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The power of Social media and Internet tools in the travel accommodation industry

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1. Introduction

1.1. Relevance of the topic

In the last few decades, the Internet and the World Wide Web have incredibly evolved from a military communication network into an enormous cyberspace where users can easily communicate, share information, interact, conduct business and many other activities.

One of the most important consequences of the Web is the rise of social media which have become an essential part of everyone's everyday life. People tend to spend more than two hours per day using these tools. Furthermore, they are mainly young people between the ages of 18 and 34 (We Are Social, 2019). Social media are powerful. They remove spatial and time limitation that represent intrinsic characteristics of traditional communication. Moreover, the introduction of easy to use interfaces enable even non-experts to share content and communicate (Fotis, 2015).

Social media and some Internet tools are now essential for tourism and all its related sectors like transportation and accommodation. Despite the recession, the tourism industry is raising again also thanks to social media platforms that create new opportunities to attract consumers and communicate with them. Social media and the Internet have changed the way people plan and consume tourism products and services. In tourism, in fact, the Information Communication Technologies have always influenced consumer behaviour (Fotis, et al., 2011). Tourists obtain more useful and personalised information thanks to the aid of other tourists that share their experiences, images, videos and ideas about their trip. They check online reviews, blogs and other channels to make a faster and more effective decision (Muñoz-Leiva, et al., 2012).

For the purpose of this study the focus is on one of the main tourism products: the accommodation and the impact of social media in its decision-making process (DMP).

Decision making is the “process by which (1) consumers identify their needs, (2) collect information, (3) evaluate alternatives, and (4) make the purchase decision”¹. These actions are influenced by past experiences, several cognitive biases, individual differences (including age, education and socioeconomic status) and belief in personal relevance ².

This study focuses on age and employment status differences in travel accommodation selection. This because it is important to understand how different generations in the leisure travel population behave to the Internet’s influence.

1.2. Objectives and research questions

Given the background discussed above, the leading goal of this research is to investigate the influence of social media and travel-related Internet tools in the accommodation choice, assessing similarities and differences between two different groups: university students and workers aged 26 – 35.

To fulfil the stated objective, the following research questions are designed:

- RQ1 Which are the main habits (types of accommodation and factors that influence the decision) of the two targets?
- RQ2 To what extend are social media and Internet tools used during the evaluation stage by both the samples?
- RQ3 Is the content published on social media more trustworthy than friends and relatives and other traditional travel sources?
- RQ4 Do reviews impact the selection of the travel accommodation?
- RQ5 Are intermediaries used to book the accommodation different from those used in the evaluation stage?

¹ <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/consumer-decision-making.html>

² <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/180/decision-making-factors-that-influence-decision-making-heuristics-used-and-decision-outcomes>

2. Literature review

2.1. Internet and the social media

To better understand social media, it is necessary to understand the evolution of the Web and its advantages and disadvantages. The following paragraph describes first this. It then reports the main definitions of social media and its classification considering also the context of tourism. Finally, it illustrates the word-of-mouth phenomenon as consequence of user-generated content (UGC) and its relevance in the industry under consideration.

2.1.1. World wide web: the evolution from web 1.0 to web 4.0

The Internet has revolutionized not only the way people and organization communicate, but also how they access information. The most prominent part of it is the World Wide Web (or simply Web) which has become a popular vehicle for spreading scientific, commercial and personal information (Brewington & Cybenko, 2000). Born in 1989, the Web is composed of “individual pages linked to and from other pages through Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) constructs” (Brewington & Cybenko, 2000). However, a more technical definition describes the World Wide Web as “a collection of documents, with unique names (address or URLs), stored in specialized computers (servers), accessible through browsers, and interconnected through hyperlinks” (Marques, 2016).

During the last 30 years, the Web has grown incredibly. Until the 2000s users were primarily consumers of content created and posted online by companies, newspapers, universities, and others but in the early 2000s users began to produce content. This has determined the transition between Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, a term diffused by Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty in 2004 (Aghaei, et al., 2012). Web 2.0 has then evolved in Web 3.0 and Web 4.0. Figure 1 describe the evolution of the Web.



Figure 1 – The evolution of the Web. Source: Spivack, 2011

Web 1.0 was the first generation of the web and extended fundamentally during the 90's. It was characterized by being a read-only web, in which users were mere viewers without being able to create and post content on the visited sites. It was static and mono-directional providing limited user interactions or content contributions. Web 1.0 was considered as a web of information connections (Aghaei, et al., 2012) where businesses were allowed to share information with both actual and potential customers. They provided catalogues and brochures to present their product using the web.

One of the most impacting changes of the web is today known as Web 2.0, term used to describe the second generation of the Web. This term, which appeared between the years of 2000 to 2009, was first introduced by Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty in 2004. Tim O'Reilly defines Web 2.0 in his website³ as “the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them”. Web 2.0 is also called the wisdom Web, people-centric Web, participative Web,

³ <http://radar.oreilly.com/2006/12/web-20-compact-definition-tryi.html>

and read-write Web (Aghaei, et al., 2012). The user is no more only a consumer but also a producer (Marques, 2016). Thus, there is no longer mono-directional, but it became bi-directional. Websites become interactive, providing feedback and encouraging user participation in the content production. Social networks have been introduced designing a web of people connection (Aghaei, et al., 2012). Thanks to Web 2.0, users not only obtain information, but they can also provide them to others. Table 1 compare Web 1.0 and web 2.0.

Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Reading	Reading/Writing
Companies	Communities
Client-Server	Peer to Peer
HTML, Portals	XML, RSS
Taxonomy	Tags
Owning	Sharing
IPOs	Trade sales
Netscape	Google
Web forms	Web applications
Screen scraping	APIs
Dialup	Broadband
Hardware costs	Bandwidth costs
Lectures	Conversation
Advertising	Word of mouth
Services sold over the web	Web services
Information portals	Platforms

Table 1 – A comparison of web 1.0 and web 2.0. Source: Aghaei, et al., 2012

In tourism industry, travellers make decisions about their travel plans using Travel 2.0 platforms. The term was coined by PhoCusWright (a company which aim is to provide travel, tourism and hospitality market research) with the aim to represent the concept of Web 2.0 and describe the second wave of travel information websites. It is defined as “a new Internet model to access, publish, share, discuss and distribute information on tourism whose content is created by users interacting with each other” (Hernández-Méndez, et al., 2015). Its structure is designed to incorporate interactivity between suppliers and potential customers facilitating the travel decision making process (Elci, et al., 2017).

Web 3.0 is the term coined by John Markoff of the New York Times in 2006 to describe a third generation of the web (Spivack, 2011). Its aim is to organize how content is searched and viewed by users to customize and optimize the online search. This is based on the history, interests and wishes of users (Almeida, 2017). Web 3.0 tries to link, integrate, and analyse data from different data sets with the aim to obtain new information. For this reason, it is considered as a web of knowledge connection (Aghaei, et al., 2012). Web 3.0 is also known as semantic web which main purpose is to make the web readable by machines and not only by humans. At the World Wide Web consortium there are a dedicated team that works to improve, extend and standardize already developed system, languages, publications and tools. In addition, the current web is a web of documents and data. The main difference between Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 is that Web 2.0 is more focused on content creativity of users and producers, while Web 3.0 is more focused on linked data sets (Aghaei, et al., 2012). Table 2 describes the main differences between the two generation of web.

Web 2.0	Web 3.0
Read/Write Web	Portable Personal Web
Communities	Individuals
Sharing Content	Consolidating Dynamic Content
Blogs	Lifestream
AJAX	RDF
Wikipedia, google	Dbpedia, igoogole
Tagging	User engagement

Table 2 – A comparison of web 2.0 and web 3.0. Source: Aghaei, et al., 2012

Web 4.0, at the end, will be as a read-write-execution-concurrency web with intelligent interactions (Aghaei, et al., 2012). Web 4.0, also known as symbiotic web, is still an underground idea in progress. The idea behind this phase is the interaction between human mind and machines in symbiosis. Machines would be able to read the content of the web and then decide what to execute first to load the websites fast with superior quality and performance and, build commanding interfaces. In this way the information will be highly personalized. Web 4.0 is so considered as a web of intelligence connections.

2.1.1.1. Advantages and disadvantages of the Internet

We Are Social, in collaboration with Hootsuite, every year releases a Digital report which aim is to examine social media and digital trends around the world. Digital 2019 report reveals that internet users are growing fast. In 2019, there are 4.39 billion internet users (57% of the world's population) observing thereby an increase of 367 million (9%) versus January 2018. On average, an internet user spends 6 hours and 42 minutes online each day. The reasons why people spend so much time on the web are different: they can communicate, gather information, have fun, shopping and carry on other many activities.

Nowadays, Internet is becoming the main communication medium in both daily life and business. It enables people from two opposite sides of the earth to communicate without problems (ezTalks, 2017). Communication via Internet is cheap and fast allowing users to save time and money. The majority of available tools are mainly free and easy to use. With the advent of high-speed connection, different tools of instant communication have been introduced:

- Social networks like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter which are mainly focused on sharing online content and exchanging information
- Instant messaging such as WhatsApp, Messenger and Skype which are a type of online chat that offer to the user the possibility to send real-time messages to other users.
- Emails which continue to be an essential tool for every business
- Forum which is a place where people exchange messages and participate in conversations
- Internet telephony which is a type of communication technology where all calls and data are sent over the Internet⁴. Examples include Skype and Facetime.

⁴ <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/7783/internet-telephony>

Although the Internet has provided many advantages, privacy problems have emerged due to email hacking, phone signal interceptions and so forth.

Internet communication has created new jobs like system analysis, web designers, hardware and software developers. Nevertheless, the unemployment rate decreases because of outsourcing, downsizing and redundancies.

Information seeking is another activity carry out online. It is so important that has become a routine activity (Schroender, 2018). When people are looking for information, they turn to the web first (Dutton & Blank, 2011). The web can so be considered as the modern source of information, a kind of huge library. The information people search for is useful for everyone (embracing, for example, students and workers) and regards different topics: travel plans, news, information about local events, health, sport, work and so on. In carrying out this activity, most internet users start the research by browsing search engines like Google and Yahoo (Dutton & Blank, 2011). The advantages of searching information online over print ones include the speed, ease of use, the price (most of the time it is free), the ability to save, print and repeat a research, frequent updating and ability to access outside the library (Esew, et al., 2014). However, the web provides a huge amount of information causing information overload. Furthermore, it is possible to find misleading information because anyone can publish on the web and there is not a process to check information truthfulness. Additionally, virus threat represents another big issue that causes problems to computers. Because of all these problems, people need to take more efforts to process information (Essays, UK., 2018).

Over the years, online shopping has gained a big relevance. According to the business dictionary, online shopping is “the act of purchasing products or services over the Internet”⁵. The top internet shopping sites are Amazon.com, Ebay.com and Etsy.com. According to the Global Digital Report 2019 almost 75% of Internet users

⁵ <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/online-shopping.html>

have purchased a product or service online. The main reasons why people like to buy online are presented below (Vinish, 2017):

- Online shopping offers a wide range of products to the consumer who can switch from one shopping website to another.
- Customers can save money thanks to the discounts offered by different websites. Moreover, many of them offer free shipping.
- Customers can visit different shops to compare prices
- Online shopping helps in saving time allowing customers to avoid, for example, queues and parking hassles. Furthermore, online shops are almost never closed.

Even though Internet provides a quick and easy way to buy products, some people prefer not to use it. The causes of this are different:

- The product may not turn to be the desired one purchased by the consumer because of the impossibility to see, touch and try the item.
- In the case the product is defective the process to return it back is not always so easy and clear.
- Even though the selection, purchase and payment for an online product may not take so much time, the delivery of the product may be longer.
- Shops not always are safe.

Many people tend to use the Internet not only to shop but also to have fun and to engage in personal interests. Indeed, it plays significant role in entertainment offering many options. This is mainly due to speed and low price. Tools like YouTube, Spotify and King.com are, for example, mainly free (Allconnect, 2018). The most popular activities on the Internet are:

- Watching multimedia products like videos, photos and other visual forms

- Listening to music
- Playing games

Finally, even though Internet has helped to eliminate the cultural gap between people of different nations, some cultures have overruled others. For example, teenagers in western countries have influenced the way other teenagers act, behave and dress (ezTalks, 2017).

2.1.2. Social media: definition, characteristics and functionalities

One of the most important consequences of Web 2.0 is the rise of what has been termed “social media”. This term has gained so much relevance that has become an essential part of people’s everyday life. In 2019, almost 3.500 billion of people worldwide (45% of the total population) are active social media users, thus recording a 9% increase (We Are Social, 2019).

A review of literature reveals that there is no yet an agreement about the definition of social media. A big issue in the social media definition is the confusion not only in the definition itself but also in the terms used to describe social media. Some authors use the term social media as a synonym to “Web 2.0”, others as a synonymous with “user-generated content” and others as “social networks” (Fotis, 2015).

One of the most appropriate definition is offered by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). They describe social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. Web 2.0 are the technologies through which it is possible to use social media and user-generated content (UGC) refers to texts, images, videos, and other elements produced by users. Social media are so considered as services offered to users and communities who use these platforms to share, co-create, discuss and modify contents (Kietzmann, et al., 2011).

Social media is a phenomenon in continuous evolution and so it is its definition. Two of the most updated definitions are provided by Burgess, et al. (2017) and McCay-

Peet & Quan-Haase (2017). According to the first authors, social media refers to “those digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection”. McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase (2017), on the other hand, define social media as “web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modifies, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible”, emphasizing the activities it is possible to carry out on social media.

Web 2.0 and UGC are two of the four commonalities among social media services identified by Obar and Wildman (2015). The authors reviewed the most important literature in the area finding out the following common features:

- Social media services are Web 2.0 Internet-based applications – Web 2.0 applications have made the Internet more interactive. Indeed, they changed the way people interact not only with the online world but also with other users. As previously stated, the shift to Web 2.0 is a shift from users as simple consumers to users as participants. Contents are no longer created and published by individuals, but continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative way (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).
- User-generated content is the essence of social media – “UGC can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The term is used to describe the different forms of media content like videos uploaded on YouTube, photos added on Instagram, personal information entered into a Facebook profile and an endless number of other forms.
- Individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed and maintained by a social media service – All social media

services require a user profile useful to enable connections between user accounts.

- “Social media services facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a profile with those of other individuals and/or groups” (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Kietzmann et al. (2011) present a framework that defines social media by using seven functional building blocks useful to understand the functional characteristics of different social media activities. They used a honeycomb (Figure 2) of seven functional building blocks as framework.

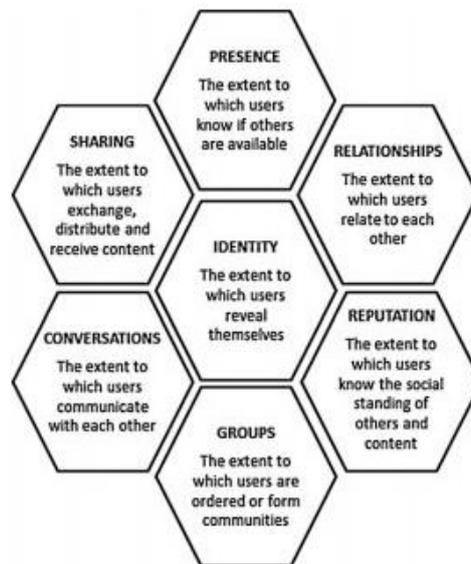


Figure 2 – The honeycomb of Social Media (Social Media Functionality). Source: Kietzmann, et al., 2011

Identity – The identity functional block refers to the extent to which users are willing to divulgate their personal information on social media sites. This information can regard practical information like name, age and gender, but also subjective ones such as thoughts, feelings, likes, and dislikes.

Conversations – The conversations block represents the way users communicate with each other in social media sites. Many of them are designed to facilitate conversations among individuals and groups. These conversations happen for all sorts of reasons like making new friends, discovering like-minded people, diffusing a message

to others and influencing society regarding issues that range from environment problems to political debates.

Sharing – Sharing refers to the activity through which users exchange, distribute and receive content that could be texts, videos, pictures, sounds, links, location, et cetera. Sharing is a very important way of interacting within a social media platform, but it is the “functional objective of the social media platform” (Kietzmann, et al., 2011) that influence the opportunity of sharing. To better explain this, think about LinkedIn which aim is to share careers.

Presence – Presence is the block of the honeycomb that lets users know “if other users are accessible” (Kietzmann, et al., 2011). This means knowing where they are, both in virtual and/or real world, and whether they are available. Facebook chat, for example, allows users to know whether others are available to interact. Moreover, Friends Around Me displays which friends are closed to the user.

Relationship – Relationship represents how users are connected with each other. Some social media are focused on the expansion of a network whereas others aim at fostering existing relationships. This associations are done by providing personal information, likes and dislikes, sharing and so forth. Thanks to this, users can meet people they would like to meet.

Reputation – Reputation is the functional block through which it is possible to identify the standing of both themselves and others in a social media environment. It focuses on how people, products and brands are viewed by others. Reputation depends not only on the users themselves, but also on the content they share, post and make available to others. This content is evaluated by using content voting systems. On Facebook, for example, the reputation may be based on likes, comments and so forth. On Instagram it could be the number of followers.

Groups – The groups functional block reports the fact that people can form communities and sub-communities. “The more social a network becomes, the bigger the group of friend, followers, and contacts” (Kietzmann, et al., 2011). There are two major

types of groups. The individual one is when users group their friends and contacts together. The other one is a kind of offline club in which the administrators can decide to set an open group, a closed one (approval requires) or secret group (by invitation only).

It is important to highlight that: “these building blocks are neither mutually exclusive, nor do they all have to be present in a social media activity”. There are not social media sites that focus on just one block or in all of them. Some focus more on sharing, others on presence, et cetera.

2.1.3. Classification of social media

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) classify social media into six types: blogs, social networking sites, virtual social worlds, collaborative projects, content communities and virtual game worlds (Figure 3).

		Social presence/ Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)

Figure 3 – Classification of Social Media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure. Source: Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010

The big issue with this classification is the fact that three important social media types are excluded. They are: microblogs, consumer review and rating websites and location bases services (Fotis, 2015).

For the purpose of this study, only the main Travel 2.0 platforms will be further examined (Figure 4). Blogs, social networks, content communities, consumer review websites, collaborative projects and internet forums will be described.

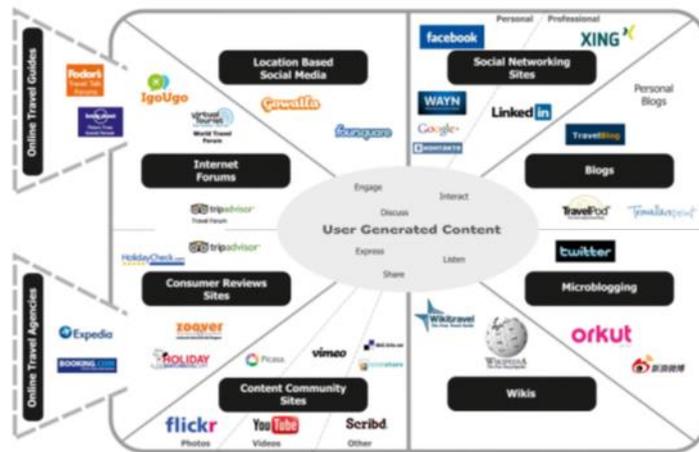


Figure 4 – Social media types in travel and tourism. Source: Fotis, 2015

Blogs – Blogs can be personal or corporate blogs. In the former, also known as “online journals” or “online diaries”, the users are the authors. The aim of personal blogs is to share authors’ experiences related to their life or about specific areas. In contrast, the authors of a corporate blog are members of a company and the purpose is to spread the company’s message (Hernández-Méndez, et al., 2015). Both types of blog are websites in which entries are regularly published in reverse chronological order (most recent posts appear first) and combine text, digital images, videos and links. They can be managed by one person or a small group of authors. Blogs’ main characteristic is the interactivity emphasized by the possibility to add comments which encourage people to express their feelings, ideas and thoughts. Travel blogs, which are usually personal, are very useful for users who can read opinions and travel experiences of other travellers to obtain information about destinations, accommodations and activities carried out in different destinations. They are mainly helpful in the search information stage (Hernández-Méndez, et al., 2015).

Social networks – Social networks are the most widespread type of social media and their influence continues to increase. Boyd, et al. (2008) define social network “as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. Furthermore, Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) describe social

networks as applications that allow users to connect each other by creating personal profiles, inviting others to visit those profiles and communicating each other through emails and instant messages. These personal profiles contain a set of descriptors (e.g. age, gender, location, personal interests, etc) and a photo or an avatar. Profiles are then enriched with content like status updates, comment posts, photos, and so forth. They can be private, which means accessible only by a specific set of users, or public. In the latter case anyone can access to the profile. Through social networks, users can establish relationships with others who they already know or who are strangers.

In 2019, Facebook has the highest number of active users. It counts, in fact, 2.27 billion of people that use this media worldwide (We Are Social, 2019). Apart from Facebook, there are many other websites like Instagram and Twitter.

The access to social networks can be open or restricted. The first one means that everyone can register. The second one, meanwhile, can take the form of a minimum age requirement or an invitation only requirement (Fotis, 2015).

The main purpose of joining social networks is to support, maintain and reinforce existing relationship or to communicate with friends when this is not immediately possible. Moreover, people like to keep contact, share information, recommendations and opinions with others and get to know people.

In the travel industry, social networks are used primarily to let users share their travel experiences with others, provide recommendations, upload videos and photos about the trip and evaluate accommodations and restaurants (Muñoz-Leiva, et al., 2012). Thus, travellers use social networks to search for more information like reviews and contacts. Travel pictures on social networks are fundamental because they generate interests in users (Fotis, 2015).

Content communities – Content communities are web-based applications which aim is the sharing of online multimedia content between users. Such content can take the form of videos, photos, documents and presentations, music and web links. The most common applications are YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Picasa, slideshare.net, and

many others. Fotis (2015) reports that videos have the potential to influence travellers because of their ability to generate mental pleasures in the forms of dreams and fantasies.

Consumer review websites – Consumer review websites are social media applications through which people can upload reviews and ratings related to a product or service. They can offer a “wide range of features, from uploading comments and pictures, and from a product or service rating on a single variable, to an impressive range of features such as wish-lists, price comparisons, advanced search, multi variable ratings, price comparisons, price history charts, buy/hold recommendations, price alerts, deals’ rankings, merchant/retailers’ evaluations, personalized shopping and more” (Fotis, 2015). They can take different forms:

- As standalone website which primary function is the collection and presentation of consumer feedbacks like TripAdvisor and Yelp.
- As embedded content within websites which primary function is to sell goods and services. These websites incorporate reviews with the aim to facilitate consumers’ decision making. In tourism industry and, more specifically in the accommodation one, these sites are known as OTAs (Online Travel Agencies) like Expedia and Booking.com.

Travelers use online travel reviews for different reasons: to narrow down choices, to get inspired or to get confirmation (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Other travelers’ reviews are more likely to contain up-to-date and reliable information. TripAdvisor, one of the biggest review websites, counts more than 570 million reviews and opinions⁷. Yelp, meanwhile, hosts more than 171 million of reviews. This underlines the relevance of online user reviews which become an important source of information for consumers. Reviews are, in fact, able to influence travellers when making purchase decisions (Dellarocas, et al., 2007) generating powerful word-of-mouth (Chen & Xie, 2008).

⁷ <https://www.tripadvisor.com/TripAdvisorInsights/w580>

Furthermore, a good reputation can make customers pay more for a product or service (Ye, et al., 2011).

Collaborative projects – Collaborative projects allow groups of people to join and create online content. They are “probably the most democratic manifestation of UGC” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Within collaborative projects, it is possible to differentiate between wikis and social bookmarking. For the purposes of this study, only wikis will be further examined. Wikis are collaborative websites that allow users to add, remove or change text, images and links. The best-known wiki is Wikipedia which is a multi-lingual, free online encyclopaedia written by its users. The big issue of wikis is that its entries might contain mistakes since anyone is able to modify them. In the travel and tourism industry, the most popular wiki was Wikitravel (www.wikitravel.org) which was an open source online travel guide. In 2006, advertising to the website were introduced. Because of this, the articles were copied to Wikivoyage (www.wikivoyage.org) and new content and updates have been added only to Wikivoyage⁸. Wikivoyage is now considered useful because it suggests not only what to see, how to get in a specific destination, what to do, but also where to eat, drink and sleep.

Internet forums – Internet forums are web-based virtual spaces where people exchange information, discuss, ask and answer to questions and post messages about a specific topic. Internet forums are also known as discussion forums, web forums, online forums, online communities, message boards, discussion groups or simply forums (Laughlin & MacDonald, 2011). Forums can be standalone websites or embedded in websites. Regarding the first, an example could be the Disney trip planning forum (www.disboards.com) which is an unofficial forum for Disney travel product. Embedded forums, conversely, can be included in consumer review sites such as TripAdvisor’s Travel Forum (www.tripadvisor.com/ForumHome) or in travel guides’ websites such as the Lonely Planet’s Thorn Tree travel forum

⁸ https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Wikivoyage:Wikivoyage_and_Wikitravel

(www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/welcome). Consumer participate in travel forum to satisfy functional, social and psychological needs (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004).

2.1.4. Word-of-mouth as a consequence of user-generated content

As stated in the previous paragraph, one of the four features of social media are user-generated content (UGC). UGC are published content “created by users and publicly available” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and are considered the means through which people express themselves and communicate with others online (Boyd, et al., 2008) According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) to be considered in this way, UGC should fulfil three requirements:

1. The content should be published on publicly accessible websites or on social networks accessible to a selected group of people. Content exchanged through emails and instant messages are excluded
2. The content should contain a certain amount of creative effort. Replications of existing content are excluded
3. The content should not be created in a professional environment. Thus, content created as a purpose of commercial market is exclude.

The content can include anything from images, videos and audio to posts and reviews. Table 3 reports an overview of different types of UGC and the most important platforms that display it (Luca, 2016).

Types of User-generated Content	Prominent Platforms
Pictures	Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Flickr
Personal Updates and Networking	Twitter, FourSquare, Facebook, LinkedIn
Reviews for Products and Services	Yelp, Rotten Tomatoes, ZocDoc, Amazon
Encyclopedia and Reference Sites	Wikipedia, Wikia
Videos	YouTube, Vine
Comments on News Articles	NY Times Online, WSJ Online
Crowdfunding	Crowdrise, Kickstarter, IndieGoGo
Sharing Platforms	Uber, Airbnb, Couchsurfing
Social Payments	Venmo, Square
Discussion / Question and Answer	Reddit, Quora, StackOverflow
Blogs	Tumblr, WordPress

Table 3 – Popular user-generated content platforms. Source: Luca, 2016

UGC is related to, but not identical with, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Smith, et al., 2012). eWOM is defined by Hennig-Thurau, et al. (2004) as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”. eWOM has gained a new feature thanks to social media which enable users to communicate with each other.

King, et al. (2014) have identified six major characteristics of eWOM:

1. Enhanced volume – eWOM conversations can reach many more people in a shorter period of time over the Internet.
2. Dispersion – Platform dispersion is defined as “the extent to which product-related conversations are taking place across a broad range of communities”. The nature of the platforms could significantly impact eWOM. Furthermore, because of dispersion it is difficult to determine which platforms to target and measure (King, et al., 2014).
3. Persistence and observability – eWOM are persistence and observable which means that comments remain in public repositories and are searchable. Because of this, past conversation, opinions and comments will

influence future WOM. Thus, it is possible to state that eWOM is endogenous because it not only influences consumer purchase decision, but it is also the outcome of consumer purchase (King, et al., 2014).

4. Anonymity and deception – eWOM lose credibility when vendors manipulate online opinions, and this can happen because the Internet is a “relatively anonymous medium” (Ku, et al., 2012). Furthermore, businesses can pay to generate online discussions, and this is translated into decrease of customers’ trust in eWOM. For these reasons, it becomes important to focus on quality rather than quantity.
5. Salience of valence – Salience of valence refers to the positive or negative rating assigned by consumers while reviewing products or services. Thanks to their easy interpretation, there is a positive relationship between valence and product sales.
6. Community engagement – To reach competitive advantage, profitability and consumer loyalty, consumer engagement is the key and this engagement is supported by eWOM platforms that allow the creation of “specialized, non-geographically bound consumer communities” (De Valck, et al., 2009). Forums are an example of this. Their aim is to offer to consumers the possibility to discuss about a products/services.

Social media websites are considered as the platform for eWOM (Canhoto & Clark, 2013, Erkan & Evans, 2014, Kim, et al., 2014) because they facilitate the diffusion of information among a huge amount of people (Sohn, 2014) also thanks to the possibility to share the content (Chu & Kim, 2011). These websites allow opinion leaders to promote products sharing their opinion via written texts, images, videos or applications (Erkan & Evans, 2016). eWOM information in social media can arise in different ways (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Users can decide to post contents about a brand, a product or a service, but they can also display their preferences to their network by liking and commenting brands’ posts or sharing a brand’s post without any advertising aim.

Marketers, conversely, can also post information through their official accounts on social media (Alboqami, et al., 2015).

eWOM is considered as an influential tool. To decide whether to purchase a product or service they are unfamiliar, consumers search for reviews posted by other consumers (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). However, not all eWOM information have the same influence on consumers' purchase intention. This is primarily due to the large amount of information available (Erkan & Evans, 2016). The influence of eWOM depends on both the information and the consumer. Characteristics of information are not enough. Consumers' behavior towards information should also be considered (Knoll, 2015).

eWOM can be generated by online reviews (Schuckert, et al., 2015). The latter have become an important source for travellers to select an accommodation because they believe that reviewers are more trustworthy, neutral and honest (Wee, et al., 2016). It is possible to identify two categories of online reviews: consumers' reviews and professional editors' reviews. The most reliable are the former because consumer perceive that information is not provide by suppliers and professional editors (Wee, et al., 2016). Reviews may be powerful because they "play an important role in the trip planning process for those who actively read them. They provide ideas, make decisions easier, add fun to the planning process and increase confidence by reducing risk and making it easier to imagine what places will be like" (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Accommodation decisions are frequently influenced by both positive and negative reviews. When a facility has negative comments, it is less likely for travellers to book that accommodation.

eWOM is a type of communication essential for tourists to create an image of the destination or hotel they are choosing (Hernández-Méndez, et al., 2015). When tourists are satisfied with an accommodation, they are more likely to return to the same accommodation and recommend it to others generating the WOM effect. Because of the advent of eWOM in the tourism industry, more information is available to tourists, thus providing new knowledge and changing their perception of travel. Furthermore,

it has changed also the way in which users access information (Hernández-Méndez, et al., 2015).

2.2. Tourism and hospitality industry

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to describe the tourism industry focusing on its nature and the tourism products. The following paragraph will illustrate then the travel accommodation industry, the accommodation types and the decision-making process that lead travellers to choose the accommodation that best meets their needs.

2.2.1. The tourism and travel industry

Nowadays, tourism is considered a key driver of socio-economic progress. The tourism industry has continued to expand becoming one of the most important economic sectors in the world. This is also due to the arise of new destinations in addition to the traditional ones, including Europe and North America. Furthermore, it is one of the leading industries in terms of international trade (UNWTO, 2016).

Tourism is a complex phenomenon, one that is extremely difficult to describe. Over the decades, different authors have provided different contribution to explain what tourism is. And this is due the amorphous nature of the industry. Indeed, there is no universally agreed definition. For this reason, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) provided a more widely accepted definition. UNWTO (2008) defined tourism as a “a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes”. Moreover, tourism is defined as “the activities of persons, identified as visitors”.

A visitor is a “traveller taking a trip to a main destination outside his/her usual environment, for less than a year, for any main purpose (business, leisure or other personal purpose) other than to be employed by a resident entity in the country or place visited” (UNWTO, 2008). He/she may be either tourist or excursionist (also known as same-day visitors). The former refers to visitors who spend at least one night away

from home. The latter refers to both people who leave their house and return there on the same day and tourists who visit other destinations away from the place where they are staying overnight, for example passengers of sea cruises (Camilleri, 2017).

In relation to a given country, it is possible to distinguish the following forms of tourism:

- a) Domestic tourism, which comprises the activities of residents travelling within their own country
- b) Inbound tourism, which comprises the activities of non-residents travelling in the given country
- c) Outbound tourism, which comprises the activities of residents travelling in another country.

These three forms of tourism can be combined in different ways to obtain the following categories of tourism:

- a) Internal tourism, which comprises domestic tourism and inbound tourism. It is so related to visits by residents and non-residents of the country of reference
- b) National tourism, which comprises domestic tourism and outbound tourism. It is so related to visits by residents within and outside the country of reference
- c) International tourism, which consists of inbound tourism and outbound tourism. It is so related to visits by residents outside the country of reference and non-residents within the country of reference.

2.2.2. Nature of tourism

To be successful, tourism practitioners must understand factors which motivate tourists to leave their usual environment. As UNWTO stated, people travel for personal motives or for reasons of business.

Business travel is a more focused subset of regular tourism which involves people travelling “for purposes that are related to their work” (Davidson, 1996). It includes so trips related to the work of business executives and professionals and it is based on business meetings, conventions, seminars, conferences and exhibitions. Business travelers have little control in choosing the destination or the period and duration of the trip which could be short as a day. This because the purpose of the trip is not to enjoy the destinations’ attractions and facilities (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). They are less concerned about the cost of the travel (Gustafson, 2012). So, higher prices do not stop them to travel and lower prices do not encourage them to travel more.

Leisure travel could include reasons like holiday, health, visits to friends and relatives, religion, study, sport, et cetera. The decision to travel is under the control of travellers who are price sensitive. Hall (2008) affirms that lower prices to specific destination lead to an increase in the number of travellers in that specific place. To save money, they are willing to book in advance risking to cancel the travel (Russo, 2003).

2.2.3. Tourism products

Tourism major function is to serve travelers through tourism products (Camilleri, 2017). Tourism, therefore, could be considered as a collection of activities and services that deliver a travel experience⁹. Basically, tourism is composed of four main sectors: transportation, accommodation, ancillary services and sales and distribution (Camilleri, 2017). Sometimes all these services are purchased from one supplier, sometimes customers put the different activities together.

Tourism products are mainly services which aim is to satisfy the needs of tourists and they have the following distinct characteristics:

- Intangibility – a service has not a physical existence hence it cannot be touched, held, tasted, heard or smelt before its purchase. When a tourism product is purchased the consumer does not receive a tangible product (Pender & Sharpley, 2004). Because of this, customers perceive tourism

⁹ <http://www.prm.nau.edu/prm300/what-is-tourism-lesson.htm>

product riskier. A hotel room or the flight ticket cannot be touch. One way to overcome this problem is to offer to the consumer a video about the holiday location to make the experience seem more real (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007).

- Inseparability – most tourism products are first sold and then produced and consumed simultaneously. Moreover, they can only be consumed at the supplier's premises (Kaiser, 2012).
- Heterogeneity – since services are people based, tourism products tend to vary in standard and quality over time¹⁰. For this reason, it is difficult to provide the same level of service at every consumption time (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Every service performance is so unique to each customer.
- Highly perishable – a service cannot be restored, saved, returned or re-sold once it has been used. Production can take place only if the customer is present. And once consumption begins, it cannot be stopped, interrupted or modified¹⁰. Perishability is one of the most important characteristics of tourism industry, since it may have a strong impact on financial results. Hotel rooms, for example, cannot be store for future sales. Any room that is unsold tonight can no longer be sold.
- Complex product – most visitors need to combine different products in their travel decisions (Pender & Sharpley, 2004). The tourist product is so the sum of various service suppliers. It is not provided by a single enterprise, but by different suppliers¹⁰. For instance, hotels offer rooms and airlines supply seats.
- Unstable demand – tourism demand depends mainly on seasonal and economic political factors¹⁰.

¹⁰ <http://bieap.gov.in/pdf/ttppaperiii.pdf>

- Lack of ownership – tourism products can be bought for consumption, but ownership remains with the provider of the service. Hotel rooms and airline tickets can be used but not owned because people buy the right to accommodate or be transported¹⁰.
- Risky – the risk is connected to the impossibility to see a product in advance¹⁰.

2.2.4. Accommodation

Tourism accommodation service is defined as: “the provision, for a fee, of sheltered overnight accommodation in appropriately equipped rooms, including at least a bed, offered as a main service to tourists, travellers and lodgers. The provision of overnight sheltered accommodation may include the provision of food services, fitness activities and/or green areas” (Commission Decisions 2009/564/EC).

Accommodation is considered one of the most important component of tourism products. It represents one of the largest subsectors within the tourism industry (Pender & Sharpley, 2004), but also a subsector of the hospitality industry which is “made up of two different services: the provision of overnight accommodation for people staying away from home and the provision of sustenance for people eating away from home” (Pender & Sharpley, 2004). Even if the former is not a precondition of the latter, hotels often provide the two services together (Pender & Sharpley, 2004).

Accommodation can be split into two categories (Middleton, et al., 2009):

- Serviced accommodations, which includes hotels, bed and breakfast and guesthouses, are accommodations where a staff is available on the premises to provide some services such as housekeeping, meals and room services. All these services are included in the price charged (Middleton, et al., 2009)
- Non-serviced accommodation does not provide additional services and includes self-catering establishment. It includes, for example, rented

apartments, hostels, caravan, and so on. These units are furnished and equipped but no personal services are included in the price (Middleton, et al., 2009)

Accommodation is perceived as an experience. In fact, it is not only one of the elements of the tourism product but also of the tourism experience. Accommodation is more related to the satisfaction of guests' need and expectation rather than tangible elements like a room, a bed, a meal, and so on (Middleton, et al., 2009, Pender & Sharpley, 2004). This experience is composed of a series of service operations of which the most important are:

- Booking services – handling enquiries and bookings
- Reception/check-out services – registering arrivals and departures, checking bookings and allocating rooms
- Room/site services – delivering rooms or self-catering units cleaned and ready to occupy
- Food and beverage – including restaurants, bars and coffee shops
- Other services – including, for example, room service, shops, dry cleaning, health facilities, and so on.

Product experiences are complex. They are influenced by sensual benefits (experienced through sight, sound, touch and smell), physical elements (such as buildings) and psychological benefits (experienced as mental states of well-being, status and satisfaction) (Middleton, et al., 2009).

The demand for accommodation derives not only from leisure travelers but also from business travelers. For the former, accommodation plays a very different role in the tourism product since it is a part of the trip motivation or part of the destination's attraction. Leisure visitors tend to stay many hours in their accommodation, particularly if the weather is not good. On the other hand, for business travelers the room is

not simply a place to sleep, but it is also an extension of the office (Middleton, et al., 2009).

2.2.5. Types of accommodation

Although hotels are the most significant form of tourism accommodation, nowadays a multitude of other accommodation types are available. These are summarized in using the serviced/non-serviced distinction (Table 4).

Market segment \ Sector	Serviced sector		Non-serviced sector (self-catering)	
	At Destinations	On Routes	At Destination	On Routes
Business and other non-leisure	City/town hotels (Monday–Friday) Budget hotels Resort hotels for conferences, exhibitions Educational establishments	Budget hotels Motels Inns Airport hotels	Apartments	Not applicable
Leisure and holiday	Resort hotels Guesthouse/pensions Farmhouses City/town hotels (Friday–Sunday) Budget hotels Some educational establishments	Budget hotels Motels Bed and breakfast Inns	Apart hotels Condominia/timeshare Holiday villages Holiday centres/camps Caravan/chalet parks Gites Cottages Villas Apartments/flats Some motels	Touring pitches for caravans, tents, recreation vehicles YHA Some motels

Table 4 – Principal types of accommodation used in tourism. Source: Middleton, et al., 2009

The main types are below described.

Hotels – A hotel provides accommodation, meals and refreshment for irregular periods of time. Travellers may book their accommodation either in advance or on the premises. A hotel also offers amenities like fridge and television and facilities like room services, laundry services and shops. Depending on the facilities and services provided, hotels are classified into “star” categories (1-Star to 5-Star).

Resort hotels – Resort hotels satisfy the need of holidaymaker and those tourists who travel for health or change of climate. They provide accommodation, food, drink and entertainment. Moreover, they offer recreation facilities like swimming pool, golf course, tennis courts, skiing, and other various sports. They are located near special

attractions such as beaches, mountains and other areas of natural beauty. In resorts, guests are seeking a holiday experience rather than only accommodation services.

Bed and breakfast – these forms of accommodation establishments are generally family-run, and they may host both leisure and business tourists. They are suitable for tourists that want to meet and engage with local people. Visitors may get in touch with the culture of the country they are visiting. Moreover, they are cheaper than most hotels.

Apartments – Apartments are forms of accommodation that provide fully-equipped kitchen, living and bedroom areas. Usually breakfast is not available for guests. They are perfect for longer stays or for large groups.

Youth hostels – Youth hostels have played a very important role in developing and supporting the youth travel and adventure holiday market (Veríssimo & Costa, 2018). They are one of the cheapest accommodations. They are clean and simple, and they normally offer shared rooms with bunk beds. However, some hostels provide also private rooms. Hostels are the great solutions for meeting new people¹¹.

Camping grounds – camping grounds are usually located in open spaces. They provide facilities for parking, tent pitching, water, electricity, toilet, and so on. They are equipped to host mobile form of accommodation such as campers.

Farmhouses – farmhouses tend to host tourists who are interested in healthy food and natural outdoor life. Farmers build farmhouses on the land used for cultivation.

2.2.6. Decision-making process

Knowing how tourists choose an accommodation is very important. This decision is influenced by a complex set of factors. Those attributes that determine preferences and purchase behaviors are called determinant indicators (Sohrabi, et al., 2012).

¹¹ <https://www.travelanddestinations.com/what-are-the-different-accommodation-types-available-for-your-travels/>

First, tourists should choose between hotels and non-hotels. Then they select a specific accommodation. To do this, they evaluate some attributes. The most relevant features that affect the accommodation choice include price, location and cleanliness (Lockyer, 2005). The price has a very high impact because people are price-sensitive and, nowadays, tourists can compare prices using the Internet. The location, on the other hand, is a feature able to differentiate one accommodation from another producing “place-sensitive products” (Bull, 1998).

Travellers evaluate also the offered services and their quality. Quality, most of the time, is synonymous with long-term relationship (Sohrabi, et al., 2012). It allows to gain a sustainable competitive advantage and to create a competitive differentiation (Ankur, 2018). Quality is related not only to the design and the conditions of the accommodation but also to the staff which should be professional, kind and helpful. It is considered the key to the creation of value and satisfaction of customers. However, it is important to underline that quality is very subjective and depends on customers’ perception (Ozimek, et al., 2017).

Finally, there are other factors that influence the decision. These are, for example, the safety and security of accommodations, front desk, food and recreation and the reputation of the accommodation (Sohrabi, et al., 2012). Reservation services, past experiences and reviews are other factors able to influence the decision.

In the past, travellers had a limited number of ways to find an accommodation. Now the way they evaluate, research and book the hotel or the other types of accommodation has drastically changed. In addition to the recommendation of friends and family, guidebooks and traditional travel agencies, travellers have now many new resources available. They can compare price and availability via online travel sites or read reviews on TripAdvisor and Yelp. Because of all this, the decision-making process is no more linear, but it has become more dynamic and cyclical. The traditional marketing funnel is becoming obsolete and this is true for many other industries (HawkPartners, 2012).

According to the study carried out by HawkPartners, the decision-making process start with the evaluation stage followed by the selection and booking process (Figure 5).



Figure 5 – Hotel Evaluation and Selection Process Framework. Source: HawkPartners, 2012

The evaluation process consists in evaluating the different types of accommodation from the top-of-mind, the recommendations and the online search results. Tourists search for information about the accommodation more frequently than other travel related products (Murphy, et al., 2016) and this is done by consulting information sources. These can be categorized into internal and external sources. The former, which are usually used first, are related to personal experiences and knowledge and recall from memory. The latter are influenced by marketing actions as advertising and websites (Murphy & Chen, 2016). During this stage, travelers add and subtract possible options from the top-of-mind. Fesenmaier, et al. (2010) rank travel-related websites in the following order: general search engines (e.g. Google), supplier sites, OTAs (e.g. Booking.com, Expedia), friends and family, review sites (TripAdvisor), destination sites, general travel sites, travel search engines, travel guidebook sites, community sites, newspaper/magazine sites, consumer content generates sites, and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram). With the advent of social media, travellers tend now to combine different channels: from the more traditional ones like friends'

and family’s suggestions and guidebooks, to the more recent such as OTAs and travel blogs. This combination allows consumers to compare accommodation with one another, to gather an “objective and authentic overview” of the available offers and to get access to content that fellow travellers have already published (Neuhofer & Varkaris, 2017). Information search can be done by using different devices: PCs/laptops, smartphones and tablets. Despite the growing importance of smartphone for information search, PCs remain the most used device in the search process (Murphy, et al., 2016).

After the evaluation, the tourists select the accommodation. At this stage, they are influenced by personal recommendations and online review sites. Personal recommendations are considered as the most trustworthy channel even if they provide less information. In contrast, supplier websites provide the right amount of information with a moderate trust rating. Furthermore, also advice on social media sites have an impact on the choice (Figure 6) (HawkPartners, 2012).



Figure 6 – Channel Perceptions Map. Source: HawkPartners, 2012

Finally, the booking process through which travellers reserve an accommodation. Basically, it is possible to identify three different methods to make a reservation divided into “traditional channels” and “Internet channel” (Law, et al., 2015). These tools will be further described in the following paragraph. Regarding the devices used to

make the reservation, Murphy, et al. (2016) found out that travellers that use mobile devices to search for information tend to return to their PCs to make the final booking. This is mainly due to greater risk involved at this stage. The study conducted by Ozturk, et al. (2016) reveal an opposite phenomenon. More travellers have started to rely on mobile devices and for this reason the number of travellers that use this tool to book an accommodation is increasing. This is possible also thanks to the introduction of new applications (apps).

2.2.6.1. Traditional vs Internet channels

Traditional channels include traditional travel agencies and tour operators who help to distribute the tourism product. According to some authors, traditional agencies will disappear (Law, et al., 2015). However, there are some niche market (such as luxury and corporate travellers) for specialized travel that ensure a market to the them. The traditional agencies allow to save a lot of time and they offer something that these niches are not able to find¹². They also guarantee personal connection and interaction. Because of the development of new technologies and electronic commerce, traditional travel agencies are facing a crisis. Indeed, tourists and specifically the leisure ones, prefer to book their accommodation over the Internet (Lien, et al., 2015).

Internet channels are composed by online travel agencies (OTAs) and supplier official websites. OTAs are online intermediaries that assist not only hotels but all travel suppliers in selling travel products to consumers. Some of them sell products that vary from flights and accommodations to car rentals and activities. Others, on the other hand, are specialized in selling tours. The best known OTAs are Booking.com, eDreams, and Expedia. Travellers can also reserve the accommodation via official websites which are forms of distribution channel where suppliers sell their products (Kok & Teoh, 2013). For travel suppliers, direct bookings minimize distribution costs and strength customer relationships. But OTAs serve to access to customers suppliers may not otherwise attract (PhoCusWright, 2015).

¹² <https://www.tts.com/blog/using-a-traditional-travel-agent-or-an-ota-for-your-next-holiday/>

The advantage of using OTAs is the possibility to compare multiple suppliers that can be searched by price, location, or other criteria allowing customers to save not only time but also money as they offer attractive discounts. Official websites can also do that, but they are limited to their own properties (Toh, et al., 2011). Given OTAs ability, these intermediaries play a key role in travel accommodation evaluation and booking stage. Travellers are more likely to receive information about and reserve an accommodation via an OTA than the website of a supplier as it is easier and convenient for them. Instead of bouncing from one site to another, they can browse photos, read reviews, and check pricing and availability for many suppliers on one site. In this way, travellers can find the best options, prices and availability to satisfy their needs (PhoCusWright, 2016). Furthermore, OTAs serve most of the time as a one-stop-shop where customers can purchase flight and car rental packages in addition to the accommodation.

2.3. Social media in the tourism industry

Prior the advent of social media, consumers traditionally had limited resources to collect information on product and services. Potential travellers usually searched information and advice from “official sources” such as travel agencies, calling directly different suppliers or making reservations over the phone. Furthermore, other information sources were personal WOM which included suggestions from family and friends, travel books and travel guides and the traditional Web 1.0 platforms such as hotel websites (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). In the last decade, however, the traditional tools have been replaced by social media. Travellers started, in fact, to consult UGC to plan and make decisions about the accommodation. They use social media to share their travel-related experiences, get in touch with others and buying tourism products and services (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017).

In tourism, consumers’ behaviour has always been influenced by developments in Information Communication Technologies (Fotis, et al., 2012) and Web 2.0, or better Travel 2.0, has fundamentally changed the way tourists select and purchase services online and specifically the accommodation (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Moreover,

social media are taking “an important role in travellers’ information search and decision-making behaviours” (Fotis, et al., 2012). They are rated as “somehow influential” on both destination and accommodation choice (Fotis, et al., 2012). Furthermore, Fotis, et al. (2012) identify a strong correlation between social media level of influence on accommodation choice and the changes made in holiday plans before final decisions were taken.

Consumers use different Web 2.0 channels to search the accommodation that fits their needs. According to Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017) the most frequently used social media for accommodation search are TripAdvisor, Facebook and Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. Travel-related photos published on Facebook generate interest to viewers (Fotis, et al., 2012). In addition, also Instagram was found to play a key role in the accommodation decision journey adopted by millennials (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). This is due to the pictures, videos and hashtags published on this social network. They also highlighted the use of both classic websites and social media for information search. However, social media constitute the primary channel including search engines, visits to official supplier websites and use of booking sites like Booking.com to find information and make decisions. The combination of different channels allows to “get access to UGC from travellers who have already visited a specific accommodation, to compare hotels with one another, and to gather an objective and authentic overview of the offer available” (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Furthermore, through social media, it is possible to obtain specific information like the cleanliness, the location, the price and the proximity to central places.

As stated in paragraph 2.2.3., tourism products are complex, involve high risks and for these travel-related decisions require extensive information search. To reduce uncertainty and increase exchange utility, consumers rely on other travellers’ experiences. With the advent of Web 2.0, users not only obtain information, but also can provide information to others (Muñoz-Leiva, et al., 2012). Thus, in Travel 2.0-based platforms, travellers not only take an active role in planning their own trips, but they also help others in “forming an image or idea” of their trip by posting their experiences,

videos, pictures et cetera. Consumers rely on reviews and rating websites which assist them in selecting accommodation and therefore facilitate decision making (Fotis, et al., 2012; Fotis, 2015). Nowadays, checking reviews is regarded as an indispensable activity to carry out when choosing the accommodation as travellers, most of the time, are unfamiliar with the service provider. They are considered authentic, helpful and more credible than information provided by marketers because they are written from a consumer's perspective (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008)

2.4. Online trust in tourism industry

In an online environment, trustworthiness is an important issue during the accommodation decision-making process. Trust is a key factor in the online context (Agag & El-Masry, 2016). It allows to mitigate uncertainty, perceived risk, lack of social presence and interdependences in online transactions. It creates "a climate of mutual trust" in an environment where interactions are not face-to-face and there is a lack of social presence (Muñoz-Leiva, et al., 2012).

Trust is defined as "the expectations that other individuals or companies with which one interacts will not take improper advantage resulting from the dependence one has on them" (Gefen, et al., 2003). In line with this definition, trust in travel sites can be defined as "the belief or expectation that the content generated by other users is reliable and that these users will fulfil their obligations" (Muñoz-Leiva, et al., 2012). In the accommodation industry, for instance, customers expect that the hotel will provide the services promised in the website and the expectation depends on the trust the customers have on the hotel (Lien, et al., 2015).

Trust consists of three distinct factors:

- Honest – Honesty is based on the idea that other community members will fulfil their promises (Agag & El-Masry, 2016)
- Competence – Competence refers to the perceived skill and ability of the other party (Agag & El-Masry, 2016) and in the case of this study the competence of the accommodation suppliers.

- Benevolence – Benevolence refers to the intend of community members to support, help and care for other community members (Agag & El-Masry, 2016)

All these factors contribute to “consumers’ perceptions of trust in an online travel community” (Agag & El-Masry, 2016). Both websites and consumers characteristics are important in online trust. Privacy and order fulfilment are the most influential characteristics that determine trust for travel websites. Prior online shopping experience, familiarity with the sites, online skills and online entertainment experiences are, meanwhile, the most important consumer features (Yoo, et al., 2009). In addition, the level of perceived market orientation, site quality, technical trustworthiness, and the web experience and product knowledge of users influence the travellers’ trust level too (Yoo, et al., 2009).

The main issue of online transaction is the lack of a physical interaction between the buyer and the seller. Moreover, the payment is done by using credit cards exposing in this way customers’ financial data. Thus, the online transaction can create a “sense of powerlessness” among online shoppers (Perea y Monsuwé, et al., 2004). In these circumstances, trust plays a key role (Chen & Barnes, 2007) because it is able to determine whether people will purchase online. There is so a positive influence on purchase intention which means “the higher the degree of consumers’ trust, the higher the degree of purchase intentions of consumers” (Chen & Barnes, 2007). In the tourism industry, consumers who trust in a travel website are more likely to reduce the perceived risk and to repurchase (Muñoz-Leiva, et al., 2012). In addition, “the easier a website is to use, the greater the trust in it” (Muñoz-Leiva, et al., 2012).

Trustworthiness is an important issue in the accommodation decision-making process. Among the most important travel accommodation related information sources, friends and relatives are the more trustworthy source, followed by information provided by other travellers in different websites (Fotis, et al., 2012). According to the research conducted by Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017), travellers trust the content

published on social media because it is perceived as “non-biased” and “honest” information source. They are “more likely influenced by and trust content from social media than equal content from traditional and official information sources” because these sources are potentially “less objective and biased, commercially driven and financially bestowed” (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017; Fotis, et al., 2012). Even if trustworthiness is essential in accommodation information search, a big issue is that “anybody can post anything they want on social media”. This may create problems at times, especially when there is the doubt that the content is fake or has been published by the companies themselves or by competitors (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017).

The study conducted by Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017) found also that travellers trust and are influenced by content shared by their own “personal circle” which include friends and family too. This is because the content, which is considered more helpful and credible, derives from users who they personally know. In addition, they also trust the content originated by other users. UGC content is considered more reliable and trustworthy than information provided by official tourism websites, travel agents and mass media advertising (Del Chiappa, 2011). Conversely, company UGC on social media is perceived as less credible.

3. Methodology

To review, the aim of this study is to assess the impact of social media and travel-related Internet tools in the travel accommodation choice analysing the behaviour of two different groups: university students and workers aged 26 – 35.

The first part of this paper consists of a literature review concerning social media and the tourism industry. For the first topic, the evolution of the Web and its advantages and disadvantages, but also the definition and classification of social media have been provided. For the second topic, attention has been given to the travel accommodation, its classification and decision-making process.

To achieve the aim, in the second part of the study a quantitative descriptive research method is used. This approach was chosen as appropriate for collecting and comparing a sufficient amount of data about the usage of social media in travel accommodation industry.

3.1. Research method

A quantitative research method is the research that relies on the collection of data done through structured techniques such as surveys (conducted online, by phone or in person), observations and secondary data. Data produced are number and “facts” and they are analysed by applying statistical methods. This type of research is used “to establish a representation of what consumers do or what consumers think; we try to establish behavioural and mental facts” (Barnham, 2015) and generalize results from a sample to the population of interest. Quantitative research is useful to compare or generalise information between different populations. And this is the aim of this research: understanding the influence of social media in the travel accommodation decision-making process of both university students and workers aged 26 – 35. The main issue of this type of research is the lack of deeper explanations as it cannot account for non-numerical information such as human feelings, beliefs and imaginations.

This research adopted also a descriptive method which consists in describing characteristics of a population or a phenomenon. It focuses more on the “what” rather than

the “why” of a research. It is a quantitative research method which aim is to collect quantifiable information to be used for statistical analysis. Its main disadvantages are non-representative sample and the halo effect because of which an observation may be considered invalid or untrue.

3.2. Research hypotheses

Given the research questions of this study (as presented in the introduction), the following hypotheses, per each search question, have been developed to describe the influence of social media on travel accommodation selection.

RQ1 Which are the main habits (types of accommodation and factors that influence the decision) of the two targets?

H 1.1 Workers travel more than students

H 1.2 Price of the accommodation influences students more

H 1.3 Workers prefer to reserve a room in a hotel

H 1.4 Students prefer to rent a house/apartment

RQ2 To what extend are social media and Internet tools used during the evaluation stage by both the targets?

H 2.1 University students combine more than one source to receive information

H 2.2 Workers combine more than one source to receive information

RQ3 Is the content published on social media more trustworthy than friends and relatives and other traditional travel sources?

H 3.1 Information provided by friends and relatives are more trustworthy for workers

RQ4 Do reviews impact the selection of the travel accommodation?

H 4.1 Students find reviews more important than workers

H 4.2 Students read more reviews than workers

H 4.3 The element considered while reading the reviews depend on the type of traveller

RQ5 Are intermediaries used to book the accommodation different from those used in the evaluation stage?

H 5.1 Both students and workers use OTAs to book the accommodation

3.3. Data collection

To answer the research questions, data will be collected through an online survey. Surveys are “information collection methods used to describe, compare, or explain individual and societal knowledge, feelings, values, preferences, and behaviour” (Fink, 2015). They can take the form of self-administered questionnaires and interviews. For the purposes of this study, only questionnaires will be used. A questionnaire is “a set of standardized questions, often called items, which follow a fixed scheme in order to collect individual data about one or more specific topics” (Lavrakas, 2008).

Questionnaire was chosen for this research because they are reliable and allow to collect information from many respondents quickly. A general disadvantage is the lack of in-depth observation because of its fixed and strict format¹⁶.

For the development of this questionnaire, Google Form has been used. It contains closed-ended questions that limit the answers of the respondents to a distinct set of pre-defined responses. Questions are mainly multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale questions. The former consists in providing multiple answer options and respondents are asked to select one or more of the alternatives. The latter refers to “questions that ask respondents to assign numerical measures to subjective concepts such as attitudes, opinions and feeling” (Wilson, 2018). The questionnaire was presented in Italian (Appendix 1).

¹⁶ <https://writepass.com/journal/2015/10/sample-research-methodology-chapter-quantitative-research/#Questionnaires>

The survey is divided into four parts. The first part consists of general questions about the respondents and their travel habits. The following parts are related to the online decision-making process of the travel accommodation.

The general questions included demographic variables such as age, gender and employment status. In addition, to better understand the habits of the two different groups, questions regarding the frequency of travels, the types of preferred accommodation and the factors influencing the decision have been asked.

The second part is related to the evaluation stage and aims at identifying to what extent social media and other Internet tool are used during the first phase of the decision-making process. To reach this purpose, questions regards mainly the sources used to collect information travellers need.

The third part concerns trust and reviews and focuses on understanding which sources are perceived as more trustworthy and credible by both groups. Furthermore, it tries to find out if reviews influence the selection of the travel accommodation.

The fourth part is related to the booking stage and aims at assessing if there are differences in the intermediaries used to book the accommodation with respect to those used to gather information. In this section, questions related to the intermediaries used to book the travel accommodation have been designed.

3.4. Population and sampling

The target population for this study comprises Italian university students on one hand and Italian workers aged 26-35 on the other. To define the sample, the non-probability sampling was chosen, as it is impractical to conduct a probability sampling. The types of non-probability selected are snowball sampling, as friends and relatives were asked to share the questionnaire, and convenience sampling, as Facebook was used to promote the survey.

308 participants completed the anonymous survey on a voluntary basis as no form of compensation was offered. After carefully reviewing the data, the out-of-target responses (93 respondents) were removed leaving a sample of 215 complete responses.

For the purposes of this study, only leisure travellers were taken into consideration. This to guarantee the right balance between the two samples since students travel mainly for leisure.

Most of the respondents were women. Out of 156 students (72.56% of total respondents), 122 were women, which is 78%, and 34 were men, which is 22%. With regards to workers, they were in total 59 (27.44% of total respondents) of which 37 were women (63%) and 22 were men (37%). The reasons of why women are more than men can be several: women spend more time online than men or they are more willing to take some time to answer online surveys.

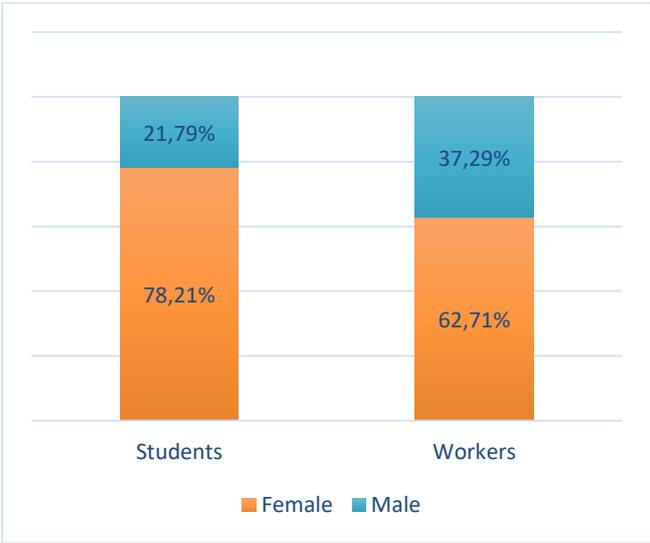


Figure 7 – Gender of respondents

3.5. Data analysis

Once the required computations had been completed in Microsoft Excel, data was imported to SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) to test the hypotheses in advance formulated. Three different types of statistical test are used: Pearson’s Chi-square test and Mann-Whitney U test. All these are used to assess differences between the two samples: university students and workers.

The Pearson's Chi-square test is a nonparametric statistic useful to investigate group differences. It is an appropriate choice for all nominal variables that compose this analysis. This test assumes that:

- The sample data follow a chi-square distribution
- "Fewer than 20 per cent of the cells have an expected frequency of less than 5" and "no cell has an expected frequency of less than one" (Siegel & Castellan, 1988)
- No cell should have expected value less than zero

In case of violation of assumptions, Fisher's Exact test (only for 2x2 table) and likelihood ratio are computed to assess the differences between the samples.

Questions that include Likert-scale are tested by performing a Mann-Whitney U test. This is a nonparametric test used to test whether one variable has higher value than the other and so to assess differences between two independent groups. The dependent variable should be measured on an ordinal or continuous scale while the independent variable should consist of two categorical, independent groups.

The null hypothesis (H_0) is the same for each hypothesis tested: the two samples are equal. This means that no significant differences between university students and workers are detected.

Hypotheses are analysed by comparing the calculated probability (p) values with the significance level equal to 0.05 for 95% confidence level. When p-value is smaller or equal to 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$), null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected otherwise if it is higher than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$) it is accepted.

4. Analysis and discussion

This study aims at analysing and discussing data based on the purposes of this research. The results are organized in five sections each corresponding to one research question: 1) Travellers' preferences, 2) Evaluation process, 3) Trust in travel-related sources, 4) The power of reviews in the selection process and 5) Booking process.

4.1. Travellers' preferences

To be defined as such, tourists should spend at least one night away from home. Both university students and workers were asked how often they stay away from their usual environment for at least one night.

66.10% of workers and 58.33% of students travel 2 – 4 times a year, while 20.34% of workers and 25.64% of students spend at least one night away from home once a year (Figure 8).

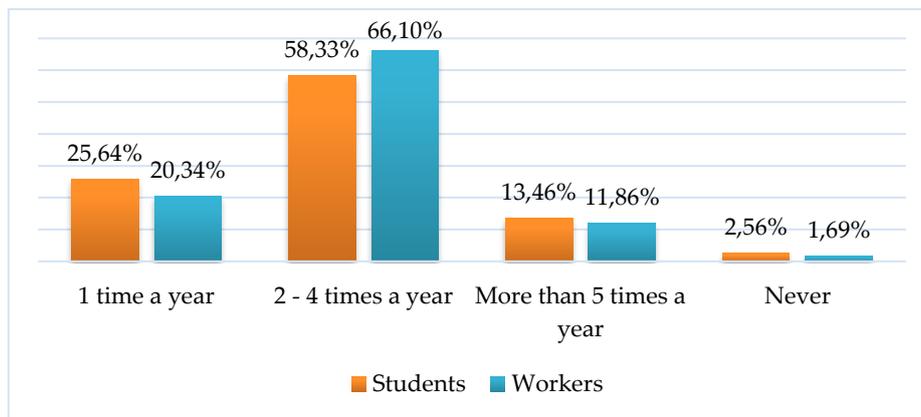


Figure 8 – Travel frequency

With regards to the travel frequency, the following hypothesis has been tested:

H 1.1 Workers travel more than students

To test this hypothesis, it is not possible to use a Pearson's chi-square test because of the violation of the assumption that at least 80% of the cells should have an expected value greater than 5 in each cell. The likelihood Ratio Chi-square test is used. Table 5 shows no significant differences (Likelihood ratio = 1.169, $df = 3$, $p = 0.760$) since the p-value (labelled Asymp. Sig.) is more than 0.05 (which is the alpha level associated with a 95% confidence level). The first hypothesis that workers travel more than students is

rejected. In addition to this, it is possible to affirm that there is no association between the two variables.

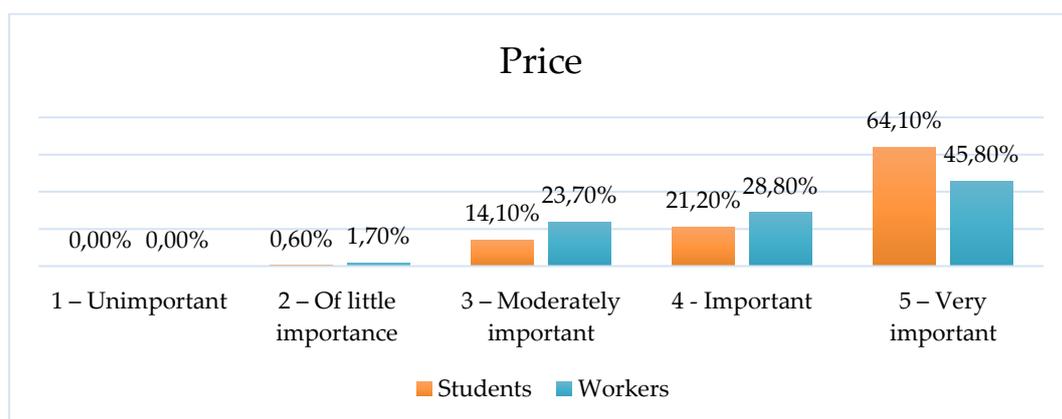
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig.
Pearson's chi-Square	1.148 ^a	3	0.766
Likelihood Ratio	1.169	3	0.760

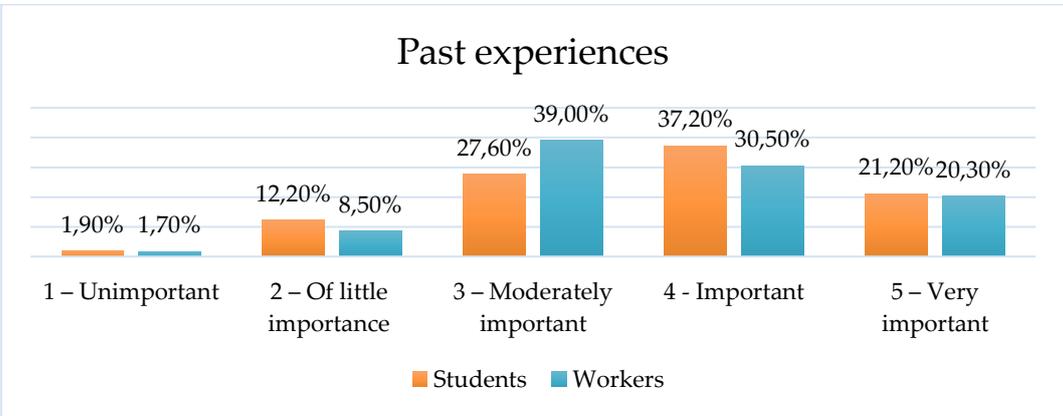
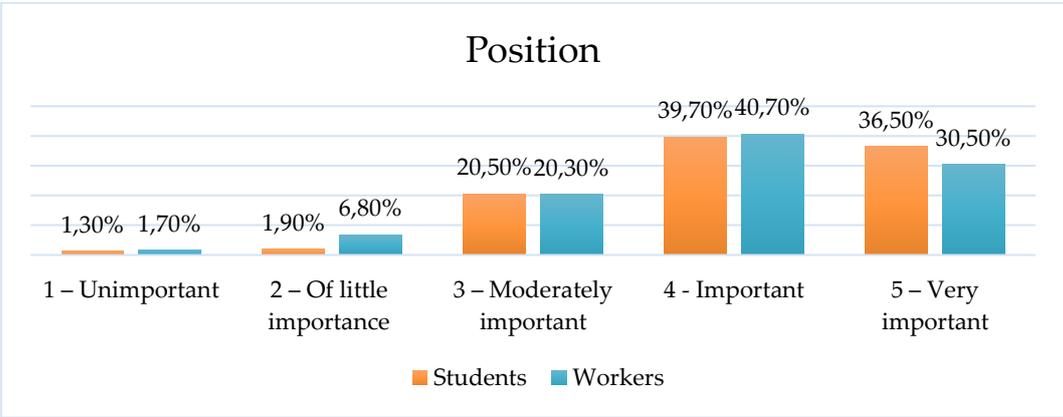
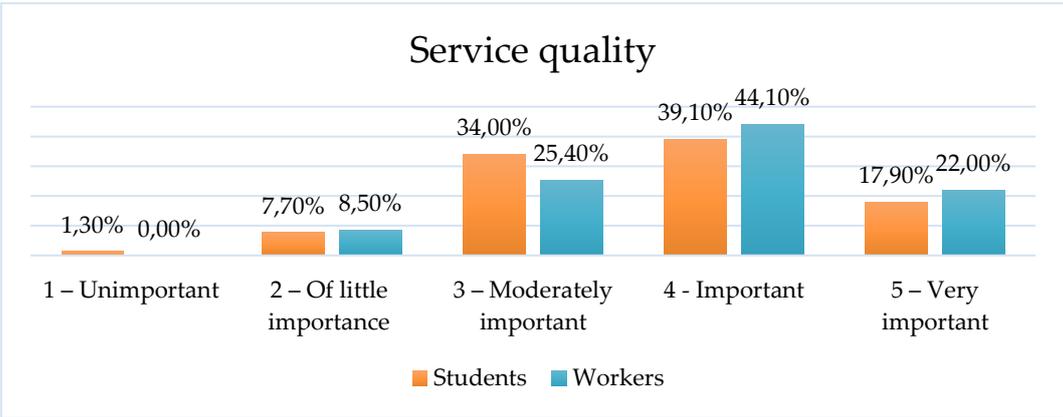
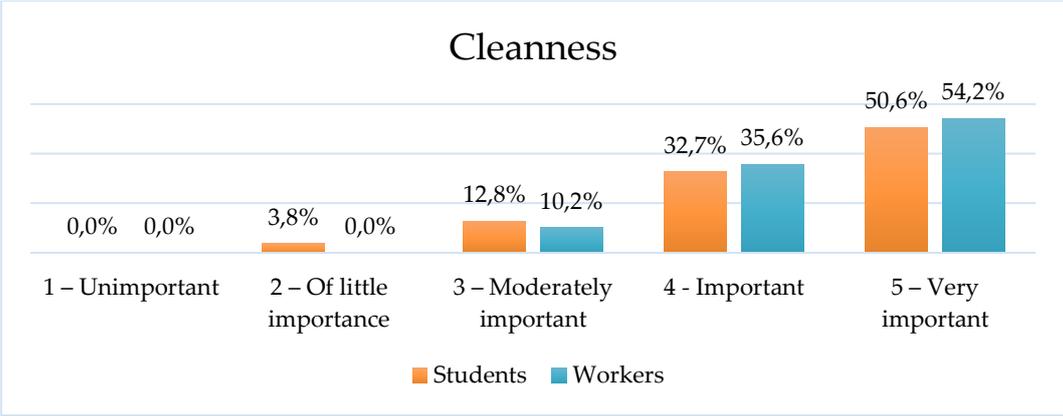
a. 2 cells (25,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,37

Table 5 – Pearson's chi-square: travel frequencies

When planning their trip, tourists should select the accommodation that best fits their needs. They evaluate different attributes that range from price to cleanness, from quality to location, and many others. However, each attribute has not the same level of importance. Some are considered more important than others. For this, tourists were asked to express their level of importance for each factor (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Very important).

When searching for information, more than 60% of students consider the price “very important”, while more than 50% of workers consider the cleanness of the accommodation “very important”. Furthermore, service quality and position of the accommodation are considered by both sample “important” (Figure 9).





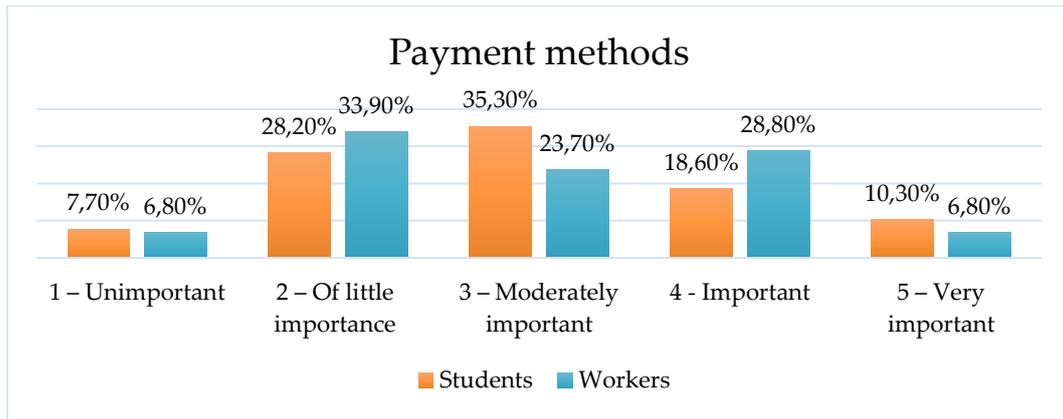


Figure 9 – Factors influencing travel accommodation decision

With regards to this, the following hypothesis has been stated:

H 1.2 Price of the accommodation influences students more

This hypothesis assumes that there are some differences between the variable being university students or workers and the variable price. The Mann-Whitney U test is performed, and the test reveals a significant difference between the price and the type of travellers (Table 6). The null hypothesis is so rejected ($p \leq 0.05$), and it can be assumed that price has more influence for university students.

Mann-Whitney U test is also conducted to test the other attributes (Table 6). From this analysis emerges that no significant differences are detected.

	Mann - Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Asymp. Sig. (1-tailed)
Price	3702.000	0.012*	0.006*
Cleanness	4298.500	0.411	0.206
Service quality	4175.500	0.268	0.134
Position	4194.000	0.287	0.144
Promotions	4317.500	0.465	0.233
Past experiences	4430.500	0.660	0.330
Payment methods	4598.500	0.993	0.497

Table 6 – Mann-Whitney U test: factors influencing the accommodation decision

Finally, when evaluating the accommodation, tourists should also decide the type of accommodation that best satisfy their needs. They can choose among a vast range of options. Concerning this, one of the questions in the survey asked travellers to indicate where they prefer to stay when travelling (multiple answers were possible).

A first analysis of the frequencies shows that students prefer to rent a house or an apartment (57.1%) but also to book a room in a bed-and-breakfast (55.1%) or in a hotel (53.8%), while almost 70% of workers largely prefer to reserve a room in a hotel (Figure 10).

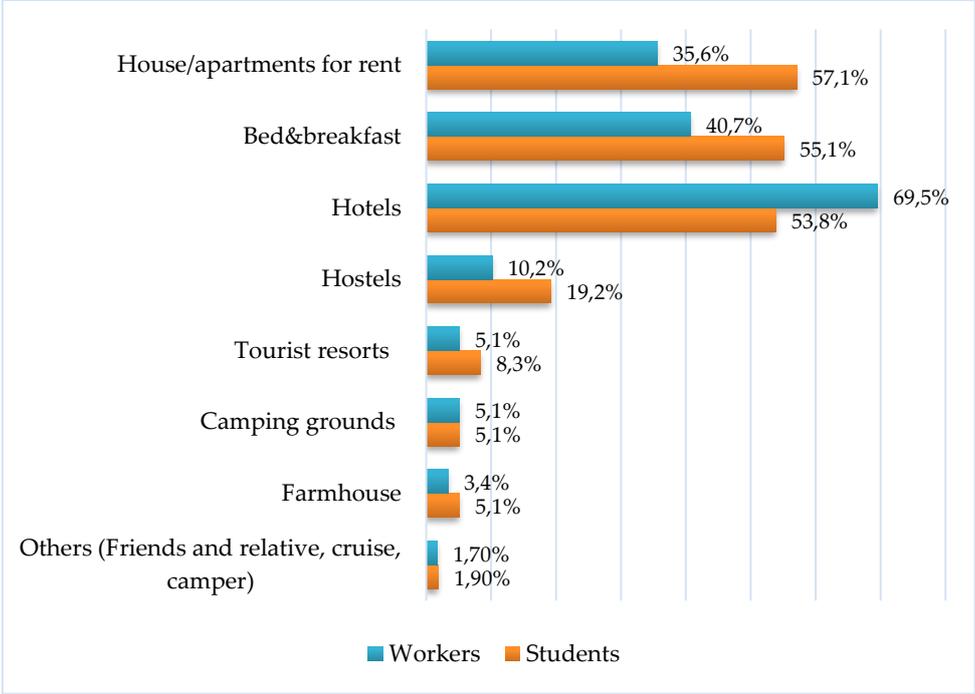


Figure 10 – Accommodation preferences

With regards to this, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H 1.3 Workers prefer to reserve a room in a hotel

H 1.4 Students prefer to rent a house/apartment

To test the hypotheses, a series of chi-square test are performed. The option “other (friends and relatives, cruise, camper)” was eliminated from the analysis because of the lack of enough values.

The test confirms both hypotheses. H 1.3 is accepted since $p = 0.038$, while H 1.4 is accepted since $p = 0.005$. The test reveals that there are also some slightly differences between the two samples with regards to bed-and-breakfast. They are preferred a bit more by students rather than workers. Concerning the other accommodation types no significant differences are detected. In this sense, interesting is the case of hostels which do not present differences even if they are though mainly for students and young travellers (Table 7).

	Pearson's Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig.	Fisher's Test ^a
Hotels	4.306	1	0.038*	
Apartments/house for rent	7.889	1	0.005*	
Bed-and-breakfast	3.578	1	0.059*	
Hostels	2.521	1	0.112	
Tourists resorts				0.565
Camping grounds				1.000
Farmhouse				0.731

a. Calculated when chi-square assumptions are violated

Table 7 – Pearson's chi-square test: accommodation types

4.2. Evaluation process

To review, the evaluation process consists in evaluating the different types of accommodation not only from the top-of-mind and recommendations but also from the online search results. During this first stage, travellers collect information combining multiple sources to gather “an objective and authentic overview” of the available options (Neuhofer & Varkaris, 2017). They first identify the accommodation that might satisfy their needs and then they compare the main characteristics of the possible options (e.g. offered services, price, position) and check for reviews.

The analysis of the collected data revealed that, on average, university students visit 3.1 different sources with a range from 1 to 8, while workers use 2.7 different sources with a range from 1 to 7 (Figure 11). This difference, even if slight, can be

related to what affirmed previously: price is the most important factor that influences students when evaluating the possible options. This means that students are willing to spend more time to find the most convenient solution.

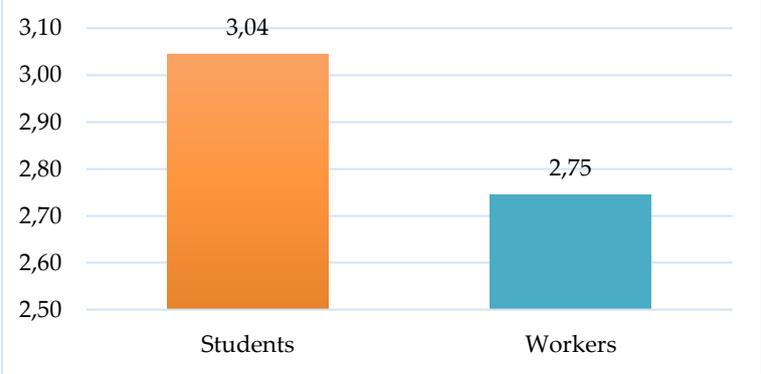


Figure 11 – Average of information sources used

With regards to this, the following hypotheses were tested:

H 2.1 University students use more than one source when searching for information

H 2.2 Workers use more than one source when searching for information

In this case, the null hypothesis is different from the one mentioned before. H_0 assumes that both students and workers use, on average, only one source. Furthermore, the test used is not the same. To test the null hypothesis a one-sample t-test was performed for each group of travellers (Table 8). Test results reported that the null hypotheses are rejected, accepting the alternative ones. This means that both students and workers use more than one sources.

	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Students	25.503	155	0.000*
Workers	14.242	58	0.000*

Table 8 – One-sample t-test related to information sources

In addition, to assess whether there are significant differences between the means of students and workers, an independent-samples t-test was run. The test reveals that no significant differences are detected ($t_{(213)} = 1.315, p = 0.190$).

Tourists can search for information using different channels that range from the traditional ones like travel agencies and friends and relatives' suggestions, to online sources such as search engines, OTAs and review websites. The author of this Study has decided to classify all these tools into two categories:

- Sources in which the author is interested in suggesting a specific accommodation because he/she get money for this (e.g. traditional travel agencies, some travel blogs and Facebook and Instagram profiles)
- Sources in which the author has no interest in publishing a specific content because he/she is not paid (e.g. friends and relatives and review websites where the content is created by other travellers).

As mentioned in paragraph 2.2.6., to gather information tourists are more likely to consult first search engines, supplier websites and OTAs, but also friends and relatives and review websites. This is partially confirmed by the present research. Both students and workers employ first review websites and OTAs (Figure 12). Review websites are employed because they offer a true idea about the accommodation and make it easier for traveller to decide. OTAs are used because allow travellers to compare lots of alternatives based on price, availability and guest reviews all in one place, but also because most of them are easy to use. A smaller number of students and workers tend to use search engines and social networks. Surprisingly, travel blogs are used only by less than 10% of respondents. Finally, the Airbnb phenomenon was highlighted by some respondents who added it in the section "other".

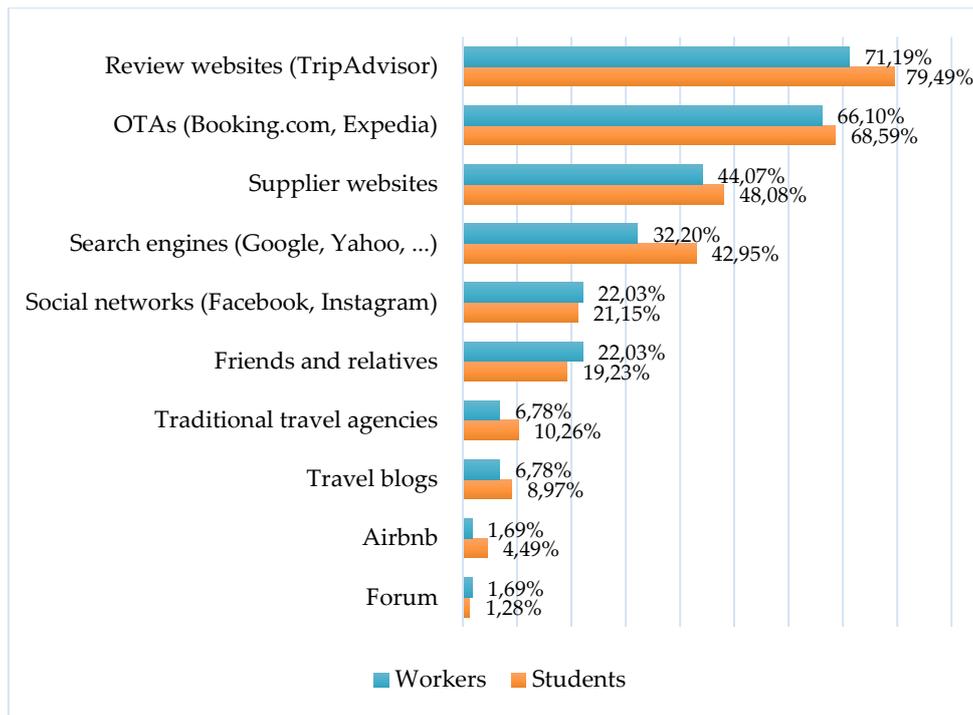


Figure 12 – Information sources used by both samples

During the information search process customers can use different devices: PCs, smartphones and tablets. This research confirms the findings from Murphy, et al. (2016). 61% of students and 59% of workers use PCs to obtain the information they need (Figure 13). Almost 40% of both samples use their smartphone to carry out this activity. This emphasizes the importance that mobile devices are gaining in recent years.

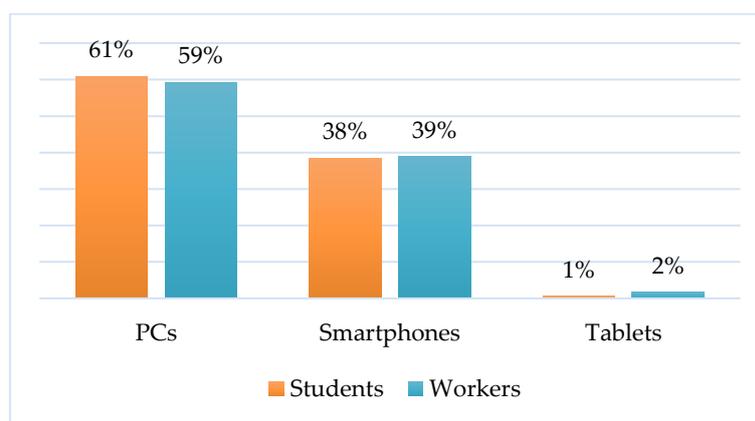


Figure 13 – Devices used during the information search

4.3. Trust in travel-related sources

Trust is fundamental to reduce the perceived risk in an environment where face-to-face interactions do not exist. This Study examines also this issue. Respondents of

the questionnaire were asked to indicate their level of trust towards the following sources:

- Review websites like TripAdvisor
- OTAs like Booking.com and Expedia
- Friends and relatives
- Supplier websites
- Traditional travel agencies
- Social networks like Facebook and Instagram

Comparing trust level towards information provided by friends and relatives and other travellers, it turns out that more than 50% of students trust other travellers while only 38% rely on friends and relatives (Figure 14). This emphasizes that students trust more review websites rather than information provided by people they know. With regards to workers, 32% and 25% of the sample trust and completely trust friends and relatives. This is a bit different for review websites. Only 13% of workers trust completely this source, while 35.6% trust them.

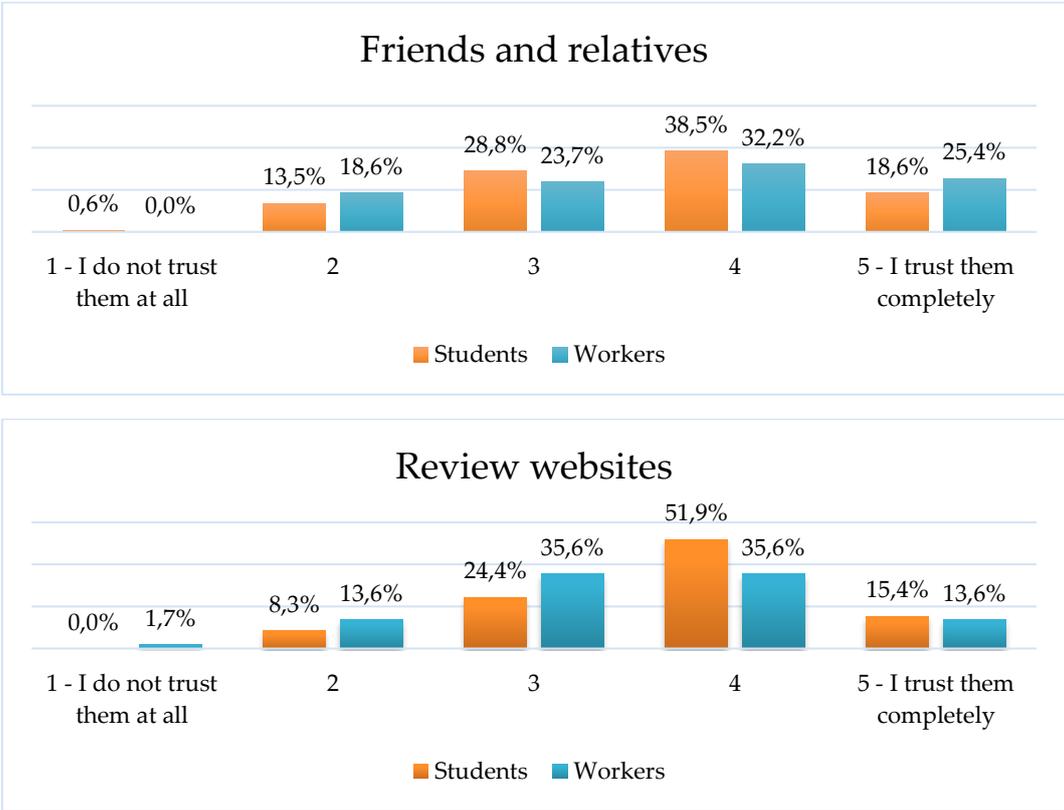


Figure 14 – Trust towards friends and relatives and towards other travellers

Concerning OTAs and brick and mortar travel agencies, only few students and workers trust completely these intermediaries. Analysing the graphs (Figure 15), it seems that students prefer a bit more online intermediaries rather than the traditional ones. Most students (54.5%) trust OTAs while they are neutral for workers. From the results presented in graph, it turns out that there is a higher level of distrust from students towards the traditional travel agencies. In addition, one third of both samples have declared to be neutral and the other one third have affirmed to trust them.

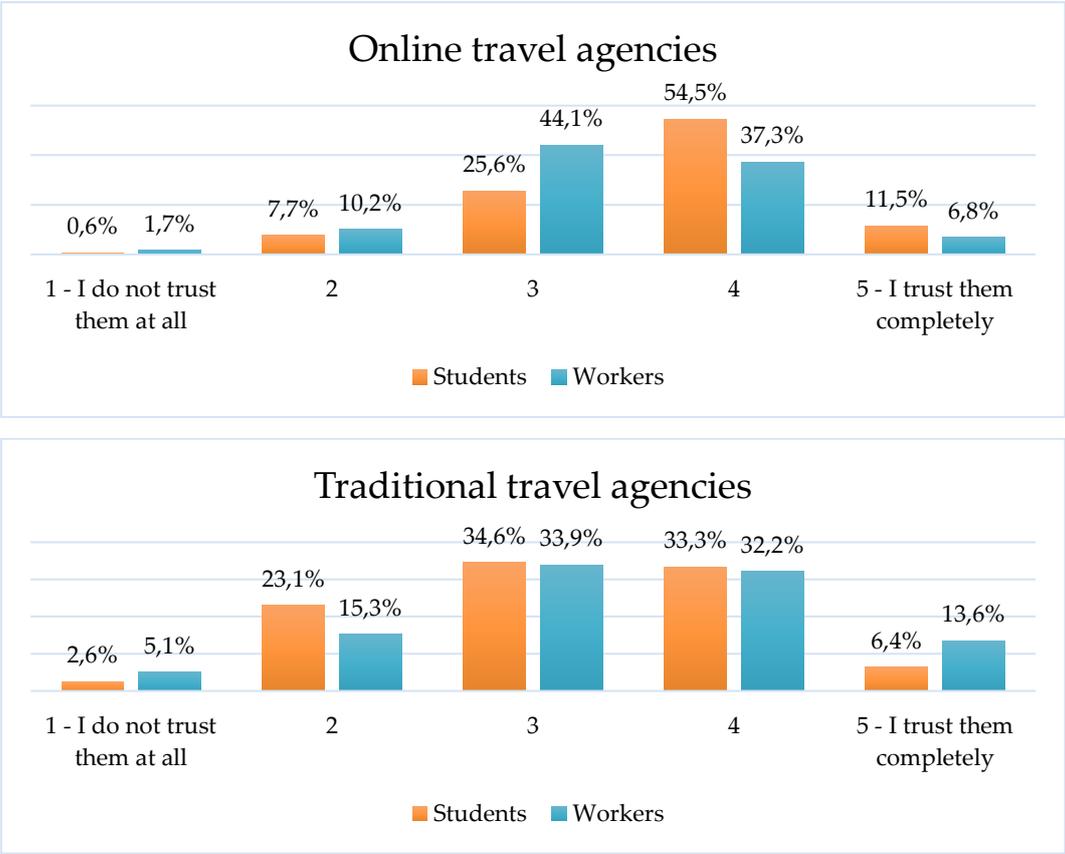


Figure 15 – Trust towards OTAs and traditional travel agencies

Concerning the supplier websites, students (40.4%) trust them while 39.0% of workers are neutral and more than 28.8% don't rely on them (Figure 16). This because they are sources in which the author is interested in publishing a specific content.

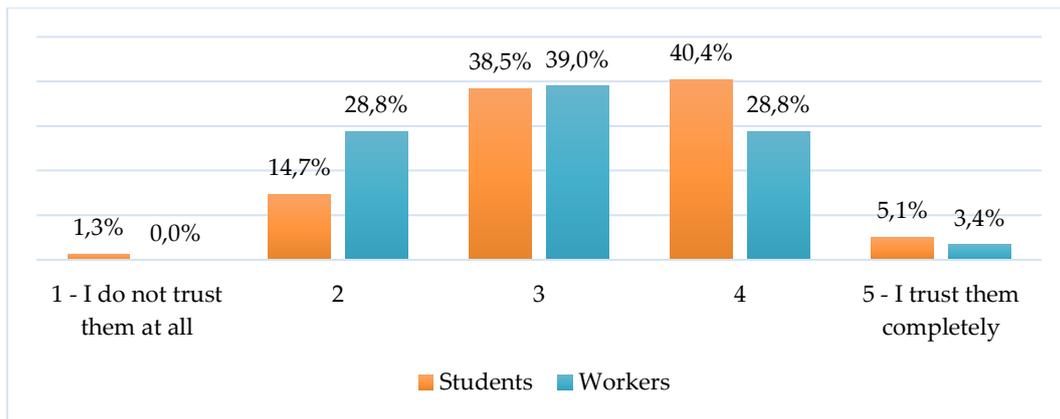


Figure 16 – Trust towards supplier websites

Finally, considering social networks, no worker has answered to trust them completely (Figure 17). Most of them (45.8%) are neutral, even if more than 6% do not trust them at all. With regards to students, it is possible to identify three groups: 1) 28.8% of students don't trust social networks; 2) 32.1% of this sample is neutral towards this type of source and 3) 28.8% of students trust them. From the analysis of the graph, it seems that social networks are the least trusted information sources.

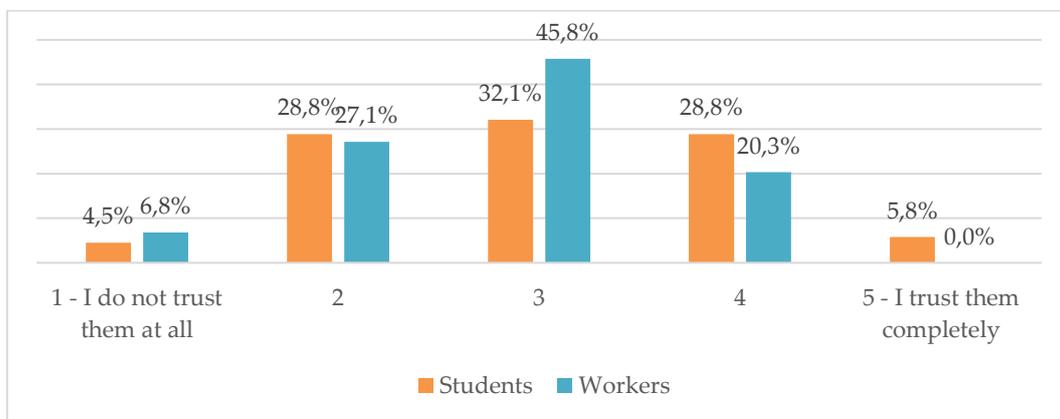


Figure 17 – Trust towards social networks

Regarding trust issue, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H 3.1 Information provided by friends and relatives are more trustworthy for workers

The Mann-Whitney U test does not confirm the hypothesis since the p-value is 0.386 ($p > 0.05$). The test was also run for the other sources. From this it turns out that there are significant differences in relation to supplier websites, review websites and OTAs (Table 9).

	Mann – Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Asymp. Sig. (1-tailed)
Friends and relatives	4489.000	0.772	0.386
Supplier websites	3779.000	0.032	0.016*
Review websites	3797.500	0.034	0.017*
Social networks	4059.000	0.163	0.081
OTAs	3589.500	0.007	0.003*
Traditional travel agencies	4172.000	0.269	0.134

Table 9 – Mann-Whitney U test: level of trust towards some information sources

4.4. The power of reviews in the selection process

While selecting the accommodation, tourists ask for recommendations to friends and relatives and read reviews published by other travellers to narrow down choices. Review websites represent for both samples one of the main information sources (paragraph 4.2). And their usefulness is confirmed by the fact that 98% of students and 96.6% of workers read reviews before making the final decision (Figure 18).

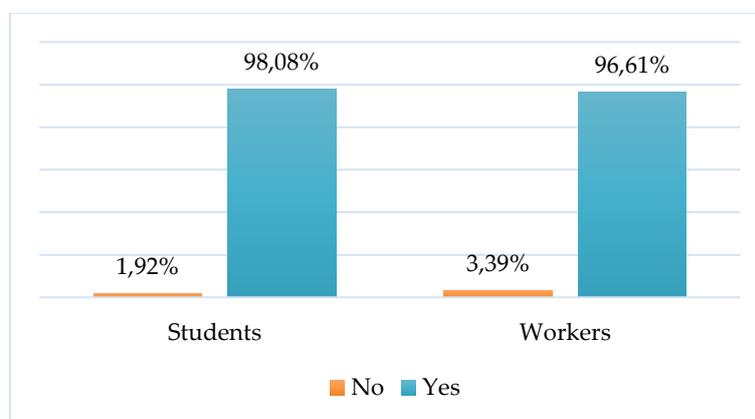


Figure 18 – Do travellers read reviews?

Almost 45% of students and 42% of workers find reviews very important, while 40% of students and 34% of workers find them important (Figure 19).

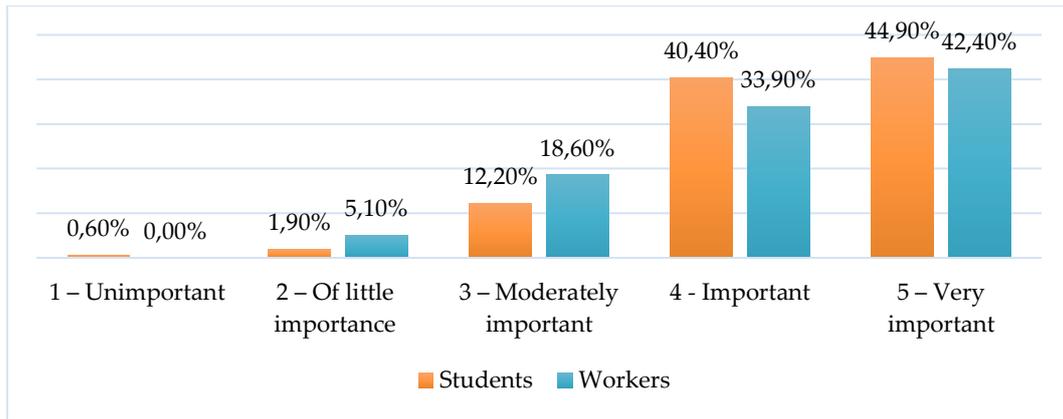


Figure 19 – Level of importance for reviews

With regard to the level of importance, the following hypothesis has been tested:

H 4.1 – Students find reviews more important than workers

To test the hypothesis a Mann-Whitney U test was performed. Since the $p > 0.05$, significant differences are not detected and the H4.1 is not confirmed ($U = 4271.000$, $N_s = 156$, $N_w = 59$, $p = 0.190$, one-tailed).

To further examine the importance of reviews, the question: “How many reviews do you read before reserving the accommodation?” was asked. 34.0% of students and 37.3% of workers have declared to read 4 – 8 reviews in the process of selecting the accommodation. However, there is a quite high number of students (34.6%) that read more than 12 reviews (Figure 20).

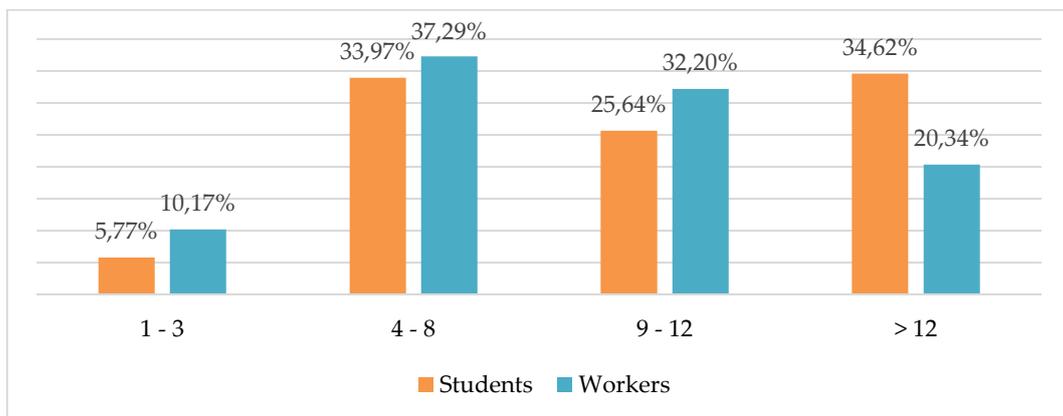


Figure 20 – How many reviews do travellers read?

Concerning the number of reviews read by the two samples, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H 4.2 – Students read more reviews than workers

The Chi-square test does not confirm H 4.2 since the $p = 0.184$ and so significant differences are not observed between the two groups and the number of reviews they read ($\chi^2(3) = 4.837, p = 0.184$).

To better understand the impact of reviews, respondents were asked to indicate whether they have booked an accommodation without reviews (Figure 21) and whether they have changed their mind after reading reviews (Figure 22). It turns out that reviews are very influential. 77.6% of students and 84.7% of workers have never reserve an accommodation without reviews. In addition, almost 80% of both students and workers have changed their mind after reading reviews.

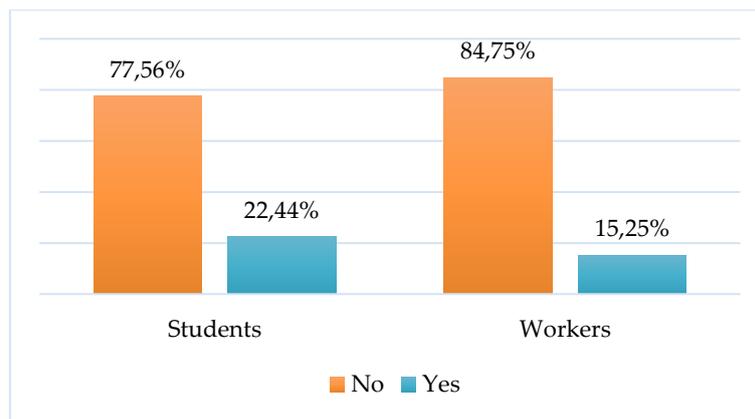


Figure 21 – Have you ever book an accommodation without reviews?

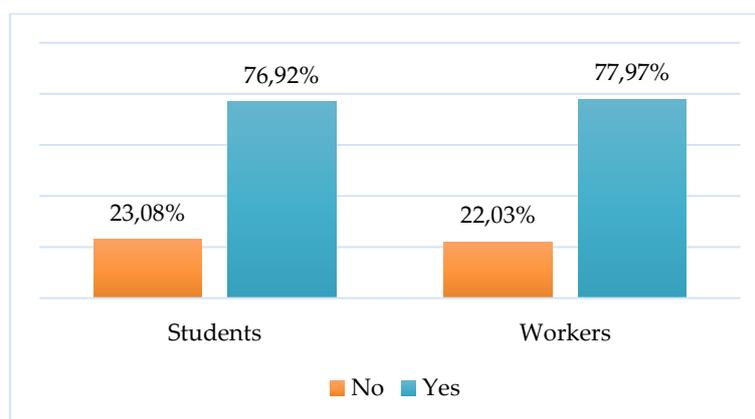


Figure 22 – Have you ever changed your mind after reading reviews?

Respondents were also asked to rate (1 = Extremely unlikely, 5 = Extremely likely) their likelihood of choosing an accommodation with either positive or negative reviews. The analysis reports that it is extremely likely for 57% of students and 52% of

workers to book an accommodation with positive reviews (Figure 23), while it is extremely unlikely for 39% of students and 40% of workers to reserve an accommodation with negative reviews (Figure 24).

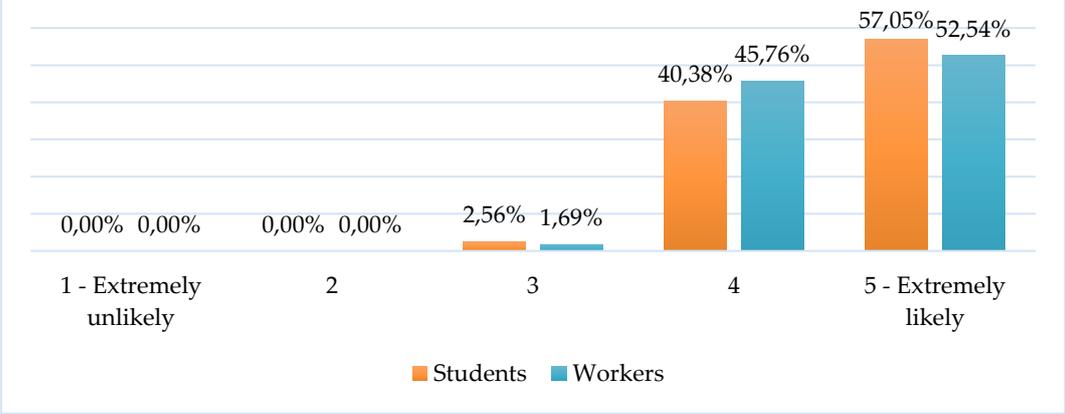


Figure 23 – Likelihood of choosing an accommodation with positive reviews

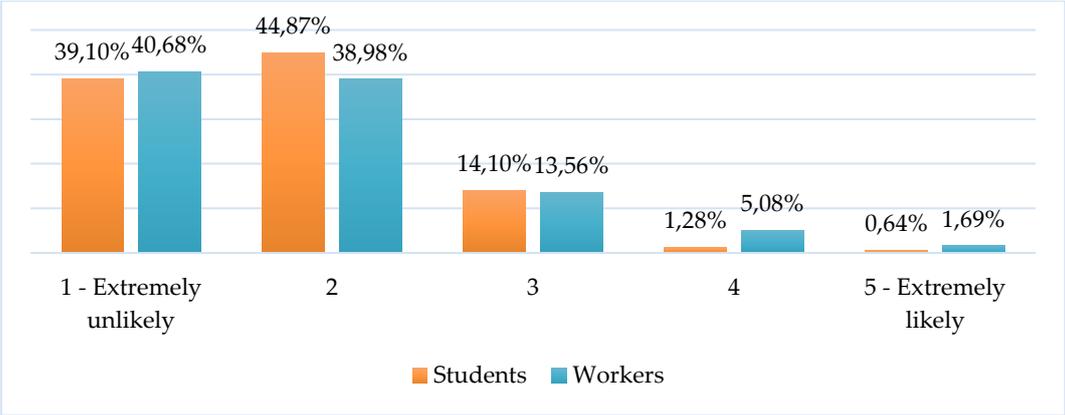


Figure 24 – Likelihood of choosing an accommodation with negative reviews

An accommodation, to be taken into consideration, should be reviewed with an average score higher than 3.3 for both students and workers. Both are concerned with the cleanness of the accommodation and the position (e.g. proximity to the city centre, airport). However, what it is interesting in these results is the “staff”, which represents the least factor considered by both students and workers (Figure 25).

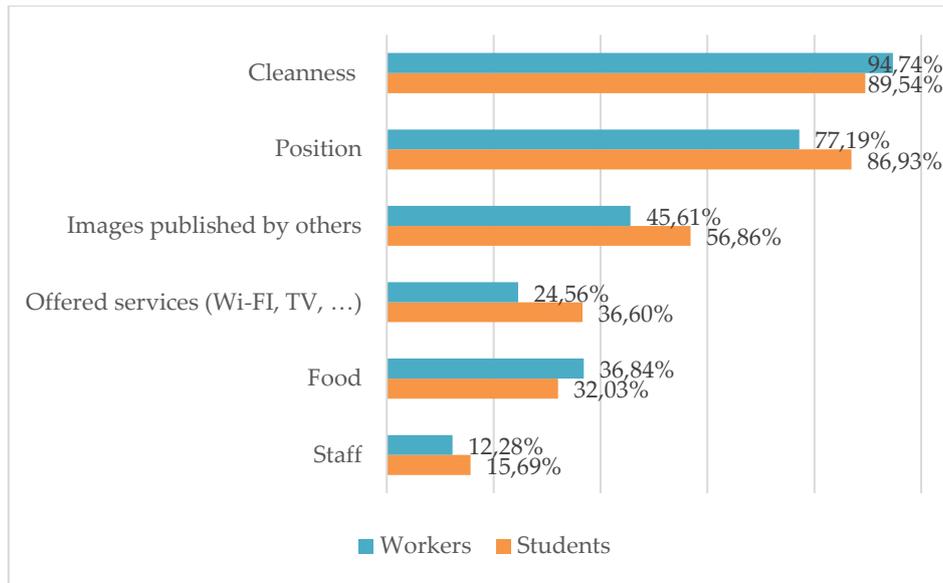


Figure 25 – Factors that travellers consider when reading reviews

With regard to the element taken into consideration, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H 4.3 The elements considered while reading the reviews depend on the type of traveller

The Chi-square test reveals that H 4.3 is rejected for all elements except for the position (Table 10). The latter presents a $p \leq 0.05$ highlighting the dependence of the variable position to the type of traveller ($\chi^2 (1) = 3.826, p = 0.05$).

	Pearson's chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Cleanness	1,714	1	0.190
Position	3.826	1	0.05*
Images published by others	2.351	1	0.125
Offered services (Wi-Fi, TV, ...)	2.123	1	0.145
Food	0.527	1	0.468
Staff	0.430	1	0.512

Table 10 – Pearson's chi-square test: factors that travellers consider when reading reviews

As for information sources, both groups tend to combine more review websites. On average, they visit two websites to read reviews about the accommodation.

The most employed website is Booking.com. The reason of this is the fact that it offers not only the possibility to compare accommodation but also to read reviews. The second most used channel is TripAdvisor which also allow to compare prices (Figure 26).

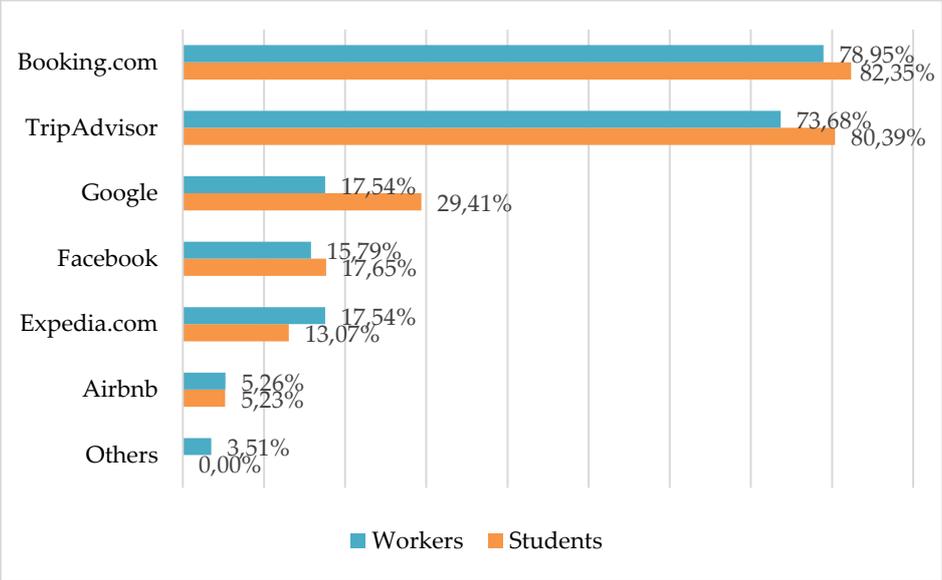


Figure 26 – Most visited review websites

4.5. Booking process

After evaluating the possible options and choosing the best one, travellers should book their accommodation. The incredible growth of Internet and social media has determined also the increment of tools useful to book an accommodation online. It has become so powerful that almost every student and worker has booked online at least once (Figure 27).

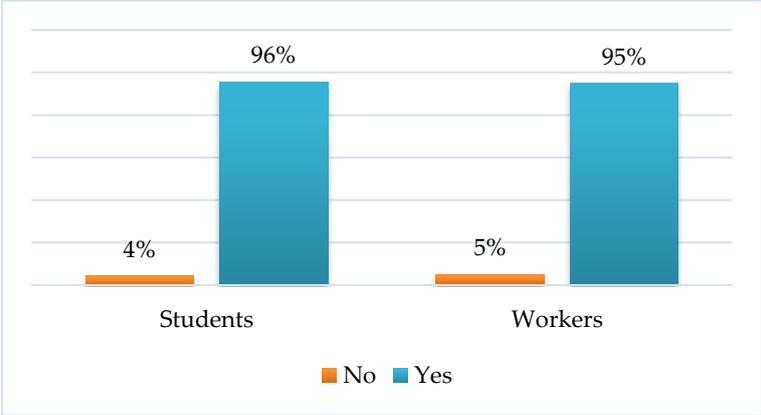


Figure 27 – Online booking

92% of students and 93% of workers use OTAs to reserve their accommodation and the most employed are Booking.com and Airbnb (Figure 28). In addition, some travellers like to book directly through the official website of the supplier. Because of the continuous evolution of Internet and its tools, there are only few travellers, both students and workers, that make reservation contacting the traditional travel agencies.

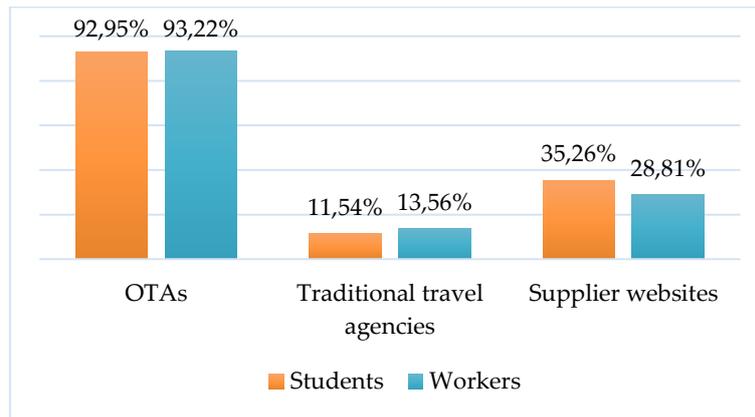


Figure 28 – Booking intermediaries

Regarding the booking process, the following hypothesis has been tested:

H 5.1 There are differences in the use of OTAs

The test does not confirm H 5.1 which means that no differences are detected in the use of OTAs by both samples. This is also true for the other intermediaries (Table 11).

	Pearson's Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig.
OTAs	0.005	1	0.944
Supplier websites	0.798	1	0.372
Traditional travel agencies	0.164	1	0.685

Table 11 – Pearson's chi-square test: intermediaries used to book the accommodation

Concerning the devices used during the booking process, the study confirms that some travellers return to their PCs during this activity. This phenomenon is more evident in students rather than workers. 65% of students book using PCs observing a 5% decrease of smartphone users in this stage, while 61% of workers use PCs to reserve

an accommodation against 59% that use this tool in information searching (Figure 29).

Figure 1

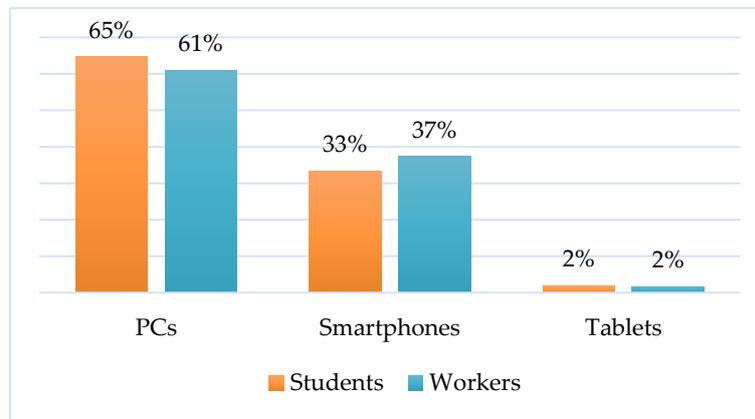


Figure 29 – Devices used in the booking process

4.6. Limitations

As with any empirical research, some limitations should be considered. Firstly, the majority of respondents were female. In this sense, it would be interesting to study the male perspective and observe if there are significant differences between male and female. Secondly, the number of workers who answered the questionnaire is smaller than that of the students.

Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to further investigate why travellers prefer not to use their smartphones during the travel accommodation decision-making process, since more and more people spend a lot of time using this device.

Finally, this study was conducted only in one country (Italy) and this limits the generalization of the result in other contexts.

5. Conclusions

In recent years, the Internet has become essential for people's everyday life. Thanks to its development and the rise of social media, they can communicate saving money and time, search for information and buy products and services online. The Internet has become fundamental also for companies. This because this powerful tool is able to influence the behaviour of customers during all stages of the decision-making process.

Customers are influenced by the content published on the Web and on social media. Images, videos, reviews, but also comments and others' opinions are the main elements able to help customers in the decision but also to make them change their mind. This is true for every single industry. For this reason, businesses have started to develop their strategies based on the Internet and all its tools.

The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of social media and other Internet tools on the travel accommodation industry, which is one of the most important subsectors of both tourism and hospitality industry. The focus was on identifying the online behaviour of two different groups of leisure travellers: university students and workers aged 26 – 35.

After reviewing the available literature and analysing data collected through an online survey, the following conclusion have been reached.

Both students and workers travel 2-4 times a year spending at least one night away from their home. This means that most of them should search for an accommodation. They can choose among different types. Students prefer to rent a house or an apartment even if there is also a slightly preference towards bed-and-breakfast. This is mainly due the fact that the price is the most important factor considered by this sample. Workers, on the other hand, prefer to book a room in a hotel. To decide, they are mainly influenced by the cleanness of the accommodation rather than its price. For both samples, service quality and position are other two important factors to consider when evaluating the possible options.

The online travel accommodation decision making process is composed of three stages: 1) the evaluation process, 2) the selection process and 3) the booking process.

In the evaluation process customers search for information about the available accommodations. This activity is done by combining different sources. In this sense students tend to combine more sources than workers since the former pay more attention to the price but also because they have more time to spend searching for information.

With regards to the sources used in this part of the decision-making process, differences between the two samples are not detected. Both students and workers employ first review websites and OTAs. Review websites are used because they are perceived as more trustworthy since reviews are published by other customers who do not receive money. OTAs, on the other hand, provide customers with more alternatives. In this way, they can compare the possible options and make a more objective decision. Traditional travel agencies, but also travel blogs are used less because most of the time they receive money for suggesting some accommodation and so are perceived as no reliable.

Even if nowadays more and more people spend a lot of time using mobile devices, in the search for information about the accommodation they use mainly PCs.

The second stage of the decision-making process is the selection process. At this stage, review websites play a key role in influencing customers. Almost every student and worker read the opinions published by other travellers before making the final decision. Students read more than 12 reviews while workers read 4 – 8 reviews.

Online reviews are an important source for travellers to make accommodation decision. Both students and workers have declared to have never book an accommodation without reviews and to have changed their mind after reading reviews about the accommodation they wanted to reserve. In addition, negative reviews make customer's attitudes towards a specific accommodation more unfavourable while positive reviews make customers more likely to book that accommodation. This shows that online reviews have the power to influence attitudes and opinions of customers.

Customers tend to consider an accommodation if it has an average score higher than 3.3 out of 5. While reading reviews, both samples pay attention mainly to cleanliness and position while staff is not considered so important. As in the evaluation process, both students and workers combine more review websites and the preferred sources are Booking.com and TripAdvisor.

The final stage of the decision-making process is the booking process. Almost every student and worker has booked online at least once. They use mainly OTAs and the most employed are Booking.com and Airbnb. Some students and workers use also the supplier website. Only few travellers make the reservation contacting brick and mortar travel agencies. This underlines the increasing relevance of OTAs and the decreasing use of traditional travel agencies. In addition, students that have searched information using smartphone tend to return to their PCs to reserve the accommodation.

A key factor in the online environment is trust. The study reveals that students tend to trust review websites more than information provided by people they know. This is not true for workers who trust more friends and family rather than other travellers. With regards to travel agencies, students trust the online one while are indifferent towards the traditional ones. Workers, on the other hand, do not trust completely both online and offline travel agencies. Concerning supplier websites, it is not possible to express whether workers trust these sources since some of them have declared to trust them while others not. Interesting it is the level of trust towards social networks. Workers tend not to rely on them while some students trust them and others not.

Table 12 summarises the main similarities and differences between the two samples under examination. It suggests that university students and workers aged 26 – 35 present similarities in most of the aspects analysed. The only differences detected are related to the factors considered when evaluating the accommodation, the accommodation types, the reviews and the trust towards information sources.

	Similarities	Differences	
		Students	Workers
Travellers' preferences:			
• Travel frequency	2 – 4 times a year		
• Accommodation types		House/apartment, bed-and-breakfast	Hotel
• Factors influencing the decision		Price	Cleanness
Evaluation process:			
• No. of information sources	More than one		
• Information sources used	Review websites, OTAs		
Selection process:			
• Level of importance for reviews	Considered very important		
• No. of reviews read		More than 12 reviews	4 – 8 reviews
• Elements taken into consideration	Cleanness, position		
Booking process:			
• Online or offline booking?	Online booking		
• Intermediaries used to make a reservation	OTAs		
Trust:			
• Who do they trust?		Review websites, OTAs	Friends and relatives
• Who don't they trust?			Social networks

Table 12 – Similarities and differences between the two samples

Appendix 1 – The questionnaire

Social media e la scelta dell'alloggio

Il seguente questionario mira ad individuare qual è l'impatto che Internet ed in particolare i social media hanno sulla scelta dell'alloggio nella fase di pianificazione di un viaggio. I dati qui raccolti saranno di aiuto alla realizzazione della mia tesi.

1. Genere

- Femmina
- Maschio

2. Età

- < 18
- 19 – 25
- 26 – 35
- 36 – 45
- 46 – 55
- > 56

3. Professione

- Operaio
- Impiegato
- Dirigente
- Imprenditore
- Studente
- Pensionato
- Libero professionista
- Disoccupato
- Altro: _____

4. Viaggi principalmente per:

- Lavoro
- Motivi personali

5. In un anno, quanto spesso viaggi pernottando almeno una notte fuori dalla località in cui vivi?

- Una volta l'anno
- 2 - 4 volte l'anno
- Più di 5 volte l'anno
- Mai

6. Quando viaggi preferisce alloggiare in

- Hotel
- Appartamento/casa in affitto
- Bed-and-breakfast
- Ostello
- Campeggio
- Villaggio turistico
- Agriturismo
- Altro: _____

7. Hai mai alloggiato nella stessa struttura per più di due volte?

- Sì
- No

8. Quanto sono importanti i seguenti fattori nella scelta dell'alloggio?

	Per niente importanti	Poco importanti	Abbastanza importanti	Importanti	Molto importanti
Prezzo	<input type="radio"/>				
Pulizia	<input type="radio"/>				
Qualità dei servizi offerti	<input type="radio"/>				
Posizione (vicinanza al centro città, all'aeroporto,)	<input type="radio"/>				
Offerte e promozioni	<input type="radio"/>				
Esperienze passate	<input type="radio"/>				
Metodo di pagamento	<input type="radio"/>				

9. Hai mai prenotato un alloggio online?

Sì

No

10. Se no, hai mai ricercato informazioni riguardo l'alloggio online?

Sì

No

11. Quali risorse utilizzi principalmente nella ricerca di informazioni riguardanti l'alloggio?

Amici e parenti

Siti di recensione (TripAdvisor)

Motori di ricerca (Google, Yahoo, ...)

Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)

Sito web della struttura

Agenzia di viaggio online (Booking.com, Expedia, Edreams, ...)

Blog sui viaggi

Agenzia di viaggio tradizionale

Forum

Altro: _____

12. Con quale dispositivo viene fatta la ricerca di informazioni?

Computer

Tablet

Smartphone

13. Hai mai visitato il sito web di una struttura dopo averla individuata su siti come Booking.com, Expedia, ... ?

Sì

No

14. Qual è il tuo livello di fiducia nei confronti delle seguenti fonti?

	1 - Non mi fido per niente	2	3	4	5 - Mi fido completamente
Amici e parenti	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sito web della struttura	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Siti di recensione (TripAdvisor)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Agenzie di viaggio online (Booking.com, Expedia)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Agenzie di viaggio tradizionale	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. Leggi le recensioni prima di prenotare?

- Sì
- No

16. Quanto sono importanti le recensioni nella valutazione delle alternative?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Per niente importanti	<input type="radio"/>	Molto importanti				

17. Quali siti utilizzi maggiormente per leggere le recensioni?

- TripAdvisor
- Booking.com
- Expedia.com
- Facebook
- Google
- Altro: _____

18. Quali elementi ti portano a scegliere un determinato sito?

- Grafica del sito
- Consigliato da amici/parenti/conoscenti
- Presenza di immagini
- Pubblicità
- Primo tra i risultati offerti dai motori di ricerca (ad esempio Google, Yahoo)

19. Hai mai prenotato un alloggio senza recensioni?

- Si
- No

20. Hai mai cambiato idea sulla scelta della struttura dopo aver letto le recensioni?

- Si
- No

21. Quante probabilità ci sono che prenoti una struttura con recensioni positive?

1	2	3	4	5		
Improbabile	<input type="radio"/>	Molto probabile				

22. Quante probabilità ci sono che prenoti una struttura con recensioni negative?

1	2	3	4	5		
Improbabile	<input type="radio"/>	Molto probabile				

23. Su una scala da 1 a 5, qual è il voto minimo che una struttura deve avere per essere presa in considerazione?

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

24. Quante recensioni leggi prima di prenotare?

- 1 - 3
- 4 - 8
- 9 - 12
- > 12

25. Quali elementi prendi in considerazione quando legge le recensioni?

- Pulizia
- Wi-Fi
- Cibo
- Posizione
- Immagini pubblicate da altri ospiti della struttura
- Staff

Altro: _____

26. Quali intermediari utilizzi principalmente per prenotare l'alloggio?

- Booking.com
- Expedia
- Airbnb
- Hostelworld
- Agoda
- eDreams
- Sito web ufficiale della struttura
- Cofanetti regalo (Smartbox, Emozione3)
- Agenzia di viaggio tradizionale
- Altro: _____

27. Con quale dispositivo hai prenotato l'ultima volta la struttura?

- Computer
- Tablet
- Smartphone

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