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**The Role of Culture in Word-of-Mouth
Generation And Online Reviews.**

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The Example Travel & Tourism Service

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Introduction

Customer decision journey is affected by deep changes nowadays. It is characterised by intertwining relationships between offline and online touch points that cannot be totally controlled by companies. Today, customer journey starts offline and continues online or viceversa, asking to companies to adapt their business models in order to answer to these quests. An example is offered by Tourism and Travel Sector that shows a growing potential, as the last World Economic Forum's Report on Tourism and Travel argues: *"In 2018, according to the World Tourism Organisation, the number of international tourist arrivals worldwide reached 1.4 billion, two years before it was predicted to do so. That year also marked the seventh year in a row where the growth in tourism exports (+4%) exceeded the growth in merchandise exports (+3%). Given this rapid pace of growth, the prediction that international arrivals will reach 1.8 billion by 2030 may be conservative"* (World Economic Forum, 2019).

Travel experience has changed thanks to the advent of worldwide web since 25 years. The earliest Travelweb.com, a comprehensive catalogue of hotel properties, involved little components to make bookings. The rest is history. From then on, events followed each other, and strengthened the idea that traditional travel agencies were changing their role. Not only could travellers book vacations online, but the process of giving opinions was going to be democratised. This was possible thanks to the birth of the social platform TripAdvisor, that gave the possibility to travellers to share reviews and opinions about hotels and restaurants.

This brings to introduce Word-of-Mouth (WOM) construct, which is a form of communication that has always existed. What has changed is that, in the past Word-of-Mouth was passed orally and with a narrow ring of friends and its boundaries were geographically and temporally limited. Online Travel Agency (OTA) platforms and social network sites have revolutionised WOM: people feel engaged and have fun on them, and provide helpful opinions that simplify travel decisions of other people. The thesis considers that there are different motivators which push people to speak favourably or unfavourably about products: it highly depends on product involvement, and since Tourism & Travel sector is a highly involving, the likelihood of talking about it is enhanced.

Tie strength, homophily, trust, and interpersonal influence are some triggering factors which move WOM, and they are reinforced by the inner characteristics of social commerce. Positive or negative reviews that are left after a travel experience, will be read by other potential guests, and whether they are positive or negative, they will affect the decision of booking or not booking. This is the reason why, customer satisfaction is the source of hoteliers' competitive advantage, and it is seen as revenues' generator.

Before contextualising the phenomena of WOM within Tourism & Travel sector, the researcher has analysed general literature on customer experience and customer journey map. The circular shape aims at reducing the gap between initial consideration and purchase: in the middle of these two steps, the customer searches actively information and evaluates alternatives (Court et. al, 2009). It is right in this moment that, reviews are taken into account as a precious source of information. Thus, in Chapter II, the focus on WOM and its main constructs will allow to grasp the importance of managing this tool, and to comprehend the opportunity of improving the experiences, as well as the importance of listening carefully to the external context. It is important to know what triggers WOM as well as how it impacts on others' purchasing decisions and buying behaviours. Leveraging WOM also reflects the shift from traditional advertising toward new forms of communication that put at the centre the customer as the main character.

Heading back to Travel and Tourism sector, it is worth recalling that this field is connoted by complexity (its multiple features are explained in Chapter III) since there is a huge set of involved variables. Complexity is also enhanced by the presence of multiple tourists coming from worldwide, requiring the application of cross-cultural marketing techniques. As a matter of fact, travel experience and the subsequent intention of leaving reviews, as well as their content are affected by numerous variables: motivations, attitudes, personal traits, habits - which are deeply rooted in culture (Chapter IV). A recurring technique among marketers, in order to investigate the content of reviews, is given by content analysis. There are many studies which have investigated the issue, as to define the factors that satisfy people during their travel experience (as it is explained in Chapter V).

From a cross-cultural perspective, which are the factors that satisfy guests coming from different countries? Are there any differences when evaluating cross-cultural reviews? These will be the leading questions of the analysis, which will guide the researcher. The last part of the dissertation aims at providing an exploratory research to investigate the problem. In Chapter V, a sample of hotels is selected following a series of criterion, and after having read available researches carried out by Tourist Regional Office of Venice. These data offer information about tourists' arrivals, overnights, and presences, not only

with reference to the internal market, but also to foreign markets. Venice has been chosen as the research element, not only because it is where the researcher is concluding the Master degree, but also because it is the main example of an overcrowded city that attracts millions of tourists from all over the world, with lots of peculiarities. The curiosity of how people perceive the Italian offering, and especially that of the floating city, has pushed her to investigate more. Moreover, the passion for foreign languages, that have been studied from the high school and by attending language course during the Master, has stimulated her to analyse reviews adopting a cross-cultural perspective.

Cross-cultural differences exist: people have dissimilar habits, values, and communicate differently. Moreover, communication continues also after the experience, when a guest leaves a review, that summarises the experience at the hotel. Grasping what people want to communicate when writing texts, good or bad intentions is necessary to for hoteliers in order to answer to feedbacks, complaints, and compliments correctly, avoiding ambiguity, and managing long-lasting relationships. To sum up, communication is the basis of Tourism & Travel sector, since consumption is based on a continual “exchange” between guests and service providers.

Furthermore, language. It is a cultural element that can be mislead, especially when analysing reviews, since text might exclude the pragmatic content, context, and some helpful elements which simplify interpretation. People from different countries are unlike because of social, economic, and political factors, and within the new context of social media, they also tend to adopt distinct tools to communicate each other. Thanks to the aid of NVivo software, which gives the opportunity to catalogue, categorise, and organise data, collected reviews from Booking.com™ are investigated semantically, as to provide with a first interpretation and exploratory research about what foreign guests evaluate and consider of a travel experience, with a view to the accommodation service. However, the sample that should be a significant representation of the population presents some limits that will be explained in Chapter V.

The conclusive part of the thesis summarises results and draws the lines, as to offer to hoteliers and tourist marketers a general framework in order to handle with cross-cultural reviews, leveraging them as powerful tool, that add value to the overall customer experience, taking into account the subtle line between subjectivity and cultural traits.

Chapter I

Fundamentals of customer experience and customer satisfaction

1.1 Introduction

People live in an unprecedented era, where customers have the power and exert it in a huge varieties of ways. From online reviews until websites and social networks, they impact on final purchase decisions. Customers are more informed about products, services, pricing and competitors (Stein and Ramaseshan, 2015). Literature emphasises that some changes have definitely reversed the rules of the game. Hot topics marketers have to deal with increase exponentially from technological developments to new communicative processes, involving a new generation of users that do not want to receive passively mass marketing campaigns, rather they seek for more interaction with firms and want to live real emotional experiences (Walter, Cleff, and Chu, 2013; Stankevich, 2017).

It is the era of User Generated Content (UGC) and Social Media Marketing (SMM), and people help others through information, positive and negative reviews about their own brand and product experience. The idea is perfectly in line with the so-called “sharing economy” based on some basic assumptions - for instance collaboration. Additionally, the advent of “MilleXZials”, that combines generation X and Z together with Millennials, who seem to show similar consumption behaviours (Deloitte Insights, 2018).

This is grounded also on the concept of physical and virtual communities made by people that aggregate themselves in order to share interests, passions, ideas and beliefs affecting the entire consumer decision making process. Integrated, fragmented and infinite channels are the main witnesses of this communicative revolution that has encompassed anthropological and cultural aspects of everyday lives, shifting from the typical one-to-one toward two-way communication (Di Fraia, 2015; Belch and Belch, 2017). Brand experience has become the commonplace, as “customers want to be entertained, stimulated, emotionally affected and creatively challenged” (Schmitt, 1999; Keller et al., 2012, p. 202), reflecting a new plea.

A satisfactory journey pushes customers to repeat the experience and, to suggest the product or service to other peers. Pre-purchase and post-purchase steps along the consumer decision journey are becoming decisive to influence decision-making process. However, it must be recognised that each cognitive process is subjective, and it is moved by several factors, such as age, sex, education, lifestyle, preferences, cultural traits, habits, and so on and so forth (Lanzini, 2018). As a consequence, in the next paragraphs it will be explained that customer experience is the sum of progressive moments in which customer satisfaction is a *conditio sine qua non* customer loyalty emerges.

The main objective of Chapter I is to comprehend customer experience and customer decision journey, as an aggregate of relationships and touch points between the brand and its customers. Then, the focus will move toward customer satisfaction, particularly the process through which people generate positive and negative Word-of-Mouth, a valuable and effortless tool for companies. The idea of customer experience, as generally considered, will be translated to the more complex, intangible, and subjective case of Travel & Tourism sector (T&T), that will be presented in Chapter III.

1.2 From the old “funnel” to the new customer decision journey

Defining customer experience has become a thrilling issue given the growing complexity of marketplaces and ecosystems. Customer experience is a debatable topic, and consultancy firms as well as business schools struggle with it in order grasp how to engage, educate and entertain their audiences (Barwitz and Maas, 2018; Thompson, 2017; Rosenbaum, Otalora and Ramírez, 2017).

Literature has currently stressed the importance of studying consumer behaviour in order to understand how companies impact on purchase decisions, improve marketing strategies and, thus, be successful on the market (Stein et al., 2015; Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Hamilton and Price, 2019; Belch and Belch, 2017). Stankevich (2017) draws a meaningful framework, explaining behavioural economics’ theories which have been elaborated since 1960 (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Behavioural economics theories between 1960 and 2009.

Model name	Author, date	Description
Simon Model	Simon, H., 1960	People do not follow a rational process in making decision, but it is based on three conceptually divided stages: intelligence activity, design activity, and choice activity.
Nicosia Model	Nicosia, F. M., 1966	The model is based on communication process between the customer and the brand.
Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell Model	Engel J.F, Kollat D.T., and Blackwell R.D., 1968	The main components of the model are: input, information processing, decision process, and variables which influence the decision process. Five stages are involved - need recognition, search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and outcomes.
Sheth, Newman and Gross Model	Sheth J.N., Newman B.I. & Gross B.L., 1991	Five consumption values influence consumer choice behaviour: functional, social, conditional, emotional, and epistemic values.
McKinsey's dynamic Model of consumer decision journey	Court D, Elzinga D., Mulder S. & Vetnik O.J., 2009	The model is circular and includes four steps: initial consideration; active evaluation, or the process of searching potential purchases; purchase; and post-purchase, when consumer experience them.

Source: Stankevich, 2017.

1.2.1 From Herbert Simon to McKinsey's dynamic model

To begin with, the main rational assumption¹ on which the decision making process was based has been surpassed by Herbert Simon arguing that the hypothesis that people followed a rational methodology to make decisions was wrong. His main pillar was contemplated by the following scholars, who advanced a linear sequential approach to consumer behaviour. For instance, Nicosia Model elaborated in 1966, concentrated on the communication process involving different steps from brands to consumers. Engel, Kollat and Blackwell Model of 1968 (Williams, 2004; Stankevich, 2017) was based on sequential and interdependent elements, through which the client gathered, evaluated and used available information that could lead to the final decision. The traditional funnel made of five stages - need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase and

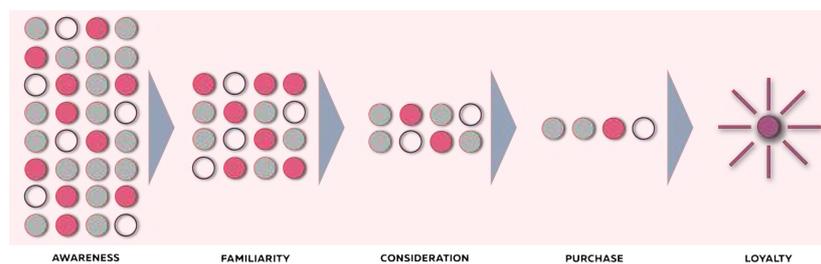
¹ The rational choice paradigm selects the best possible alternative with the highest expected value, based on logic and available information. The theory is grounded on several assumptions, for instance the clarity and compatibility of goals and the possibility to assess the expected outcome of each option. Then, the actor can evaluate simultaneously alternatives, choosing the one with the highest payoff (McShane and Glinow 2009).

outcomes - was maintained and modelled decade after decade, stressing its complexity and the fact that it was not simply sequential and equal for each product and person.

In fact, customer experiences are dissimilar and regard different types of products such as food, clothing, health insurance, bank services, consumer electronics, automotive, and travel. A one-size fits all solution does not reflect the goal of winning customers' attention and loyalty. According to Richardson (2010), building a customer journey is a step-by-step process in which the path is drawn by making sense of all the activities, emotions, barriers, pains, and questions coming up; then, touch points are planned (including websites, advertising and customer care), and lastly ecosystems are merged to unify both customer experience and customer journey (Richardson, 2010).

Some authors have pointed out the relevance of multiple values in evaluating and comparing alternatives and determining what people buy (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991) as well as the advent of the Internet: factors like website marketing, socio-cultural environment and psychological issues have changed the degree to which this process was considered simple, clear and rational. The issue of values as a component of culture will be further explained in Chapter IV, when examining in depth the example of Tourism and Travel sector. Since 2009, the circular customer decision journey replaced the old “funnel”, in which customers started having some brands in mind and marketing had to make purchase choices converge toward just one brand (Court, Elzinga, Mulder and Vetvik, 2009; Stankevich, 2017). As already explained, the old linear funnel (Figure 1.1) was systematic, rigorous and linear and it involved steps such as awareness, familiarity, consideration, purchase, and loyalty (Thygesen, 2018).

Figure 1.1 The old traditional linear funnel.



Source: Court et al., 2009.

1.2.2 Customer experience and customer journey: two sides of the same coin

Customer journey can be shaped like a “pyramid, diamond, hourglasses and so on” (Thygesen, 2018), but the most used figure is a circle. Everything starts from the initial consideration: the customer has a set of potential brands in mind and a need is triggered by internal and external factors. After the initial consideration, the active evaluation stage begins, and the user seeks and gathers as much information as possible and goes shopping. Its length varies according to the type of need at hand, the level of risk, and involvement.

Not only is the journey influenced by past experiences and memories about brands, but also by external factors like advertising and promotion as well as recommendations from family and friends (Stankevich, 2017; Belch and Belch, 2017, Court et al., 2009). When the purchase concerns a durable and expensive item, there might be a delay between the moment of decision and the actual purchase, and if the brand awareness is not high as to reduce the number of considered brands, the user has to actively evaluate a set of elements making the process more complex. An example is given by the purchase of travel products. Travel choices depend on motivations and preferences. This will be deeply explained in Chapter III.

After having searched information and evaluated available alternatives, there is the purchase moment followed by two potential results: satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The degree to which a customer is satisfied or not is also affected by the post-purchase and after-sales experience: customers might be converted into active or passive loyalists, who will purchase again in the future, increasing brand awareness, and recommending the experience to peers through Word-of-Mouth (Court et al., 2009). In a nutshell, customer journey is unpredictable and firms do not detect the control. Customers choose relevant, helpful, and personal brands. They are becoming more and more demanding in terms of assistance and information search (Thygesen, 2018).

Customer experience and customer journey are two sides of the same coin: the former can be better understood through the definition of customer journey (Hamilton and Price, 2019). Additionally, Hogg reveals that “in an ideal world, the journey people take to become loyal customers would be a straight shot down a highway: see your product. Buy your product. Use your product. Repeat” (Hogg, 2018, p.1). It is not so easy: it is a journey made of stops, explorations, discussions.

A definition of customer experience is provided by several scholars within available literature (Richardson, 2010; Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Hogg, 2018; Court et al., 2009), even though today the issue is extremely complex and not commonly held. In fact, when scholars use the term “customer experience”, they refer to questionable definitions: digital experiences and interactions, or retail and customer service (Richardson, 2010). Subjectivity and personality are two main characteristics of customer experience. This is affected by factors that are under firm’s control (service interface, store display, and advertising), but also by elements that the company cannot monitor. Each experience is build upon a series of prerequisites and emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual stimulus that allow customers to live their own experience involving both direct and indirect contact² (Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

Customer journey is used as a metaphor in order to create a sort of connection with abstract constructs. The term “journey” evokes arduous natural events, shorter or longer and, such paths are characterised by unexpected events, fears and failures. This word can be attached to love, relationship, disease, adventure, addiction, creativity, growth, death and many other human experiences (Hamilton et al., 2019). Every customer journey is a sort of “corridor” made of touch points, where companies are used to collect information, and whose values differ from customer to customer as every type of product or service inquires different offering or interaction (Meyer and Schwager, 2007). Customer journey map helps to reduce complexity³, being it a typical diagram (Figure 1.2) showing all the major steps starting from the first engagement in the store as well as the other sharing activities, until the end of the journey, where there might be an upgrading or even the replacement of the brand with a competitor (Richardson, 2010).

Customer journey map is based on several models⁴ that show up their features. First of all, actions (what brings the customer into the next step), but also motivations, involving emotions and feelings. Then, questions and uncertainties, jargon or issues that threat and

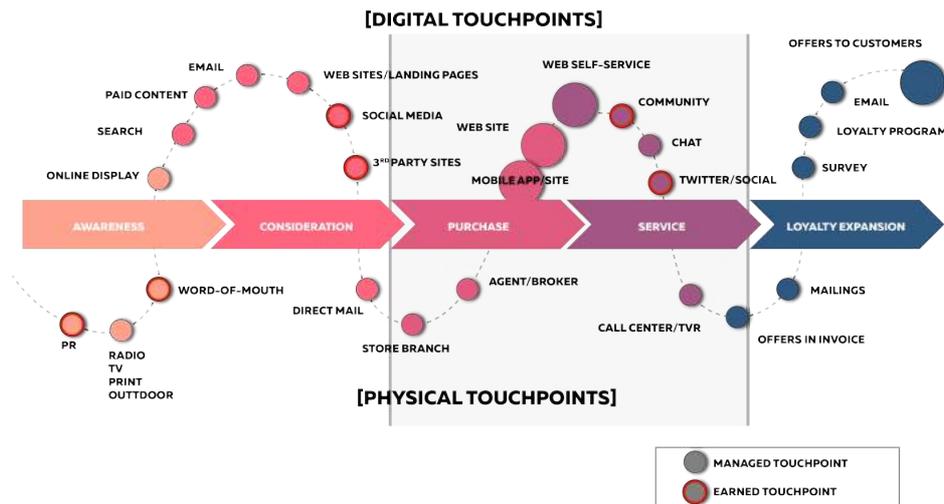
2 Direct contact includes the act of purchasing, use and service, whereas indirect contact is usually unplanned and it is thought up of different elements such as Word-of-Mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews, and so on and so forth (Meyer and Schwager, 2007).

3 Each product, service, retail, and online experience as well as each specific target has its own journey map specifying all these customer-company interactions, which are sometimes even difficult to grasp because there are multiple and fragmented channels (Belch and Belch, 2017).

4 Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) use the sequential incident technique to study the customer experience, defining the involved elements through a survey. Findings included atmospheric, technological, communicative elements, process, customer-customer interaction, customer-employee interaction, and product interaction elements. As a result, elements were combined and the authors found how much they differently affect customer journey’s touch points.

block the process, and finally barriers related to the structure, process, costs and so on (Richardson, 2010). Complexity, overload of information, the explosion of the number of available products and services, and a more educated and informed customer require marketers to adopt a different approach. The advent of Internet has completely changed the way in which customers interact among each other and with the brand itself (Court et al., 2009).

Figure 1.2 A customer journey example.



Work by Hamilton and Price (2019) underlies that new technologies have altered customer journey by introducing channels through which customers interact with providers. Authors also make a distinction between “customer journey” and “consumer journey”. The former is characterised by concrete goals, while the latter is featured by people motivated by abstract goals⁵ (Hamilton and Price, 2019).

1.3 Aligning touch points to create memorable experiences

Companies fighting in the current competitive arena design an innovating, optimised and shaped customer experience, gaining competitive advantages, and providing customers with value. The definition of customer journey map is a long-lasting valuable tool that improves experiences (Hamilton et al., 2019) even though a part of literature claims that

⁵ The example they provide is about medication sector, but it can be extended to food or travel. Imagine a person who is looking for a restaurant to celebrate a job promotion. It involves activities such as searching for a location online, asking for recommendation to colleagues, and friends or can be based on internal factors like past experiences. Customer journey is motivated by a concrete goal of eating and celebrating; consumer journey is grounded by the abstract goals of feeling good, eating healthy with friends and dears, being in a nice atmosphere and so on.

the concept of “experience” is dead. Accordingly, there is the need to turn the customer journey into a more human one (Deloitte Digital, 2018).

By understanding clearly which are the goals, tasks, paths that customers want to accomplish, product and service’s providers will be able to adopt a broader and holistic perspective that maximises information related to the main choice (Hamilton et al., 2019). To call up the concept of “customer journey map”, it “includes different horizontal tracks that capture and describe different aspects of the customers’ interactions, generally related to what a customer is doing, thinking, or feeling for a given touch point in the journey” (Thompson, 2017, p. 72). According to the type of customer experience they are looking at, companies assess how the process is carried out, which the main touch points are and, hence, send the right message to a precise target⁶.

Customers define the essential product’s features they expect to find and the kind of communication messages they want to receive - for instance, the different approach adopted by Microsoft that offers a lot of features in its devices, compared to the minimalist approach by Apple for which “less is more” (Meyer and Schwager, 2017). Through the adoption of a holistic approach, companies improve solution design, identify new network partners, and create new offerings (Epp and Price, 2011). Those who listen carefully to needs, win the attention of their audience and are chosen among the large amount of companies that are competing on the market (Thygesen, 2018).

Lotz, Rabe and Roggenhofer (2018) add that managers usually focus on specific touch points or channels, in a biased way. Having clear in mind how the experience works and which the meaningful moments are is a good predictor which helps companies to align the marketing communication elements, such as the strategy, spending, channel management and messages. Integrated communication and marketing strategy (IMC) increases effectiveness and minimises costs (Court et al., 2009). The main advantage of studying the overall journey is having a broader view on what the valuable features of products and services are with respect to the competitor’s offering but also improving customer satisfaction (Stankevich, 2017).

⁶ Edelman and Singer (2015) provide with useful insights about how companies compete in creating innovative customer journeys in really complex products, such solar panels. Sungevity is the company used as a successful example to describe the usage of new technologies guiding new processes, and creating a more structured path (clients receive information every time they want and need, and the company knows at which stage of the process they are situated, avoiding useless and aggressive marketing campaigns). Another example concerns make up accessories: L’Oreal has created the app “Makeup Genius” which gives the possibility to try different looks real-time, and to purchase products in a very simple way, having a look at tutorials, using similar products, receiving more suggestions, and pushing the client to become a loyalist.

Adopting a customer-centric mind-set requires efforts to the purpose and a transformation of the entire customer experience that is related to an orchestration of all the involved touch points in the process⁷. There is a large amount of studies carried out by Google which focus on the customer journey, and according to Hogg (2018) the customer journey mapping process gives a great understanding of how customers interact and engage with brands, “how products fit in their lives, schedule, goals and aspirations” (Hogg, 2018, p. 1). The proposed process is a well design thinking process, based on ideating, brainstorming, organising thoughts, prototyping and testing in order to change the communication at these touch points knowing what the customer is looking for.

Nowadays, one of the most relevant issue for scholars is related to neuromarketing and emotions. How can companies maximise the emotional connection with customers and induce desired behaviours? Leemon and Magids (2015) found out that there was not a standard lexicon of emotions and after a long anthropological and sociological research they have identified 300 “emotional motivators”. The authors state that clients are emotionally connected “once the brand is in line with their own motivations and it helps them to satisfy deeper needs which are sometimes unconscious” (Leemon and Magids, 2015, p. 16). The assessment of the emotional motivators is even higher than any other indicator, including brand awareness and customer satisfaction, adding that emotions vary according to the sector, brand, touch point and position along the customer decision journey.

1.3.1 Touch points and the multitude of options to connect with clients

Mapping touch points has become extremely relevant in order to observe and watch customers’ reactions, learning how to direct efforts. It is possible to quantify the relative importance of each touchpoint, isolate key transactions, accounts, regions, customer segments, and so on and so forth (Meyer and Schwager, 2007). There is multitude of options to interact with companies and the relevance of each channel varies across the customer journey according to the interaction’s purpose. Literature focuses on how

⁷ The assumption advanced by Meyer and Schwager (2017) is that too many investments are done in Customer Relationship Management softwares, and they stress the difference between CRM and Customer Experience Management (CEM). On one hand, CRM looks at the customer’s story, observing and tracking products and services’ requests, returns, and inquiries. On the other hand, CEM goes more in-depth investigating emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Another difference concerns the moment in which data are recovered: while in the CRM data are tracked after the fact; CEM looks at every single customer’s response to company’s actions. A further affirmed critic is that while customer satisfaction has been heavily documented, customer experience asks for further improvements.

customers get information and where they finally purchase the product. As a matter of fact, people search information in store and buy online giving rise to the “showrooming effect” as well as they can do the reversal action: searching information online and then purchasing offline, a phenomena called as “webrooming” (Barwitz and Maas, 2018).

The integration of diverse and fragmented channels enables marketers to find the right solution that best fits pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase needs. This process depends also on the perceived risk, customer habits, personal characteristics, including socio-demographic and psychographics variables, cultural traits, brand experience, and other factors (Barwitz and Maas, 2018). Marketing literature usually mentions the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)⁸ that involves a series of audience contacts, being opportunities that customers have to enter in touch with a company - through websites, social media, online advertising, and traditional promotional tools such as billboard, print advertising, or broadcasts (Belch and Belch, 2017). It is sometimes difficult to calculate and assess the importance of each touch point⁹, since it depends on product features and on the characteristics of the sector. The usage of TripAdvisor, Booking.com™, Expedia, Trivago platforms involves *unexpected touch points*, such as virtual Word-of-Mouth that passes by means of reviews from peer to peer, and which cannot be totally controlled.

Designing customer experience and customer journey map is an intensive process, and has a big impact on the business in the long term: every company provides with a customer experience that can “be good, bad or indifferent”, but in the end every person gets in touch with the brand. It is up to it whether this experience can be superlative, awful, or industry average (Richardson, 2010, p. 2). Literature concerning customer experience has

8 The issue of IMC means coordinating firm’s promotional elements and other marketing activities that communicate with its customers. Today, there is an extensive variety of promotional tools and companies have started to develop and implement them into synergic integrated promotional plans.

9 Touch points, classified through the taxonomy by Duncan (2013), are made of four basic categories. First, *company-created touch points* which are planned and monitored by the company (advertisements, websites and social media sites, news/press releases, packaging, sale promotions, brochures, point-of-purchase displays and other in-store design issues). Second, the so-called *intrinsic touch points*, a type of direct contact between the user and the company along the buying or using steps that are not completely under the control of the firm.

Then, *unexpected touch points*, totally uncontrollable by organizations and they are one of the most influential type of contact, counting Word-of-Mouth that refers to messages transmitted from person to person not only virtually but also directly, like in point-of-sales. Finally, *customer-initiated touch points* are situated between unexpected and intrinsic one, as regards the possibility of a company to effectively manage them, the direction usually goes from customers toward the company, such as calls, e-mails, contact forms, and so on. Particularly, customer-initiated touch points are strategic since they are related to customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty (Belch and Belch, 2017).

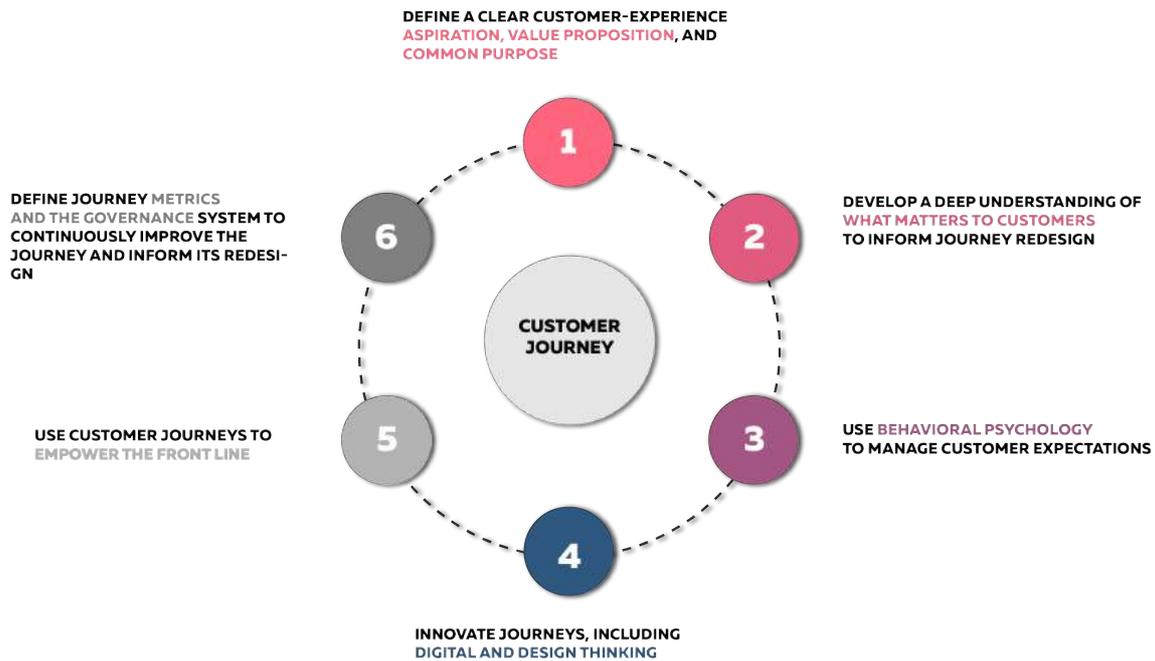
longly expressed the difficulty to control experiences since they involve human perceptions, emotions, cultural aspects and unexpected behaviours. For instance, Richardson states that “people don’t behave like robots, and no matter how well we craft an experience, they will not perceive exactly as we anticipate or hope” (Richardson, 2010, p. 2).

There is no magic formula to plan and design a customer experience. Touch points are concrete and directly controllable by companies. Edelman and Singer (2015) underline the ability of being proactive. Reactive behaviours, improvement of weaknesses and efficiency are not anymore sufficient tactics to gain success. For instance, in the Tourism and Travel sector, proactive personalisation thanks to direct contact with the client, contextual interaction due to a deep knowledge of the journey and innovation of the path by experimenting and analysing dynamically client’s needs are some examples of competitive actions.

Further developments of customer journey theories include more adaptive and customised maps incorporating the pre- and post- components of the path (Hamilton and Price, 2019). Thompson (2017) adds that customer journey maps lack of rigour. Collected data are not sufficient to have a comprehensive idea, they do not involve stakeholders and the actions as well as implications are usually related to the short term. Finally, inferences are not validated or monitored over time. In other words, when gathering information about customers, it is necessarily to plan, avoiding biases and shortcuts when synthesising and analysing data. Otherwise, a lot of useful insights would be wasted due to the lack of experience in examining and extrapolating the right information.

Customer journey map templates are shaped according to the specific context, project goals, and stakeholder expectations. A constructive perspective might include the evolution of the customer experience and touch points. In this way, not only would marketers be able to reach customer satisfaction, but they would also create memorable experiences, inducing customers to repeat purchases, to recommend the brand to others, to enhance brand loyalty, and thus increase the level of brand love. Customer journey map definition (Figure 1.3) is not a static process. It includes several consumer’s features (psychographic variables and cultural traits) through an innovative design thinking and digital approach (Lotz, Raabe, and Roggenhofer, 2018).

Figure 1.3 How to build and design a satisfactory customer experience.



Source: Lotz et al., 2018.

1.4 From customer satisfaction and trust to brand loyalty

A concept that is increasingly related to customer experience is customer satisfaction, since it determines other's choices contemplating, as Schwager and Meyer (2017) argue in their article *"Understanding Customer Experience"*, the need to shift to a more complete framework that includes all the possible touch points between the customer and the firm. Consumer behaviour comprehends several steps, from gap's perception, followed by the searching of information and the evaluation of alternatives. The final stages - purchase, usage, satisfaction/dissatisfaction - are usually the most enjoyable for the customer, since every monetary or non monetary sacrifice is forgotten in order to get the product/service.

At this point, the user has to come to terms with the choice: in some cases the brand keeps the promises and the product/service measures up with the initial expectations. If some traits are not in line with these predictions, disappointment will figure out. Sadness and regret are examples of feelings related not only to the unacceptable offering, but also to the fact that the customers feel introspectively that after a lot of effort, seek and struggle, they have not obtained what they desired. Disappointment is also attached to the brand, that will be banned and not considered anymore for future purchases. As an alternative, satisfaction is transformed into gratefulness and trust towards the company guiding future consumption behaviours (Fiocca and Sebastiani, 2010).

1.4.1 Prior definition of customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction derives from Latin *satis* (enough) and *facere* (to do or make) and it is strictly related to customer's initial expectations, defined as the "anticipation of future consequences based on prior experience, current circumstances, or other source of information" (Oliver, 1997, p. 68) or, as the "belief that something will happen or be the case" (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2019). Satisfaction is not just the fruit of the quality of a product/service, but it highly depends on customer's features, preferences and expectations, hence it is a dynamic parameter (Oliver, 1997). The core idea is the "psychological emotional consumer's evaluation of or the pleasurable degree of" the experience related with it (Song, Wang and Han, 2019, p. 51). It is the customer's response to consumption experience as well as the *ex post* evaluation whether the selected option meets or exceeds initial expectations (Terpstra and Verbeeten, 2013; Xu and Li, 2016).

From a study conducted by Giese and Cote (2000), there are three common elements bringing customer satisfaction's definitions together. First, customer satisfaction is a response, both emotional or cognitive. Second, the answer is the direct consequence of a focal point, such as an expectation, product, or consumption experience. Third, the response happens promptly after an event, like consumption; choice, or after a series of accumulated experiences (Güngör, 2007).

Customer satisfaction is often related not only to a single product or service, rather it depends on the general contact with the company along the customer journey. That is why the consumer-brand relationship comes up to the mind and among the three main paradigms (Table 1.2) proposed by Fournier (Giovanis et al., 2018; Fournier, 1998), the focus can be brought on the third perspective, based on the commitment-trust theory, which looks at the effects of customers' perceptions on customer commitment and brand loyalty manifestations. Accordingly, cognitive and affective dimensions such as brand trust, satisfaction and commitment are manifested through repurchase intention, positive recommendations, and price tolerance.

Table 1.2 Three paradigms of customer satisfaction.

Brand Paradigm	Explanation
Brand relationship quality paradigm	It reflects, partner quality; interdependence; intimacy; commitment; self-connection, and brand passion/love.
Brand love paradigm	It is how consumers connect with brands and it is grounded on feelings such as love, emotional attachment, self-brand connections.
Brand commitment paradigm	This paradigm implies a relationship that negotiates the effects of interdependence, brand trust, and other consumer-brand aspects on the brand performance.

Source: Fournier, 1998; Giovanis, Athanasopoulou, 2018.

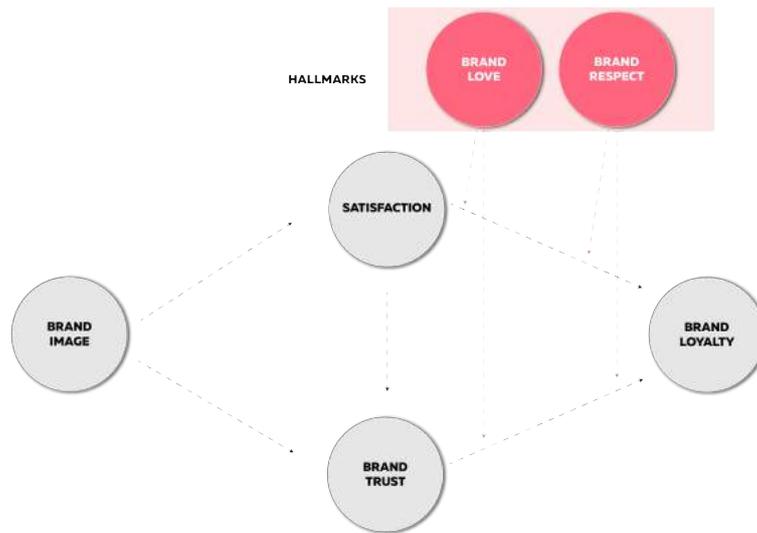
1.4.2 The power of trust in supporting relationships

Customer satisfaction turns into brand loyalty that comprises attitudinal and behavioural aspects. Attitudinal loyalty is customer's expressed attitude or feeling toward a product/service and it is shown in several ways such as repurchase intention, willingness to recommend it to others, price tolerance; whilst, behavioural loyalty is expressed through a repurchase behaviour. Loyalty is the fundamental ingredient to transform a brand into a truly strong brand (Keller, 2009) and it is the reason why so many companies are aiming at strengthening loyalty among their customers.

By work of Song, Wang and Han (2019) in the field of coffee shops, it has been hypothesised that there is a positive relationship between brand image, satisfaction and trust as well as a positive correlation between trust and brand loyalty, where the latter is considered as the logical consequence of customer satisfaction. Brand image plays an important role in affecting consumption decisions, because it is the set of client's beliefs, ideas, and impressions (Keller, Apéria and Georgson, 2012) that can truly change along the experience (Figure 1.4).

Trust is one of the main effects of customer satisfaction, and it is the feeling of security, and confidence toward a person or company which reflects a decrease in uncertainty especially where brand interaction and risk are high. According to Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) there are two sub-dimensions of trust: cognitive and affective. On one hand, cognitive aspects include expectation of brand reliability; consistency; competence, and predictability, on the other hand brand integrity; honesty, and benevolence are comprised into the affective aspects.

Figure 1.4 Relationship between brand image, satisfaction, trust, and brand loyalty.



Source: Song, Wang, and Han, 2019.

By work of Clark, Scolder and Boles (2010) three dimensions of trust (Table 1.3) have been identified: competence; integrity, and benevolence, which are further explained. Competence is the customers’ assumption that the company has knowledge, expertise and skills to satisfy their needs. Secondly, integrity encompasses feelings towards the brand such as honesty; predictability; credibility, and dependability. Third, benevolence reflects actually the willingness of the company to help customers (Giovanis et al., 2018).

Table 1.3 The three facets of trust.

Competence	Integrity	Benevolence
The company is a knowledgeable unit, with expertise and skills.	The company is honest, predictable, credible and dependent.	The company wants to help customers.

Source: Clark, Scolder and Boles, 2010.

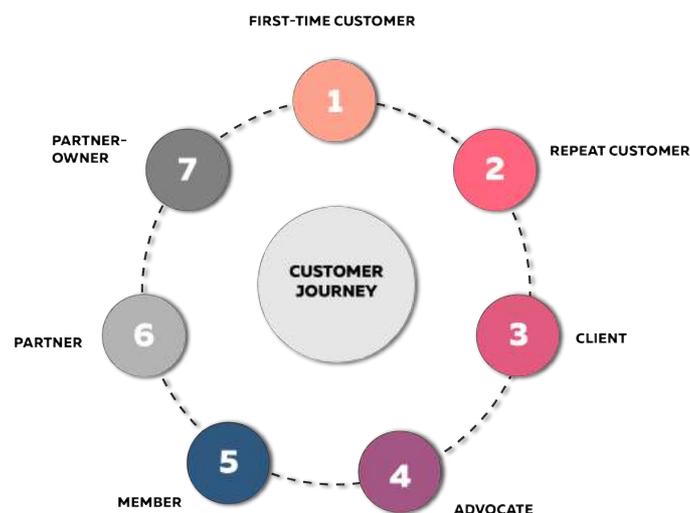
1.4.3 When customer satisfaction turns into brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is a long-term bond between customers and suppliers (Alhaddad 2015; Han et al., 2013) that is build upon behaviours like repeating the purchase, a positively biased emotive, evaluative and/or behavioural tendency for brands, positive Word-of-Mouth and communication, but also the mechanisms that consist in refusing to switch to another brand (Oliver 1999; Song et al., 2019). According to Kotler (2014), marketers today want to own customers and “loyalise”, and induce them to increase the amount of

products they buy. The concept of increasing and pursuing the “share of customers” is also connected to affinity marketing. It means that a company would like to target every person that has some common problems, needs and lifestyles. Building a customer loyalty is grounded on several stages that are described by Kotler as it follows (Figure 1.5)¹⁰:

- First-time customer;
- Repeat customer;
- Client;
- Advocate;
- Member;
- Partner;
- Part-owner.

Figure 1.5 Building customer loyalty according to Kotler.



Source: Kotler, 2014.

¹⁰ For instance, client, a term that has replaced “customer” implying a continuous and deeper relation that leads to more familiarity and empathy. Or advocate, considering the willingness of people to talk positively about a company, providing opinions and information. Or, members as it happens for every type of membership, do not want to lose their privileges, hence they will not switch to another supplier. As it will be explained in Chapter III, the role of advocates in Tourism and Travel sector is determinant. In fact, advocates suggest a hotel solution to their friends or acquaintances if the experience has been positive for them. Moreover, this process is not necessarily verbal, but it also passes through the online platforms that enable users from all over the world to read and search for information about destinations and accommodation. This allows them to reduce risk substantially. However, it must be recognised that it is a subjective and cultural process as well (Kotler, 2014).

1.4.4 Gaining a competitive advantage through customer satisfaction

Why is it customer satisfaction so relevant today? Empirical evidence¹¹ shows some interesting insights. For instance, the issue of customer profitability as the difference between customers' revenues and costs or, in other terms their contribution to firm's profits (Terpstra and Verbeeten, 2014). While in the past it was generally thought that the most important ability was to discover new customers, now the challenge is to keep and grow profitable clients. As a matter of fact, the cost of attracting a new client is five times higher than the cost of keeping an existing customer happy (Kotler, 2014).

As a strategic variable, customer satisfaction is the core of competitive advantage and it is strictly related to profitability¹². A large amount of marketing studies¹³ analysed whether there is a relationship between customer satisfaction and performance, implying similar hypothesis: satisfied customers tend to be loyal, willing to purchase firm's products at higher prices, generating favourable Word-of-Mouth, and positively affecting brand equity, revenue growth, and cost reduction (Giovanis et al. 2018; Oliver 1997).

Customer satisfaction is expressed by means of recommendations to peers and, in the Internet 4.0 environment, through e-WOM. In fact, in 2009 McKinsey Company revealed that two-thirds of touch points during the active evaluation phase are characterised by consumer-driven marketing activities, changing completely the typical push-style communication adopted by marketers (Court et al., 2009). Therefore, a satisfactory brand experience becomes the inspirational constituent guiding search and other consumers' evaluation steps, considering also the high level of subjectivity.

Reviews and Word-of-Mouth are more decisive when the offering is made of intangible services. As it will be explained in Chapter III, the brand is an essential predictor of customer satisfaction, since it helps to make its abstract nature more concrete, especially

11 The study by Terpstra and Verbeeten was carried out on the banking service, but assumptions are valid for the great majority of commercial companies.

12 Assessing and planning customer's expectations is determining in finding out the essential product/service's features and components. Particularly, Busacca (1994) sets forth four main pillars: a higher competitive pressure and technological complexity of the service; dynamic demand, and new ways of getting competitive advantages based on intangible resources like the brand (Petruzzellis and Chebat, 2010; Busacca, 1994).

13 Other empirical studies found a correlation between customer satisfaction index and stock prices, but also a correlation between customer satisfaction and accounting performance in firms and/or business units, including sales growth, profitability and return on investment. However, a minority of literature has also highlighted the increase of costs related to customer satisfaction as customers become more and more demanding and thus, the company has to deal with higher expectations.

when features are not predictable and identifiable. For instance, in the Tourism & Travel sector, when the customer steps into the inspiration, information search, and evaluation of alternatives' steps, reviews play an important role in guiding choices. The brand is a good predictor in assessing the level of satisfaction (Keller, Apéria and Georgson, 2012).

Remember that companies should consider the entire customer experience. Last but not least, establishing an emotional connection is a precious and valuable element that keeps customers satisfied. Data vary according to the type of sector, and in the case of Tourism & Travel, emotional connected customers account for more than 41% (Magids et al., 2015).

1.5 Predictors of customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction involves two main elements: emotions and communication. Emotions are feelings of love and trust towards the brand; communication involves the delivery of messages and promises that need to be consistent in order to build customer trust. Brands doing this, generate goodwill and remain resilient and consistent because they are in line with communication strategies (Pulido, Stone, and Strevel, 2014). Otherwise, clients that see or hear about certain messages, and then receive inconsistent product/service or experiences may ultimately be unsatisfied.

Before analysing which are the main factors predicting customer satisfaction, it has to be stressed that a part of literature (Vanharantaa, Kantola and Seikola, 2015; Schwager and Meyer, 2017) affirms that measuring customer experiences provides with more interesting insights than basing the analytics just on the issue of customer satisfaction. This is not only due to the fact that the customer experience is the antecedent of customer satisfaction, but also because it is more holistic as it comprehends not only the act of purchasing and using the product, but also other related steps within the journey. Moreover, it also looks at loyalty and emotional side because satisfied customers are not always loyal, thus experience can better predict the level of faithfulness.

Knowing which are the elements that provide a better experience and thus, a higher level of satisfaction lets to gain a competitive advantage, a challenging issue in the Tourism & Travel sector (Table 1.4). Managers have to grasp which are expectations, needs as well as perceptions of their guests and to find the means to fulfil them at their best (Radojević et al., 2015; Jin et al., 2012).

Service quality is a factor establishing the degree to which a customer is satisfied, considering the initial needs; star rating that is provided according to the physical aspects and facilities, but also to the service quality, reflecting the type of luxury of the hotel (Ryan and Gu, 2007; Radojević et al., 2015). Thus, a component that assesses whether a client is satisfied or dissatisfied is the quality of the service/product and whether it reflects some standards. As a matter of fact, each offering has some essential attributes like cleanliness, price, location, security, personal service, physical attractiveness, opportunities for relaxation, standard of services, appealing image, and reputation (Radojević et al., 2015).

The level of satisfaction also depends on customer and brand experience (Walter, 2013), which triggers companies to design services based on experiential marketing tools. Customers do not want to receive passively marketing campaigns, but they want to live experiences, participate, be immersed and absorbed by the brand, a setting that has been explored by Schmitt, who identified a series of experiences: Sense, Feel, Think, Act and Relate (Schmitt, 1999). Accordingly, these stimulus predict the actual buying behaviour and measure customer satisfaction (Walter, 2013).

Table 1.4 Predictors of customer satisfaction.

Predictor of satisfaction	Literature
Brand image	Song, Wang, and Han, 2019.
Culture	Meyer, 2014.
Customer and brand experience	Walter, 2013.
Customer's motivations	Park, 2014; Jin et al., 2012.
Lovemarks	Roberts, 2004.
Service quality	Ryan and Gu, 2007; Radojević et al., 2015.

According to the research conducted by Song, Wang and Han (Song et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2012), customer satisfaction is determined by brand image, that reduces the perceived risk determining trust. Brand image is built by creating marketing campaigns that construct strong, favourably and unique associations with the brand. Moreover, these connections are strictly related to brand experience and marketing campaigns. It involves two more struggling issues: brand attributes, also known as the descriptive features of a product/service; as well as brand benefits meaning personal values attached to the product (Keller et al., 2012). Other researches link the concept of brand image to customer satisfaction, since it pushes to continually purchase from the same brand even though there are other alternatives.

Lovemarks is a further theory stressed to show inner effects on customer loyalty (Roberts, 2004), and it uses the construct to show how firms build customer loyalty going beyond rationality and touching customer inner heart. The theory of lovemarks is grounded on two pillars of brand love and brand respect. In this case, consumers construct a solid emotional attachment that is cognitive, emotional and intimate with the brand, creating a feeling of trust. Brands build a strong and deep emotional connection with consumers, inducing people to repeat purchases. Emotional motivators are another predictor of customer satisfaction, and if these are present they allow people to satisfy unconscious and deeper needs¹⁴. The model proposed by Magids, Zorfias and Leemon (2015) is made of four steps, from disconnection and high-satisfaction to the perception of brand differentiation and high-connection, and in shifting from a stage to another, the customer becomes more and more precious for the company. The role of emotions is considered a predictor of satisfaction also by Westbrook (1987) and Oliver (1991), who include affective and cognitive variables as a measurement of judgement.

Jin, Lin and Huffman (2012) hypothesises elements in the customer experience apart from brand image, such as the environment, which is the “atmospheric designing of the space” (Kotler, 1973; Jin, Lee, and Huffman, 2012, p. 534), that generates positive customer’s service experience, enhances the intention to repurchase and recommend it, as well as the usage of physical design leads to a positive quality perception, and evaluation of the experience, and favourable attitude (Han and Ryu, 2009). Then, customer satisfaction is affected by customer’s motivations, that vary according to the type of experience at hand. Considering Tourism & Travel sector, a customer has different motivations, such as travelling for leisure, cultural or religious purposes (Park, 2014; Jin et al., 2012).

Last but not least, culture. Culture is the set of “ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society” (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2019). Culture shapes human behaviours, and if it is not taken into consideration it might bring to misunderstandings, cultural traps as well as failures. When considering cultural aspects, the perspective must be intended in relative terms. For instance, Tourism & Travel sector is affected by in-bound and out-bound flows, involving people that come from different countries all around the world. Sometimes, people think that certain attitudes, intentions or behaviours are caused mainly by personal traits and characteristics, while in reality it is just a matter of culture (Meyer, 2014).

¹⁴ Some examples vary from the need of distinguishing themselves from the mass, feeling a sense of well-being or freedom, the willingness of protecting the environment or feeling protected and secure, as well as to gain life’s success.

Brochado, Troilo and Shah (2017) conducted a study with respect to Airbnb customer experience, stressing the relationship between customer's preferences and culture. They selected three countries: India, Portugal, and US. They represented different cultures as to study contrasts among travellers' experiences and to assess whether a divergence or convergence among them existed. The study showed a certain level of convergence, as the authors noticed homogeneity in the majority of web reviews, meaning that people across different countries have the same idea as regards the meaning of an enjoyable Airbnb experience.

1.6 Conclusions

Starting from a first description of new consumer trends and marketing patterns, Chapter I aimed at defining how the current panorama needs to shift from considering merely the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) toward the concept of Customer Experience Management (CEM). In fact, investigating deeply emotions, feelings, thoughts emerging across different touch points is strategic in order to build a well-designed and personalised offering to the client. Pine and Gilmore (1998) affirmed that creating a distinctive and memorable customer experience leads to enormous benefits for firms.

For this reason, at the beginning of the Chapter, the focus was mainly based on the comprehension of the evolution of customer journey, which has shifted from the typical funnel and linear model to a more circular framework in which the company shortens the flow, increasing brand awareness, avoiding "search information steps" because the customer is willing to repeat the purchase thanks to previous satisfactory experiences (Court et al. 2009).

The conclusive part focused on the final step: there are many factors, which generally affect the final evaluation and whether they are positive or negative, they finally impact on the possibility to build brand trust and brand loyalty (which are considered lifeblood for those companies that do not simply aim at owning or finding out new prospects, but above all address to transform them into fans and "apostles", being the main witnesses of the entire satisfactory brand experience).

Chapter II

Investigating the relevance of WOM for buying decisions

2.1 Introduction

Shopping experience has become more and more complex, integrated and fragmented nowadays, and customers use different tools in order to get in touch with brands. People buy products and experiences by means of apps, social networks and, e-commerce platforms in every sector from clothing to tourism. Intertwining relationships between typical mass-media advertising and forefront tools characterise the new *époque*, pushing companies to avoid aggressive strategies and to grasp the potential of two important phenomenon: social commerce¹⁵ and eWOM (Ahmad and Laroche, 2017; Di Fraia, 2010; Belch and Belch, 2017; Hajli, 2014; Goswami, 2016).

Consumer experiences are innovative, and clients look for information online, on specialised blogs on food, sport, travel, and fashion. Images become a key element grabbing everyone's attention. Stories have twofold dimensions, sociality and visual, that become the right combo, touching people and convincing them to purchase brands. Reviews are accompanied by visual elements such as photos and videos that provide with better perception of the offering, as seen through someone's else eyes (Barbotti, 2015; Mazzotti, 2018).

Since the journey might start from online channels and then continue offline, it is necessary for a company, to take into account all these dimensions, and to orchestrate them in a way that appeals customers' attention. Web sites and social network's pages are seen as a valuable business card, communicating with customers about firm's values, mission, offering, and acting like a magnet in attracting new clients.

¹⁵ Social commerce is one of the four zones of social media channels and a sub-set of e-commerce which uses tools enabling customers to interact, share, and collaborate during the shopping experience (Belch and Belch, 2017; Hajli, 2014). The terminology used by scholars includes expressions like "digital shoppers", "social shopping", "social shopping experience" and so on, meaning that a paradigm shift occurred pushing marketers to draw a new set of decisions.

While in the past entrepreneurs had to use expensive marketing tools to launch products and feed customer relationships, one can now use cheaper and effective means, offering memorable experiences (Meo, 2017). Again, marketers deal with new sources of competitive advantage, particularly viral and free marketing tools, such as Word-of-Mouth. This highly relies on brand reputation and on company's ability to go beyond the initial expectations on which customer satisfaction is based, inviting people to talk favourably about firm's values, offering, quality, and so on. The positive and memorable customer journey (those who have tried, tasted or lived the experience) becomes the vital seed that decisively influences information search and evaluation stages of the decision-making process. Accordingly, having a great brand image and a positive brand reputation is an essential prerequisite that affects decisions, convincing and persuading the client not only to purchase, but to become also a loyal customer and brand ambassador (Court et al. 2009).

As concerns Word-of-Mouth logics, there are plenty of books telling the secret recipe of viral effects, even though it is not so simple as they state. Word-of-Mouth seems to be in the midst of today's marketers' conversations and at the centre of a paradigm shift based on sociality, conversations that are object-based, and for which people are information, opinions, and recommendations' providers. The idea is in line with the User Generated Content paradigm (Tuten and Solomon, 2017; Di Fraia, 2010). This is based on the ability to create valuable, helpful, and persuasive messages, and contents that affect other's decisions.

After having analysed customer journey's features and the elements composing customer satisfaction, it is provided an explanation of what occurs after: the customer is more or less likely and encouraged to talk about the experience. The practice called Word-of-Mouth. Starting from the phenomena of social commerce, other social media constructs are presented (reviews, ratings and recommendations). These are the innovative instruments through which people share opinions and information, following and expanding the classical potential of Word-of-Mouth. The most revolutionising aspect is that firms can, not only control, but also direct into new paths Word-of-Mouth in a way that brings more value to the customer journey. The leading question of Chapter II will be: which are the factors that affect Word-of-Mouth, and how does it affects the final purchase decision-making process?

2.2 Contextualise WOM: social commerce and social media constructs

Since antiquity, people are used and like talking about past experiences, for instance telling where they went on holiday, what was the last TV series they saw or, the last restaurant they went to eat. Stories are told through Word-of-Mouth, a typical form of unconventional advertising through which people convey a personal product/service's experience, and express it using an authentic and enthusiastic language (Dichter, 1966).

2.2.1 *Interact, share and collaborate through social commerce*

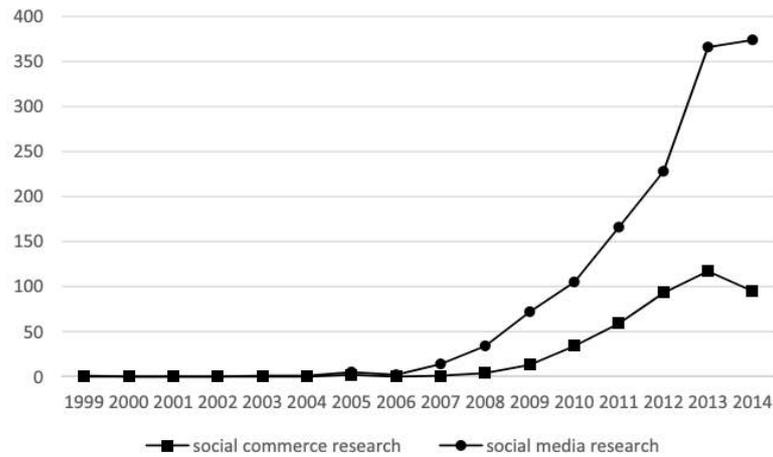
Word-of-Mouth can be contextualised in the multifaceted and broader framework of social commerce, which reflects a new archetype of how customers interact with their peers, availing themselves of social media platforms. It is defined as an extension of e-commerce based on co-creation principles, Web 2.0, and social media technologies that empower customers in the simple creation and acquisition of product information (Hajli, 2015). An explosion of studies emerged since 2004 (Figure 2.1), when Facebook and other social media platforms were born, even though social commerce concept was introduced in the late 1990s (Lin, Li and Wang, 2016).

Social commerce is a powerful construct, since people influence other's decision making process, as well as intentions and behaviours. Additionally, users are directly involved in gaining and disseminating information, creating contents, writing texts and comments on different platforms, contributing positively to decrease the level of ambiguity and to increase trust (Shanmugam et al., 2016; Hajli, 2014).

The idea of social commerce is related to the concept of community (Hajli, 2017; Tuten and Solomon, 2018), a group of people sharing particular interests, passions or characteristics, and whose goal is to connect and build supportive and sociable relationships. Social communities are systems of social networks, characterised by flows from node to node¹⁶.

¹⁶ According to Tuten and Solomon (2018), nodes are people, organizations, and countries, that are tied one each other. Complexity is attached to the fact that conversations might start online, and then extend to other territories at an exponential speed, including *vis-a-vis* conversations, e-mails, or chats (Tuten and Solomon, 2018).

Figure 2.1 Publications on social commerce and social media research (1999-2014).



Source: Lin et al., 2016.

Communities are supported by online forums, social networks, web sites where people share interests toward products or brands, exchanging ideas, discussing, solving problems, and acquiring know-how from more knowledgeable people (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Moreover, they are based on interaction and exchange of information, allowing people to learn each other and to gain acquaintance on focal topics; accordingly, users interact, socialise, and build relationships¹⁷.

People engage each other on web sites but above all on social media, where they seek for information and valuable feedbacks, get in touch with a new format of e-commerce, built on trust, an expected feature when the perceived risk is high such as in the Travel & Tourism sector, where people cannot know things until they finally experience them¹⁸(Hajli, Lin, Featherman, and Wang, 2014).

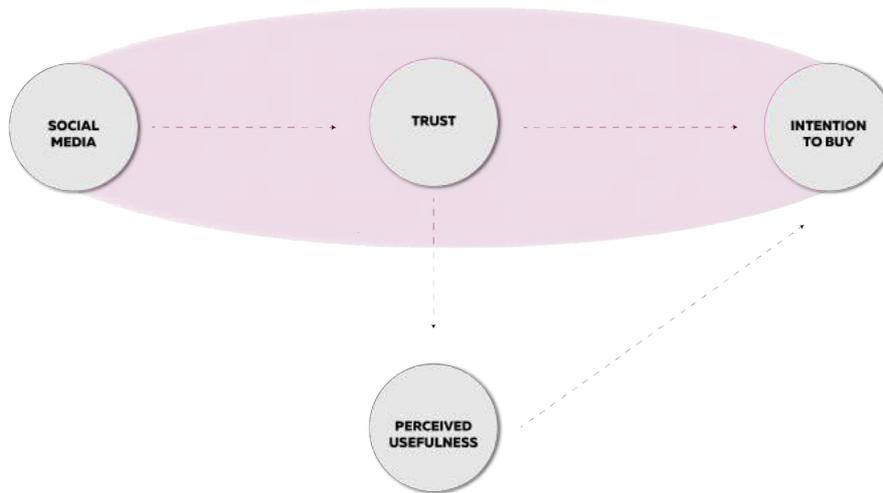
17 By their work, Kirby and Marsden (2006) introduce the concept of connected marketing: “product related conversation, interpersonal interaction which does not include personal selling, opinions from personal sources, hearing about a product or service from friends, interpersonal communications in which none of the participants are marketing sources; the act of telling at least one friend, relative or acquaintance about a satisfactory or unsatisfactory product or brand experience” (Kirby and Marsden, 2006, p. 165).

18 For instance, Nelson (1974) makes a distinction among products with *search* or *experience* qualities. The former are those which can be assessed through a pre-purchase inspection and where an own-based decision-making process is fulfilled. The experience qualities are more complex to assess previously, thus the user relies on product recommendations using a hybrid decision-making process.

An example of experience quality is given by the Tourism & Travel services, in which attributes are difficult to estimate. That is why reviews are usually very descriptive and detailed as to provide all the possible instruments to decide whether to buy or not. As a matter of fact, the feature has given rise to platforms based on recommendations, such as Booking.com™, TripAdvisor, and so on.

Social commerce reflects also customers' willingness of not being anymore passive users, receiving aggressive messages by companies adopting a one-way communication strategy. Rather, they are part of a dynamic network, and people want to interact, skip or block firms's advertising, avoiding their intrusion¹⁹ (Kirby and Marsden, 2006; Di Fraia, 2010). The Internet allows these activities thanks to virtual reality, co-creation, and through a collaborative culture. Thus, social media are useful to increase trust levels, comments and opinions are perceived are useful; both induce people to buy the product or service (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Effects of social media on purchase intentions.



Source: Hajli, 2014.

Companies acquire new inputs and develop better customer experiences thanks to users' ability to generate texts, reviews, information and other contents available online, which are considered the basic constructs of social commerce, based on genuineness, trustworthiness, and transparency that drive sales²⁰.

¹⁹ Literature (Füller, Mühlbacher, Metzler and Jawecki, 2014) has coined the term of consumer-empowering technology, when talking about Internet, meaning that people can express opinions and observations gaining more control, being more motivated and experiencing self-efficacy and self-determination (Bandura, 1997; Füller, Mühlbacher, Metzler and Jawecki, 2014).

²⁰ In line with the concept of social support (Hajli, 2015), made of two dimensions or drivers, informational and emotional support (Hajli, 2014).

2.2.2 Social media constructs: ratings, reviews, and recommendations

As concerns social media constructs, literature (Hajli, 2014; Hajli and Sims, 2015) distinguishes ratings, reviews, and recommendations. Word-of-Mouth evolved into the concept of electronic Word-of-Mouth, a commonly used terminology in both marketing and information system fields (Hajli, Lin, Featherman and Wang, 2014).

Ratings are a score ranging from one to ten²¹ through which customers express valuable and attribute-based information, such as perceived quality, satisfaction, or popularity (Hajli et al., 2014; Tuten and Solomon, 2018). They are heuristic, or mental shortcuts that simplify the decision-making processes (McShane and Von Glinow, 2009). Reviews are detailed comments whose potential is to increase trust and reduce uncertainty through the valence, credibility, and quality of information (Figure 2.3). They include deeper evaluation on product/service's features and specifications, impressions, positive or negative judgement, pros and cons, the experience with the product and the final recommendation. Finally, recommendations²² are systems with which people suggest products or services to other peers in a way that facilitates interaction (Hajli and Sims, 2015). This can be done even through the Facebook or Instagram's "like" button.

Figure 2.3 A review of Antico Panada Hotel in Venice.



Source: Booking.com™

21 The range varies from platform to platform. Booking.com™ and Agoda have a scale from one to ten; Tripadvisor from one to five.

22 Senecal and Nantel (2004) affirm that recommendations are promoted by different sources such as sellers, commercially and non-commercially linked third parties. Particularly, the more independent and non-commercial are web sites, which spread a better perception among users. A further taxonomy provided by the authors concerns the distinction among the sources, who can be other consumers such as relatives, friends, and acquaintances; human experts and expert systems, like recommendation systems.

2.2.3 *The role of social media constructs within the new customer journey map*

Customer journey map gives more attention to the integration of online and offline marketing tools today: social media are incorporated in every step of the customer experience (Tuten and Solomon, 2018; Court et al. 2009). Gap recognition's step might start from social ads, social networks, and Pinterest boards, for instance in the Tourism & Travel sector. Then, during the information search, the user may get in touch with comments, queries and responses on social media, ratings and reviews, but also recommendations. These are the main sources of Word-of-Mouth, and affect the final decision²³. Volume, valence, and source of information affect purchase decision, and when the review volume is low, people tend to follow professionals and bloggers' suggestions. This has to do with the so-called *confirmation bias*. People focus more on benefits to the consumer than on product attributes (Tuten and Solomon, 2018).

Trust is the ultimate goal of building social commerce, since it is valuable to drive a good brand reputation. This is related to reliability, truth and responsibility of a person or firm, being an important feature especially in the service sector, characterised by personality and intangibility. Mayer (1995) defines trust as the “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman, 1995 p. 712). Accordingly, scholars set out benevolence and credibility dimensions that are respectively the iterated relationship between buyer-seller and the belief that the counterpart of a transaction is reliable and honest (Ba and Pavlou, 2002; Hajli et al., 2014)

To sum up, 90% of people are influenced by viral marketing and two-thirds of advertising are driven adopting pull-style communication strategies, such as Word-of-Mouth (Wee, Luan and Lwin, 1995; Belch and Belch, 2017; Court et al., 2009). People are tired of being bombarded by mass media advertising and aggressive messages, and scholars named this phenomenon as “the crisis of mass marketing” (Kirby and Marsden, 2006, p. XIX) saying that an increasing amount of firms think that mass media advertising cannot work anymore.

23 Scholars introduced the concept of ZMOT (Zero Moment of Truth), in which every single touch point is decisive to the final decision as well as the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the client (Tuten and Solomon, 2018). Particularly, in the information search step, influential elements are ratings and reviews. During the alternative evaluation stage, shoppers read reviews, compare prices, and consider others' opinions. Authenticity, credibility and trustworthiness are essential features as Rathore and Panwar (2017) confirmed.

Marketers' willingness to abandon typical mass media marketing strategies is based on the intention of exploiting the higher potential of Word-of-Mouth, that seems to be based on people's real and genuine conversations and to be not fake, manipulating, degrading, rather honest. According to the existing literature, Word-of-Mouth will be converted into one of the most powerful tools at firms' disposal even though it is not innovative as well as the number of channels and media formats that have been rocketed (Sernovitz, 2012; Kirby and Marsden, 2006).

Word-of-Mouth is largely adopted in some sectors, like in Tourism & Travel, characterised for being highly intangible, and where trust is relevant to convert web site visitors into customers. Online communities, social commerce, social media constructs are quickly embracing each part of the globe. They also require a better understanding of the culture. It will be possible to offer people the right service according to socio-demographic, psychographic, and cultural traits, as to adopt the right tactics and transform people into advocates, keeping in mind the importance of habits.

2.3 Focus on social media constructs: the importance of leveraging WOM

The conceptual framework, as regards social commerce, has been provided in order to contextualise a phenomena that is currently observable on the market. While in the past companies could not detect the control over consumers and interactions among people where geographically limited, today the Internet breaks boundaries. The globalised Web 2.0 empowers customers to influence international people's decision-making process, following more or less the typical features of Word-of-Mouth, even though the speed is higher.

Considering the tripartition that focuses on the types of media that companies detect, Word-of-Mouth is among the so-called *earned media*, a type of exposure for which the firm did not have paid, and it is generated through positive PR and publicity. The effort has been amplified by the advent of social media. People spread easily and quicker their voice, sending and sharing information about products, brands, and campaigns.

2.3.1 *Word-of-Mouth definitions*

Word-of-Mouth is a spoken communication that is used to transmit information from a person to another, and a social media construct involved in social commerce (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2019; Shanmugam et al., 2016). People who are asked why they bought a product usually respond that is because a friend or a colleague recommended it. Other scholars define Word-of-Mouth as an oral, person-to-person communication in which the receiver perceives that the message is not commercial (Wee, Lim and Lwin, 1995). There is a certain degree of convergence among definitions (Table 2.1) which have been provided by literature: what has changed is the set of techniques and strategies to control WOM and influence people (Rathore and Panwar, 2017; Kirby and Marsden, 2006; Sernovitz, 2012).

According to Cova, Giordano, and Pallera (2010), Word-of-Mouth is the informal transmission, from person to person, of information, considerations, and opinions about a product or brand. It is now passed and enhanced by Web (blogs, forums and e-mails) as well as new technologies. It allows to spread messages more efficiently and quickly, producing positive externalities. Word-of-Mouth is considered a form of unconventional or guerrilla marketing that is build upon four main categories: viral marketing, stealth marketing, ambient marketing, and ambush marketing²⁴.

2.3.2 *From the Word-of-Mouth to the electronic WOM*

Within the category of viral marketing can be found the origins of Word-of-Mouth as demonstrated by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). Messages that flow through the usage of social media are spread at an exponential rate, with effects that are similar to buzz marketing. The result is also called “buzz” which is higher and more intense. Word-of-Mouth affects consumers’ attitudes and behaviours, and it is much more effective than mass media communication tools. It gets results that are seven times more effective (Cova, Giordano, and Pallera, 2010). The term Word-of-Mouth occurred for the first time in the Oxford Dictionary in the XVI century, referring to “oral communication”, “oral publicity” and “speaking”, but in the recent literature it has been progressively attached to a kind of

²⁴ Stealth marketing is based on subliminal advertising, that is also known as undercover marketing or covert marketing. Ambient marketing is a complex form of communication that utilises some external elements like public spaces, in order to diffuse messages that stimulate consumers. Finally, ambush marketing origins can be found in 1984’s Olympic Games in Los Angeles. It is a form of associative marketing used by companies in order to increase awareness and to benefit from the other advantages of an event. It is also known as parasitic marketing (Cova, Giordano and Pallera, 2010)

interpersonal communication linked to businesses. Scholars point out the importance of the “message of being commercial in content, but non-commercial in perception”²⁵ (Kirby and Marsden, 2006, p. 164). In the article “How Word-of-Mouth Advertising Works” written in 1955, Dichter points out the motivators that push people to talk about a brand and explains why Word-of-Mouth is so privileged with respect to the other forms of advertising.

Table 2.1 Word-of-Mouth evolution from 1950 to 2010.

Author	Year	Definition
Oxford Dictionary	XVI th century	Earlier terms emerged in this period. It refers to oral communication and speaking. It is attached to interpersonal communication.
Martineau	1950	It criticizes the theoretical framework based on rational behaviours, because little effort is dedicated to the exploration of attitudes and motivations of new marketing segments.
Katz and Lazarsfeld	1955	Word-of-Mouth is a subcategory of viral marketing whose importance grows thanks to the exploitation of social media.
Dichter	1955	The author provides a distinction between mass marketing and Word-of-Mouth, focusing mainly on motivations of listener/speaker.
Arndt	1967	The author studies the relationship between Word-of-Mouth and the acceptance of a new product.
Kirby and Marsden	2006	It is a commercial message in content, but not commercial in perception.
Cova, Giordano and Pallera	2010	It is the transmission of information, considerations and opinions about a product or brand informally, and from person to person facilitated by the usage of new technologies.
Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner	2010	It proposes three models: the Organic Interconsumer Influence Model (conversations are an important organic and natural instrument to help and warn others); the Linear Marketer Influence Model (indirect influence with advertising and promotions, potential opinion leaders); and the Network Coproduction Model (based on Internet, active networks, groups and communities)

²⁵ The customer has to perceive of not being biased by the company or invited to leave a positive recommendation, rather it should be the fruit of a genuine thought after having had a real contact with the firm

On one hand, Dichter (1950) judges typical advertising as excessively aggressive; on the other hand friend, colleague, or relative's recommendations make people feel more relaxed. Both speaker and listener have different motivations when talking about or listening to a product-based conversation. As a matter of fact, the author divides the intentions related to the speaker's willingness to recommend a purchase into four categories: for example, to relive the experience, assuring himself as regards the choice, receive attention, feeling smart, suggest a status, convince or persuade. The argument might be considered innovative, if one thinks about the context, and the importance given to mass marketing, which at that time was aggressive, persuasive²⁶.

Likewise, Martineau criticises the theoretical framework of 1950, since it is based on rational behaviours and little effort is dedicated to the exploration of attitudes and motivations related to the birth of new marketing segments. He argues that there are differences among social classes, like the richest and the poorest one. For instance, in those times wealthy families were much more reactive with respect to new forms of mass media marketing and advertising, while moneyless people were more suspicious and they usually relied on peers' recommendations²⁷ (Martineau, 1950). As a matter of fact, people are influenced not only by traditional advertising messages but also by family, friends, and other respectful people's thought. Even though it seems quite obvious now, in the 1950 little effort was directed toward the comprehension of motivations, intentions, and emotions behind the act of purchasing, hence the framework seemed to be innovative, as the one proposed by Dichter (1966).

By his work, Arndt (1967) analyses the relationship between Word-of-Mouth under pressure and the acceptance of a new product, finding a positive causal relationship between them. Moreover, by conducting the study on a new food product diffusion, he finds out that, contrary to the initial hypothesis, other-directed people are not likely to use Word-of-Mouth channels nor to be influenced by them. Other elements, such as awareness that other friends have bought the product could have been important, as well as the "observation and emulation of other people" (Arndt, 1967, p. 295).

26 Especially in some sectors, such as the household one, advertising aimed at creating fear with respect to women (Mokyr, 2002).

27 Among the main changes affecting the American society, which need further investigation, the author mentions community leadership, linked to Word-of-Mouth and particularly to the process of creating positive thoughts about products and brands.

Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner, (2010) have proposed another explanation of the evolution of WOM theory. The first model is called as Organic Interconsumer Influence Model, in which conversations are an important organic and natural instrument. People are motivated to help and warn others about excellent or poor service. Then, the Linear Marketer Influence Model has emerged, and marketers have tried to influence indirectly and through advertising and promotions, potential opinion leaders, whose voice was faithfully and reliably seen by consumers. Finally, the Network Coproduction Model has raised with the advent of Internet touching some current topics such as networks, groups and communities, where people are proactive, co-creators of contents, and where the contribution is not anymore unidirectionally, rather plenty of flows, nodes, and ties.

Today, Word-of-Mouth is more effective than traditional marketing, since it affects the behaviour of consumers online, through reviews and it is a good predictor in terms of generated analytics. Everything is tracked easily without being pushy thanks to Artificial Intelligence (Kirby and Marsden, 2006; Rathore and Panwar, 2017). People express opinions electronically at a higher speed, and news are not destined to die after a short period of time. With respect to offline tools, electronic Word-of-Mouth is assessed and monitored with less efforts, even though complexity in assessing return on investment indexes remains. However, there are several advantages.

Today, Word-of-Mouth is associated with the usage of social media that spread messages to more than two people. Moreover, it has been strengthened by the advent of User Generated Content that refers to a series of elements from Wikipedia, blogs and micro-blogs, content communities, or networking. These are relevant when one thinks about the viral marketing as it makes easier to share messages with a community (Cova et al., 2010). The eWOM phenomena has been also called “word of mouse”, “web of mouse”, “internet of WOM”, and so on. Several definitions have been given to it, stressing mainly the interpersonal aspect of communication, even though other scholars have pointed out a phraseology that is more commercial and not consistent with the initial idea.

Furthermore, Sernovitz (2012) distinguishes between organic Word-of-Mouth (it is more natural and derives from the excellent customer service and from the good product quality); and the amplified Word-of-Mouth that originates from a conscious and planned campaign, making people talk about a brand. The concept of organic Word-of-Mouth might be related to that of “brand love”, in which people fall in love with the brand, love the product characteristics and the entire brand experience.

2.3.3 The main features of electronic Word-of-Mouth

Electronic Word-of-Mouth comprises a set of features mentioned by available literature (Table 2.2). First of all, the ability of an argument to be valid and strong: its quality must be high. Concepts that translate it at the best are relevance, timeliness, accuracy for being reliable, and comprehensiveness (Rathore and Panwar, 2017). Quality is a subjective notion based on personal traits and culture, thus there is no consensus about it. Moreover, the quality of the message will definitely predict others' final decisions if the review is perceived as reliable and trustworthy.

Another aspect is message's valence: on one hand the review carries positive and negative information, stressing strengths and benefits or problems and weaknesses, affecting the final purchasing decision. Moreover, the source of credibility: scholars stress the importance of emotional closeness between decision maker and reviewer. Some dimensions are the level of expertise that reflects the knowledge about a certain topic, trustworthiness (that is how much honest, fair and sincere the reviewer is), and finally attractiveness. Particularly, Tuten and Solomon (2018) argue that closeness between sender and receiver affects Word-of-Mouth: the higher it is, the more the likelihood that the sender shares negative WOM in order to protect others.

Lastly, the degree of consistency with other contributions made by users in a way that the comment is coherent and credible; the information volume measured by the number of posted comments by consumers with respect to a specific product that is also an indicator of popularity; followed by the classification messages. If a review has a higher rating or receives several comments it means that other people have experienced the same (Rathore and Panwar, 2017).

Table 2.2 The main features of Word-of-Mouth.

Author	Year	Word of mouth features
Kirby and Marsden	2006	Use of verbal language; brand or product content; perception of not being biased.
Chu and Kim	2011	Opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing.
Rathore and Panwar	2017	Validity, strengthen of the message (relevance, timeliness, accuracy for the reliability, and comprehensiveness); reliability; trustworthiness; valence of the message; consistency (coherence and credibility); information volume.
Tuten and Solomon	2018	The closeness between sender/receiver influences the likelihood of sharing negative opinions about a brand.

Kirby and Marsden (2006) stress few elements characterising Word-of-Mouth. First of all, verbal language as the main code, excluding both behaviours induced through imitation as well as non-verbal communication. Secondly, the content, that has to be brand- or product-based. The ultimate assumption is that clients should not be motivated commercially or perceived of not being biased²⁸. Opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing are three further elements highlighted by literature, where the first two aspects were considered as the more frequent in original Word-of-Mouth issue. However, interactivity and dynamism of the current Internet environment let people acquire different roles (providers, seekers, and transmitters). Finally, the opinion-passing behaviour is considered an important feature that facilitates interaction, and multidirectional communication (Chu and Kim, 2011).

The asynchrony's feature reflects the flexibility with which agents share information breaking boundaries of time and space, as the information on the Internet is accessible anytime and anywhere (with the possibility to archive posts and comments). Then, while in the traditional Word-of-Mouth, participants know each other, in the large community of Internet, the anonymity is easily preserved and people might use fake profiles in a way that is even more and more trackable, measurable and analysable. Among the other differences between traditional WOM and eWOM, the possibility of reaching people coming from several parts around the globe that leave opinions thanks to the possibility of registering on platforms such as Amazon, TripAdvisor, Booking.comTM, that are widely accepted.

To conclude, there is a general consensus among scholars, and the definition of Word-of-Mouth is solid in academic research, being that kind of interpersonal communication among people, with respect to commercial topics, that is not planned as a strategic marketing tool. The large amount of academic research focusing on Word-of-Mouth is also due to the higher importance of the issue as an innovative form of communication. Particularly, negative Word-of-Mouth notion is gaining attention among scholars, since it seems to be more disruptive and warning than positive Word-of-Mouth: this is the reason why companies should always try to go beyond their customers' expectations.

²⁸ This means that the speaker is neither an employee that could have an interest in talking positively about a brand or product nor has been incentivised.

2.4 Discover the factors affecting WOM communication

Literature about reviews has pointed out the shift from the traditional Word-of-Mouth toward the modern concept that is related to Web and social media. Even though the tools through which Word-of-Mouth is transmitted have changed, the underlined functioning factors remain the same. Next paragraphs focus on the examination of the factors that currently affect eWOM.

2.4.1 *From product perception toward customer satisfaction in influencing WOM*

Chouhan (2016) summarises several factors that impact on Word-of-Mouth (Figure 2.4). First of all, product perception (attributes such as price, country of origin information, experimental design, and brand name). Brand image and brand reputation, may also affect product or service perception²⁹. When considering brand image, Cova, Giordani and Pallera (2010) state that a brand is made of conversations and discourses made by the totality of people. It means that the creation of a good brand image is not just in the hands of marketers, that struggle with creative, innovative, and viral campaigns, but it depends on people. By the action of the “innocent” talking, users create an alluring brand, but also ruin it and manipulate other people³⁰. People might exaggerate comments and ruin someone’s else reputation in just few seconds with the use of social media.

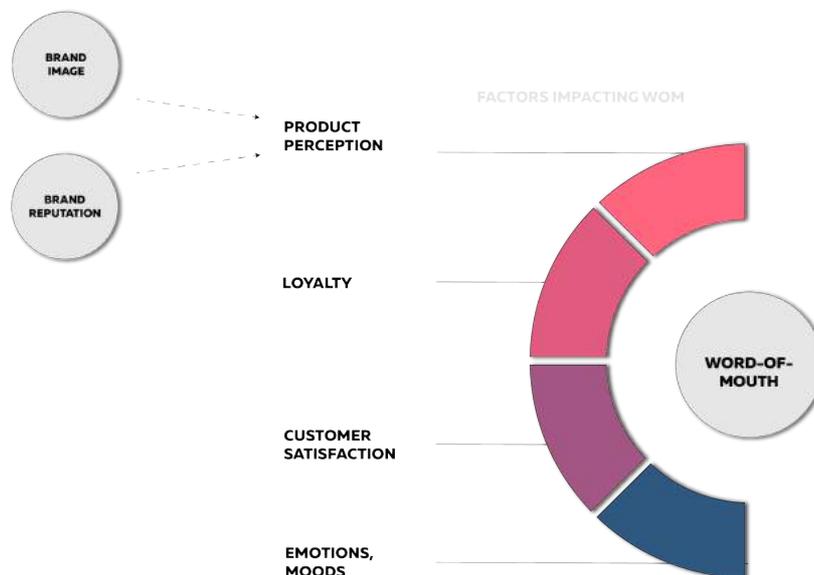
Secondly, loyalty that is composed of a set of favourable behaviours and actions that expresses the type of relationship between the company and the brand. According to some authors, there is a correlation between loyalty and WOM. Loyalists are more inclined to positively recommend a brand to others, to be motivated for gathering new information about the company and to hold out against the possibility of being persuaded by contrary information about the company. Thus, Word-of-Mouth is conceived among the motivational, perceptual and behavioural consequences of customer loyalty. In 1987, Westbrook pointed out that, emotions and moods were facilitators in engaging Word-of-Mouth, as people with both positive/negative emotional experiences were much more triggered to spread their experience (Dick and Basu, 1994).

²⁹ For instance, unethical companies or those involved in scandals, negatively influence customer perception, pushing people to reject or, boycott a firm with relevant knock-on effects.

³⁰ A social phenomena such as bullying could be seen as an extreme but also worth example, showing the power of negative Word-of-Mouth on reputation (Tuten and Solomon, 2018).

Third, customer satisfaction³¹. Particularly, it influences two purchase behaviours: repurchase intentions and WOM. The latter largely depends on how much the functioning of the product exceeds the initial expectation. Scholars explain the phenomena of dissatisfaction as the complaints' predictor, that occurs both privately and publicly. The former consists in stopping future purchasing and in warning friends, the latter is made by a series of actions which aim at involving the seller and other parties. Among the factors determining complaint, authors mention socioeconomic characteristics, personality differences, cost benefit ratio from complaining, propensity to complaint, importance of purchase (Bearden and Teel, 1983). Meyer (2014) adds that the way in which people express complaints varies according to cultural traits: some people tend to be more direct, such as Americans, while Mexicans for instance, prefer not to tell it in front of other peers, as to not be offensive. According to Jalilvand, Esfahani and Samiei (2011) there are several reasons why people spread Word-of-Mouth, particularly if customer experience was extremely satisfactory or dissatisfactory. This, might also happen whether a strong relationship with the firm exists or even if the client is committed to it, and finally according to the novelty of a product. Moreover, emotions motivate consumers to share experience if they feel satisfied, pleased, or sad.

Figure 2.4 Factors that affect Word-of-Mouth.



Source: Chouhan, 2016.

31 Customer satisfaction is the customer's evaluation regarding the comparison between initial expectations and product/service performance (as seen in Chapter I).

2.4.2 Diverse motivations subtending product-based conversations

Accordingly, Martineau's article (1950) states that, if the speaker is satisfied, she shares the experience to reduce cognitive dissonance, but also to relive, tell and motivate others to make the same decision. While, she speaks negatively if the experience has been dissatisfied: negative emotions such as anger or frustration emerge, and she tries to express them as a form of venting. Hence, the recipe to generate positive Word-of-Mouth is to exceed customers' expectations and deliver an experience that strives others to advocate, suggest or simply initiate conversations about a brand (Kirby and Marsden, 2006). Cohen (1997) suggests the expression of "WOW effect" that is a way to keep customers fresh and exciting, through the generation of creative ideas, becoming a leader in the referral market. As one looks at the social side of WOM, factors such as Self-Presentation Desire and Information Sharing Desire should be considered. People do nothing for nothing. They are motivated by the need of helping others, providing information or support, but also to reduce cognitive dissonance.

Finally, electronic Word-of-Mouth might also start from marketing managers' willingness to develop viral marketing campaigns, encouraging favourable Word-of-Mouth. They initiate conversations, and people express positive or negative opinions toward the idea of promoting the brand in a certain way. Previous constructs are taken as independent variables influencing Word-of-Mouth (dependent variable)³².

As regards conversations, there are several motives pushing people to take part in online conversations (Table 2.3). First, the willingness of supporting other customers, and help them in their decisions. Then, because it is a hedonistic and pleasurable experience, and because of economic incentives provided by companies in order to get reviews. People also need to build new relationships, to be part of a group, and to develop a sense of belongingness, and meet new friends. The need of expressing ideas is generated by dissatisfactory product or excellent experiences, and to support a brand (Rathore and Panwar, 2016).

³² Chouhan conducted an experiment in an Indian college, in order to find a causal relationship, using a five point Likert scale. Through a multiple regression analysis, he found out that two factors (product perception and market loyalty) could significantly explain eWOM, even though a certain multi collinearity between them has been detected. In other terms, there might be a higher correlation between product perception and market loyalty, and one variable effect could be found in the other one. At the same time, it is worth to notice how much insightful these results are: better marketing strategies are devised in order to increase product perception and brand image, attracting positive conversations as well (Chouhan, 2016).

Wee, Lim, and Lwin (1995) put the accent on the role of influencers, who pass information to others, moved by different stimulus. For instance, instrumental, altruistic, ego-defensive, ego-involvement, cognitive clarity establishment in case of ambiguous situations and reduction of cognitive dissonance. There are other involvement-related motivations that trigger Word-of-Mouth. “Product involvement” in which there is a mental strain that is spread through talk; “self involvement”, if Word-of-Mouth is triggered in order to reassure oneself; “message involvement” whether WOM is stimulated by an advertising; and finally “other involvement” if engaging Word-of-Mouth is initiated with the attempt of helping others.

Table 2.3 Why people take part of online conversations.

Author	Year	Reasons
Dichter	1966	Listener and speaker have different motivations: source credibility, homophile and personal ties; personality, attitudes, involvement and other situational factors.
Wee, Lim, and Lwin	1995	Instrumental, altruistic, ego-defensive, ego-involvement, clarity establishments move influencers.
Rathore and Panwar	2017	Supporting and helping others in making decisions; hedonistic, and pleasurable experience (build relationships, sense of belongingness);

2.4.3 Negative Word-of-Mouth and the attitude of complaining

Some studies investigated the factors that influence negative Word-of-Mouth, affirming that the majority of researches focused mainly on positive Word-of-Mouth’s effects, hence excluding negative ones (Lau and Ng, 2001). To recall it again, Dichter’s article (1966), mentioned different motivations involved in Word-of-Mouth communication occurring between speaker and listener. For instance, the receiver is motivated by source credibility, homophile and interpersonal ties with the other part, the features of a product which could be perceived risky, and other situational factors. On the other hand, reasons pushing the speaker to advice for the product are connected to personality, attitudes, product involvement, and other situational factors.

A special attention has been paid to negative Word-of-Mouth, as revealed by the same study conducted by Lau and Ng (2001), Wee et al., (1995) who define several individual factors to be observed. They include three attitudinal concepts: self-confidence which is found in people from upper social classes, who feel more comfortable in complaining; sociability that is related to WOM's social phenomena, involving outgoing and participative people, who want to interact and discuss with peers; social responsibility that concerns people's willingness to help others. Secondly, attitudes toward complaining that consider other domains, such as norms, expectation of societal benefits of complaining, as well as its costs.

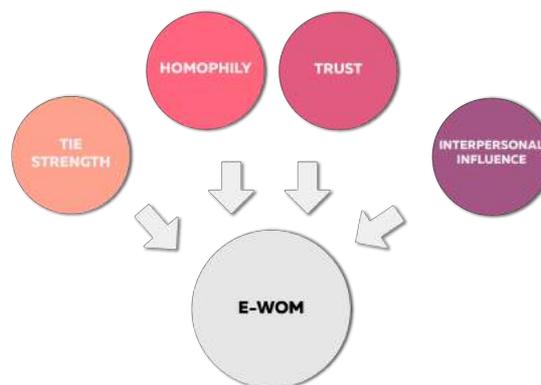
However, one should think about the degree to which attitudes of complaining are affected by culture rather than personal traits. For instance, the attitude of talking negatively about a firm, if it has a bad brand reputation, as well as a negative perception of the business in general. Finally, the last individual factor is product involvement. It indicates the “amount of arousal, interest, or drive evoked by a particular stimulus or situation” (Lau et al., 2001, p. 167). The higher the product involvement, the stronger the likelihood that the user talks positively/negatively of it. As regards the other situational factors highlighted in the study, it is mentioned purchase decision involvement, positively related to Word-of-Mouth, and proximity to others. In the latter case, the users’ need in case of dissatisfactory situation to reduce frustration, pushes to talk about the product/service/brand experience with others in order to share their feelings (Table 2.4).

Table 2.4 Word-of-Mouth predictors according to literature.

Author	Year	Key concept of research
Martineau	1966	People speak about past experiences to reduce cognitive dissonance, relieve, tell, and motivate others.
Wee, Lim, and Lwin	1995	Influencers and their motives.
Rathore and Panwar	2017	Motivators pushing people to talk about products are the willingness of supporting others, and providing help; hedonistic and pleasurable experience, as well as the economic incentives; building new relationships, being part of a group; developing a sense of belongingness and meeting new friends.
Chouhan	2016	Predictors of Word-of-Mouth (product perception, loyalty, and customer satisfaction).

Tie strength, homophily, trust and interpersonal influence are key dimensions of Word-of-Mouth's dynamics. Tie strength is a bond among network's members. It might be strong, weak, and latent³³. Homophily concerns "the degree to which individuals who interact with one another are congruent or similar in certain attributes" (Chu and Kim, 2011, p. 54). Accordingly, product-based conversations easily occur among people that have similar characteristics, interests, and qualities. Then, trust is positively connected to the engagement in eWOM behaviours. Finally, interpersonal influence is a social factor that influences consumer decision-making process, and it is composed of normative influences, which is the tendency to conform to others' expectations, affect attitudes, norms, and values; as well as informational influences which is the tendency to accept information from knowledgeable people and be guided within the customer experience. Both factors are defined as guiding elements of eWOM (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5 The factors that trigger Word-of-Mouth.



Source: Chu and Kim, 2011.

Other scholars have provided a taxonomy of eWOM's antecedents: egoistic, collectivism, altruism and principalism motivations. The first one is motivated by the individual's search for intangible or tangible returns linked to the spread of information activity (pay and prizes, reputation and recognition). As regards reputation, users usually provide with information since they want to gain an informational recognition and be considered experts. On the other hand, reciprocity is another motivator. People help others because they expect returns in the future; this is one of the main characteristics of social

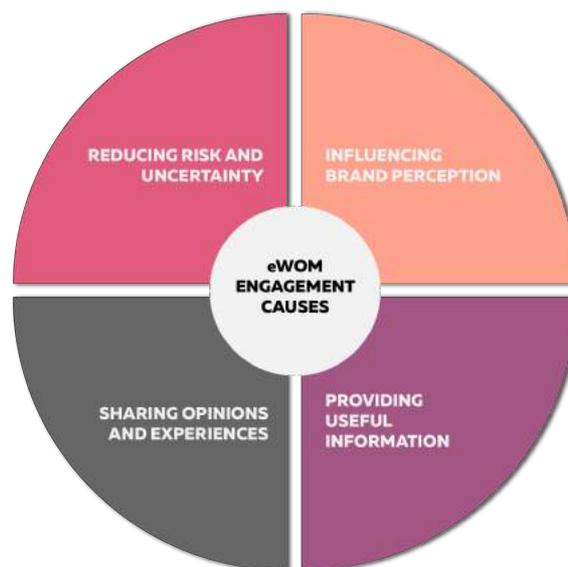
33 For instance, strong ties characterise relationships such as family or friends, providing a substantive and emotional support. Each relationship has a different impact on Word-of-Mouth and related thought. Weak ties can be found in colleagues and relatives' relationships, which facilitate information gathering activities, and at a macro level they are crucial in working as a "bridge" that disseminate and spread information across groups.

media and communities' rules. Second, collectivism is deployed by contributing in order to benefit the whole group, and feel a member. Afterwards, altruistic motivations are related to the willingness to increase other's wellbeing, establishing empathy and sympathy with them. (Cheung and Lee, 2012). Finally, principalistic motivation refers to normative commitment. Users want to contribute to the organisation's well being, and from it, it is derived the moral obligation (or the sense of duty to help others). Again, Cheung and Lee (2012) recall the self-efficacy matter which is a self-motivator leading people to better spread opinions on social media platforms.

2.5 The impact of WOM on purchasing decisions and buying behaviours

Several researches have presented the hypothesis that Word-of-Mouth affects purchase decisions and choice behaviours in several fields (Lau and Ng, 2001; Goswami, 2016). Word-of-Mouth is powerful in converting lower order cognition and affect into committed behaviours than typical mass and printed advertising. In fact, it easily accesses to memory, enhances product/brand awareness, and it is more relevant in judgement and persuasive. Why are people engaged in such form of communication? There are several causes: the attempt of reducing risk and uncertainty, influencing brand perceptions, providing useful information, sharing opinions and experiences (Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6 The reasons why people are engaged in Word-of-Mouth communication.



Source: Lau and Ng, 2001; Goswami, 2016.

2.5.1 Reducing risk and uncertainty

Word-of-Mouth reduces risk levels and uncertainty as well as the amount of required effort to process information. Thus, it is considered as a trustworthy source of information on which people rely, when making purchase decisions (Price and Feick, 1984). When tie bonds do not offer information, the role of electronic sources is strengthened (Goswami, 2016). Investigations about the issue aimed at defining the impact of eWOM on product sales, consumers' decision making processes, as well as the attitude toward a brand and web sites (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Lee et al., 2009).

2.5.2 Influencing brand perception

By sharing the experience with others, users influence also brand perception. King (1965) affirms that Word-of-Mouth is the most important predictor that affects the adoption of new fashions (Wee et al., 1995), as well as explains complex products, such as the technological ones that are plenty of features and which knowledge is not always available for simple users, who prefer reading reviews. Accordingly, these types of ratings, recommendations, and reviews help companies in judging the product or brand perception and improving the quality, as well as to acquire new customers (Goswami, 2016).

2.5.3 Providing useful information

The term that is currently used nowadays is "prosumer", who is active and contributes on the market, giving information to those demanding. Product's reviews inevitably influence final decisions (whether purchasing or not); this phenomena has gained importance across businesses which want to grasp how to leverage it, proactively inducing people to spread brand satisfaction, leading purchasing and sales.

By their work, Ahmad and Laroche (2017) analyse how reviews affect the purchase decision-making process. They highlight the importance of elements, such as valence, content, and helpfulness of reviews. The former focuses on both positive and negative aspects and it varies according to the type of product, brand knowledge, and purchase purpose. Then, content focuses on quality, price and customer value; finally helpfulness is attached to the reviewer's credibility, the length and comment's depth as well as the given product's rating. Reviews are an example of User Generated Content and they show how value does not flow simply from the firm to the customer, but it follows the reverse path

(from customers to firms). User Generated Content is one of the most influencing factors of purchasing decisions³⁴. Furthermore, sociological and psychological studies revealed how attitudes affect customer behaviour. Persuasion, consisting in a sequence of different elements (for instance message source, the channel, the message as well as the receiver), impacts on communication and shapes behaviours (Foxall and Goldsmith, 1994).

Word-of-Mouth is well-involved within customer decision journeys, since product knowledge is usually limited. Customers' beliefs and attitudes are exposed to several sources of information, that are originated from traditional advertising or interpersonal communication. Post-purchase step guides future Word-of-Mouth, taking into account nurturance activities or possession rituals, like caring for the product/service, improving it, talking to others and disposition of the product when it is used up or no longer needed.

2.5.4 Share opinions and ideas about brand experiences

People exploit social networks (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn) to share opinions, experiences with brands and retails. Due to the increasing importance of social commerce, companies have started changing their business plans embracing digital e-commerce platforms (Hajli et al., 2017). Trustworthiness, reliability and truth levels are converted into factors that directly influence purchase intentions and Word-of-Mouth. Before purchasing products, people look for information through various channels, read reviews and ratings, look at images, and finally participate into communities³⁵. For instance, in the Tourism & Travel sector people look at Pinterest boards, Instagram images, read blogs and posts on social media platforms, and so on and so forth.

Word-of-Mouth is related to the willingness of sharing reviews with others, and to social commerce, that is shifted into two main groups. On one hand, e-commerce that allows little interaction among customers (like in the Amazon case, in which people post comments on other reviews). On the other hand, the second category is linked to social commerce platforms (for instance Facebook, Twitter and so on that involve a more interaction among people). Communication by means of comments, ratings, sharing, reactions is facilitated, and platform's value increases (Hajli et al., 2017).

34 Cheung and Thadani (2012) conducted a research, and they found that 91% of respondents seek for information on online reviews, blogs and other UGC, while 46% are influenced depending on the purchasing channel.

35 This is an example of social commerce, that becomes a network of interaction among people, who are the main source of value.

Electronic WOM is a trustworthy, credible and reliable source of information, due to the high level of involved knowledge and competence. It implies that companies plan investments and daily activities in order to maximise the return on investment. In doing this, WOM helps. Messages flow from node to node, with powerful consequences on people³⁶. The intention of spreading positive/negative messages depends on the level of involvement (Wee et al., 1995), and on the tie among people. Furthermore, WOM seems to have more impact in conditioning others than traditional advertising. Keith, Jackson and Crosby (1990), analysed the impact of direct exchange between two channel members on behaviours.

2.5.5 Characteristics of eWOM messages

Electronic Word-of-Mouth involves the creation of a message that spread from the speaker to the receiver, who is moved by different motivations. Some scholars put the accent on the features (Table 2.5) of a message, which influences the final decision. According to Semin (2000), the message includes words that have the attempt of influencing others' intention; it has a social end. Furthermore, Dichter (1966) highlighted words' meaningfulness, content, body language, and expressiveness of Word-of-Mouth messages.

The distinction between cognitive and affective features is highlighted by Goswami (2016). The former involves product knowledge, particularly its attributes such as performance, response to problems, price-value perceptions as well. The latter includes message's depth, intensity, vividness, and reflect the language. Credibility, consistency, timeliness, accuracy, completeness, relevance, valence, and volume are other mentioned characteristics, which measure message's features.

The message should be in line with other customers' evaluations and credible, even in the case of weak ties. Then, it should be up-to-date and information should be correct, useful, and comprehensive. Valence and volume are other elements that summarise the emotional content of a review influencing both positive and negative Word-of-Mouth, as well as the total number of posted reviews, which is positively correlated to the likelihood of influencing purchasing intentions (Rathore and Panwar, 2017).

³⁶ About 69% people declared that they have exploited it, in order to choose a restaurant and about 22% wanted help others to book their holidays (Tuten and Solomon, 2018).

Table 2.5 Features of flowing messages.

Author	Year	Highlighted features
Semin	2000	Focus on words that might affect customer intentions.
Dichter	2016	Words, content, body language, and expressiveness should be meaningful.
Goswami	2016	Division among affective and cognitive features of the message.
Rathore and Panwar	2017	Valence and volume of messages.

2.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, it has been analysed the occurred shift from the traditional mass marketing advertising, toward a more disruptive and innovative business model based on technological tools and on the advent of Internet.

Even though Word-of-Mouth, that is a form of verbal communication from a sender to receiver concerning a product or brand, has existed since antiquity, what has changed is the strategy used by marketers in order to communicate with a broader audience. Electronically Word-of-Mouth has been evolved into social Word-of-Mouth, and is based upon concepts such as communities, groups, networks, ties in which people struggle to communicate, interact, and socialise with other peers in order to respond to different sociological, psychological, and economic needs.

No one do something for nothing. People share their opinions, feedbacks, and experiences in order to relive them, be recognised as knowledgeable people or even to help and support others. Again, culture is reminded, since it is worth to distinguish the degree to which a review, recommendation or rating is affected by personal traits or culture.

Chapter III

Applying customer experience and WOM notions to T&T sector

3.1 Introduction

Customer journey is the map which every customer follows anytime she enters in touch with a brand. Communication and marketing strategies imply to define the path, an intertwining succession of offline and online moments. Brands know how people reach them: from typical mass media advertising (including TV and printed campaigns) until online tools, physical, and virtual Word-of-Mouth.

As already seen in Chapter II, Word-of-Mouth guides trustworthy information from node to node within a community. Before choosing a restaurant, a person searches it on Google Maps, looks at the 'stars', reads reviews, and so on. Tourism product in general has changed: the role of travel agencies has been overcome by OTA platforms. Millennials and Generation Z follow trends in collecting information about touristic destinations.

Tourism industry exists since the antiquity, particularly with the Grand Tour. Young aristocrats used to travel around European and Italian cities, from Paris to Venice, in order to complete their education. Since 1960s, infrastructures and services have been improved and the offering has been broadened, causing a boom in touristic flows (intensified by the abolishment of border checks and deregulation which allowed European travellers to move across the continent without restrictions and to buy airline tickets at lower rates). Then, ePlatforms have changed the way in which customers book a travel, making the tourism product's purchasing process simpler and safer³⁷.

Customer journey involves the "information search step", based on the quality of reviews that simplifies the decision-making process. For instance, customers who visited a

³⁷ This does not mean that the tourism product is less complex than how it was in the past. It involves a huge amount of touch points, both online and offline, in every step of the customer journey map.

city, have flown with a certain airline company, or have been into a cozy restaurant closed to St. Mark's Square in Venice, become witnesses of a positive experience, willing to help and support others. This is the well-known concept of communities. Communities, forums, social media sites, and other T&T platforms provide information in a democratic way, empowering people, and changing the role of travel agents and tourist guides. Locals, real or virtual friends, and relatives are trustworthy and reliable sources of information able to influence customers' purchases and intentions³⁸. These shifts ask for a great comprehension and analysis of demand (demographic, psychological and cultural factors), going beyond personal traits. This corresponds to experience's notion, that is strictly related to the act of travelling.

Chapter III will focus on definitions, constructs, and characteristics of tourism product as provided by many organizations, such as the World Tourism Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and prevalent literature in order to move toward the analysis of customer preferences, intentions, and behaviours. After a general overview of T&T sector, factors determining its complexity will be explained, with a focus on the travel planning process. This is affected by personality, attitudes, sociodemographic factors, and culture. In fact, there are cities characterised by intense flows, and the comprehension of culture is necessary in order to facilitate the achievement of customer satisfaction and loyalty. A focus on cultural traits will be provided in Chapter IV.

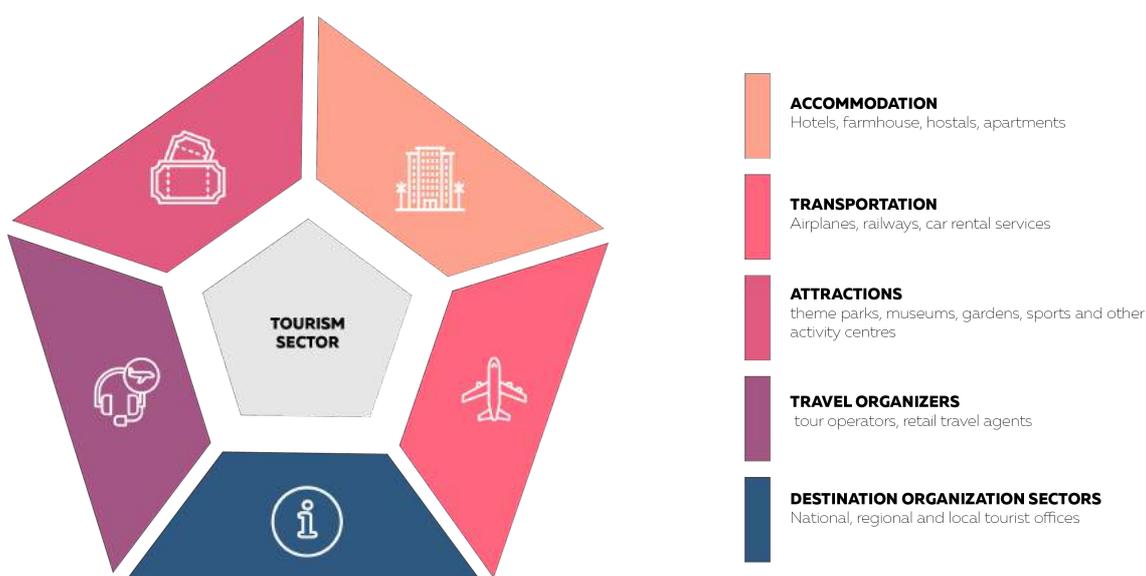
³⁸ The same is said for the Food Sector. People evaluate experiences not only on the basis of the provided quantity of food, but according to quality. There are some elements forming the experience (atmosphere, food presentation reflecting chef's aesthetic values) that were previously part of the *nouvelle cuisine*, and which can currently be found also in backyard family-owned restaurants.

3.2 The Tourism & Travel sector: definitions, concepts and general overview

3.2.1 Tourism product definitions and taxonomy

Tourism sector, in general, is devised as an *amalgam* of different goods and services devising the experience offered to the traveller (Vanhove, 2005; Gilbert, 1990). The five main sectors of the tourism industry according to Middleton (1988) are accommodation, attraction, transport, travel organisers' and destination organisation sector (Figure 3.1). Tourists choose among hotels, apartments, farmhouse, theme parks, museums, gardens, sports, and other activity centres, airlines and railways, tour operators, retail travel agents, and national, regional as well as local tourist offices. The taxonomy points out the relevance in terms of ancillary companies and sectors being involved, with an impact on value creation. As concerns hospitality, it is the group of companies, including hotels, bars, and restaurants providing food, drink, or a place to sleep, as well as entertainment to guests (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019).

Figure 3.1 Tourism sector classification.



Source: Middleton, 1988.

Tourism has an economic impact, contributing in the OECD area for about 4.1% of GDP, 5.9% of employment, as well as 21.3% of service exports. It requires an integrative system made of both public and private institutions, which promote the territory through a series of experiences, cultural, and natural resources, in a sustainable way. Inclusion and continuous dialogue in the short and long-term should be the main objective in order to obtain relevant benefits for local communities (OECD, 2018).

3.2.2 Tourism trends and debatable issues

Since 2009, tourism experienced an economic downturn due to terrorism attacks, economic crisis, geopolitical precariousness, and natural cataclysms (WEF, 2017). After that, there has been a gradual steady increase of demand thanks to globalisation, and to the advent of digital technologies (OECD, 2018). Scholars expect this trend to rise with an average of 3.3% per year by 2030.

Among the major trends assessed by OECD, it is mentioned the expected growth of international tourist arrivals in the emerging economies, doubling the increase of advanced ones (OECD, 2018). While in the past people were used to travel from North to North, now they visit destinations like Africa, Middle East, Asia-Pacific with an exponential growth (WEF, 2017): World Travel and Tourism Council (2016) revealed that the 10 fastest growing destinations for leisure-travel were India, followed by Angola, Uganda, Brunei, Thailand, China, Myanmar, Oman, Mozambique, and Vietnam³⁹. There has been a growth without equal between 1950 and 2016, as the number of tourists increased, passing from 25 million travellers to 1.2 billions (WEF, 2017). The same overview provided by OECD distinguishes tourism consumption according to the type of product: passenger transport accounts for 24%, followed by accommodation (19%), and food and beverage (16%).

The “overcrowding”⁴⁰ problem is another debatable issue nowadays, concerning growth, and involving four main topics: affluence, demographic shifts, convenience, and awareness. The increasing purchasing power of middle classes is going to influence the willingness of travelling, pushing people to undergo shorter trips, to change behavioural patterns, and to adopt a “bucket list” approach that aims at identifying accessible and famous spots. Apart from demographic shifts, reviews are used to mention the opportunities offered by digital technologies in helping travellers to search information about destinations, and to afford holidays that were previously more expensive. Finally, rating and review sites, social media, and destination rankings have contributed to increase the interest for travelling as well (McKinsey & Company, 2018).

39 This rise requires countries to be more prepared in attracting and welcoming tourists, exploiting new paths of marketing and communications.

40 Venice is an example of overcrowded city. An article by Corriere della Sera revealed the coined neologism of “overtourism”, a sort of obesity of visitors affecting several cities, *in primis*, Venice. www.corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/venezia-mestre/cronaca/19_agosto_06/venezia-0203-documentobcorriereveneto-web-veneto-3de90328-b80a-11e9-8090-318654441c18.shtml

3.2.3 The definition of tourism product

Tourism product is defined as an ‘amalgam’ by literature, made of different elements (Figure 3.2). Even though the customers seem to buy just a simple service like a room or a meal, they purchase something more: a set of functional elements, from attractions, accessibility, the destination itself, including accommodation, catering, transport and entertainment, and other emotional constructs such as the atmosphere, ambience, friendliness of the local population (Vanhove, 2005; Gilbert, 1990).

Thus, tourism product seems to be more than a simple service. It requires an intertwining collaboration between producers and consumers, based on a very complex set of infrastructure and tangible/intangible resources related with the destination to which the user is travelling. Among the other dimensions, the impossibility of stocking travels and transferring its ownership as it happens for tangible goods (Cooper and Hall, 2008). However, tourism product is defined as a service by other scholars, who consider the relative distinction with respect to tangible goods. Middleton and Clark (2001) provide a taxonomy concerning the main features that differentiate services from goods.

Figure 3.2 Definition of tourism product.



Source: Vanhove, 2005; Gilbert, 1990; Cooper and Hall, 2008; Middleton and Clark, 2001.

For instance, services are not manufactured, rather performed; they usually require customer’s full participation, involving a full comprehension and linkage between offerer and requirer; they are also delivered in the place to which people are travelling, they are perishable and not held for future sales; last but not least they are complex and cannot be previously inspected by users, while in the case of traditional goods, there is the possibility to see, touch, and evaluate the product (Vanhove, 2005). Finally, friendliness and helpfulness of the staff might be crucial in order to offer a satisfactory experience (Middleton and Clark, 2001).

Nowadays, intangibility seems to prevail on materiality. Tourism product is an intangible service, which is hardly evaluated before consumption, involving a high-level of risk and subjectivity. Moreover, it is a seasonal, perishable, and highly competitive product, raising more questions for marketers (Litvin et al., 2008; Lewis and Chambers, 2000). The *raison d'être* of tourism is given by multifaceted destinations. First, perishability, implying that with larger inbound flows, destinations may deteriorate; second, they are common goods involving conflicts with local population; and finally, they are cultural appraisals. Scholars underline also unpredictability of demand, particularly preferences, past experiences, education and expectations impact on the choice of a destination (Medlik, 1991).

3.2.4 A psychological issue: stereotyped idea of destination image

Destination's concept arose for the first time in the 1990s by the World Tourism Organisation, being that a place characterised by series of attraction spots, infrastructures, and so on. Tamma (2002) also defines three necessary elements: the geographical space, an offering/market and the complex system of resources, infrastructures, activities, actors, and so on. Initial independent resources become unitary systems thanks to tourists' cooperation, who compose vacations according to their preferences (Martini, 2017).

Destination image (Figure 3.3), a psychological issue, is the “sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has about a destination”, a sort of territory's “stereotype” that tourism promoters, public institutions, and other marketers want to deliver to travellers (Crompton, 1979, p. 18; Sonnleitner, 2011). Accordingly, Sonnleitner (2011) provides a classification with respect to destination image, including:

- *Primary and secondary image*, where the former is acquired through personal experience and direct contact with the place, while the second one may be formed through “organic, induced and autonomous information sources” (Sonnleitner, 2011, p. 19). Primary image is more accurate, personal, and comprehensive, also depending on the level of involvement and intensity of travel (Beerli and Martín, 2004);
- *Pre-visit and post-visit image* is a distinction based on the assumption that perceived image changes over time, thus being dynamic and depending on variables of time and space. Pre-visit image refers to service perception, expected to be found at a destination; post-visit image is usually analysed through questionnaires that might present some biases.

- *Cognitive and affective image* related to knowledge and beliefs about a spot, and to feelings, emotions, and the level of sentimental attachment toward a destination respectively. Affective image is also more volatile than cognitive one since it depends on emotional conditions.
- *Attribute-based and holistic image*. Destination is seen as a whole of attributes and a unitary system that contributes to the creation of a wide impression. These attributes vary from the most functional (activities, landscape, nature and cultural spots) to the psychological ones (service quality, originality, and so on).

Figure 3.3. Destination image taxonomy.

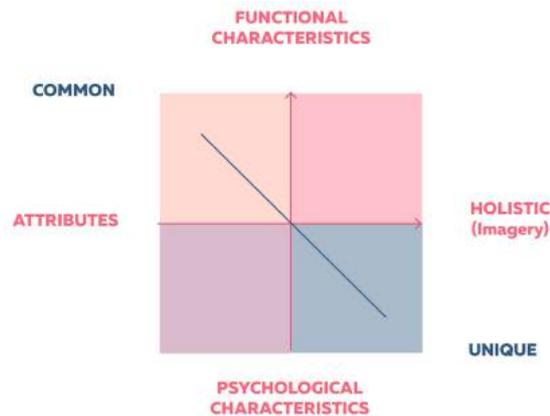


Source: Sonnleitner, 2011.

To conclude, destination image depends on individual attributes and holistic impressions; scholars distinguish between functional features that are easily to be assessed and psychological characteristics. By merging the two dimensions, it is assessed a two-dimensional model (Figure 3.4). On the vertical axis authors put *functional* and *psychological* characteristics, whereas on the horizontal axis, they set *attributes* and *holistic* elements.

Four quarters are pointed out with respect to destination image, including: a *functional-holistic image*, the mental picture of physical elements of the destination; a *psychological-holistic image* that is the general feeling about the atmosphere and so on; a *functional-attribute image* (high prices or hot climate for instance); and *psychological-attribute image* including the general sense of safety and friendliness of people. The last dimension concerns the degree to which it is common or unique, according to the level of uniqueness, emotions and other images that a destination evokes (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991).

Figure 3.4. Destination image two-dimensional model.



Source: Echtner and Ritchie, 1991.

The interesting point outlined by Sonnleitner's dissertation (2011) regards the way in which destination image is formed, particularly it is influenced by personal experiences, reputation which is spread through both positive and negative publicity as well as awareness of a country. Thus, destination image could be considered a sort of brand. Typical instruments that are usually adopted to study brand image can be applied to detect the features of destination image. For instance, a country might exploit its good reputation, loyalty, and positive Word-of-Mouth to improve its image.

3.2.5 Looking at the offering side: SMEs and OTA systems

An important constituent of the tourism product is its offering. SMEs are operating in the tourism field, and they do not apply commercial logics as big companies do. The framework is getting complex, since traditional travel agencies have been partially substituted by Online Travel Agencies (OTA), that account among the main leading players Ctrip, Expedia, Priceline, and Booking.com™. In order to build competitive advantage, they usually seek for promising loyalties and partnerships with other companies. Today, users are put at the centre: calibrating the experience, capturing customer's attention, measuring the interaction and finding ways to disrupt are among the main features of the new travel distribution sector (McKinsey & Company, 2017).

Restaurateurs and hoteliers are usually not well educated in managing and exploiting new technologies, especially electronic Word-of-Mouth and social media. They are a better way to enhance customer experience, even though several aspects might be considered. For instance, subjectivity and cultural elements that might affect the content of electronic

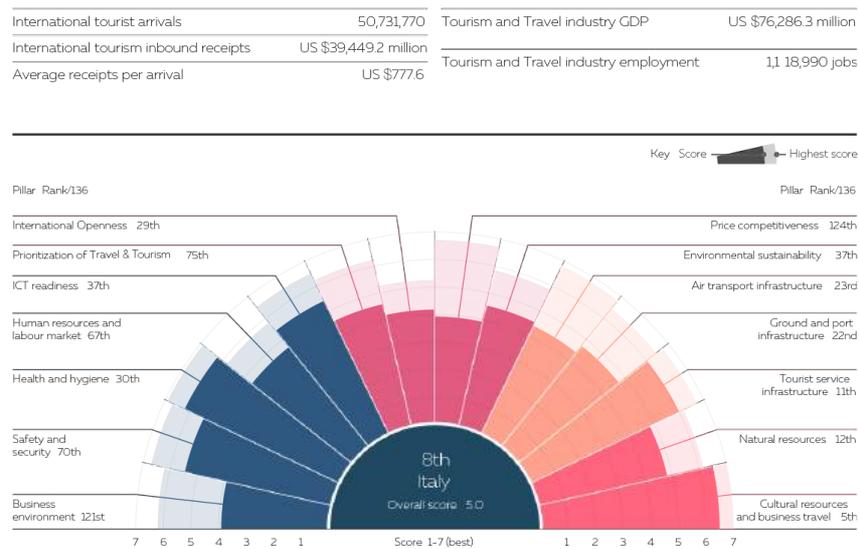
reviews. Reviews might be misunderstood or dictated by emotions, moods, cultural traits, that are sometimes hard to decode. The logic consequence is that, by ignoring this, a restaurateur who receives bad comments reacts impulsively without accepting critics.

Another important thing to keep in mind is that, customer satisfaction depends on the gap between initial expectations and the experience they get into the hotel. The expectation is usually formed during the information search step, when the client visits web sites and social media pages, or read reviews. They are all manageable by owners. This means that the identity that entrepreneurs build online should reflect the quality of the service that is delivered on site. This is because, today customers do not simply share opinions by means of sentences. They also include images and videos as to make their opinion more authentic.

3.2.6 Measuring competitiveness with the Tourism and Travel sector

An index that has been constructed aiming at measuring competitiveness of a country is the so-called Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (WEF, 2017), which provides cross-country comparisons and insights with respect to strengths and weaknesses related to different countries, in order to formulate appropriate policies and actions. Among the main four factors measuring competitiveness it is worth to mention: environment, policy and enabling conditions, infrastructure, and natural/cultural resources. These are sub-divided, including 16 sub-dimensions that put the accent on deeper aspects, such as human resources, health and hygiene, ICT readiness, and more (Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5 Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index of Italy.



Source: World Economic Forum, 2017.

For instance, Italy is situated on 8th position at a global level, due to the excellent presence of cultural and natural resources, as well as the world-class tourism infrastructure. These are strengths that appeal customers and tourists. On the other hand, weaknesses can be found in ground infrastructure, poor human resources, uncompetitive prices, that should be seen as points for further improvements and reflection (WEF, 2017).

To sum up, this paragraph has outlined the main characteristics of tourism product, particularly highlighting its complexity. Tourism product is strictly related to the concept of destination image, that depends on several functional, psychological, cultural factors, guiding the overall reputation and awareness of a geographical spot. Being aware of what the main responsible elements of a positive experience are, is necessary to promote and adopt marketing strategies which goal is to attract national and foreign visitors. The second preliminary step is to analyse the demand and the involved segments in order to define the best strategy to fulfil marketing objectives.

3.3 Segments and traits of tourism demand

3.3.1 The figure of Traveller 2.0

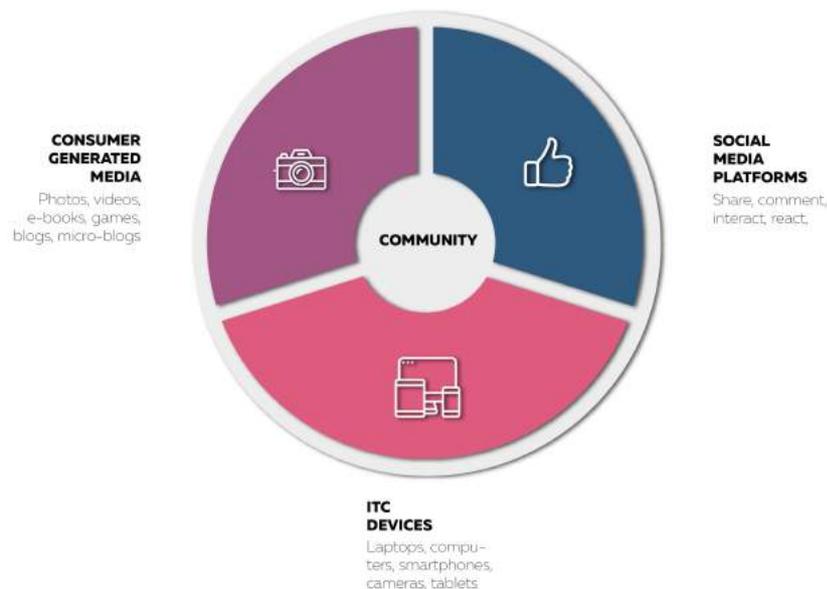
When analysing the tourism system, it is worth to consider the figure of travellers (Figure 3.6) and the constraints affecting their final purchasing decisions, such as the income, time, political rights, health, information and education, safety and security of the travel destination, including the perceived threat of crime, political instability and health risks, but also legislated holidays, work location, gender, and finally culture (Cooper and Hall, 2008).

Scholars use the term of travellers 2.0 to show the willingness of obtaining information on travel, sharing experiences, purchasing ancillary travel-services, as well as using devices like photo-sharing tools, videos, blogs, micro-blogs, geo-referencing, and communities. They utilise technologies in order to search information, availing themselves of search engines or more advanced augmented reality systems. According to a study conducted on some US cities, it has been found that, people usually start the research by using general terms, like the destination name, and then go more in-depth adding attributes. Each destination has a different visibility within search engines⁴¹ (Beckendorf, Sheldon and Fesenmaier, 1997; Parra-López, Gutiérrez-Taño, Díaz-Armas, and Bulchand-

⁴¹ This should be investigated with respect to research's queries as to adopt the ideal destination marketing strategy.

Gidumal, 2012). People post information, following the phenomena of consumer generated media, based on the creation of travel pictures, including photos and videos shared as soon as they are get, or comments corresponding to detailed reviews about the travel-product used (Parra-López et al., 2012).

Figure 3.6 The Traveller 2.0 based on community concept.



Source: Cooper and Hall, 2008.

Tourism sector involves some mega trends, one of which is the evolving visitor demand⁴² (OECD, 2018). Particularly, OECD has examined the changing visitors' propensity to travel and their expectations, affected by factors such as gender imbalances, income, and education levels, population's ageing, and so on. On one hand, the report considers that people are becoming richer and older; on the other hand the attention goes to Millennials and Generation Z, who will lead important shifts within the tourism market as concerns mobility and travel behaviours (OECD, 2018). The expansion of the global middle class will result in a higher purchasing power and consumption levels, gaining more access to goods and services, with differences that will vary from country to country. This is also thanks to new technological advances, which on the other hand are going to alter the number of people within the same class because of coming automation of labour force (OECD, 2018).

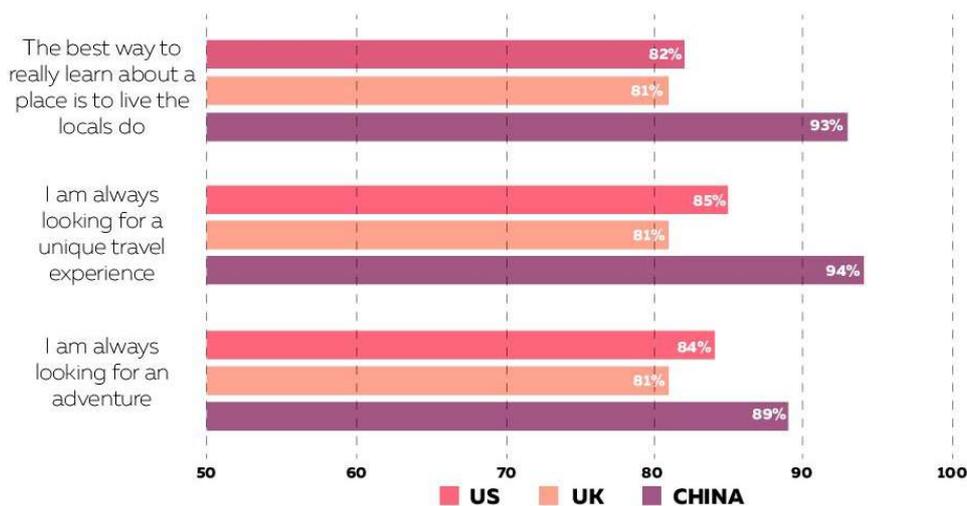
⁴² OECD (2018) mentions four mega trends bringing opportunities and threats. Apart from the shift of customer demand, it is mentioned the sustainable tourism growth, enabling technology, and finally travel mobility.

Secondly, ageing populations, due to life expectancy as well as growing fertility rates, especially in developing countries. Upcoming generations of elderly people will be more inclined to experience leisure-oriented services than past generations. As regards, the fall of working age, it might affect the tourism demand as well (OECD, 2018).

Finally, emerging generations, such as Millennials and Generation Z will be probably more demanding than previous one as they have been grown in a period characterised by technology and Internet, being more adaptive and more used to travel independently; to use new technologies and community-based platforms, expecting to visit nontraditional destinations, as well (McKinsey & Company, 2017).

Airbnb’s survey (AirBnb Report, 2016) pointed out that Millennials tend to travel for shorter periods of time, and prefer experiences allowing them to “live like a local”, seeking for more genuine, adventurous experiences, especially across US, UK, and China. They are used to find out local restaurants and people, unknown hidden and hot spots (Figure 3.7). Travel is sometimes considered as a priority than owning a car or a house, confirming the relevance of experience economy. Combining preferences and attitudes with technologies, it is noticed that current generations are used to design their own itineraries by themselves, rather than relying on travel agents or pre- packaged tours (OECD, 2018).

Figure 3.7 Percent of surveyed Millennials who said they agree with the following statements.

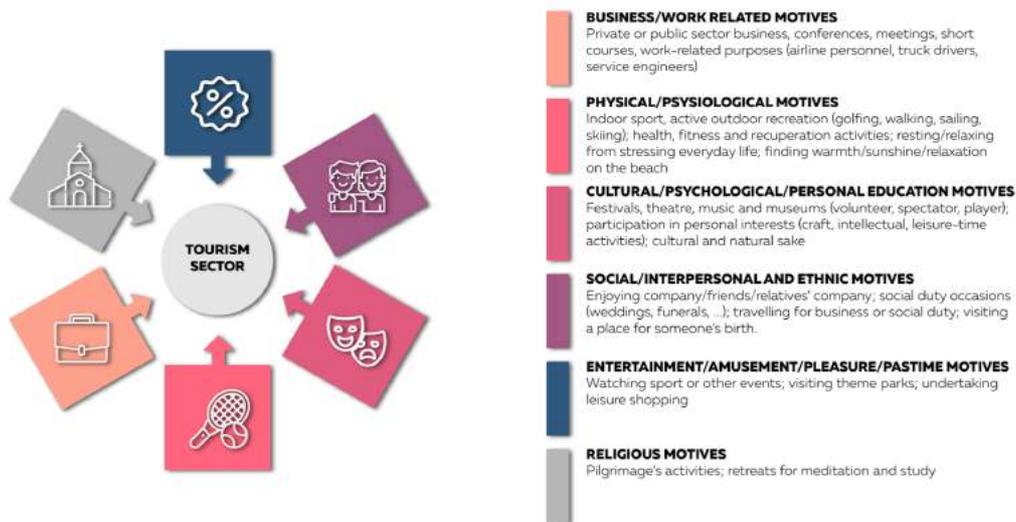


Source: Airbnb Report, 2017.

3.3.2 A general framework of Traveller's 2.0 motivations

Middleton (1988) explained that travel and tourism demand is also in competition with other goods such as hi-fi equipment, concert tickets, fashion goods, and so on. Moreover, internal and psychological processes affect the choice of a particular destination, which consequently influence other marketing decisions: they are travellers' motivations (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8 The main motives for Travel & Tourism.



Source: Middleton, 1988.

The main motivators that push people to travel are for business or work, as to attend meetings or conferences; physical or physiological reasons, for instance to participate in outdoor activities, pursuing health, fitness or recuperation, having rest or simply relax; cultural and social motives are related to the need of visiting heritage destinations or having fun with friends; finally entertainment motives as for leisure shopping or visiting theme parks; and religious motivations, including people taking part in pilgrimages or meditate, and study (Middleton, 1988). However, these motivators have nothing to do with how effectively decisions are made: humans take them according to the price, habits, personality, experience (Middleton, 1988), and on the type of information they acquire over a product.

Work by Line and Runyan (2012) focused on the topics which have been examined over the years in the tourism field. Just 36.9% of research has investigated consumer perceptions and characteristics (such as satisfaction, expectations, service quality, persuasion, dissonance; decision making, motivation, information search, and so on);

whereas the majority of reviewed articles stressed merely management, planning and strategy, and other marketing topics. Furthermore, a research investigating the traits of social media users in the tourism context, found out that they tend to be young, male and to have higher incomes and Internet skills. Young people are more prominent in sharing photos and posting than seniors⁴³ (Yoo and Gretzel, 2012).

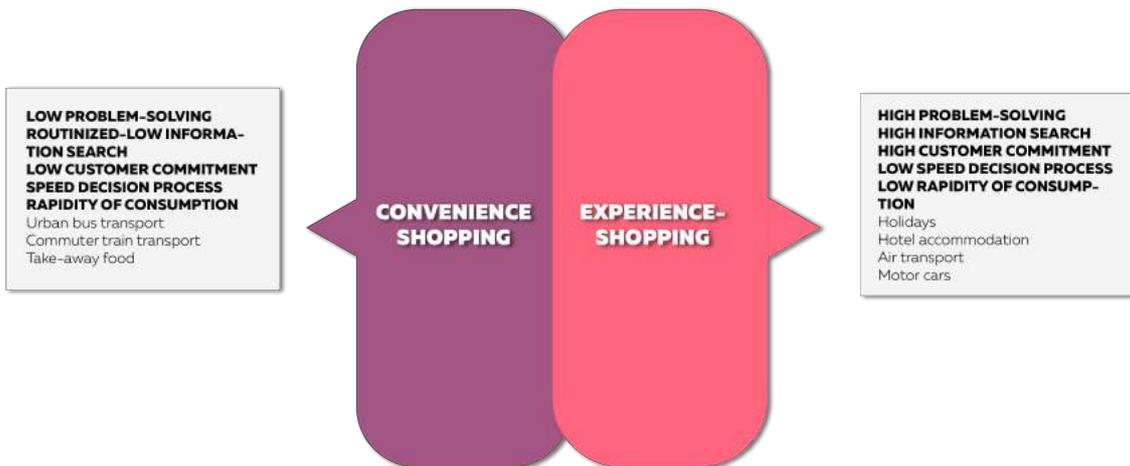
Demographic, social, and economic positions affect customers' decision process, and according to the position within the life cycle, each person has different intentions, behaviours, needs, and wants. Middleton (1988) considers also psychographic factors, such as temperature of a person, who is more or less conscious, confident, gregarious, assertive, or adventurous. Finally, attitudes which are positive or negative statements toward experiences. Individuals who tend to travel extensively have also strong self- development needs, positioned at the top of Maslow's pyramid, requiring the basic one to be satisfied (Middleton, 1988; Maslow, 1943).

As concerns needs, travel was associated to self- recognition, being that the need of acquiring knowledge and being exposed to others' culture. Nowadays, self- development is connected to people's leisure activities, hobbies, sports, and so on. Travel is a way to reach personal goals, such as respect to friends, group's influencing, having a good domestic life, achievement and work status, or voluntary work.

Finally, the distinction between convenience and shopping goods that is associated to tangible products, is also applied to services (Howard and Sheth, 1967). Urban transport or commuter train services might be convenience products, since they are consumed rapidly, the process of decision-making is speed, there is low involved information, and they are purchased frequently. On the other hand, holidays, hotel accommodation, and air transport might be considered shopping products, since they differ for being more complex in the way in which people decide, search, and consume them (Figure 3.9).

43 Researchers also point out the distinction between push and pull factors when considering demand's trait (Martini, 2017). On one hand, push factors include all those elements that incentivise people to leave the destination in which they are based to visit another one. For instance, economic, social (including available leisure time), demographic, and environmental factors. Then, the distance between geographical spots, on which the advent of low cost means of transport has impacted; historical and cultural factors which through Word-of-Mouth push people to visit areas. On the other hand, flows depend on pull factors related to financial, geographical and social or political accessibility, involving image and perceptions of the space (Martini, 2017).

Figure 3.9 Convenience vs shopping buyer behaviours.



Source: Middleton, 1988.

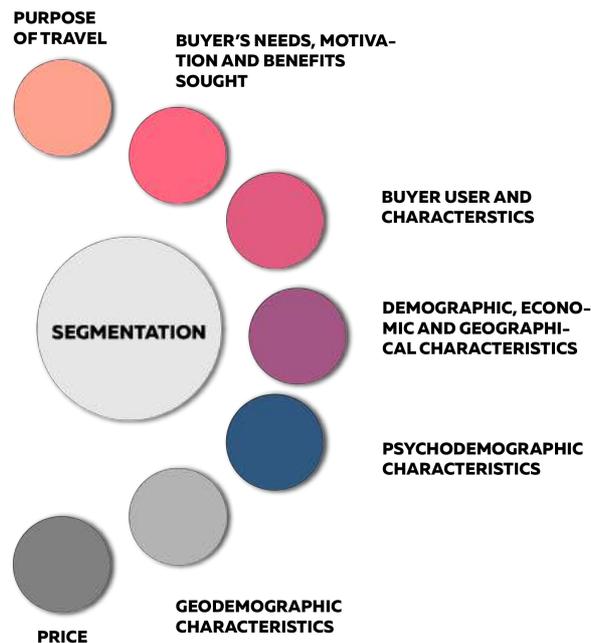
3.3.3 Segmentation process in the tourism market

Segmentation is a process through which a company groups people within clusters (they have the same features and characteristics). In segmenting profiles, marketers usually adopt a series of techniques prioritising purpose of the travel; buyers’ motivations; needs and users’ characteristics (Figure 3.10). According to motivations, purposes, features, and traits, each offering is well shaped to achieve and fulfil the involved dimensions⁴⁴. Hence, people might have different needs, and could prefer to stay in modern and international hotels or even in local accommodation, as to understand the culture or get in touch with locals as well.

Segmenting the market is a necessary condition in order to devise an optimal marketing and communication strategy, given the rising complexity of customer’s traits and requirements, especially in the ‘T&T’ sector. People are increasingly consuming digital contents, being inspired by Instagram’s photos and videos showing top destinations, but they are also affected by the decision of visiting unknown destinations and of being more responsible, travelling far away from overcrowded places (WEF, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2017). Being aware of these shifts allows marketing managers to assess the correct strategy and to shape the best customer experience in a sector that is complex, multifaceted, subjective, and above all based on culture.

⁴⁴ Thus, the existence of infrastructures, services, human requirements varies according to the purpose at hand and lead to a positive or negative experience’s evaluation.

Figure 3.10 Tourism and Travel’s criteria to segment the market.



Source: Middleton, 1988.

3.4 How does the customer journey take place in the tourism sector?

While in the past, the main channel was constituted by intermediaries who acted between tour operators and final customers, today online channels prevail, and facilitate the process of information acquiring. To avoid commissions, hotels seek for selling rooms directly (with exception for air travel and cruise industry), diminishing travel agencies’ importance (Toh, DeKay, and Raven, 2011). Steinbauer and Werthner (2007) affirm that Internet is not the only channel users consult in order to get information. Customers combine offline with online tools.

Even though travel experience is a really complex and multifaceted product, scholars assume it as referral model the typical five-stages consumer decision-making process, starting from the “pre-trip” step in which people perceive a gap or need and begin to look for information, followed by the “during trip” where they consume included services, and finally the “post-trip” or evaluation stage. The act of looking for information is extremely necessary in the pre-trip or travel planning stage, and it includes several sources of information (Cox et al., 2009), with an increasing attention toward blogs and social platform sites (Figure 3.11).

3.4.1. The travel planning process

Pre-consumption, consumption, and post-consumption are the main stages, in which new information technologies play a crucial role. First, pre-consumption is a series of activities where the traveller usually plans the journey, forms some expectations, evaluates alternatives, compares, and selects activities on the basis of interests. Second, consumption stage is the experience at the destination, where the user uses Internet and social media, in order to get more information about specific services and resources. Finally, when the journey is over, it begins the post-consumption step, in which the traveller shares collected materials. The act of sharing is facilitated by the possibility of sharing experiences as soon as they are lived, or thanks to geo-positioning - allowing to get geotagged photos, including the destination's name as soon as they are uploaded on social media (Parra-López et al., 2012).

Figure 3.11 The travel planning process.



Source: Engel et al., 1990; Woodside and Lyonski, 1989; Cox et al., 2009.

Tourists' decision-making process has been described by several scholars. For instance, Woodside and MacDonald (1994) stated that the final decision-making process is made of eight steps, that contributes to the final decision. It seems that there would be some situational factors, such as personal traits and marketing activities that might influence the information search step. The "Decision Net Model" was assumed by Fesenmaier and Jeng in 2000, who highlighted the fact that tourist decisions were complex and made of sub-decisions. The hierarchical structure meant that decisions were contingent upon others, and they had been already made. Finally, by assuming that the final decision consisted of core, secondary, and *en route* sub-decisions.

Meanwhile, Crompton (1992) described tourist decision-making process as composed of three steps. First, the awareness step that involves the development of an initial set of potential destinations for a trip influenced by subjective beliefs, passive information catching or incidental learning. In this step, Word-of-Mouth and past evoked experiences by other people are relevant. Second, the user discards some destinations and creates a smaller evoking set, in which the future traveller seeks information actively, and reduces the number of destinations. This allows to go further to the final set that includes the information search concerning those alternatives from which the final one will be finally selected.

Furthermore, the model hypothesised by Steinbauer and Werthner (2007) is based on factors that affect customer’s choice to use Internet in order to plan travels: evaluation of the website, travel motivation, trip features, experience with e-commerce/e-tourism, Internet affinity, self-efficacy⁴⁵, involvement, and trust. Particularly, Internet affinity is strictly related to one’s education, which is based on demographic variables, such as age or gender (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Literature’s overview on travel consumer behaviour.

Authors	Year	Topic
Crompton	1992	Three steps: awareness; creation of a smaller set of potential destinations, final decision.
Woodside and MacDonald	1994	The final decision is composed of eight different steps.
Fesenmaier and Jeng	2000	“Decision Net Model” states that each decision is made of several sub-decisions.
Steinbauer and Werther	2007	Factors affecting the choice, with regard to Internet affinity.
Cox et al.	2009	Five-stages decision-making process: “pre-trip” (gap perception, information search); “during trip” (alternative evaluation, decision); “post-trip” (evaluation step).
Parra-López et al.	2012	Pre-consumption, consumption, and post-consumption, in which new information technologies play a crucial role.

45 As regards self-efficacy (Steinbauer and Werthner, 2007), the more people are confident in having knowledge about how to book services, the more they will evaluate Internet as a useful tool for planning the vacation. While, surprisingly, trust seems to have small impact and it depends on the experience level as well as loyalty.

Several hypothesis have been assumed by work of Toh, DeKay, and Raven (2011), who have affirmed that the growing importance of Internet in making researches about travel is due to price transparency, and perception of lower prices⁴⁶. In fact, there are several identifiable patterns; for instance the fact that booking is usually completed online rather than by telephone or through intermediary travel agencies; people who use online tools are younger, richer and savvier and travel for pleasure finding Internet as a great opportunity for making businesses. Moreover, third-party websites, including Expedia, Trivago, TripAdvisor, Booking.com™, provide the possibility of comparing prices, rooms, and services, and they are often preferred to the main website (Toh et al., 2011).

Among the factors influencing customer behaviours, involvement has been analysed by Cai, Feng and Breiter in a research of 2004, which is a state of motivation, arousal or interest, that is distinguished into ego involvement and purchase involvement⁴⁷ (Beatty et al., 1988); involvement is measured through spent time in product/service search, the energy spent, the number of examined alternatives, and the extent of the decision process (Cai, Feng and Breiter, 2004, p. 140). As regards the pre-trip decision-making process, travellers are usually motivated to make an aware choice, selecting the final destination out of two or three alternatives.

Crompton (1992) also states that in some situations, for instance when the vacation is short, close to home and cheaper, the selection coincides with low-involvement decision, in which the process is relatively simpler and does not follow a complex problem-solving approach. Furthermore, the author (1992) also advances the hypothesis that there are three degrees of involvement: high, medium, and low. The first one, is the typical situation in which the tourists have decided yet to visit a specific place and thus, they are already looking for information. Then, medium implies that they have several destinations in mind and need to get more information; finally, low information is attached to the need of situation for a future decision (Crompton, 1992; Cai et al., 2004).

46 This pushes people to check and re-check offerings, hotels and rooms in order to find the most convenient according to motivations, needs, and wants.

47 Beatty et al. (1988) affirms that ego involvement is the importance of the product to the individual and to the person self-concept, values and ego; whereas purchase involvement concerns the degree of concern for the purchase process moved by the need to consider a particular purchase.

3.4.2 Focus on the information search step

During the information search step, which aims at identifying both information, contents and channels⁴⁸, travellers are used to consult social media channels, and to exploit information search queries (Yoo and Gretzel, 2012; Cai et al., 2004; Cox et al., 2009). According to different internal and external contingencies arising during the process, people use different pieces of information in order to facilitate and make the process more dynamic. The information search step has the goal of reducing the perceived risk related to the decision⁴⁹ (Hussain et al., 2017).

Information is quintessential in each step of the journey (Cox et al., 2009). The way people search for information has radically changed thanks to the advent of TripAdvisor, Lonely Planet, and other social network sites. Individual reviews, opinions, and ratings assume a pivotal role, since they are based on knowledge and information. These contents are called User Generated Contents or consumer-generated media as they are generated and created by people who want to express their point of view, exploiting Word-of-Mouth (Cox et al., 2009).

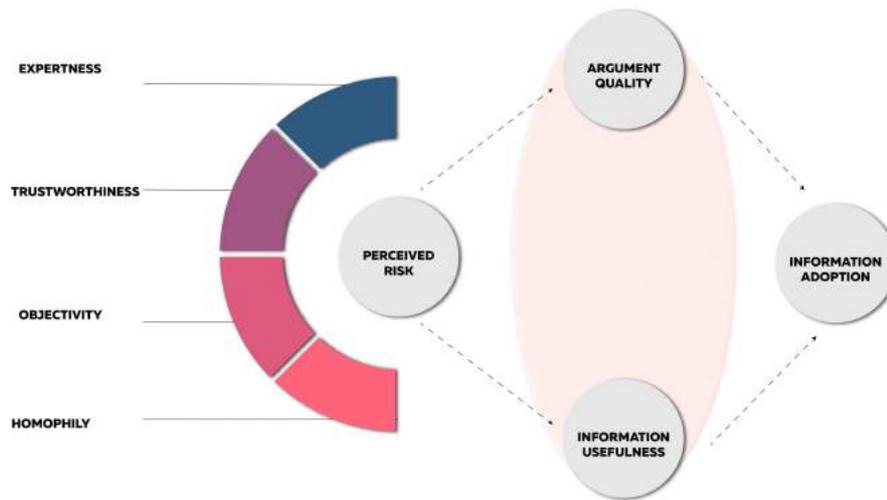
When it comes to choose an accommodation, people may base their decisions on location, brand name, facilities such as swimming pool, fitness centre or spa; service quality, price, loyalty programs, quality ratings by past guests. Other variables could be considered such as atmosphere and design (Cantalops et al., 2014), and Word-of-Mouth (Figure 3.12). Because of that, risk reduction is affected by the credibility of information source, and generally perceived risk is influenced by uncertainty⁵⁰; inseparability considering that all these services affect the overall satisfaction during the journey and they cannot be divided; intangibility because they are human based and depend on the type of personal connection with other people. Moreover, they vary according to cultural levels as well; perishability in the sense that services may deteriorate increasing the level of perceived risk (Hussain et al., 2017).

48 Information contents and channels are respectively what and how users search information (Cai et al., 2004).

49 For instance, travellers often look for information about travel partners; destination; required expenditure; activities; travel dates; attractions to visit; means of transport; length of trip; rest and food stops (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006).

50 Uncertainty is attached to the perception of possible financial, psychosocial, physical, performance, time loss, as well as the typical features of a tourism product indicated as heterogeneity (since it includes a huge variety of services like transport, accommodation and entertainment).

Figure 3.12 The pivotal role of Word-of-Mouth in information acquiring step.



Source: Cantalops and Salvi, 2014

Within this framework, Internet has acquired a relevant attention, allowing people to become co-creators and content generators, providing comments, ideas, devising new patterns of behaviours. Internet has allowed dynamic, fast real-time information, suggesting a new way of having access, interact, and customise experiences (Cai et al., 2004). Another relevant element of the customer journey is deriving fun and enjoyment from telling others stories about locations and destinations⁵¹.

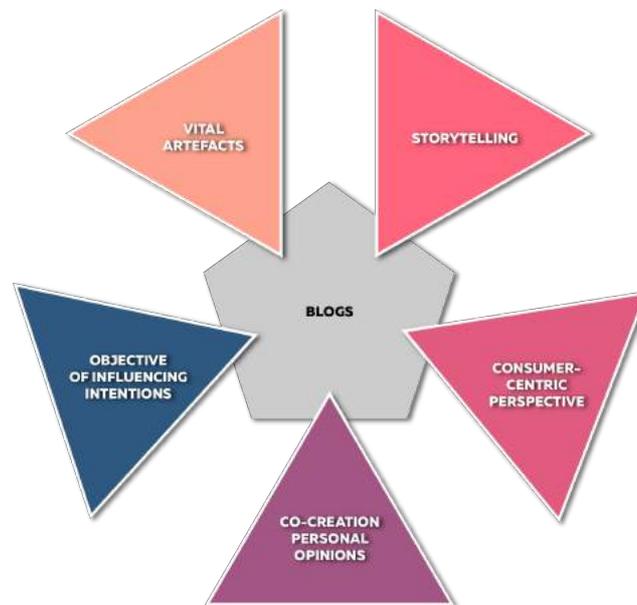
As regards, online travellers' behaviour, literature puts the attention on online consumers who pass from simple passive users to be active and co-creators. Moreover, scholars distinguish different approaches that vary from 'collectors', 'joiners', 'spectators' who consume contents generated by other peers and "inactives" who instead are not involved in these activities (Yoo and Gretzel, 2012). One should consider the role of blogs, that have the main goal of getting someone's attention, interest, and desire in order to activate the planning step. Generally, blogs are powerful to elicit destination marketing and to positively allure people to do activities in a country or region (Cox et al., 2009).

Blogs are vital artefacts in the context of tourism and travel, because they stimulate reflection, personalise events, imply co-creation, meaningfulness, and storytelling (Figure 3.13). Blogs are tools through which consumer-centric perspectives are expressed, provoking reflection and providing personally relevant opinions and insights that naturally

⁵¹ A survey conducted by Yoo and Gretzel (2012), pointed out that in 2010, 81.8% of people used social media in order to decide where to stay overnight, while 76.6% used it in order to choose what to eat and what to do. Accordingly, the majority of people perceive that social media impact on their decision-making process.

evoke something in readers influencing their future intentions. Literature has examined some contents within travel blogs, such as description of destinations, including climate, cuisine, transport, attractions or regional specific stereotypes that might affect destination image, evaluation of destination and tourist behaviour (Bosangit, Hibbert and McCabe, 2015).

Figure 3.13 Blogs as powerful constructs to elicit destination marketing.



Source: Cox et al., 2009.

To sum up, travel experience is described by extant literature as a complex topic, since there is a strong connection between consumption and production, involvement, subjectivity, and culture. Customer experience is built step-by-step along the journey and it is influenced by human-based interactions, mood, temperature, and also by other tangible/intangible aspects. Today, the increasing trend of using OTA to book travels, together with the attempt of providing insights and analytics, allow people to better understand customer journey, and producing product and process innovations. Then, innovative strategies that shorten the link between customers and offerers provide the opportunity to cut costs, establishing direct-channels, and launching large-scale marketing campaigns (McKinsey & Company, 2017). However, since distributors are currently increasing daily, scholars assess the difficulty of measuring the phenomenon.

3.5 How Word-of-Mouth communication flows in the tourism sector

3.5.1 The role of Word-of-Mouth in promoting the tourism product

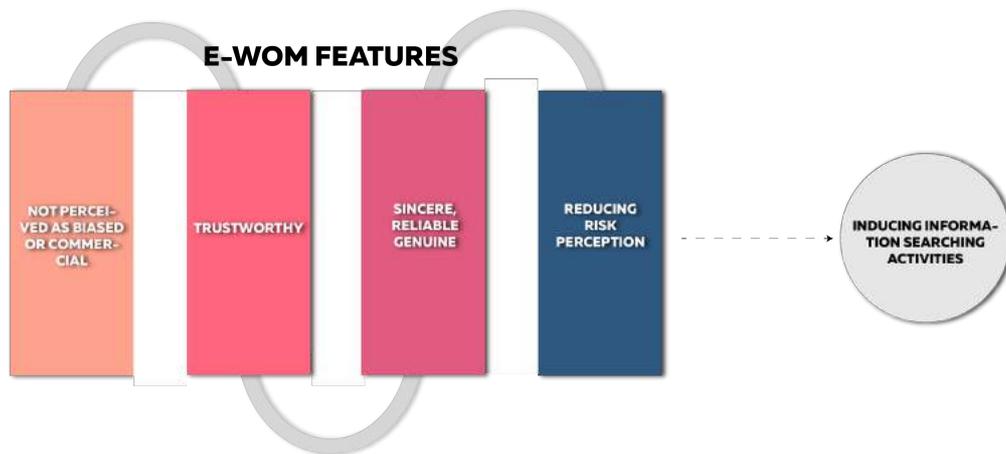
When speaking about the promotion mix, scholars usually mention different tools (the typical mass-media advertising availing of TV or press, personal selling, sales promotions and publicity, that is made of different public relations activities, including the customers' invitation to experience the product, and above all the already mentioned Word-of-Mouth). As already pointed out in Chapter II, Word-of-Mouth and PR have not been always taken into account by marketers, since their results were difficult to assess and to evaluate *ex post*.

However, marketers and literature recognise their role to create and maintain favourable relationships with stakeholders. Traditional Word-of-Mouth brought to a variety of benefits for companies in case of favourable experience (Holloway and Robinson, 1995). Between 2000 and 2004, several studies (Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott, 2003; Crick, 2003) have been conducted in order to grasp the relevance of Word-of-Mouth among nations revealing that positive and negative Word-of-Mouth come into view as a consequence of satisfying/dissatisfying experiences, and it is among the major drivers of touristic flows.

Electronic WOM has a great power in reducing the perceived risk, since the service is intangible and inseparable, activating people to engage in several information-seeking activities (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011; Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). Some scholars identified different types of behaviours according to gender and age: women tend to read reviews in order to reduce risk, for convenience and quality purposes, whereas men usually read reviews according to their level of expertise (Figure 3.14).

One of the main source of information in the tourism sector is constituted by personal past experiences, suggestions and stories told by relatives, friends and colleagues, and spread through Word-of-Mouth mechanisms (Polizzi, 2010; Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). A destination is usually described through graphic representations and verbal statements that affect the final decision. The key point is to provide optimal information in line with a customer driven strategy that aims at offering necessary information in order to guide the future intentions and behaviours (Cai et al., 2004).

Figure 3.14 Electronic Word-of-Mouth features.



Source: Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011; Cantalops and Salvi, 2014.

First, credibility is determined by the level of expertness of the reviewer, who provides relevant knowledge, experience or information that is considered to be authentic⁵². Second trustworthiness depends on the degree to which a reviewer might be recognised in providing customer-generated opinions, being considered as not fake. Third, objectivity is related to user's emotions, unusual events, and biasness. This is truer in the case of a personal and subjective experience such as a travel, that requires a direct involvement between producer and consumer that co-participate. Hence, different elements including emotions, moods, attitudes can have a direct relation with the final evaluation. Accordingly, the fact that a review is available in a written form can reduce risk and increase trust. Finally, homophily affects personal relationships, helping in decreasing vulnerability, upgrading the right sentiment, strengthen the interpersonal ties, and so on (Hussain, 2017). Thus, participating in social communities is an attempt to respond to both functional, social, psychological, and hedonic benefits. Usually people who write on TripAdvisor are motivated by intrinsic motives of enjoyment. Other findings point out that travellers intend to use social media when they perceive greater benefits and altruism, availability, individual predisposition or trust. Accordingly, literature has focused on the factors that affect consumers' behaviours, such as gender, income level, nationality, culture, membership in generational cohort and finally involvement and personality.

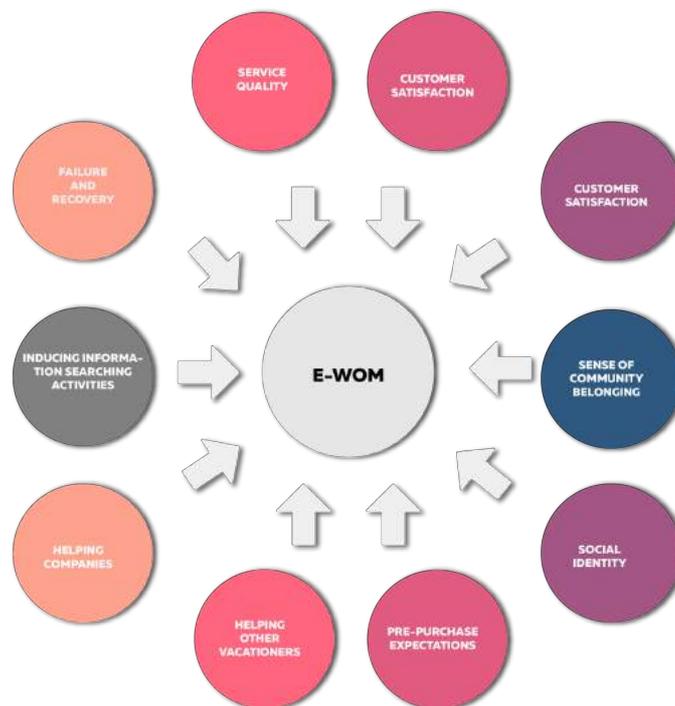
⁵² For instance, a person that has already visited a destination becomes like an "expert" who can provide relevant information to people that have never been to that spot. The level of expertness can be reinforced thanks to website or appealing and persuasive comments.

3.5.2 The current literature on review-generating factors

Literature on review-generating factors (Figure 3.15) defines a set of factors that generate reviews, such as motivation, gender influence, cognitive and psychological elements, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, group influence, sense of community belonging, as well as service quality or simply helping other vacationers and/or companies. As a matter of fact, dissatisfactory experiences may cause negative eWOM, probably because of the willingness of helping others, and not for revenge (Cantalops et al., 2014).

Cox et al. (2009) highlighted the role of electronic Word-of-Mouth as valuable in order to plan a travel. People are used to rely on friends, family and peer groups' advices when choosing a destinations that they have not already visited, and since information is provided with no commercial interests, WOM tend to be more trustworthy. Why is it WOM so valuable in the Tourism & Travel sector? First, because of the high intangibility of tourism product, and as people have never visited a destination before, they find these source of information trustworthy, unbiased, and not commercial⁵³.

Figure 3.15 Review-generating factors.



Source: Cantalops and Salvi, 2014.

⁵³ Some scholars, criticise the role of User Generated Contents because some information could be fake undermining their social end. On the other hand, thanks to the strong ties which can be created on online communities. They contain the spread of false information and consequent negative effects.

Moreover, Word-of-Mouth is a sort of destination storytelling, and it is spread through visual, textual and other images. Accordingly, a user might incorporate different elements in order to memorise, communicate, focus, and stimulate other people. Storytelling is one of the most important topics among marketers and literature, which is based on adhesive and true messages, that focus on attaching emotional messages, talking about past experiences in order to involve other people, through a “wow-experience” (as the content should generate a wow-effect), involving and grabbing the attention of the audience (Rathore and Panwar, 2017).

According to Cantalops and Salvi (2014) the current literature usually focuses on factors that motivate people to generate reviews. The interest toward the subject increased since 2011 in which several articles were written focusing on eWOM and hotels. From the consumer perspective, those studies aimed at defining the impact of reviews on the decision making process and behaviour. Reviews act on awareness and attitudes toward hotels, and especially when a huge number of negative reviews is involved, they influence negatively decisions and booking intentions. Scholars found out that among the factors that affect behaviours, trustworthiness, credibility, valence, accessibility were the most important one.

3.5.3 Word-of-Mouth from the company's point of view

From the company perspective, reviews help to interact with clients, increasing bookings and sales. Market transparency is another opportunity/risk for companies as customers may compare different alternatives and have better substitution opportunities thanks to the possibility to interact and have information on products and services. Competitive advantages are obtained if the company is able to manage both positive and negative Word-of-Mouth, finding out ideal solutions for each profile and needs⁵⁴.

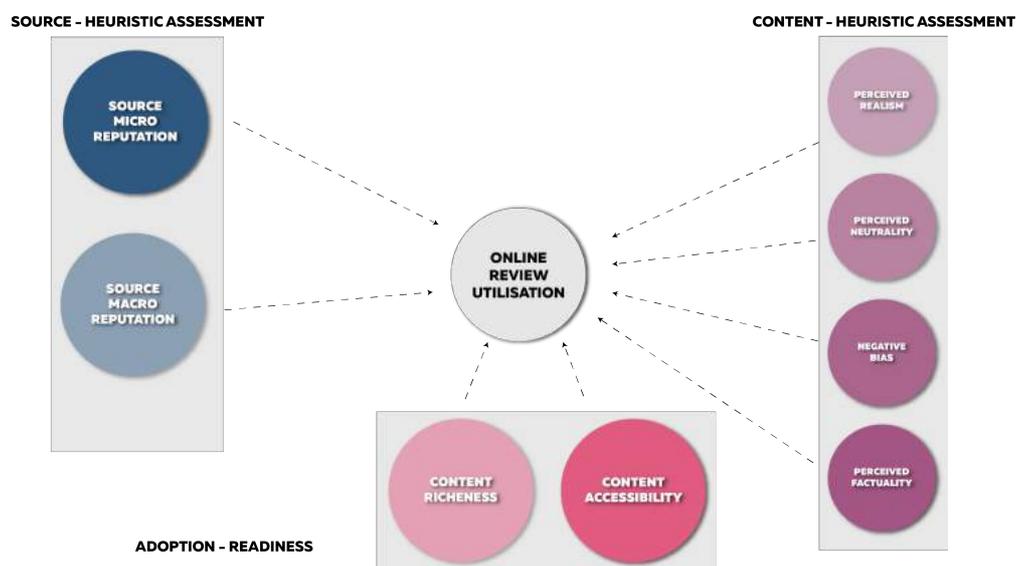
As concerns available ePlatforms on the market, Booking.comTM can be considered as the most relevant one within the Tourism & Travel sector, that allows tourists to share opinions, media contents on destinations, videos and photos that make ideas authentic. Some users revealed that they looked for other customers' comments and materials,

54 Cantalops and Salvi (2014) point out the number of studies which have been conducted on several topics, particularly, the impact of eWOM on customer decision making process and its valence (18 studies), as well as the relationship between eWOM and purchase intentions (17 studies). A minor number of studies had, as main focus the development of reputation through the usage of word-of- mouth, risk reduction, loyalty, and perceived expertise.

because they find them credible, reliable, enjoyable and up-to-date⁵⁵ (Cox et al., 2009). Travellers tend to trust peers' reviews more than advertising because while producers emphasise strengths and disguise negative aspects, customers are honest with respect to weaknesses of the product (Papathanassis and Knolle 2007).

Marketers should keep in mind that consumers act and filter content on the basis of a set of heuristics (Figure 3.16). They are more skilled, informed, empowered, and adopt sophisticated mechanisms to process information. They also should opt for increasing destination awareness and reputation⁵⁶.

Figure 3.16 Perceptions and intentions of holidays' reviews.



Source: Papathanassis and Knolle, 2007.

There are several ways to keep reviews under control: content management, integration of different traits that allow to get data mining control, collect and verify information by customers, through the availability of marketing tools (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2007). As regards, social media behaviours on Tourism & Travel sector, scholars also introduce a cultural distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures⁵⁷. The

55 Among the other aspects, credibility of the source review, that can be perceived as less relevant with respect to traditional forms of Word-of-Mouth communication with already known peers (Cox et al., 2009).

56 Papathanassis and Knolle (2007) conducted a research and they distinguished some categories of variables: adoption readiness, source-related assessment heuristics, and content-related assessment heuristics (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2007, p. 219).

57 The same distinction is highlighted by Erin Meyer, in the book "The Culture Map". Cross cultural differences are evident in every community, and have to do with communication, evaluation methods, persuading, leadership, decision-making, trust, disagreeing or agreeing, and scheduling activities (Meyer, 2014, p. 16).

latter are more likely to produce contents reflecting their past experiences, and serve the purpose of documentation and ego-enhancement (Cox et al., 2009). To sum up, even though several studies have been conducted on the eWOM topic, it is worth to notice that the topic is relatively new, and it requires more knowledge and research, particularly on mechanisms to generate purchasing intentions and loyalty.

Since new softwares and technologies are introduced on the market, marketers can deal with the problem, gaining acquaintance and being more able to track comments and reviews. The objective is to offer a greater service and reduce perceived risk along the customer journey. It is also worth to remember the high number of variables involved in customer satisfaction.

3.6 Conclusions

Tourism sector is one of the most important industry contributing to GDP worldwide. The extant literature confirms its importance, highlighting a shift from the traditional distribution toward the birth of Online Travel Agencies.

A great attention is given to mobile devices, user-generated-contents, social media, and peer's reviews. Since tourism product is made of inseparable and intangible services that are rarely assessed previously, customer journey embraces information search in each step, from the 'pre-trip' to the 'evaluation' step. Hence, Traveller 2.0 is used to leave reviews and comments in order to relive the experience. This is reinforced by the willingness of being considered experts, knowledgeable and altruistic, but also helping, supporting and suggesting others.

Blogs, ratings, and reviews are helpful tools that guide travellers intentions and purchases, and they aim at creating positive expectations with respect to a destination. However, it is not just a matter of demographic variables, but also cultural and other psychological elements are involved. Culture is an intrinsic part of Tourism and Travel sector, requiring a strong effort for those companies that want to flourish and gain a competitive advantage.

Chapter IV

Reflections on culture in the T&T sector

4.1 Introduction

Customer experience is one of the most discussed issues in marketing literature, which focuses on the quintessential consumer behaviour. The application of theory to Tourism & Travel (T&T) product is complex⁵⁸ (Middleton et al., 2001; Litvin et al., 2008). Each moment of the journey is vital since the way service is purveyed is perceived differently across cultures. This is mainly due to human interaction, subjectivity, moods, emotions, and also language. The linkage between expectations and customer satisfaction pushes people to irrationally leave reviews on SNS - democratic platforms - in order to share the experience, moved by the social need of helping others and to be seen as influencers or opinion leaders in the sector.

Customer journey in the T&T sector is tangled, varying according to socio-demographic, psychographic, and other variables. Each person has different motivations, willings, moods, and emotions toward a destination. These govern each step of the journey from the inspiration and experience phases to the final evaluation of the vacation. But, which is the role of culture? How does it affect customers' emotions and perceptions? When mixing culture, customer journey, and eWOM, one should be mindful of the fact that digital education level, usage of social media across countries, the degree to which digital tools are integrated in one's life can be unlike. For instance, in China digital apps are integrated within lifestyle and behaviour, giving the possibility to do whatever they wish with just one click.

Culture should be contemplated when devising marketing strategies, since the message that is delivered to the final client could be mislead or misinterpreted by the target. Moreover, collective and individual cultures generally have different ideas about being part of a group, sharing ideas, and so on. This depends on lifestyle, as well as political and

⁵⁸ It is denoted for being a high-involvement product, based on learning and information search activities, with a great extent of unpredictable emotions involved.

historical factors, that other cultures might ignore. Scholars concur that culture inevitably shapes decision-making processes in the T&T sector, even though further research should be conducted, since little frameworks and theories, bringing a systematic comparison of cultures, have been developed (Chen, 2000; Özdemir and Yolal, 2017; Correia et al., 2011).

Culture is a forward-looking issue which challenges companies in the T&T field, asking for more creativity and innovation. Thus, would it be right to diversify touristic offering? Or, would it be better to offer a traditional service coherent with country's identity, assuming that people look for authenticity and contact with locals, and are willing to welcome, accept, and deal with dissimilar values, traditions, and behaviours?

Chapter IV introduces culture and its components (personality, values, and habits) that affect customer behaviours, underlying that culture cannot be considered as an isolated variable, rather it should be integrated with other social, psychographic, and personal elements; economic, political, and technological factors are some antecedents of tourist behaviours. A brief overview about the globalised Traveler 4.0 is provided, that consequently focuses on international tourists and their perception of the Italian destination brand (German, Russian, Chinese, and US markets are analysed as to point out differences in consumption behaviour).

4.2 Introduction to culture, values, and habits

Culture is crucially embedded in the T&T sector: people travel to discover new cultures and lifestyles; when they go around, they absorb new values but also bring with them new habits. Channels through which they find information, where they stay in the night, the activities they do, what they eat, and where/how they finally share reviews, are all decisions that are strongly affected by culture. As a result culture forms expectations that are determining variables of satisfaction. This is composed of “patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values” (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 9).

Globalisation has induced marketers to better segment the market following cross-cultural criterion. The post Fordist touristic model requires less standardisation and more flexibility, as to improve customer perception. Final satisfaction may depend on cultural

and subconscious motives - 95% of purchases is caused by subconscious choices (Moreno, Santos, and Pascual, 2017). Culture involves a multitude of constructs, which add more complexity to an issue that is sometimes confounded with other components of customer satisfaction, such as emotions, moods, and personality.

4.2.1 Culture and other constructs

“Software of the mind” is the worthwhile analogy that draws culture as a sort of computer in which people learn things and behaviours especially during their childhood: what people learn will affect choices in their ordinary lives from greeting and eating until showing feelings and maintaining a physical distance with others, with consequences in terms of expectations⁵⁹.

Society is a concept that is attached to culture, and the most complete human group example. Moreover, within a nation there are several cultural groups varying from Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Europeans, and so on, with different traits that depict them as foreigners to that society. Culture is different from identity, seen as the sense of belongingness to a specific social group, based on images and stereotypes, emotions, linked to symbols, heroes, and rituals. The latter are further culture’s constructs: symbols are words, gestures, pictures, and objects of embedded meaning, recognised by those who share the same culture; heroes are died or lived people constituting models for behaviour; rituals are essential collective activities in order to achieve well defined objectives, for instance greeting or paying respect to others. These can be observed, but their intrinsic message is sometimes hidden, and is just interpreted by others (Hofstede, 2001).

4.2.2 Several branch of studies to investigate culture

There are several fields of study that deal with cultural traits:

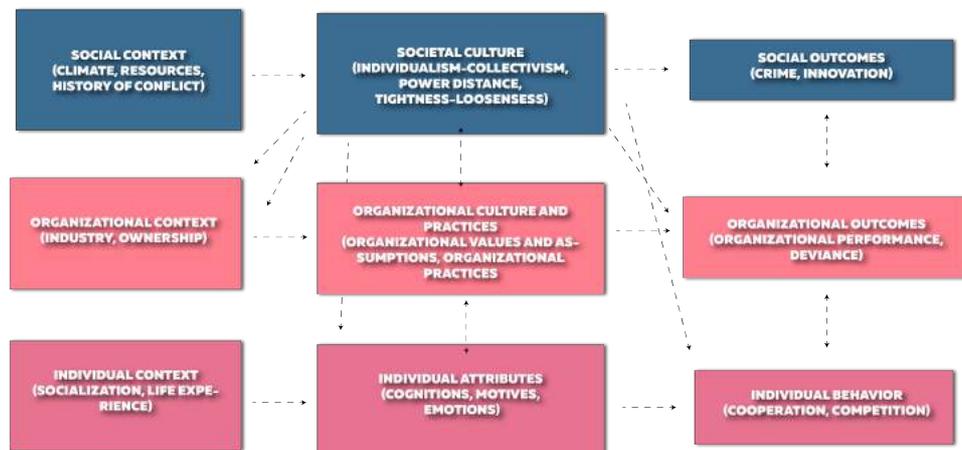
- Cultural anthropology, a branch of studies that investigates human societies and cultures (as well as their developments). It involves culture as the main construct, and concentrates the attention on human groups, and on how they organise and shape ideas, behaviours, and physical environments, stressing the interconnection between

⁵⁹ According to what is taught to people in terms of habits, values, and lifestyle, it will influence expectations they will form, especially when covering human interactions that are prevalent in tourism field.

present and past. Culture is something that is built across centuries, and it is difficult to change (Fabietti, 1999).

- Cross-cultural research is a discipline that investigates cultural differences across countries; a scientific method of comparative research which compares systematically cultures. Over time there has been a development of different typologies of research. Cross-cultural research does not deny individuality or uniqueness, but it elaborates similarities and differences among cultures, defining universal rules in human societies. This area investigates on a series of aspects as it is shown by Figure 4.1 (Ilesanmi, 2009).

Figure 4.1 Cross-cultural research: the main characteristics

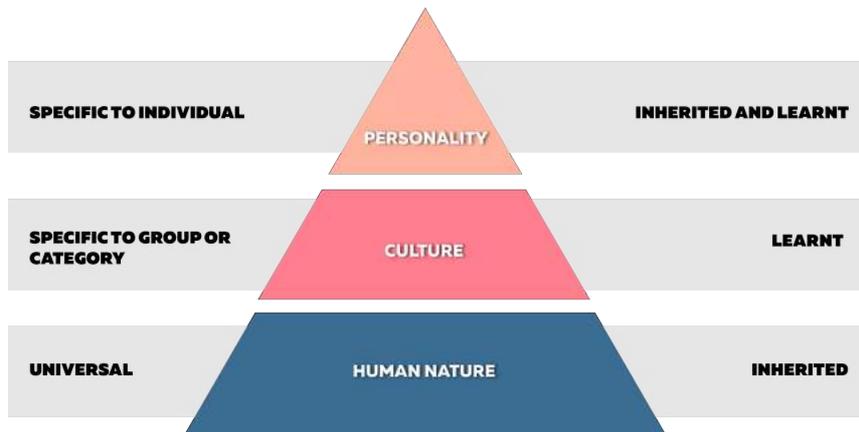


Source: Ilesanmi, 2009.

Scholars represent the relationship among personality, culture, and human nature through a pyramid (Figure 4.2), where personality is put at the top and it merges both culture and human nature, or in other terms, what is inherited and learnt⁶⁰ (Hofstede, 2010). Nonmaterial elements such as values, norms, conventions, and practices as well as material dimensions, including where to travel, what to eat and to buy, or how to behave while traveling are the main determinants of culture (Master and Prideaux, 2000; Özdemir and Yolal, 2017; Marzotti, 2017). These elements vary among regions within a country, making cross-cultural analysis more complex.

⁶⁰ In fact, some constituents of people’s behaviour are common to every human being, and what changes their state of mind is culture, that can be instead learnt (Hofstede, 2010).

Figure 4.2 The three levels of uniqueness in mental programming.



Source: Hofstede, 2010.

Herskovits (1948) argues that the issues of fair versus unfair, good and bad; beauty and ugliness are present in every culture, even though each human being adopts unlike evaluative criterion. This means that a Spanish traveller might adopt the same evaluative criteria of a German one, and thus it might be not possible to cluster and set groups that reflect a country of origin. This is amplified by technologies, Internet, and SNS. People use approximately the same channels to access information, especially in the T&T where OTA platforms dominate the market. In a globalised world, customer behaviours are shaped by culture. This can be an antecedent of customer satisfaction, loyalty, intention to revisit, and visitor's expectations (Reisinger and Turner, 2003; Özdemir and Yolal, 2017). Together with socio-demographic variables, culture forms similar expectations, making people distinguish between “we and they”, homogeneous attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms that scholars define as stereotypes (Sonnleitner, 2011; Hofstede, 2010).

4.2.3 Consumer behaviour theories and the relation with culture

When examining consumer behaviour, scholars merge different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology. This is because of the complexity of human beings that requires a full perspective evaluation. A large extent of behavioural studies assesses as main independent variables, intentions, values, and habits (Ajzen, 1991), where values are principles or standards of behaviour, and what is important in one's life, held in both individuals and collectivities. Values allow a person to select modes, means, and ends of actions, involving a series of contradictory choices, such as being good or evil, clean or dirty, irrational or rational, and moral versus immoral (Hofstede, 2001). Habits are

subconscious determinants that affect travellers behaviour and form expectations. On the other hand, they are settled, regular tendencies or practices, that are usually hard to give up. They reflect past actions that inevitably affect future ones, as empirical evidence reveals (Ajzen, 2011).

Then, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and Global Consumer Culture Theory analyse from a social perspective consumer behaviour (de Mooij, 2019). Civic sense, the relationship with the surrounding environment, the way in which people behave and are respectful toward their things and others are the result of centuries of civilisation and differ across countries. When people go far away, they usually feel a sense of detachment from their routine and usually behave differently, adopting the existing rules of the country or rejecting them. De Mooij (2019) highlights the *convergence-divergence* ratio: since a certain level of development is not reached, people are used to consume more or less the same products and services. However, when basic needs are fulfilled, cultural identity emerges, and when the income increases brand's choices and consumer behaviours tend to diverge making values and habits arise (de Mooij, 2019). Travelling is an example of luxury good, that make people show inherit values and identity.

4.2.4. *Culture is not an absolute issue: cognitive relativism*

Cognitive relativism is the foremost conceptual element highlighted by anthropologists⁶¹ and psychologists, who argue that people with different cultural premises would definitely draw different conclusions (Meyer, 2014). *Laissez-faire* is the idea behind: behaviour, or mentality should be justified by circumstances that have produced them. From the philosophical point of view, by justifying others' behaviours people also accept them (Fabietti, 1999). Meyer (2014) stakes that cultural issues are not absolute, and that when evaluating nations, a comparison to each other is required. She makes the example of directness: Americans are used to be more direct when giving a feedback, while Asians tend to assert something below the lines. This is what she calls relativism concept (Table 4.1).

People coming from far geographical distances might feel emotionally detached or not familiar with certain places. This distance, or *estrangement feeling*, let have the right objectivity and analyse situations accurately, forgetting norms, pre-assumptions, and values (Fabietti, 1999). This is the added value that hoteliers gather from reviews: thanks to tourist detachment they objectively realise facility's weaknesses, being aware of cross-cultural

⁶¹ The concept of relativism was born after the World-War-II when racism had drawn differences among cultures as something wrong and to be eliminated (Fabietti, 1999).

differences that could be the main cause of dissimilar perceptions (Hofstede, 2007; de Mooij and Hofstede, 2002).

Table 4.1 Cultural relativism inspections.

Author	Year	Topic
De Martino	1977	Cultural relativism is a threat for anthropology.
Gellner	1986	Criticism toward scholars that sustained the concept of relativism (Wittgenstein, Feyerabend, and Rorty). If I stake that vision about the world and values are relative, how can I prove that the assertion is absolute, since it is relative too?
Fabietti	1999	Relativism is not racism: cultures are equivalent.
Meyer	2014	Cultural issues are not absolute: a comparison between/among nations is required.

Source: Fabietti, 1999.

4.3 The power of culture in the Tourism & Travel sector

4.3.1 General overview

Tourism and Travel sector implies inherit cross-cultural flows since people travel easily from a place to another thanks to lower transportation's costs, Internet, and new technologies that give the possibility to search for information before departure, book, and pay. Touristic flows involve more than one foreign market, and a great comprehension of travellers. In the past, the analysis could be done with expensive methodologies, exploiting questionnaires or focus groups. Nowadays, several researchers have investigated the potential of reviews as a source of eWOM, being them a less expensive way to conduct market researches. However, some aspects should be considered. For instance, the choice of the selected sample (for instance, which kind of platform would be trustworthy in representing the total population) Then, the difficulty to interpret sentences that are written in foreign languages, and require a semantic and context analysis. Or, cultural traits themselves which push a person to write something adopting a communication style that could be mislead.

Today, context analysis involves a series of factors like economic, politic, demographic, and cultural environment. For instance, as regards economic conditions, who travels usually has a high income, good standards of living, stable currency⁶² (Ipsos, 2017). Then, age, income, employment average, but above all motivations. What triggers people to travel? How do people form expectations, and which is the scale they use in order to evaluate the service? Faith in social media platforms increases when gauging the upcoming class of Millennials, whose travel expenditure accounts for 50% of the total retail travel market. Millennials represent a generation that has remarkable and unpredictable quests. Since they are tapped into the usage of new communication tools, firms should ask whether cross-cultural strategies around the world are changing or whether national identities will continue to exist in the next years; several researches account that even Generation Y and Z have similar consumption behaviours that should not be forgotten (Nielsen, 2017; GlobalWebIndex, 2018).

People have access to information and evaluate the experience differently. They also adopt a disparate approach toward complaints according to their culture (Meyer, 2014). Language, lifestyle, values, ethical, and moral standards are some cultural included variables in the evaluation process: every country has different cultural traits setting needs and wants, and the modalities through which these are accomplished⁶³. In fact, countries have different hygiene and cleanliness standards: Jafari introduces a distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary life. Once the tourist shifts from the original space to the new one, a separation takes place. People jump progressively into the state of being tourists, bringing with them a sort of “cultural baggage” and then being pervaded by “rules, roles, motions, forms, forces, expectations, processes” (Jafari, 1987, p. 153). Before leaving travellers have expectations that reflect the country of origin, and then in the step that he calls ‘animation’, the client progressively abandons original culture to be embedded by the new one.

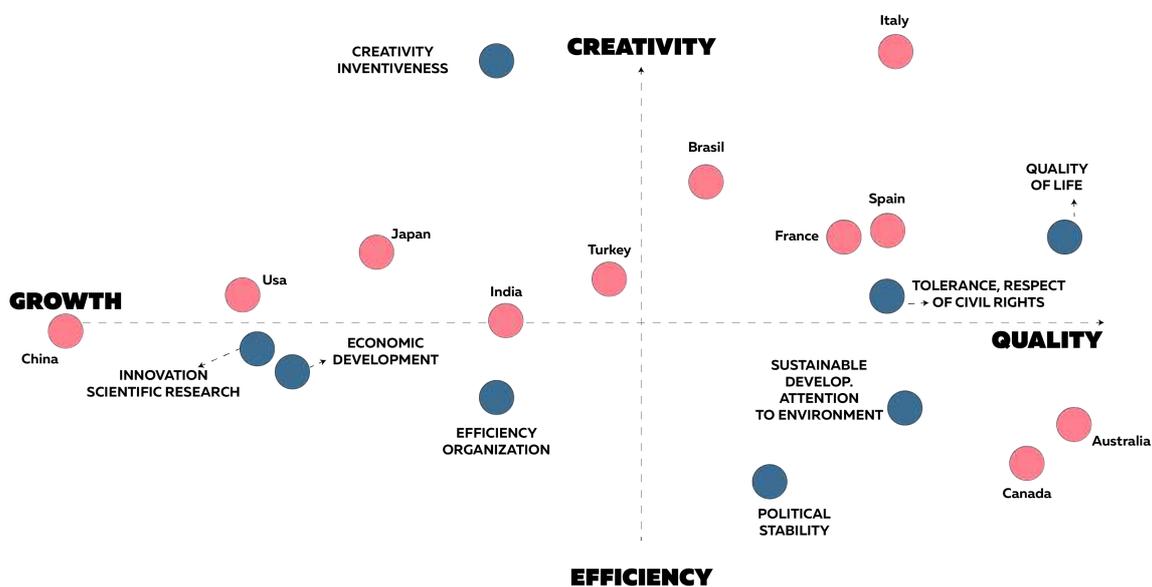
Undervaluation of culture leads to mistakes and to negative consequences blocking the possibility of a company to flourish in the long-term. People choose a restaurant, hotel, or experience following different criterion; they have an experience that will differ

62 A research conducted by Ipsos in 2017 “Be-Italy”, revealed that international visitors are generally men between 30-49 years, with a high socio-economic status and a high level of education.

63 To make an example, language can culturally undermine the positive perception of a service: if a restaurateur or hotelier does not speak travellers’ language, communication might become baffling, and create misunderstandings and dissatisfaction. On the other hand, if she speaks the foreign language, this may improve customer experience, reducing the gap between expectations and evaluation, keeping in mind that what is given for granted for a specific society, could be not the same for other cultures.

according to their habits and wants; but also the evaluative process will be diverse, impacting the perception and willingness to express complaints. Destination image is the basis of expectations, and people have different access to information and knowledge about a country. With respect to Italy, knowledge increases when status and cultural background grow: Germans are those that know better Italy, while Indians declare to know it better⁶⁴ (Ipsos, 2017). Italy is usually associated to quality of life, creativity and inventiveness, tolerance with respect to rights, and for its attention toward sustainability and development issues (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3 Tourists' perceptions about countries⁶⁵.



Source: Ipsos, 2017.

64 The research was based on 18 countries divided into European, Mature, and Prospects. The survey comprehended 500 online interviews per country (200 high status/managerial class). Moreover, it also involved 45 economic actors that play a relevant role in the international landscape (Ipsos, 2017).

65 Fashion, food, monuments, and cities are the visual images that are linked to Italian destination brand: food as regards mature markets such as US, Canada, Australia, Japan, and UAE; monuments and culture by Polish and Spanish. Italy's image varies since the geographical distance of interviewers is reduced, even though most people who have already visited the country, would choose it again. From the stereotyped idea of prospect markets as the idyllic place where to live toward the one related to resources that should be exploited and valued better, until contradictions linked to a bad government (Ipsos, 2017).

Culture affects the experience and vacation's patterns in different ways. Hofstede (2010) has identified a set of indexes, that distinguish a culture from another. The process of identification implies that differences between individuals remains, and that these statements are not a description of reality. An extensive research⁶⁶ by Hofstede has provided a set of six indexes (Table 4.2), worldwide accepted in both academic and professional settings about dimension of culture (Hofstede et al., 2010). Dimensions that could be linked to T&T sector are individualism and collectivism and uncertainty avoidance index. Distinction between collectivistic and individualistic cultures emerges, as the former are usually affected by brands, prices, and the number of alternatives; while individualistic ones decide according to their own criterion (Correia et al., 2010).

Table 4.2 Hofstede's Indexes on cultural differences.

Power distance	PDI	The degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Large PDI: people accept hierarchical order where everybody has a place and not need further justification; Low PDI: people try to equalise its distribution.
Individualism vs collectivism	IDV	It is the preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. Collectivism culture is based on the expectation that relatives or members of a group look after them.
Masculinity vs femininity	MAS	The Masculinity side of MAS represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Femininity is based on cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life.
Uncertainty avoidance index	UAI	It expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. Strong UAI: have rigid codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. Weak UAI: societies maintain a relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles.
Long term orientation vs short term normative orientation	LTO	It concerns the relationship between past and future. Low LTO: people prefer to maintain traditions and norms, seeing changes with suspicion. High LTO: adopt a pragmatic approach, encouraging efforts to be prepared to the near future.
Indulgence vs Restraint	IND	The former is a society that looks for gratification of basic and natural human drives linked to enjoying life and having fun. The latter suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms.

Source: Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov, 2010.

⁶⁶ The research's goal was to understand how values in the workplace are affected by culture. A large database of employees' values scores was collected within IBM between 1967 and 1973 (Hofstede, 2001).

The cultural factor might involve distinct behaviours, especially in the information search step as well as the final step of sharing. To provide an example, collectivistic cultures might be more induced to read online reviews to fill the gap of being helped, and suggested by those who have already tried a service, in order to reduce the level of uncertainty embedded in tourist services; thus being related with risk and uncertainty. Collectivistic countries also tend to share pictures, videos, opinions during and after experience to fill the need of being with others, and so on. Uncertainty avoidance index might be the factor indicating how people search information and weight other reviews, for instance whether they prefer to plan accurately each step of their holidays, or whether they prefer living like locals.

4.3.2 The difficulty of isolating culture

Today, 53% people search information on the Internet, and 42% are social media users, with an increasing trend of +7% and +17% respectively⁶⁷ (We Are Social, 2018). People seem to have lost their trust toward institutions, and they are more attentive to peers' and influencer's reviews. This is the shift toward a massive usage of social media. Most international reports deal with socio-demographic variables, such as purchasing power and income: available data focus on the total amount spent in travels⁶⁸ (UNWTO, 2018).

Literacy rates by gender and region, Internet penetration, average speed of connection, number of users are some peculiarities that distinguish a culture from another one (Table 4.3). For instance, Africa has the lowest literacy rate with respect to the maximum level of Asia. In UAE, Sweden, Netherlands, UK, and Japan people are used to access Internet with different average speed connections⁶⁹ (We Are Social, 2018). In fact, infrastructural problems and digital education, or those who do not have an account on SNS, could be excluded by research's samples.

67 We Are Social is a digital company that provides with reliable marketing data from sources such as United Nations, Internet Worldstats, ITU, Internet Stat, Cia World Factbook, and so on, dividing the analysis among continents as to give a detailed picture of digital trends.

68 Income defines the expectations and the quality of service that should be provided. In fact, there is a positive relationship between the amount of money spent in travel and the expected service's level.

69 Singapore 161.2 mbps, Hong Kong 141.6 mbps, South Korea 132.5 mbps, Italy is positioned in the middle of the ranking (32 mbps) while Egypt is the last one (5.4 mbps) according to the Digital in 2018 Global Overview (We Are Social, 2018).

Table 4.3 Data on total population, Internet users, penetration, and growth.

	Total Population	Internet Users	Penetration	Growth
Africa	1,272 MIL	435 MIL	34%	+20%
America	1,011 MIL	741 MIL	73%	+3%
Asia	4,214 BIL	2,01 BIL	48%	+5%
Europe	843 MIL	674 MIL	80%	+6%
Middle-East	252 MIL	164 MIL	65%	+11%

Source: We Are Social, 2018.

Apart from infrastructural factors, Kozak (2002) stresses the importance of tourist motivation in determining the destination choice: according to the confirmation/disconfirmation model, a person is more or less satisfied according to the initial motives and expectations that triggered the vacation. Motivation is a dynamic issue that varies from person to person, from a market segment to another, it changes from a travel to the next one, and it is touched by push and pull factors. Motivation across countries is inspected with respect to values, preferences, and needs. Age, income, personality, cost, distance, and risk are other factors that affect choices and (dis)satisfaction of traveler.

Moreno, Los Santos, and Pascual's model (2017) focuses on two variables related to the consumer journey map: personality and culture. Although culture is a relevant component, it is not the only one: cultural, social, personal and psychological factors are all included when making choices⁷⁰. For instance, social factors are among the major determinants of Chinese behaviours: people are pushed by social pressures, roles, and status to buy certain luxury products. However, this trend is in contradiction with traditional values of Chinese culture that obliges people to modesty and frugality (Jin et al., 2015).

⁷⁰ Touristic demand is caused not only by destination's features, but also by socio-economic and motivational components, like preferences, tastes, and values. Their model assumes that dimensions delineated by Hofstede (power distance; collectivism/individualism; risk aversion; masculinity/femininity; long/short term orientation) affect the tendency to avoid risk, to search new things, and to be dependent on premiums. These variables consequently influence all the steps included within the travel journey map (Moreno et al., 2017).

Personality determines tourist demand, together with preferences, tastes, and ideas (Cloninger, 1987, 2013). There are five elements to grasp motivation according to tourist's personal traits:

- Psicocentric: people look for well-known places that are created for touristic purposes, for instance art installation of Lorenzo Quinn in Venice. The ultimate need of the tourist is to avoid risk and to reduce interaction with locals;
- Mesopsicocentric: tourists are more open to inhabitants, even though they look for unknown places;
- Centric: many tourists are between mesoallocentric and allocentric;
- Mesoallocentric: tourists prefer less visited destinations;
- Allocentric: they are attracted by unknown undeveloped destinations, since they enter in touch with locals.

To sum up, the customer journey map from the initial inspiration step involves several aspects. They affect satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and the way in which people share opinions, perceptions, and evaluations. This may depend on several factors, for instance Internet access, digital education and penetration, which depends on other factors such as age, education, income, and so on. All these aspects (being part of a social group) are part of the culture of travelling. Being aware of personal traits, emotions, moods, and other cultural factors becomes tough especially on SNS and reviews, since certain aspects of verbal and not verbal communication are ignored and difficult to judge.

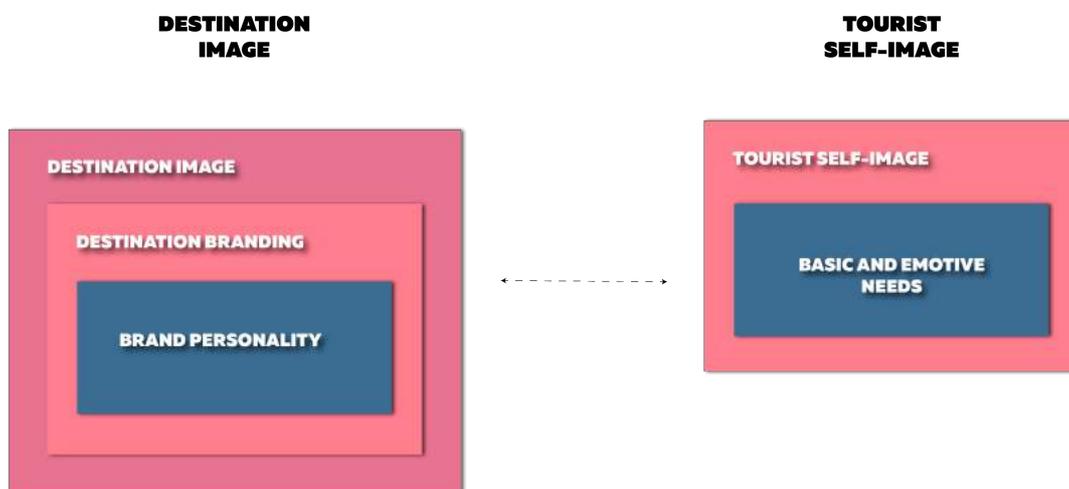
4.4 Why is the tourist global? The role of culture and media

4.4.1 Identity as the basis of culture

Travellers' patterns of behaviour tend to integrate each other and to merge in a global world: after having visited cities and hotels, people leave positive/negative reviews that reflect cultural roots, and subjectivity. Each group share the same identity consisting in long-lasting history, institutions, and practices. Some groups co-exist since lots of centuries and have integrated their habits and values. It is the case of US, but also Europe, apart from certain minority groups (Gobel et al., 2018). Destination identity can be assimilated to brand identity, which is how the brand/destination wants to be perceived by clients. In setting strategies, marketers should consider culture and identity for the reasons already

explained. According to Ekinci, destination image (Figure 4.4), that is how tourists perceive a destination, is related to tourist self-image that is based on basic and emotive needs (Sonnleitner, 2011).

Figure 4.4 Destination image and tourist self-image.



Source: Ekinci, 2003.

Millennials, Generation Y and Z tend to share similar consumption behaviours especially as concerns media and social media consumption. It is well-known how important media, TV programs, web contents are in order to shape teenager’s behaviours, that usually tend to adopt the same actions. While in the past people were used to deal with traditional travel agencies and chose their vacations thanks to traditional Word-of-Mouth, now they read online reviews and book holidays through OTAs. According to a research conducted in 2018 by GlobalWebIndex on global vacationers, most people go to vacation in their country home. Europeans are more likely to travel abroad: is it a matter of culture? In the XVII century, young aristocrats used to travel abroad in order to complete their education in Southern Europe, and this tradition seems to have been maintained across centuries⁷¹. As regards customer journey and involved channels, touch points emerging in tourism sector are the same: traditional channels, including TV ads, friends and relatives’ recommendations, UGC on social media⁷². In tourism, customer journey is shaped by a

71 According to the same study, Europeans “are likely to vacation abroad” (GlobalWebIndex, 2018) and this is due to the proximity of countries in the continent. In the Americas, just 1 in 4 takes vacation abroad yearly. Depicted descriptions of travellers define them as “adventurous people” who like trying new things.

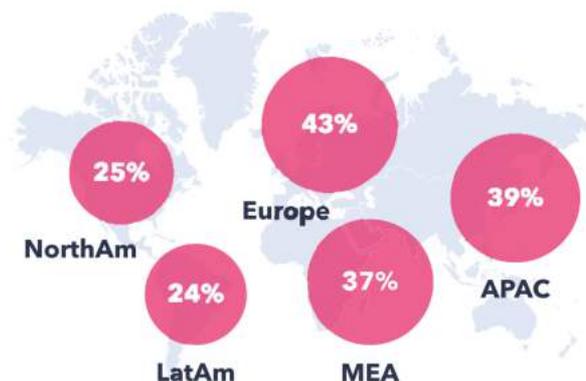
72 The creation of a customer journey map should look at countries specificities (penetration of the Internet in the area, literacy level, hours spent on Internet and on SNS, platforms and keywords searched, and so on) but this should be expanded as well.

huge variety of components, from socio-demographic to psychological ones. It is impossible to generalise. Culture should be a further component to improve the efficacy of marketing tools and help to create the so-called “WOW effect” in order to respond expectations and create advocacy among clients.

4.4.2 Building up the portrait of global Traveler 4.0

Demographics are essential features to grab global Traveler 4.0 profile. For instance, travellers from different continents are used to travel abroad, even though people from Southern America are less used to do so; whereas in the US there are less countries and little intention to travel to close places, and they opt for long-haul distances to enjoy the experience (Figure 4.5). The global traveller is a risk-taker, altruist, and buys ethical and sustainable products, for instance eco-resorts (GlobalWebIndex, 2018).

Figure 4.5 Percentage of vacations abroad at least once a year per continent.



Source: “Vacationers – Audience Report 2018” by GlobalWebIndex.

About 36% people read reviews and look for information before departure. Recommendations and reviews are consulted, because people (80%) want to be informed and most of them seek for an expert opinion. Data recovered by Google Analytics all over the world have been accepted as the manifesto of the customer journey map and allow to track each step of the customer journey all around the world (Llontop Diez, 2018). Tourists 4.0 are demanding, since with the advent of OTA system they usually pay in advance, asking for precise information before leaving. It implies that even if cross-cultural literature agrees on the concept of customer journey map, research is not complete. In fact, it should be implemented focusing on anthropological habits, values, traditions, and behaviours for each country.

4.4.3 Will Eastern and Western countries converge?

Even though globalisation has become a keyword in today's newspapers, articles, and books, differences, especially between Eastern and Western countries, remain from the economic, social, politic, cultural and religious point of view. Generalising is not a strategic choice: predictions about Western cultures are not necessarily true for Eastern travellers.

Western customers focus on their personal brand preferences, giving attention to intrinsic attributes, whereas Eastern clients opt for prestigious brands looking at their extrinsic attributes (Reykowski, 1994; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). In the field of services what matters in Western cultures is concrete evidence (task completion, efficient delivery, and time savings) not as Asians that account more human contact. Then, for what concerns advertising style and modalities, individualistic, representing enjoyment, cost savings, and individualism are some of the topics that appeal much Westerns, instead Eastern are much more oriented toward collectivistic appealing advertising referring to family values, tradition, and technology. Contrasts between high- and low-context cultures is a taxonomy that put the attention on the communication styles: Asians are apt to read between the lines and to see subtle meanings even though they are not directly and verbally expressed; low-context cultures involve people being more direct and using verbal expressions (Chen, 2000; Meyer, 2014).

Cultural differences exist. They are worth in specific sectors, like HR, since they can undermine productivity, and they tease the curiosity of organisational behaviours' scholars; they are analysed in terms of semantics in the marketing field, since errors can bring to the closure of shops or block exports; in the T&T sector there is a little attempt of studying culture as it happens for other products and services. This is likely due to the fact, that those who travel abroad are prepared to accept cross-cultural differences and route accidents. They are part of the travel. But this cannot be an excuse for managers and entrepreneurs to avoid cross-cultural comprehension.

4.5 Before and during travel experience: a cross-cultural comparison

Search engines (36%), TV ads (33%), Word-of-Mouth recommendations (30%) are some of the traditional channels used to discover hospitality brands. The initial step of recovering information is essential since people usually book and pay the service before, such that the quality of the service remains unknown. The process of information search

has been investigated by scholars (Chen, 2000; Hofstede, 1991; Richardson and Crompton, 1988; Pizam and Sussman, 1995) who highlighted different cross-cultural patterns among countries (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 Information search studies across countries

Author	Year	Cross-cultural studies
Chen	2000	Cross-cultural differences in travel information acquisition among tourists from three Pacific-Rim countries. The sample is made of Japan, South Korea, Australia tourists.
Hofstede	1991	Differences in cross-cultural behaviour. Summary of culture in five dimensions
Richardson, Crompton	1988	Different patterns in travel, from French, Canadians, English.
Pizam, Sussman	1995	British tour guides perceptions of Japanese, French, Italian, and American tourists.

Instagram and Pinterest are the best place for inspiration, looking at what friends, peers and family post. The visual power of photos and videos provokes the need of looking for a place to go (Mazzotti, 2018). Word-of-Mouth is the most common source of information in Europe together with digital tools that have become an important especially in Latin America and Middle East, where online consumers are relatively younger and more engaged with social media; in North America SNS play an important role too. GlobalWebIndex conducted a research, asking to interviewee how they are used to discover travel brands (Table 4.6).

Figure 4.6 Percentage top source travel brand discoveries at a global level.



Source: “Vacationers – Audience Report 2018” by GlobalWebIndex.

Several scholars have analysed the impact of culture on perceived values and on the decision-making process in general. For instance, they found differences among Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and American tourists as regards their expectations about in-flight materials, food and beverage requests, and duty-free purchases (Kim and Prideaux, 2003). Considering information search stages, cultural differences were noted by scholars (Chen, 2000; Gursoy and Chen, 2000; Money and Crofts, 2003), as well as the fact that people from different countries consider unlike sources of information. Scholars investigated how satisfaction levels, hospitality businesses' and tourist perception change according to the country of origin⁷³ (Kozak, 2002).

As already seen in Chapter III, Italy has increased its competitiveness as concerns the tourist offering, gaining the 8th position (WEF, 2019). Tourist sector represents a huge part of Italian GDP, and this requires companies to be prepared to challenge international tourists requests. As it is usually stated by scholars of cross-cultural marketing, it is necessary to set customised strategies fitting the involved market segment. To do that, hoteliers and marketers should be aware of tourists' perceptions, attitudes, and preferences. Below, it is presented an overview of the most important market segments referred to Italian tourist offering, since the last Chapter of the present dissertation will present the analysis of reviews related to Italian offering, particularly the case of Venice. It is important to stress that this segments have been chosen according to available data.

4.5.1 The German market segment

The number of Germans' departures abroad is increasing (90.966.000 in 2016 with a decrease between 2014 and 15). Germany is the first major market in Italy (59,3 millions tourist presences) and the preferred regions are Trentino Alto-Adige, Veneto, Lombardy, and Tuscany. Germans prefer staying in hotels (54%) or in touristic villages since they travel for leisure purposes, choosing seaside and lakeside destinations, or for cultural purposes. Generally, they are between 45-64 years old, with a medium purchasing power and income (they spend at least 92€ a night). This market also opts for traditional channels to book holidays: TUI Deutschland/TUI AG, Thomas Cook, DER Touristik, FTI Group, Aida Cruises. A further investigation points out strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as it is shown in Table 4.5 (National Tourist Board, 2018).

⁷³ The same research analysed both socio-demographic factors and motivations of the sample.

Table 4.5 How Germans perceive Italy - SWOT analysis of the Italian destination brand.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Italian brand (history, culture, lifestyle); • Artistic, historical, environmental heritage; • Variety of tourist offering; • Geographical closure; • Possibility to combine travels (business, shopping, cultural, ...); • Climate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prices are too high; • Low quality of infrastructures; • No transparency; • Information services are not adequate (no up-to-date information, information are available only in italian); • Inefficient transportation; • Parking; • Closure of some structures during spring/ autumn season.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customise packaging especially for families; • Evaluate suburb areas; • Promotional campaigns (for events, spa packages); • Digitalisation of Italian offering; • Social Media Marketing strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Association of Italian brand with seaside and cultural elements; • Strong competition with Southern European countries; • Absence/Low strategy toward Millennials generation.

Source: National Tourist Board, 2018.

4.5.2 The Russian market segment

Russians represent 26% of touristic Italian market, and they have visited mainly Venetian cities staying in hotels (80,6% in 2016 with an increase of +23,6%). Russians travel for cultural purposes. The target is younger: people are between 35-44, with a high income level (in fact they spend on average 157€ a night in hotels) and they travel during summer holidays. As regards the information search step, 40% of Russians book travels through traditional travel agencies; 50% book using OTAs; only 10% exploit direct networks and contacts with hotels or airline companies. Russia is also among the Internet TOP 10 Countries with a penetration that accounts for about 75% of total population. The most active social platforms are YouTube, Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, and Instagram (only 29%). Among the most popular search engines it can be mentioned: yandex.ru, google, yahoo, mail.ru, and rambler.ru (National Tourist Board, 2018).

4.5.3 *The American market segment*

53% Americans are interested in food, restaurant and cooking, while they are less interested in travelling and discovering new places. Adopted SNS are YouTube, Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and so on, which are typically used by Western people. WOM accounts for 40% of choices when they have to discover new brands (GlobalWebIndex, 2018). Americans use mainly PCs even though mobile and tablet are on an increasing trend.

Watching movies, listening to broadcast, reading press, social networks and gaming are the main activities on web. Social networks have become a necessary element in teenagers' live as a way to stay in touch with peers and share thoughts. For American consumers' reviews are an important source from which taking inspiration, discovering high quality brands and products. Even though their behaviours is similar to Europeans, they travel less since countries are not closer to each other (GlobalWebIndex, 2018). As concerns the tools used in order to plan the travel, mapping sites (65%), mobile access travel info (58.9%), User Generated Content (58.2%), social media resources (54.6%) are most helpful ones.

In 2018, the National Tourist Board pointed out that this growing market (+10.3%) choose Lazio, Tuscany and Veneto as the main Regions to visit. They also prefer to stay in hotels (78%) and they are the second targeted country in Italy in terms of expenditure. Most of tourists travel for cultural purposes and it is demonstrated by the destinations chosen. Socio-demographic variables are similar to German market: travellers are between 45 and 64 years old, even though there has been a growing trend of younger tourist (35-44 years old); with high income (the travel to Italy is perceived expensive since it includes an intercontinental flight and they spend on average 138€ a night).

The American market is complex and it is relevant to point out that most booking platforms are from US: TripAdvisor, Trivago, Booking.com™, Expedia, Kayak, Agoda, and so on and so forth. Even though there has been general decrease of travel agencies in US, they are still in use in order to book cruises (77%), airline tickets (55%), packaged tours (73%). Today travel agencies combine new promotional tools (e-mail, social media, website, newsletter) with the more traditional one (community events, traditional nights and coffees, flyers, newspaper, etc.). Table 4.6 shows how Americans perceive Italian tourist brand in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

Table 4.6 How Americans perceive Italy - strengths and weaknesses of Italian destination brand.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is the preferred destination of Americans; • Security; • Hospitality; • Not only a tourist brand but also a lifestyle; • Mediatic place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low quality standards; • Disorganisation and crowd places; • Expensive destination; • Scarce presence on social media.

Source: National Tourist Board, 2018.

4.5.4 The Chinese market segment and differences with respect to Westerns

As concerns the Chinese market, two traditional culture-specific values must be highlighted: *mianzi* and *guanxi*⁷⁴. On one hand, Chinese are face conscious and they take care about self-image and others' appraisals. On the other hand, Chinese are hardly *guanxi-oriented*, which means that human interaction and relations are important and highlighted in the hospitality industry. Moreover, behavioral patterns are dissimilar across countries: Asians seem to be the less risk-takers since 1 in 4 buys travel insurance before taking off; North Americans are more willing to buy travel items (65%) than Asians (51%). Europeans also opt for travel products online by choice using e-platforms such as Skyscanners, and they visit other European countries since they are close to each other (Global Web Index, 2018).

Dissimilarities in tourist behaviours are observed considering Western countries against Asian cultures. Language skills would influence the possibility to talk each other, communicating, and congregate. From a research carried out in 2017, Americans, French, German, British, Italians, and Spanish visitors resulted similar in the type of activities and ways of socialising each other, while Japanese behaved different, probably because of the general distance between Asian and Western cultures in terms of communication styles (Özdemir and Yolal, 2017).

⁷⁴ Mianzi means “face” and it refers to a sense of positive social self-worth where an individual wants to keep in the relational and network context. On the other hand *guanxi* means “relationship” and it is linked to the bond between two persons.

At a global level, high-quality products, rewards, love for the brand, great customer service are some of the key reasons why travellers usually advocate travel brands online after their experience (GlobalWebIndex, 2018). Brand advocacy allows a brand to stand out from the crowd. To make a cross-regional comparison, those from APAC are the most active reviewers (64%), while Europeans are the least likely to be doing so at 37%, who instead are more willing to use these reviews during the research phase. This study seems a little bit in contradiction with the tendency of Asians to avoid complaints, as it is pointed out by Meyer (2014).

Current literature is infinite and afford distinct parts of the customer journey, involving comparison of countries, and making the usual distinction between Western and Eastern ones. Within Tourism and Travel sector, some scholars have analysed whether expectations impact on the service quality perception, advancing the idea that Asian people have usually higher expectations than European and American travellers (Luk et al., 1993; Armstrong, Mok, and Go, 1997), as well as the fact that cultural values influence them.

Companies have to adapt communication styles according to perceptions, evaluation methods and the way in which satisfaction is expressed. For example, some people do not express negative feedbacks as to avoid breakdown and to maintain harmony (Meyer, 2014). Then, relativity: countries need to be compared each other and there is no absolute point of view when examining them. To better grasp what is relevant for tourists and to investigate how culture affects their perceptions, qualitative or quantitative research based on focus groups, questionnaires, or a content analysis of reviews can be carried out. As a matter of fact, the possibility to track conversations, comments, and behaviours on websites, makes easier to convene data and to draw conclusions on how to set objectives, strategies, and tactics.

4.6 After the experience: cultural evaluation of reviews

Reviews are one of the most adopted form of communications today, that help decision-making and modify the typical one-to-many relationship as to embrace innovative ways to communicate with guests. Many marketing books about hospitality usually claim the importance of dealing with eWOM since reviews are read globally, and they are a helpful mechanism to avoid tedious misused lexicon, that can be met on accommodation's websites. However, it is important to stress that each country adopts its own social media and OTA platforms to talk each other: some opinions could not be found on Western

networks. In the past the risk linked to booking was high, and people did not know what to expect at their arrival. Today, reviews preclude it. Since the earliest steps of the process, each person from different countries, looks at reviews, photos, and consciously decides whether to make a reservation.

Culture determines the expected standard of services. People who are used to some hygiene and cleanliness standards, expect a definite treatment and gentleness when buying a service. Some parameters are taken for granted and thus, not satisfactory for the customer, or if they are not present, they result in discontentment. The relationship between attributes and satisfaction has been analysed in Kano Model, which laid out five distinct categories⁷⁵ (Kano, 1984). Reviews depend on clients' willingness to judge and express publicly their satisfaction or discontent; this requires contemplating the separation between high and low-context cultures in communication styles. The latter implies an implicit form of communication, that is typical of Asian cultures. On the other hand, in low-context cultures, people are used to use more direct verbal expressions. For instance, Americans are more direct than Asians in providing feedbacks, while Chinese and Japanese people tend to listen to people instead of interrupt them while they are talking, as a form of respect. Furthermore, Liu and McClure (2001) argue that Eastern cultures are more inclined to praise when they receive positive service quality, but not complain, even if they receive a bad service.

Surveys' results also show that interviewees "overuse the extremes of a numerical scale with verbal anchors at the ends, while an agreement scale without numbers was less subject to this extremity response bias" (Shulman, 1973; Kozak, 2002, p. 223). Verbal response alternatives rather than numerical were provided for each question of motivations (Kozak, 2002). Insisting on Hofstede's dimensions, collectivism/individualism and uncertainty avoidance indexes are better linked to reviews. In fact, being a collectivist culture implies that people behave according to some social norms, rather than privileging self-sufficiency and independence; thus they might pay more attention to peers' reviews, especially during the search information step. And, as concern the uncertainty avoidance, people may want to consult and read those information in order to reduce the disconfirmation gap. In this sense, Chinese people are less risk-takers and usually do not want to try innovative products. Chinese tourist are more tolerant of service failure and

⁷⁵ The model proposed in 1984 offers an interesting overview about what is relevant for customers. The included categories are must-be quality, one-dimensional quality; attractive, indifferent, and reverse quality (Kano, 1984).

more brand loyalist than Westerners (Chan, Wan, and Sin, 2009; Lowe and Corkindale, 1998; Zhang, van Doorn, Leeflang, 2014).

For instance, Asians pay more attention and are influenced in their judgement by human relationships: they appreciate “the quality of their interactions with employees” (Zhang et al., 2014, p. 285). Chinese customers also prefer closer relationships with salespeople, and they are intentioned to buy when they know their names. Accordingly, people might be more likely to evaluate the standards on the basis of quality’s relationships with service providers.

4.7 Conclusions

Hospitality is a complex service, and reviews are usually based on several elements of the overall infrastructure. For instance, reviews can include opinions about rooms, since it leaves a long-term impression on customers, and the Traveller 2.0 wants to feel and live a multi-sensorial and memorable experience. In the room, customers want to find what they usually do not have at home. Minimalist spaces, functionality and comfort are the new trends, with an attention toward design and atmosphere. Finally, the bathroom, seen as an extension of the bedroom. Technological innovation is another aspect, for instance Wi-Fi or TV that are seen as a “must-be” category in the Kano Model, since they are now given for granted by clients. Common areas such as the hall, lobbies, cafeterias, bars are becoming the place of events and networking activities, thus influencing the general satisfaction. Finally, wellness areas also contribute to generate a positive experience. It is important to remember that even the website of a hospitality industry is relevant in generating an expectation and creating perceptions: once clients arrive and the space is not as they imagined, this could generate intolerance (Mazzotti, 2018).

To conclude, by conducting a qualitative research or a data mining analysis of reviews left on social platforms like Booking.com™, Agoda, or TripAdvisor, one might infer which elements, both tangible and intangible account more for the customer. Such tools and the exploitation of User Generated Contents, such as photos, opinions, and videos made directly by people are helpful in order to trigger needs and motives in other customers. In this sense, in the T&T sector, reviews are drawn by both inbound and outbound clients. Being aware of cultural differences is necessary to handle with them in the most effective way, and to generate future returns and brand advocacy.

Chapter V

Generation of reviews: the analysis of Booking.com™

5.1 Introduction

Previous chapters allow to draw a series of conclusions: (1) purchase process is complex and characterised by an increasing connection between online and offline; (2) Word-of-Mouth is a phenomena that was once limited to a small network of friends, that has now become global and it influences travel planning processes and behaviours; (3) Word-of-Mouth is a powerful tool that exploits web technologies, in both information search step, and post-purchase behaviours; (4) Cross- Cultural marketing strategies are very determining, since the world is now globalised.

The general framework presented in Chapter I and Chapter II has been applied to the example of T&T sector, concluding that (1) the process of buying travels usually starts online. People are more and more inspired by social media, such as Instagram and Pinterest that are quintessential in making gaps and needs arise. (2) Word-of-Mouth is generally passed exploiting platforms such as Booking.com™, Trivago, Tripadvisor, Expedia, and so on. These platforms accelerate the process of information gathering, allowing people to enter in touch with a very huge amount of opinions that are expressed by means of reviews. (3) Tourism sector is one of the most complex field when taking into account cultural differences: countries have their own culture and people who travel bring with them these differences that determine the way in which they choose hotels, they weight services (quality, staff, position, price, and so on); how they finally express feedbacks and opinions to both entrepreneurs and other peers - willingness to complaint, usage of verbal forms of communication, choice of the right platform, and so on (Meyer 2014).

5.2 The analysis

5.2.1 Introduction to analysis

Entrepreneurs should be aware of demand traits as to bring managerial decisions that enhance customer satisfaction. In order to do that, they conduct market researches. Marketing researches are a tool to assess opportunities and performances. Each process starts with the identification of a problem, followed by information gathering, and management of data. After that, the researcher analyses results, and communicate managerial implications or further improvements (Malhotra and Birks, 2017).

Marketing research starts from the problem-identification research: recognising economic, social, or cultural trends is necessary in order to set out market opportunities or threats. GlobalWebIndex, Digital Trend Reports, and World Tourism Organisations have highlighted tourism demand's features. An emerging trend is that, even though people from different cultures seem to maintain their own patterns of behaviour, they are generally converging into the figure of Traveller 4.0, who follows iterative steps along the travel planning process. Concerning electronic Word-of-Mouth, it is involved throughout the process, especially during and after the experience, and this attracts more and more literature and research on it.

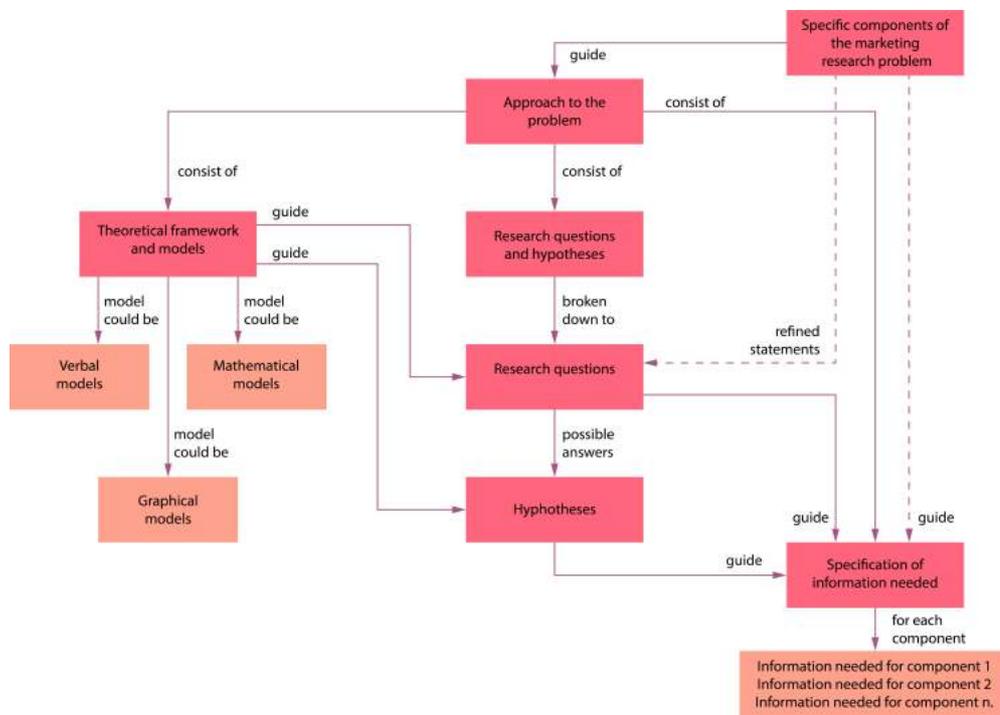
The researcher has also to evaluate variables and topics of interests. Scholars have usually analysed Word-of-Mouth within the context of customer journey map, as well as the reasons why people look for online reviews (Cox et al., 2009; Cantalops and Salvi, 2014; Hussain et al., 2017); why they take part of online conversations (Rathore and Panwar, 2017; Chouhan, 2016), and the factors that trigger Word-of-Mouth (Chu and Kim, 2011; Rathore and Panwar, 2017).

Moreover, sentiment analysis technique is prevalent among literature in order to evaluate opinions by reading texts (Cambria, 2017; Xiang et al., 2015; Ravaglia et al., 2016; Dirsehan, 2016); others have studied the correlation between the sentiment and nationality of tourists (Pablos et al., 2016). Since there are many platforms on which people express opinions, studies are little fragmented. Some have analysed the sentiment on TripAdvisor (Cambria, 2017; Banerjee and Chua, 2016; Jeacle and Carter, 2011; Chang, Ku, and Chen, 2016); others on Twitter (Philander and Zhong, 2016; Barbagallo, Bruni, et al., 2012; Refae and Rieser, 2014) in order to grasp customers' attitudes and perceptions. Another study by Ye, Zhang, and Law (2009) compared several machine learning algorithms and incorporated sentiment classification techniques into the domain of reviews.

The most adopted technique is semantic analysis, and it is adopted to know whether a relationship between commentaries and ratings exists, which are the factors that generally affect customer satisfaction. Moreover, from previous quantitative analysis that show frequency terms, ratings, and so on, they tend to adopt a qualitative analysis that explains data.

As a first step, the researcher has read available literature on the topic to gain acquaintance about the most investigated problems and general research trends. This has stressed that several phenomenon have been investigated (they are related to Word-of-Mouth generations in general, as well as the field of hospitality, tourism, and travel). However, few studies offer a cross-cultural comparison among teasers of customer satisfaction. Problem-definition has been necessary in order to proceed in a consistent manner. The struggling issue for the researcher was to define the problem correctly, since there are a huge number of variables involved and because the focus should be not too broad nor too narrow. The followed conceptual map (Figure 5.1) is the one proposed by Malhotra and Birks (2017).

Figure 5.1 Approaching the problem: a conceptual map.



Source: Malhotra and Birks, 2017.

5.2.2 *The objectives of the research*

The interest toward the analysis of eWOM is moved by the fact that the issue is increasingly debated and investigated by marketing literature. As already seen, this is also due to the fact that the interest toward traditional advertising is suffering a downward trend (Rathore and Panwar, 2017). Electronic platforms are powerful communication tools for hoteliers to engage customers worldwide during and after the experience (Disehan, 2016). Researcher's objective has been to investigate how culture affects customer satisfaction. Given the high number of involved variables within satisfaction which are not always cited within reviews (age, gender, education, lifestyle, attitudes, and so on), it might be difficult to isolate the effect of each single variable on the independent variables, since they are related each other (this is what statisticians call multicollinearity in the multiple regression analysis).

The main problem is whether culture, expressed in a broader sense by country of origin, affects customer satisfaction, and as a consequence, reviews left by travellers on Booking.com™, reflect cultural traits. In other terms, the researcher has aimed at assessing if tourists from different countries evaluate different elements (or at least the same) within their travel experience⁷⁶. Finally, among the other components of the marketing problem definition, there is hypothesis definition. These are based on papers that have been analysed from the existent literature.

- (1) Customer satisfaction depends on cultural traits;
- (2) Reviews' contents vary according to cultural traits;
- (3) Travellers from different cultures evaluate different aspects of the service (location, comfort, cleanliness, service, staff, and price).

It has been observed that among the main factors that are evaluated by customers some categories are recurrent in literature. For instance, location, cleanliness, comfort, staff's politeness, and value for money. These are the factors on which guests usually express favourable or unfavourable opinions (Mellinas et al., 2015; Das, Chawla, Ray, 2017; Dominici and Palumbo, 2013). As already seen, the evaluation depends on initial expectations and motivations. For instance, if a visitor goes to a seaside resort, she will evaluate entertainment or ancillary services - as the transport between airport and hotel (Dominici and Palumbo, 2017). To begin with, categories used by Booking.com™ have

⁷⁶ Generally, the researcher has to define the correct approach, and set questions. The kind of approach which is adopted by scholars depend on several factors. For instance, the paradigm's researcher, including assumptions, agreed-upon knowledge or judgement's criteria. The evaluation of available research might bias the researcher inducing to adopt a specific approach, thus ignoring other instruments.

been chosen to conduct an exploratory research as to gain acquaintance about the topics that are highlighted by visitors with a higher frequency. Since the researcher concentrated on culture, other variables were maintained constant (as to isolate as much as possible the cultural effect). In fact, chosen “visitor type” is the couple (business travel, families, groups have been excluded from the sample because they seem to have different motivations and needs in a broad sense, and they could have discordant initial expectations and evaluative judgement criteria).

5.2.3 *The chosen platform to conduct the analysis: Booking.com™*

Booking.com™ is one of the most used platform by travellers along their travel planning process, in order to book online accommodation and flights, rent cars, and book taxis. This is how the company presents itself, in its web site:

“Established in 1996 in Amsterdam, Booking.com™ has grown from a small Dutch startup to one of the largest travel e-commerce companies in the world. Part of Booking Holdings Inc., Booking.com™ now employs more than 17,000 employees in 198 offices, in 70 countries worldwide”. (Booking.com™, 2019).

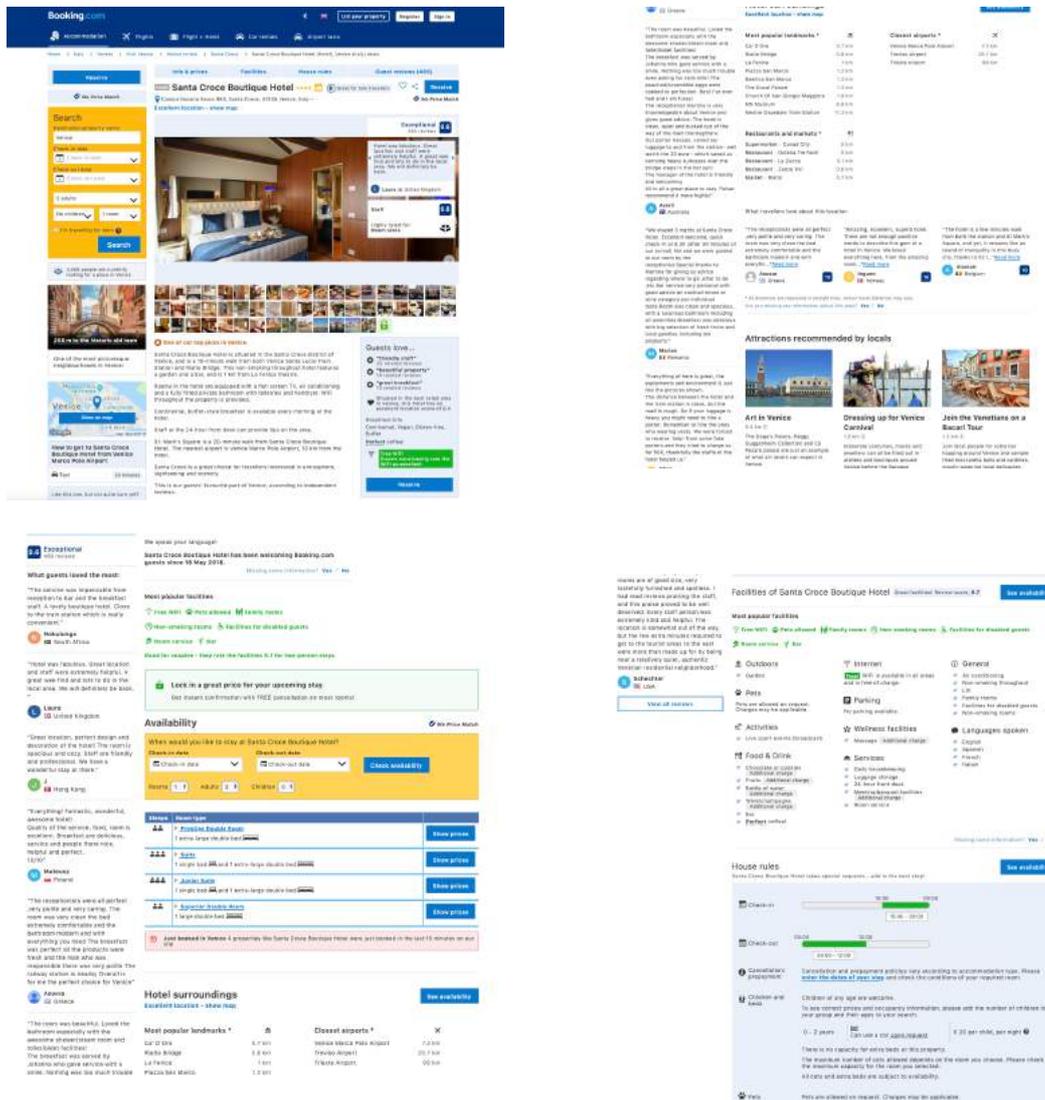
Its mission is to connect travellers with a large selection of places where they can stay (hotels, apartments, vacation homes, family-run B&Bs, 5-star luxury resorts, tree houses, and even igloos). Website and apps are available in more than 40 languages, “offer 28,982,858 total reported listings, and cover 153,519 destinations in 227 countries and territories worldwide” (Booking.com™, 2019). Booking.com™ is an intermediary service which allows hoteliers to show the structure on the platform, simplifying the process of travel planning and booking. The user enters a research query on the platform or applies some filters. Then, hotels are ordered on the basis of a “default ranking”, that is created automatically by an algorithm⁷⁷; lowest prices (they are ordered from the lowest to the highest price); ratings and best value for money ordering; stars, which are determined by third independent parties. They are defined according to local regulatory and vary from country to country and from region to region; clients rankings; distance from the city centre. Finally, the platform gives the possibility to select “Preferred Partner Properties”⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ Booking.com™’s algorithm considers popularity among clients, prices, customer care, available data on bookings, commissions, and regularity on payments.

⁷⁸ These properties might have paid the platform to be shown within the program. These are properties that are expected to provide guests with a positive experience, “thanks to their commendable service and good value” (Booking.com™, 2019).

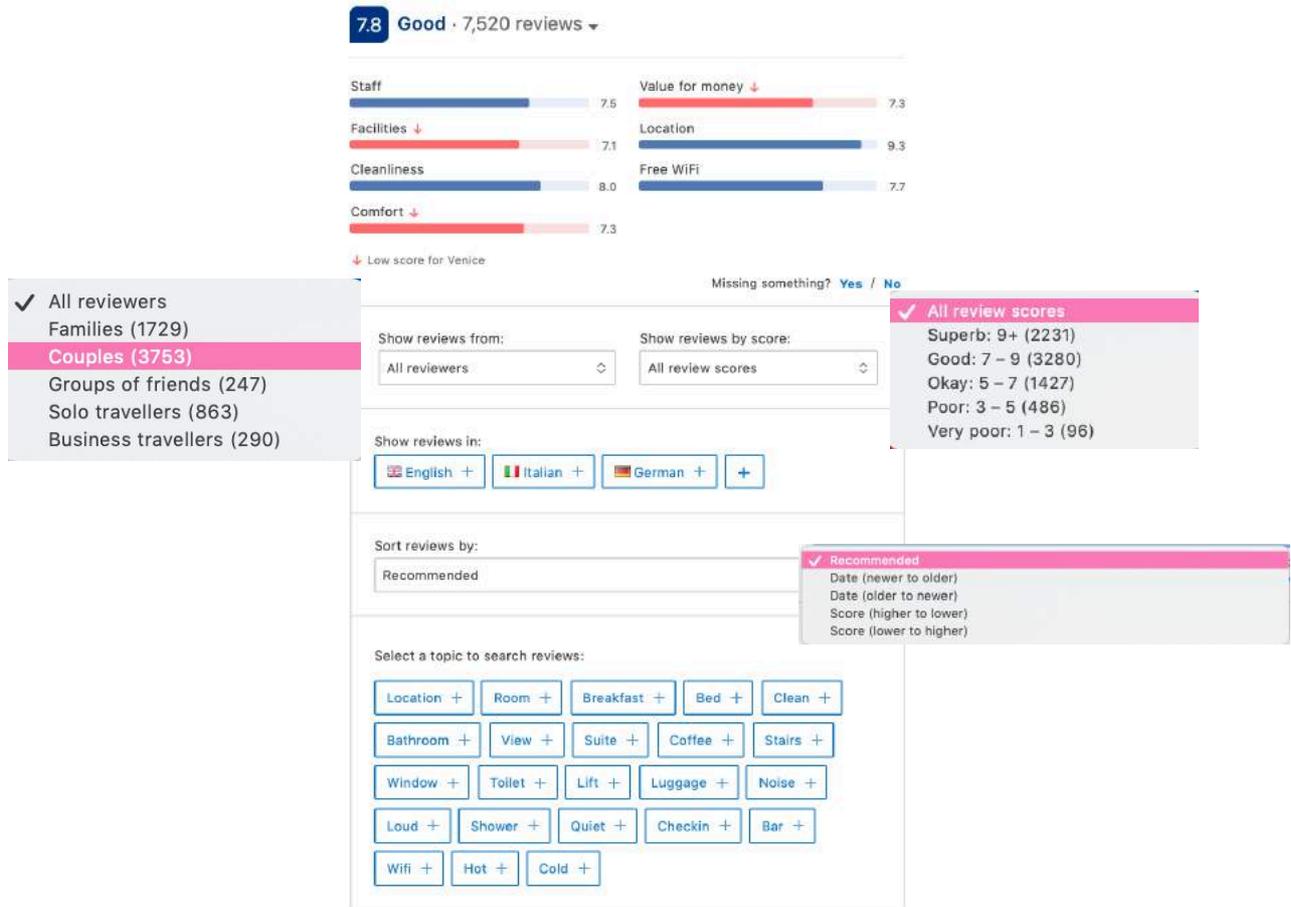
When the customer selects a hotel, the platform shows a card containing all the information about the hotel (Figure 5.2): photos, description, facilities and rules, availability, rooms, recommendations, surroundings, and attractive spots.

Figure 5.2 The example of a hotel page on Booking.com™.



Reviews section shows the total number of reviews, the average rating to a set of categories, including staff, services, cleanliness, comfort, value for money, location, wi-fi. Moreover, it allows the traveller to check reviews according to the type of visitor, rating, language, period, or to select reviews according to some keywords, that might represent categories of interest for the reviewer (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3 Visualisation of reviews' section on Booking.com™.



Each Booking.com™ review has a particular layout (Box 5.1):

Box 5.1 Example of a review on Booking.com™

- Name of the reviewer: the person who writes the review;
- Country of origin;
- Rating: a number between 1 and 10 that represents the attributed rating to the hotel;
- Title: brief statement about the opinion of the accommodation;
- Positive evaluating statement;
- Negative evaluating statement;
- Period of reviews and period of the vacation
- “Helpful” and “Not helpful”: left by other people that suggest or not the comment.



In order to have clear in mind the process of registration for both hotelier and traveller, the researcher has tried to complete a registration process on the platform which is simple. On one hand, the hotelier registers the structure, by entering personal data, selects the type of structure (hotel, apartments, and so on and so forth). Booking.com™ asks whether the hotel is already present on other platforms (AirBnb, TripAdvisor, HomeAway, Vrbo). To conclude the process, the entrepreneur has to fill a form which includes all the necessary information to be shown to guests (Figure 5.2.). The platform comprises several brands, as to diversify the offering as much as possible and to enhance travel experience (Table 5.1.)

Table 5.1 Brands of Booking.com™ Group: a summary.

Booking.com™	It is the leading brand for online accommodation reservations. It offers services for approximately 2,180,000 properties in over than 230 countries, and in over 40 languages.
Rentalcars.com	Rental car offering and other ground transportation, in more than 55,000 locations and in over 40 languages.
Kayak.com	It offers an online price comparison that allows to compare services and itineraries (airline ticket, accommodation reservation, and car rental) from hundreds of sites. Services are offered in over 60 countries, with the United State (its largest market), through various websites, such as Momondo, Cheapflights and HotelsCombined.
Priceline	The platform offers online travel reservation services primarily in North America. It includes hotel, rental car and airline ticket reservation services, but also vacation packages and cruises.
Agoda	It is a leading online accommodation reservation service. It primarily serves consumers located in the Asia-Pacific region. Its headquarters are based in Singapore and operations in Bangkok, Thailand and elsewhere.
OpenTable	OpenTable is a leader for booking online restaurant reservations. It does business primarily in the US.

5.2.4 The sample

A sample represents a subgroup of the population, that should be representative, in order to make inferences about the total population. The research's aim has been to investigate reviews of 3-star hotels located in Venice, in the San Marco district, which are published on Booking.com™, and then reviews have been collected. The city of Venice has been chosen for several reasons (even though it is not in the first position of the ranking provided by tourist institutions which shows the most visited cultural cities in

Italy⁷⁹). First, because it is close to the researcher. Second, because of a recent article by Gianna Fregonara, called “*New tourism works: are we ready?*”. There, the author exposed a reflection on the new types of experiential, responsible, and shopping tourism in Italy. Curiosity pushed to a deep reflection concerning available data. The city welcomes at least 86.5% tourists per year. Ente Bilaterale del Turismo of Venetian area revealed that tourism is one of the most important economic activity in the floating city. The statistical office of Veneto Region offers an overview as concerns the total of arrivals, providing time series, between 2007 and 2017 (Table 5.2).

The phenomenon of overcrowding is observable, since both arrivals and overnights have almost doubled, considering this period of time. In order to see whether the city hosts international tourists, and its distribution, the researcher asked to Oxford Economics’ managers, the global leader company in forecasting and quantitative analysis, to have access on travel data available on Global City Travel Databank (the section which is in charge to provide data on tourism and travel). The platform Global City Travel Databank⁸⁰ shows the most recent results: in 2018 the number of overnight visits in paid accommodation in Venice was 2.6 millions and tourists came from each part of the globe: 26,98% from US, 11,34% from UK, 9,12% French, 6,95% Germans, 6,15% Japanese, 5,04% Russians, 4,09% Australians, and about 3,12% Brasil and 3,03% China. Other travellers came from other part of the world but they represented a small percentage out of the total.

The importance of the international markets is confirmed by the same statistical office which provided more detailed data. It can be considered that there has been a steady increase of foreign arrivals and presences between 2013 and 2017 (with an increase of +12% between 2016 and 2017). On average, tourists spent 2.28 nights in 2013 nights that have reached 2.31 in 2017 (Table 5.3, 5.4).

79 A report by Centro Studi Turistici revealed that Rome, Milan, and Florence are positioned at the top, followed by Venice. These cities host more than 84 millions people which is 19.5% of national touristic flow.

80 Global City Travel (GCT) is a proprietary database providing reliable, timely, and detailed international travel intelligence for 300 cities around the world. The database allows clients to quickly benchmark competitive cities and track market performance over time to inform global market strategies. The GCT is provided by Oxford Economics company. Oxford Economics, is a leader in global forecasting and quantitative analysis with more than 1,500 corporations, financial corporations, universities, and institutions around the world. Based in Oxford, its staff includes more than 650 employees between economists and analysts. Its main objective is forecasting market trends and assessing their economic, social, and business impact. Its branch Tourism Economics aims at offering actionable insights to a large portfolio of clients, including corporations (Accor, Apple, Boeing, Etihad, Fairmont Raffles, Hilton, Host Hotels, Google; associations (European Travel Commissions, Events Industry Council, U.S. Travel Associations, World T&T Council, UN World Tourism Associations); and over 200 destinations worldwide (Oxford Economics, 2019).

Table 5.2 Number of arrivals and presences - Venice (time series 2005-2017).

Anno	Arrivi	Var. %	Presenze	Var. %	Perm. media
2005	3.237.623	7,3%	7.670.433	10,7%	2,37
2006	3.496.160	8,0%	8.245.154	7,5%	2,36
2007	3.626.853	3,7%	8.842.874	7,2%	2,44
2008	3.433.775	-5,3%	8.487.539	-4,0%	2,47
2009	3.405.115	-0,8%	8.445.911	-0,5%	2,48
2010	3.708.407	8,9%	8.521.247	0,9%	2,30
2011	4.167.171	12,4%	9.417.872	10,5%	2,26
2012	4.106.161	-1,5%	9.310.132	-1,1%	2,27
2013	4.251.798	3,5%	9.778.225	5,0%	2,30
2014	4.280.632	0,7%	9.983.416	2,1%	2,33
2015	4.495.857	5,0%	10.182.829	2,0%	2,26
2016	4.645.567	3,3%	10.511.788	3,2%	2,26
2017	5.034.882	8,4%	11.685.819	11,2%	2,32

Source: City of Venice, Tourism Field - Osservatorio del Turismo data of Statistical Office of Regione Veneto, 2018.

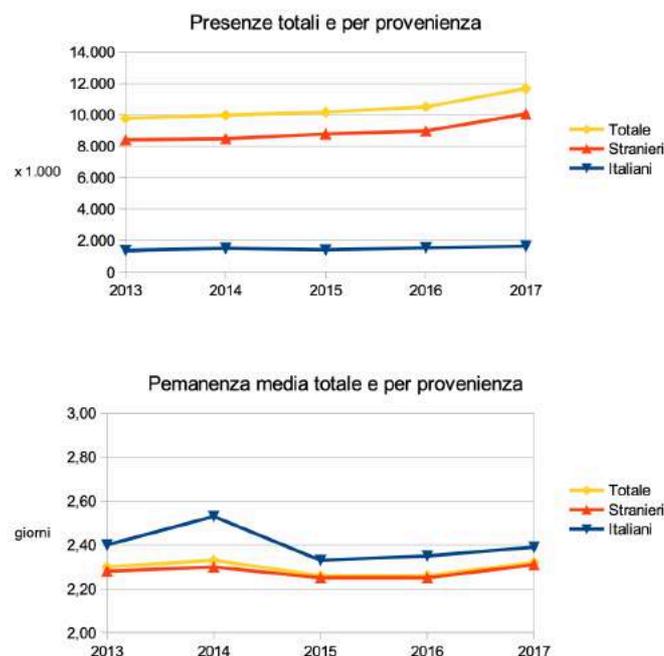
However, variation between 2016 and 2017 decreased. As the Report about Tourism by WEF reveals there are several causes of fluctuations (political, economic crisis, commercial strategies that persuade people to travel more). However it should be reminded that, it is also the delivered service that makes the difference in attracting tourist (the already explained concept of brand image) as well as the service that is delivered by hoteliers. In this sense, when analysing these data, it should be carefully considered the increasing attempt of travellers to choose accommodation that differ from the typical hotel structure, such as AirBnb, B&B, and other types of accommodation, which are not already under control of statistical offices.

Table 5.3 Arrivals and overnights: Italian and foreign market - Venice.

Anno	Arrivi (x 1.000)	Var. %	Presenze (x 1.000)	Var. %	Perm. media
Totale					
2013	4.252	-	9.778	-	2,30
2014	4.281	0,7%	9.983	2,1%	2,33
2015	4.496	5,0%	10.183	2,0%	2,26
2016	4.646	3,3%	10.512	3,2%	2,26
2017	5.035	8,4%	11.686	11,2%	2,32
Stranieri					
2013	3.686	-	8.421	-	2,28
2014	3.686	0,0%	8.482	0,7%	2,30
2015	3.898	5,7%	8.788	3,6%	2,25
2016	3.995	2,5%	8.983	2,2%	2,25
2017	4.356	9,0%	10.062	12,0%	2,31
Italiani					
2013	566	-	1.357	-	2,40
2014	595	5,1%	1.501	10,6%	2,53
2015	598	0,6%	1.394	-7,1%	2,33
2016	651	8,8%	1.528	9,6%	2,35
2017	679	4,4%	1.624	6,3%	2,39

Source: City of Venice, Tourism Field - Osservatorio del Turismo data of Statistical Office of Regione Veneto, 2018.

Table 5.4 Time series (2013-2017): overnights and average staying for Italian and foreign markets.



Source: City of Venice, Tourism Field - Osservatorio del Turismo data of Statistical Office of Regione Veneto, 2018.

To select the sample the researcher has made another reflection concerning the month in which there is the highest number of overnights. The second quarter (July-August-September) was the one with the highest number of tourist presences (33.7%) as concerns the foreign market (Table 5.5).

Table 5.5 Foreign market's overnights in Venice (2016-2017), and Index number.

Comune di Venezia 2016		Comune di Venezia 2017		Var. % 16-17
Presenze turisti stranieri (x1.000)		Presenze turisti stranieri (x1.000)		
gennaio	382	gennaio	405	6,2%
febbraio	486	febbraio	528	8,7%
marzo	655	marzo	638	-2,5%
1° Trimestre	1.522	1° Trimestre	1.572	3,3%
aprile	760	aprile	910	19,8%
maggio	928	maggio	962	3,7%
giugno	883	giugno	1.038	17,6%
2° Trimestre	2.571	2° Trimestre	2.911	13,2%
luglio	1.066	luglio	1.174	10,1%
agosto	1.023	agosto	1.147	12,0%
settembre	927	settembre	1.070	15,4%
3° Trimestre	3.017	3° Trimestre	3.391	12,4%
ottobre	883	ottobre	1.059	19,9%
novembre	542	novembre	634	17,0%
dicembre	448	dicembre	496	10,8%
4° Trimestre	1.873	4° Trimestre	2.189	16,9%
Totale anno	8.983	Totale anno	10.062	12,0%

Source: City of Venice, Tourism Field - Osservatorio del Turismo data of Statistical Office of Regione Veneto, 2018.

The choice of 3-star hotels was based not only on the fact that they represent 43.3% of the total offering (Table 5.6), but also because they seem to be family-owned hotels that provide a service that is not standardised as it happens for luxury hotel chains. Thus, when customers choose a 5-star hotel they might also expect an international and standardised service, that is equal in every chain worldwide. While, family-owned hotels offer a service that is typical of the place in which the hotel is based. This implies that the service could be evaluated more critically by guests.

Table 5.6 Types of hotel in Venice (hotels, beds, rooms) in 2016.

Categorie e tipi di strutture	Alberghi	Quota su totale	Letti	Quota su totale	Camere
Alb./Res. d'ep. 5L e 5 Stelle	20	4,9%	4.704	15,3%	2.375
Alb./Res. d'ep./RTA 4 Stelle	119	29,3%	14.716	47,9%	7.544
Alb./Res. d'ep./RTA 3 Stelle	176	43,3%	8.636	28,1%	4.745
Alb./Res. d'ep. 2 Stelle	52	12,8%	1.786	5,8%	1.013
Alberghi 1 stella	39	9,6%	873	2,8%	487
Totale strutture alberghiere	406	100.0%	30.715	100.0%	16.164

Source: City of Venice, Tourism Field - Osservatorio del Turismo data of Statistical Office of Regione Veneto, 2017.

On 23rd July it has been assessed a first selection of hotels that would have been analysed, following a series of steps. First, the researcher has had accessed on Booking.com™. In this case, access was free and it did not require a registration. In the home page, the platform gives the possibility to enter different parameters⁸¹ (place, check-in and check-out dates, number of visitors, number of rooms). The researcher did not select any period of time, rather she entered by clicking on the image representing “Venice” and more than 3,000 properties.

After that, a new landing page showing all the properties (Table 5.7) located in the floating city appeared. To reduce the number of results, filters were applied:

- Stars: 3-stars hotels were selected for the reasons mentioned above;
- Category: the category “Hotels” was selected, and the others excluded (B&B, apartments, holiday homes);
- District: San Marco was chosen since it is concentrated the highest number of 3-star hotels (38), followed by Castello and Cannaregio districts (Figure 5.4).

⁸¹ However, access can also be made by clicking on some photos of the city that a visitors would like to visit: Venice, Florence, Rome, Milan, and Paris. Once users click on an image, they land on a page that shows all the results. It is important to remember that, if a customer selects a range of time, the availability of resulted hotels may vary.

- Rating: between 7 and 8 points. The score for each review was previously calculated on an average of six categories (Location, Cleanliness, Comfort, Value for money, Services, and Staff). The choice of selecting a rating comprised between 7 and 8 points was related to the properties of arithmetic average (Cicchitelli, 2012). According to the second and fourth properties (Table 5.7):

(a) If a and b are the minimum and the maximum values respectively of a distribution (x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n) , the arithmetic mean is comprised between these two quantities, $a \leq \mu \leq b$

(b) The sum of squared statistical discrepancies of the values x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n from a constant c is minimised when c is equal to arithmetic mean.

Figure 5.4 Distribution of registered hotels within Venice on Booking.com™

District	
<input type="checkbox"/> Guests' favourite area	120
<input type="checkbox"/> Venice City Centre	61
<input type="checkbox"/> Best areas outside centre	59
<input type="checkbox"/> San Marco	38
<input type="checkbox"/> Castello	26
<input type="checkbox"/> Cannaregio	25
<input type="checkbox"/> Venice Biennale	21
<input type="checkbox"/> Santa Croce	15
<input type="checkbox"/> Dorsoduro	10
<input type="checkbox"/> San Polo	5
<input type="checkbox"/> Grand Canal	3
<input type="checkbox"/> Giudecca	1

Source: Booking.com™.

Table 5.7 Distribution of hotels on Booking.com™ in the San Marco district.

Hotel Name	Stars	Total number of reviews	Average rating
Rosa Salva Hotel	3	1639	9,4
Hotel Flora	3	1140	9,1
Hotel Becher	3	611	9,0
Hotel Bel Sito & Berlino	3	1081	9,0
Hotel Montecarlo	3	2365	8,9
Hotel Violino d'Oro	3	1698	8,8
Hotel Santo Stefano	3	426	8,8
Hotel Ala	3	1804	8,8
Antica Locanda al Gambero	3	1750	8,7
Hotel San Gallo	3	1698	8,4

Hotel Mercurio	3	1517	8,6
Al Gazzettino	3	1126	8,5
Hotel San Luca Venezia	3	881	8,5
Hotel San Moisè	3	1315	8,4
Hotel Gorizia a La Valigia	3	2213	8,4
Hotel Do Pozzi	3	456	8,4
Hotel Lisbona	3	1431	8,4
Ca del Nobile	3	243	8,3
Hotel Anastasia	3	1237	8,3
Centauro Hotel	3	1697	8,3
Hotel Ateneo	3	824	8,2
Hotel La Fenice des Artistes	3	743	8,2
Albergo San Marco	3	1591	8,2
Hotel Torino	3	1022	8,0
Ambassador Tre Rose	3	680	7,8
Antico Panada	3	7381	7,7
Hotel San Zulian	3	1787	7,7
Hotel Città di Milano	3	1765	7,6
Hotel Diana	3	2492	7,4
Hotel San Giorgio	3	427	7,2
Hotel Alcyone	3	2430	7,3
Hotel al Graspò de U	3	567	7,0

The sample of reviews was based on the hotels with a rating comprised between 7.0 and 8.0 points which received the highest number of reviews:

- Hotel Antico Panada, 3-star hotel, rating of 7.7, 7381 reviews;
- Hotel Diana, 3-star hotel, rating of 7.4, 2492 reviews;
- Hotel Alcyone, 3-star hotel, rating of 7.3, 2430 reviews;
- Hotel San Zulian, 3-star hotel, rating of 7.7., 1787reviews;
- Hotel Città di Milano, 3-star hotel, rating of 7.6, 1765 reviews.

As it can be seen, they offer more or less the same services: service & extras (some provide with tickets for attractions); food & drink (they have a bar or restaurant or they serve breakfast in the room); WiFi (in some cases it is available in all the spaces, while in other structures, just in public areas); services (from luggage storage, currency exchange, room service, until 24-hour express); general service (family room, safety deposit box, lift, or air conditioning and heat); language spoken (the staff speak different foreign languages which is considered a plus in the travel evaluation step).

To conclude, it has to be highlighted that culture is not the only factor affecting travel decision process. Some noise within the collection of data is due to a set of variables. First, subjectivity that determines satisfaction or dissatisfaction in each phase of the customer journey, as well as personal traits (gender, age, education, job, but also tastes). These cause fluctuations and variance among perceptions and evaluations of the travel experience. Noise is also caused by the existing gap between initial expectations, that are usually moved by motivations and by the experience itself. For instance, people who travel for business motives have a set of expectations that are different from those who travel for leisure. Thus, cultural aspects should be evaluated upstream. People have a different approach toward digitalisation and social media, different penetration rates and education, as well as a different approach toward expressing or not showing complaints (Meyer, 2014). This excludes upstream some cases from the study: some people who have been hosted by a hotel, might have not left a review because of their cultural traits (because they are not used to do so).

Finally, when introducing the matter of online reviews and electronic WOM, self-selection bias should be considered. As a matter of fact, individuals who leave reviews select themselves causing a bias, meaning that people choose to participate or not to a project (Malhotra and Birks, 2017). In the example of reviews: people can freely choose to leave or not leave reviews, and this might also be caused by subjective or cultural traits, again. It is hard to draw a line between them. The self-selection bias transforms a probability sample, into a non-probability one, which relies on a researcher's personal judgement that can bias results.

Other problems related to the collection of the sample have been related to linguistic approach: reviews have been left in several languages. As concerns the choice of languages used to write reviews, it has to be highlighted that there are several researches concerning the topic. Some articles rank human languages according to the number of native speakers, even though it should be considered with caution. Estimations are not always reliable and constant over time, since languages change continually. According to a research carried out

by Ethnologue (2019), languages can be spoken by inhabitants of a country, and they are also known by those who do not live in a specific country. There are some countries, such as those located in South America, that speak Spanish, because they have been colonised by Spanish. Indians that have their own language, but they are also used to speak and communicate in English because they have been longly colonised by English, and so on and so forth. Everything depends on history and cultural traits.

The selection of languages could bias the analysis, since some reviews might have been left in the original one. This is what happens to entrepreneurs: how do they interpret reviews if they do not speak foreign languages? In this case, rating scale might help, but within comments, hoteliers can discover aspects of the experience that have not been satisfactory for guests. Thus, since available tools were not able to conduct a semantic analysis, and since guests worldwide are used to select their own language (or at least english) to leave reviews, the researcher has decided to focus on those languages on which she had acquaintances or knowledge from the high-school (mainly English, Spanish, French, and German).

5.2.5 First exploratory research based on descriptive statistics

After having collected a sample of 352 reviews from the selected hotels located in Venice, the researcher has conducted a former exploratory research⁸². The objective was to set out insights and a first understanding of the phenomena. After an initial exploration, this analysis might conclude with a conclusive research, which aims at defining and testing hypothesis, and determining relationships. The exploratory research is also helpful when the problem is not enough rationalised and the researcher wants to investigate beliefs and attitudes.

Descriptive statistics were calculated in order to provide a brief overview of the sample and its distribution. Particularly, the total number of reviews left from visitors per country (absolute and relative frequencies); the mean (which is the attributed average rating by travellers from a specific country, since the scale is comprised between 1 and 10); the minimum and maximum attributed rating by each country (Table 5.8). Within the sample, there were 48 countries, and 53 reviews were left by French (15,0568%), followed by Spanish (14,4886%), and German (10,277%). On average they have attributed a scale comprised between 7 and 7,9. There are some minor group (Figure, 5.5) for instance

⁸² According to Malhotra and Birks, (2017) the approach is used when samples are small, data analysis can be both quantitative and qualitative, and it is also flexible.

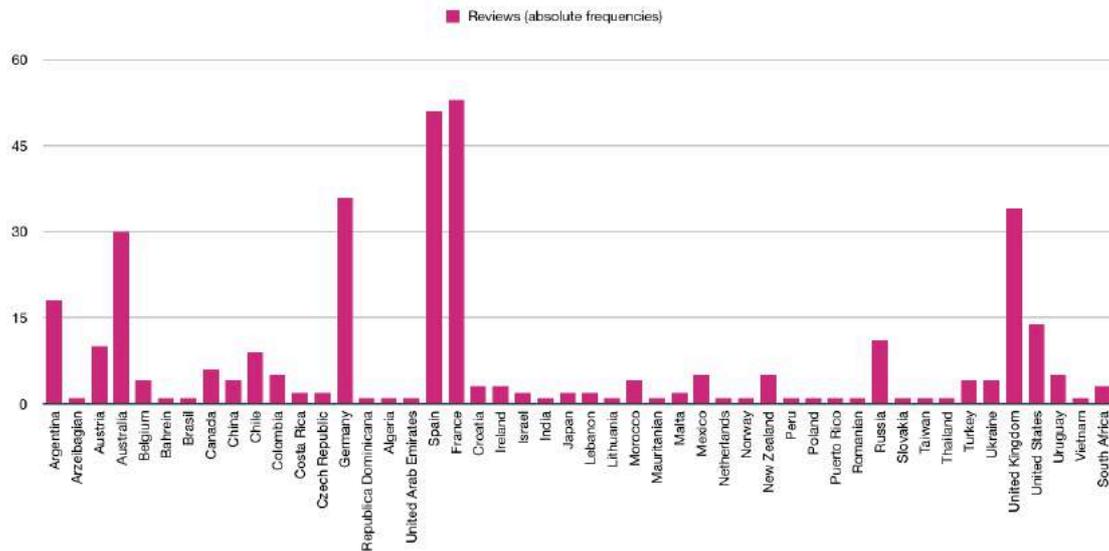
Australia (whose visitors left 8,5227% reviews, attributing on average 7,693 points); United Kingdom (9,6591% with an average rating of 8,179).

Table 5.8 Reviews' distribution (absolute and relative frequencies) and ratings (mean, minimum, maximum rating).

Country	Reviews (absolute frequencies)	Reviews (relative frequencies)	Mean (rating)	Min (rating)	Max (rating)
Argentina	18	5,1136%	7,769	3,3	10,0
Arzeibagian	1	0,2841%	8,3	8,3	8,3
Austria	10	2,8409%	8,07	4,2	9,6
Australia	30	8,5227%	7,693	4,2	10,0
Belgium	4	1,1364%	6,975	3,8	10,0
Bahrein	1	0,2841%	8,8	8,8	8,8
Brasil	1	0,2841%	6,2	6,2	6,2
Canada	6	1,7045%	7,083	5,0	10,0
China	4	1,1364%	7,925	6,7	9,6
Chile	9	2,5568%	7,278	5,0	10,0
Colombia	5	1,4205%	8,08	5,0	10,0
Costa Rica	2	0,5682%	9,15	8,3	10,0
Czech Republic	2	0,5682%	7,5	7,5	7,5
Germany	36	10,2273%	7,9	3,3	10,0
Republica Dominicana	1	0,2841%	8,8	8,8	8,8
Algeria	1	0,2841%	7,9	7,9	7,9
United Arab Emirates	1	0,2841%	7,0	7,0	7,0
Spain	51	14,4886%	7,462	2,5	10,0
France	53	15,0568%	7,4	4,2	10,0
Croatia	3	0,8523%	8,8	7,9	9,6
Ireland	3	0,8523%	8,467	6,2	10,0
Israel	2	0,5682%	9,4	9,2	9,6
India	1	0,2841%	5,0	5,0	5,0
Japan	2	0,5682%	6,7	5,4	7,9
Lebanon	2	0,5682%	8,4	7,1	9,6
Lithuania	1	0,2841%	8,3	8,3	8,3
Morocco	4	1,1364%	6,975	4,6	9,6

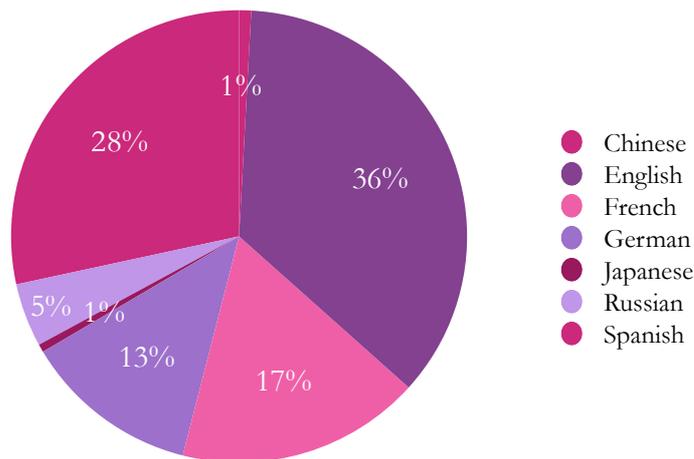
Country	Reviews (absolute frequencies)	Reviews (relative frequencies)	Mean (rating)	Min (rating)	Max (rating)
Mauritanian	1	0,2841%	8,3	8,3	8,3
Malta	2	0,5682%	8,6	7,5	9,6
Mexico	5	1,4205%	9,08	6,2	10,0
Netherlands	1	0,2841%	7,5	7,5	7,5
Norway	1	0,2841%	10,0	10,0	10,0
New Zealand	5	1,4205%	7,18	3,8	10,0
Peru	1	0,2841%	3,3	3,3	3,3
Poland	1	0,2841%	5,0	5,0	5,0
Puerto Rico	1	0,2841%	10	10,0	10,0
Romanian	1	0,2841%	9,2	9,2	9,2
Russia	11	3,1250%	8,464	5,4	10,0
Slovakia	1	0,2841%	10,0	10,0	10,0
Taiwan	1	0,2841%	7,5	7,5	7,5
Thailand	1	0,2841%	7,1	7,1	7,1
Turkey	4	1,1364%	8,85	7,5	10,0
Ukraine	4	1,1364%	9,375	8,3	10,0
United Kingdom	34	9,6591%	8,179	4,2	10,0
United States	14	3,9773%	7,428	3,8	10,0
Uruguay	5	1,4205%	8,76	7,5	10,0
Vietnam	1	0,2841%	7,9	7,9	7,9
South Africa	3	0,8523%	6,4	5,4	7,1
Total	352	100,0000%			

Figure 5.5 Histogram representing the distribution of reviews across countries within in the sample.



Chosen languages by the researcher are those that are also spoken by the majority of people for the reasons mentioned above⁸³. The sample shows that 35,80% people left reviews in English, followed by Spanish (28,41%), and French (17,32%) as it seen in Figure 5.6. Self-selection bias should be considered, as well as the fact that some reviews could have been left on other social media networks, rather than Booking.com™.

Figure 5.6 Pie chart showing distribution by language (relative frequencies).



⁸³ Chinese is spoken by 918 millions people, Spanish by 460 millions people, English by 379 millions people. After Hindi, Bengali (whose reviews could not be analysed semantically), Portuguese (221 millions), Russian (154 millions), and Japanese (128 millions) have the highest number of speakers worldwide (Ethnologue, 2019).

As concerns attributed ratings to hotels by country, Table 5.9 provides with general framework. Generally, 2,27% people were dissatisfied and provided a rating between 2.5 (which is the minimum value) and 4.0. In some cases, guests complained about the fact that the experience did not respect the initial expectations, when they looked at Booking.com™ platform in order to book the room. Others express dissatisfaction toward the service (unfriendly and ungentle staff), rooms (which are old and damaged). The bathroom has usually been seen as a weakness that reduces satisfaction. As it was observed by Mazzotti (2018), tourists who are experiencing a travel want to live a memorable experience, and elements such as bed and bathroom are quintessential in order to grant satisfaction. In this case, it is hard to comprehend whether preferences are influenced by culture or whether it is a matter of personal traits. These differences might exist also among people coming from the same country, as it is seen from the examples of two German tourists below, who write about the experience in a very descriptive and detailed way.

For instance:

“Ich kann leider nichts Positives anführen. Die Bewertung auf [Booking.com](https://www.booking.com) stimmt leider mit den tatsächlichen Gegebenheiten in Gänze nicht überein. Das Hotel hat seine gute Zeiten lange hinter sich. Abgerissene und von der Wand gelöste Tapeten im ganzen Zimmer. Möbel stark abgenutzt und beschädigt. Durchgetretene Fußböden, ausgetretene Badewanne. Aus dem Fenster direkt den Blick in die Restaurantküche des gegenüberliegenden Hauses. Das Hotel insgesamt sehr klein und gedrückt, ganz anders als auf den Fotos. Bereits bei der Ankunft trafen wir auf lautstark über die Zimmer schimpfende Gäste, der Portier selbst gestand gleich entschuldigend ein, dass die Zimmer alles andere als gut sind. Wir sind von dem Hotel und der Leistung tief enttäuscht.” (Antico Panada Hotel, Germany, rating 3,3)

Translation from German to English: *“Unfortunately, I cannot say anything positive. The rating on Booking.com doesn't coincide with the actual conditions in their entirety. The hotel has its good times long behind. Torn and detached from the wall wallpaper in the whole room. Badly worn and damaged furniture. Treaded floors, leaked bathtub. From the window the view was direct into the kitchen of the opposite house. The hotel overall is very small and pressed, and it looks different than photos. When we arrived, we met loud on the room scolding guests, the porter apologised, since the rooms are anything but good. We are deeply disappointed with the hotel and the service.”*

“Das Hotel ist trotz des für Venedig recht niedrigen Preises nicht zu empfehlen. Das Frühstück war auf niedrigem Niveau in Ordnung. Die Lage war zentral. Bettwäsche und Handtücher waren sauber und wurden täglich gewechselt. Gute Klimaanlage und Schallisolierung. Die zentrale Lage bringt "Ballermann-Atmosphäre" mit sich, da Venedig überlaufen ist. Das Bad war eine Katastrophe: Duschkopf defekt, unsauber, wackliger Toilettendeckel. Ekelfaktor! Duschkopf wurde trotz Reklamation nicht repariert. Die Zimmer sind winzig, dunkel, da das Nebenhaus ca. einen Meter entfernt steht und berührt werden kann. Ausstattung des Zimmers ist plüschig, schmierig. Kopfende des Bettes mit sichtbaren Anlehnstellen vorangegangener Köpfe! Teppichboden nur mit

Badelatschen zu begeben, da unsauber. Zimmer abgenutzt und abgewohnt.” (Antico Panada Hotel, Germany, rating 3,8)

Translation from German to English: *“The hotel is not recommended despite the price for Venice very low. The breakfast was alright at a low level. The location was central. Sheets and towels were clean and changed daily. Good air conditioning and soundproofing. The central location brings "Ballermann atmosphere" with it, as Venice is overrun. The bathroom was a disaster: shower head was broken, dirty, shaky toilet lid. Ick! Shower head was not repaired despite a complaint. The rooms are tiny, dark, because the neighboring house is about a meter away and can be touched. Room is plushy, greasy. Headboard of bed with visible leaning points of previous heads! Carpet only with flip-flops to commit, because of dirty. Worn and old room”.*

Table 5.9 Ratings (absolute and relative frequencies) by country of origin.

Country	Rating (2.5 - 4.0)*	Rating (2.5 - 4.0)**	Rating (4.1 - 5.0)*	Rating (4.1 - 5.0)**	Rating (5.1 - 6.0)	Rating (5.1 - 6.0)**	Rating (6.1 - 7.0)*	Rating (6.1 - 7.0)**
Argentina	1	12,50%	2	6,90%	0	0,00%	1	3,03%
Arzeibagian	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Austria	0	0,00%	1	3,45%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Australia	0	0,00%	2	6,90%	3	11,54%	1	3,03%
Belgium	1	12,50%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,03%
Bahrein	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Brasil	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,03%
Canada	0	0,00%	1	3,45%	1	3,85%	1	3,03%
China	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,03%
Chile	0	0,00%	2	6,90%	0	0,00%	3	9,09%
Colombia	0	0,00%	1	3,45%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Costa Rica	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Czech Republic	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Germany	2	25,00%	1	3,45%	2	7,69%	5	15,15%
Republica Dominicana	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Algeriy	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
United Arab Emirates	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,03%
Spain	1	12,50%	6	20,69%	2	7,69%	5	15,15%
France	0	0,00%	7	24,14%	9	34,62%	3	9,09%
Croatia	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%

Hungary	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Ireland	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,03%
Israel	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
India	0	0,00%	1	3,45%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Japan	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,85%	0	0,00%
Lebanon	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Lithuania	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Morocco	0	0,00%	1	3,45%	1	3,85%	0	0,00%
Mauritanian	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Malta	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Mexico	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,03%
Netherlands	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Norway	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
New Zealand	1	12,50%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,03%
Peru	1	12,50%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Poland	0	0,00%	1	3,45%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Puerto Rico	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Romanian	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Russia	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	2	7,69%	0	0,00%
Slovakia	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Taiwan	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Thailand	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Turkey	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Ukraine	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
United Kingdom	0	0,00%	1	3,45%	4	15,38%	4	12,12%
United States	1	12,50%	2	6,90%	1	3,85%	3	9,09%
Uruguay	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Vietnam	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
South Africa	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	3,85%	1	3,03%
Totale	8	100,00%	29	100,00%	26	100,00%	33	100,00%

Country	Rating (7.1 - 8.0)*	Rating (7.1 - 8.0)**	Rating (8.1 - 9.0)**	Rating (8.1 - 9.0)*	Rating (9.1 - 10.0)*	Rating (9.1 - 10.0)**
Algeria	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Argentina	4	4,49%	2	3,77%	8	7,62%
Arzeibagian	0	0,00%	1	1,89%	0	0,00%
Australia	13	14,61%	4	7,55%	7	6,67%
Austria	3	3,37%	3	5,66%	3	2,86%
Bahrein	0	0,00%	1	1,89%	0	0,00%
Belgium	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Brasil	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Canada	1	1,12%	1	1,89%	1	0,95%
Chile	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	3	2,86%
China	2	2,25%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Colombia	2	2,25%	0	0,00%	2	1,90%
Costa Rica	0	0,00%	1	1,89%	1	0,95%
Czech Republic	2	2,25%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
France	13	14,61%	10	18,87%	11	10,48%
Germany	6	6,74%	9	16,98%	11	10,48%
Croatia	1	1,12%	1	1,89%	0	0,00%
Hungary	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Ireland	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	2	1,90%
Israel	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	2	1,90%
India	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Japan	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Lebanon	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Lithuania	0	0,00%	1	1,89%	0	0,00%
Morocco	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Mauritanian	0	0,00%	1	1,89%	0	0,00%
Malta	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Mexico	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	4	3,81%
Netherlands	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Norway	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
New Zealand	2	2,25%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Peru	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Poland	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%

Puerto Rico	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Republica Dominicana	0	0,00%	1	1,89%	0	0,00%
Romanian	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Russia	2	2,25%	2	3,77%	5	4,76%
Slovakia	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	1	0,95%
Spain	21	23,60%	7	13,21%	9	8,57%
Taiwan	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Thailand	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Turkeu	2	2,25%	0	0,00%	2	1,90%
Ukraine	0	0,00%	1	1,89%	3	2,86%
United Kingdom	5	5,62%	5	9,43%	15	14,29%
United Arab Emirates	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
United States	0	0,00%	2	3,77%	5	4,76%
Uruguay	2	2,25%	1	1,89%	2	1,90%
Vietnam	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
South Africa	1	1,12%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Total	89	100,00%	53	100,00%	105	100,00%

Moreover, 24,14% French as well as 20,69% Spanish people gave a rating comprised between 4.1 and 5.0, which is considered below the mean. Remaining 55,17% is well distributed among Argentina, Australia, Chile, United States (6,90%); Austria, Canada, Colombia, Germany, India, Marocco, Poland, and United Kingdom (3,45%). Germany and Spain were pretty satisfied and gave a sufficient rating (between 6.1 and 7.0) for about 15,15% of total responses, followed by United Kingdom (12,12%). Rating between 7.1 and 8.0 accounts for about 1/4 of the total distribution and this has been overcome by highly satisfied guests who were surprised by the service and left an excellent rating between 9.1 and 10. People who left satisfied review represent 105 out of 352 guests, and among them it is possible to mention English tourists (14,29%) as well as French (10,48%), and Germans (10,48%).

Some examples are provided: people appreciated the location of hotels, which are all positioned near to St. Mark's Square, that is a hot spot within the city, and because of ferry terminals that are a valuable service to travel around the city. The tidiness, cleanliness, and comfort of the room are other factors that have caused positive reviews, as well as the helpfulness and gentleness of the staff. Even though these people left an excellent rating

and were satisfied about the experience, they also tended to highlight things to improve, such as weak WiFi, the fact that they did not have a great view, or a limited breakfast selection. By reading their comments, it seems that these factors have not contributed to weaken satisfaction levels. For instance,

“Central location, rooms were clean and tidy, easy to access from ferry terminal, staff were friendly and very helpful. Everything was fine, and the hotel were more than accommodating with allowing us to leave our luggage while we wandered around for the day before our connecting flight. Only down side would be the wi-fi was very weak in room.” (Hotel Città di Milano, Australia, rating: 10)

“Location was great to access all major sites/transportation, we were even able to return to the room during the day to escape the heat. Room was large and beautifully decorated. Air conditioning was wonderful to beat the heat. No view from our room, not sure about others. Breakfast selection was limited but sufficed.” (Hotel San Zulian, United States, rating: 9,6).

“La amabilidad del personal, hotel muy céntrico a solo 5 minutos de la Piazza San Marco, cama muy cómoda, y la habitación muy limpia. Calidad precio muy buena. Todo muy bien personal muy amable la cama muy cómoda pero sobretodo es que esta muy céntrico solo a 5 minutos andando hasta la Piazza San Marco. Lo que no me gusta es el ruido de la puerta de la entrada al hotel cuando entraba la gente sobretodo por la noche. Pero ha sido una gran experiencia estar en este hotel. Trato muy familiar.” (Hotel Città di Milano, Spain, rating: 10)

“El hotel tiene check in 24 horas . Menos mal porque nuestro vuelo se retrasó y llegamos a las 5 de la mañana. La ubicación es perfecta para ver Venecia y vivirla de día y de noche. Esta genial. La habitación es amplia y cómoda y nos pusieron jacuzzi en la habitación que estaba genial para descansar después de andar muchas horas. Tiene en frente un supermercado para comprar cosas. Y hay ascensor cosa rara en Venecia. El desayuno muy escaso. Solo cruasán. Y poco más.” (Hotel San Zulian, Spain, rating: 10)

5.2.6 Content analysis

After having analysed descriptive statistics from the sample of 352 reviews, it has been applied content analysis procedure, in order to conduct a first cross-cultural comparison. This method aims at summarising available data into a structured way starting from a collection of qualitative data. Words, characters, themes (or propositions), topics, space and times measures are the main unit of analysis (Malhotra et al., 2017). The technique is used in order to calculate the frequency of appearance of words, as to see how many times users talk about a specific category, and which attributes they usually attach to it. Content analysis is appreciated for being a standardised procedure that allows to summarise a large amount of data.

The process begins with the collection and systematic organisation of data, in order to provide concise summary of results (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017). The process is harder when different languages are involved into a cross-cultural analysis, since some of them could not be within the researcher's domain of expertise. As a matter of fact, not only is the semantic meaning important (which is the meaning of a word that can be found on the dictionary): what makes the difference is also pragmatic meaning, that is the real meaning of words in use including the context.

Malhotra and Birks, (2017) also criticise the procedure since it presents a set of disadvantages: established categories have to be precisely determined in order to be interpreted in the same way by coders. In this sense, a cross-cultural content analysis that starts from different languages can be biased. This is due to complexity of assigning exactly semantic and pragmatic meaning of words: "The significance of the message may lie more in its context than in its manifest content" (Malhotra and Birks, 2017, p. 251). In fact, this type of communication hides meanings within communication that complicate comprehension. Second, data fragmentation. By concentrating on single categories or "matching words", the researcher decontextualise words from the general context, losing in the general overview of communication process. This is related to the first aspect.

Third, content analysis is a quantitative process, and it lies outside qualitative research or investigation of the content. Otherwise, it would be subjective and unsystematic. In this sense, the objective was not to test hypothesis or find statistical evidence, rather to find managerial implications and suggestions for those who strive to compete in the current cross-cultural arena. Biases in finding out relationships between contents and culture are hard to be found, since several factors are involved and fall outside culture: subjective and personal traits that make people write reviews adopting their communication style (communication style also depend on age, and on the ability of using these new ways of communication), as well as the context itself.

As it has been presented by previous descriptive statistics, the sample was composed of 352 reviews. As to have a general idea, a first check of included reviews has been made by the researcher. The sample included many outliers (just one or two reviews from a same country). In order to conduct a content analysis, the researcher has concentrated on the most copious sub-groups which represented 204 reviews: French, Spanish, German, Australian, and English (Table 5.10). These people adopted native language to write reviews, apart from some exceptions.

Table 5.10 The revisiting sample composed of some subgroups.

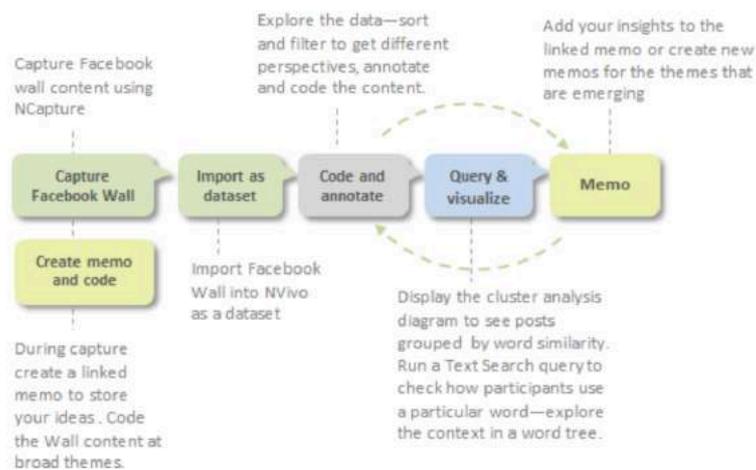
Country	Reviews (absolute frequencies)	Reviews (relative frequencies)	Mean (rating)	Min (rating)	Max (rating)
Australia	30	14,71%	7,69	4,2	10,0
Germany	36	17,65%	7,90	3,3	10,0
Spain	51	25,00%	7,46	2,5	10,0
France	53	25,98%	7,40	4,2	10,0
United Kingdom	34	16,67%	8,18	4,2	10,0
Total	204	100,00%			

Former chosen variables used to categorise reviews were initially the same than those adopted by Booking.com™: “Cleanliness”, “Comfort”, “Location”, “Price”, “Service”, “Staff”. Then, a further distinction was made according to the fact that tourist spoke positively or negatively. By reading all the reviews, the researcher has noticed that some variables were too broad, and they would need to be broken up into subcomponents. The categorisation provided by Booking.com™ does not give the possibility to evaluate some aspects in-depth, such as room, bathroom, or breakfast.

- Cleanliness: it is related to the general structure and public areas, and to its components such as room, bathroom, and restaurant;
- Comfort: it refers to the degree to which a person “feels relaxed or free from pain” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). This variable is related to the comfort of the room and bathroom, but also to the soundproof and general organisation of the overall structure’s layout.
- Location: it refers to the position of the hotel, whether it is easily found or if it is near to attracting spots (in this example, hotels were near to St. Mark’s Square and Rialto Bridge);
- Price: whether the hotel offers great value for money;
- Service: it refers to a set of included elements, from air conditioning and WiFi, to breakfast and restaurant.
- Staff: the variable is related to the fact that people in charge of welcoming, hosting, and serving guests are good in communicating with them.

To categorise data, the researcher has chosen the software NVivo, that allows to explore, organise, categorise, analyse, visualise results. It is used to carry out qualitative research, and to evaluate, interpret, and explain social phenomena, given unstructured data such as reviews, but also images, notes, web pages, and more. The applied model (Figure 5.7) is made of several steps that can be iterated: (1) Import data from documents; (2) Explore data; (3) Code data, which is done by assigning words or sentences to nodes, that correspond to categories of interest; (4) Query, which is to ask to NVivo to answer to some predefined questions; (5) Reflect; (6) Visualise, that shows results graphically; (7) Memo, which records insights to be written into a project).

Figure 5.7 Application of NVivo model for capturing SNS insights.



The basic unit of NVivo is given by a *node*, which is a “collection of references about a specific theme, place, person or other area of interest” (NVivo, 2019). They are defined as containers, that allow to track easily contents. After having grouped contents into nodes, data can be shown through graphs or diagrams in order to provide with a better visualisation and comprehension. The researcher has prepared separated Excel files containing reviews that were referred to a specific country. Then, all the subgroups of reviews have been analysed and categorised into nodes that corresponded to the variables mentioned above. Then, by clicking on each node, NVivo showed the total number of references for each country. The researcher has summarised results into tables and graphs for each market, as it follows.

5.3 Visualisation of results

5.3.1 Analysis of French reviews

This subgroup of reviews represents 25,98% out of the total, and it comprises 53 reviews which have been written in French. The main indicator is given by *total references*, showing how many times an element is coded to a node. It is worth considering that, when evaluating a single variable, some aspects could positively contribute to satisfaction; while others could cause dissatisfaction. This means that the same variable could be mentioned twice within a review. Hence, the total number of reviews does not always correspond to the number of references. Then, *coverage*: within a dataset it refers to the percentage of characters that is coded at a node.

Table 5.11 sums up results referred to reviews left by French travellers. The most appreciated variable was the location (51,16% have expressly referred to this variable as a factor that has satisfied them). Location is followed by a positive evaluation of comfort (15,12% references) and staff (12,79% references). However, if one compares the number of positive and negative references to comfort, it can be seen that people have been mostly unsatisfied with respect to this variable. Among the main causes of dissatisfaction, 39,22% complained about the services of the hotel, and did not appreciate the level of comfort (37,25%).

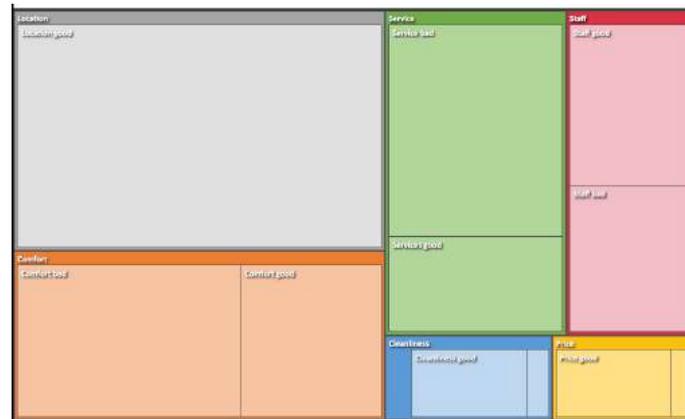
Table 5.11 Counting references (absolute and relative values) of French reviews.

Variable	Positive references	Positive references (relative values)	Negative references	Negative references (relative values)
Cleanliness	4	4,65%	1	1,96%
Comfort	13	15,12%	19	37,25%
Location	44	51,16%	0	0,00%
Price	5	5,81%	1	1,96%
Service	9	10,47%	20	39,22%
Staff	11	12,79%	10	19,61%
Total	86	100,00%	51	100,00%

Patterns are better visualised through a tree map (Figure 5.8): it shows a hierarchical representation of nested rectangles of different sizes. In this case “location” node has the largest number of coding references, thus it is represented with a larger rectangle, including

just the positive attributes, since no one has given a negative feedback about that. Sizes are related each other, and they do not represent absolute values. Generally, there is the same number of references concerning “Comfort” and “Service” nodes. However, perception was unlike: a higher number of people is dissatisfied from the experience.

Figure 5.8 Tree map showing references and coverage of French reviews.



Some attributes or adjectives are attached to the good position of the hotel, for instance “idéal”, “stratégique”, “parfait”, “bonne”; or they describe its geographical location: “en plein centre de Venise”, “situation exceptionnelle press de la place St. Marc”, “proximité avec la place St. Marc”. By running a word frequency⁸⁴, it appeared the term “Marc” which is referred to the square, and it accounts 0,80% out of the total words within the subgroup of reviews. When running content analysis, it is worth recalling the most recurring terms (Table 5.12), as well as a word cloud tab, that shows up to 100 words in different sizes and colours, and those that occur more are represented in larger fonts (Figure 5.9).

“Petit” has been used 44 times (2,21% weighted percentage), and the software included all the similar words. The adjective is associated to “déjeuner” (breakfast) but also it is used as an adjective to indicate the dimension of the room. This is followed by the term “chambre” (room) that has been typed 39 times (1,96% weighted percentage). Some visitors appreciated the decoration and style, others complained about dimension, saying that the room was too small, dirty, or difficult to access.

⁸⁴ The query has been run by including stemmed words and putting a minimum length of four characters, that excludes articles and other stopped words that have a higher frequency of repetition. When determining the word frequency query, NVivo applies some rules: words containing punctuation are divided into separated words, and stop words are not included.

5.3.2 Analysis of Spanish reviews

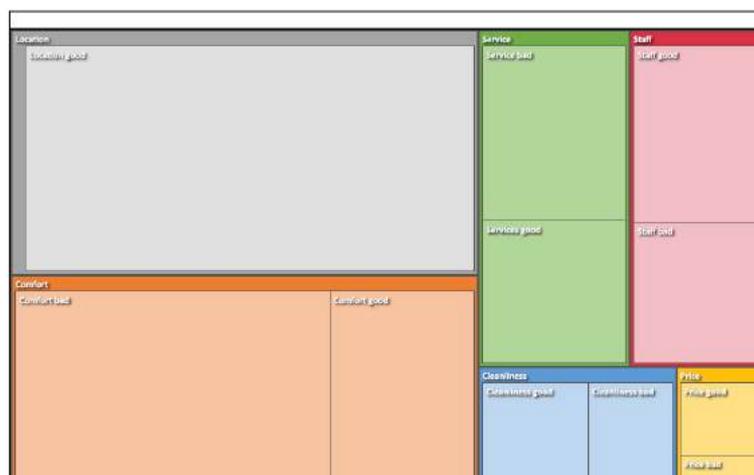
Spanish segment, representing 25% of the sample, is represented in Table 5.13. “Location” (ubicación) has been appreciated 53,01% of times, for its closeness to St. Mark’s Square and to the main transportation services. 14,46% Spanish have liked the degree of comfort, particularly the decoration as well as the fact that they were cosy hotels; staff has been another element which positively affected the final evaluation: it was defined lovely (“amable”) and gentle (“agradable”). However, dissatisfaction has been caused by some discomfortable elements: 52% of people complained about the hotel’s layout, bad soundproofing, and uncomfortable and hard bed.

Table 5.13 Counting references (absolute and relative values) of Spanish reviews.

Variable	Positive references	Positive references (relative values)	Negative references	Negative references (relative values)
Cleanliness	5	6,02%	4	8,00%
Comfort	12	14,46%	26	52,00%
Location	44	53,01%	0	0,00%
Price	3	3,61%	1	2,00%
Service	9	10,84%	11	22,00%
Staff	10	12,05%	8	16,00%
Total	83	100,00%	50	100,00%

Tree map shows a visual depiction of relationships among variables. Negative references about comfort are higher than the positive ones; while the favourable and unfavourable references with respect to service and staff are more balanced (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10 Tree map showing references and coverage of Spanish reviews.



Word frequency table is offered to show the most recurring terms among reviews (Table 5.14). The room was the second most typed word (*habitación*) that has been repeated 32 times, which weighs 1,82% out of the total. NVivo gives the possibility to explore attributes that have been associated to this element. Among those who have expressed an evaluation about the room, it emerged that 61,1% evaluated it negatively, since it was old (“*envejada*”), small (“*pequeña*”), and not ventilated. 38,9% of references about room were positive and described it as comfortable, fresh, broad (“*fresca*”, “*agradable*”, “*limpia*”, “*espaciosa*”, “*cómoda*”, “*correcta*”). Some liked the Venetian style since it brought back to the antique Venice (“*te llevaba a la antigua Venecia*”, “*decorada al estilo veneciano*”). Apart from location, breakfast was evaluated by Spanish tourists: 22,22% evaluated the offering positively (“*rico*”, “*completo*”), the remaining 77,78% of those who have expressly evaluated it, they said that it was normal or poor, and thus that it could be improved. Word cloud shows not only the very first 10-recurring terms, but all the most typed terms, with different sizes (Figure 5.11). As it can be seen, “*habitación*”, “*hotel*”, and “*ubicación*” are the most evident terms, as well as “*desayuno*” (breakfast), and *Marcos*, that is associated with the term of location.

Table 5.14 Word frequency table of the first 10-recurring terms among Spanish reviews.

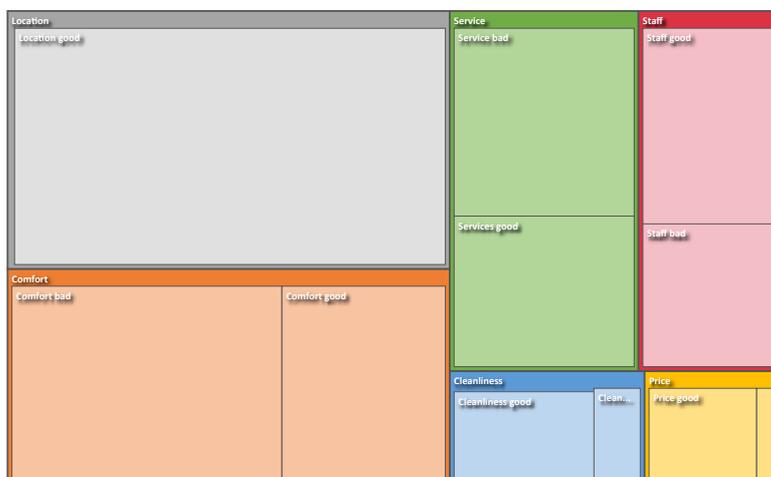
Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage	Similar Words
hotel	5	34	1,94%	hotel, hotels
habitación	10	32	1,82%	habitación
ubicación	9	30	1,71%	ubicación
marcos	6	26	1,48%	marco, marcos
desayuno	8	18	1,03%	desayuno
pero	4	17	0,97%	pero
plaza	5	16	0,91%	plaza
para	4	15	0,86%	para
algo	4	11	0,63%	algo
personal	8	11	0,63%	personal

Table 5.15 Counting references (absolute and relative) of German reviews.

Variable	Positive references	Positive references (relative values)	Negative references	Negative references (relative values)
Cleanliness	6	8,33%	2	6,67%
Comfort	14	19,44%	19	63,33%
Location	24	33,33%	0	0,00%
Price	4	5,56%	0	0,00%
Service	14	19,44%	6	20,00%
Staff	10	13,89%	3	10,00%
Total	72	100,00%	30	100,00%

Relative frequencies allow to make a comparison among variables and across countries. As it has been done for the other subgroups, results can be shown through a tree map, in order to visualise relationships among variables (Figure 5.12).

Figure 5.12 Tree map showing references and coverage of German reviews.



As concerns the most occurring terms (Table 5.16), keep clear in mind that a term can occur more than once within a sentence. “Zimmer” (room) has been described by Germans with detailed sentences that draw the characteristics and aspects of the room. They also have used mostly the term “hotel”, in order to describe it in a general manner. This subgroup mentioned 19 times the word breakfast (“Frühstück”), with a weighted percentage of 1,30%. The reference to the position appeared less than these other variables, differently from other subgroups. Weighted percentage represents the frequency of the word relative to the total counted words. As regards breakfast, some were satisfied about the Italian variety, but did not like coffee. On average, they said that “Frühstück war

5.3.4 Analysis of English reviews

English left 34 reviews representing 16,67% out of the total sample. Location contributed for about 54,55% of the satisfaction, followed by good comfort and good staff (12,73%). Guests appreciated that fact that the hotel was positioned next to St. Mark's Square, and "close to lots of restaurants and shops" (some adjectives were for instance, "fantastic", "excellent", "convenient", "great", "brilliant"). Good aspects of the hotel concerning comfort contributed to generate a positive perception of the experience, as well as a positive evaluation of the staff. On the other hand, discomfort was the main cause of dissatisfaction, as well as the perceived bad service and the human relation with the staff (28% of references and 20% respectively). Absolute and relative counting references are shown in Table 5.17.

Table 5.17 Counting references (absolute and relative) of English reviews.

Variable	Positive references	Positive references (relative values)	Negative references	Negative references (relative values)
Cleanliness	3	5,45%	0	0,00%
Comfort	7	12,73%	12	48,00%
Location	30	54,55%	0	0,00%
Price	2	3,64%	1	4,00%
Service	6	10,91%	7	28,00%
Staff	7	12,73%	5	20,00%
Total	55	100,00%	25	100,00%

Tree map offers a better visualisation of the relationships among variables that have been considered in order to evaluate the overall travel experience, with respect to the accommodation service. The larger quadrant is location, followed by bad evaluations of comfort (Figure 5.14). Location (4,66% weighted percentage) is followed by other terms, such as "room" (4,66% weighted percentage), "staff" (2,50% weighted percentage), "breakfast" (2,16% weighted percentage). Again, adjectives such as "great", "perfect", "fantastic" have been used in order to enhance the positive perception and satisfaction. Room has been appreciated mostly for the decor, size, and great value for money (Table 5.18).

Figure 5.14 Tree map showing references and coverage of English reviews.

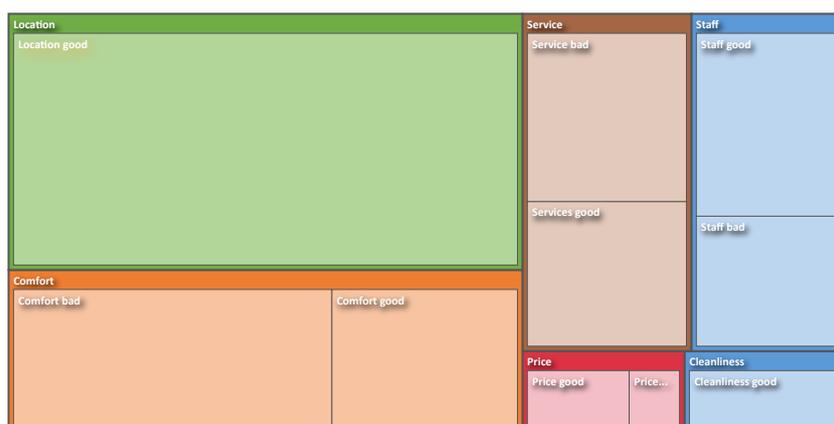


Table 5.18 Word frequency table of the first 10-recurring terms among English reviews.

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage	Similar Words
location	8	28	4,66%	location
room	4	28	4,66%	room, rooms
staff	5	15	2,50%	staff
breakfast	9	13	2,16%	breakfast
marks	5	13	2,16%	mark, marks
walk	4	13	2,16%	walk, walked, walking
great	5	12	2,00%	great
square	6	12	2,00%	square
hotel	5	10	1,66%	hotel
friendly	8	9	1,50%	friendly

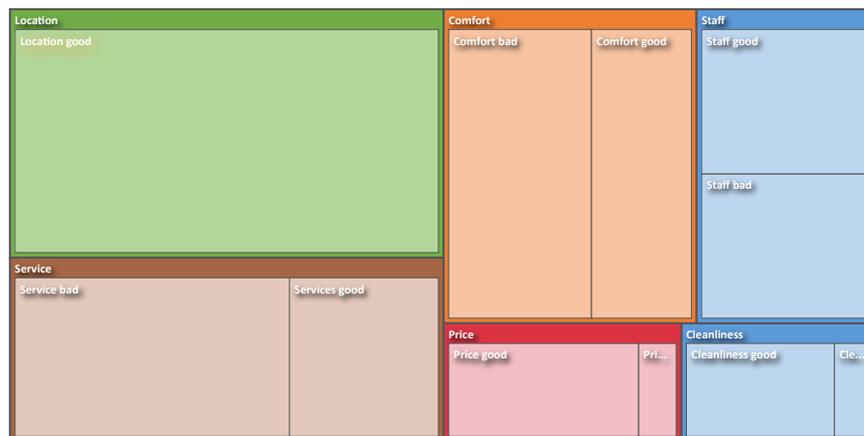
As concerns the variable “staff”, English tourists have judged welcoming people as friendly and helpful, and this has contributed positively to satisfaction and to the experience. However, some people (five reference out of total) complained about that. For instance they argued: “The staff walked into the room when my partner and I were changing for the evening out”; other comments are about the unwelcoming, grumpy, and uninterested behaviour of the staff that caused dissatisfaction of guests. The summary of most occurring words is given by a word cloud (Figure 5.15).

Most people also criticised the fact that WiFi signal was weak inside their room (3 mentions).

Table 5.19 Counting references (absolute and relative) of Australian reviews.

Variable	Positive references	Positive references (relative values)	Negative references	Negative references (relative values)
Cleanliness	4	7,84%	1	3,45%
Comfort	7	13,73%	10	34,48%
Location	23	45,10%	0	0,00%
Price	5	9,80%	1	3,45%
Service	6	11,76%	11	37,93%
Staff	6	11,76%	6	20,69%
Total	51	100,00%	29	100,00%

Figure 5.16 Counting references (absolute and relative) of Australian reviews.

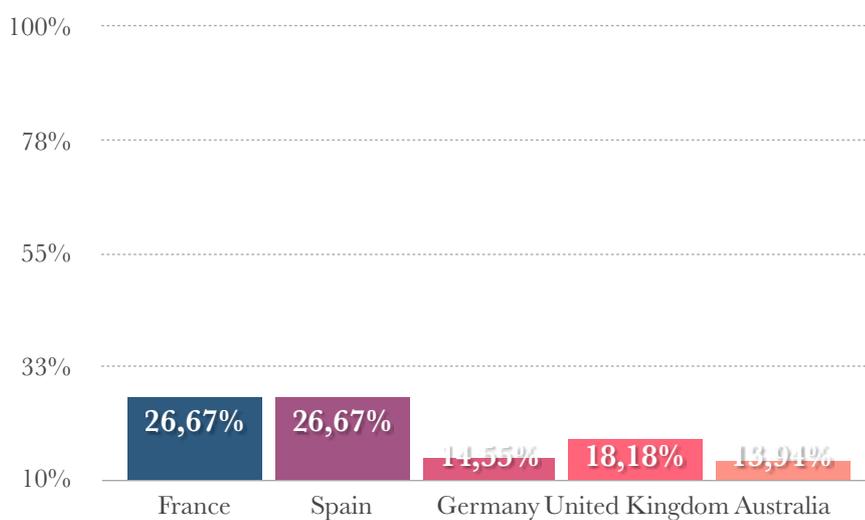


The researcher has used NVivo to query the word frequency table in order to show the first 10-recurring terms (Table 5.20) and has represented them with a word cloud tab. Word cloud helped to depict particular themes emerging throughout the reviews (Figure 5.17). Location has been indicated with a large font as well as “room”, which has been another recurring term. They have been followed by “great”, an adjective that highlights positive perception (if one looks at it as an isolated term, it cannot be grasped to which variable it has been attached). “Breakfast” is another term that emerges within the word cloud, in fact it weighted 1,48% out of the total words used to describe the experience.

5.4. Conclusions

When dealing with cross-cultural researches, comparisons among countries is necessary to depict similarities and dissimilarities. All the variables which have been collected in order to devise satisfaction or dissatisfaction levels are summarised and compared from a cross-cultural perspective. As concerns the location, no one spoke unfavourably about it, since it was well located, positively contributing to satisfaction of travel experience (Figure 5.18).

Figure 5.18 Positive evaluation of location: a cross-cultural comparison.



In attributing a positive evaluation to the variable of location, the highest number of references was given by French (26,67%) and Spanish (26,67%). Those that mentioned only 14,55% out of the total were Germans. French and Spanish tourists evaluated positively the experience thanks to the good location of hotels.

Considering the variable “cleanliness” (Figure 5.21), the total number of given references was equal to thirty: 73,33% expressed a positive evaluation, while 26,67% were unsatisfied about that. Cleanliness was positively evaluated by English, who did not mention any kind of negative aspect. The same perception was felt by Australian (80%) and French (80%). On the other hand, Spanish were the subgroup who dislike the degree of cleanliness of the hotels, followed by Germans (25%).

Table 5.21 The cross-cultural evaluation of cleanliness.

Country	Positive References	Positive References (relative frequencies)	Negative References	Negative References (relative frequencies)	Total	Number of references out of the total (%)
France	4	80,00%	1	20,00%	5	16,67%
Spain	5	55,56%	4	44,44%	9	30,00%
Germany	6	75,00%	2	25,00%	8	26,67%
United Kingdom	3	100,00%	0	0,00%	3	10,00%
Australia	4	80,00%	1	20,00%	5	16,67%
Total	22	73,33%	8	26,67%	30	100,00%

The variable “comfort” (Figure 5.22) has been mentioned 139 times. 38,13% have been satisfied about the comfort of the hotel: French accounted for 40,63% followed by Germans (10,07%), while English and Australians were those who did not mention too much comfortable elements. Then 61,87% disliked the hotel from the comfort point of view. The most dissatisfied were Spanish (68,42%), followed by English (63,16%) and French (59,38%). For instance, an aspect that has been criticised was the path to access to the room, but also the bathroom that did not reflect expectations. Absolute frequencies have been transformed into relative one as to allow a comparison: the total number chosen as denominator was given by total frequencies on a specific topic.

Table 5.22 The cross-cultural evaluation of comfort.

Country	Positive References	Positive References (relative frequencies)	Negative References	Negative References (relative frequencies)	Total	Number of references out of the total (%)
France	13	40,63%	19	59,38%	32	23,02%
Spain	12	8,63%	26	68,42%	38	27,34%
Germany	14	10,07%	19	57,58%	33	23,74%
United Kingdom	7	5,04%	12	63,16%	19	13,67%
Australia	7	5,04%	10	58,82%	17	12,23%
Total	53	38,13%	86	61,87%	139	100,00%

“Price” is another parameter chosen by Booking platform in order to reflect the value for money of the accommodation (Figure 5.23). The total number of accounted references was 23, and 82,61% people appreciated the price and thought it was fair. French mentioned it 26,09% and 83,33% really liked the value for money (the same can be said for Australian).

Table 5.23 The cross-cultural evaluation of price.

Country	Positive References	Positive References (relative frequencies)	Negative References	Negative References (relative frequencies)	Total	Number of references out of the total (%)
France	5	83,33%	1	16,67%	6	26,09%
Spain	3	75,00%	1	25,00%	4	17,39%
Germany	4	100,00%	0	0,00%	4	17,39%
United Kingdom	2	66,67%	1	33,33%	3	13,04%
Australia	5	83,33%	1	16,67%	6	26,09%
Total	19	82,61%	4	17,39%	23	100,00%

The variable “service” (Figure 5.24) has been mentioned 99 times. 29,29% references pertained to French tourists, and 68,97% and guests complained about the low level of service, particularly with reference to breakfast, as it was mentioned above. On the other side, 31,03% liked the degree of service. Among those who appreciated mostly the variable, it can be mentioned Germans (it is worth to consider that in Chapter IV, a research conducted by Ipsos, revealed that they are the market which knows better the Italian offering. This could be the cause of such appreciation with respect to other subgroups: their expectations are more in line with what is finally offered).

Table 5.24 The cross-cultural evaluation of service.

Country	Positive References	Positive References (relative frequencies)	Negative References	Negative References (relative frequencies)	Total	Number of reviews out of the total (%)
France	9	31,03%	20	68,97%	29	29,29%
Spain	9	45,00%	11	55,00%	20	20,20%
Germany	14	70,00%	6	30,00%	20	20,20%
United Kingdom	6	46,15%	7	53,85%	13	13,13%
Australia	6	35,29%	11	64,71%	17	17,17%
Total	44	44,44%	55	55,56%	99	100,00%

Finally, the variable “staff” (Figure 5.25) which referred to the type of human contact between the guest and the staff of the hotel. It has to be highlighted that this is a subjective variable, since the type of communication varies not only according to culture, but also from individual to individual. The majority of people (57,89%) provided a positive comment concerning the staff, while remaining 42,11% judged it negatively. Among these data, French tourists were satisfied (52,38%), and surprised by the type of contact with the staff. Then, 55,56% Spanish and 76,92% Germans were satisfied about that, as well as the same number of references has been attributed by French (47,62%), who have been criticised the behaviour of the staff.

Table 5.25 The cross-cultural evaluation of staff.

Country	Positive References	Positive References (relative frequencies)	Negative References	Negative References (relative frequencies)	Total	Number of reviews out of the total (%)
France	11	52,38%	10	47,62%	21	27,63%
Spain	10	55,56%	8	44,44%	18	23,68%
Germany	10	76,92%	3	23,08%	13	17,11%
United Kingdom	7	58,33%	5	41,67%	12	15,79%
Australia	6	50,00%	6	50,00%	12	15,79%
Total	44	57,89%	32	42,11%	76	100,00%

The analysis has advanced the hypothesis that a good location is considered a plus by the majority of foreign travellers. However, the sample that has been taken into consideration presented a list of hotels which were all well located near to attracting touristic spots, such as St. Mark's Square. It might be interesting to compare these results with another sample of hotels' reviews located in another district. Tourists tend also to highlight discomfort elements in varying degrees, but the tendency is observable in many countries. Generally, the features of the room and its objects are appreciated and taken into account when giving a feedback. As explained by Mazzotti (2018), when people travel and have rest out of their home, they want to be treated as guests and look for some plus services.

Among these references, there were also comments that did not add any further or valuable information to the researcher's interpretation. Sometimes these variables include deep aspects that emerge with a certain frequency, and which should be evaluated separately. An example is given by the evaluation of breakfast, that it is considered an important element of accommodation (Mazzotti, 2018). The same can be said for the room, which is the most important factor that is evaluated by customers, and this is usually classified under the variable "comfort", together with other parameters. In this sense, classifying elements of satisfaction and dissatisfaction using the taxonomy provided by Booking.com™, brings to ambiguity and makes difficult to interpret results.

To sum up, content analysis is a valuable tool that helps entrepreneurs to assess customer satisfaction, even though it presents some weaknesses. As a matter of fact, the knowledge of a language implies to grasp not only the semantic meaning of words, but also the pragmatic one. The context is relevant for the meaning of words, and it is the frame that helps to understand the meaning that the speaker wants to deliver to the listener. Otherwise, ambiguity could emerge, that is when a sentence admits more than one interpretation. Some reviews might be ambiguous and not totally intelligible.

To better assess patterns of behaviour from a cross-cultural perspective, further improvements should aim at increasing the sample size, and comparing different methodologies that allow to collect opinions, thus transforming the sample into a probability sample, which does not exclude a significant and representative part of the population. If the sample size is reduced, it might be difficult to distinguish between cultural and personal traits. As it is generally thought, the line between culture and subjectivity is very subtle, even though some behavioural patterns are more evident within certain groups rather than others. This involves that tastes vary even among people coming from a the same country,

Finally, what managers can effectively do to reduce pragmatic complexity is to be aware of content analysis' limits, read and contextualise reviews, as to be aware of differences, as well as to engage people that are specialised in reading anthropological differences and in understanding languages. They should also have clear in mind what basic standards are across countries, and which kind of parameters foreign people adopt in order to judge an experience. Apart from that, managers should also remind that there are a huge number of uncontrollable variables caused by external context that changes continually.

Conclusions

Since the last decade, electronic Word-of-Mouth has increased its importance becoming a powerful source to spread information among customers. The shift from traditional Word-of-Mouth, transmitted mainly from peer to peer, toward a new advanced version, has introduced the possibility to put in contact customers from all over the world. Generally, they are willing to initiate product-based conversations. Scholars argue that customers are tired of being bombarded by mass media and aggressive advertising, a phenomena that literature has indicated as “the crisis of mass marketing”. Today, 90% of people is affected by viral marketing in making purchasing decisions, and two-thirds of advertising are driven choosing pull-style communication strategies (Wee, Luan and Lwin, 1995; Belch and Belch, 2017; Court et al., 2009).

Word-of-Mouth is based on a set of social media constructs - ratings, recommendations, and reviews - which represent the intention of customers of not being anymore passive, and to participate actively in the co-creation of value with firms. In this sense, people use reviews as a tool to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction about customer experience they have lived. To recall Martineau (1950), the speaker is willing to share the experience with others in order to reduce cognitive dissonance, as well as to relieve, tell, and motivate others to make the same satisfactory decision. On the other hand, the customer might also talk negatively about the company showing emotions such as anger or frustration, and expressing them as a form of venting. If one thinks about the period in which this article was published, social media did not already existed. However, it is an evergreen idea which can be applied to the new social media: intentions, motivations, and needs are the same. However, changes regard the ways in which information flows.

Word-of-Mouth also concurs to share trust. Trust is a typical consequence of customer satisfaction, that produces a sense of security and confidence, and reduces the degree of uncertainty that is felt by users when making choices - following the limited rationality paradigm devised by Herbert Simon. Hence, its significance increases once the level of risk grows. Tourism & Travel service makes the concept of risk more tangible, since literature considers it as an “amalgam” and an intertwining relation between physical and human artefacts (Vanhove, 2005; Gilbert, 1990; Cooper and Hall, 2008; Middleton and Clark, 2001). Travel experience’s enjoyment relies on the collaborative relationship between customers and providers, and it is based on a very complex set of infrastructure and tangible/intangible resources related with the destination to which the user is travelling.

Cognitive dissonance and risk are mitigated by travellers thanks to the existence of reviews, that are an authentic evidence of what users are going to live - since everything remain unknown until the moment in which they consume the travel product. Reviews are examined especially in the information search step (Yoo and Gretzel, 2012; Cai et al., 2004; Cox et al., 2009) and are acquired from different sources: social network sites, blogs, as well as OTA platforms. The latter have completely revolutionised the way in which people collect, analyse, evaluate the information in order to make decisions. Typically, reviews are User Generated Contents that are created by people that are interested in leaving an opinion with a view to homophily.

Some managers and family-owned hotels are unaware about the importance of managing reviews in the current competitive context. However, they should recognise two important elements. First, the importance of knowing exactly the target with whom they build relationships. Socio-demographic, psychographic, and cultural traits for instance. This requires to keep in mind that tourism is a luxury good, and according to the so-called “convergence-divergence ratio”, people diversify behaviours and buy luxury goods once the primary needs are fulfilled. This lets cultural traits, including identity and values emerge (De Mooij, 2016). Moreover, it opens new perspectives, managers also will have to consider that the Traveller 2.0 is more and more demanding, pro-active, and responsible.

Second, the issue of globalisation - including low air fares, liberalisation, and so on and so forth - has induced people to travel extensively, requiring managers to deal with foreign customers with different habits, values, and languages. Habits and values impact on the final evaluation of the service, and contribute positively or negatively to customer satisfaction. As it was previously explained, before leaving and after having gathered information people form expectations that also depend on identity, values, and lifestyle. On the other hand, OTA platforms, such as Booking.com™, allow to leave reviews in different languages, opening a problem of semantic and pragmatic interpretation.

The main goal of the dissertation was to conduct an exploratory research in order to detect the factors of the Italian offering that form satisfaction from a cross-cultural perspective. The Italian case study has been selected since Tourism represent a great part of GDP, and since Italian destination image varies across countries: tourists usually pinpoint different strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Given the premises and the importance of WOM, reviews have been chosen as research object in order to assess whether cross-cultural differences existed. The sample that should be a valid representation of the overall population was an initial selection of 350 reviews that have been formerly analysed in order to grasp its statistical distribution.

Descriptive statistics allowed to confirm the existence of some important markets of Italian offering as it was previously assessed in Chapter IV. Typically they are from European continent represents the major market segment of Italian offering (57,66% of reviews were left by countries within the European region) The content analysis has focused just on the semantic aspects of sentences, avoid a deeper pragmatic and anthropological interpretation that would be instead meaningful in order to grasp how to improve the service in order to increase positive WOM, and thus the total number of overnights. The researcher has investigated how some variables impacted on customer satisfaction from a cross-cultural perspective, concentrating on those groups within the sample that were enough copious in order to constitute a statistical evidence. Chosen variables were a selection from those that are usually provided by the OTA platform Booking.com™, that usually invites customers to leave an opinion about the structure that might help other visitors in making decisions.

For instance, location, or the good or bad position of the hotel in terms of closeness to the city centre as well as to public transportation. Secondly, comfort that is referred to the structure in general but also to the room in which guests have rest. Then, cleanliness a variable that is really close to comfort, but in this sense it is referred to the degree to which the hotel is clean or dirty, and to both private and public areas. Service includes for instance breakfast (that has been mostly cited within the sample of reviews by travellers), but also laundry service. Generally, travellers speak about those services for which they have paid and which are included in the room's price. Staff is another variable that tells more about the human contact with hoteliers, concierge, and staff in general. Finally, price is intended as the evaluation concerning the value for money and the quality/price ratio.

The researcher noticed that the majority of people appreciated the location. In this sense, the closeness of the selected hotels to the main square of the city has been seen as a strength that have contributed positively to a pleased travel experience. Location, as it has been observed by scholars (Mazzotti, 2018) is a variable that usually is strictly related to motivations and purpose of the vacation. In the case of a travel to Venice moved by cultural purposes, the proximity to hot spots is a good predictor of satisfaction since it allows travellers to save time and to visit as much places as possible.

Visualisation through tree maps allowed to make a comparison about the different perception of such variables across countries. Good perception of location has always occupied a prominent position. Price was the less mentioned location as well as cleanliness. Slight differences can be observed in the evaluation of comfort, service, and staff. French, Spanish, Germans, English and Australians have been dissatisfied about the comfort of the

hotel. Spanish were those who have mostly complained about the issue. On the other hand, French criticised more the services offered by the hotel, particularly breakfast. Germans' distribution showed that people were generally more inclusive in talking about the experience, since reviews touched several aspects of the experience as to be as much objective as possible.

Among the other aspects that regard the analysis, it is valuable mentioning the degree of noise characterising data. First of all, a self-selection bias caused by the fact that people who present the attitude of being helpful are used to write reviews. By collecting reviews, researchers automatically exclude a part of population that is not used to do so for cultural reasons, for instance because they have different attitudes toward expressing feedbacks and complaints, diverse communication styles (some might prefer to express opinions orally rather than social media), as well as different tools and social media sites to socialise with others. They can also be caused by other contingent causes (penetration of Internet in specific areas around the globe and other socio-demographic factors, political regulation that might oblige people to use some social networks rather than others).

The problem of cultural differences has been pinpointed by Erin Meyer (2014). The author has put at the centre a constant distinction between low-context and high context cultures, that have different types of behaviours. One of her most relevant chapters calls: "The Many Faces of Polite - Evaluating Performance and Providing Negative Feedback". This opens a debate between the difference between pragmatic and semantic content of sentences, and the difficulty of assessing the real meaning of words especially when dealing with different cultures. Qualitative softwares allow to categorise according to predefined words that could be attached to specific topics, and to count the frequency with which these words are repeated.

However, language implies several facets that can be grasped if the reader or listener considers the context in which words are put. This is not enough: sometimes, it is necessary to consider anthropological aspects to interpret what foreign people intend by using specific terms or slangs. Not all the countries are frank and direct in giving feedbacks: everyone selects the right words as well as a series of "upgraders" or "downgraders" to gauge meaning and to provide a different message. Some cultures adopt upgraders such as *absolutely, totally, or strongly*; others soften sentences by using expressions such as *kind of, sort of, a little, a bit, maybe*. For instance: "In Germany, we typically use strong words when complaining or criticising in order to make sure that the message registers clearly and honestly" (Meyer, 2014, p. 68), and this was an idea that emerged when examining reviews: sentences were complete, detailed.

Stemmed or stopped words are usually excluded and ignored in content analysis: it is one of the main rules adopted by semantic analysis softwares in order to grasp relevant meaning. When examining reviews, some managers ignore the importance of context and do not take into accounts such expressions. Pragmatic analysis and anthropological studies might be instead precious in order to understand the degree to which a customer enjoys the experience and how service can be improved. Communication styles are a complex matter that requires sometimes managers to read below the lines and to grasp concepts that are not directly expressed. In other words, it means being aware and open to diversity, keeping attention to the most powerful human side that makes the difference in intangible services such as the Tourism & Travel sector.

It means also to exploit the great potential of a gold mine, such as reviews, and to take advantage from a huge and free amount of data that otherwise would remain unexploited. It means transform simple contents and words into meaningful data that guide decisions on investments, service improvements, and so on and so forth. Of course, this does not imply to homogenate the service, otherwise the Italian offering would loose its sense. It only aims at being more sensitive, educated and open to cross-cultural differences, improving the destination reputation as well. As Meyer would say: “Every individual is different. And, yes, when you work with people from other cultures, you shouldn’t make assumptions about individual traits on where a person comes from. But this doesn’t mean learning about cultural contexts is unnecessary”.

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