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The influence of social media on the consumers' hotel decision journey

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore "how social media influence the way consumers search, evaluate and select a hotel within the 'evaluation stage' of the wider hotel decision-making process".

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory qualitative research has been carried out, conducting 12 individual face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with social media users, followed by a qualitative thematic analysis.

Findings – Social media transform the consumers' hotel decision journey by influencing the way consumers search, decide and book hotels. The findings reveal the determinants shaping this process, by shedding light on the perceived value of using social media, consumers' information search behaviour "then and now", the advantages and disadvantages of social media use for decision-making, their trustworthiness and the factors that influence the consumers' hotel decision-journey. The findings are conceptualised in an integrated theoretical model, entitled "hotel consumer decision-journey through social media".

Research limitations/implications – The study's scope for qualitative in-depth insights into the "hotel consumer decision-journey through social media" asked for a compromise on a larger sample size and in turn the transferability of the theoretical model beyond service, hospitality and tourism consumer decision-making contexts.

Practical implications – This paper provides strategic implications for hospitality marketing and management for a better understanding of the influence of social media on the hotel customer decision journey. The study shows that a variety of social media with associated content sources and levels add to the complexity of hotel-related information search and decision behaviour. The developed framework not only helps hotel professionals understand consumers' different levels (e.g. type of content, content source, content level) through which social media might influence decision-making. Various real-life scenarios presented also help practitioners understand the fine nuances of how consumers are influenced by social media and how this causes them to iteratively change their minds and make a final decision towards the rejection or selection of a hotel.

Originality/value – Consumers use social media for a wide spectrum of scenarios in tourism and hospitality, while the influence of social media on the consumers' hotel decision-making process remains little understood. This study makes a theoretical contribution in that it addresses these existing gaps and bridges consumer behaviour and social media literature in the hotel context to shed light on the "hotel consumer decision journey through social media". The core contribution is an integrated theoretical model and real-life scenarios that depict the impact of social media on the hotel decision-making.

Keywords Social media, Hospitality, Decision-making, Consumer decision journey, Hotel decision journey

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Prior to the "age of social media", consumers traditionally had limited resources to collect information on services and products (Hu and Wei, 2013), with accommodation purchases primarily informed by brochures and travel agents (Baruca and Civre, 2012). In recent years, traditional sources of information have been replaced by social media (Fotis *et al.*, 2012), as travellers started to consult user-generated content (UGC) on social media to plan and make decisions on their hotel stay (Browning and Sparks, 2013). In the context of tourism, consumers use social media for a wide spectrum of scenarios, e.g. sharing their travel-related experiences, engaging with others, connecting with people from different destinations and buying travel-related products and services (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). While the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has always had a major effect on consumer behaviour in tourism, the Web 2.0 has transformed how tourists select and purchase tourism services online (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2012; Gohil, 2015). This is particularly true for the hotel sector. Hotel-related decision-making has fundamentally changed (Hudson and Thal, 2013), as social media are used in every stage of the consumers' decision-making process (DMP). Prospective tourists are influenced by social media, as content from other travellers can shape, guide and redirect their initial decisions (Fotis *et al.*, 2012).

However, the way "how" and the reasons "why" tourists use social media, and how social media influence the consumers' DMP, specifically in the hospitality context, still remains little understood (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Ayeh *et al.*, 2012; Gohil, 2015). Based on this premise, this research aims to explore how social media influence consumer behaviour during the hotel DMP, contributing towards a better understanding of social media's role and influence on consumer behaviour in the tourism and hospitality domain. The study's core contribution advances the current body of literature by developing a social media-facilitated consumers' hotel DMP model, which outlines nuances of the hotel search process, its advantages and disadvantages, the level of trustworthiness of social media in hotel information search and their influence on the overall hotel DMP. Firstly, this study reviews social media in tourism and their use and influence on the travel DMP. Secondly, it presents the methodological approach of a qualitative in-depth query, followed by the results of the study, depicting the social media-enabled hotel DMP. Finally, conclusions are drawn, discussing the study's limitations and offering a range of theoretical and practical implications for the IT, tourism and hospitality sector.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 The proliferation of the Web 2.0 and social media

The Web 2.0 and social media have empowered companies and consumers to engage and participate in service-related processes more than ever before (Sigala *et al.*, 2012). As social media gained increasing importance across a number of industries, their role and application have become widely discussed in the marketing, information systems, consumer behaviour and tourism literature (Cardon *et al.*, 2009; De Valck *et al.*, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2010; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Sigala, 2012). Beyond their role in tourism operations, marketing, management and the DMP (Leung *et al.*, 2013), social media have received wide attention in the tourism domain.

For instance, from a customer's point of view, studies have investigated social media and their role as information-sharing and searching platforms in facilitating consumers' autonomy (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Ayeh *et al.*, 2012; Gohil, 2015) and creating value through the exchange and sharing of personal experiences through electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). In the business domain, social media received attention as

electronic tools that transform the traditional marketing and advertising landscape (Sigala *et al.*, 2012), connect a range of stakeholders (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Sigala *et al.*, 2012) and give practitioners a means for interaction, sharing of content and conversations online (Leung *et al.*, 2013).

A rich body of interdisciplinary work has established social media definitions, typologies and fields of application (Sigala *et al.*, 2012; Leung *et al.*, 2013; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). In an attempt to disentangle this complexity, several authors have mapped out dominant social media types. For instance, Constantinides and Fountain (2008) classify five main types, including blogs, social networks, content communities, forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) structure social media according to their level of social presence and media richness, and their level of self-presentation and self-disclosure, distinguishing six overall social media types. In the tourism domain, recent studies have advanced our knowledge by assessing the use of microblogs (e.g. Twitter), consumer reviews and rating websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) and internet forums, some of which are particularly relevant for tourism-related services (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Ayeh *et al.*, 2012; Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Sigala *et al.*, 2012; Hudson and Thal, 2013; Chung and Koo, 2015; Gohil, 2015).

2.2 The role of social media in travel

Beyond their significant role in people's daily life and social contexts, social media have become an indispensable aspect of tourism (Zeng, 2013; Yazdanifard and Yee, 2014; Gohil, 2015). "Travel 2.0" captures the revolution of the travel industry towards a new generation of platforms and social interactions online, which has changed the way travellers search, rank, evaluate, purchase and consume products and services on the Web (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Hudson and Thal, 2013). While a wide range of social media come into play, the most frequently used social media for tourism and hospitality include TripAdvisor, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace and Flickr (McCarthy *et al.*, 2010; Ayeh *et al.*, 2012; Sigala *et al.*, 2012). In synthesising recent travel-related social media work, it is clear that social media play a key role before, during and after the trip (Fotis *et al.*, 2012). While several scholars agree that travellers use different social media for online information depending on each travel stage (Verma *et al.*, 2012), it has been argued that social media unfold their most critical role in the pre-travel stage, when tourists consult social media for travel planning, information search and decision-making (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Zeng, 2013).

In these crucial information search and decision stages, social media re-shape how consumers seek, detect, read, trust and exchange information (Sigala *et al.*, 2012). Travel-related UGC represents a key source for prospective travellers to understand previous travellers' experiences about destinations, facilities and restaurants (Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Sigala *et al.*, 2012). In fact, Cox *et al.* (2009) highlight that almost 80 per cent of users who use social media for travel-related reasons are searching information regarding travel destinations and accommodation, with the majority of users consulting online hotel and travel reviews (Murphy and Chen, 2014). In this process, social media are particularly used to support DMPs (Zeng, 2013). Consumers trust material from other travellers on social media, while UGC is considered to be more trustworthy than any information provided by official tourism websites, travel agents and mass media advertising (Del Chiappa, 2011; Fotis *et al.*, 2012). While the benefits of social media have been widely noted, some controversy surrounds the power of UGC on social media, challenging its trustworthiness and the authenticity of content (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Fotis *et al.*, 2012). This is important as Lopez and Sicilia (2014) claim that the perceived trustworthiness of a source determines the influence on consumer behaviour and, by extension, the influence on the consumer DMP.

2.3 Influence of social media on the hotel consumer decision journey

The DMP occurs in the pre-travel phase as part of the wider consumer decision journey (CDJ), in which consumers undergo four stages: consider; evaluate; buy; and enjoy, advocate and bond (Court *et al.*, 2009). Court *et al.* (2009) reveal that instead of systematically limiting their choices until they have agreed on what to purchase, consumers add and subtract brands from a "group of favourites" under consideration in the "Evaluation stage". In this stage consumers start to search and process information from various sources to fulfil their purchasing needs and evaluate several alternatives based on their obtained information prior to the buying decision (Ayeh *et al.*, 2012). This evaluation process shows, however, added difficulties in the selection of hotels and accommodation (Baruca and Civre, 2012).

Because of their intangible nature, hotel products and services make the buying decision highly emotional and hard to replicate (Kwon *et al.*, 2011). Hotel providers are no longer the unrivalled experts on the features or quality of brands and products. Instead, online reviews about hotels play a significant role in assisting contemporary consumers' evaluation stage, by providing positive and negative reviews and indirect customer-to-customer communication through blogs and review sites (Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Hudson and Thal, 2013). This is grounded in the principal foundations of consumer behaviour, i.e., consumers have the power to influence each other (Haywood, 1989). Although it is accepted that social media have the potential to influence travellers in the final purchasing decision (Ayeh *et al.*, 2012; Fotis *et al.*, 2012), the specifics of how this process might unfold and behaviour is influenced are less explored.

While social media are primarily used to assist consumers in limiting choices and verifying decisions (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008), hotel reviews are used to form a "consideration set" of possible choices (Singh and Torres, 2015). In this evaluation process, hotel decisions are frequently influenced by negative and positive customer reviews, as both ends of the spectrum increase customers' awareness and can change their attitudes towards a hotel (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). For instance, Verma *et al.* (2012) found that when a hotel has negative comments, it is less likely for prospective travellers to book the hotel, while Almana and Mirza (2013) demonstrate that higher ratings of reviews are effective factors in making purchasing decisions.

While the central role of social media in the DMP has been confirmed in recent studies, there is still a limited understanding of the detailed nuances that shape the CDJ, specifically the "evaluation stage". Cox *et al.* (2009) argue that the role of UGC in the traveller's behaviour and DMP are the most unclear and under-researched topics. While a large body of research (Gretzel *et al.*, 2007; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009, Murphy and Chen, 2014) has examined the influence of online reviews or specific platforms (e.g. TripAdvisor) on decision-making, there is still a dearth of studies that take wider social media platforms on the CDJ into account. This study thus advocates the need for a more nuanced understanding of how various types of social media influence the CDJ, and how they shape the final hotel DMP (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). While previous work has developed frameworks around the CDJ, models that capture the hotel CDJ through social media, by considering the particularities of the hospitality context, are missing. Grounded in this rationale, this study aims to explore the hotel DMP through a qualitative in-depth approach to advance hospitality consumer behaviour and develop a useful model on the hotel consumer decision-journey through social media.

3. Methodology

A qualitative in-depth approach has been adopted to assess customers' DMP in the hotel context and "zoom in" on the "evaluation stage" and the role social media play within that. A total of 12 individual face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with

social media users between the ages of 19 and 33 years in the second-half of 2015 in the UK. To identify, recruit and select prospective interviewees based on a set of sampling criteria, a non-random, purposive sampling approach was used. To qualify for participation in the study, participants were selected based on four main criteria, including the need to have travelled during the past two years; have stayed in a hotel during their trip; be active users of social media, defined as usage of at least 1 hour per day; and have used social media for travel-related decision-making purposes. The interview instrument was developed based on the prior literature review (Table I) to aid the discussion and help uncover underlying influences of social media use on individual hotel choices. The interview guideline covered six main themes, which are presented in Table I, while a full outline of the interview instrument is provided in the Appendix.

Table II provides an overview of the socio-demographic profile and social media use behaviour of the study participants. While the age range is not representative of the entire population, it can be considered representative of the younger population of social media users, as identified by Pew Internet that more than eight in ten internet users (aged 18-29 years) use social networking sites, compared to seven users (aged 30-49 years) and half or

Interview themes	Evidence from the literature
Definition and conceptualisation of social media	Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Ayeh *et al.* (2012), Fotis *et al.* (2012)
Consideration and information search for accommodation choices	Gretzel and Yoo (2008), Litvin *et al.* (2008), Gretzel *et al.* (2006), Murphy and Chen (2014)
Social media types and underlying rationale for use	McCarthy *et al.* (2010), Xiang and Gretzel (2010), Ayeh *et al.* (2012), Fotis *et al.* (2012), Sigala *et al.* (2012)
Influence of social media on decision-making process	Gretzel *et al.* (2007), Gretzel and Yoo (2008), Verma *et al.* (2012), Almana and Mirza (2013)
Potential negative influence on decision-making process	Litvin *et al.* (2008), Cox *et al.* (2009), Fotis *et al.* (2012)
Post-decision-making and purchase behaviour	Gretzel and Yoo (2008), Sigala *et al.* (2012)

Table I.
Interview themes and evidence from literature

Participant	Pseudonym	Age range	SM use (h/d)	SM types for hotel information search
1	George	26-29	10-12	TripAdvisor, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter
2	Erika	22-25	5-6	TripAdvisor, Facebook, Instagram
3	Dean	22-25	3-4	Facebook, TripAdvisor
4	Mohamed	30-33	3-4	TripAdvisor
5	Marie	22-25	3-4	Instagram, Facebook, TripAdvisor, YouTube
6	Arianna	22-25	1-2	TripAdvisor, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter
7	Rosa	22-25	1-2	TripAdvisor, Facebook, Instagram
8	Moritz	26-29	3-4	TripAdvisor, Facebook
9	Anna	18-21	5-6	Facebook, TripAdvisor, Twitter, Instagram
10	Andrei	26-29	3-4	TripAdvisor, Facebook, YouTube
11	Stella	18-21	1-2	TripAdvisor
12	Nichol	26-29	5-6	Facebook, YouTube, TripAdvisor, Instagram

Table II.
Participant profile

less than half of the users (50-64 years and beyond), suggesting a relationship between higher age and decreasing use of ICTs (Lennon *et al.*, 2012). The sample profile reflects these age groups with the majority of the participants in the age groups of 18-21 years (16.6 per cent), 22-25 years (41.6 per cent), 26-29 years (33.4 per cent) and 30-33 years (8.4 per cent). The sample profile reveals social media usage hours per day and the most frequently used social media platforms for hotel-related decision-making. While the findings are obtained from a limited sample size, the findings can be considered transferable to individuals of the wider population, part of a younger age group characterised by the adoption and use of social media applications (Lennon *et al.*, 2012) in everyday life and for travel purposes. For the subsequent qualitative data analysis, Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach of thematic analysis was adopted consisting of a multiple-step coding process. The manual coding process started with a transcription and familiarising with the data, followed by an initial "broad-brush coding" that was guided by the theoretical underpinning of the literature review and the *a priori* defined themes of the interview instrument. This stage was followed by a coding-on stage, in which an open mind was kept to identify emerging codes and patterns, that were subsequently merged, sorted, deleted and cleaned, before identifying overall themes, reviewing and finalising themes and producing the findings report and framework of the study.

4. Results
4.1 Hotel consumer decision journey through social media
The thematic analysis reveals several themes that explain the influence of social media on the consumers' hotel DMP. Embedded within the wider theoretical framework of the CDJ, this study, through a qualitative in-depth approach, elicits nuances of the "evaluation stage". The emerging themes were conceptualised as "then and now", advantages and disadvantages of social media use and trustworthiness of social media, and their influence on the consumers' hotel decision. These findings are then integrated into a "hotel consumer decision journey through social media" model, which adds a new dimension to the theoretical CDJ framework and provides a zooming-in perspective by developing a better theoretical and practical understanding of the "evaluation stage". The final section contextualises the hotel CDJ by providing three consumer scenarios, which reveal common narratives and demonstrate how social media's influence on the hotel CDJ process unfolds in practice.

4.2 Hotel information search: then and now
To determine the influence of social media on the hotel information search behaviour, participants frequently drew a comparison between their hotel search "then" (hotel selection pre-social media) and "now" (hotel selection after social media). Participants highlighted that in the pre-social media era, they mostly sought information and advice from "official sources", such as travel agencies, called various hotels to get details or made hotel reservations over the phone. Based on their answers pertaining to "then", other key information sources were personal WOM that included suggestions from friends and family, official travel books and travel guides, as well as the use of traditional Web 1.0 platforms, such as hotel websites, which were used then and still continue to represent an important source for hotel information search now. When it comes to social media use, consumers use various Web 2.0 channels to conduct a comprehensive hotel search, with TripAdvisor being the most significant channel, followed by Facebook, and Instagram, YouTube and Twitter being mentioned in a few instances. This seems to be in line with previous work (McCarthy *et al.*, 2010; Ayeh *et al.*, 2012) noting the use of "different social platforms for different specific purposes". While TripAdvisor appears to remain the most important channel, the study finds that among the interviewed sample of young social media users, Instagram plays an

important role within the hotel DMP. This finding is interesting, as until today, Instagram has largely been overlooked and is only gaining attention, as Harrigan *et al.* (2017) noted the increasing popularity and influence of this channel on customer engagement. Consumers use Instagram to access pictures, videos and hashtags relating to the prospective travel, which may be an indication for this channel to play a bigger role within a sample of the younger consumer market. This research shows that in the CDJ, it appears that "sources of information" associated with now and then are not mutually exclusive, but instead, participants seem to mix and "switch" between classic websites and social media on a continuous basis. In this respect, social media constitute the primary channel for information search, while this may be complemented with search engines, visits to official hotel webpages and use of booking sites, such as Booking.com to find information and make decisions before booking a hotel and vice versa:

> I write on Google the name of the hotel, to find the official hotel website. Then I search on social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram about what people write (George).

> I am checking on Booking.com the prices and make a shortlist of hotels. Then I compare them on TripAdvisor (Mohamed).

The underlying reasons for social media use predominantly related to their ability to offer the necessary information on a wide range of hotels and answering individuals' questions through a combination of reviews, comments, ratings, pictures and videos, strengthening the overall decision process. The combination of diverse channels allows consumers to get access to UGC from fellow travellers, who have already visited certain hotels, to compare hotels with one another, and to gather an "objective and authentic overview" of the offers available. While websites are still used for hotel search, social media offer distinct value by allowing to search "for very specific factors" that might be difficult to obtain via "traditional information routes", such as information about the cleanliness, location, price and the proximity of a hotel to central places. The overall consensus is that consumers want to create a "bigger picture" that draws together basic hotel information, as well as specific authentic insights, which enable them to make more informed decisions based on previous visitors' experiences:

> It is really important for me to see the travellers' photos firstly and then look at the guests' reviews (Mohamed).

> Mostly I am searching about cleanliness. Moreover, I look for the location. Price is not so important for me, as I prefer quality (Erika).

While Baruca and Civre (2012) argued that accommodation purchases were predominantly reinforced by brochures and contacts with a travel agent, the interviews add to the previous literature that a combined use of Web 1.0 and social media sources appears to take place. Interesting hereby is that a "switching process" occurs, through which consumers gather a variety of information, swap between more company-centric websites and consumer-generated social media content, in an attempt to verify initial impressions towards a final hotel decision.

4.3 Advantages and disadvantages of hotel information search through social media
A second theme highlighted is that consumers, although they describe themselves as generally technology-savvy, seem to not unconditionally use social media, but evaluate a set of distinct benefits and challenges within the hotel selection process, which are clearly shown in this study. Participants value social media as highly beneficial information sources to access updated information on hotels, compared to less dynamic

and outdated information available on more traditional travel channels. An additional benefit is the possibility of "being able to expose oneself" to various opinions and real-life experiences from users all around the world in the pre-decision-making stage. Participants see social media as valuable tools offering an easy, convenient and quick way to obtain necessary hotel information, with TripAdvisor as a key platform to compare and contrast alternatives, resulting in the ideal hotel choice:

They are updated. You can read a comment from people that went there even the previous day (Rosa).

I find out other people's point of view and experiences there (Dean).

Participants further mentioned the value of UGC, which provides them with a wider background of a hotel, through pictures, videos, comments and reviews, leading to a distinct insight into the "true nature" of a hotel. Social media were further praised as helpful tools as an "objective source of content", that gives "real" and "equal insights into both positive and negative" characteristics and customer experiences:

Social media can make you virtualise the place. You can see the rooms and you can see yourself wandering around the hotel (Anna).

While all participants indicated a widespread social media use in the hotel evaluation process, some participants expressed concerns relating to the trustworthiness of the content. Participants are concerned that some content might be "fake", which occasionally makes social media a "doubtful tool" to consult for important DMPs, such as holiday purchases. While the access to the wide pool of hotel-related information was perceived as positive, the same information was deemed as potentially "confusing" and in fact, "complicating the hotel selection process". This is due to the countless options of hotels available and their often contradicting evaluation on social media, which renders the hotel selection in many instances a "more time-consuming" activity than ever before.

There is a lot of content that is not so necessary for me (Erika).

Sometimes it is confusing to have so many options. It can more time-consuming (Rosa).

To some extent, the findings are consistent with recent studies (Sigala *et al.*, 2012; Zeng, 2013), suggesting that social media help users accumulate information about products and services, evaluate alternatives, save time, make their decisions easily, and select the most appropriate accommodation. Beyond that, this study demonstrates that social media use manifests several challenges, which may limit the usefulness of social media at times. There however was a consensus among participants, that while negative aspects exist, the positive benefits outweigh the negative aspects of using social media when selecting a hotel. Some participants stated that despite some drawbacks, they would "always choose social media" for their hotel information search, without going back to traditional information sources.

4.4 Trustworthiness of social media
Trustworthiness is an important issue during the hotel DMP (Lopez and Sicilia, 2014) and specifically emerged through three dimensions in this study:

(1) social media trustworthiness compared to traditional media;

(2) social media trustworthiness issues; and

(3) the relationship between the source of content and trustworthiness.

The majority of the participants generally trust social media content when selecting hotels, considering them a "non-biased" and "honest" information source. Participants emphasised that they are more likely influenced by and trust content from social media than equal content from "traditional" and "official" information sources (e.g. websites, newspapers, magazines), which potentially are "less objective and biased", commercially driven or financially bestowed. Trustworthiness is an important factor in participants' hotel information search and in the conclusion leading to their final hotel decision. However, the fact that "anybody can post anything on social media" was a concern shared by many participants, questioning the trustworthiness of the content. Participants confirmed that this may create problems at times, when there is a suspicion that content might be fake, created by companies themselves to "improve reality", or created by competitors, who want to defame other businesses:

> Social media is based on non-biased strangers, there is no agenda, is honest and open, so I definitely trust them (Mohamed).

> Companies can manipulate the information available on websites. It is not so objective. I prefer to have a third party and listen to the experiences of them (Arianna).

> Many comments can be fake or they are written from competitors in order to destroy the reputation of other hotels, so they are not trustworthy (George).

Beyond confirming that trust of travel-related social media content represents one of the most researched factors in the literature (Leung *et al.*, 2013), this study uncovers that there exist various "variations of trust levels" pertaining to the source of the content, which consumers review when looking for hotels.

The highest level of trust was established through social media when content was generated by known networks. Participants seem to mostly trust and be influenced by social media content shared by their own "personal circle", including the friends and family domain. They find it more helpful and credible, because it derives from users, who they know personally, further influencing their decision. The second most trustworthy content level is the one originating from "other users". UGC content by strangers gives a variety of opinions and offers content that is potentially trustworthy, while company's UGC on social media was perceived as the least reliable, possibly concealing negative sides:

> I tend to trust my own friends more because I know them personally. After my friends I trust other users on social media and then the companies (Erika).

The contribution of the study is the distinction of the trustworthiness of social media content during the consumers' hotel DMP. This implies that trust is not generally generated through social media, but consumers specifically evaluate the source origin of the content seen on social media, and allow to be influenced in their hotel selection accordingly.

4.5 Influence of social media on consumers' hotel DMP

The final theme relates to the deeper nuances of social media use that influence the consumers' hotel DMP. Participants generally agreed that social media content plays an important role when deciding which hotel to pick. Thereby, this study suggests that participants distinguish three main "levels of content", which influence them in their decision-making, including positive content on social media, negative content on social media, and lack and inexistence of content.

On a "positive content level", participants noted that positive comments, reviews, high ratings and attractive pictures influence them positively on initiating and getting

them triggered to consider and select hotels in the final "evaluation stage". Several participants start a hotel search and positive content influences them to "shortlist" a hotel. For instance, a Facebook post by strangers or friends with positive comments about a hotel would influence participants favourably, inspiring them to find "more information" and possibly "paying a visit". Positive content is however not always an "absolute factor" leading to a hotel decision. Hotels with positive content are only considered if they are "convenient", for example, if they are in the destination they are planning to go and if the hotel is "affordable". This indicates that positive social media content seems to be supportive, but not decisive and able to change the mind of consumers, as hotel decisions appear to be contextually co-shaped by consumers' pre-defined location and price expectations.

Negative social media content does not necessarily exclude hotels, but makes prospective travellers rather "hesitant" in choosing a particular hotel. The majority of participants said that they personally believe that negative content has a more powerful effect on them than positive content. While a hotel with positive content might be considered an option, a hotel with negative content is much more likely to be "excluded" from the list of possible choices. Participants reported that negative content is critical to make a "concrete decision fairly easily", i.e., rejecting a hotel in favour of another hotel. In terms of the type of content, it appears that negative reviews and comments, low ratings and poor pictures, which portray a hotel's weaknesses, seem to affect participants most. A minority of participants reported to have cancelled a reservation after having come across negative content in the past, causing them to restart their information search and decision-making cycle. In particular, if "negative comments outnumber positive ones", a hotel would definitely not be booked. The following quotes underline how easily consumers are swayed to "reject" a hotel based on a negative content associated:

> Some people post pictures where the hotel looks worse than the hotel website's pictures. When I see that, I change my mind (Moritz).

> Once, I had booked a hotel and after reading the reviews I found out that it was really bad. So, I cancelled the hotel and then I booked another one (Mohamed).

Several participants explained that they would not automatically "disregard hotels with negative reviews". Instead, the way they are being influenced is rather dependent on "which kind of negative content" is presented. For instance, participants explained that negative comments about an instance that is not personally relevant or important, a hotel would still be considered for booking. In contrast, if the negative review is personally significant (e.g. cleanliness, customer service, Wi-Fi), participants would refrain from booking a hotel and mentally put it on the "do not book list".

Third, the findings indicate that a "lack or non-existence of content" on social media plays a critical role in shaping consumers' hotel selection process. Participants explained that if a hotel does not have a "respected amount of UGC", based on which a comprehensive evaluation can be made, they would not consider it. Instead, they prefer finding a hotel with more content that gives them the "confidence to verify" that the right decision is being made. In fact, if there is no "critical mass of reviews", participants argued that it would lead them to feel as though "something is wrong" or even "suspicious" with the hotel, in case it is not possible to find available pictures, comments or reviews of a hotel online.

By pointing to three distinct "content levels", the analysis points to underlying drivers that influence a hotel DMP. These insights suggest that the influence of social media on the hotel DMP cannot be simplified. It would be too simplistic to say that

positive content leads to selection, while negative content leads to the rejection of a hotel. Instead, the findings show the importance of recognising a contextual influence of social media on hotel selection, based on the source of content; the trustworthiness of content; and the level of content, i.e., positive, negative, inexistent content (Figure 1).

4.6 The hotel consumer decision journey through social media
The themes emerged through the qualitative in-depth interviews contributed to the development of an integrated "Hotel consumer decision journey through social media" model. Grounded in the CDJ framework, this study contributes to a better understanding of the "evaluation stage", in which hotel information search and selection through social media occurs. While the CDJ model captured generic dimensions from the considering to the staying and bonding stage, this study is one of the first to zoom-in on a specific stage and elaborate on the complex decision-making, social media usage, content evaluation and channel switching processes that occur within this stage.

Figure 1 expands the evaluation stage and sheds light on the consumer's personal framework of how one may be influenced by social media in the hotel selection. The model distinguishes underlying reasons for social media use, related to advantages and disadvantages, a switching process between Web 1.0 and 2.0 sources, trustworthiness levels relating to the source of content and the content type, and demonstrates the influence of diverse content levels on the final decision making. Based on this set of information, influencing hotel selection process, the evaluation stage is concluded with the consumer's final decision, deciding to proceed with a particular hotel choice towards the booking Stage (feedback loop – next stage), or to reject a particular hotel choice and re-initiate the information and evaluation stage (feedback loop – repetition of stage).
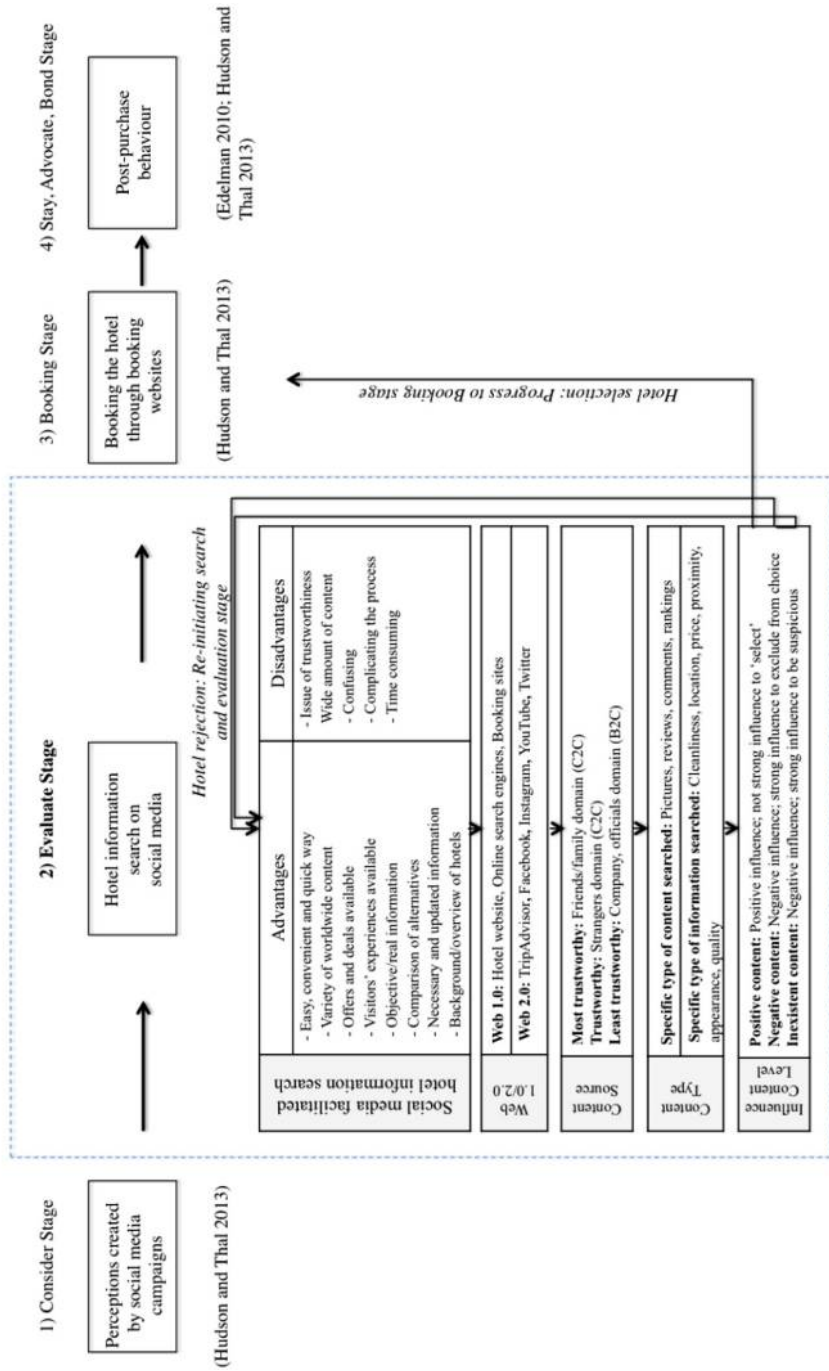
4.7 Hotel decision-making scenarios
By building upon this model and offering relevant implications for practice, three "hotel decision-making scenarios" are offered (Figure 2), providing an insight into participant narratives, showcasing how the hotel decision-making might unfold with social media in place.

5. Conclusions and implications
Consumers use a range of social media to share travel-related experiences, engage with others, connect with people from different destinations, and purchase travel-related products and services online (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Leung *et al.*, 2013; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Potential tourists are influenced in their decision-making by social media, as content and opinions from other travellers can shape, guide and re-direct initial and final decisions (Fotis *et al.*, 2012). By drawing upon the CDJ framework, this study used an in-depth approach to holistically examine how social media influence the "evaluation stage" when making hotel-related decisions. In that it zooms-in and explains the complexity of the DMP in this stage, several theoretical and practical implications result from this study.

First, the study makes a theoretical contribution in that it bridges consumer behaviour, tourism and social media literature in the hotel context and contributes to a more refined understanding of the hotel CDJ through social media. Second, this study revealed a framework of levels that make up the "evaluation stage" of the hotel selection. While the impact of social media on information search and decision-making has been widely discussed (Leung *et al.*, 2013), this study maps out refined layers that influence consumers in their hotel evaluation. With its detailed layers, the model shows that contemporary decision-making is not static and does not happen in isolation, but is
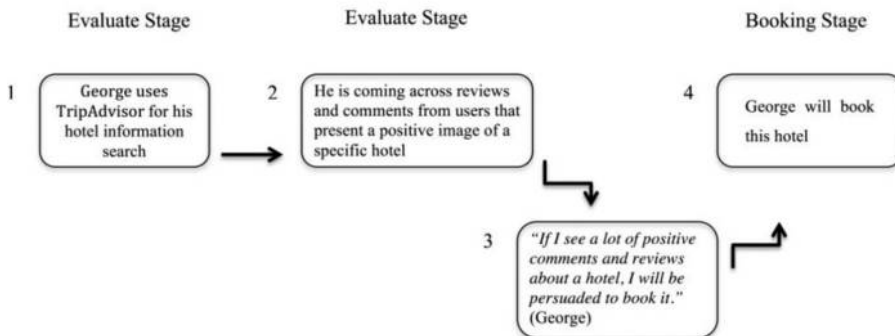
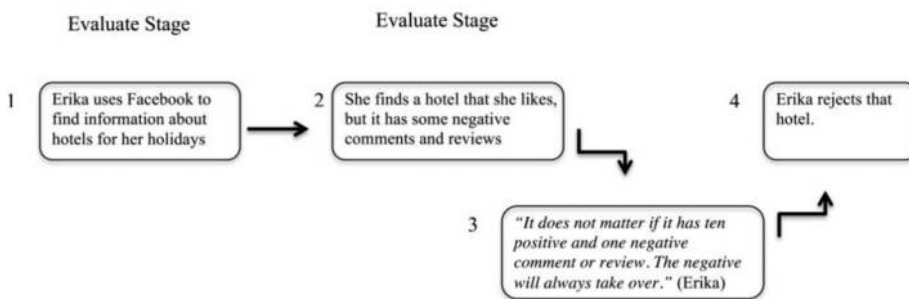The Hotel Consumer Decision-Journey through Social Media Model

Figure 1.
The hotel CDJ through
social media

Scenario 1. Influence from positive content

Evaluate Stage

Evaluate Stage

Booking Stage

1 George uses
TripAdvisor for his
hotel information
search

2 He is coming across reviews
and comments from users that
present a positive image of a
specific hotel

4 George will book
this hotel

3 *"If I see a lot of positive
comments and reviews
about a hotel, I will be
persuaded to book it."*
(George)

Scenario 2. Influence from negative content

Evaluate Stage

Evaluate Stage

1 Erika uses Facebook to
find information about
hotels for her holidays

2 She finds a hotel that she likes,
but it has some negative
comments and reviews

4 Erika rejects that
hotel.

3 *"It does not matter if it has ten
positive and one negative
comment or review. The negative
will always take over".* (Erika)

Scenario 3. Influence from inexistent content

Evaluate Stage

Evaluate Stage

1 Dean searches on YouTube,
Facebook and Instagram to
obtain information about
hotels

2 He realises that he cannot
find pictures, comments and
ratings about a specific hotel,

4 He immediately
rejects the hotel.

3 *"Without information on social media I
would never book a hotel. Something is
wrong with that hotel if people do not create
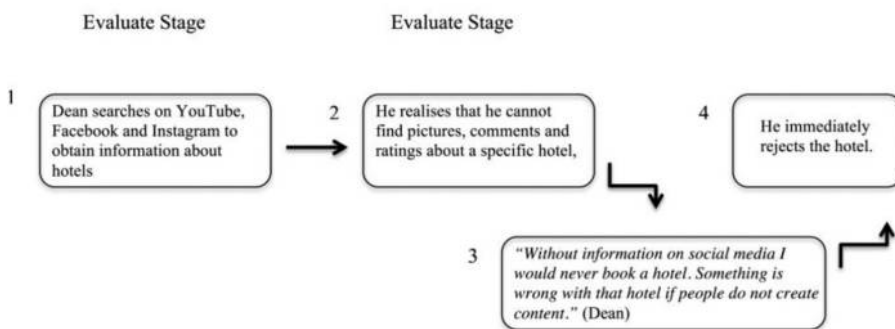content."* (Dean)

Figure 2.
Hotel decision-making
scenarios

influenced by positive and negative aspects of social media and the trustworthiness that is associated with specific channels and their embedded content. Social media were found to generally have a strong influence on consumers, while the intensity of influence differs between positive, negative and inexistent content. This knowledge could provide the basis for developing quantitative measurement instruments of social media, which are largely absent today (Leung *et al.*, 2013) to test specific channels, content levels and trust levels. Third, this paper contributes by revealing the influence of social media on a number of levels, which were graphically exemplified in a set of real-life scenarios, which shall demonstrate how social media may influence the decision-making of consumers on a practical level.

For the travel and hospitality industry, a number of implications emerge from this study for the awareness, understanding and management of the role and influence of social media on the hotel CDJ. First, this study has shown that a wide variety of social media with associated content sources and levels add to the wider influence of how consumers engage in hotel-related information search and decision. The findings help hotel professionals to understand consumers' different levels (e.g. type of content, content source, content level) on which social media might inform the hotel DMP. The theoretical model and real-life scenarios shall help practitioners to better understand that social media are not one "homogeneous bundle of online channels" and that there is not one "linear process" that explains online-supported decision-making behaviour. Instead, it is critical to acknowledge fine nuances and complexities, the iterativeness of the process and the contextual and content levels that shape how subtly consumers are influenced by social media, causing them to search, switch, confirm and refuse information, and iteratively change their minds, until a final decision through selecting or rejecting a specific hotel is made. What can be learnt from this work is that hotels should be aware of the importance of the content represented on social media, integrating this knowledge in their "digital strategies" and facilitating UCG, preferably in real-time on-site, that can positively inspire, stimulate, guide and influence prospective consumers towards the selection of a hotel. Hotels should make it a priority to foster real-time posting by providing the technological infrastructure (free Wi-Fi access) and post-trip posts and reviews by their guests (e.g. via Facebook, Instagram), while minimising negative content, and ensuring there is no "absence of content" by developing engagement and reward strategies for leaving reviews, liking a hotel's social media page and adding a comment about the stay.

6. Limitations and future research

As with any empirical research, several limitations are acknowledged. The study's scope to generate qualitative in-depth insights into the "evaluation stage" of the wider hotel CDJ asked for a compromise on a random sample and in turn the transferability of the findings beyond hotel and tourism consumer decision-making contexts. In offering an expanded hotel CDJ model, this work hopes to stimulate further research that expands on various content levels and examines tourism-related CDJ processes as decision-making increasingly unfolds on-site. Decision-making is no longer exclusive to the pre-trip stage, but transcends the on-site travel stage, where consumers make dynamic decisions with the help of social and mobile platforms, and content often defined through destination and place specific hashtags, on the go. In considering the social media domain as a fast evolving one, research could focus on video and live-streaming networking sites (e.g. Instagram Boomerang, Periscope, Vine) to understand their influence and effect on hotel- and travel-related decision-making. By

building on this study as a fundament, quantitative follow-up work is encouraged to test the influence of specific social media channels, and their respective content levels on the overall CDJ process.

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Appendix. Interview guideline

(1) What is perceived as social media?
   - What types of social media do you use in your daily life?
   - How many hours per day do you spend on social media? _____
   - When you hear the term social media, which are the first 3 words that come to your mind?
     _____
   - Could you give me a definition of social media?

(2) Consideration and information search for accommodation choice:
   - Before start searching information for your accommodation what information do you already have in your mind?
   - Before booking a hotel what actions do you do? Where are you searching for information?
   - Has your way of searching information and booking a hotel changed during the recent years and the arrival of social media?

(3) Social media types and reasons for use:
   - What types of social media do you mostly use in order to find information about your accommodation?
   - What type of information/content are you searching for your accommodation in social media?
   - For which reasons do you use each of the above mentioned social media?
   - Which social media content are you looking for and help you most in searching for accommodation? Companies, other users (not known) or your own friends on social media?

(4) Ways of influence:
   - Why do you use social media for information search about your accommodation?
   - Before your decision to book a hotel how do opinions, reviews, photos, videos or other information (UGC) you can find in social media websites influence you?
   - Have social media posts ever inspired you to search information about a hotel?
   - Have you ever made any changes in your original holiday plans because of information found in social media websites?
   - Would you choose a hotel without a wide amount of content shared by other users on social media?
   - Would you choose a hotel with negative comments and reviews?
   - In your opinion, which do you think that are the advantages of searching for a hotel through social media?

- Are posts/photos of your friends on social media influencing your plans to book a hotel?
- Why do you think social media influence you more than traditional media (newspapers, websites, etc.)?

(5) Negative influence:
  - Is there any negative side of social media? Have you ever experienced that social media were not useful or destructive in your accommodation search?
  - Is there any reason why you would decide not use social media for your information search of hotels?

(6) Post-purchase behaviour:
  - Do you create UGC? Do you share your experiences after a hotel stay?

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