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The role of Consumer Generated Content, Electronic Word of Mouth and Online Reviews in the travel planning process

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>The original idea of the work was sparked during my time in the tourism industry and I was trusted to be in charge of generating content for our webpage. My interest in marketing started growing at this moment and motivated me to pursue my studies at JAMK. For the thesis I decided to keep my focus on content generation but rather than focusing on firm generated content I turned my focus towards the customer and consumer generated content.</p> <p>The main objectives were to examine the general perception of CGC, eWOM and online reviews. Whether or not consumers trust in content that is created by fellow consumers and what motivates them to post content themselves.</p> <p>The approach was quantitative as the instrument for data collection was a questionnaire to get insight in the general public's view on CGC, eWOM and online reviews. The questionnaire was created with google docs and was distributed over various social media platforms. The focus was wide as it targeted everyone who at some point in their life has travelled for pleasure.</p> <p>The results showed that CGC, eWOM and online reviews plays a big role in the early stages of travel planning but the importance of them fades as the traveler gets further with his or her plans. It also shows that the most common platforms for consumers to read various types of CGC from are dedicated review webpages, travel agencies own webpages as well as social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Conclusions that were drawn are also established in other researches.</p>		
Consumer generated content, electronic word of mouth, online reviews, travel planning process, Tripadvisor.com, services marketing		
Miscellaneous		

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	6
1.1	Thesis background and motivation	6
1.2	Research questions and objectives.....	8
1.3	Thesis structure.....	9
2	Literature Review	9
2.1	Definition of Consumer generated content	9
2.2	Service Marketing	10
2.3	Types of CGC	12
2.4	CGC's effect on a company's brand image	17
2.5	The role of online information in the travel planning process	19
2.6	Adoption of CGC in the tourism sector	21
2.7	Control of CGC.....	23
2.8	Difficulties with CGC.....	25
3	Methodology.....	27
3.1	Evaluation of methodology.....	30
3.2	Limitations.....	30
4	Results	30
5	Conclusions	39
	References.....	43
	Appendices	46
	Appendix 1. Questions used in questionnaire.....	46

Table of Figures

Figure 1.	Nazar's own view of their brand image (Nazar 2018.)	18
Figure 2.	Nazar's consumers version of brand image (Nazar 2018.)	19
Figure 3.	Edited testimonial (Nazar's Website 2018.)	22
Figure 4.	TUI direct link to Tripadvisor (TUI's webpage 2018.)	23
Figure 5.	Thomas Cook direct link to Tripadvisor (Thomas Cook's webpage 2018.)	23
Figure 6.	The Research Onion (Saunder & Lewis 2009)	28
Figure 7.	Answers for question 1	31
Figure 8.	Answers for question 2	32
Figure 9.	Answers for question 3	32
Figure 10.	Answers for question 4	33
Figure 11.	Answers for question 5	33
Figure 12.	Answers for question 6	34
Figure 13.	Answers for question 7	35
Figure 14.	Answers for question 8	36
Figure 15.	Answers for question 9	37
Figure 16.	Answers for question 10	38
Figure 17.	Answers for question 11	39
Figure 18.	Example of how people can make their Facebook accounts private. (Adapted from Facebook 2019)	40

Figure 19. Example of TUI UK implementing 3rd party (Tripadvisor.com) reviews on their webpage (Adapted from TUI UK 2019) 41

Table of Tables

Table 1. Travel planning process. Adapted from Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Buultjens (2009). 20

Index of abbreviations

CGC	Consumer Generated Content, any content such as photos, videos, text, audio, etc.
eWOM	Electronic-word-of-mouth, online version of Word of Mouth.
Online reviews	reviews and ratings in an online environment.
Tripadvisor	Dedicated review and rating website for tourism and restaurant industry.
TUI	Touristic Union International, one of Europe's biggest travel agencies.
Thomas Cook	One of Europe's biggest travel agencies.
Nazar Nordic	A small to medium sized Nordic travel agency

1 Introduction

1.1 Thesis background and motivation

In December 1995 there were about 16 million internet users, which was equal to around 0,4 % of the global population at the time. In June 2018 it had grown to around 4,2 billion internet users which equals to over 55 % of the global population and there are no signs that the growth will slow down. (Internet World Stats 2018.) With the huge increase in internet usage there is also a high likelihood that the use of Consumer Generated Content (CGC) will increase as well.

This thesis will try to understand how travellers are affected by other travellers' pictures, videos and other forms of CGC and reviews across various online platforms while planning their vacation. It will also help travel agencies understand how travellers affect each other while planning a vacation and how they can try to influence the consumers to affect each other.

Together with the huge growth in internet usage, marketing saw a shift of power when the newest version of the web (Web 2.0) was born, from being fully controlled by the firms, the power over the marketing is moving more and more into the hands of the consumers. With consumers having the possibility to create their own content in the form of pictures, videos or text and then share it with the world gives them increased control over firms marketing. Especially in the tourism business there is a strong sense of reliability in other travelers reviews of hotels and destinations. Many travel agencies are therefore incorporating their own rating systems for their hotels and destinations on their webpages. However, there are other third-party services that provide the same rating services as the travel agencies themselves. In this paper I will research how consumers perceive the validity and reliability in online reviews and CGC depending on where they are posted and in what form.

The main rating service that I will be using in my research will be Tripadvisor.com which is arguably the largest online rating service for hotels, restaurants and other sights in tourist destinations. I will compare the perceived reliability in Tripadvisor

ratings with the ratings that are posted on the travel agencies' own webpages as well as social media updates.

Tripadvisor

Being a part of the Expedia Inc. Tripadvisor.com is probably the best-known online review website in the world. Only Tripadvisor.com alone is the home of over 700 million different reviews and opinions, they average 490 million unique visitors per month as well as showing opinions about 8 million accommodations, airlines, experiences and restaurants. (Tripadvisor 2018.) When you see the massive amount of data that is held by Tripadvisor.com it is easy to expect some fraudulent or non-reliable reviews, but as a matter of fact, Tripadvisor.com are monitoring all the content that is uploaded to their database to make sure that it conforms to company guidelines. These guidelines however, does not do much to verify that the reviewer stayed at the hotel or ate at the restaurant that they reviewed, it might in fact be a jealous competitor posting negative reviews to lower the competitor's rating. Or it can be the company itself trying to boost their own numbers by posting good reviews. Tripadvisor.com however, states that they are having fraud detecting staff viewing all posts before they go public. (Gretzel, Law & Fuchs 2010, 52-53.)

Personal Motivation

The reason why I chose to write my bachelor thesis on a marketing topic is that I have always been having an interest in the topic and the field of marketing is one of the main reasons why I chose the international business programme at JAMK University of Applied Sciences in the first place. The justification as to why I chose to put a tourism angle on my marketing thesis is that I was also working for 5 years in the tourism field prior to my studies in Jyväskylä. During my 5 years in the field of tourism I was spending 4 years in Turkey as a travel agency representative and then I ended my time abroad with a year in Greece.

During my years abroad I built up an interest and eagerness to understand what marketing methods were mostly used in the tourism sector. In the company where I worked it was very clear that the focus on customer satisfaction was of utmost importance and since I was working in the tourism industry which by extension is a

part of the service industry, I saw this as something obvious. It was first when I stumbled across CGC during my studies however that I realized just how important the customer satisfaction really is for a travel agency, especially for a smaller ones that cannot afford big fancy TV ads. For the smaller companies such as the one that I worked for customer satisfaction is important simply because they cannot afford the TV ads and are relying fully on CGC created by their customers. In this thesis I want to investigate further what motivates customers to use CGC, I will also research the perceived reliability in CGC and lastly how CGC affects customers in the travel planning process.

1.2 Research questions and objectives

Research questions

Q1: What is the perceived reliability of online reviews originating from different sources?

Q2: What motivates tourists to post content to social medias?

Q3: What motivates tourists to write online reviews?

Q4: Are customers relying on CGC when booking a trip?

Q5: How impactful is CGC in the travel planning process?

Research objectives

O1: To identify whether there is a difference in the way consumers perceive the reliability of online reviews depending on the webpage where the review is posted.

O2: To establish what the strongest motives for a consumer to leave a positive or negative review after a holiday are.

O3: To determine if there are any successful ways for travel agencies to influence what their customers post on review sites or social media platforms.

O4: To establish how important it is for travel agencies to manage their CGC.

1.3 Thesis structure

The thesis is structured around five research questions that are aiming at figuring out how online reviews, consumer generated content and other types of eWOM are affecting the travel planning process. To get results which in their turn would lead to a conclusion I have used a wide literature review to familiarize myself and the reader with the broad topic of CGC, eWOM and online reviews. I have also used a questionnaire to aid me in answering the research questions of the thesis.

The thesis is started off with an introduction chapter (1) which is introducing the reader to the thesis topic, research questions and objectives as well as my own personal motivation behind the chosen topic. The literature review (chapter 2) is aimed to explain more in detail about the various aspects of services marketing, eWOM, online reviews and other types of CGC. The literature review also examines how powerful CGC can be both in positive and negative ways for travel agencies. The literature review is mostly based on secondary sources such as academic journals, books and a few webpages. In the methodology chapter (3) I am presenting the approach to the thesis based on the research Onion presented by Saunders. I will also go through the questions and results from the questionnaire that I have used to get an answer to my research questions. The results of my questionnaire are the base of which I concluded the paper with general takeaways as well as implications for managers to consider when it comes to CGC.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Consumer generated content

Consumer generated content (CGC) in marketing refers to marketing that is not made by the marketers of a company but rather by the consumers that are using the products or services from a company. CGC can come in the form of various blog and microblog posts, pictures and updates on social media platforms, customer reviews

of products or services or a video on Youtube, to name some of the main sources of CGC.

To gain understanding of how CGC came about we must go back to the year 2004 when Tim O'Reilly gave a name to the next generation of internet usage, web 2.0. Web 2.0 is to be considered as the return of the web after the dotcom-crash of 2001, it is not meant to be viewed as version number in software but rather as the next generation of the internet. For a webpage or platform to pass as web 2.0 it must contain a number of criteria; The user must be able to contribute to the content of the page, for example by creating their own profile and posting updates in the form of text, pictures or videos. The user should have control of their own information, meaning that in their profile the user can set their gender, name, age, location, or other information about themselves. The design should be rich, interactive and useful, meaning that it contains posts and updates from various users that can connect with each other. (Cormode & Krishnamurthy 2008.)

It can be argued that CGC, to some extent existed also before the birth of web 2.0 but it is however, clear that web 2.0 gave CGC its full potential.

Rodriguez-Diaz (2018) disputes that the industries that are affected the most by eWOM, online reviews and other types of CGC are e-commerce and hospitality. Hospitality being one of the industries most affected by eWOM and online reviews justifies this paper since hospitality and tourism are correlating.

2.2 Service Marketing

The tourism sector deals in services and therefore also with services marketing. CGC, eWOM and other online reviews can therefore also be placed under services marketing. The marketing of services is somewhat different to that of goods. With goods you can see the good or goods that you are interested in and it makes it easier to make a purchase decision since you already know something about the product, with services it is much harder to visualise what you would get. It is stated by Bawa & Kansal (2008, 33) that characteristics for services are Intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability.

Intangibility

Bawa & Kansal (2008) disputes that the biggest issue with intangibility in the marketing of services is the lack of protection through patents. Since services are intangible it is often also very difficult to visualize to your customers exactly what your service is doing for them. As goods can be displayed to the customer it leaves them with less risk as they make their purchase decision. Since services cannot be displayed to the consumer as easily as goods can it makes the purchase decision much riskier for the consumer. This creates problems both for the marketers and for the consumers. (34.) According to Soutor & Sweeney (2003, 231) it is common when you as a customer sense risk that you go to a well known company to minimise the risk. Furthermore Bawa & Kansal (2008) also disputes that intangibility leads to generalisation which means that that there is no distinctive differentiation between service providers. In the eyes of the consumer all service providers provides the same services.

Heterogeneity

To sum up how heterogeneity causes problems for the marketing of services I would argue that you need only one word, people. Since we are all different in so many ways it also means that we do things differently and we perceive things differently. As an example you might have a favourite hotel that you love to stay at during summer vacations but the next time you go there half of the staff has been swapped and it will alter your experience during your stay. It does not have to alter your experience for the worse, but it will for sure be different from what you expected. Bawa & Kansal (2008) states that heterogeneity can cause problems for firms as it will make it very difficult for them to standardize their service. In the eyes of the consumer this will once again increase the perceived risk of purchasing a service and might lead the customers to one of the bigger and more well known companies. (36.)

Inseparability

Bawa & Kanlas (2008, 36-37) states that it is common that the service provider is seen as the service itself. This will become especially harmful for the service provider in case you get an unsatisfied customer. With a product the customer might just criticise the product itself, as it is easier to separate goods from its company. With

the problem of inseparability between service and service provider however, it will harm the service provider more as they are sometimes inseparable from their service.

Perishability

Means the fact that services cannot be stored in a warehouse or anywhere else for that matter. This means that service providers must sometimes adjust prices to save up for possible loss of revenue in the future. If it was about a product they could just put excess goods in a warehouse to be sold at a later moment. This cannot be done with a service so instead you have to adjust prices. This can make customers confused as they might have to pay different prices for the same service.

2.3 Types of CGC

To segment CGC even further, some researchers are dividing CGC into two different types: the ones that are solicited by companies through some contests for consumers and those that are created by consumers on their own without a proposition of a company (Ertimur & Gilly 2012, 116). According to Thompson and Malaviya (2013) there are many motives why firms should solicit consumer-generated ads for their advertising campaigns. When the customer is involved in the advertising development, it is likely that it provides valuable perceptions and shapes a sense of collaboration and engagement with consumers. (33.) With both of CGA types consumers complete tasks that previously used to be handled by the company itself. Hereby, this new type of consumer-generated content online tests the traditional firm generated advertising (FGA). Highly relevant point of CGA for the firms are that the consumers who are generating the content are let to communicate on behalf of the company and participate in creating their brand image. (Ertimur & Gilly 2012, 116) However, CGA has some negative sides too, most particularly less control over and more discrepancy of the brand message. In order to guard against these problems there is a way to use co-opting strategy, in which companies solicit and encourage consumers to create advertisements through competitions, projects and forums. These kinds of competitions help create valuable insights, increase

engagement within targeted sectors and generate authentic content. (Thompson and Malaviya 2013, 33.)

Co-created ads

As the audience is nowadays more active users rather than passive viewers and aware of their influence on marketing, Armstrong and Stojmirovic highlight the concept of participatory design. As a company applies participatory design in their marketing strategy, it utilizes content from consumers. A company transfers this CGC to another context and modifies it into something greater than the initial contribution. Participatory design provides value to the consumers, as companies and the designers rewards them for participating (2011, 12.) However, Humphreys and Grayson (2008) argue that in many cases the value a consumer receives is simply the enjoyment of contributing to the designing process of these advertising campaigns. The consumer is actually willing to help companies become more successful in the marketplace without any actual monetary reward (11-13).

Electronic word of mouth

CGC can be defined as Internet content that is created and published by the consumers that use the product, not media or communications professionals. eWOM is mentioned as *“any helpful or harmful statements made by possible, actual, or previous customers about a product, service or business, which is made accessible to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”* (Henning–Thurau et al., 2004, 39).

According to Kaijasilta (2013) the efforts of traditional marketing is losing its power as customers trust in eWOM is growing, the reason why customers trust eWOM more is that you can establish a two-way communication rather than the traditional marketing where the communication usually only goes one way.

eWOM can be subcategorised into two different kinds of eWOM where it can be argued which type is the most effective. The first type is often shared in consumer review websites and other similar platforms which are specifically designed for consumers to exchange their opinions and reviews about products and services, an example of such a platform is Tripadvisor. Many travel agencies are directly linked to

Tripadvisor.Com where customers can write a comment after a purchase or read what others experienced before they make a purchase themselves. Consumer comments are directly linked to the marketing of products and services and relate to the influence of eWOM on brand reputation, trust, attitudes toward products, and consumer decision-making to name a few. (Rodgers & Wang, 2011, 214.)

The second type of eWOM, according to Rodgers & Wang (2011), occurs on electronic discussion boards, online communities, and social media sites which include communication among consumers with shared interests and experiences and these platforms create a more natural setting for eWOM advertising. Researchers have recognized several basic and important characteristics of eWOM for these settings, which contain an informational feature, an emotional feature, and valence value of informational and emotional eWOM (Fong & Burton, 2006). For example, upon returning home from a holiday, people usually want to share their travel experience with friends and family on various online platforms where they go through details of their vacation, including their opinion of the hotel they stayed at, restaurants they ate at and activities they partook in. Informational eWOM could express how clean the hotel was, how professional the staff was, whether they liked the swimming pool, etc. while emotional eWOM may demonstrate how the individual felt when they were enjoying the sunset in the café or how happy they were when they went dancing at a local bar. Emotional eWOM could also be negative (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008) and can have degrees of negativity as well as positivity.

If travel agencies want to use eWOM as an efficient tool for marketing their services, understanding how consumers talk about them is the first and most important step to creating the marketing strategy based on eWOM.

Negative vs Positive eWOM

With the increased use of social media and web 2.0 there are great opportunities to include customers into their business and make them advocates of your brand. However, the now widespread use of social media and web 2.0 also poses a threat to businesses if UGC is not handled in the most effective way. When it comes to

managing negative reviews and comments about your company in online environments there are some matters that you should be considering, such as, what motivated the customer into writing a negative review?

In a research made by Rensink (2013) there are several factors that might motivate a consumer to post negative remarks or reviews about your company, product or service. *Self enhancement* is in this case expressed as the desire for positive recognition from others. The *social benefits* are reasons of identification and social integration to participate in and belong to online communities. *Advice seeking* would be your motivation if you left a comment, hoping to get advice from others on which products might satisfy your needs instead of the one you had bought. *Concern for other customers* can be to warn other potential consumers about the product or service that you bought. *Venting negative emotions* is if you feel upset or angry after a purchase that did not satisfy your needs and you need to vent your anger. (12-13.) After you have studied the possible motivations behind a negative review, it makes your job to make them satisfied again easier.

In a study made by Purnawirawan, Dens & De Pelsmacker, P (2012) the effect of a mixture of positive and negative reviews have been researched as to how they affect the travelers planning process. A lot of prior research has been investigating the outcome of *one* positive review against *one* negative review, however, real life cases of online reviews usually contains hundreds if not even thousands of reviews. The research shows that it is not only the amount of reviews that matters, even though negative reviews showed to have a stronger impact on the travel planning process. But also the order in which the reviews are presented, if a lot of positive reviews are grouped up they can reinforce the positive image of the object that is being reviewed, the same goes for if negative reviews are grouped up (71-79.) This would indicate that for travel agencies to portray an as favorable image as possible of their online reviews they should try to structure them in such a favorable order that positive reviews are grouped up in a longer sequence and the negative review should be spread out to minimize the effect that the negative reviews would have on a potential travelers planning process.

Customer reviews in online platform

With the rise of web 2.0 and CGC, it is becoming increasingly important for companies to stay aware of their reputation. One way of keeping track of your online reputation is to keep up with what is written about your company on various online review platforms. However, as mentioned before, it is not only online platforms that are designed for reviews (company's own webpage, Tripadvisor.Com etc.) that are responsible for your company's reputation. The reputation is also spread on other online discussion forums and social medias such as Facebook, Instagram or other online blogs.

The review platforms are relatively easy to monitor since you as a company can monitor your own page and have a much wider overview of what is being said about you. On social medias however comments are not necessarily posted onto your company's Facebook page but rather on the creators private profile to be seen by that creators friends and family. This makes the second type of CGC much harder to monitor.

Customer reviews can be categorized as general CGC and it is possible that they are the new leading type of CGC (Liu, Karahanna & Watson 2011). Most travel agencies today are using review or rating services on their websites, however, according to Gretzel & Yoo (2007), these are perceived to be less credible due to the commercial interests of these sites. The most used and credible online review platform in the travel industry is Tripadvisor.com

Credibility in online sources

When travelers are planning a trip it is becoming increasingly important for them to research other users reviews to make an informed decision, for example on Tripadvisor.com. However, many online reviews lack credibility. According to Ott, Choi, Cardie & Hancock (2011) individual consumers are facing difficulties to determine whether a review is fraudulent or not.

Jensen, Averbek, Zhang & Wright (2013) argues that traditional WOM being communicated face-to-face between family members, friends, or other connections, leads to potential customers encountering less uncertainty about the information because they know and trust the person sharing the information. When the source is known, consumers are more likely to deem the review to be credible and therefore recommendations provided through WOM can be favourable over eWOM. With eWOM, information about the source is often detached from the information the source provides about a product or service. This detachment places a significant burden on the potential consumer to make credibility acknowledgements of an anonymous source, as the basis of any attribution may be limited (295-296.)

With this information in mind, video content should then be deemed to be the most reliable source of CGC, as video content is as close to face-to-face communications as you can get online.

So even though the internet has given plenty of opportunities for companies to market their products it comes with a great risk of losing control over your own marketing abilities, and credibility is still a concern among consumers.

2.4 CGC's effect on a company's brand image

A company's brand image is very important for their business and it determines the view that consumers have of their products or services. Kuksov, Shachar & Wang (2013) disputes that companies are constantly trying to control their brand image through their advertisements by communicating the message that their product is intended for a specific demographic of people. However, the ultimate power to determine a company's brand image is in the hands of the consumers, that is how strong the power of CGC is. One of the reasons why the power is in the hands of the consumer is that the brand image will most likely be determined by the users of the product. Another reason could be because consumers that use the product can

communicate better with each other regarding the product and therein determine the brand image (294.)

For example, Travel agency Nazar Nordic, which is a travel agency operating throughout the Nordic countries, is communicating through their firm generated marketing that they are a company that sells luxurious holidays. This is done by focusing a lot of their own content on showing fancy pool areas, classy lounges on the beach or massive chandeliers in the hotel lobby. That is the brand image that they are trying to portray for themselves (see Figure 1).

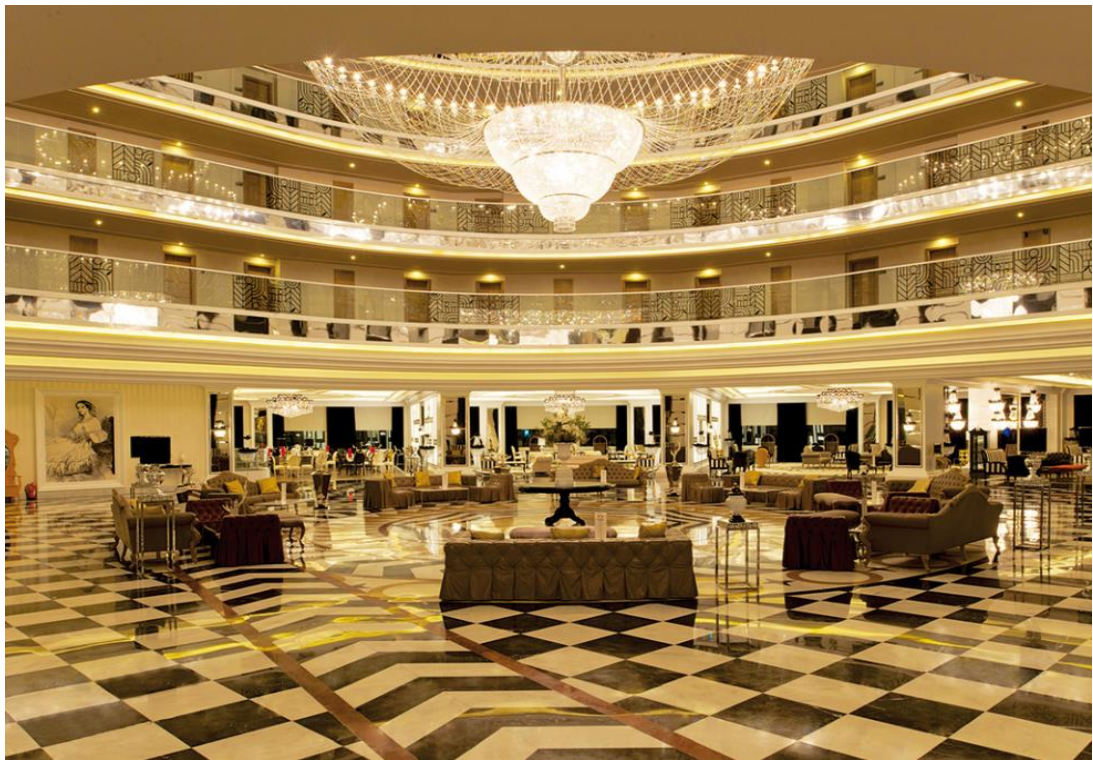


Figure 1. Nazar's own view of their brand image (Nazar 2018.)

However, when you look at the CGC that is created by their customers there is very little focus on luxury in the normal sense and most of the content is focused on how child and family friendly they are to travel with. For a family it can of course be considered a luxury to have a waterpark, free ice cream or an arcade room in the hotel, that keeps your children happy and occupied during the day. It is however, a different kind of luxury than the one that Nazar themselves are trying to portray. (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Nazar's consumers version of brand image (Nazar 2018.)

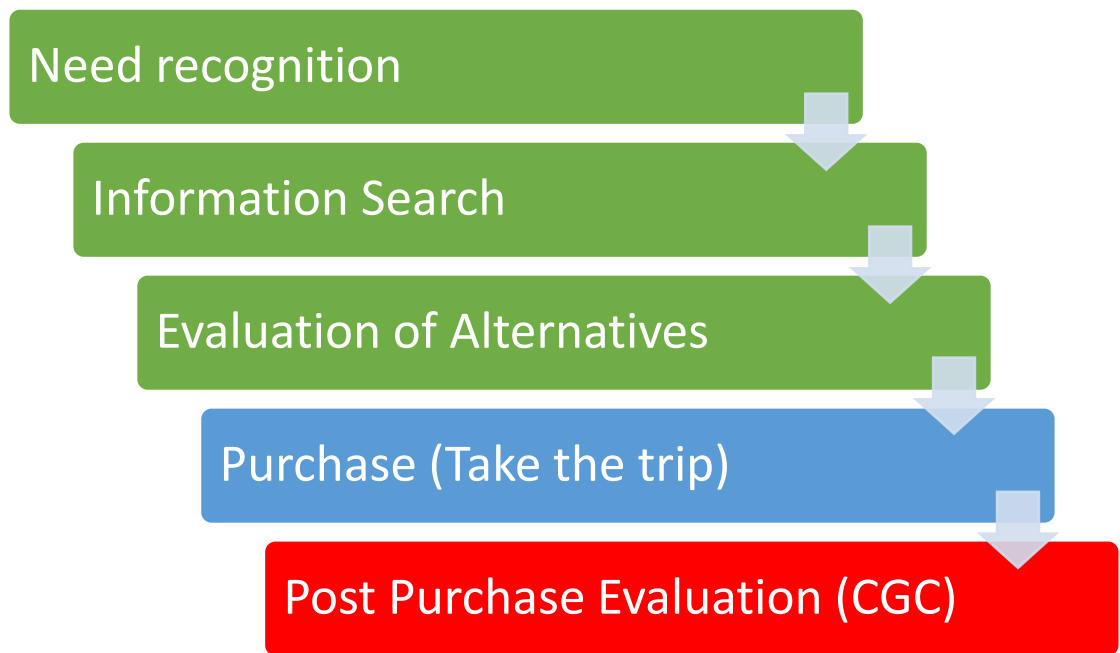
This case strengthens the beliefs that the power to determine a company's brand image is indeed in the hands of the consumers.

2.5 The role of online information in the travel planning process

The travel planning process has been described by Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Bultjens (2009) to include 5 steps. Need recognition being the first step when you start planning your travels and you start recognizing your own specific needs for the travel, these needs can be whether you need a city hotel or a beach front hotel. The next step being Information search, this stage is straight forward as the travel planner consider his or her needs and bases the search on the needs. After the search is made there will naturally be at least a couple of viable alternatives to choose from which leads the travel planner into the third step of the travel planning process. When the first 3 steps have been dealt with it comes down to making the purchase and take the trip. When the trip is over you start evaluating how the trip

was and with the power of CGC consumers can now directly share their evaluation with other potential customers using eWOM and other types of CGC. (744-746.)

Table 1. Travel planning process. Adapted from Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Buultjens (2009).



Before making a purchase of any kind you want to be able to make an as informed decision as possible about which product or service to buy. Before the web 2.0 and CGC was introduced to the world, people had to rely heavily on firm generated marketing as well as expert guides, such as book and pocket book reviews on various destinations. However, after the rise of web 2.0 and CGC this process of planning your travels based on reviews has gotten easier since most of your desired information is now very accessible online.

A study made by Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides (2012) showed that 82% of Americans made some sort of research about potential destinations to travel to, either via blogs, reviews or other forms of online feedbacks regarding various destinations. Travel planning is rather complex and in the view of the traveler there is some risk involved in planning a vacation (Sirakaya & Woodside 2005). As a traveler you might only have a few weeks of holiday and you want to spend your money well to get the most value for money when going on vacation. To be as sure as possible to get a

hotel and destination that matches your expectations many travelers nowadays decide to listen to other travelers' experiences to minimize the risk (Kotler, Bowen & Maken 2014).

In a research made by Zhou & Duan (2016) almost 9 out 10 customers that read online reviews stated that they were influenced by the reviews before making their purchase decision.

2.6 Adoption of CGC in the tourism sector

Since the dawn of web 2.0 and CGC, marketing creation has been going through a shift from corporations towards consumer and the tourism industry was one of the pioneers in allowing their customers to generate their marketing content. However, the first attempts at utilizing CGC in the tourism sector was by using edited customer testimonials.

In Figure 1 we have a good example on how travel agencies first tried to adapt to CGC by conducting interviews with consumers and after the interview edit it into nice text about the company, hotel or destination. After this is done it is posted on the company's webpage by the company together with a nice picture of the customers. This type of CGC might be considered less credible by the viewers since it is posted by the company on their own page for their own gain. Some might even argue that this type of advertising is in fact not even CGC, but Firm Generated Content.



Figure 3. Edited testimonial (Nazar's Website 2018.)

Figure 3 translation. *We have travelled with Nazar (a travel agency) four times and we always choose Nazar because it is so comfortable when you travel with kids. All the four times we chose the hotel Pegasos World, because the kids love it. We like that there are so many different activities and it is perfect with such a big pool. The water park is definitely the best part of the hotel.*

Consumer generated reviews are now regularly built into online travel agency webpages, in some cases impacting display order and certainly influencing the potential customer's choice. However, research shows that reviews posted on travel agencies' own sites are less credible than those posted on dedicated third-party consumer review sites. In many cases, those reviews that are displayed on travel agencies' own webpages are perceived as being less objective due to the fact that the travel agency's main goal is to profit. (Xue & Phelps, 2004.)

Two other travel agencies that are adapting to the marketing world of CGC is Touristic Union International or more commonly known as TUI and Thomas Cook. As Figure 4 and Figure 5 shows screenshots Directly from TUI's and Thomas Cook's

webpages that displays how the companies are directly incorporating ratings for the specific hotel that you are searching for from Tripadvisor.Com.

PHUKET MARRIOTT RESORT & SPA, MERLIN
BEACH  Plus


TripAdvisor Traveller Rating

Based on 2766 reviews

Figure 4. TUI direct link to Tripadvisor (TUI's webpage 2018.)

Since customer reviews are nowadays such a big part of consumers travel planning process it is a smart move to implement an impartial third-party review sites results of your hotels, this will increase the perceived credibility of the reviews rather than if the reviews would come straight from the company themselves. However, when reviews comes from a third-party it is much harder to validate the origin of the senders of those reviews as anyone can make a review on Tripadvisor.com without having ever visited the hotel that they have reviewed, it is however perceived more reliable than when travel agencies do not incorporate third-party reviews on their webpage (ibid, 2004).



Figure 5. Thomas Cook direct link to Tripadvisor (Thomas Cook's webpage 2018.)

2.7 Control of CGC

Consumer-generated content (CGC) has become an unavoidable aspect in the general image of a business presented especially on online social networks. It might seem that steering CGC is somewhat paradoxical because it is not in the hands of the

acting firm, but nonetheless strategies can be found to influence the content consumers create about one's brand, product or service.

Muñiz Jr. & Schau (2011) find that consumers can have a tendency to imitate messages communicated by the firm's own marketing specialists, also known as firm-generated marketing. That means that advertisements made by a marketing division of a firm can influence the audience to produce similar kind of content about the brand or product advertised. Since software for audio-, video- and animation-production is nowadays very accessible and affordable for the single consumer, or private person, these consumers will also be found to be able to create strong advertisement-content; especially those in brand communities and consumer collectives. Their collaboration can result in powerful advertising without the firm having to compensate as much as they would in a strictly firm-generated marketing strategy. The researchers found that some firms outsource marketing communications completely to their customers successfully. Collaborative CGC efforts should be included in long-term marketing objectives for any business. (216.)

Delivering persuasive communications to exactly those consumers that experience and create CGC should therefore be part of marketing strategies. Daugherty, Eastin & Bright (2008) state that a consumer's attitude towards a brand, affected by the firm's marketing, in its turn effects the shape of the CGC produced by them. Attitudes towards CGC are as well driven by psychological motivations such as so-called ego-defensive and social functional sources; the first implying that interacting with CGC online somehow minimizes emotions of self-doubt while at the same time establishing a sense of community by said interaction (by spending time online with people involved with the CGC). Through these psychological motivations social media became a popular platform of marketing. Harnessing the psychology behind CGC might be achieved by providing a platform where consumers can collaborate and create CGC, while the firm's marketers can stand ready to add information that increases brand-value; by engaging with the consumers on the platform whether that is self-created or an existent one (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). (22-23.)

Therefore, the underlying psychological drives as found in social media usage are involved in CGC as well. Additionally, that the shape of CGC can be affected by a firm's own communications. One might at first think CGC and its sometimes brutal honesty can form a threat for businesses' PR and strategical marketing communications, while it should be seen as an opportunity at the same time to amplify one's communications at a very low cost. As a matter of fact Lydahl & Gitomer (2010) argues that you need to get your customers to talk about you, even if the reviews would be negative they would be better than no comments at all.

2.8 Difficulties with CGC

When it comes to CGC, companies need to be proactive. An example of how tardiness can harm your business is presented by Lindenblatt (2014) and it regards the oil company BP. In 2010 BP's oil rig Deepwater Horizon exploded and started leaking a huge amount of oil into the Mexican gulf and it was not long before BP became synonymous with words such as "disaster" and "shame" across various social media platforms. After BP's previously sound reputation had plummeted to its lowest figures ever, BP attempted to apologize and mitigate the situation via social media but failed since the apology came first after they had realized that their reputation had been harmed (2.) A similar scenario could be encountered by a travel agency, say would there be a malfunction with an aircraft or an unsafe environment in one of their destinations or other issues that the company is aware about but does not act upon. Through the power of CGC these issues could potentially scale up to unfathomable reaches and completely ruin your company's image.

CGC can also bring upon your company some very long and painful copyright processes that might even take you to court to determine who is the actual owner of a specific piece of content. For example you might come across a picture taken and uploaded to a media sharing platform by one of your consumers and you decide to use that photo in your marketing campaigns. This can lead to heartache for the company if the consumer has put a copyright on it and did not intend the picture to

end up as marketing content. So, as a company you need to always be very careful when using implementing your consumers content into your own marketing strategies. Some ways that you can avoid these problems are very simple, but still, it has happened that companies have been acting nonchalant and later on ended up in controversy. The easiest way to avoid this whole controversy is to ask the original producer of the content if they accept that you use it for marketing purposes. But what if a company runs a contest? They cannot possibly screen all the content. This is when the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) steps in, it gives web hosts and Internet service providers a safe harbor from copyright infringement claims, if they implement certain notice or takedown procedures. (Klaassen 2009.)

One issue that marketers see when they are considering UGC is that they will lose the control of their marketing strategy. I believe that in order to maintain a small piece of control over your marketing strategy is to also use some sort of Firm Generated Content to try to influence the content of its users.

Article 17 (Formerly Article 13)

As of 26th of March 2019 article 17 of the EU Copyright Directive is voted in favour by the European parliament. Article 17 contains well-intended betterments for already existing copyright rules on the internet. These improvements mean that social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube or Twitter must start using filters that removes content uploaded by someone else than the copyright holder of the content. Before article 17 came to use you could still use copyrighted content but you were not entitled to make profit by doing so, meaning that you could accompany your own video with copyrighted music and it would still be legal. You would still have to either acknowledge the fact that you do not own the rights to the music or give the right to monetize on your video to the copyright holder. The online platforms had no obligation to monitor their own sites for infringements but they were however obliged to remove content from their sites if the copyright holder notified them about their content being shared by other users.

The introduction of article 17 means that the various online platforms now must have working filters in place that will remove such content that is copyrighted. The

entire article has good intentions as it will protect the ones that rightfully own the content. However, it is being disputed online on various forums and discussion boards that even though the article is well intended it will mostly serve the big companies (copyright holders) as smaller companies and individuals will not afford to buy and maintain copyrights.

Article 17 might also however affect bigger organizations and companies, as a lot of today's marketing relies on CGC. The tourism industry could also be affected by article 17 as Tourism is one of the industries that is mostly affected by CGC.

3 Methodology

The work is focused on answering a set of 5 research questions; What is the perceived reliability of online reviews originating from different sources, What motivates tourists to post content to social medias, What motivates tourists to write online reviews, Are customers relying on CGC when booking a trip, How impactful is CGC in the travel planning process? The questions are focusing on understanding the consumers various opinions about CGC, eWOM and online reviews in the travel planning process.

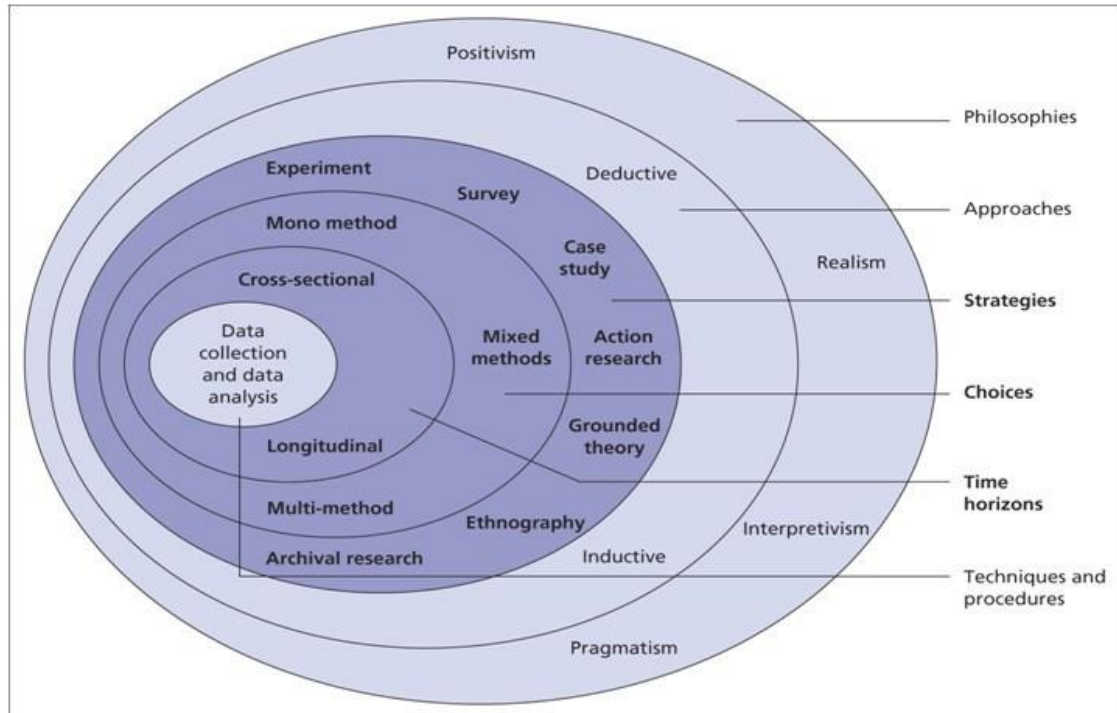


Figure 6. The Research Onion (Saunders & Lewis 2009)

The philosophy that has been used in this thesis has been pragmatism as the study is mainly focused on answering the research questions at hand. I realized that each question might need a different approach in order to be answered which makes pragmatism the best philosophy for this work. According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2012, 106-107) the pragmatism philosophy is best used when the work circles around answering the research question and when the researcher understands that to do so you might need to use different approaches. The work is investigating different opinions among humans and how we as humans interpret and react to different kinds of content created by other humans. CGC is very much a type of social interaction between people and it also leaves lots of room to be interpreted differently depending on the person the perceives it. Which means that interpretivism could also be used by future researchers on the same topic. Interpretivism is a philosophy that supports the need to understand people's differences as social actors and it highlights the difference of conducting research among people rather than objects. (ibid.) One implication is that interpretivism is best suited for qualitative work. This means that a researcher that chooses interpretivism as their philosophy should also consider a qualitative approach rather

than having the possibility of both qualitative and quantitative approaches as you would with pragmatism.

In the second layer of the research onion the approach has been deductive as the questions arose from existing models and theories rather than the inductive approach where you build your theory by processing your observations, experiments and data collection.

For the strategy I decided to approach my research questions with a questionnaire that was distributed by me on social media platforms and in person. The questionnaire contained a set of demographical questions; How old are you, Where do you live, What is your gender, How many times per year do you travel for pleasure. These questions are meant to segment the respondents into groups to be able to analyse differences across customer segments.

Except for the demographical questions I also set up questions to answer the actual research questions; Where do you read holiday reviews?, How likely is it that any type of CGC will affect how you plan your vacation?, How likely is it that you will change you existing travel plans due to any type of CGC?, What is most likely the reason why you leave a negative review about a company/hotel/destination?, What is most likely the reason why you deem any type of CGC to be unreliable?, Where do you post CGC about your trip? And a question asking if they believe it to be more reliable when a company incorporates ratings from a third party or only from their own customers.

The reason why a questionnaire and therein a quantitative approach is the most fitting for my research is that my research questions are there to figure out the perception of CGC, eWOM and online reviews among the customers. It was decided that a quantitative approach would be the best way to answer the research questions. The use of focus groups was also considered but in the end the choice fell on using a questionnaire approach as it is less time consuming and more effective at acquiring quantitative data.

The goal of the thesis, timewise, has always been to have it ready by May. Therefore the time horizon according to the research onion has been cross-sectional.

In the literature review mostly secondary sources such as journals, books and articles are used.

3.1 Evaluation of methodology

In hindsight I still believe that conducting a questionnaire in order to obtain data is the best approach to take when doing market research. I have come to think that another option could have been to conduct the research with the help of a focus group. It would however, not have generated a strong enough quantity of respondents to get an idea of where the customers stand in opinion to CGC. An option would be to conduct the questionnaire and to strengthen the results of the questionnaire conduct interviews or discussions with some of the respondents afterwards.

3.2 Limitations

The limitations to my work is mostly related to the questionnaire and the amount of respondents as well as the demographics of the respondents. Most of my respondents has been Swedish or Finnish women and most of the respondents are also belonging to the age group 20 – 29. With an online questionnaire it is very hard to control the demographics of your respondents so my suggestion to future researchers is that you also try to generate questionnaire answers in person by asking around on campuses or workplaces to even out the demographics. Another option could be to go for a focus group with varying demographics.

4 Results

In the questionnaire that I have developed in order to get results from the market, I have used 3 demographical questions to segment customers. The demographical questions concern age, gender and geographic location. In the demographical set we

can see that we have a high representation of Swedish and Finnish people, a vast majority of the respondents have been women and the dominating age group is between 20 – 29 years old.

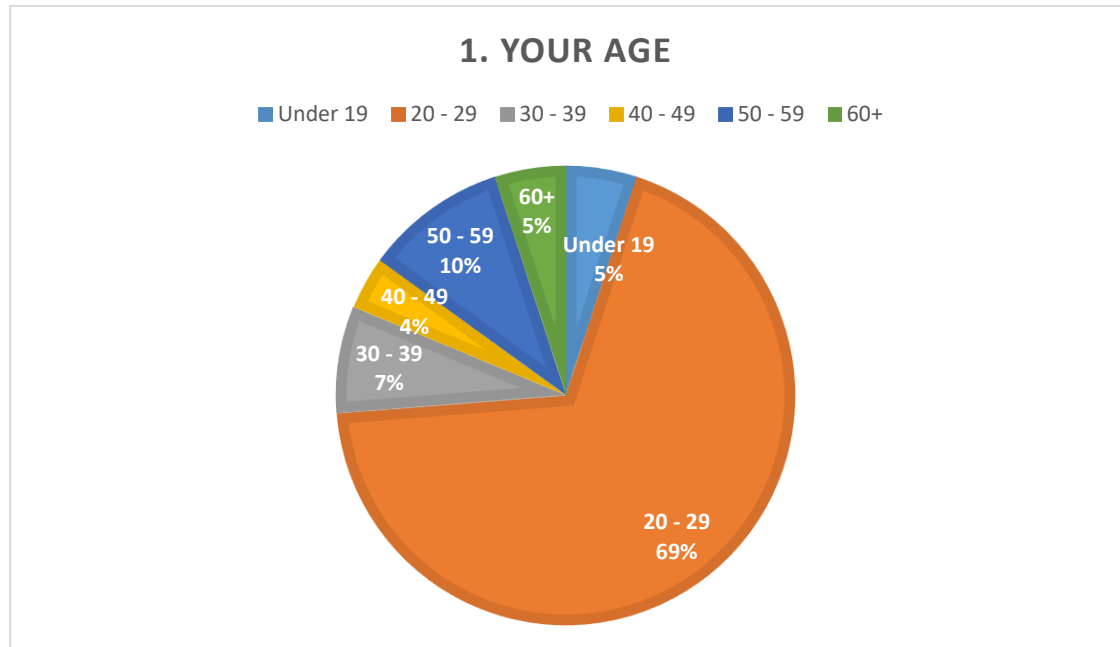


Figure 7. Answers for question 1

69% of the respondents have indicated that they are between 20 – 29 years old with the second largest age group being 50 – 59 with 10% of the respondents. The surveys validity is compromised since we have such a dominant age group.

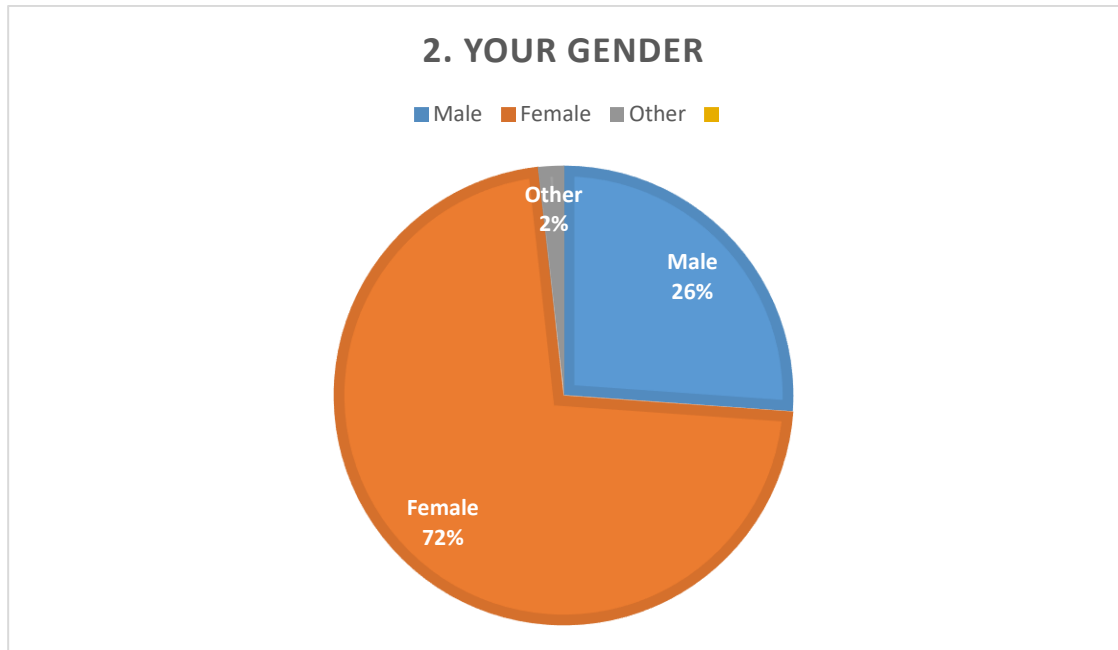


Figure 8. Answers for question 2

72% of respondents are female, 26% are men and 2% have specified other/don't want to say.

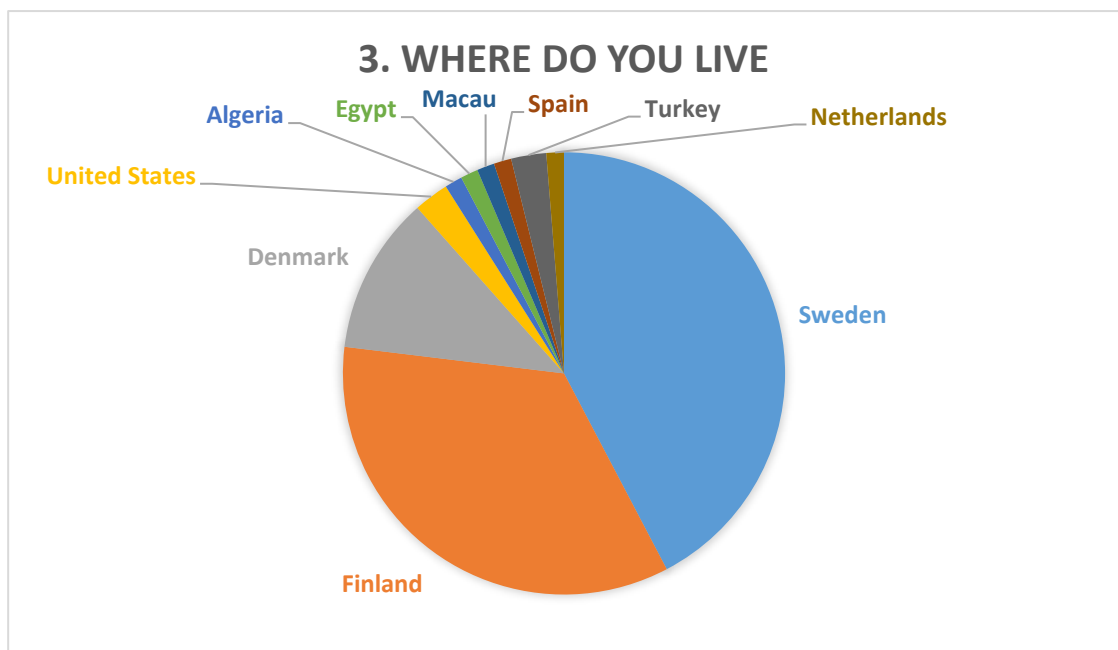


Figure 9. Answers for question 3

In the geographic segment the majority of the respondents are either Swedish or Finnish with Danish respondents in a clear 3rd spot.

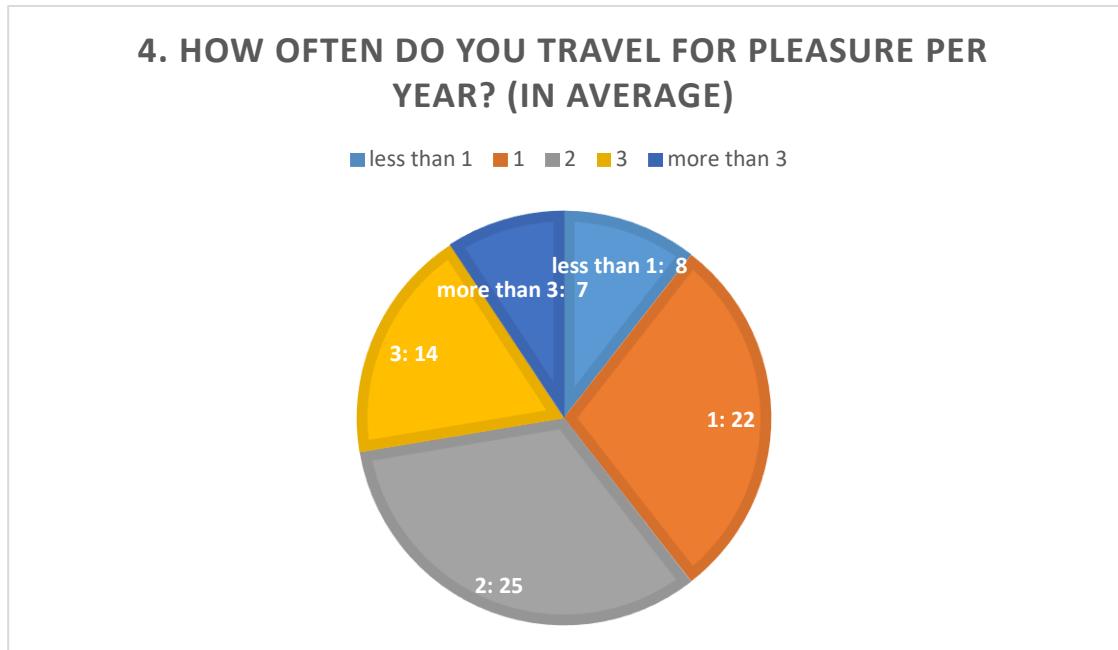


Figure 10. Answers for question 4

Question 4 lets us know that majority (89%) of respondents travel at least once per year, with 22 respondents traveling once per year, 25 respondents traveling twice per year and 21 respondents traveling at least 3 times per year.

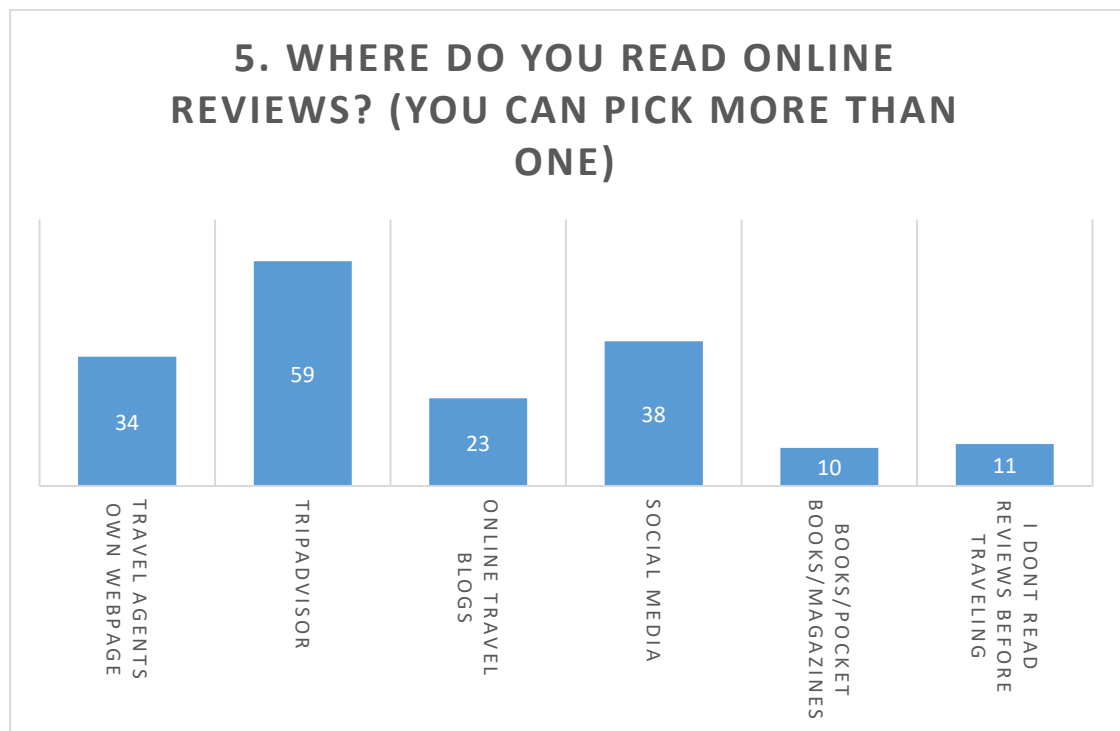


Figure 11. Answers for question 5

When the respondents were asked where they read online reviews only 11 answered that they do not read reviews when planning their travels. The dominating (59 respondents) platform from where people read reviews before traveling is Tripadvisor.com, however, social media (38 respondents) as well as travel agents' old pages (34 respondents) are popular options to read reviews from.

Figure 11 and 12 measures the impact that CGC, eWOM & online reviews have on the way a traveler plans his or her holiday as well as the impact that it can have on already existing plans.

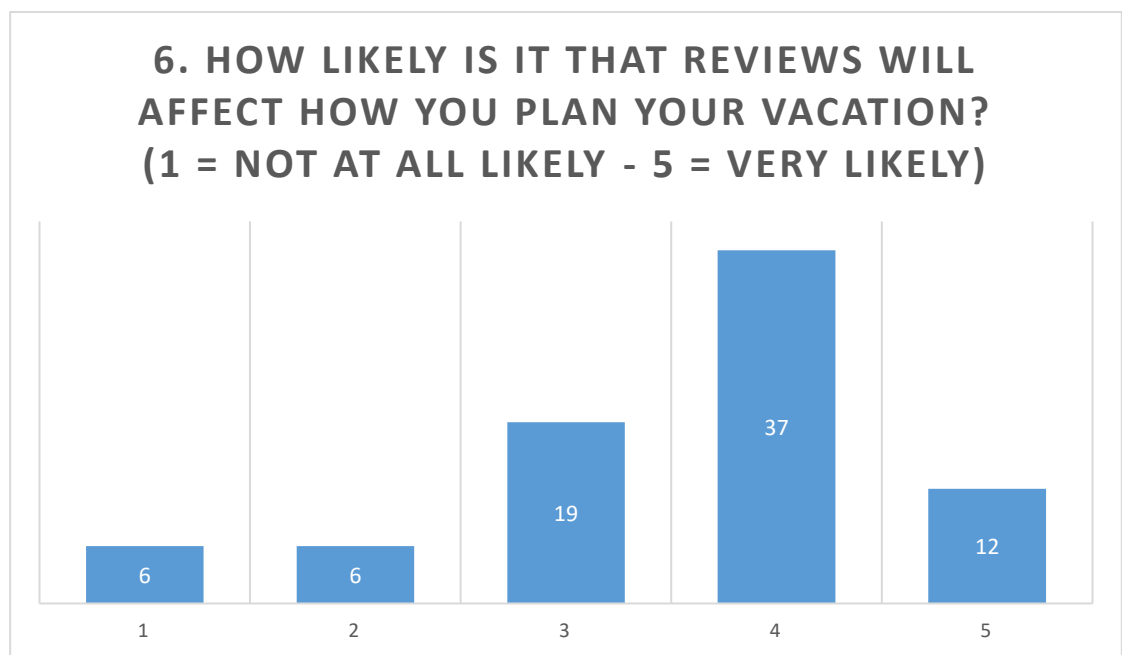


Figure 12. Answers for question 6

A majority (37) of respondents indicate that it is likely that CGC, eWOM and online reviews will affect how they plan their holiday. Only 6 respondents indicate that it is not at all likely that they will be affected by any types of CGC.

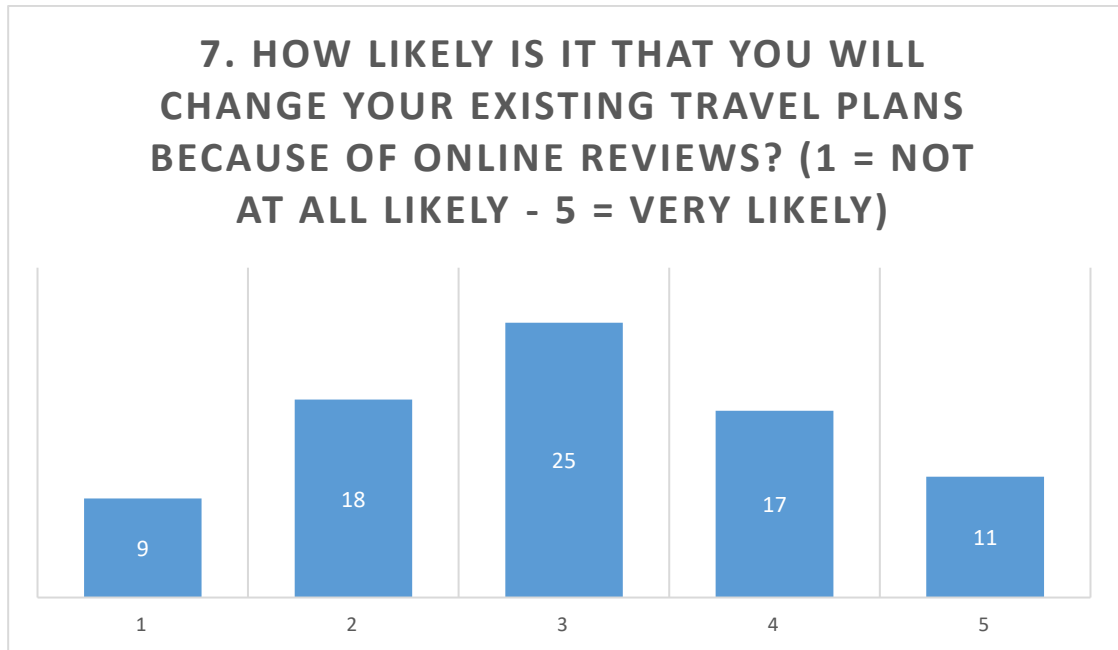


Figure 13. Answers for question 7

When the respondents have already made plans for their trip however, it is significantly less likely that CGC would be the reason for a change of plans. 25 of the respondents are neutral towards CGC changing their existing travel plans while 9 respondents says that they are not at all likely to change their existing plans due to CGC and 11 saying that they are very likely to change existing plans due to CGC. The answers to question 7 would then indicate that CGC is most effective early on in the travel planning stage and loses its impact the further the traveler gets in the planning process.

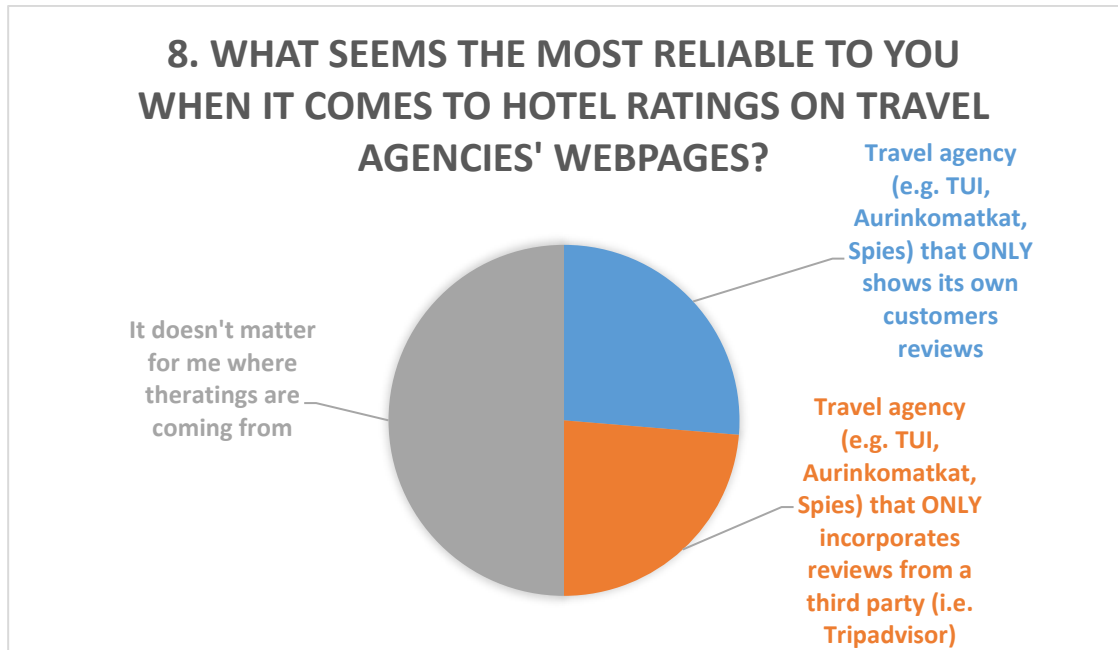


Figure 14. Answers for question 8

When investigating the perceived reliability in travel agencies own webpages and the reviews that resides there half of the respondents say that it does not matter to them where the review is coming from. 24% indicates that they trust a travel agent who ONLY includes ratings from a third party (i.e. Tripadvisor) more and 26% indicating that they trust agents that ONLY includes its own customers reviews more.

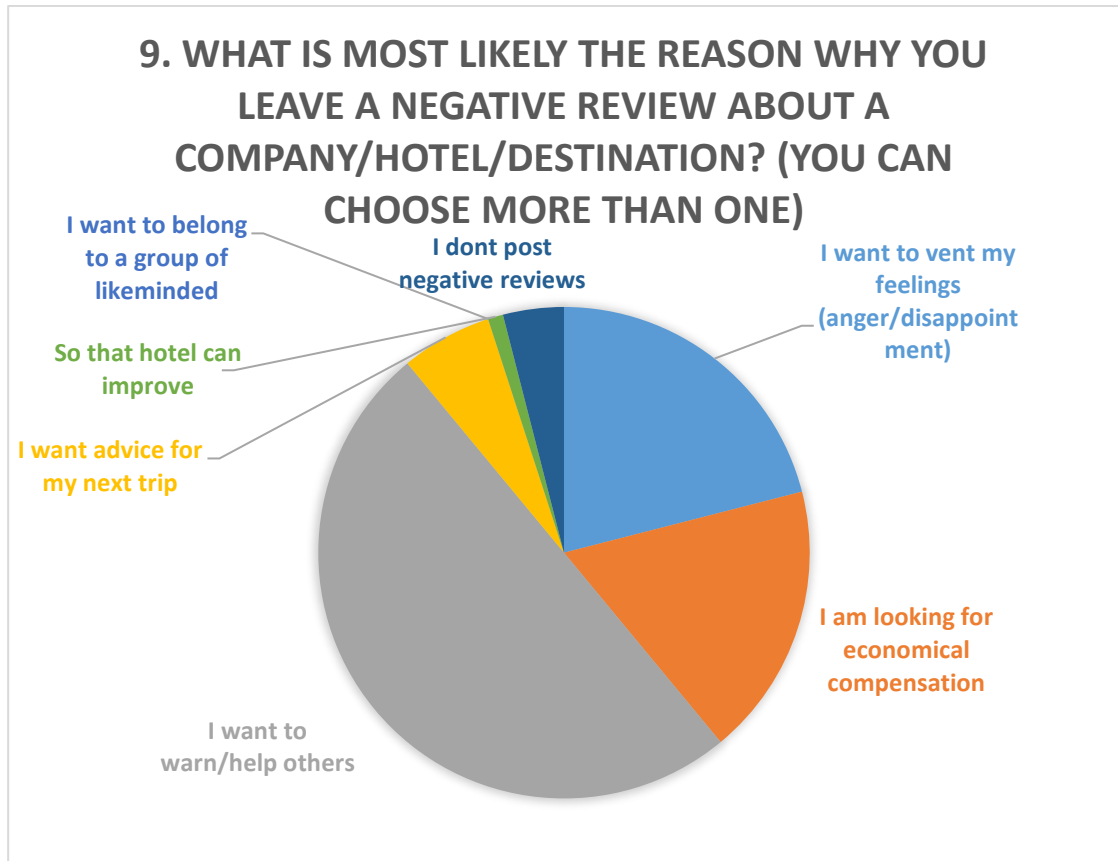


Figure 15. Answers for question 9

On the question “what is most likely the reason why you leave a negative comment?” 50% of the respondents answered that they want to help/warn other travelers. 21% answered that they want to vent their negative emotions such as anger or disappointment. While 18% of respondents leave negative comments because they want to be economically compensated for their experience.

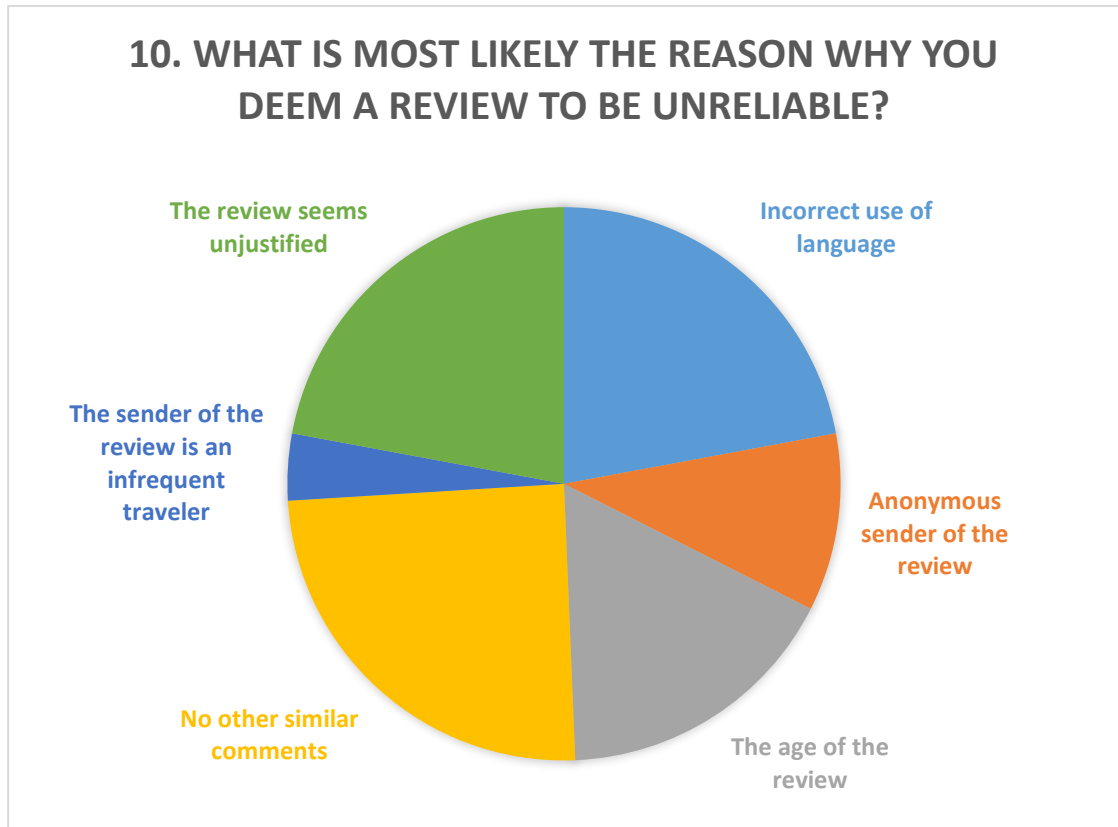


Figure 16. Answers for question 10

When researching the perceived reliability of CGC eWOM and online reviews there was no outstanding reason that made a review seem more unreliable than others. This could indicate that there is a lack of trust in the online community and all the listed examples are valid reasons not to trust CGC, eWOM and online reviews. The one reason that did however get the most responses was “there are no other similar comments” with 19 (25%) of the respondents. “Incorrect use of language and the review seems unjustified” both got 17 (22%) responses each.

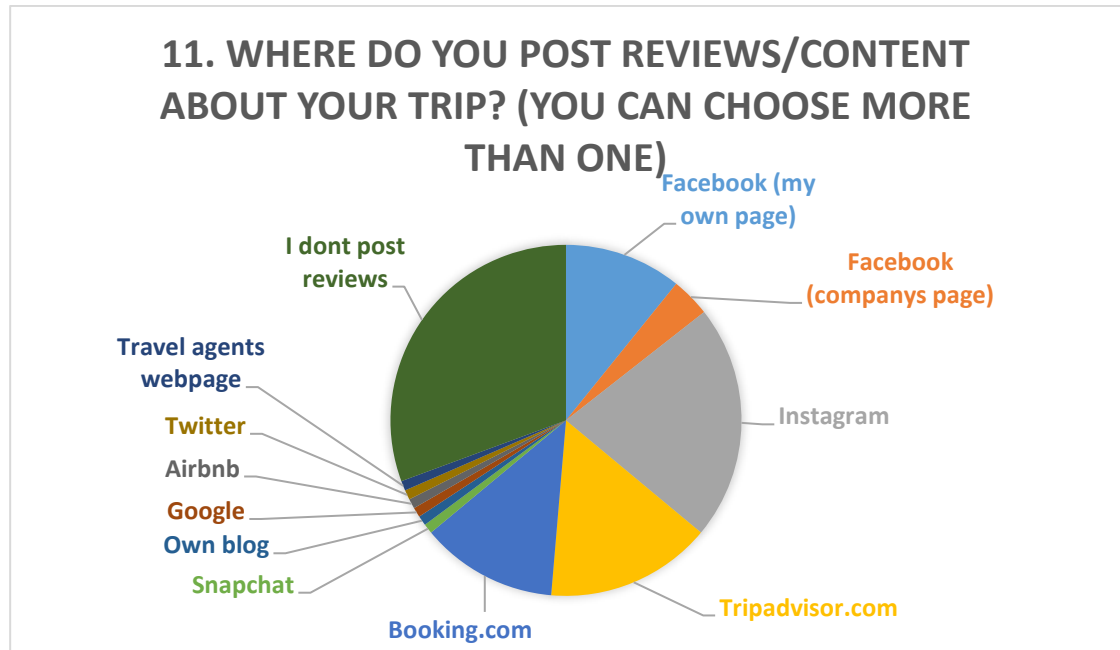


Figure 17. Answers for question 11

When the respondents were asked if and where they post CGC we got the answer that 34 (31%) respondents do not post any type of content about their trip at all. Out of the places where people do post content Instagram is the most popular with 24 respondents (22%) followed by Tripadvisor.com with 17 respondents (15%) and Booking.com with 14 respondents (13%). Out of the 16 (15%) respondents that post content on Facebook 12 post on their own page and 4 post to the travel agents page. This could indicate that Tripadvisor.com and Booking.com are the best places for travel agents to monitor what is being said about them since many profiles on Facebook and Instagram are private and can only be seen by friends.

5 Conclusions

The result of my thesis shows that it is important for travel agents to maintain a user-friendly webpage that displays some sort of reviews for consumers to use while making travel plans, as travel agents webpages are some of the most common places for travellers to read reviews. However, the most common place for people to read customer reviews is on dedicated review pages such as Tripadvisor.com, Booking.com and hotels.com. Other than their own webpage and review pages it is also important for travel agents to monitor social media platforms such as Facebook

and Instagram as well. An implication for companies is that a lot of the content that is shared on social media platforms is shared on private accounts which makes it inaccessible for companies to read.

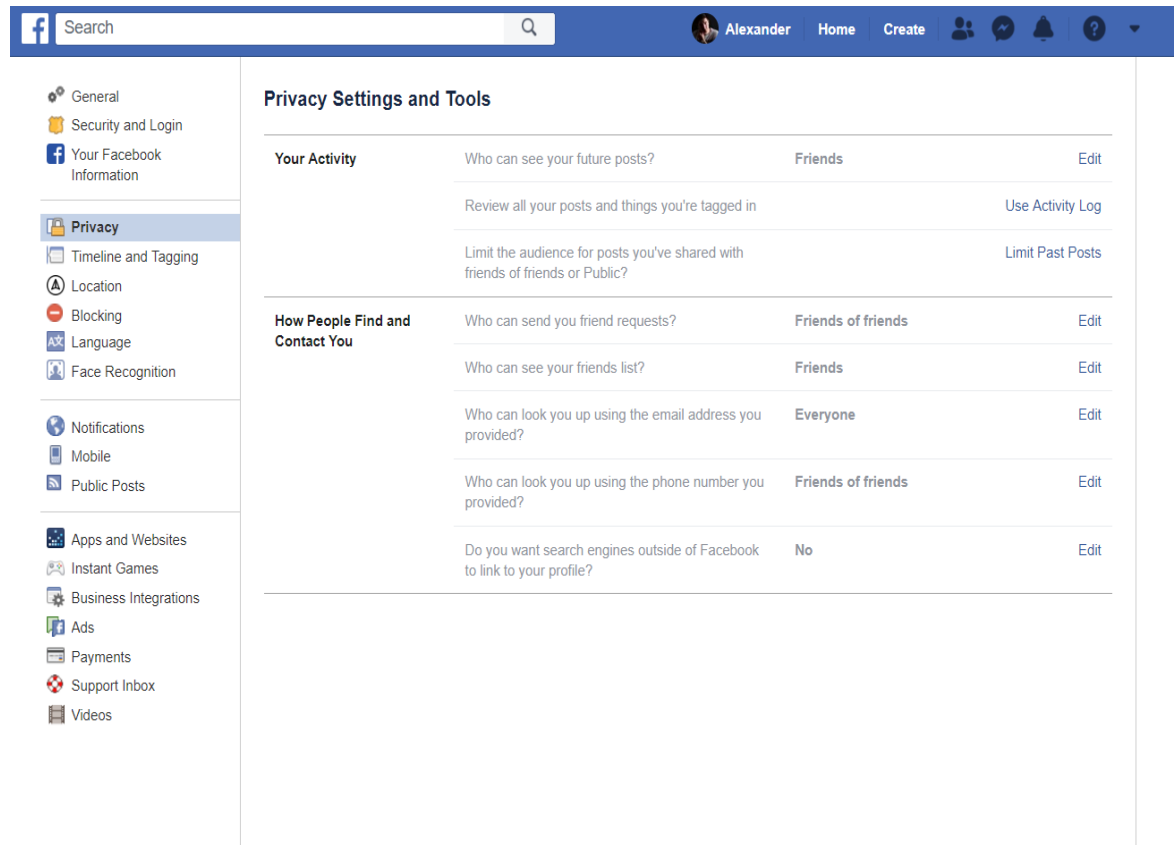


Figure 18. Example of how people can make their Facebook accounts private.
(Adapted from Facebook 2019)

It is important for travel agents to be aware of what is being said about them online as most of my respondents indicate that it is likely that their travel plans will be affected by CGC, eWOM and online reviews. Even when the customer has started planning his or her vacation there is a chance that CGC, eWOM and online reviews could change the existing plans, it is however not as likely to affect existing plans as it is early in the travel planning process. So CGC, eWOM and online reviews are strong forces when it comes to the travel planning process. This result is also partly supported by the research conducted by Gretzel & Yoo (2008) as their research shows that at least people who read reviews and other types of CGC frequently are likely to be affected by it. (44.)

When it comes to whether or not travel agents should only display their own customers reviews on their webpages or if it is perceived to be more reliable to use a third party review platform (such as Tripadvisor.com, Booking.com or Hotels.com), it can be concluded that it actually does not make that big of a difference where the reviews are coming from. So, what could be done here is to show both your own customers ratings and those of a third party. According to Sparks, Perkins & Buckley (2013) it can push customers towards making a purchase if there is a third-party accreditation displayed on the webpage as it strengthens the credibility of the company. They also state that it does not have to be reviews from a third party but that it can for example also be an eco-label from a third-party confirming that the company is eco-friendly. (1-9.)

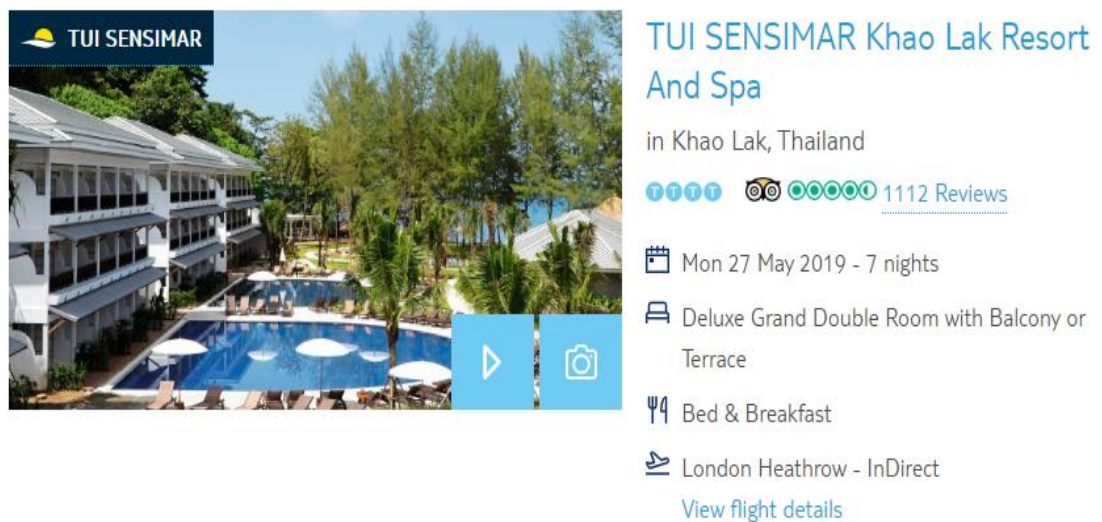


Figure 19. Example of TUI UK implementing 3rd party (Tripadvisor.com) reviews on their webpage (Adapted from TUI UK 2019)

When travel agents are dealing with CGC, eWOM and online reviews it is important to know what motivated the customer to post their content. When trying to turn the dissatisfied customer into a neutral or satisfied customer this information is a key factor. This research shows that the most common reason why customers leave a negative review is that they want to warn/help others from the same negative experience. It is also relatively common that the customer is looking for economical compensation or that they simply want to vent their negative emotions. Gretzel &

Yoo (2008) states that when it comes to positive reviews, they are often rooted in the good service provided by the travel agent and the consumer feels the need to reciprocate that gesture. Their research, much like mine, showed that warning/helping others from the same negative experience was the most common reason for a negative review. (292-293.) I feel however that economical compensation is a more common reason than my research shows, but to leave that answer would leave a bad self-image in the consumer and therefore they answer that they want to help/warn others to instead strengthen their self-image.

When customers are reading online reviews or any other type of CGC there are however nowadays many red flags in most online communities. The biggest reasons not to trust another review are; the review is the only one of its kind, incorrect use of language and the age of the review. So, if a travel agent is monitoring various online communities it means that they should prioritise the negative reviews that does not fall under one of those categories as other consumers are more likely to deem them unreliable. They should instead focus on helping the customers that have more common issues that are mentioned by other customers as well.

Implications for travel agencies

Based on the results of this research most of the implications for travel agencies seems to circle mostly on the general reliability of the online world, as anyone has the option to be anonymous. There are also a great number of online trolls who are not sincere in what they write or post online which can lead consumers to trust less in the online communities. Also pages such as Tripadvisor.com faces problems with verifying the reliability of reviews as anyone can create an account and review or rate a service or product in the tourism business.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questions used in questionnaire

1. Your age *

- 19 or under
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60+

2. Your gender *

- Male
- Female
- Other

3. Where do you live? *

4. How many times per year do you travel for pleasure? (in average) *

- Less than once per year
- 1 time per year
- 2 times per year
- 3 times per year
- Over 3 times per year

5. Where do you read holiday reviews? (you can choose more than one) *

- Travel agents (i.e. TUI, Thomas Cook) own webpage
- Travel rating sites (i.e. Tripadvisor.com, booking.com)
- Online travel blogs
- Social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Instagram)
- Travel books/Pocket books/Magazines
- I don't read reviews when im planning my holiday

6. How likely is it that reviews will affect how you plan your vacation? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not likely at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very likely
	⋮					

7. How likely is it that you change your existing travel plans due to something you saw or read online? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not likely at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very likely

8. What seems the most reliable to you when it comes to hotel ratings on travel agencies' webpages? *

- Travel agency (e.g. TUI, Aurinkomatkat, Spies) that ONLY shows its own customers ratings on their webpage
- Travel agency (e.g. TUI, Aurinkomatkat, Spies) that ONLY includes ratings from a third party (e.g. Tripadvisor) on the...
- It doesn't matter for me where the ratings are coming from

9. What is most likely the reason why you leave a negative review about a company/hotel/destination? (you can choose more than one) *

- I want to vent my feelings (anger/disappointment)
- I am looking for economical compensation
- I want to warn/help others
- I want advice for my next trip
- I want to belong to a group of like-minded
- Other...

10. What is most likely the reason why you deem a review to be unreliable? *

- Incorrect use of language (i.e. spelling mistakes, grammatical mistakes)
- Anonymous sender of the review
- The age of the review
- No other similar comments by other users
- The sender of the review is an infrequent traveller
- Other...

11. Where do you post reviews/content about your trip? (you can choose more than one) *

- Facebook (own page)
- Facebook (travel agents page)
- Instagram
- Tripadvisor.com
- Booking.com
- I don't post reviews/content about my trip
- Other...