based on comment orientation



Source: *Researcher's own model*

Figure 6.1 shows that most comments made on TripAdvisor can be classified as being balanced in terms of positive and negative comments referring to the 63 criteria. Eleven percent of the criteria received more than 80 percent negative comments and 16 percent of criteria (made by more than 10 reviewers) received almost only positive comments.

Table 6.1 outlines which comments in the three categories were almost entirely positive, or negative.

Table 6.1 *Comments on criteria that are predominantly positive or negative*

	Objective Tangible Criteria	Subjective Tangible Criteria	Service Delivery Criteria
More than 80% positive comments	Balcony	Views from the hotel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Staff did not say no</li> <li>- Staff professionalism</li> <li>- Tourist information / recommendations</li> <li>- Organisation of bookings / transport</li> <li>- Warmth and friendliness of staff</li> <li>- Upgrade or Discount</li> <li>- Staff made extra efforts</li> <li>- Complimentary food / services / facilities</li> </ul>
More than 80% negative comments	Elevator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Smell in room</li> <li>- Rodents / fleas / bed bugs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accuracy of advertising</li> <li>- Accuracy of booking and billing</li> <li>- Cost of in-house services</li> <li>- Hotel environment</li> </ul>

Source: *Researcher's own model based on data from the Spread Sample*

From Table 6.1 it can be seen that the majority of the comments that are predominantly positive or negative are made on service delivery. In this group eight comments are predominantly positive and four predominantly negative. Comments made on objective and subjective tangible criteria are fewer, two on objective tangible criteria and three on subjective tangible criteria.

The objective tangible criteria that were commented on are 'balcony' and 'elevator'. The presence of a balcony invited 11 positive comments in seven destinations. One review mentioned the lack of a balcony as negative. The lack of an elevator was mentioned by 20 reviewers in five destinations. Only one reviewer mentioned the presence of an elevator as positive. This elevator is a small lift for bags in Fusion Suites in Amsterdam.

Three subjective tangible criteria were commented on in a predominantly positive or negative manner. 'Views from the hotel' were mentioned in a positive manner by 19 reviewers in four destinations. A smell in the room was commented on in 22 reviews in seven destinations. All these comments were negative. Rodents, fleas, and bed bugs were commented on in 14 reviews in six destinations. Only one of these comments was positive: with the reviewer expressed satisfaction that the room was 'bug free'.

Service delivery criteria were commented on more frequently in a predominantly positive or negative manner. Eight criteria are commented on in a predominantly positive manner, and four in a predominantly negative manner. Table 6.2 outlines how these comments relate to the five service quality dimensions that were used to provide a sub-structure for the service delivery criteria.

Table 6.2 Positive or negative comments categorised by service quality dimension

Dimension	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
<b>Reliability</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accuracy of Advertising Promise</li> <li>- Accuracy of Booking and Billing</li> </ul>
<b>Responsiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Staff did not say no</li> </ul>	
<b>Assurance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Staff Professionalism</li> <li>- Tourist Information Recommendations</li> <li>- Organisation of Bookings / Transport</li> </ul>	
<b>Empathy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Warmth and friendliness of staff</li> <li>- Upgrade or Discounts</li> <li>- Staff made extra efforts</li> </ul>	
<b>Service Delivery Tangibles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Complimentary Food / Service / Facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cost of in House Services</li> <li>- Hotel Environment</li> </ul>

Source: *Researcher's own model based on Spread Sample of TripAdvisor with dimensions of Zeithaml et al. 2009.*

Table 6.2 clearly shows that both criteria that fall in the reliability dimension are predominantly negative. The accuracy of advertising was commented on 16 times in eight destinations. Only one reviewer was positive about this accuracy. The accuracy of booking and correct billing was also commented on negatively. All 13 reviewers, covering seven destinations, provided negative comments, mentioning a confirmed booking not being recognised, not receiving the correct room type, being charged for services not used, or being charged extra without an apparent reason. One criterion within the responsiveness dimension was commented on predominantly positively. Staff not saying no was mentioned positively by 11 reviewers covering six destinations. No negative comments on this criterion appeared in the data. Three comments referred to criteria in the assurance dimension and all three were predominantly positive. Comments referring to staff professionalism were made 51 times of which only four were negative. These comments included 'great staff' and 'professional service'. The empathy dimension included three criteria that were also referred to predominantly with positive comments.

Warmth and friendliness of staff was mentioned by 85 reviewers in all destinations and was only referred to negatively by eight reviewers. The Inn New York City hotel received five such comments that ranged from 'it feels like visiting friends' to 'staff was warm and welcoming'. The second criterion in the empathy dimension was being given an upgrade or discount. All 17 comments referring to this criterion were positive. These comments were made in nine destinations and represented an 'extra' that the reviewers did not expect but very much appreciated. Staff's extra efforts were appreciated; 29 comments of this type were made and all were positive. 'Extra effort' included giving information, providing unexpected services, and generally 'going the extra mile'. These comments were from eight of the highest ranking hotels in as many destinations. Three criteria can be grouped under Zeithaml and Bitner's tangible service quality dimensions (Zeithaml *et al.* 2009). Complimentary food, facilities or services were commented on by 32 reviewers; all were positive, and came from the highest ranking hotels in ten destinations. An example of this criterion is a complimentary cell phone that guests received in the *Zinn1* in Cape Town. Six of the ten reviewers commented on this additional service provided by the hotel. The costs of in-house services are appreciated to the same degree: 20 of a total of 21 comments on this criterion were negative and covered six destinations. The hotel environment also appeared to frustrate reviewers as 11 solely negative comments were made on this criterion in four destinations. This particular criterion referred to issues such as prostitution in the hotel (Grand Moov Hotel and Ramee Hotel in Dubai), intrusive merchants outside the hotel (*The Imperial Hotel* in Hong Kong, and the *Rio Othon Palace* and *Oceano Copacabana hotel* in Rio de Janeiro), and school children drinking in the car park (*Menzies Prince Regent* in London).

By exploring the comments from the different criteria groups, a further definition of the phenomena was possible. First, the researcher decided to refer to these criteria as 'factors' so as not to create confusion with the three groups of criteria used for this study (objective tangible, subjective tangible and service delivery criteria). The factors that were commented on in a predominantly negative manner were experiences with facilities or services in the hotel that frustrated the reviewer, as poor performance, or the entire absence of these facilities or services was not expected. With comments that were predominantly positive, the reviewer was pleasantly surprised by the exceptional quality or the presence of the

facility or service. The criteria that were commented on in a more balanced manner were criteria that the consumer generally expected and had experienced in a positive or negative manner. From this analysis each of the factors can be defined as follow.

### **I. Frustration factors**

Criteria that are taken for granted in the reviewer's expectation, but are absent, or of very poor quality, or their presence is unexpectedly disappointing. As a result, these factors are predominately commented on in a negative manner.

### **II. Satisfaction factors**

Criteria that are expected by the reviewer, and are experienced either positively, or negatively. As a result they are commented on in both a positive and a negative manner.

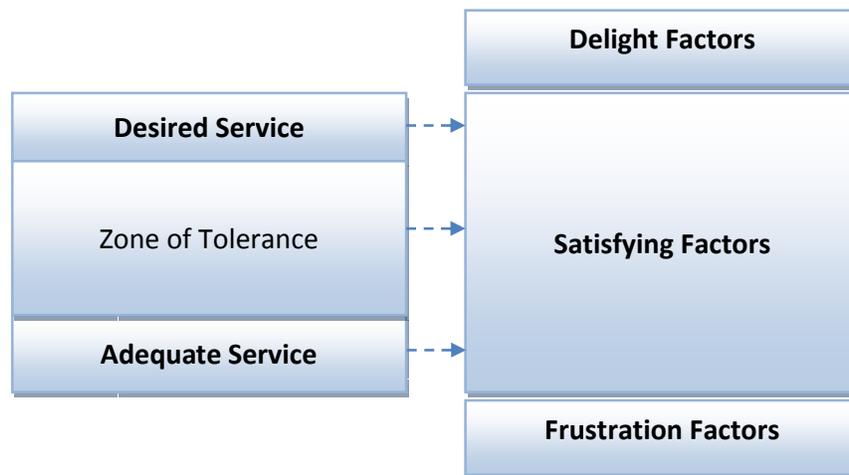
### **III. Delight factors**

Criteria that delight the reviewer because the reviewer's expectation is unexpectedly exceeded. The absence of these criteria generally did not result in a negative comment as their quality, or presence was not expected in the first place.

These frustration and delight factors appear to lie outside the two levels of desired and adequate service presented by Zeithaml and Bitner and the 'zone of Tolerance' that lies in between (Zeithaml *et al.* 2009), as they appear to be not expected at all, at least not at a conscious level. The factors of delight relate to the findings of Oliver *et al.* (1997), as they appear to be particularly the result of the component arousal (surprise).

Figure 6.2 outlines how the three factors relate to the expected service framework of Zeithaml *et al.* (2009).

Figure 6.2 Frustration and delight factors related to customer expectation



Source: Adapted from Zeithaml et al. (2009)

Figure 6.2 shows that frustration and delight factors fall outside the expectation framework as they are either not expected to be in place, or their presence or quality is assumed to always be in place within the hotel experience.

Section 6.5 proposes a model on how information from a guest feedback platform such as TripAdvisor may be used in collaboration with information presented by conventional rating systems. How the three factors defined in this chapter may be applied by both systems is also elaborated on. Section 6.4 presents a scenario that may however be more likely, namely, the demise of conventional hotel rating systems as a result of guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor.

### 6.3 VALUE OF TRIPADVISOR

From this study it becomes apparent that TripAdvisor provides value to guests, hotels and destinations in presenting information on hotels that conventional hotel rating systems do not. This section outlines how value is created for the above groups within the context of conventional hotel rating systems. First the limitations of conventional rating systems are outlined. Then the value of the information presented by TripAdvisor in connection to these

limitations is explored, identifying where and how TripAdvisor adds value within this context.

### **6.3.1 Limitations of conventional rating systems**

In Chapter 5 it became apparent that information on hotels presented by conventional rating systems is limited in coverage and does not always reach the prospective traveller. First, hotel ratings are frequently falsely displayed on websites such as TripAdvisor. The confirmation of ratings through the conventional rating system databases revealed that the accurate ratings are frequently most difficult to retrieve. Through the internet, the consumer has more access to information. However, more parties also have access to the consumer and there is no legislative framework that can prevent third parties from presenting their own rating systems using stars as a symbol. The skill required to find the 'correct' rating may be expected to be developed by only expert travellers. It is difficult, if not impossible for prospective travellers to identify the type of hotel they are seeking, and seriously undermines the concept of conventional hotel rating, since one of its main strengths is that it seeks to measure and control hotel quality in an unbiased and independent manner.

Secondly, almost half of the hotels in this study do not have a conventional rating. As long as hotels have the option to choose to be included in a rating system, and may simultaneously present a 'false' rating on a platform such as an online travel agent, the incentive to go through a conventional rating process is limited. Limited coverage of a conventional rating system limits its effectiveness, as tourists will not recognise it when it is not all encompassing.

Thirdly, the conventional rating systems analysed in this study differ strongly with regard to criteria. This means that a tourist, after identifying the correct rating, should review the respective rating system to identify what can be expected. The focus on flexibility and the incorporation of subjective tangible and service delivery criteria have made systems more complex to read, as a certain rating category is no longer a guarantee that a certain criteria or service is offered. In section 5.2 it became clear that within the sample of 11 destinations apparent differences in the 'quality standard' are noticeable. The limited number of

American Automobile Association and Forbes Travel Guide four and five star, or diamond rated hotels are testimony to this. As outlined in section 2.3, the diversity of conventional rating systems seems to be on the rise despite serious attempts for harmonisation.

Fourthly, despite a trend where systems seek to include more service delivery criteria (Intel, 2004), only one system measures this through mystery shopping assessments across all rating categories. Section 5.4 emphasized service delivery in TripAdvisor reviews, which indicates that this, to a large extent, influences the hotel experience of travellers most. There is little evidence to suggest that the option for guest feedback presented by six of the 11 systems is effective, as the researcher finds it unlikely that travellers will easily find their way to the website of the respective rating body, or obtain a form to provide such feedback.

From this it can be said that contemporary conventional rating systems and their distribution channels have apparent limitations in providing travellers with information on the hotel experience. Section 6.3.2 outlines how a platform such as TripAdvisor may close this gap.

### **6.3.2 The value of information on TripAdvisor**

This study has identified several areas where information provided by a platform such as TripAdvisor may add value. A starting point for this elaboration is that information presented by TripAdvisor should be reliable. This study has identified that despite limitations presented by the open nature of TripAdvisor, its information at the time of writing is deemed reliable.

From sections 5.3 and 5.4 one could argue that TripAdvisor is in direct competition with conventional rating systems, as it challenges the status quo of criteria used in systems that have been expensive to develop, operate and control. Also, it allows hoteliers to move away from the conventional systems and replace the stars they would receive from a conventional rating organisation with a TripAdvisor rating, thereby reducing the credibility of the conventional system and limiting that system further. The high rankings of hotels without a conventional rating are testimony to this. TripAdvisor appears to succeed where conventional rating systems historically have failed, providing a brief, but comprehensive overview of the quality that a traveller may expect in a hotel. As outlined in section 4.3.5, much of the value of the TripAdvisor reviews is created by their elaborate context.

When one reviews the objectives of why destinations have historically developed and operated conventional rating systems, it appears that TripAdvisor is quite successful in attaining these objectives. Section 2.5 outlined the importance of hotel rating and presented eight benefits of a well developed and administered rating system. In this section these eight benefits are related to the findings of this study to identify where TripAdvisor may provide value for a destination and its visitors.

**I. It assists government planning by supplying authoritative and reliable statistical data for different types of accommodation.**

TripAdvisor provides a comprehensive filtering system that is fed by traveller feedback continuously. Although this data is unlikely to be entirely correct, one can argue that it is generally more reliable than data generated through official channels as it is scrutinised and updated continuously. The data presented by TripAdvisor tested for Amsterdam and Dubai in section 4.2.2 is testimony to this.

**II. It helps to identify the need for developing certain categories of establishments.**

The extensive filtering system on TripAdvisor allows not only travellers, but also tourism planners to identify the market supply. In addition, the popularity index gives a good indication of what type of accommodation is popular in a destination. The segmenting option of the demographics of reviewers can provide an opportunity to identify which specific market segment appreciates what types of accommodation and where, although this has not been researched in detail in this study.

**III. It improves marketing strategies by enabling tourist board promotion of hotels in particular geographical locations (e.g. resort, city, riverside, mountain).**

The TripAdvisor filter as well as its integration with Google maps on the website may be used for marketing strategies, although the tourist board would have no influence over the broad classification (such as resort, city, or business hotel).

**IV. It allows the travel trade and visitors to identify more easily and accurately the types of hotels they are seeking.**

The previously mentioned filtering options and direct feedback mechanisms from other travellers present information that appears much more comprehensive than conventional property information. In addition, the rating information is uniform for hotels worldwide, which means that as soon as prospective travellers are capable of filtering the information that is important for them when reading TripAdvisor reviews and ratings, they are able to do so for any hotel in any destination that is covered by TripAdvisor.

**V. It encourages hoteliers to improve standards and the range of facilities by pinpointing weaknesses in operational services.**

In reviews, hoteliers receive direct feedback on what is satisfactory and unsatisfactory concerning the hotel. The social media element of the TripAdvisor platform is available to everyone. The hotel industry has come to recognise the strength of the platform in both a positive and a negative manner, and many hotels are in the process of formalising responses to and corrective action strategies based on TripAdvisor reviews, as was outlined in section 2.8.3.

**VI. It eliminates poor hotels which harm the good reputation of the better hotels.**

The large number of hotels without a conventional rating, identified in this study, suggests that rating systems are still not able to control the hotel industry. In the majority of destinations in this study, hotels have an option to not be rated, which defeats the purpose of a conventional rating system being able to eliminate the poor hotels. TripAdvisor does not offer such a way out for poor hotels, as hotel ratings will be displayed on TripAdvisor regardless. Hotels that perform consistently poorly will drop down the list and are not likely to receive visitors who have consulted TripAdvisor.

**VII. It adds to the age of information technology as contemporary guests base their purchasing decisions on information published on websites.**

Being presented with a relatively simple system of rating and guest reviews that discuss a hotel's quality from the guests' perspective, TripAdvisor appears to offer travellers a platform that supports traveller autonomy. The number of users and its growth outlined in section 4.2.1 provides testimony to the fact that guests appreciate and use platforms such as TripAdvisor. In addition, as TripAdvisor is web based, it allows for almost immediate feedback, which ensures that information is current. The fact that more than one party can provide information on the platform creates a mix that is likely to facilitate the reader further. Although not many hoteliers in the sample hotels of this study chose to respond, this is not likely to remain so. An advantage of hotelier response would be that not only will the reader then see the feedback of guests, but also the way that the hotel management deals with this feedback.

**VIII. It increases opportunities for local independent hotels.**

The TripAdvisor platform appears largely indiscriminate to size or branding, since it allows small, unbranded properties exposure when they satisfy their guests. Section 4.3.7 of this study outlined that it is primarily the smaller and non-branded hotels in certain destinations that rank high. The amount of exposure these properties receive when performing well on TripAdvisor is unprecedented, and provides a new marketing paradigm for hotels as it is no longer the hotel with the largest marketing budget that receives most exposure.

It thus becomes apparent that the only advantage of conventional classification systems not provided for by TripAdvisor is the opportunity for destinations to market certain geographical areas specifically, as the rationale of TripAdvisor is to be independent in its provision of information. TripAdvisor has however started to offer a paid service for tourism boards to market their destinations. Furthermore, one can argue that TripAdvisor may do better than conventional hotel rating systems in achieving the eight mentioned in this section as it provides good value to a destination, its industry, and its visitors. The

continuous growth of TripAdvisor is testimony that this type of guest feedback platform will continue to grow and develop in the future.

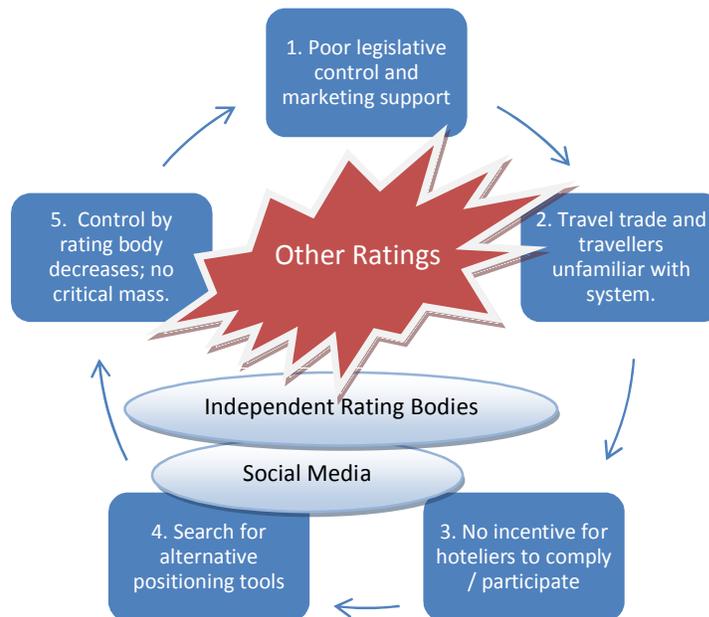
An important question that follows is how the foregoing discussion influences the conventional rating systems. Section 6.5 presents a model on how conventional rating systems and social media platforms such as TripAdvisor may provide comprehensive traveller information using their own unique attributes best. First, a scenario that is perhaps more likely is presented; the demise of conventional hotel rating systems due to guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor.

#### **6.4 THE DEMISE OF CONVENTIONAL HOTEL RATING SYSTEMS**

Although conventional rating systems have grown in number and increased their focus to include subjective tangible criteria and service delivery criteria, they have not increased their effectiveness in ensuring that all hotels participate in the system (control) and in providing this information to the travel trade and travellers (communication). In contrast, many hotel ratings made available to consumers on TripAdvisor are incorrect as different platforms present different ratings thereby creating confusion for the consumer (Hewitt, 2008).

Figure 6.3 depicts the process of decreasing support for conventional rating systems due to other ratings being presented by guest feedback platforms and independent rating organisations that do not run conventional rating systems.

Figure 6.3 Process of conventional rating system decline due to other ratings



Source: *Researcher's own model*

Figure 6.3 shows that the limited control of a conventional hotel rating system over hotels originates from two key elements, namely, legislative control and marketing support. If a system does not have legislative control, there must be an incentive for hoteliers to subject themselves to the rating system. The only other incentive is marketing exposure; by participating in the system, the hotelier expects to be able to attract more travellers. However, if the system is not marketed well to the travel trade and individual travellers, the hotelier will experience little incentive to participate if the system is voluntary, or comply if the system is obligatory. Testimony that such an attitude exists is suggested by the fact that the three highest ranking hotels on TripAdvisor in Amsterdam were not part of, nor complied with the rating system or its regulations. The fact that these unrated hotels may not use the name hotel is of little influence as online travel agents and TripAdvisor do without legal consequences.

Independent rating bodies and social media provide strong alternatives to a conventional hotel rating system; hoteliers may receive more value for money in terms of marketing exposure and positioning. This results in a lower participation rate where the number of participating hotels falls short of a critical mass, or 'network effect' (Shank, 2009). A

participation rate of just over 50 percent of the hotel market, as identified in this study, appears to be insufficient for the travel trade and consumers to critically study the structure and criteria of the system in place. As a result, the travel industry and its online variations devise alternative rating systems (for example, Expedia, 2009 and Northstar, 2009). The consumer is more likely to encounter the 'alternative ratings', as these are provided by organisations with a much stronger marketing scope. As a result, the actual rating is not likely to be used, or appreciated, which reduces the marketing support further.

From Figure 6.3, it would appear likely that over the next few years participation in conventional rating systems will decrease due to social media platforms such as TripAdvisor. Applying critical mass, or the network effect principle it is likely that participation in conventional rating system will decrease dramatically when a critical mass in a destination is no longer present. As the number of hotels starts decreasing, the circle starts reinforcing itself negatively, providing less and less incentives for the hotels still participating in the system to continue to do so.

Although this scenario appears very likely based on the findings of this study, a more positive scenario is presented in section 6.5. In this second scenario, conventional rating organisations and social media platforms such as TripAdvisor are re-evaluated from the perspective of the value that both may add through their different characteristics when providing prospective travellers with the most accurate information on the hotel experience.

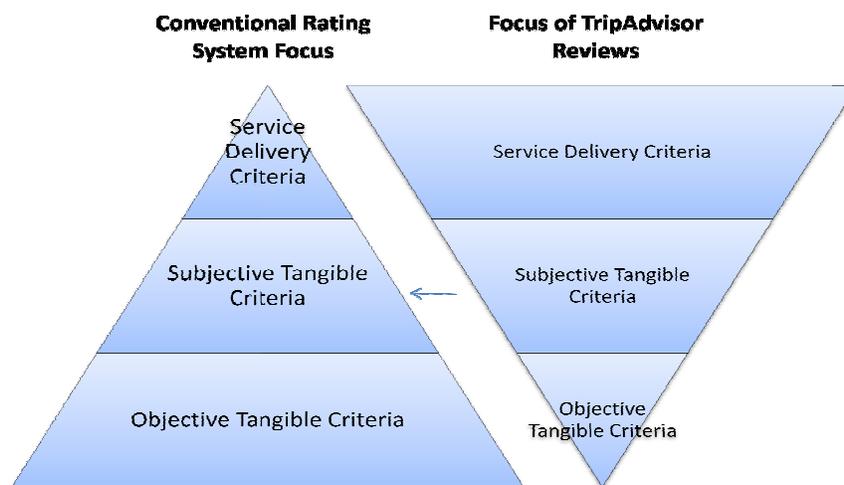
## **6.5 A MODEL FOR INTEGRATION OF GUEST FEEDBACK AND CONVENTIONAL HOTEL RATING**

The focus of conventional rating systems and the information provided in TripAdvisor reviews is different. Although conventional rating systems have increased their focus to include subjective tangible and service delivery criteria over the last decade, the coverage of these criteria is still limited. The main reason appears to be the cost involved in measuring these criteria, as well as the limited effectiveness of measuring them. The fact that the three conventional systems that include mystery shopping did not score higher in their average ratings in the TripAdvisor top 10 seems to be testify to this.

Although some subjective tangible criteria may be controlled by an inspection every year, or once every two years, several cannot. Cleanliness, for example, may be manipulated just before an inspection and be poor the rest of the year. Furthermore, the quality of linen and other subjective tangible criteria may deteriorate quickly if not properly managed. In addition, it is unlikely for an inspector to control all the rooms in a hotel. The same principles apply to inspections for service delivery. A mystery shopper is generally one individual with one experience on two specific days of the year. Furthermore, most systems do not clearly outline what the findings of the mystery shopping assessment were and only the result (the rating) is presented. TripAdvisor can add value here primarily by the rich context of the data presented in the reviews.

The value of TripAdvisor in terms of complimenting conventional rating systems is therefore one of providing insight into these two factors. This would present a situation where the pyramid presented in Figure 2.5 is combined with one presented from TripAdvisor. This process is depicted in Figure 6.4.

Figure 6.4 Integration of information from conventional rating systems and TripAdvisor

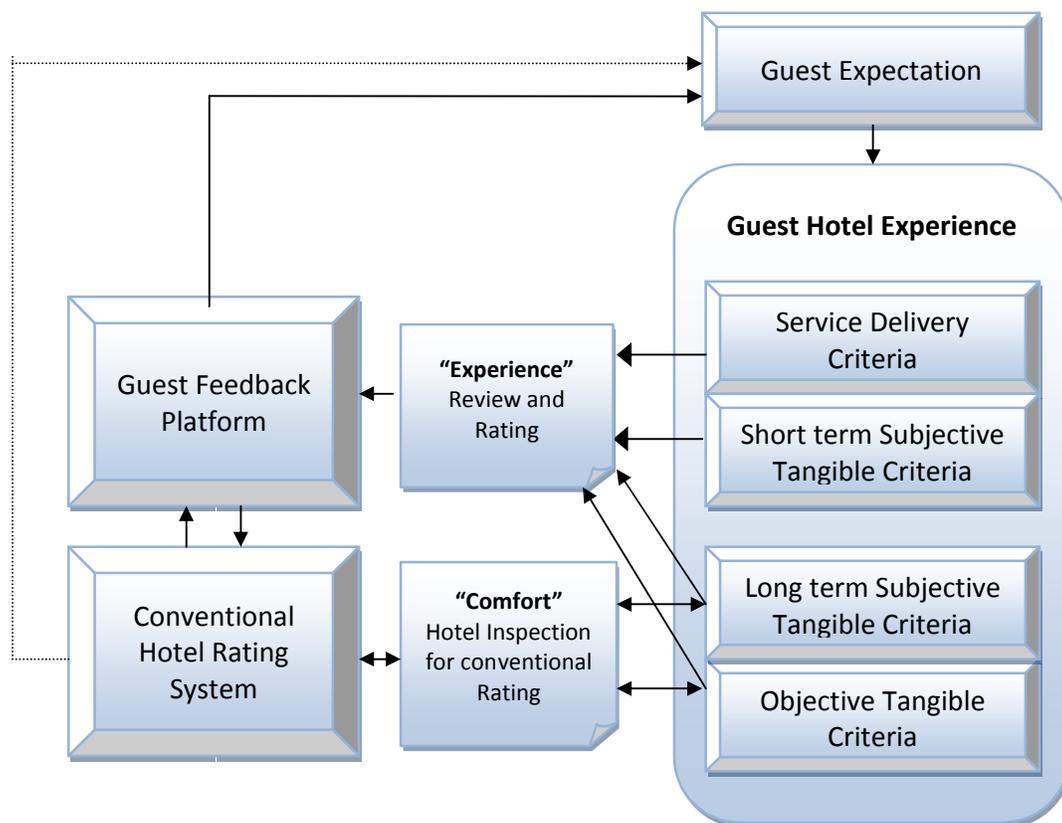


Source: *Researcher's own model.*

From Figure 6.4 it is clear that TripAdvisor can add value by providing more information to prospective travellers on subjective tangible criteria and service delivery criteria. From the argument that conventional rating systems can only execute limited control over certain

subjective tangible criteria and most service delivery criteria, the researcher proposes a model where conventional rating systems purposefully limit their control over these criteria and leave them to guest review platforms such as TripAdvisor to assess. This proposition is outlined in a new conceptual model (depicted in Figure 6.5) for the integration of guest reviews in the process of facilitating the guest experience, where conventional rating systems would present information on ‘comfort’ and social media would present information on the ‘experience’ in the hotel.

Figure 6.5 Integration of guest feedback with conventional hotel rating systems



Source: *Researcher's own model*

Figure 6.5 shows that conventional rating systems in this proposed scenario control the objective tangible criteria as well as long term subjective tangible criteria, whereas the guest review platform provides primarily the short term subjective tangible criteria as well as service delivery criteria, as this is what reviewers appeared to mainly focus on. The focus of

conventional rating systems would again return to what they can do well by the very nature of their set up, that is, controlling relatively objective criteria over a longer period of time, and creating a standard of hotel class more than a standard for hotel quality. The researcher identified five preconditions for this model to work in providing complete and reliable information to the prospective traveller:

**I. Conventional hotel rating systems should be simple and display a high level of uniformity worldwide**

Contemporary conventional hotel rating systems display a large diversity in structure and in the criteria that are mentioned. As a result it is nearly impossible to communicate a standard that guests may easily understand. A traveller cannot be expected to study a destination's hotel rating system before travelling, but could, over time start to recognize and appreciate five uniform classifications of standards of comfort. These standards should be simple enough to be understood by the average traveller, objective to measure, and limited in complexity.

**II. Conventional rating systems should cover the vast majority of hotels in the market**

For conventional ratings to be used by travellers and the travel trade, the vast majority of hotels should subject themselves to such system. When not all hotels are part of the system, the negative vicious circle illustrated in Figure 6.2 sets in and continuously reduces the 'buy-in' to such a system.

### **III. Conventional hotel rating systems should control frustration factors**

One of the areas where conventional rating systems can add value is in the control of the frustration factors identified in this research. Frustration factors can be covered through minimum criteria that demand fulfilment. As delight factors appear to primarily include created innovations (e.g. a complimentary cell phone), or best practice in a service oriented company culture (e.g. the empathy of staff), it follows that such factors cannot be controlled by a conventional rating system. Their place is in guest review platforms where they are shared and celebrated, and provide inspiration for the industry.

### **IV. Guest feedback platforms should be deemed reliable**

The main potential weakness in the social media model is the extent to which consumers trust that reviews are written by their peer travellers and not by a PR company seeking to boost a hotel's rating. The success of TripAdvisor is testimony to the trust that consumers place in such media, but also to the lack of trust of the conventional marketing and rating systems. If this trust is violated, the main strength of guest feedback through social media is distorted.

### **V. Conventional rating systems and guest feedback platforms should exchange information**

For a conventional rating system to work, its systems and ratings should be clear to all involved. Furthermore, it could strengthen its position by focusing on comfort through displaying information generated by social media platforms such as TripAdvisor. This exchange would require a direct link between databases to ensure full and correct alignment of data.

## **6.6 SUMMARY**

This study has identified an additional category of quality criteria, namely, frustration factors, satisfying factors, and delight factors. Frustration and delight factors appear to lie

outside the expected service scope of customers and are therefore generally only mentioned in positive, or negative feedback.

The value of guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor is substantial, as conventional rating systems fall short in providing clear information to the prospective traveller, and the information provided by guest feedback platforms covers most of the objectives that conventional rating systems were intended to achieve. During the course of this study, TripAdvisor has grown in size and coverage of hotels. It can therefore be concluded that platforms such as TripAdvisor are likely to continue to play a more prevalent role in the travel industry. There are two possible future scenarios for conventional rating systems. The first is that conventional rating systems will be subsumed by guest feedback platforms as the main source of reference for prospective travellers, as information is more easily available on the internet and coverage is higher in terms of the number of hotels included. This trend would re-enforce itself, making conventional rating systems less and less attractive for hoteliers to use as a marketing tool. A second scenario is that guest feedback platforms could complement conventional rating systems in a model where conventional rating systems focus mostly on comfort, and guest feedback platforms on the service experience. This model requires conventional rating systems to become more uniform; they should control the majority of the hotel market, and their criteria should incorporate the frustration factors identified in this study. Furthermore, guest feedback platforms should be deemed reliable to ensure their continuous use, growth and coverage. Lastly, conventional rating systems and guest feedback platforms should exchange information so that they re-enforce each other's continued use, reliability and therefore, coverage.

The lack of uniformity and coverage of contemporary conventional rating systems makes the first scenario more likely.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions and recommendations of this study. There will be suggestions for further study and recommendations for organisations involved in the hotel rating phenomenon, namely, hotels, conventional rating organisations, and organisations that provide platforms for guest feedback.

## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 6 identified the value of TripAdvisor and presented two scenarios on expected future developments in the relationship between conventional hotel rating systems and guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor. This chapter presents a summary of and conclusions to the study, makes recommendations for the different parties involved, and outlines suggestions for future research. Paragraph 7.2 presents a summary of the thesis specifying the main items per chapter. Next, conclusions are presented, which highlight the answers to the research problem and the questions outlined in chapter one. Different recommendations are made to hoteliers, conventional hotel rating organisations and guest feedback platforms based on the findings of this study. The chapter concludes with shortcomings and suggestions for further study.

#### 7.2 SUMMARY

Chapter 1 gave the background to and motivation for the research, a preliminary theoretical framework, the research problem and questions, the research design and structure, and the outline of the thesis. The main question to be answered by the study was whether guest feedback can determine hotel ratings more accurately than conventional methods and thus contribute to a more representative overview of the quality of hotels. To answer this question, five research questions were identified.

Chapter 2 provided a theoretical framework for hotel rating, service quality, and social media. Through a study of existing literature it was identified that although conventional hotel rating systems have grown in number and scope, their effectiveness in assisting travellers in creating an accurate expectation of the hotel experience is questionable. As service quality is defined by the perception of each guest, the method of defining quality

through an expert inspector presents a dichotomy in the way that conventional rating systems are operated. Social media, in the form of guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor, may present ways to overcome this dichotomy. The reliability of guest feedback platforms in general, and TripAdvisor in particular, is however disputed by the travel trade. The chapter further presented a conceptual model of the guest feedback cycle on hotel rating that outlines how guest feedback may contribute to creating a more accurate picture of the hotel experience that may be expected by potential travellers.

Chapter 3 explained the research methodology used in this study. The chapter outlined the procedures used to obtain, collect, code and analyse the data from TripAdvisor. The first phase consisted in gathering data from TripAdvisor to identify how it allows travellers to review hotels. Phase two consisted of a pilot study to identify the correct sampling and coding strategies for the study. Phase three entailed gathering data for two non random samples of TripAdvisor hotels in 11 international destinations and for the conventional rating systems in these destinations. The choice to select two samples resulted from findings of the pilot study that outlined that not only a Spread Sample of hotels on TripAdvisor was interesting, but that also the top 10 ranked hotels in each destinations displayed unique characteristics making it relevant for the study. The first sample included 110 hotels in the top 10 on TripAdvisor's website, and the second sample included 33 hotels spread over the spectrum of the TripAdvisor ratings, selecting the highest ranking, the middle ranking, and the lowest ranking hotel in each destination. For each hotel, the ten most recent reviews in the English language were collected. These reviews were coded in phase four. During the fifth phase, the data that was collected and coded was analysed. Owing to only few previous academic studies having been conducted on this topic, the methodology can be considered unique.

Chapter 4 discussed the findings for TripAdvisor, and its reliability, providing answers to research questions one and two of the study. The findings showed an organisation that is the market leader in guest reviews and ratings on hotels with the highest total number of reviews, members, and reviews per hotel. Most arguments against the reliability of TripAdvisor appeared to be unfounded and although the findings suggested that it was

possible to manipulate ratings, no evidence was found that this occurred on a scale that jeopardizes the accuracy of the information presented on TripAdvisor.

Chapter 5 described the ratings and review criteria on TripAdvisor and compared them with ratings and criteria presented by the conventional hotel rating systems in the 11 sampled destinations. These findings answered the third and fourth research questions of the study. It was found that almost half of the sampled hotels did not have a conventional rating, and that the ratings of TripAdvisor differed significantly from those of the conventional rating systems. The criteria used in guest reviews differed from those used in the conventional rating systems in that they focused more on service delivery. No connection was found between the inclusion of a criterion and the satisfaction of reviewers on TripAdvisor with regard to this criterion. Also no apparent differences were noted between hotels that were rated by a conventional rating system and those that were not.

Chapter 6 defined the value of TripAdvisor by triangulating the findings of the first four research questions and answering the fifth and last research question: 'To what extent is TripAdvisor valuable in providing information that conventional systems do not?' It was found that TripAdvisor fulfils most of the objectives that conventional rating systems were identified as needing to fulfil. The success of TripAdvisor and other guest feedback platforms for hotels presents a threat to the future of conventional hotel rating systems. Two scenarios were presented: either the success of guest review platforms such as TripAdvisor will result in the demise of conventional rating systems, or guest feedback platforms and conventional hotel rating systems will coexist. For the latter scenario, different conditions for the feasibility of such coexistence were presented.

### 7.3 CONCLUSIONS

TripAdvisor has been identified as the market leader for guest feedback on hotel and other tourism experiences. Since its inception, it has grown continuously in size, coverage and influence, and in June 2010 the website had more than 35 million reviews (TripAdvisor, 2010). TripAdvisor's growth appears to be facilitated by constant innovation in traveller services, which during the time of the research, were regularly adapted and extended. Furthermore,, the 'network effect' (Shank, 2009) seems to play a role here. As TripAdvisor is the largest platform, reviewers like to post their comments here as they believe they have the highest chance of being read by others.

TripAdvisor allows travellers to post reviews and ratings and uses the ratings of these reviews. The rating is combined with other factors to provide hotels with a ranking. This ranking represents the quality image of a hotel and results in strong exposure on the website.

Although it is possible to post false reviews on TripAdvisor and for the lower and middle ranking hotels alter the hotel's rating and ranking, the researcher did not find evidence that this happens on a scale that would influence the rankings. Furthermore, no evidence of censorship or a conflict of interest was established. Although reviewers do not always agree, the context in the majority of the reviews allows for readers to identify the quality of a hotel to a very detailed extent. It can therefore be concluded that TripAdvisor provides a reliable and rich source of information for travellers.

The number of conventional ratings of the sampled hotels in this study was low, as only 48 percent of the hotels sampled had a conventional rating. Conventional hotel ratings and TripAdvisor ratings showed a very weak relation. The limited control by rating bodies cannot be said to be the cause, as the one destination that seems to provide full control shows a weak connection to TripAdvisor ratings in the Spread Sample. Although the most frequent ratings in the Top 10 Sample are five and four star ratings, it is by no means a rule that hotels with a lower conventional rating do not receive high ratings on TripAdvisor. It can therefore be concluded that the conventional ratings and the ratings on TripAdvisor differ. This may be

the result of the differences in the criteria that are being used by reviewers in guest reviews as opposed to the criteria used by conventional rating systems.

TripAdvisor's reviews and ratings cover an area of the hotel experience that is largely not controlled by conventional rating systems. Conventional rating systems focus largely on objective tangible criteria, whereas the main focus of TripAdvisor reviews is service delivery criteria. Subjective tangible criteria are covered by both; however, more coverage is given by TripAdvisor reviews. Even when a rating system included service delivery criteria, this was not found to increase the satisfaction of TripAdvisor reviewers. There was no connection found between the control of conventional rating systems and the reviews and ratings given by reviewers on TripAdvisor.

TripAdvisor is valuable in presenting information on hotels to prospective travellers, as it fulfils most objectives that conventional ratings are expected to fulfil. Furthermore, the rich context presented in many TripAdvisor reviews as well as the focus on service delivery provides information that prospective travellers cannot obtain through conventional rating systems. As a result, platforms such as TripAdvisor may jeopardise the future existence of conventional rating systems, as they provide information that is easier to find online with reviews that are generally rich in context. Without a critical mass, the marketing incentive for hoteliers to conform to conventional systems' requirements disappears, leaving only legal compliance as an option for these rating systems to maintain control over the hotel industry.

The data triangulation facilitated the hypothesis of two future scenarios in which guest feedback may complement, or, over time, replace conventional rating systems entirely. Five conditions were suggested for the scenario where guest feedback platforms can complement conventional rating systems. The most likely scenario, however, is that guest feedback platforms will devalue conventional rating systems and over time subsume their role completely.

### 7.3.1 The impact of guest feedback platforms on the service quality paradigm

Guest feedback platforms have given consumers a medium that they can use to share their opinions, vent their frustrations, and learn from other consumers how services are experienced and assessed. The rich context included in many reviews provides a large amount of qualitative data suitable for analysis, while the elaborate filtering options and demographic information provides a very large amount of quantitative data. This data may be used for a wide range of analysis to explain the concept of service quality. The following areas have been identified in this study.

- i. The concept of value for money as it is experienced by travellers is an area that became apparent in many reviews. Value for money was mentioned in 35 percent of the reviews analysed for this study.
- ii. The perception of the quality of the hotel location as is another area that stood out in this study. Location was mentioned in 55 percent of the reviews analysed in this study, 49 percent of which was positive and six percent negative. As the quality of location is a highly subjective concept, this is an area of the guest experience that would require additional study to identify how it is evaluated by different travellers. Extremely positive and negative reviews may be used to identify ‘triggers’ of such emotions for a specific industry and present additional insights and models on the development of guest satisfaction in a service process.
- iii. Critical success factors for different hotel concepts can be identified using the feedback provided in guest reviews weighted by the ratings provided with such reviews.

A paradigm shift has taken place in the mind of the consumer, from a dependency on the “wisdom of the specialist” to the “knowledge of the many” (Dellarocas, 2003), or as TripAdvisor (2009) calls it, “Wisdom of the crowds”. As the nature of guest feedback platforms data is unique, its study requires alternative approaches in the research methodology applied to properly understand the phenomenon of customer feedback platforms and the richness of data generated there.

### **7.3.2 Research methodologies for the study of social media**

The large amount of qualitative and quantitative data presented through social media platforms requires a rethink of research methodologies best suited to study this phenomenon. This study was initiated with a pilot study to identify ways in which the available data could be analysed to answer the research questions. Alternative approaches, or combinations of approaches may, however, prove more beneficial for future studies. Additionally, one may argue that the definition of secondary data does not fully encompass the data available through social media platforms and as such further research into defining this data would also be desirable.

- i. Although the data generated by guest feedback generally does not allow for follow-up questions, analysing the keywords used in reviews may present further insights into guest expectation, experience and satisfaction. In addition, keywords could be related to extremely high or low rankings.
- ii. The vast amount of quantitative data presented on guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor provides opportunities for contemporary research methods such as data mining.

### **7.3.3 Developments of conventional rating systems**

The data for this study was gathered over a period of several months. Its findings suggest a continued growth of guest feedback platforms that may, in one of the two scenarios presented, result in a decrease in the use of conventional hotel rating systems. Studies over a longer period are required to research this process further. Studies could focus on the coverage and control of conventional rating systems over time. In this area, a focus on the different rating systems in terms of uniformity and integration with other systems, simplicity, transparency, and the use of marketing and legislation are expected to define their success in terms of coverage. Especially the recent collaborative initiatives, such as the Hotelstars Union (2010) require further study over a longer period of time to identify their

relative success compared with non-collaborative systems that are run in one destination only.

## 7.4 CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY TO NEW KNOWLEDGE

Five research questions have been answered in this study and have contributed to new knowledge. This section presents the new insights generated by the findings on each research question. Table 7.1 first presents the answers to the research questions in this study after which the findings of each research question are elaborated on.

*Table 7.1 Answers to the research questions in this study*

Research Question	Answer to the research question
1. How does TripAdvisor allow hotel guests to review hotels?	TripAdvisor provides a social media platform with elaborate input and filtering options that presents a large database of hotels and traveller opinions on these hotels
2. How reliable are the guest reviews on TripAdvisor in providing an accurate picture of guest experiences in a hotel?	There is no evidence to suggest that the accuracy of the data on TripAdvisor is compromised by false reviews or other practices by TripAdvisor or users of TripAdvisor.
3. How do hotel ratings on TripAdvisor differ from ratings these hotels receive from conventional systems?	There is no apparent relation between TripAdvisor ratings and ratings from conventional hotel rating systems.
4. What quality criteria are represented in the guest reviews and how do they relate to criteria measured by conventional systems?	TripAdvisor criteria focus more on subjective tangible criteria and service delivery criteria presenting an opposite focus of the conventional rating systems in this study.
5. To what extent is TripAdvisor valuable in providing information that conventional systems do not?	TripAdvisor fulfils most objectives of conventional hotel rating systems and provides additional value due to the rich context of guest reviews and the focus on service delivery criteria.

*Source: Author's own model*

Sections 7.4.1 to 7.4.5 elaborate on how each research question has contributed to new knowledge.

#### **7.4.1 How TripAdvisor allows guests to review hotels**

TripAdvisor provides an elaborate platform that facilitates the sharing of hotel and other travel related experiences in a way that generates an unprecedented amount of data on hotels and travel related services. The number of hotels and other forms of accommodation on TripAdvisor are generally higher than the number found on other destination databases, even those that are government controlled. Through the continuous input of the TripAdvisor community that includes millions of members, it is believed that data is updated and corrected quicker than is feasible on other databases. The extensive filtering options allow for easy segmentation of available data.

#### **7.4.2 The reliability of TripAdvisor**

The arguments presented by the travel trade against the reliability of TripAdvisor proved mostly untrue. Although it is possible to post false reviews on TripAdvisor, the data researched in this study identified that the impact of such false reviews does not affect the reliability of the information presented.

#### **7.4.3 Differences in ratings of TripAdvisor and conventional hotel rating systems**

Almost half of the hotels in this study did not have a conventional rating. Also, almost half of the conventional ratings displayed on TripAdvisor are incorrect when compared with the ratings on the databases of the conventional hotel rating bodies in the destinations. There is no apparent relation between the ratings on TripAdvisor and the ratings of those hotels that had obtained conventional ratings.

#### **7.4.4 Quality criteria used in TripAdvisor reviews**

The criteria used by TripAdvisor reviewers focused more on service delivery than the criteria of the conventional rating systems in the sample. The inclusion of a criterion in a conventional rating system does not influence the satisfaction of guests, according to the

TripAdvisor reviews analysed. There is also no apparent connection between the conventional rating of a hotel and guest satisfaction in the reviews on TripAdvisor.

#### **7.4.5 The value of TripAdvisor**

TripAdvisor is valuable in providing information on the hotel experience to prospective travellers in that it fulfils most objectives that conventional hotel rating systems set out to achieve. The rich context found in many reviews provides information on the hotel experience that conventional hotel rating systems do not.

TripAdvisor reviews present a use of rating criteria where 27 percent of the comments are almost entirely positive, or entirely negative, thus making it possible to identify factors of the hotel experience that either frustrate, or delight. The use of these criteria has implications for the service quality paradigm as the criteria do not seem to fit the existing model of expectation and experience and seem to be outliers of this context.

The success of platforms such as TripAdvisor is expected to decrease the use and effectiveness of conventional hotel rating systems, which is likely to cause a demise of those systems, unless conventional hotel rating systems and guest feedback platforms integrate and reposition themselves to provide unique information to the prospective traveller. This repositioning would include a focus that is mainly on objective tangible criteria, and an integration that would necessitate conventional rating systems displaying more uniformity worldwide, maintaining a high level of coverage of hotels in the area of operation, controlling frustration factors, and sharing information with guest feedback platforms.

### **7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has identified many different opportunities and threats for all parties involved in hotel rating. Recommendations in this section focus on hoteliers, conventional rating organisations, and consumer review platforms using the two scenarios identified in chapter 6 as a starting point.

### 7.5.1 Recommendations for hoteliers

Hoteliers can benefit from guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor to increase their service delivery and marketing exposure through guest satisfaction (Craig, 2010a; Gale, 2009). The hotels in the Top 10 Sample of this study appear to have embraced the marketing opportunities that presented themselves by featuring in TripAdvisor's top 10 ranking. Hotels make this ranking available by posting their TripAdvisor ranking, and sometimes even their TripAdvisor reviews directly onto their websites. Social media change the current marketing paradigm as the 'word of mouth' effect is amplified to a much larger audience. The effect is visible on TripAdvisor where it is the hotels that provide the best guest experience that receive the most exposure and not the best branded hotels, or those with the largest marketing budget. In several destinations, hotels that would previously not have been able to position themselves to a large audience are now being promoted by their satisfied guests. Alternatively, a hotel that gives poor guest satisfaction can no longer successfully camouflage this weakness through its marketing. Its poor reputation is visible online. Therefore, the main recommendation for hotels from a marketing perspective is to satisfy their guests, and minimize negative exposure by engaging with guests who it was not able to satisfy. As argued by Craig (2010b), Gale (2009), and Nassaure (2010), hotels should respond to negative feedback swiftly and in a transparent and constructive manner through a culture of listening.

The second recommendation to hoteliers is that they use the vast amount of guest feedback on platforms such as TripAdvisor to identify the critical success factors of their respective target groups, where the hotel is performing well, and which areas of the service provision require improvement. It was found in this study that ten reviews provide enough information for saturation, and present a complete picture of how guests assess their hotel experience.

A third recommendation to hoteliers is to further use the online data in their marketing strategy. From guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor, hoteliers can learn what the guests find important and where the hotel is satisfying their needs most. By translating this

into a marketing communication strategy, the marketing promise will be both accurate and exciting, which is likely to yield better results from the desired market segments.

### **7.5.2 Recommendations for conventional hotel rating organisations**

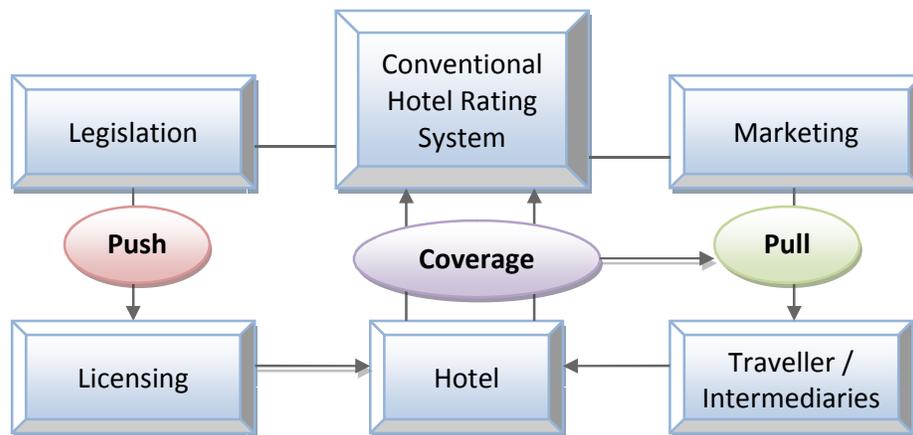
Conventional rating organisations have lost their right to exclusivity when it comes to assessing the quality of hotels. As the richness of the data presented by guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor exceeds theirs, owing to the context provided in guest reviews as well as the distribution effectiveness of this information, the focus of conventional hotel ratings needs to change if conventional rating organisations wish to maintain control over the hotel industry.

Figure 6.5 presented a model illustrating how conventional rating systems can co-exist with guest feedback platforms and maintain their control. This model requires five conditions to be in place, four of which apply directly to conventional hotel rating organisations.

The first recommendation is that conventional rating systems should stop trying to diversify and be unique in the international context to avoid confusions among travellers. The initiative by the Hotelstars Union (2010) under the patronage of HOTREC proposes a model that is likely to be effective in this context. The uniformity and simplicity of the system makes it easy for prospective travellers to understand the criteria and how they translate into a hotel rating. The focus should primarily be on objective tangible criteria and long term subjective tangible criteria as they are largely measured within a minimum criteria structure.

Secondly, for a system to be effective, its coverage and therefore its control should encompass the majority of the hotel industry. Such coverage can be attained by legislation and marketing incentives. A marketing incentive is created when the traveller, stimulated by effective marketing efforts of the hotel rating body, asks for, or even demands a conventional rating. Legal compliance may constitute an even more effective tool, such as displayed in Dubai where all hotels sampled were found to have a rating, as this is required by law. Figure 7.1 shows how legal requirements and marketing create both a push and pull effect that persuades hoteliers to use a conventional rating system.

Figure 7.1 Push and pull factors in conventional rating system coverage



Source: *Researcher's own model*

Figure 7.1 shows that legal requirements, for example, a licensing system that requires a hotel to be rated before it can be licensed, creates a 'push' for the hotel to comply with rating standards. The challenge of legislation is that it is generally subject to national laws and is therefore difficult to apply internationally, which is a requirement for the first condition of uniformity. A 'pull' is created when a system is well marketed to prospective travellers and intermediaries who will then request, or even demand a conventional rating before making a booking. The coverage of a rating system generated by law and marketing reinforces the 'pull', as travellers and intermediaries expect a hotel to be rated as this is considered common practice.

Thirdly, although conventional rating systems are advised to seek uniformity with other conventional rating systems, it is equally important to differentiate from the perspective of guest feedback platforms. TripAdvisor reviews focus largely on service delivery. It is therefore suggested that conventional rating systems differentiate themselves by focusing on objective tangible criteria and long term subjective tangible criteria, so as to create a relatively objective assessment of the comfort levels that may be expected in the hotel. In addition, conventional rating systems should ensure that they address 'frustration factors', as these are minimum expectations that can generally be controlled through inspection and may create strong guest dissatisfaction when they are not.

Fourth, as guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor gain popularity, conventional rating systems should use these platforms to market their systems and ratings actively. During this study it became apparent that almost half of the conventional ratings on TripAdvisor are incorrect when compared to the databases of the conventional hotel rating system bodies. This strongly devalues the conventional ratings and travellers are likely to stop trusting these ratings in favour of ratings supplied by peer travellers solely. By sharing the information from guest feedback platforms on the conventional rating websites, the conventional rating system organisations would be able to clearly specify the difference between ‘comfort’ and ‘experience’ - such as depicted in Figure 6.5.

### **7.5.3 Recommendations for consumer review platforms**

This study shows that consumer review platforms continue to grow in scope and size. Their popularity seems to be based on trust, participation and other strengths of user generated content (see section 2.8). The main recommendations focus on transparency and reliability as these seem to be the only constraining factors in TripAdvisor’s success. Rumours that reviews are false detract from their value, and although this research is one of several studies that did not identify discrepancies in this area, the very possibility of reviews being false presents a potential danger for consumer review platforms. This study has identified the following strategies to enable guest review platforms to increase their reliability.

- i. Increase the number of reviews on each hotel to minimise the impact of fraudulent reviews. This study identified that when a hotel receives over 100 reviews, the potential distortion rate drops strongly.
- ii. Increase and maintain the context richness of reviews by guiding reviewers in questions and rewarding reviews rich in context. This may be done, for example, by highlighting the ‘best review’ on a hotel and requesting a reader to indicate whether the review was helpful or not, which is already done on TripAdvisor.
- iii. Develop dialogue with hoteliers by increasing the response time to hotelier queries, disputes and reports on fraudulent reviews to promote buy-in from the hotels and

travel trade, and to increase transparency. The perceived slow response time and lack of transparency appears to create frustration within the travel trade.

- iv. Increase collaboration with conventional rating bodies to obtain accurate conventional ratings. To avoid confusion, these ratings could be referred to as the hotels 'comfort level'.
- v. Stimulate reviewers to provide as much demographic data as possible and translate this to a 'reviewer status'. For example, a reviewer whose identity demographic data has been verified and who has posted several reviews could receive a 'full reviewer' status, whereas a reviewer who has only given minimal demographic data could receive the status of 'new reviewer'. In this way, the data on TripAdvisor would increase in accuracy and richness. Presently, demographic data may be incomplete and/or false, which limits the filtering option accuracy. The reviewer identity itself would have to remain hidden from readers and hoteliers so as to ensure that reviewers felt secure and therefore honest and elaborate in their reviews.

TripAdvisor may be commended for its visible efforts to continuously improve and expand its platform during the last few years. As it presents a new range of services, there is little historic data and research to base decisions on and its evolution can be described to a large extent to be trial and error. Section 7.6 discusses the shortcomings of the current study and makes suggestions for further study to develop insights into the phenomenon of guest review platforms and their impact on the hotel industry.

## **7.6 SHORTCOMINGS OF THE STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

As this study was explorative in nature and focused on an unexplored topic, a substantial number of suggestions for future study can be made. Online guest feedback presents opportunities that are unprecedented; as such a large amount of secondary data has never been available before. The main shortcomings of the study are the apparent reliability of guest feedback and potential cultural bias of the reviews sampled for this study.

### 7.6.1 The main shortcoming of the current study

Although the researcher has analysed the reliability of TripAdvisor as extensively as possible, this area requires more research. Reliability may be the most important critical success factor for the continued use and growth of guest feedback platforms, and currently this area of scientific research appears to be overshadowed by social media discussions that generally focus on individual experiences rather than reliable trends in the behaviour of users of social media. The area of reliability of social media data and the credibility of such data need to be further explored as it was not the focus of this study.

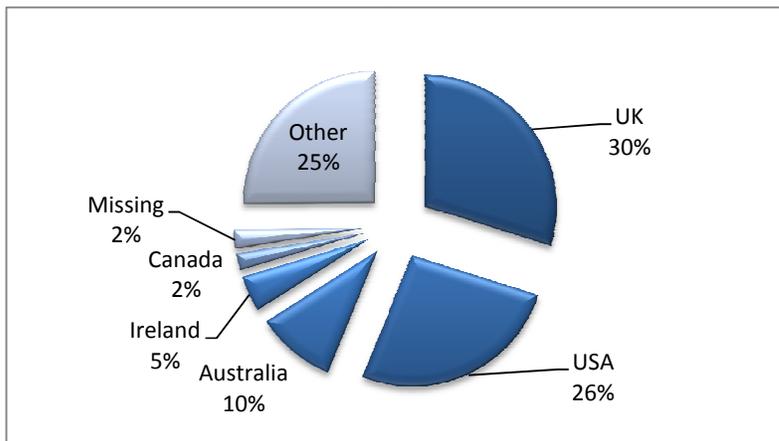
To ensure that reliability is addressed in social media it is suggested that future studies focus on the following areas.

- i. Perceptions of the reliability of travellers and the travel trade and their influence on the use of guest feedback platforms;
- ii. The use and effectiveness of screening algorithms to identify false reviews;
- iii. The use of scenario planning to identify the likelihood of consumers writing false reviews; and
- iv. The moral and legal implications of posting false reviews and the influence these implications have on individuals or organisations posting false reviews.

It is expected that such studies will enable the social media platforms to institute measures to control the accuracy of information and increase their (perceived) reliability.

The qualitative data used in this research may have been subject to cultural bias. Although TripAdvisor gathers results from many different countries through different websites, the use of the website is more apparent within certain regions. As the sample of reviews per hotel is also limited to those written in the English language, this can be argued to impose a further cultural bias. Figure 7.2 shows the nationalities of the different reviewers.

Figure 7.2 Nationality of reviewers



Source: Researcher's own model based on TripAdvisor data (Spread Sample).

From Figure 7.2 it becomes clear that the majority of reviewers are travellers from English speaking countries. The United Kingdom and the United States of America represent 56 percent of the sample. A limitation of the research may be the cultural preference of these travellers. It is worth noting that 40 different nationalities were recognized in the sample of 330 reviews. Appendix 7 presents a comprehensive overview of the nationality of reviewers per hotel.

### 7.6.2 Suggestions for future research

Although much data is available on how consumers use guest feedback platforms, the number of studies of this data is limited. The way that consumers use these platforms can be expected to be continuously changing as the structure and set up of these platforms is constantly changing. The following areas were identified in the course of this study that may warrant further study.

- i. How readers screen reviews and ratings to evaluate a hotel. The researcher identified ten reviews to be the saturation point after which no usable new facts on each hotel were presented. It is however not clear how many reviews are read by the TripAdvisor platform. It is also important to identify whether reviews and/or ratings

take precedence in the decision-making process of users of TripAdvisor and whether the filtering options available on the website are used to attach more value to reviews written by travellers with a similar profile. As the information and the structure in which it is presented changes on platforms such as TripAdvisor, new behaviour is expected to be invited, which should be studied to maintain an up to date picture on how consumers use this new media to make decisions.

- ii. This study identified the possibility of uploading pictures and video footage of hotels on TripAdvisor. No studies have, however, been undertaken on whether readers use this type of information in their decision-making process and whether it would be valuable.
- iii. The rise of mobile internet can be expected to further fuel the growth of guest feedback platforms such as TripAdvisor, as immediate feedback can be given without the need of a computer. The impact of an increase in such feedback should be studied, as the nature of feedback through mobile phone can be expected to be different due to, for instance, the assumption that mobile phone users would want to write shorter reviews from their mobile phones.

This study identified the social media as changing the marketing paradigm for the industry through the impact of guest feedback on hotels. Small hotels received a large amount of exposure that they could not previously facilitate from their limited marketing budgets. Since this area fell outside the scope of this study, no further data collection or analysis has been performed. Further studies could be conducted in the following areas.

- i. The awareness and responses of hotel managers and owners on online guest feedback.
- ii. The impact of positive and negative guest feedback on room sales and pricing.
- iii. The impact of guest feedback platforms on the concept of branding.
- iv. The changing marketing function of hotels as a result of guest feedback platforms.
- v. Coping strategies of hoteliers on positive and negative guest feedback through guest feedback platforms and the effect on a hotel's reputation, sales, and room pricing.

- vi. Differences in feedback information between traditional guest satisfaction surveys and online guest feedback.

Studies on the impact of guest feedback platforms on hotels are expected to provide the hospitality industry with practical tools for using online guest feedback in their marketing strategies. Another area of study that is expected to be influenced by guest review platforms is the way service quality is perceived and measured.

This study has contributed to the body of service marketing knowledge, by not only identifying delight factors, as found in the study of Oliver *et al.* (1997), but also frustration factors. Delight and frustration factors require further study in other service related industries using actual guest feedback from customer feedback platforms.

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