A Classification of Presentation Forms of Travel and Tourism-Related Online Consumer Reviews

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Abstract

Electronic word-of-mouth communication and consumer-generated reviews in particular play an important role in the travel and tourism sector. The impact of online reviews on consumer behaviour in travel and tourism has been widely assessed in the last few years but not much attention has been paid to the forms of presentation of consumer reviews. The presentation of online consumer articulation is multi-faceted and can differ a lot depending on the website. This paper introduces a classification, which is derived from an analysis of 59 German-language websites containing travel and tourism-related consumer reviews with regards to the different types of presentation. Twelve different kinds of presentation are found and grouped into *service evaluation functions*, *feedback & interactive functions* and *matching & search performance functions*.

Keywords: electronic word-of-mouth; user-generated content; online consumer articulation; consumer reviews; presentation of consumer reviews.

1   Introduction

According to the 2009 Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey, involving over 25,000 Internet users from 50 countries, seven in every ten Internet users worldwide trust consumer opinions and peer recommendations posted online (The Nielsen Company, 2009). A recent survey for the German travel and tourism sector shows that 62 percent of 2000 surveyed German users state that online reviews and opinions of other consumers had an effect on their holiday-related decisions (Trendscope, 2010). Especially when it comes to choosing an accommodation or a travel destination, consumers heavily rely on peer-reviews published on the Internet (ibid.). The products offered in travel and tourism are mostly service products and therefore of an intangible nature. Intangible goods are usually harder to describe and therefore "[...] consumers tend to rely on word-of-mouth from an experienced source to lower perceived risk and uncertainty" (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008, p. 36). Travel and tourism services can be rated as high-involvement purchases, leading to increased information demands to lower the perceived risk of making a wrong decision (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005).

2   On the Importance of Word-of-Mouth Communication

Word-of-mouth communication (WOM) can be defined as "all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987). The positive effects of WOM on the marketing and distribution of goods and services has been widely assessed (Bayus, 1985; Beck, 2006; Hogan, Lemon & Libai, 2004).

The influence of WOM is described as being superior to the one of mass communication (Katz, Bischoff & Lazarsfeld, 1962). Word-of-mouth is considered as an important determinant of consumer behaviour (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004). It can be a very effective and powerful way of spreading the word about products and services and has therefore – known as word-of-mouth marketing – become an important tool for the acquisition of new customers. Some even praise consumer referrals as being the most effective and probably cheapest of all marketing tools (Sernovitz, 2009; Wilson, 1994).

The Internet enables users to produce or receive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) – sometimes also named *word-of-line*, *word-of-mouse* or *word-of-modem* communication (Bauer, Martin & Albrecht, 2007). eWOM has reached a new dimension due to the technological developments often summed-up with the term Web 2.0 enabling every computer-literate consumer to publish opinions or evaluations on products and services. And these "customer comments articulated via the Internet are available to a vast number of customers, and therefore can be expected to have a significant impact on the success of goods and services" (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004, p. 51). Due to the nature of the Internet such consumer comments and reviews are being archived and are therefore available to other (potential) consumers over a long period of time – independent of time and location (Kilian, Walsh, & Zenz, 2008).

As the number of products and services available grows quickly, consumers need more information about the goods on offer. The information available online play an important role in this information-gathering and decision-making process. Especially when it comes to intangible and experience-related products, such as travel and tourism services, consumers increasingly use online consumer reviews and recommendations to seek advice (Fick & Hauser, 2007). The impact of eWOM and of online travel reviews on consumer behaviour in travel and tourism – especially information search, holiday planning and purchase decisions – has been assessed by many scholars in the last few years (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy, 2007; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; O´Connor, 2008; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2010; Sidali, Schulze & Spiller, 2009; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Ye, Law & Gu, 2009). However, the different forms of presentation of consumer reviews have not received much attention so far.

3 Online Consumer Articulation in the Tourism Context

To gain a general overview of German-language Web 2.0 sources containing consumer-generated reviews dealing with travel and tourism services an analysis was carried out in March and April 2010. As Google is currently the most commonly used search engine in Germany (Kolokythas, 2010), Google.de was used to search the Web with five frequently used keywords containing a common travel and tourism service, namely *Hotels* (hotels), *Pauschalreisen* (package holidays), *Reisen* (travel), *Ferienhäuser* (holiday homes) and *Kreuzfahrten* (cruises) as well as ten keywords combining the word *Bewertung* (review) with a common travel and tourism service, namely *Hotelbewertungen* (hotel reviews), *Reisebewertungen* (travel reviews), *Bewertungen Airlines* (airline reviews), *Bewertungen Ferienwohnungen* (holiday homes reviews), *Bewertungen Fluggesellschaften* (air carrier reviews), *Bewertungen*

Hotels (hotel reviews), *Kreuzfahrten Bewertungen* (cruise reviews), *Reiseveranstalter Bewertungen* (tour operator reviews), *Schiffsbewertungen* (ship reviews), *Bewertungsportale Reisen* (travel review platforms). For each of the keywords the top ten findings were analysed with respect to their content. These top-ranked sources are the ones rated by the search engine as the sources comprising the most relevant content. They are also likely to receive the highest click-rates.

Out of the 150 findings in total, 108 offered some kind of consumer-generated reviews on a travel and tourism service, such as hotels, cruises, holiday homes or airline services. As many of the sources were not only found once but appeared several times under different keywords, 59 websites containing consumer reviews were extracted. German consumers are therefore very likely to be confronted with consumer reviews when searching the Internet for information about travel and tourism services or when looking for reviews and evaluations specifically. This outcome is in line with the findings of Xiang and Gretzel, who recently examined the role of social media, including consumer review sites, in online information search (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

4 Classification of Presentation Forms of Consumer Reviews

The presentation of online consumer articulation is quite multi-faceted and can differ a lot depending on the website. Here a two-level classification is proposed. It is derived from an analysis of 59 German-language websites containing travel and tourism-related consumer reviews. Precisely, twelve different functions provided by different websites are identified, named and then grouped into three categories based on the type of function. As mentioned, the classification is derived from an analysis of German-language websites. Nevertheless, it is believed that it is also applicable to websites in other languages without the need for any modification, as 20 of the 59 sources also contained the same functions in other languages. But this aspect is out of the scope of this paper and left for future research.

4.1 Service Evaluation Functions

Functions in this category focus on the presentation of consumer evaluations.

Free-style text and structured text. Found in 95% of the sources. Websites with this function offer consumers the opportunity to write their reviews in free-style text formats leading to reviews of very different styles and length. Some sites however try to structure the textual display of the written reviews by for example asking the reviewers to name positive and negative features of the service (i.e. hotel) evaluated.

Ratings. Found in 95% of the sources. Ratings of the services evaluated are used to allow the website user to quickly grasp the basic message of individual reviews. On a scale reviewers can rate the overall performance of a service (i.e. hotel, holiday home, cruise ship) as well as individual service components or product characteristics (i.e. service quality, location, rooms or cabins, food). The individual ratings of all reviewers are then combined to present an overall rating for the respective service (i.e. hotel). Usually platforms also tell how many reviews were received for the respective service. Therefore readers can easily see on which basis the mean value was calculated.

Recommendations. Found in 56% of the sources. Besides evaluating services in reviews and ratings consumers can also state whether they recommend a certain travel and tourism service. These recommendations can be seen as a valuable conclusion of the overall review, as the reviewer has to declare in one statement whether he or she recommends the respective service. It seems to be feasible that these recommendations can be seen as balanced, yet personal judgment of the perceived price-performance ratio. How many reviewers recommend the respective service is usually expressed in percent.

Pictures and videos. Found in 29% of the sources. Consumer-generated pictures and videos offer visual information about travel and tourism services. Candid photos or videos of hotels, resorts, holiday homes, etc. taken by consumers provide an insight into their perception of their holiday and the services used.

Review summaries and trend analysis. Found in 25 % of the sources. Showing the percentage of recommendations or displaying the perceived performance of a service in ratings are not the only ways of providing potential consumers with a quick overview of consumer evaluations. The travel review website HolidayCheck.de for example provides summaries of service characteristics which received positive evaluations by the consumers (a function called "guests praise"). In addition the so called "trend" provides potential consumers with an analysis of all reviews received for a certain service over that last twelve months and therefore shows an overall trend within consumer evaluations.

4.2 Feedback and Interactive Functions

Functions in this category focus on the input and feedback of readers.

Rating of helpfulness. Found in 24% of the sources. Readers of consumer reviews can rate whether they perceive the content of an individual review as being helpful to them or not. These individual ratings of perceived helpfulness are then either displayed as absolute numbers or as a percentage of all ratings submitted.

Annotation function. Found in 22% of the sources. Websites with this function provide the opportunity to react to reviews. This way airline staff is given the chance to react to customer complaints, landlords have the opportunity to respond to reviews of their guests and members of a virtual-opinion platform can write comments on consumer-generated reviews – to name a few examples.

Forums and communities. Found in 27% of the sources. Forums and communities provide an opportunity for consumers or community members to exchange in-depth information, opinions and ideas and to provide advice. Such forums and communities complement consumer reviews, as they do not only allow the interaction between (potential) consumers but do also allow companies and staff to react to consumer questions and concerns. Travelogues, photos and insider information are typical features of such forums and communities.

4.3 Matching & Search Performance Functions

Functions in this category focus on increasing the usefulness of consumer reviews.

Reviewer characteristics. Found in 64 % of the sources. Website with this function offer information about those who write reviews. Reviewers are mostly categorized by their age, origin or their form of travelling (i.e. alone, as a family, as a couple). Also information concerning the length of stay (in the respective hotel) or the type of trip (i.e. leisure or business) is often provided. Readers of such reviews can use this information to decide whether the reviewer potentially has the same needs and desires concerning travel and tourism services and can therefore better judge whether a review is helpful or not. Some platforms also offer the opportunity to view all reviews composed by the same author, enabling readers to especially consult reviews of those authors whose needs and desires seem to be consistent with their own.

Use of social graph. Found in 12% of the sources. One of the latest trends that can be discovered on websites containing consumer reviews is the use of the social graph to enhance the quality of holiday destination recommendations. The term social graph describes the social network of relationships between users of a social networking service and can therefore be seen as an abstract concept that defines the relationships between individuals online. An example on how to use the social graph within the context of consumer reviews can be found on the travel review site TripAdvisor.de. There users can log into their Facebook accounts, check which destinations their friends have visited so far and ask them for their personal advice. In case no friend has visited the specific destination so far, users can also ask other Facebook users who have already been there for their advice.

Search function integration. Found in 20% of the sources. When searching for a hotel or a package holiday on some booking platforms potential consumers can integrate consumer ratings and reviews directly into their initial search. They can for example define that only hotels which received a certain amount of reviews or which were recommended by a defined minimum percentage of reviewers are shown in the search results.

Integration of reviews and ratings from other platforms. Found in 10% of the sources. Platforms with this function do also include ratings and reviews collected by other virtual opinion or booking platforms. Thus increasing the amount of consumer reviews available via their own website.

5   Conclusion

This paper presented a classification which is derived from an analysis of 59 German-language websites containing travel and tourism-related reviews with regard to the different forms of presentation. Twelve different functions grouped into three categories, being *service evaluation functions*, *feedback & interactive functions* and *matching & search performance functions*, are suggested.

The work presented forms the basis for possible future research leading to a better understanding of how readers of consumer reviews use and make sense of the range of functions and information presented to them. Instead of offering every function, which is technically feasible, research results in this area can lead for example to better website usability and consumer information. Further research in this field is planned.

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