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| Subjects: (tick box) | Project | Synopsis | Portfolio | Thesis X | Written Assignment |
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|---|--|------------------|
| Study programme: | Master in Tourism | |
| Semester: | 10th | |
| Exam Title: | Master Thesis Exam | |
| Name and date of birth/ Names and dates of birth of group members: | Name(s) | Date(s) of birth |
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| | | |
| Hand in date: | 31.05.2012 | |
| Project title /Synopsis Title/Thesis Title | The roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes. | |
| According to the study regulations, the maximum number of keystrokes of the paper is: | 168 000 | |
| Number of keystrokes (one standard page = 2400 keystrokes, including spaces) (table of contents, bibliography and appendix do not count)* | 114 284 | |
| Supervisor (project/synopsis/thesis): | Carina Ren | |

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I would like to thank Carina Ren for supervising my work and support through the process of writing my Master Thesis; my brother for his feedback and great help with finishing the project; the interviewees who made it possible to collect data; my parents and friends for support and understanding.

Thank you.

Magdalena Jackowska

Executive summary

In the project I answer the research question *What are the roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes?*

In my research I construct the view on the roles of online travel communities. I choose ontological standpoint, which affects my further choices of methods I use in the project. I decide to explore individual opinions of the respondents, which help me to construct the view on online travel communities and their roles in the holiday decision-making processes. I approach the research inductively, starting from gathering data and then choosing relevant theories. I find my research reliable and credible because it is based on personal opinions of the online travel communities' users and my own participation in the experience of using the communities.

The theoretical background of the project focuses on explaining the phenomenon of online travel communities as one of the social media channels in order to present the phenomenon to the reader. Moreover, I choose to describe the theory of consumer behavior and the decision-making process. I find these theories relevant for my research because they help me to understand sociological factors influencing one's behavior and consequently one's decisions. Knowing that the literature approaches online travel communities and both theories from the business perspective, I take sociological standpoint and I try to understand the roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes from an individual perspective.

I use the data collected from the semi-structured interviews to learn how the communities are perceived by their users as well as I compare their point of view with the perception of the communities - that gives me knowledge about the general roles online travel communities have. I also analyze specific roles of online travel communities in relation to the holiday decision-making processes. I am able to distinguish three roles pointed out by the respondents of the interviews, which assist in the holiday decision-making process: assisting in the information search, to find information, and to evaluate information. The analysis shows me that the roles of virtual travel communities are applied only to pre-decision step of the decision-making process. Moreover, I find out that the issue of trustworthiness on online travel communities is strongly incorporated into the role of evaluating information and in the context of this research it disagrees with the theoretical assumption that trust is built up on social relationships.

In the end of the project I suggest future discussion about the roles of online travel communities in the post-purchase step of the holiday decision-making process.

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Introduction

Problem area

Phenomenon of social media has been perceived as a new era of social computing, challenging people and businesses in their everyday life. Social media are not about technology but as a communication and social channel, they are bringing people together and affect their actions in personal ways (Shih, 2009). That happens through online social interaction between people. It has been claimed that actions taken on social media, such as networking, creating user-generated content, sharing etc., have strong impact on decisions people take. This phenomenon has strong implications in tourism and it “(...) has begun to play a key role in the promotion of business travel by corporate travel agencies to support their travel management programmes to understand clients travel patterns and to encourage clients to network with each other” (Page, 2011). There are various perspectives on how social media are used in tourism industry and its main implications concern business perspective. Social media are being used as a marketing tool; therefore publications focus on understanding it from a business point of view and not from sociological perspective. However, knowing that peoples’ decisions are being influenced by others’ recommendations and opinions, it seems to be especially interesting to relate social media to people and understand the ways they use them when planning holidays.

In order to connect people, social media offer different communication channels. One of them is online community – in tourism called *online travel community* or *virtual tourist community*. Such communities have various definitions. They are in great use in tourism and they constitute the highest online tourism domain - “informational entities that relate to travel” (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010,p.180) - represented by Google when searching for information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Being the most researched channel of social media, online travel communities seem to be strongly influential on taking holidays decisions because they allow potential tourists to exchange individual opinions about holiday’s products. Such an information source can be preferred over official business’ information, e.g. official product’s/service’s website, which are profit driven.

Having in mind online travel communities’ position in the Internet information search and the fact that online interaction strongly influences one’s decision-making process, I would like to focus on the following research question:

What are the roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes?

Elaboration on the research question

The research question aims to understand what roles online travel communities play in the holiday decision-making processes. According to Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 'role' means "the position or purpose that someone or something has in a situation, organization, society or relationship" (Cambridge Dictionaries Online). Therefore, in this paper I decide to look at various functions online travel communities have when taking a holiday decisions. It is interesting to see how such communities are understood and used by people who plan their holidays. In discussing different ways of understanding online travel communities I find it relevant to use a social science approach, rather than a business point of view.

Structure of the project

The project consists of five big chapters, including the Introduction chapter, where each of them has different focus.

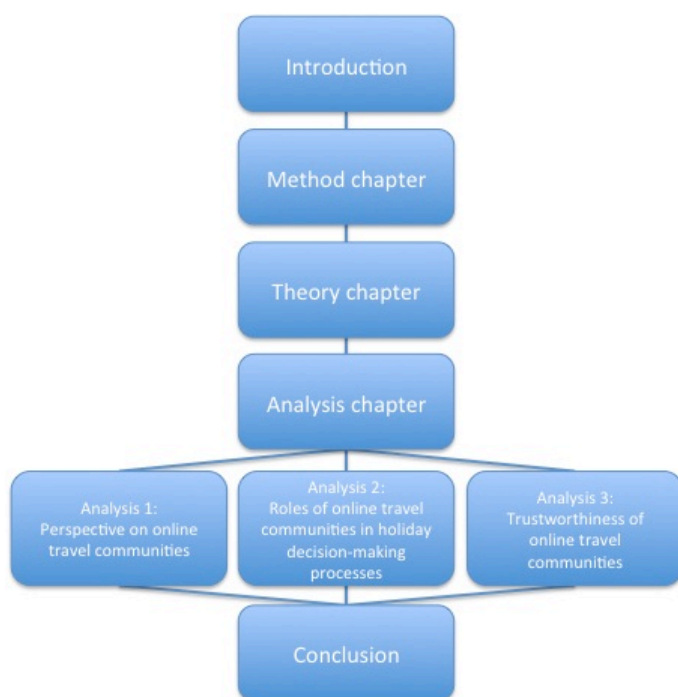


Figure 1 Structure of the thesis

Method chapter explains research philosophy I choose for my project and the methods, which with the choice of my ontological and epistemological position are used in the research.

In the Theory chapter I explain the phenomenon of social media and online travel communities in literature. Afterwards I show how the online travel communities perceive themselves. Furthermore, I introduce the consumer behavior theory – at first I reflect how it is approached in literature and then I give its explanation

with a focus on factors, which are relevant for my research. Last but not least, I describe a decision-making process in tourism.

Analysis chapter is split into three analysis parts, where I analyze and emphasize three different findings related to the roles of online travel communities.

- Analysis one – focuses on understanding online travel communities from two perspectives:

the communities and the users. It is shortly summarized in the end of it.

- Analysis two – here I distinguish between the three main roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes.
- Analysis three – focuses on an issue of trust in relation to online travel communities. Trust will be discussed in terms of interpersonal relationships created on the communities, and risk involved in trusting opinions on the communities. I will also share my own experience related to trust, which I gained on one of the online travel communities - TripAdvisor.

In the Conclusion I wrap up what I have done in the project as well as I summarize the findings of my research.

Method chapter

In this chapter I will explain my research standpoint and the methods I use in the research. I start by explaining my philosophical standpoint, which affects the methods I choose in the project creation. Consequently, I detail the research approach and strategy, which helped me structure the project. Afterwards, I describe the process of formulating the research question, and methods related to data collection and sampling. In the last sections I explain why I believe that my research is credible, as well as I outline the type of analysis used in this thesis.

Research philosophy

The following section details the research philosophy that guides me throughout the thesis.

Ontology is concerned with nature of reality and it strives to investigate '*what can we know about reality?*' (Rakić, 2010). To understand the nature of online travel communities, one can take either objective or subjective standpoint. Objectivism "implies that social phenomenon confront us as external facts that are beyond our reach or influence" (Bryman, 2008, p.18). Taking the objective standpoint would require to analyze the phenomenon of online travel communities from external position, e.g. when a person does not have an influence on roles pointed out by the communities. There would be no need to understand a personal perspective on how people use such communities but the focus of the project would have been different. I decided to approach this project from a subjective standpoint known as *constructionism*. This approach implies that "social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman, 2008, p.19) thus I focused on social construction of reality (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The knowledge about online travel communities is generated from meanings of individuals towards a

phenomenon - their own interpretations of ways of using online travel communities, which construct certain view about it. Individuals can express their perception of online travel communities and state their personal opinion about it. An interpretive view on a phenomenon, in comparison to objectivist description, allows one to understand how an individual sees reality. It allows comparing different points of view and does not generalize the way a phenomenon is seen – as an objective position would seek to do. It does not show a reality from external point of view (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009) but it accepts in-depth study of social perception of online travel communities. Taking constructionist position helps to generate knowledge about different roles of such communities from personal opinions. Different understandings and perspectives on the communities show how the field of such communities is shaped.

The knowledge about online travel communities leads to epistemological philosophy, which explains what is acceptable knowledge (Bryman, 2008). In other words it aims to explain what information is needed to develop the knowledge of the project. In the research I take an interpretivist standpoint. This philosophy argues that world is complex and it cannot be defined by laws and generalizations, as positivists would assume. Interpretivism sees people as social actors who have different roles in the world and thus different perceptions towards things in life (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Hence, it is relevant to understand differences between the social actors and their individual perception of the world. Such an approach comes from phenomenology, which “refers to the way in which we as humans make sense of the world around us” (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, p.116). Bryman (2008) refers to Bogdan and Taylor’s (1975) who state that human behavior is “a product of how people interpret the world” (Bogdan & Taylor, 2008). Hence, social reality matters for human beings and it influences one’s behavior and meanings of actions (Bryman, 2008).

Ontology and epistemology cannot be separated from each other because ontological assumptions decide on ways of carrying on the research (Bryman, 2008). Constructionism allows me to understand nature of online travel communities through personal opinions about the phenomenon on online travel communities. In the beginning of the research I had to decide on how to carry the research in order to get these opinions. Thus, I make a decision on taking interpretive stance and see *how do I know about field of online travel communities in relation to the holiday decision-making processes?* That standpoint influences my choices of how to collect data to gain relevant knowledge about the phenomenon of the communities and decision-making processes. Therefore, it has an impact on methods, literature and theories used in the project. My personal interest in phenomenon of online travel communities was too broad to decide about what problem I would like to focus on

and what theory I should use. Therefore, I considered the inductive approach to be appropriate for my project because it allows the literature and data to lead towards a research question. To get relevant knowledge about the field of online travel communities in relation to decision-making processes I conduct an online pilot survey, an online survey and the interviews with people who use such communities. The interviews are done among my friends and colleagues. I make my own interpretation of the interviewers' perception on the online travel community phenomenon (Bryman, 2008).

Inductive approach

Inductive approach shows the specific relationship between research and theory and it is usually associated with qualitative research. In comparison with deductive approach, inductive approach indicates that first observations and findings are made and then a theory is stated, where deductive view starts from presenting a theory and results in certain findings. Deductive approach can be very linear because there are certain steps, which structure the project. Typical process accompanying this approach follows: theory, hypothesis, data collection, findings, confirmation or rejection of hypotheses and revision of theory. In case of the inductive approach, the process is more complicated. It contains the following steps: general research question, selection of relevant subjects, data collection and data analysis, theoretical framework, specification of the research question, if needed further data collection and finally findings of the research. Inductive approach can entail some elements of deduction, e.g. when theory is generated and further data is collected (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

This project is a result of inductive approach and the associated steps to this approach are further described in the chapter. This approach is relevant for the project because at first I gather quantitative and qualitative data and afterwards I find the consumer behavior theory, which I consider to be relevant for my project. The theory does not structure my research as the deductive approach would but it is implemented into my interpretation of the data and my perception of how reality is constructed – how people use online travel communities in relation to the holiday decision-making processes.

In the beginning of the research process I considered making the best out of my interest in online travel communities and to explore the field of online travel communities, hoping to find an interesting focus point. I believe that taking such an approach towards the field one wants to explore allows having more freedom in terms of gathering knowledge because it is not based on any specific theory. Hence, it is possible to discover the field – in the case of my research it is online

travel communities - in various directions and find a desired point of interest. Such a freedom on the field raises many brainstorm and at some point even confusions what is actually the most interesting to focus on. That, in effect, raises concerns about how to decide on a research question, what can be the most interesting and valuable to focus on, what would keep up the interest of work on the issue for a few months and what a reader could gain out of the project.

Because inductive approach allows following gathered data and its findings, the research question can be formulated generally in order to frame a focus area and then to be adjusted to the final version in the end of the analysis process. I did formulate my research question being aware that it can be changed when I reach the final results of the research. However, I believe that the research question is answered through the project and there is no necessity for an adjustment. An uncertainty about the final research question, however, did give me a feeling of insecurity, but also curiosity, what the result of the project will be. Thus, it seems to me that not having an organized work, as deductive approach would imply, can be challenging.

Despite all the difficulties inductive approach can bring, the work becomes more structured once it is decided on how the data will be analyzed and what theory will be applied. These decisions affect my further choices of what research approach, strategy and type of analysis my project will carry on.

Research approach

Research conducted in this project takes exploratory approach with descriptive elements. Exploratory studies change nature of phenomenon being studied in a specific way (Veal, 2006) because they explore the topic and give personal interpretation of that topic. Initially, exploratory study challenges a writer to explore variety of directions. As the research progresses, the study becomes narrower (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). It starts from a search of literature (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009), which allows one to get to know the field from different angles and to find possible subjects of interest. Therefore, it is of great importance to take that advantage and be flexible to explore literature broadly. In the project, I did find texts related to online travel communities and decision-making processes but I also expand my literature view on information about user-generated content, virtual community and customer loyalty, influence of personality on content of such communities, intentions of using travel communities and other. Variety of readings brings good understanding of how phenomenon of online travel communities can be approached but also they bring valid knowledge to the project.

Being explorative in a research also requires willingness to follow data (Saunders, Lewis, &

Thornhill, 2009). As in case of this project, having a broad topic of online travel communities at first allowed to follow different issues and to touch upon interesting problems where in the end only one was chosen. To gather data, online surveys and semi-structure interviews are prepared and the questions in each of them aim to explore the phenomenon on different levels.

Firstly, online pilot survey is posted on social media, to get an idea whether online travel communities are in use and if so, how they are used. This survey aims to explore possible points of focus. The second online survey – the main survey - focuses on getting more detailed understanding of the phenomenon and helps to decide on further questions for the semi-structured interviews. The interviews are explorative because they provoke the interviewees to give their individual answers to the questions. Being explorative gives great source of information, however, such flexibility to various research opportunities can also get complicated. As I experience when working on the project, too many options of topic exploration can be misleading and cause confusion, which, when having limited time of writing a project, can be stressful and turn to complicate the work. Due to broad choices of how to approach the phenomenon of online travel communities, I did encounter problems when preparing questions for the semi-structured interviews. I did realize that the decision in which direction the questions should steer the respondent has to be made. Still it was important to keep the opportunities open and not to reject unwanted answers – they could still make a valid point in the analysis of the project or even become crucial.

Research strategy

The project is based on mixed research strategy and it combines both quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research is used for any data collection technique (e.g. survey) or data analysis procedure (e.g. statistics) that would generate or use numerical data. Qualitative research, however, uses data collection technique (e.g. interview) or data analysis procedure (e.g. categorizing data) that would generate data expressed by words (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

Online survey is a quantitative method to gather data and it is used in the project.

As a qualitative method I use semi-structured interview. The reason for using these two methods is for quantitative finding to provide a context for understanding qualitative findings (Bryman, 2008). In other words, online survey is done in order to get to as many respondents as possible, not because it is important to see gender, age and other statistics, but to be able to see a pattern in using online travel communities. This pattern shows that such communities are in use and it points out some interesting directions to further investigation, for example how the respondents understand the phenomenon, how they use such communities etc. Therefore, the quantity of the survey responses results in qualitative information. Afterwards, qualitative semi-structured interview is conducted

to generate more qualitative data relevant for the analysis of the research question.

General research question

The idea for the project came from personal interest in online communities. The very first idea was to understand whether Internet users use online travel communities and if so, in what ways they do that. I narrowed down the idea and in order to find some points of focus, and to state a general research question, I decided to create an online pilot survey. The online pilot survey was conducted to answer few basic questions (Appendix: Online pilot survey) and it was sent to different age segments. At first I did consider age to be an important factor because the initial idea was to focus on teenagers and their ways of using online travel communities. Therefore, the biggest sample of respondents is gathered from teenagers. However, this data does not seem to be reliable enough to take it into consideration in the project. Working with an online community site for young teenage girls and using my personal experience I notice that young teenagers might have different understanding of questions they are asked. It seems that their understanding of online travel communities is probably associated with any travel website. Hence, even though the sample of respondents is large, I decided not to use it. The sample among adults is smaller, however I consider it to be reliable. It is because most of adults can distinguish between such communities and other websites. Thus, I conduct the further research among grown ups.

The chosen respondents, when being asked *'why do you use online travel communities'* clearly point out towards two answers in the survey:

- to get information about tourist products
- to get inspiration for holiday destination

In the online survey – the main survey - it is not specified what information or inspiration one can search for because it is not considered to be important in the research. I do not want to focus on specifics but to get a confirmation that people use online travel communities for such a purpose. Such a result did bring up a few interesting questions to investigate. It did seem to be interesting to look closer into decision-making process people make and usage of online travel communities. Therefore, I formulated the following general research question:

What are the roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes?

Selection of relevant sites and subjects

I conduct the research on social media sites and other Internet communication channels. The pilot survey is sent on online community site for teenage girls – called goSupermodel - in order to generate data from younger target audience. To reach adults' responds, the pilot survey is sent on

social media sites as Facebook, LinkedIn and various online travel communities, e.g. Lonely Planet, Travellerspoint, VirtualTourist.com, TravelBuddy. An online communicator, such as Skype is also used where I post a link to the survey on my Skype status.

Getting respondents from online travel communities I consider not being successful because the link to the survey is seen to be a spam. I meet with aggressive reaction from the communities' users and I notice that a moderator removes the link because of that behavior. Some of the communities do not allow posting any surveys due to the fact that it is seen as spam.

The main survey is launched on the social networking site called Facebook to reach general audience but it is also placed in a Facebook group of former tourism students. Moreover, I use social site like LinkedIn and communicator Skype.

I consider Facebook to be the right place to post the survey because it reaches friends among which there are some who are willing to answer it. I notice that some of them share the link on their Facebook wall what is an additional help to expand the reach of respondents. Usually the friends who did take the survey made a post under the link with a comment that they took part in it. I found it helpful when thinking about respondents for the interview because it gave me information about who might be willing to participate in the further data collection.

Staying in a circle of friends can be seen as a disadvantage because it limits e.g. the age group. However, one should keep in mind that this research is made from interpretivist perspective and it aims to gain in-depth knowledge about the subject and not a framework of how the subject is generally perceived, as positivists would look at it. Therefore, age group is not an important criterion in this research.

Pasting the survey link on Skype's status is seen as additional way to reach friends and family. It did not intend to reach big audience but it is the most visible source to engage the closest friends and family who could also become the respondents.

Collection of data

The data for the project is collected from the online survey and the semi-structured interviews. Before the online survey is launched, I prepare the online pilot survey.

Quantitative online survey method

Both the online pilot survey and the main survey are launched as a web survey (Internet survey) and when clicking on a link, the respondents are directed to a questionnaire. When designing both surveys I kept in mind that they should be short and ask only important questions needed for further analysis. There was a risk that in case of a long survey with irrelevant or too private questions a respondent would refuse to give answers. The survey can only be answered once per computer.

An advantage of that setting is that it prevents a respondent from having multiple opportunities to give answers to the surveys what could affect validity of the responds. However, such a limitation per computer allows only one respondent to answer the surveys and can limit number of participants, for example when there are several users per computer.

The links to both surveys are posted on social media as Facebook, LinkedIn and Skype; the pilot survey is additionally posted on an online community for young teenage girls – called goSupermodel and a few online travel community websites. When posting on social media sites, there is a chance to reach broad audience and get large sample of responds. Since the links are accessible to everyone who sees them, they can also be forwarded to other people who has had no access to them before. However, as I notice it is not common for the participants to share the survey with their friends and to encourage them to pass it further. It seems that when posting on the web, there is the biggest probability that the most responds will be collected shortly after publishing the survey, and the longer a link is online, the less answers are given. More likely the reason for that is that on social media people constantly make updates of their posts, so such a survey link gets lost among other posts very fast. In order to remind the audience about answering the survey, it is needed to either comment under it so there can be seen some activity around that post, or it should be reposted. Such a decision, however, can be perceived as spam and aggressive method of gaining survey's participants, hence it can discourage from participation. I reposted the main survey, though, and it resulted in obtaining more responses.

The pilot survey consists of four closed questions because it aims to create a general idea about whether online travel communities are in use and if so, who uses them. The main survey includes more detailed questions but still it is as short as possible. In that survey, besides closed questions there are also open questions, which give a chance to specify an answer. Open questions do not ask for a mandatory answer, as it is required in case of closed questions.

Both the pilot survey and the online survey can be found in the appendix under Online pilot survey and Online survey.

Interviews

Qualitative interview is used to gather primary data for the project. The interview is semi-structured, hence it aims to understand an everyday subjects from a subjective perspective. Semi-structured interview is used to gather one's personal opinion of a discussed phenomena and it seeks to understand the meaning of it (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In order to get the best data out of it, semi-structured interview has to be executed in a specific form. It is neither an open conversation nor a strict dialog; instead, it can be seen as a form in between. It is focused on a certain aspect but it leaves room for additional questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Thus, it allows being flexible

in a research in a sense that it keeps focus on the main points of interests but also lets to steer a conversation into different directions. Therefore, it makes possible to gather a lot of descriptive data, which is an advantage. However, the material does not always have to be relevant for the project and it can be too much of it what can complicate one's work. Hence, semi-structured interview might require a special way of coding and categorizing the material (Schreier, 2012) to distinguish what is important for the project and what is not.

To get the most descriptive answers from the interviewees, it is of great importance to carefully design the questions. The interviews I prepared start with "how" question to get a spontaneous description of how one defines online travel community. It seems to be a good introductory question because it introduced an interviewee to the topic by provoking to explain his/her own understanding of the phenomena. It is important for me to understand how an interviewee perceives the phenomenon of online travel communities and with further questions it also explains to what explanation of virtual communities one refers to when answering further questions. Kvale&Brinkmann (2009) claim, however, that it is good to start an interview with "what" question in order to get some theoretical perspectives on the subject. In this case, "how" question is more appropriate because it aims to understand one's perspective on the phenomenon what is the base for further answers. The authors also agree that the roles of "what," "why" and "how" questions differ from research question to research question (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and in case of this project "how" question is the right choice to introduce one to the topic.

"What" questions is used for descriptive matter. Asking "*what are the reasons*" or "*what motivates you*" provokes an interviewee to describe what makes one use online travel communities and usually automatically to elaborate on *why*. If an interviewee does not elaborate on it, then I ask some probing questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). They might be worded as broad questions but require certain focus on what to answer and to give more description. They are also used to clear out the answer, for example when asking "*what are your reasons for using online travel communities?*" I usually ask an additional question, provoking to change slightly a direction of an interviewee's focus, to clarify whether the interviewee is certain that there are no other reasons. Then he/she either can provide additional information, which points out towards new reasons, or he/she give a negative answer, which clears out doubts.

Direct questions generate "yes/no" answers and are asked in order to confirm one's respond. They are also used to get an idea what an interviewee will answer and then, if he/she does not elaborate on that himself/herself, I ask why yes/why no. This type of question is considered to be appropriate because it leaves some room for adjustment to an interviewee respond and, when it is needed, it

helps to steer a conversation into a desired direction.

I think that if I could repeat the interviews, I would try to ask more additional questions to get even deeper understanding of the interviewees' actions. When analyzing the interviews I asked myself a question *why* when interpreting the data. It made me aware that I am missing some more in-depth understanding of people's actions. Despite that I could still explain their meaning according to my own understanding. During the interviews I did not know how much of the in-depth knowledge I need and to what extent it could be relevant in my analysis. Hence, I see it as valuable learning.

The interviews I conduct are recorded and then transcribed. The interviews are short and take between 7-10 minutes. Therefore, each of the transcriptions did not take much time to transcribe and I do not feel that I encounter any difficulties when transcribing, e.g. due to bad sound quality of the recordings. I tried to make the transcriptions as close to the recorded interviews to keep it original and reliable. I did make some language adjustments, though, because some of the sentences were unclear after transcription. It is probably because the interviewees were focused on reflecting on their experiences, giving examples and trying to be clear about what they want to say and did not focus on correct language structure. This is also a real-life conversation where there can be some emotions involved, thoughts and wonderings when e.g. thinking back about examples from the past.

Sampling

56 respondents answered the online survey. The data gathered from the survey shows a pattern that online travel communities are used for searching holiday information and inspiration. It is easier to get online respondents than people who would like to help in conducting the interview. It is because the online survey was visible on the social media sites where whoever was interested in filling it out did it, thus I did not have to search for the respondents personally. It is different with the interview respondents because I had to find them and they had to have willingness to be interviewed.

I did look for people who travel for holiday purpose and whom I thought might use online travel communities. I could only interview people who actually use such communities. As Bryman (2008) says "the resort to convenience sampling is usually the product of such factors as the availability of certain individuals who are otherwise difficult to contact" (Bryman, 2008, p.458). The most convenient way of getting the interviewees is to ask friends and work colleagues who I know that have been traveling. I did not know whether they are users of the communities, though. Those, who admitted to use them, agreed to participate in the interview.

Traveling and using virtual communities are the only important criteria to consider in my research. It is not relevant for me to interview people in terms of gender, age or other criteria because I

conduct qualitative research, thus descriptive and reflective responds are in my interest. I managed to interview five persons what is rather a small sample. As I mentioned before and as Bryman (2008) argues, qualitative research is about generating in-depth analysis, hence, the issue whether a sample is representative or not can be in minor importance than it would have been when conducting a quantitative research.

Reliability and credibility of the research

Since it is of great importance for a qualitative research to encompass in-depth analysis, I consider this research to be reliable and credible. I ask five different people about their ways of using online travel communities and how that affects their holiday decision-making process. I get personal descriptions of their experiences and reflections upon virtual communities. I also personally participate in experience of using TripAdvisor and I share my thoughts about how reading user-generated content on the community makes impact on my behavior. Furthermore, I implement the consumer behavior theory into my analysis what shows the reader that the research has strong theoretical background. I believe that the in-depth information generated from the respondents and my participation, as well as theoretical arguments can be trusted.

The data generated from the semi-structured interviews allows me to make my personal interpretation of people's perceptions and construct a *context* of how online travel communities are used in the holiday decision-making processes. I can see a pattern in the interviewees responds and maybe if one would carry the research in the future and repeat it among larger sample, this pattern would be the same. It is hard to replicate the research, though, because "it is impossible to 'freeze' a social setting and the circumstances of an initial study to make it replicable (...)" (LeCompte & Goetz, 2009). My findings cannot be generalized and I do not want say that there is only few specific roles virtual communities play in the holiday decision-making processes. Therefore, I can say that my findings can be applied to the context of my research and maybe they can be relevant for a similar context of another research.

Analysis of data

The analysis of the project is based on qualitative content analysis. It is a method suitable with inductive approach, which helps to describe the meaning of qualitative material (Schreier, 2012). I gather qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. Such interview provides with large descriptive data, which has to be evaluated and categorized in terms of its reliability and validity for the project. Because my focus is to distinguish roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes, I carefully look at what functions of the communities the respondents point out. I highlight the functions, which I found similar in order to have a better overview on

those roles. Still, when writing the analysis I go beyond my highlighted categories and I find more of relevant knowledge in the transcripts. It is because during the process of analyzing the material I am getting new thoughts and my interpretation of the data is constantly developed. Thus, it is difficult to stick to the very first idea of what material ought to be used and how.

Qualitative content analysis allows to be flexible in a research in a sense that it lets one to gather a lot of data and then structure it according to the relevance, e.g. through highlighting information important to focus on. This way it also reduces data and focuses on the material, which is relevant and valid for the research. It is a suitable method for a material requiring interpretation (Schreier, 2012) and because I make an interpretation of the data I gathered, I found it important for my project. I work with personal reflections coming from different individuals, thus their thoughts about virtual communities cannot be standardized. They are personal and in-depth, hence, in my analysis I make my own interpretation of other people meanings. Through explanation of how I understand and perceive what the interviewees say, I create a real-life context where I say how virtual communities affect one's holiday choices.

Theory chapter

In this chapter I explain theoretical background of the project and how selected theories help me in answering my research question. I divide the chapter into four parts, where I first make a thorough

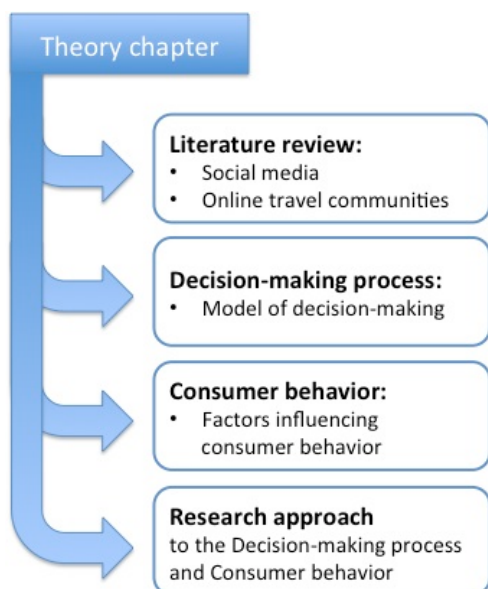


Figure 2 Structure of the Theory chapter

literature review of social media and online travel communities and later outline two main theories, decision-making process and consumer behavior, which I find relevant for understanding the role of online travel communities. The last part of the Theory chapter presents the prevailing research approach towards both theories and underlines the fact, that they could be approached from the social science angle, which I find relevant for this study.

First, in the Literature review section, I explain how the literature describes the phenomenon of social media. Afterwards, I explain what are online travel communities. I believe that it is important to get an overall understanding of

social media to be able to understand the concept of online travel communities. I think that it is

important to the reader to become familiar with those concepts in order to be able to distinguish online travel communities from other social media channels as well as to see how online travel communities are positioned on social media in relation to information search.

The second part of the chapter introduces the Decision-making process. I explain the relevance of the decision-making process for the project. I present the model showing the process and I describe it. I also state why I choose to focus only on a part of the process and not on all of its steps.

Later, in the consumer behavior theory part, I state its relevance for the research and describe factors influencing consumer behavior. I explain why I find it relevant to get familiar with these factors and I suggest that they are influencing the decision-making process regarding holiday decisions.

The last part of the chapter explains the research approach to the decision-making process and the theory of consumer behavior. At first I make a literature review where I show how different scholars view those theories. With the literature review I want to show that the literature focuses on consumer behavior and decision-making process theories from the business perspective, not from a social perspective as I do. By showing that, I can demonstrate that my research focuses on the approach, which is missing from the literature point of view and thus my research is a step to fill out this gap.

Literature review

In this part I explain the phenomenon of social media and online travel communities.

Social media in literature

Social media is a broad concept, which reshaped the possibilities of gathering information before going to travel (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Thanks to social media, everyone can be a publisher and a boundary between private life and business life is getting blurred (Shih, 2009). This is because people use social media when working, checking also their private things. I think that this blurred boundary can also be approached from a perspective of generating content by private users for the sake of businesses. When reading literature I notice that users of social media platforms are called *customers* or *consumers* what indicates that they are customers of a business, generating free database of information.

Social media is a platform of user-generated content, which allows exchanging personal experiences about certain topics and it appears in various forms, like blogs, media sharing, review sites, online communities etc. (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). There is a very thin line between those forms and therefore it is a matter of perspective and definition what distinguishes e.g. a review site

from a community. According to Wang et al. (2002) when it comes to online communities it is easy to understand them but hard to define, perhaps because of the individual perspective. Social media got some attention from tourism researches by creating interest in “understanding the role of this type of social media content in transforming travel experiences” (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010, p.181).

Xiang&Gretzel made a research about social media and their role in online travel information search. According to their work approximately 11% of searched results are information from social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Virtual communities seem to be the primary source of getting travel information; they are estimated to represent 40% of social media sites. The graph below shows various social media and their representation in information search. It is expressed in percentage number.

Figure 3 Social media represented by Google, (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010)

This figure shows that with such statistics it is clear that social media, especially online communities, are important source of information for people searching for it. In the next section, I will closely revise only online travel communities and how they are defined by literature.

Online travel communities in literature

Online travel communities, also called virtual travel communities, have been widely discussed in literature. Many authors tried to define what such community is. As mentioned before, Wang et al. (2002) points out that the concept of online travel communities is easy to understand but difficult to define. Depending on people and their approach towards such media, online travel communities

are perceived as a fuzzy place to chat, hangout and help each other. From another perspective some may see them as a dangerous space where one can meet with negative behavior and invasion of his privacy (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002).

Virtual travel communities can be explained as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks” (Rheingold, 1994). Another explanation provides Preece (2000) by saying that it is a place for people with shared goals, interests, needs, who interact with each other to satisfy their own needs. Moreover, people’s interactions are guided by policies and are supported by computer systems (Preece, 2000). It is also stressed that what people do in such online space is pretty much the same as what they would do in real life; they chat, discuss, argue, exchange knowledge, express emotions etc. but it happens through electronic conversations. As Wang et al. (2002) notices, online community can be defined in many ways, depending on the perspectives taken by specific groups. Hence, e.g. sociological understanding will significantly differ from technological perspective (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). Kim et al. (2004) writes, however, that online communities exist to allow consumers to communicate, inform and entertain (Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004). In her work she takes business approach to explain what a virtual community is, calling users *consumers* but also states rather generally the purpose of establishing such communities.

Because it is difficult to define virtual communities, the best key words to describe them would be: social, group of people, virtual place, communication and common interest (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002).

When reading about a phenomenon of online travel communities in the tourist decision-making process, I noticed that there is quite a lot of literature about it, however it is written mainly from the business standpoint – to allow marketers to understand how the holiday decisions are made and how online travel communities are used in this process. The question of the roles of the phenomenon of that kind of media has been addressed in literature, not from a perspective of a potential tourist, though. In my literature review, I did not come across a text, which would try to focus on the theory of consumer behavior in tourism from other point than business. Literature explains sociological, psychological or technology perspectives on online travel communities but in relation to marketing. That shows that there is room for research to be made from a different approach. It would be interesting to understand the roles of online travel communities in a process of decision-making

from an individual perspective and this is what I do in my research.

Decision-making process

In this part I focus on explanation of the decision-making process and consumer behavior theory. I find decision-making process relevant to apply to my research because it explains the steps of how the decisions are being made. This process is shaped by the sociological factors associated with the process, which come from consumer behavior theory. I consider these theories to be interrelated because decision-making process is an outcome of consumer behavior. Decision-making process has its implications in answering the research question because it allows seeing whether the role of online travel communities can be applied through all the process or only to its certain steps.

Tourist decision-making process

Tourist decision-making process is a course of certain actions starting from the beginning of need recognition until the final decision. The process is broadly used to understand how one makes decisions. Hence, it is commonly used in business, e.g. in marketing, to learn how a customer decides on buying a product. In my research I approach decision-making process from a sociological perspective. I want to understand how people make their holiday choices from their standpoint. I believe that this theory helps me to understand choices people make when deciding on their holiday product as well as it allows me to position the roles of online travel communities within the steps of the process. The model of the decision-making process is illustrated below:

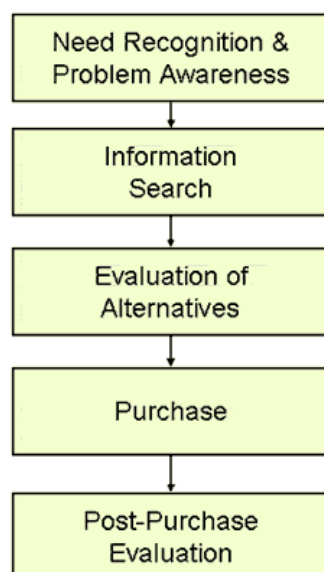


Figure 4 Decision-making process; source:
http://tutor2u.net/business/marketing/buying_decision_process.asp

As the model shows, decision-making process consists of five steps: need recognition and problem identification, information search, evaluation of alternatives, choice/purchase, and post-purchase evaluation (Moutinho, 1993). These steps belong to three stages: pre-decision, decision and post-purchase step (Correia & Pimpao, 2008).

The first step of pre-decision involves problem identification and information search. Problem identification is a phase where a person *recognizes a need and desire* to travel. This need can be a cause of various motivations, like external environment - such as reference groups or exposure to travel advertisements - or internal factors - like one's personality (Moutinho, 1993). Motives can also be unconscious and only their urge can be stimulated by the mentioned causes.

When the need is recognized, a process of *searching for information* begins. This step can be skipped, e.g. when one has an immediate need of hunger and has to eat (Moutinho, 1993). Such decision can be classified as a decision of lower rank, which requires relatively short mental process of deciding between alternatives. It is opposite with the holiday decision-making process. This stage is very important because it makes a potential tourist learn about available options, level of risk and consequences of making a higher rank decision. Information can be searched through different channels (reference groups, family, travel catalogues and advertisement, social media, etc.) (Moutinho, 1993). A person will shape a decision process according to personal determinants, such as socio-economic situation, personality, values, etc. Therefore seeking information, which fulfill one's capabilities, can take relatively long time - that can also depend on a degree of travel, e.g. long/short travel distance or costs of travel. Individual's needs and a way of perceiving things distinguishes what features of available alternatives are important to consider, e.g. financial constraints. He/she will choose an option, which will be the best in his/her mind.

The second step of decision-making process involves the actual decision (Correia & Pimpao, 2008). *Choice* of an alternative is the main problem of the whole process of deciding between the alternatives because it is a clash of various conflicts – positives of an option but also risks and uncertainty involved in that choice (Moutinho, 1993). This stage transforms an individual's motivation into taking action and making a purchase. Since the result of taking such a decision cannot be known immediately, the tourist is exposed to the uncertainty whether the choice is correct (Moutinho, 1993). That can only be known after the chosen holidays. Only then the decision can be evaluated according to personal criteria associated with individual perception of the travel – this is the last step of decision-making process and it involves post-purchase *evaluation of alternatives* (Correia & Pimpao, 2008). If the perception of the choice is positive, there is a bigger chance that

the tourist will be satisfied with the purchase of holidays and in the future might repurchase it again. If, however, his/her impressions are not satisfying, more likely he/she will not purchase it again. The outcome of purchased holidays may also result in how the tourist will talk about this product to other potential tourist (Moutinho, 1993). Hence, his/her experience will be reflected in the information he/she can provide to others.

As Smallman&Moore (2010) say, tourism decision-making process is very complex and it raises many questions: which destination to choose, where to go when being at the destination etc. They claim that choices are based on facts one gets, as well as they “are based on perceptions or evaluative judgments of relatively high-risk decisions, that is, no-one knows how ‘good’ their holiday is going to be until they are experiencing it” (Smallman & Moore, 2010, p.399).

Relevance of tourist decision-making process in the research

Tourist decision-making process consists of five steps and it is important to explain the process to see to what extent it is applied in relation to the roles of online travel communities. In the analysis of the research I focus only on the first step of the decision-making process – pre-decision, which involves need recognition and information search. The reason for that is that the respondents clearly indicate that the roles of online travel communities in their holiday decision-making processes are applied only to that step of the process. Thus, further steps of the decision-making process are not relevant to analyze in this project. They could, however, become an interesting focus of future research.

Consumer behavior

The theory of consumer behavior applies to the complicated process of getting and organizing information, which is evaluated and decisive in taking a purchase decision (Moutinho, 1993). The process is complicated because there are many factors, which are further described, which have an impact on individual’s behavior and on how each of the individual’s perceives life. Consumer behavior theory blends aspects of psychology, sociology and economics, however only sociological aspect will be discussed in the project.

Factors influencing consumer behavior

Holiday decisions are strongly affected by the environment people live in. Below I shortly explain social influences on one’s behavior. They are important to be explained in order to understand how sociological environment shapes one’s behavior and impacts one’s choices. I refer to these factors in my analysis because the respondents who participate in the research point them out. Some of

the factors are pointed out directly, as e.g. family and friends who affect one's holiday decisions. Other factors might be said indirectly and I emphasize them through my interpretation of other people meanings, e.g. product image creation. The consumer behavior theory does not help me to distinguish the roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes but it helps to understand people's reasoning how they search for information.

Below I shortly describe the factors influencing consumer behavior.

Family and reference group

Family can be considered as the closest relatives to an individual and their beliefs as well as values affect one's behavior. An individual is raised among those values, thus they are naturally implemented into one's way of being. A reference group, however, can be described as a person or a group, which sets certain standards of judgment one can refer to. Reference group sets values and beliefs one can identify with, for example it can be family, religious groups, friends, ethnic groups, etc. Those groups can overlap and interact (Moutinho, 1993).

Social class

Social class can be explained as a group of individuals who share similar lifestyle, values and behavioral patterns. It creates division between societies but it also constructs social space for those with similar beliefs. Their behavior is shaped by their knowledge and norms, which a social class accepts (Moutinho, 1993).

Culture and subculture

The concept of culture is broad and very complex. It applies to ideas, values and attitudes developed by society (Moutinho, 1993). Culture is changeable and it evolves with generations, shaping human behavior sometimes unconsciously. Therefore, it can be said that culture can be learned through its characteristics, e.g. language, religion, customs. Subculture, however, can be found within a culture. It can be characterized by specific norms, which bring people together, e.g. music, art or sports.

Personality

Personality consists of specific characteristics and ways of behaving, which allow a person to adjust to the surrounding (Moutinho, 1993). Every person represents different, unique personality what has an impact on decisions one makes. Personality can be shaped by the sociological factors as reference groups, culture etc. In a holiday decision-making process, personality can be seen from a perspective of an individual – this is called self-image. That consist of features the individual believes are characteristic to him – he/she sees him/herself that way. An individual has certain expectations towards his/her way of being what strongly influences his/her buying behavior

because it will result in choices of products, which reflect or match his/her self-image. Because of various types of personalities, there can also be changes in one's self-image (Moutinho, 1993). E.g. if a person wants to belong to a certain reference group, his/her purchase process can be completely changed.

Knowledge acquisition

The process of acquiring knowledge allows to better predict results of taking specific decisions. It is strongly affected by perception and learning process. Perception consists of certain stimuli (internal or external), which an individual selects, organizes and interprets in a coherent way. Perception is dependent on personal beliefs and values and it is not only a result of how one collects and sees information. There can be distinguished selective perception, which refers to selecting stimuli relevant to a person (Moutinho, 1993). It is because people cannot perceive everything, therefore, they select what seems to be in their interested and ignore what is irrelevant.

Information

In a process of purchase decision, a person may seek for information to consult and compare various sources before making a decision. Information search allows one to find alternatives to a product of interest. It can take place internally – be found in one's memory – or externally, via different information channels as it is the most common way of information searching in case of holiday decision making process (Moutinho, 1993).

Memory

Plays a major role in making a holiday choice because what is memorized can be thought through and used in taking a decision. When the information is found, it enters memory and is stored there. When it is needed, it is retrieved and used. If acquired data is considered to be relevant, it stays in long-term memory; if it is in low importance – it is storage in short-term memory. The more memorable information, the longer it can stay encoded. The information can be either actively acquired or passively absorbed from the surrounding (Moutinho, 1993). How information is processed and then how it is used results in learning process.

Sources of communication

Word-of-mouth is a primary way of communication but with the current status of technology, many people get it from the word-of-web. The information, gathered either way, is actively processed, evaluated in terms of its credibility and personal relevance. It should not interfere with personal beliefs and it should fulfill personal expectations. After such evaluation, the relevant information can be part of the final decision. There can be distinguished five ways of using information by potential tourists: to evaluate alternatives before making a choice, to rationalize past choices, to

resolve conflict whether to purchase or postpone the decision, to remind when to make a purchase and to get new knowledge (Moutinho, 1993).

Product image formation

When the information is processed, the potential tourist gets a holistic picture about the product. He/she is able to see positives and negatives of it and create a mental image of it. This image is a result of personal attitude based on found information but mainly on feelings one has towards the information (Moutinho, 1993).

Motivation

Motivation can be explained as additional push to decide on the product. There can be various motives to enhance an individual to make a decision about his/her holidays and they are dependent on personal expectations, e.g. educational, recreational, cultural motivations. (Moutinho, 1993)

Risk

Potential tourists may perceive risk in buying a product or uncertainty about consequences of making such a purchase, e.g. in terms of personal finances (Moutinho, 1993). The degree of risk is dependent on costs one has to make; both in terms of money and time spend on buying a product. Tourist can have different approach towards risk, generally, the lower risk – the bigger satisfaction. However, some tourists have a need of taking risk to reach personal satisfaction.

Relevance of the consumer behavior theory in the research

I use the theory as a base to understand that there are factors, which affect one's choices. For example, if one would have different background or everyday surrounding, his/her choices could have been different. Understanding various factors, which shape one's behavior, naturally lead to the steps of how decisions are being made.

Research approach to the Decision-making process and Consumer behavior

Consumer behavior theory is being used in various fields and disciplines, not only in tourism, thus "it is highly unlikely that there is a great degree of agreement regarding key research topics and how research in hospitality and tourism area should be conducted" (Mattila, 2004, p.453). It looks like the theory is used differently, dependently on what a research focuses on. Mattila (2004) points out key trends of consumer behavior in tourism and hospitality based on various articles within the field. She says that one of the key-players in decision-making process is the Internet as a place where one does the information search. She discusses motivation in relation to destination choice/image as well as culture and geographical location as the main focus of the segmentation

studies regarding tourist behavior (Mattila, 2004). For a change Kayaman & Arasli (2007) talk about consumer behavior in relation to customer based brand equity in hotel industry – brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand image. Correia&Pimpao (2008), however, argue that human being posses' dynamic behavior with very sophisticated needs and very complex motivations, thus their behavior can be looked at from various perspectives, such as external or internal stimuli. They base decision-making framework on microeconomic theory and behavioral models, e.g. pull and push factors.

Consumer behavior in tourism strongly focuses on motivations regarding one's choices, which can be concerned with destination choice, price, accommodation etc. (Correia & Pimpao, 2008; Lam & Hsu, 2006; Nicolau & Mas, 2006).

One can notice that there are different approaches towards the consumer behavior theory; it probably depends on the research focus. Motivations, perceptions, awareness, image of a service/product can be investigated from various perspectives, as above-mentioned authors pointed out. For the sake of this project the theory is used to understand sociological factors, which influence one's choices to use online travel communities.

When reading about consumer behavior theory I notice that it is mainly approached from a business perspective and not from a standpoint of potential tourists. Businesses have to have understanding of how consumers make their choices of holidays, in order to plan their sales, marketing and advertising strategies. Literature writes about the theory, addressing people's behavior to businesses. Luiz Moutinho, in his publication *Consumer Behaviour in Tourism*, which he published in European Journal of Marketing, stresses that "to take adequate actions in the area of tourism marketing, one must understand how people perceive such things as destination areas, air travel, travel distances and travel advertising; how they learn to consume and to travel; how they make travel decisions; and how personality affects those decisions" (Moutinho, 1993, p.5). He clearly directs the need of understanding of people's action to tourism marketers. Clive Smallman and Kevin Moore also refer to business brunches as destination marketing, consumer services and tourism policy (Smallman & Moore, 2010). Moreover, the word "consumer" in the phrase "consumer behavior" indicates itself, that the theory has a strong potential to be used in business.

Despite that, even when I do not take a business perspective on the subject of behavior, the theory seems to be relevant because it allows me to understand sociological aspects, which shape one's behavior. It points out towards important factors, such as personality, motivation, influence of external environment, and explains the steps associated with the process. Consequently, one's

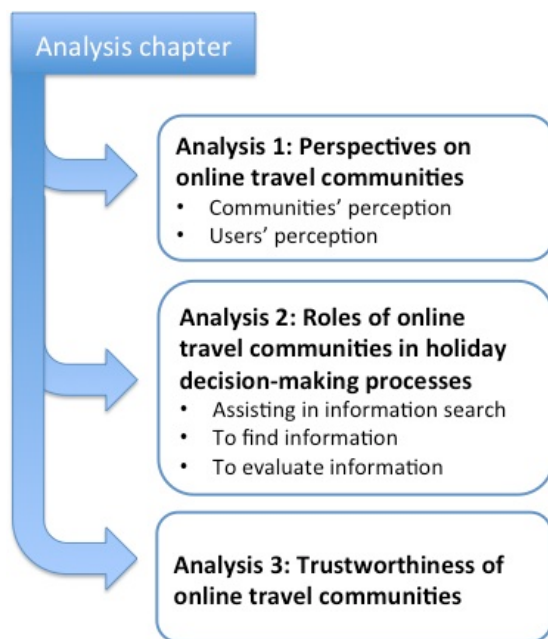
behavior is a key player in decision-making process.

Analysis chapter

Introduction to the analysis chapter

In the following chapter I commit to analyze the roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes. The analysis chapter is divided into three separate analysis sections, where I focus on: 1) perspectives on online travel communities; 2) roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes; 3) trustworthiness of online travel communities.

In the analysis one, I analyze how online travel communities think of themselves in comparison to how such communities are perceived by their users. I believe that it is interesting to understand the perception of virtual travel communities from communities' and users' point of view because only then it is possible to see what such communities are and what roles they fulfill.



In analysis two, I analyze what roles online travel communities have in the holiday decision-making processes. Based on the analysis of the data, I group their roles into three categories:

- Information search – in this section I explain that people use virtual travel communities to search for information about holidays. I give examples of two kinds of information search: the first one concerns a holiday destination and the second one focuses on facilitates. I explain that information found on virtual travel communities can influence a holiday decision.

Figure 5 Structure of the Analysis chapter

- Evaluation of the information – in this section I explain that virtual travel communities help to evaluate the information found on other information channels. I show that people want to go to virtual travel communities to validate the information and get critical opinions, which they cannot get on marketing oriented sites.

- Assistance in the information search – in this section I explain that virtual travel communities are one of many information channels and it is difficult to classify them as a primary or secondary source of information. I also show that their importance can be dependent on planning involved in the holiday decision.

In analysis three, I discuss an issue of trust in content and information provided on online travel communities. It is discussed in terms of relationships people create on the communities, risk involved in trusting opinions on the communities, as well as I share my own experience of trust I gained on one of the communities - TripAdvisor.

Analysis 1: Perspectives on online travel communities

In the following section I present two perspectives on different roles of online travel communities, the *perspective of online travel communities*, and *user perspective*. I find them both relevant due to the fact that each of them gives a slightly different perception of the roles of virtual travel communities. It is crucial to incorporate various perspectives in order to create a coherent and comprehensive overview of their roles. The understanding of perception from the communities' and the users' point of view is especially important because it contributes to the sociological approach towards understanding of online travel communities, which is in minor focus of the literature. In the end of this part of the analysis, I shortly summarize the understanding of online travel communities. Since the theoretical perspective on online travel communities has been discussed in the Theory chapter, I start by focusing on showing the communities' perception of their roles. Later, based on the analysis of the interviews, I incorporate the users' perspective and present the differences between perceived roles of virtual travel communities.

Online travel communities defined by the communities

Knowing how literature defines online travel communities, I am able to search for their roles. I am interested in seeing how online travel communities define their own roles. In order to identify their own perception of their roles, I use information available from the webpages of selected major virtual travel communities. I focus on the three citations from the virtual travel communities, which were mentioned by the survey respondents, the interviewees and which I checked myself during my research.

The communities describe themselves as follows:

Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree Travel Forum: "Join fellow travellers to exchange travel information, advice, hints and tips. Get help, get connected, get inspired and have your say" (Thorn Tree Travel Forum).

VoyageForum: "This site is designed for those who love to travel and seeking information, asking questions about their upcoming trips, share knowledge, experiences and ideas or just dream of traveling." (VoyageForum).

VirtualTourist: "As one of the largest sources of unbiased, user-generated travel content in the world, VirtualTourist is the premier resource for travelers seeking an insider's perspective. Real travel tips, reviews and photos from real people who have actually been there and done that; and this is what makes the travel content on VirtualTourist so useful" (VirtualTourist).

TripAdvisor: "TripAdvisor® is the world's largest travel site, enabling travelers to plan and have the perfect trip. TripAdvisor offers trusted advice from real travelers and a wide variety of travel choices and planning features with seamless links to booking tools. TripAdvisor-branded sites make up the largest travel community in the world (...) (TripAdvisor).

Based on the above descriptions, I am able to distinguish roles of online travel communities from their own perspective.

Virtual communities about their roles

- exchange travel information
- advice
- get help
- get inspiration
- express own opinion
- share knowledge and experience
- user-generated travel content

Figure 6 Key words describing the roles of virtual travel communities

As presented on the table 6, virtual travel communities are specific in the description of their roles and features. They obviously specify that they focus on travel, e.g. by emphasizing that they are "(...) one of the largest sources of unbiased, user-generated travel content in the world (...) (VirtualTourist). By using the term user-generated content (UGC), the website builds up credibility, which according to Jani et al. (2011) is a common reaction to such content. The authors argue that "instead of relying on a few social networks as information sources, UGC increases the scope of

personal information sources” (Jani, Jeong, & Hwang, 2011, p.1). Furthermore, virtual travel communities give some sort of idea, what kind of communication one can expect, not specifically a channel of communication (like forum, chat or private messages) but that in such community the members *advise*, *exchange* knowledge, *share* photos, etc. Virtual travel communities are more personal in their own description and clearly explain what they offer, who they target and what a person can get out of joining them, e.g. travel information and personal reviews, which can critically evaluate a holiday product. In comparison to the description of such communities in literature, they focus on functionality and give rather specific idea what are they for.

Both descriptions indicate some general roles that online travel communities have. The literature states their purposes in a broad way, giving a feeling that the communities are the online place where people with similar interests can hang out. The online travel communities, however, are more specific in showing the roles by pointing out functions as sharing, exchanging, creating user-generated content.

Users’ perspective on online travel communities

Having a broad explanation of virtual travel communities from a literature point of view as well as specific information provided by the communities from their own perspective, I look at how the users of virtual travel communities perceive their roles. The table below shows key words describing virtual travel communities by the communities and by the users who were interviewed. They are asked to define what online travel community is and based on their answers (Appendix: Interviews) I point out certain key words, which define the communities.

| Virtual communities about their roles | Users about roles of virtual communities |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exchange travel information • advice • get help • get inspiration • express own opinion • share knowledge and experience • user-generated travel content | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online platform • discussion forum • to post opinions, experiences • share travel information • get advise from users • unbiased information • exchange travel ideas |

Figure 7 Comparison of roles defined by virtual communities and by their users

The users, when asked the very first question *How would you define online travel communities?* seemed to understand the phenomenon of the community but it is felt that they had trouble to put *the right words* – words pointed out by literature when explaining the virtual communities - to describe it, as e.g. *social, online, people, share*, etc. Many aspects, which especially literature relates to, is not pointed out by all the interviewees, probably because they assume that the fact that online travel community is a virtual space and that it brings people with common interest together is just obvious and does not need any explanation. Two out of five interviewees explain that it is a “platform online” (Interview: Stephanie) and “a web 2.0 type of idea” (Interview: Jonathan). Two of the interviewees responded in a way that I felt in doubt whether they understand the concept of virtual travel communities because in any way they did not mention a social aspect to indicate the presence of a community and they did not refer to any type of communication. One of the interviewees said that it is “a place where I can find initial information about the destination where I’m going” (Interview: Jovana). This respond could relate to any source of information, in this case not even necessarily online. However, when I asked additional question whether the person distinguishes such communities from regular websites, she showed through her answer that she is familiar with the phenomenon of virtual travel communities and, as I assume, she simply thought that there is no specific explanation needed. She explains:

“(…) you get more information from people who have actually been to the place, who have spent some time there, who have experienced it. Because, you know, usually the official websites are like all nice and pretty and write all the positive things but then you actually get a real situation, at least you get more info about how it really is.” (Interview: Jovana).

The concept of virtual communities can be understood individually and there can be many definitions of it – probably it is dependent on a respondent. However, I expected to get answers, which would relate to the characteristics of the communities, which are mentioned by the literature, e.g. that it is a social place.

The interviewees’ idea about online travel communities does not differ from the way the communities describe themselves. Their perception of such communities is very alike, however, what I find interesting is that it differs in ways of using it. Virtual travel communities are supposed to be social what indicates that there should be created interactions between people. What can be understood from the interviewees is that they participate in the communities’ life from the external position – and what I mean by that is that they do not actively interact with other users and thus they do not get involved into any relationships. They take a position of an observant and search for

information they need. E.g. one of the interviewed girls says: “I can pick up a lot of information from there when I look for trips and destinations” (Interview: Stephanie). Two of the interviewees claim to ask a question on forum when they cannot find an answer, however they prefer to read others input, hoping to find what they need. One of the girls says: “Sometimes I write questions and sometimes I browse [in the forums]. It depends a little bit if I can find what I am looking for without asking” (Interview: Miia).

Thus, it seems that the users’ point out the same general roles of online travel communities as the communities. In reality, however, they use them differently than they describe them.

Understanding online travel communities – summary

The above analysis focused on identifying the roles of online travel communities according to the communities and the users. Firstly, I explained the key words, which identify the roles of online travel communities from the perception of the communities. Then, I incorporated the users’ view on the roles of online travel communities, which I interpret from the analysis of the interviews. From the comparison of these two perspectives I find out that online travel communities provide practical and personal descriptions of themselves and point out specific roles of their existence. People who use those communities perceive them in a similar way as virtual travel communities. The difference becomes visible when they distinguish between other users making use of the communities through sharing, posting, advising etc. – and their personal use, which is limited to the information search.

Based on my analysis of various communities and after interviewing their users, I am able to distinguish the following roles of virtual travel communities:

Roles of virtual travel communities

- to exchange travel information/ideas
- to get help
- to get inspiration
- to express own opinion, experiences
- to share travel knowledge and experience
- to get advise from users
- to get unbiased information

Figure 8 Roles of virtual travel communities

I have excluded some of the aspects mentioned by both, communities and users, such as “online platform, “discussion forum”, or “user-generated travel content”. That is due to the fact, that these

are not roles, but attributes describing what an online travel community is. Therefore, I follow the definition of role, which I introduced in the Elaboration on research question section, where role was defined as “the position or purpose that someone or something has in a situation, organization, society or relationship” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online). That is why I focus on the purpose of online travel communities, not on what they are.

In the next part of the analysis I will distinguish the roles of online travel communities in relation to the holiday decision-making processes.

Analysis 2: The roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes

After specifying the general roles of online travel communities and creating a common understanding of what they are, I move on to discuss their main roles in the holiday decision-making processes. In this section I group the roles into three different categories, which emerged from the analysis of the responses given by the interviewees.

Assisting in the information search

One of the roles online travel communities play in the holiday decision-making process is to assist in information search. The respondents of the interviews see it as a very important tool along with other information sources.

The interviewees express the importance of checking virtual travel communities when deciding on holidays. The reason for that is because one can find a variety of travel information. Also, information provides personal opinions based on experience. The presence of online travel communities in the information research is expressed by the interviewees words: “It’s always there. I never base myself on just websites. So it’s always present when I have to travel. I always check them. Then it’s either in smaller or bigger amount or I check more of them (...)” (Interview: Stephanie) and “(...) I don’t think I’ve been on a holiday for the past long time without looking at them” (Interview: Miia).

One of the interviewees says that online travel communities are usually the primary source of information when it comes to short trips: “(...) for small trips in general I would go there straight. You know, which places I should go to when I have two days” (Interview: Stephanie). That could indicate that for trips where there is less risk involved in terms of costs and time, virtual travel

communities can be the main source of information. “If it’s big trips I would go everywhere: websites, forums, online communities.” (Interview: Stephanie) – by saying that the interviewee points out that there are holiday decision of the bigger and smaller range and thus the involvement of risk taken depends on that. Bigger journeys require more planning and to get satisfaction from such holidays, a variety of sources might want to be checked. Complementation of information gathered from various sources may also result in better product image creation (Moutinho, 1993). The interviewees point out that they need various opinions to be able to critically look at the product and decide whether it suites them or not. The better the image of the product is, based on different sources, the easier to decide upon it.

Only one of the interviewees claims to use it as a primary source of information but as she says, she usually checks other websites as well (Interview: Jovana). Thus, it seems that virtual communities can be the first source to check but they are not the only source used.

Another interviewee sees virtual travel communities as strictly supportive channel of information. She strongly refers to an issue of trust and so she claims:

“(…) if I would go to the country such as Norway, where the official websites are more developed than for example in Thailand, I think I would trust the official website. It depends on a destination and it depends on a product. I think that in any case, the online community, or the posts on online travel community could support any official site (...). I think that could work as a support.” (Interview: Milda)

Despite that, she indicates that this source of information is present in her information search.

It is quite hard to say what can be called a primary source of information in the holiday decision-making process. Jani et al. (2011) claims that tourist often rely on informal sources as family and friends, especially “in the later part of decision process” (Jani, Jeong, & Hwang, 2011, p.2), which comes after one picks the destination. Thus, it can be understood that these reference groups may impact decisions about choosing activities within the destination but not the destination itself. It seems to be difficult to assert that issue because the respondents of the online survey and the interviewees stated that they ask e.g. friends for opinions, which can impact their choices. However, it is not specified whether they are involved in the process from the beginning, when one has to decide on a destination, or whether they appear in the process later, when the decision only concerns activities. Especially friends seem to be important reference group: “(...) mainly I talk to

people that I know and I get ideas” (Interview: Miia). As Casaló et al. (2011) state, influence of others is the most important aspect of consumer’s behavior. This also concerns the reference groups.

In general the Internet is perceived as the biggest source of information. A variety of websites and the search engine of Google can lead to many answers one searches for. The people I asked – the interviewees and the respondents of the online survey - claim to research sites like Wikipedia, Travelwiki (Interview: Jonathan), official websites of the destination (Interview: Milda), offline sources as brochures and travel guides (Appendix: Online survey). Hence, it seems that variety of information channels are involved into knowledge acquisition and online travel communities are one of them. Even though are they not a primary channel, they have the advantage over other sources in terms of objectivity towards the information.

To find information

Online travel communities are used as an external channel of communication (Moutinho, 1993) in the information search process. Casaló et al. (2011) argues that the Internet’s content is strongly involved in decisions people take. An online travel community is a place where one can find unbiased opinion of other travelers and see their perspective on the information one is interested in (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2011). His argument is strongly supported by the responds of the interviewees when talking about the holiday decision-making process.

The interviewees have split opinions about what information they search for – some of them use the communities in order to find desired information regarding a holiday destination and the opinions of other users influence their decision about the destination, while others search for information about the facilities, not the destination itself. E.g. one of the interviewees says that she tries to test her idea about going to certain destination first online. What she reads can impact her final choice. She explains: if “(...) I wanna go to Philippines then where should I go and is it a good idea to go there at all at that time of the year?” (Interview: Miia). Getting that kind of information helps her to avoid bad experiences and it is helpful, especially when visiting places for the first time: “(...) for example with Asia, with rainy season – it’s hard to know when it is, so to find out from people who have actually been there” (Interview: Miia). She makes a point that “if there is uncertainty about... important factors that affect the holidays” then it is relevant to learn more about the place from these people who have been there before (Interview: Miia).

Another interviewed person also agrees that when going to unknown place it is useful to learn

about alternatives: “(...) I was considering going to New Zealand, you know, and stay there for few months, so I compared different cities and opinions about different places (...)” (Interview: Stephanie). The respondents need opinions of the communities to be assured that they make the right choices choosing the destinations. They find it relevant to learn from people’s experiences when choosing a holiday destination significantly different from the usual environment they live in. The criteria of being *different* could be related to a place of origin, climate, culture, language or one’s personality, which Moutinho (1993) refers to as one of the crucial factors in decision-making process. Therefore, it can be said that the influence of online travel communities on a destination choice is very much dependent on the risk (Moutinho, 1993) involved in the decision. The perception of risk is individual but considering the responders of the interview, it is associated with long-distance traveling, where there is more planning involved than with short trips.

Some of the interviewees claim to use online travel communities only to search for information concerning facilities within the destination they have chosen for their holidays. They think of it as a useful tool to gain knowledge about possible options to plan their stay within the place. The respondents agree that they like to check out restaurants and accommodation. One of them explains:

“(...) it definitely influences my decisions. Especially like in booking a hotel, for example, so I would always go and check reviews of some hotel. And even though I was about to book that hotel or even I booked it, I have to read the review, I would actually sometimes cancel it and change my mind” (Interview: Jovana).

That indicates that people trust the information others write on virtual travel communities. The issue of trust will be analyzed further on in the chapter.

Gathering information and opinions about accommodation seems to be of major importance for the users of the virtual travel communities. It is the most chosen answer in the online survey I carried out. It is probably because it is unavoidable product, which normally has to be bought. Usually people want to know whether the standard of accommodation is compatible to its price. Virtual travel communities make it possible to get critical information about these issues according to which one can compare opinions and decide whether that would be the right choice.

Obviously, information about accommodation is not the only focus, however a very important one. The interviewees think that it is very useful to be able to find out what they could do in their holidays destination and what alternatives they could have. They usually have an idea of an

activities in mind and then they want to investigate it further: “(...) if I have something in mind, which I think would be interesting, then I use it to see what people have said about that place” (Interview: Miia). Another person says: “(...) if I wanna go for a kayak trip then I think it’s the best tool, like TripAdvisor, you need. Cause they provide direct feedback to those activities. The bigger the community the better feedback you get” (Interview: Jonathan).

Not only virtual travel communities allow investigating ideas. Also, they might give interesting suggestions of what to do or to see at the destination. That, however, requires being open to new ideas when planning holidays. Such flexibility in planning can be dependent on how much time one has available for vacations. If the time is quite limited and a person is sure of what should be seen, then it can be difficult to risk an attraction or activity one really wants to do for something what is highly recommended but unknown to the person. One of my interviewees gave me a very nice example of how such openness for a new idea made her holidays even more memorable:

“There was so many things that I found out from the communities that I wouldn’t know from any other way. For example when we were in Thailand I got so many information from a travel community before we went there. And, actually we were at Phuket and going for one-day trip to some other island. I remembered that on the online community I read: OK, if you go there you have to go to this other island, which is like in the neighborhood. But that one wasn’t included in our rout. And then I asked if we could go there and it was possible. It was like the best island we visited so if I didn’t read about that on the online community I wouldn’t know that is there.” (Interview: Jovana).

As the interviewees points out, the opinions of the users are relevant and they are believed to be more reliable than information from the official websites of a certain service or product, such as a hotel. The interviewee explains:

“(...) you get more information from people who have actually been to the place, who have spent some time there, who have experienced it. Because, you know, usually the official websites are like all nice and pretty (smiling) and write all the positive things but then you actually get a real situation, at least you get more info about how it really is.” (Interview: Jovana).

Moreover, they argue that virtual travel communities allow to access details and a piece of information, which can be hard to find on official websites but is interesting to know. The answer of one of the interviewee supports that thought:

“I go there because I feel I don’t get a type of information I’m into on the regular websites, which promote and advertise. And somehow it’s like asking a question to Google. It’s a very precise question and a precise answer because someone has already thought of it and asked for it, so that’s really awesome.” (Interview: Stephanie).

Thus, the respondents clearly address an issue of criticism, which is lacking on official websites of a service/product. These websites focus on advantages and creating a positive image of a service/product because they aim to market it and sell it.

Online travel communities are a communication channel between the users but experiences gained on such communities can be memorized in long-term memory (Moutinho, 1993) and used in the future, when the information is needed. It was interesting to hear the argumentation of that point from one of the interviewees:

“(…) I really go there [to virtual travel communities] when I’m planning to travel and also when I’m dreaming to. Not necessarily when I know that I am. Maybe sometimes for later when I have a destination or I have a question... Because then I can map it in my mind and for later when I want to go there I know where to come back (...)” (Interview: Stephanie).

Other interviewees, however, are clear about using virtual travel communities when they need the information before going on holidays.

Even though the literature indicates that information search is the second step in the decision-making process, the responds given by the informants make me think that it seems to have a strong influence on the recognition of needs – the first step of the decision-making process according to the literature. It is important that the initial need for going on holidays is recognized; however new information can bring new ideas both about the destination and the activities. It seems to me that this step can revise one’s ideas and even completely change it once the specific knowledge about a product is acquired and its image is constructed (Moutinho, 1993). Literature clearly emphasizes that user-generated content has a strong impact on people’s decisions and delivers variety of information. The respondents give the impression that they do make their information search on virtual travel communities and they take into consideration what the members of such communities write.

To evaluate information

Another role, which online travel communities play in the holiday decision-making process is to *evaluate* information found on other information channels, e.g. via various Internet websites, reference groups etc. As it was mentioned before, there is quite a strong awareness of the lack of criticism on the official product's websites towards what they are selling. They market it the best way in order to attract tourists to buy it. People, however, like to get unbiased opinions (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2011), which allow them to critically look at the issue and evaluate it according to personal norms. Therefore, a virtual travel community helps to evaluate the information. The information is tested whether the product is actually as it was described by the information source other than a virtual community. The users of such communities can provide different, critical review, which will evaluate the information. That brings up a question of trust and whether one should believe what virtual communities say.

I believe that the issue of trustworthiness of information found on virtual travel communities is very important finding of this project, therefore I would like to discuss it separately in the third part of the analysis chapter.

The roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes – summary

In previous section I distinguish the roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes. The roles emerge from the analysis of the interviews. I implement the theory of consumer behavior and decision-making process to understand how people make their decisions and whether the roles of the communities assist them through the whole decision-making process. I found out that there are three roles that virtual travel communities play in the holiday decision-making processes.

Firstly, the communities assist in information search. They are one of many channels used when looking for the information and it is difficult to distinguish their priority whether they are primary or secondary source of information. Dependently on risk involved into the decision, they can become the first source to check (low risk involvement). Secondly, online travel communities are used to find information both about the holiday destination and facilities. The users claim that they are able to find out more about the places they are interested in and the information they find can change their decision or help to decide. Thirdly, online travel communities are used to evaluate information. The users want to get unbiased and critical opinions about a product they are interested

in and they believe that they can get those opinions on the communities, which are not marketing oriented as the official websites.

Moreover, I found out that the roles of virtual travel communities are associated only with the first step of decision-making process called pre-decision. The theory of consumer behavior does not help me to distinguish the above-mentioned roles but it helps to understand people's rationale before they make their choices.

In the next part of the analysis I will focus on discussing trustworthiness of online travel communities.

Analysis 3: Trustworthiness of online travel communities

As I mention earlier, issue of trust seems to be an interesting finding to discuss because it focuses on the issue of trusting strangers. By *trust* I mean *believing* in someone's opinion. When analyzing the interviews, trustworthiness of the communities was naturally revealed when discussing the role of evaluating the information. Thus, trust of virtual travel communities will be looked at from three different perspectives:

- a relationships people make on the communities
- risk people take trusting the information found on the communities
- my own participation online on a virtual community called TripAdvisor and my personal reflection about trust on the communities

Trust and relationships on online travel communities

According to Casaló et al. (2011) trust comes from relationships people have with others. This sounds reasonable, as it is easier and more natural to believe someone we know than to believe a stranger. Another important issue is a feeling of belonging to a group, which one can rely on when making a decision, e.g. friends, subculture or any other reference group Moutinho (1993) talks about. Being a part of a virtual travel community might create some sort of relationships, bonds between the users whose words will be perceived as unbiased and trusted (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2011). Yet, what Casaló et al. (2011) implies can be interpreted in two ways. When I asked my interviewees about the social aspect of virtual travel communities – whether they participate actively, e.g. via writing on forums, talking to people, looking for traveling partners (Appendix: Interviews) – they claimed that they do not do that. Some of them agree to have an account on such communities but they almost never make use of it.

The only times when they write on forums is when they feel that they still do not have an answer to their questions. That is illustrated by the respond of the interviewee: “Sometimes I write questions and sometimes I browse [in the forums]. It depends a little bit if I can find what I am looking for without asking” (Interview: Miia). Another person says: “I guess I’m signed up at few, like TripAdvisor (...) but I never use it, actually. I would only use it to get inspiration (...)” (Interview: Jonathan). These responds do not fit the argumentation of Casaló et al. (2011) because these people do not want to be active part of a community. Therefore they do not build relationships, which would be a point of reference. However, the issue of trust coming from relationships between people can also be interpreted differently. Maybe there is no need to be involved in communities in order to trust in what others are saying. It is enough to look at their activity from an external point of view and observe their relations and communication. It looks like trust can be built without actively “socializing” online but through observation of others interactions. It could be argued that my observation of how people trust the information found on the communities is satisfying enough because some people want to just get information, which will be unbiased but they do not want to get into social contacts. That proves that “knowledge information needs are dominant in travel forums” (Jani, Jeong, & Hwang, 2011, p.5).

Ye et al. (2011) claim that sharing opinions on the Internet has been perceived as trustworthy because these opinions are seen as more up-to-date in comparison to information from reference groups (Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011). It could be said that word-of-mouth works slower than word-of-web and reaches less people at a certain point of time than a post on the Internet. Faster opportunities of sharing information, recommending it to friends of friends simply updates people’s knowledge with the freshest news. These news are considered to be reliable due to many recommendations but also through sharing by a friend or any other reference group, which plays a great role in influencing people’s decisions.

Risk and trust on online travel communities

In the interviews I asked my respondents whether they find information on online travel communities trustworthy. They all agree that they believe in what others are writing about the information they are interested in. One of the interviewees says: “I actually never doubt if they think that. Of course there is a question whether you are a similar type of person or not. But... Personally I don’t see any reason why somebody would lie” (Interview: Miia). Although, the information is believed, the respondent mentions herself that there is an issue of personality and that people are different. There is necessity to filter information people read and to evaluate how trustful it can be.

The step of the decision-making process, information search, points out personal determinants, which are associated with the process of finding the right information, it can be personality, financial situation, surrounding, families and friends who impact one's preferences and finally decisions (Moutinho, 1993). How the information is understood and filtered depends on these personal determinants. The interviewees say themselves that even though they perceive other's opinions trustworthy, they still value it according to their own needs. This is what one of the respondents says:

“(...) of course you always read the articles and they specify, lets say that they have for example a hotel they give you a review for that place, they at least give a statement why it is bad. And then you can already see how trustworthy it is. If they say, OK it was really dirty or a service wasn't right or whatever then I would of course see it as trustworthy. First of all it is an experience otherwise I wouldn't state it and then I can decide for myself if it's important for me or not” (Interview: Jonathan).

The same point made another respondent:

“(...) in a way I really do think that information is real cause it means that a person really tried that, if he or she is sharing it on online community, but then again I am aware that it is another person I have no clue about and we have different perception of what is quality, what is positive, what is negative so... yes, I kind of believe what they say but I'm also thinking: yeah, maybe that's too much or maybe that's not me. I also kind of try to see the way they write things. If they are complaining about every single thing what happened on their trip then I'm not reading that anymore. But if people are giving like really, you know... some things were positive, some things were negative and they are giving some kind of balanced explanation of any product or a place, or activity - then I consider it as reliable.” (Interview: Milda).

Despite the fact that the respondents believe in the information they get on online travel communities, they are aware of taking risk in trusting it. They know that people might have different expectations towards a product/a service than they would have. They clearly state that there are different personalities and thus the information can be expressed in a very individual way. However, I would assume that they do not base their trust on one review they find but they use the community's opinion and consider that as trustful.

Testing trust online

One of the respondents says: “the bigger the community the better feedback you get” (Interview: Jonathan). His statement inspired me to check TripAdvisor to see what results I could get when searching for kayak trips. I wanted to see what my general experience on the site will be, what information I can find and how trustful it will seem to be for me. I have to admit that it is fantastic to check out various possibilities of kayaking. I felt that if I would plan my holidays and I would go to such community without a specific holiday destination in mind, I would probably let the information I found about kayaking to decide about the destination I would pick for my holidays. I found it very interesting to read reviews of other people who experienced the activity in a certain place, both ranked the highest and with lower rates. It is not my intension to describe how the community websites are designed to make the information transparent to the users but I think it is interesting to mention one example from TripAdvisor.

In case of TripAdvisor it is possible to see the activity of the user – his/her contribution to the website as well as votes from other members who found the review useful. This is shown in a small box with a badge below the user’s profile (Appendix – TripAdvisor). It is a great way to present members and what information they share with others. It shows how they bring value to the site. Thanks to that, one can get a feeling that the bigger contribution to the community from the user, the more reliable his/her opinions are. At least I felt that the contribution of that user made me feel wiser about the kayak trip he made a review for. Additionally, seeing how many people found it helpful made me feel confident that I am not the only one thinking that I just read a helpful opinion about a product – therefore already at that point I did not feel left out with my thoughts but I felt included in people’s mindset. Furthermore, seeing the total number of reviews of that product and a ranking made me feel good about the product. I could trust it without being an active part of the community and having no relationship with the members. I felt some sense of belonging to the group, probably because I found mental comfort in finding interesting information and using it if I were planning my holidays. What is more, I felt that I could rely on that information and I could associate my needs with the members of the community. This participatory experience helps to explain and understand the perception of the interviewees towards their passive, or external position, when using online travel communities.

Trustworthiness of online travel communities – summary

In this part of the analysis I discussed an issue of trust on online travel communities, which naturally emerged when analyzing the role of evaluating of the information found on online travel

communities. I analyzed what and why makes users believe in opinions of strangers.

Firstly, I find out that the responds of the interviewees contradict with literature implications, which is stating that trust comes from social relationships (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2011). When interpreting the respondents view on that matter, I realize that do not want to get into social relationships on virtual travel communities but still they trust the information they read. Secondly, the interviewees claim to trust the information when being aware that they take a risk in that. They seem to be aware of differences in opinions, therefore they interpret the information in their own way and evaluate according to their personal criteria. Thirdly, I test the experience of participating on the online travel community, TripAdvisor, where I test how I react to opinions and trust in information. According to the above analysis, trustworthiness of online travel communities is associated with evaluation of the information found, which is one of the three roles distinguished by the interviewees.

Conclusion

In the research I investigate various roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes. The research contributes to the literature by approaching a question of the roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes from a sociological perspective. Taking interpretivist position helps me to construct reality through gaining in-depth knowledge from my friends and colleagues about how they use online travel communities in their holiday decision-making process. I also get involved into the experience and as my interviewees, I reflect on my impressions from the community.

My analysis is supported by the theory of consumer behavior, which points out factors influencing one's decisions. The factors do not influence the roles of online travel communities in the process of the holiday decision-making but explain, which sociological factors accompanies in the process. In the analysis I focus on the first step of the decision-making process, which is called pre-decision. It is because the participants of the research distinguished the roles of the communities, which can apply only to this step.

The theories of consumer behavior and decision-making process are broadly used in various fields, not only in tourism, and they are used dependently on the approach one takes in a research. I find it very useful for my project because they explain sociological aspects of people's behavior, which affect the decisions. I believe that their explanation is crucial in relation to online travel

communities because the communities are the most common source of information among all the social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and the Internet is the very common place to search for information (Mattila, 2004).

I split the analysis chapter into three parts in order to distinguish my focus on three various aspects: understanding online travel communities from the perspective of the literature, the communities and the users; the roles of online travel communities distinguished by the interviewees, and the issue of trust online.

The analysis results in the findings, which I summarize below.

Findings

I can distinguish three interesting findings of this project:

- People use online travel communities from a position of an observant – they do not want to get involved into online social relationships

Despite the fact that people see online travel communities in a functional way - where one can share, exchange, advise, post information and experiences – they prefer to use the communities from an external position and limit their activities to information search. They do not want to get involved into online social relationships on the communities but they find it useful to use the communities in their holiday decision-making process.

- There are three main roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes

The users point out three roles online travel communities play in that process: information search, evaluation of the information, and assistance in the information search. All the three roles are involved in pre-decision step of the decision-making process (Correia & Pimpao, 2008) and because they are very much focused on finding information and testing it, they may influence the idea of the holiday destination or facilities.

Virtual communities are considered to be one of many channels used in the information search along friends, family and other reference groups. Their role in how much they are used can differ dependently on how much planning and risk is involved in the holiday decision. If there is low

risk of dissatisfaction caused by finances involved, geographical location, culture of the holiday place or other factor – then virtual communities can become a primary source of information. If, however, there are more concerns about the holidays – then they are one of many channels to find and test the information. This is usually a case of long-distance and long-term traveling.

- Trust does not have to be built up on social relationships

Although Casaló et al. (2011) argues that trust comes from social relationships between people in real life and on online travel communities, this research shows that the issue of trust does not have to be a result of social relationships. The feeling of trust can be created out of passive participation in social community, which is restricted to reading information and does not require activities, which would lead to social contact with other users, e.g. posting, exchanging information, commenting on posts etc. It is built on community opinion and not a single review. The feeling of users' contribution to the community and how the community validates his/her participation matters to the readers of these reviews. There is always a risk involved in trusting the information, which comes from sociological factors, e.g. reference groups, background, personality (Moutinho, 1993), which make each and every person unique. The information is more likely to be trusted if it is critical and not overly positive or negative. That, however, is evaluated according to the personal norms.

Future discussion

The phenomenon of online travel communities can be approach from many interesting angles. I believe that the above findings of the research already raise new questions to discuss. The research shows that the users of virtual travel communities perceive the communities as a social space but in practice they do not want to participate in being an active part of the communities. The roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision-making processes, which are distinguished by the interviewees, can be applied only to the first step of the holiday decision-making process – pre-decision step. Because of these findings, I believe that it would be interesting to discuss *why* the roles of online travel communities are limited to the step of pre-decision and why cannot they be applied to the post-purchase step. Thus, it would be exciting to investigate why people do not want to get into social relationships and return to the communities after their holiday adventures to share their experiences with other users.

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Appendix

Online pilot survey

Adults

Pilot survey_travel communities

Community [Edit](#)

[Design Survey](#)

[Collect Responses](#)

[Analyze Results](#)

[View Summary](#)

[Browse Responses](#)

[Filter Responses](#)

[Crosstab Responses](#)

[Download Responses](#)

[Share Responses](#)

Default Report ▾

[+ Add Report](#)

Response Summary



Total Started Survey: 48
Total Completed Survey: 45 (93.8%)

[Show this Page Only](#)

PAGE: 2

1. What is your gender?

[Create Chart](#) [Download](#)




| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|-------------------|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| Woman |  | 66.0% | 31 |
| Man |  | 34.0% | 16 |
| answered question | | | 47 |
| skipped question | | | 1 |

[Show this Page Only](#)



PAGE: 3

2. What is your age?

[Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|-------------------|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| 0-10 |  | 2.1% | 1 |
| 11-15 | | 0.0% | 0 |
| 16-20 | | 0.0% | 0 |
| 21-30 |  | 80.9% | 38 |
| 30+ |  | 17.0% | 8 |
| answered question | | | 47 |

PAGE: 4

| 3. Do you use online travel communities? | | | Create Chart | Download |
|--|---|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| | | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Yes |  | | 57.4% | 27 |
| No |  | | 42.6% | 20 |
| | | | answered question | 47 |
| | | | skipped question | 1 |

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PAGE: 5

| 4. Why do you use online travel communities? You can mark max. 3 answers | | | Create Chart | Download |
|---|---|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| | | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| To meet new online friends | | | 0.0% | 0 |
| To find travel partners | | | 0.0% | 0 |
| To get inspiration for holiday destination |  | | 52.2% | 24 |
| To get some information about touristic products, f.ex. hotels, airlines etc. |  | | 60.9% | 28 |
| To gain new knowledge |  | | 37.0% | 17 |
| I do not use travel online communities |  | | 39.1% | 18 |
| | | | answered question | 46 |
| | | | skipped question | 2 |

Teenagers

Pilot survey_travel communities_gsm_PL

Community Edit

Design Survey

Collect Responses

Analyze Results

View Summary

Browse Responses

Filter Responses

Crosstab Responses

Download Responses

Share Responses

Default Report

+ Add Report

Response Summary

WOW, YOU HAVE A POPULAR SURVEY! Your survey has received 370 responses! As a basic account holder, you can view the first 100 responses. With a professional account, you'll be able to see all of your responses.

Upgrade

Show this Page Only

PAGE: 2

1. Jaka jest Twoja płeć?






Create ChartDownload

| | Response Percent | Response Count |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Dziewczyna | 98.0% | 98 |
| Chłopiec | 2.0% | 2 |
| answered question | | 100 |
| skipped question | | 0 |

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57

PAGE: 3

| 2. W jakim jesteś wieku? | | |  Create Chart |  Download |
|--------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| | | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| 0-10 lat |  | | 13.3% | 13 |
| 11-15 lat |  | | 80.6% | 79 |
| 16-20 lat |  | | 6.1% | 6 |
| 21+ lat | | | 0.0% | 0 |
| | | | answered question | 98 |
| | | | skipped question | 2 |

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PAGE: 4

| 3. Czy korzystasz z internetowych społeczności o tematyce turystycznej? | | |  Create Chart |  Download |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| | | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Tak |  | | 31.6% | 31 |
| Nie |  | | 68.4% | 67 |
| | | | answered question | 98 |
| | | | skipped question | 2 |

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4. Dlaczego korzystasz z internetowych społeczności o tematyce turystycznej? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)
 Możesz zaznaczyć max. 3 odpowiedzi. Jeżeli nie korzystasz, zaznacz ostatnią odpowiedź.

| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|---|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| Żeby poznać nowych przyjaciół | | 20.7% | 19 |
| Żeby znaleźć chętne osoby do wspólnej podróży | | 5.4% | 5 |
| Żeby zasięgnąć inspiracji, gdzie pojechać na wakacje z rodzicami | | 23.9% | 22 |
| Żeby zasięgnąć informacji o różnych produktach turystycznych, np. o hotelach, liniach lotniczych itp. | | 15.2% | 14 |
| Żeby zdobyć nową wiedzę | | 28.3% | 26 |
| Nie korzystam | | 63.0% | 58 |
| answered question | | | 92 |
| skipped question | | | 8 |

[View Summary](#)[Browse Responses](#)[Filter Responses](#)[Crosstab Responses](#)[Download Responses](#)[Share Responses](#)

Default Report |

[+ Add Report](#)

Response Summary

Total Started Survey: 47
Total Completed Survey: 39 (83%)[Show this Page Only](#)

PAGE: 2



| 1. What is your gender? | | Create Chart | Download |
|-------------------------|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Girl | | 97.9% | 46 |
| Boy | | 2.1% | 1 |
| | | answered question | 47 |
| | | skipped question | 0 |

[Show this Page Only](#)

PAGE: 3

| 2. What is your age? | | Create Chart | Download |
|----------------------|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| 0-10 | | 9.1% | 4 |
| 11-15 | | 68.2% | 30 |
| 16-20 | | 18.2% | 8 |
| 21+ | | 4.5% | 2 |
| | | answered question | 44 |
| | | skipped question | 3 |

PAGE: 4

| 3. Do you use online travel community? | | | Create Chart | Download |
|--|---|---------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count | |
| Yes |  | 40.9% | 18 | |
| No |  | 59.1% | 26 | |
| | | | answered question | 44 |
| | | | skipped question | 3 |

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PAGE: 5

| 4. Why do you use online travel community? You can mark max. 3 answers. | | | Create Chart | Download |
|---|---|---------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count | |
| To meet new online friends |  | 35.9% | 14 | |
| To find travel partners |  | 12.8% | 5 | |
| To get inspiration for holiday destination where I could go with my parents |  | 28.2% | 11 | |
| To get some information about touristic products, f.ex. hotels, airlines etc. |  | 7.7% | 3 | |
| To gain new knowledge |  | 15.4% | 6 | |
| I do not use travel online communities |  | 51.3% | 20 | |
| | | | answered question | 39 |
| | | | skipped question | 8 |

Online survey

Travel communities survey

Community Edit

Design Survey

Collect Responses

Analyze Results

- View Summary
- Browse Responses
- Filter Responses
- Crosstab Responses
- Download Responses
- Share Responses

Default Report

+ Add Report

Response Summary

Total Started Survey: 56
Total Completed Survey: 49 (87.5%)

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PAGE: 2


| 1. What is your gender? | | Create Chart | Download |
|-------------------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Woman | <div></div> | 60.7% | 34 |
| Man | <div></div> | 39.3% | 22 |
| | | answered question | 56 |
| | | skipped question | 0 |



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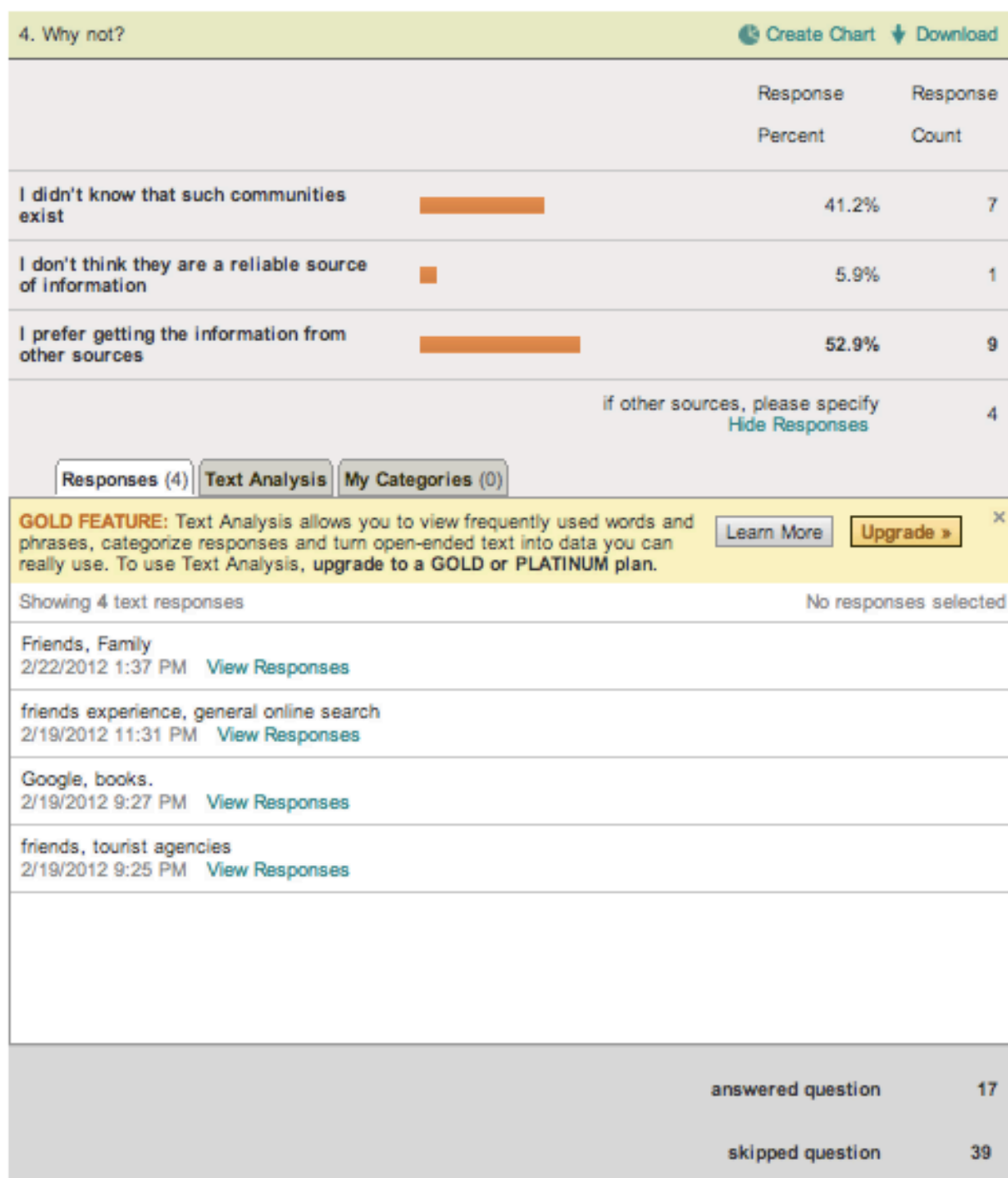
| 2. What is your age? | | Create Chart | Download |
|----------------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| below 20 | | 0.0% | 0 |
| 21-30 | <div></div> | 87.5% | 49 |
| 30+ | <div></div> | 12.5% | 7 |
| | | answered question | 56 |
| | | skipped question | 0 |

3. Do you use online travel communities for the purpose of gaining information about tourism products and to get inspiration for holiday destination?

 Create Chart  Download

| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|-----|---|---------------------|-------------------|
| Yes |  | 67.9% | 38 |
| No |  | 32.1% | 18 |
| | | answered question | 56 |
| | | skipped question | 0 |



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PAGE: 6

5. Do you create an account on online travel communities?

 Create Chart  Download




| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|-----|---|---------------------|-------------------|
| Yes |  | 23.1% | 9 |
| No |  | 76.9% | 30 |
| | | answered question | 39 |
| | | skipped question | 17 |

Show this Page Only

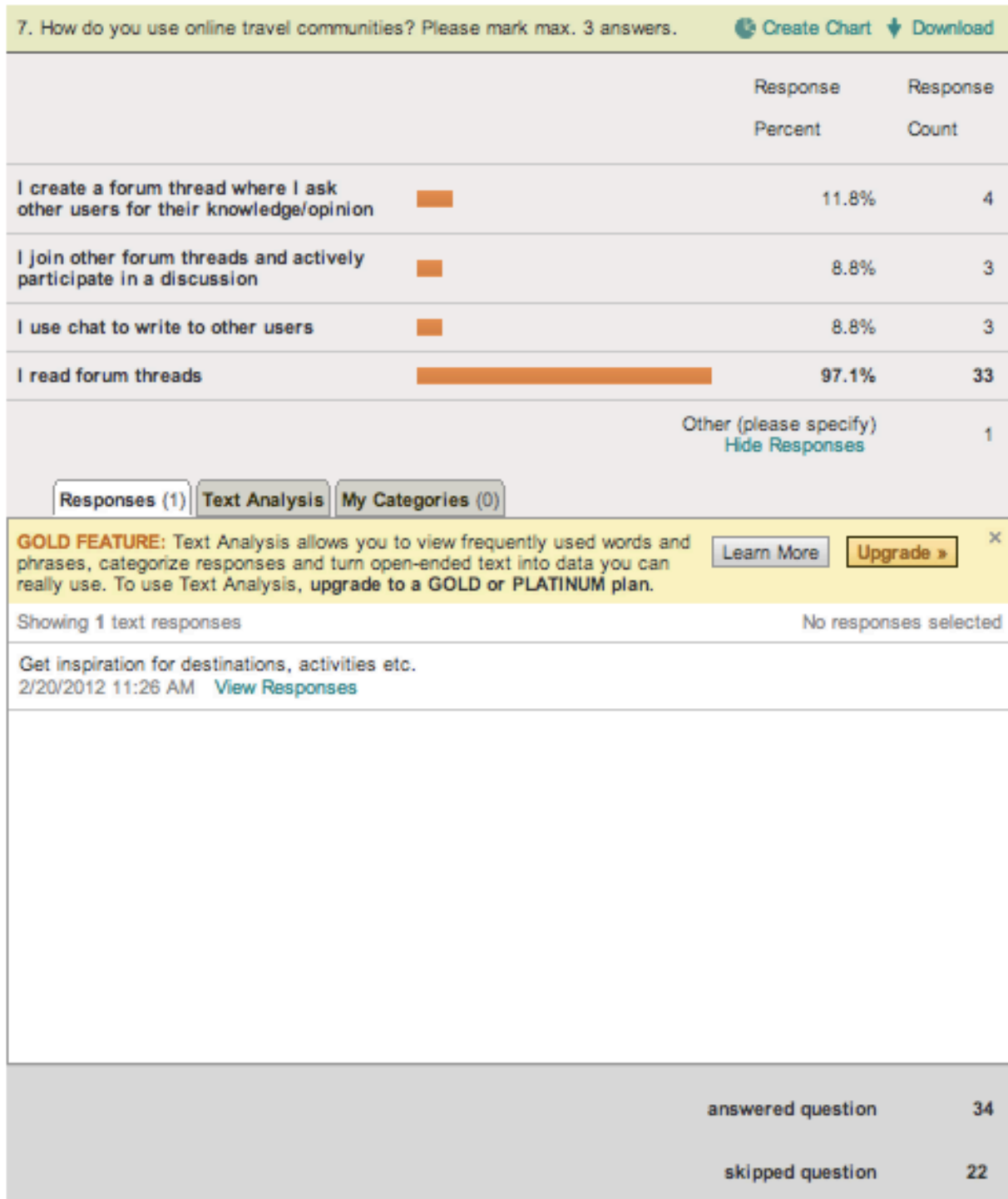
PAGE: 7

6. How often do you use online travel communities?

 Create Chart  Download

| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|--|---|---------------------|-------------------|
| Often, even when not planning holidays |  | 10.5% | 4 |
| Once in a while to find specific info |  | 71.1% | 27 |
| Rarely |  | 18.4% | 7 |
| | | answered question | 38 |
| | | skipped question | 18 |

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GOLD FEATURE: Text Analysis allows you to view frequently used words and phrases, categorize responses and turn open-ended text into data you can really use. To use Text Analysis, upgrade to a GOLD or PLATINUM plan.

No responses selected

experiences of other travellers, sporting options- often not enough info provided on booking sites
3/1/2012 12:10 AM [View Responses](#)

Show this Page Only

9. Are online travel communities the only source of information/inspiration for you when deciding on buying a tourism product? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|---|---|---------------------|-------------------|
| Yes, I find there all I need |  | 29.4% | 10 |
| No, it is rather an additional way of gaining information/inspiration |  | 70.6% | 24 |
| | | answered question | 34 |
| | | skipped question | 22 |



[Show this Page Only](#)

| | | |
|---|--|--------------------------|
| 10. Please state your main source. | | Download |
| | | Response |
| | | Count |
| Hide Responses | | 16 |
| Responses (16) Text Analysis My Categories (0) | | |
| GOLD FEATURE: Text Analysis allows you to view frequently used words and phrases, categorize responses and turn open-ended text into data you can really use. To use Text Analysis, upgrade to a GOLD or PLATINUM plan. Learn More Upgrade » × | | |
| Showing 16 text responses | | No responses selected |
| holidaycheck 3/1/2012 7:15 PM View Responses | | |
| friends of friends of friends experiences 3/1/2012 12:11 AM View Responses | | |
| Friends 2/24/2012 11:33 AM View Responses | | |
| travel guides 2/22/2012 7:05 PM View Responses | | |
| ? 2/22/2012 2:53 PM View Responses | | |
| Trip advisor 2/22/2012 11:51 AM View Responses | | |
| | | |
| answered question | | 16 |
| skipped question | | 40 |

[Show this Page Only](#)

11. Have information/opinions/recommendations on online travel communities ever influenced your decisions regarding tourism products?

[Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|-----|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| Yes |  | 90.9% | 30 |
| No |  | 9.1% | 3 |
| | | answered question | 33 |
| | | skipped question | 23 |

[Show this Page Only](#)

12. What online travel communities do you use? Please write the name of the website or paste a direct link to it. [Download](#)

| | Response Count |
|---|-----------------------|
| Hide Responses | 25 |
| Responses (25) Text Analysis My Categories (0) | |
| GOLD FEATURE: Text Analysis allows you to view frequently used words and phrases, categorize responses and turn open-ended text into data you can really use. To use Text Analysis, upgrade to a GOLD or PLATINUM plan. Learn More Upgrade » × | |
| Showing 25 text responses | No responses selected |
| tripadvisor, lonely planet, 3/1/2012 7:19 PM View Responses | |
| holidaycheck 3/1/2012 7:16 PM View Responses | |
| mysurfari.com 3/1/2012 12:14 AM View Responses | |
| Using official webpages of accomondation, airlines companies 2/24/2012 11:35 AM View Responses | |
| lonelyplanet, tripadvisor 2/22/2012 11:43 PM View Responses | |
| http://www.eskapadowcy.pl/, http://www.pasazer.com/ 2/22/2012 7:07 PM View Responses | |
| | answered question 25 |
| | skipped question 31 |

Interviews

The semi-structured interview was conducted among friends and colleagues. Therefore it had relaxed and free tone. Each of the respondents knew about the interview topic in advance. The interview was conducted after a short, friendly chat. The interviews were conducted separately and in different times.

Right before the interview, I reminded the interviewees that I work on my master thesis and I want to gather some primary data, which would help me to analyze the research question: what are roles of online travel communities in the holiday decision making processes?

In the transcripts I use abbreviation OTC for *online travel communities*.

Interviewer: Me

Interviewee: Milda

Me: My first question is how would you define an online travel community?

Milda: In my perception I think that those communities are basically forums or such websites like Tripadvisor where people just write their opinions or their experience, or they share relevant information about the previous traveling experiences, or dining experiences at the destination, or some reviews about the service or about the weather. Everything what is related to the destination or to traveling.

Me: I see, so it is about sharing, basically.

Milda: Yeah.

Me: What are your reasons for using OTC?

Milda: Hm, I'm not using those communities very often but when I use it that's when I have a reason to do that. It is when I cannot rely on other websites or other information providers, so then I go to check out some forums. You know, maybe somebody experienced that or have been at the situation where I am now and that's kind of supporting the other websites, giving me more knowledge based on the other people experiences.

Me: So it is not your primary source of information.

Milda: Not necessarily. Sometimes I am confused with all the information you can find in the destination. I could refer to Thailand cause they have so many companies that provide you with going from A to B and I don't really know which one is working and which one is not working anymore, maybe the website is still there or maybe they changed schedule but they didn't upload it on the website. So in that case I go to travel online communities and see whether people experienced that and whether they took the bus on that time. But I don't think I ever use OTC as a primary source of information.

Me: So it is rather to confirm the information.

Milda: It is rather to confirm and maybe to get a bigger picture of, you know, those facts about a schedule and so on, maybe sometimes they provide, you know, some more input like, yeah, the price is good but you have to be aware of some negative aspects, time or quality. And then it's actually, you know, giving me a thought whether to choose that product or whether to go there or not.

Me: Do you use OTC before you decide on the product you want choose or do you also go there afterwards, when you experience the product and you write recommendation, or your opinion. Or is it just to get information?

Milda: For me it is basically just to get information. I am not a member of any online community

in terms of traveling and I am using it only for getting information. Hehe, I'm stealing the information and not providing any.

Me: OK. Do you have any other motives to go to OTC? For example social motives, do you meet people there, do you chat, do you create an account? Oh no, you said you don't create an account.

Milda: No, I don't create an account. Probably in my case the motive is just to find the information or confirm the information, or to see whether it's worth to use the product, or whether to choose that product or not - instead of social thing. I don't think that's what I do there.

Me: Do you find information and opinions posted by other users trustworthy?

Milda: (pause) I do... Hm, in a way I really do think that information is real cause it means that a person really tried that, if he or she is sharing it on online community, but then again I am aware that it is another person I have no clue about and we have different perception of what is quality, what is positive, what is negative so... yes, I kind of believe what they say but I'm also thinking: yeah, maybe that's too much or maybe that's not me. I also kind of try to see the way they write things. If they are complaining about every single thing what happened on their trip then I'm not reading that anymore. But if people are giving like really, you know... some things were positive, some things were negative and they are giving some kind of balanced explanation of any product or a place, or activity - then I consider it as reliable.

Me: OK. So you see some kind of risk in that.

Milda: Of course. I am aware that I'm taking a risk trusting somebody who said something that I don't know and maybe that person was wrong and maybe it's just, you know, maybe that schedule is not like that anymore, or maybe cause they don't provide that service anymore. Of course I cannot trust it 100%.

Me: Do you trust it more than an official website of, lets say, a destination you wanna go to?

Milda: I think it very much depends on a destination.

Me: Or if it is any other product?

Milda: Oh, for example if I want to go to a website of a hotel of course I get only positive information and they will give me, you know, an explanation of how wonderful they are, and that it's very close to the beach and the rooms are very spacious and you have everything what you need there. So, I don't trust that. I wanna go to OTC then I see, OK, so whether people think it is what it is written or it's not. But, for example, if I would go to the country such as Norway, where the official websites are more developed than for example in Thailand, I think I would trust the official website. It depends on a destination and it depends on a product. I think that in any case, the online community, or the posts on OTC could support any official site or any official governmental or any official product site. I think that could work as a support.

Me: If you could summarize what you have just told me what would you say, what is the role of

online travel communities in your holiday decision process you make?

Milda: I would say it's not that strong cause online community is not the source that influences my holiday destination. I already have a destination when i go to online community to see. But it has an influence on, for example, when I'm choosing a hotel or when I'm choosing transportation, or when I'm choosing places I want to go to eat. So, I don't think it has much influence on a destination but it has on other activities and products that I choose in the destination, if that makes sense (smile). So... and the question was to summarize...

Me: Yes, if you could point out OTC roles but actually you just did.

Milda: OK, I'm not sure if I covered the question.

Me: I think you did.

Milda: OK.

Me: Great, thank you.

Milda: You are more than welcome.

Interviewer: Me

Interviewee: Stephanie

Me: Could you tell me how would you define OTC?

Stephanie: Damn it, I knew I should have prepared a definition (laughing).

Me: (Laughing) No no, I have enough definitions.

Stephanie: For me it's a platform online where I can pick up a lot of information from when I look for trips and destinations. I know I want to go somewhere or I'm interested in some place or something. I just go there and pick up information. I rarely write back, though. It's really just to pick up stuff.

Me: OK. But do you think it's different from normal (meaning regular) website with information?

Stephanie: Displays and descriptions?

Me: Yeah.

Stephanie: Yeah, yeah, definitely. Just having the personal feeling of people and little info that maybe you can't find on other websites, which are too marketing and they wouldn't say you anything anyway. It's not like that everywhere, maybe I just don't know the good websites, but yeah (smiling).

Me: OK. What are the reasons for using OTC?

Stephanie: The reasons?

Me: Yeah, why do you go there?

Stephanie: Why do I go there? I go there because I feel I don't get a type of information I'm into on the regular websites, which promote and advertise. And somehow it's like asking a question to Google. It's a very precise question and a precise answer because someone has already thought of it and asked for it, so that's really awesome.

Me: Is it only that you search for information when you plan to go on holidays or do you come back to such communities and write about your expressions and share with others?

Stephanie: No, I really go there when I'm planning to travel and also when I'm dreaming to. Not necessarily when I know that I am. Maybe sometimes for later, when I have a destination or I have a question... Because then I can map it in my mind and for later when I want to go there I know where to come back or... I like that.

Me: Do you go there when you have an idea where you wanna go and you need some small information, additional information, or does it influence your choices where to go and what to do?

Stephanie: Mmmm.... It can, I think... For example, I was considering going to New Zealand, you know, and stay there for few months, so I compared different cities and opinions about different places. Sometimes, yeah, I find information that makes me feel like: OK, I'm definitely not going

there, I'm gonna go there instead but... yeah, it really depends. Sometimes I really change my mind and sometimes I stick to what I think of and it just confirms. Yeah, so I'm very open.

Me: Yeah, that's good. What motivates you to go to such communities? And what I mean is... or the meaning is broad but what I'm also having in mind is a social aspect. Do you meet people there to talk, friends...?

Stephanie: No, I don't...

Me: You are not active...?

Stephanie: No, I'm not active really... I'm really taking in (laughing), much more than I'm giving. Maybe I should consider sharing information because I've been moving around and... but somehow I don't go back there after I traveled. It's really before. And motivation wise... when did I start... I think I started before I went to Australia because I didn't know anything about it and I wanted to learn more so I guess it was the first motivation just to find out more and more and find as much information. And I think that it complements really well with some other websites and sometimes you just find information that you don't find anywhere else, really. Just personal feedback, nothing can replace that. And that's the main motivation.

Me: Do you find information and opinions posted by other users trustworthy?

Stephanie: Sorry?

Me: Do you find information and opinions posted by other users trustworthy? Do you trust the information?

Stephanie: Hmm.... Yes, relatively. But (laughing) I still choose my own vision of things. That's what is cool about that, there are forums with a lot of discussions and a lot of inputs because then you can, you know... It's like having Wikipedia where you can double check or triple check... Well, I think on the forum that's there already cause there are so many people participating, you know, that you have different information and answers and they complete each other somehow. Then I just double check with websites or other forums, etc. But I find it very useful.

Me: So do you go there to confirm your research or is it your starting point?

Stephanie: Hmmmm.... It depends. (long pause) OK, for small trips in general I would go there straight. You know, which places I should go to when I have two days. If it's big trips I would go everywhere: websites, forums, online communities. Yeah, and complement. I don't know if I answer your question...

Me: Yes, you did. So, just to confirm, I guess it's not always a primary source of information.

Stephanie: It's always there. I never base myself on just websites. So it's always present when I have to travel. I always check them. Then it's either in smaller or bigger amount or I check more of them, you know, to find the trip tickets or stuff like that.

Me: If you could summarize what you have just told me and to point out what are the roles of such

communities in your decision making process what would you say? What are their roles?

Stephanie: Hm... Confirm, validate, question some pieces of information... So, it's really a key element for me and my decision making process, I think, before I travel. Because I won't go to a place before I check stuff like that...

Me: So you need some personal opinions...

Stephanie: Yeah, I need various opinions and instead of asking ten people, or my friends, OK, what do you think, what do you think... Yeah...

Me: OK. Can you mention some sites you are using, meaning OTC?

Stephanie: Oh, I cannot remember... But Lonely Planet sometimes, Voyageforum.com. This one has a lot of different conversation and forums, topics, a lot of things there. And... yeah, and then some others I find along when I search on Google, those are sigh-lights. I really like Voyageforum.

Me: Ok. Thank you, that's it (smiling).

Stephanie: Oh, you are welcome (smiling).

Interviewer: Me

Interviewee: Miia

Me: Could you tell me how would you define OTC?

Miia: What I think about it, at least, it would be something where you can talk about or get advice from other users, not from necessarily from anything a... of course it could be also some sort of authority but mainly where there are users advising other users giving tips and opinions. (pause) Like for example Thorn Tree with the Lonely Planet. Like a discussion formu.

Me: Yeah. What are your reasons for using such communities?

Miia: I look for what people have said about either destinations, what's good to do there, good restaurants, good hotels or weather tips or where to travel. So it's more like if I have something in mind, which I think would be interesting then I use it to see what people have said about that place.

Me: Does it influence your decision when you have to choose a place or do you have destination in mind you want to go to and then you ask for additional things?

Miia: (short pause) I think I do both. Mainly, maybe more thinking like OK, I wanna go to Philippines then where should I go and is it a good idea to go there at all at that time of the year?

Me: And because of the opinions you get you can still change your mind and it's not gonna be Philippines but something else.

Miia: Yes, exactly.

Me: OK. What motivates you to go to such communities?

Miia: It's if I have... if I'm not sure, if I'm in doubt a little bit whether it's a good idea, like for example with Asia, with rainy season – it's hard to know when it is so to find out from people who have actually been there. But if I already decided that I'm going to Greece and, maybe I've been there before, so I don't have that many doubts about. So if there is uncertainty about... important factors that affect the holidays then I often go and take a look. Or also if I already decided to go somewhere and then when I wanna know what to do for the whole week, what options, what have other people try. So I think it's for both choosing the destination but also for details inside the trip if I already picked the destination.

Me: Are there any social motives for going to OTC? To meet traveling partners...

Miia: No, I don't do that.

Me: Do you create an account on OTC or do you have an account?

Miia: I have an account on the Lonely Planet one. But i don't have an account on the other one. I read TripAdvisor a lot, as well. But I don't create accounts, there I haven't posted anything.

Me: Do you post your own experiences?

Miia: No, it's only questions to find out about. So I'm a bad user (laughing).

Me: (laughing) I noticed that it's quit common. Do you find information and opinions posted by other users trustworthy?

Miia: Yes. I actually never doubt if they think that. Of course there is a question whether you are a similar type of question or not. But... Personally I don't see any reason why somebody would lie. And you can quite easily see if it's an advert or real person writing.

Me: OK, how can you distinguish that?

Miia: (pause) Maybe it's hard to explain but often the once that are adverts are overly positive and... they're talking about this one specific place and when you look at other people who talked about the same place it doesn't match at all. So, it's not enough to see what comment you have, sometimes you have to see more.

Me: Have you ever been disappointed when you made a decision based on users' comments?

Miia: No, I wouldn't say so. But I think it's partly because... especially hotels and stuff is something what I would look at. But I find a lot of people are a lot more critical than I am, I don't expect as much as some people do, so when they complain about little things...

Me: So what do you expect from that, general answers or...?

Miia: From the other people?

Me: Yeah.

Miia: If I have asked a question then it's a specific answer to my question. But if it's just looking at a hotel and what other people said about it then it's looking at the overall picture. If there is someone complaining about details which are not important for me then I can discard that.

Me: Do I understand right that you write questions on forums?

Miia: Sometimes, sometimes...

Me: So you not only browse on forums?

Miia: Sometimes I write questions and sometimes I browse. It depends a little bit if I can find what I am looking for without asking (laughing).

Me: Is OTC your primary source of informations when you decide on your holidays?

Miia: (pause) Oh, that's tuff. If it's primary or not... (thinking) Cause mainly I talk to people that I know and I get ideas. Also...looking at general pages like official one and then... So I think it's like three important things but I don't think I've been on a holiday for the past long time without looking at them.

Me: So it's family and friends, official websites and then OTC to confirm your research, right?

Miia: Yeah.

Me: Can you mention some OTC you are using? You mentioned some already...

Miia: Yeah, it's Thorn Tree on the Lonley Planet, Tripadvisor and then hotel bookings of course, not OTC as such but for travel information.

Me: If you could summarize what you have just told me and to point out what are the roles of such communities in your decision process?

Miia: I think mainly it is confirmation I guess and detail things I cannot find from my friends and I don't necessarily trust the official one that's meant as a marketing source.

Me: Great, that's it. Thank you.

Interviewer: Me

Interviewee: Jonathan

Me: Could you tell me how would you define online travel communities (OTC)?

Jonathan: Hm... OTC is a place where you can exchange ideas about traveling, you can get inspirations for traveling, probably. I assume it's like a web 2.0 type of idea where you can exchange ideas about traveling, like an open forum for everybody. Everybody can sign up and, yeah, exchange ideas, I guess.

Me: All right. What are your reasons for using OTC?

Jonathan: To get ideas, actually. If I travel, or I know I travel to some location, I would look this location up and just see if there are restaurants or a cheap accommodation places or... maybe some ideas to go and ask people what are good places to be, what are bad places to be. Stuff like that.

Me: But does it help you to decide about your destination you want to go to or is it just to find facilities within a destination?

Jonathan: Nah, I think I would pick the destination before and then use it. I guess I wouldn't depend on community to find a location. Yeah.

Me: So it is additional source of information?

Jonathan: Yeah, exactly, just to get ideas and inspirations.

Me: OK. Do you come back to such communities to write your own reviews? (long pause from the respondent therefore I asked more questions aiming to explain what I want to know) What I mean is how active are you on such communities? Do you have an account, do you write about your experiences or do you just go there to take information?

Jonathan: I guess I'm signed up at few, like TripAdvisor... I think I might be signed up for one or two more but I never use it, actually. I would only use it to get inspiration but never to get my own feedback.

Me: Why wouldn't you go back and write your feedback?

Jonathan: Well, I am too lazy to sign up and give a review, unless I really have a motivation to do so. Even if I have a negative feedback I wouldn't bother to write it down, unless it really pisses me off, than anger might overthrow laziness (smiling).

Me: What motivates you to go to such communities?

Jonathan: (long pause) What motivates me is that it's cheap, free, it's first-hand experience from another person who has already been there, so it's a good way to get information you need and you want. Cause maybe in other places you wouldn't get this information that easily cause probably it's too small, more hard to get. So it's good that it's free pool of information.

Me: Do you use it for social motives? But I guess you don't cause you talk about getting mostly

information. What I mean is do you meet friends there, talk to someone, searching for future traveling partners...?

Jonathan: Does Facebook count as travel community?

Me: Hm, not in my mind but maybe for you it does?

Jonathan: Well, then it's more to get in contact with others I guess. Unless I agree that something is specified, they are in this destination, at this place and this time, doing this activity. Then I might sign up but this is not a case I guess. So I never use it for contacting people, just go get blank information then.

Me: I see. Do you find information and opinions posted by other users trustworthy?

Jonathan: (long pause) Yes. Mostly yes.

Me: Can you elaborate on that a little bit? Why?

Jonathan: Cause I think, well, of course you always read the articles and they specify, lets say that they have for example a hotel they give you a review for. They at least give a statement why it is bad. And then you can already see how trustworthy it is. If they say, OK it was really dirty or a service wasn't right or whatever then I would of course see it as trustworthy. First of all it is an experience otherwise I wouldn't state it and then I can decide for myself if it's important for me or not. If they say that it's dirty, I don't give a shit if it's dirty or not, for example, lets say (smile). And... yeah. Normally in those communities no people wouldn't write just for fun to bad other people. Actually I quite believe in that.

Me: All right. Is OTC is your primary source of information?

Jonathan: (long pause) Nah, I think the most information I get from pages like Wikipedia, Travelwiki, which is not really online community, yeah? In a way.... I would get good information about the country... it's rather not my primary source, I just use it additionally if I'm at some place, look for some specific accommodation, deals or some stuff... Usually, I guess, I make up my own mind.

Me: So does it confirm your research, is it a tool for that?

Jonathan: Sometimes yes, not many but sometimes.

Me: All right. You say that you wouldn't use OTC for picking a destination but how about any other tourist product?

Jonathan: Like an activity?

Me: Yes, for example.

Jonathan: Yeah, I would probably use it. Like if I wanna go for a kayak trip then I think it's the best tool, like Tripadvisor, you need. Cause they provide direct feedback to those activities. The bigger the community the better feedback you get.

Me: If you could summarize what you have just told me and to point out what are the roles of such

communities in your decision making process what would you say?

Jonathan: OTC don'tt affect my initial choice of destination, as I have other priorities in the decision making process. Yet, OTCs help me to find certain activities, accommodation and so forth in the particular destination chosen. It's an asset, as the web 2.0 based platform seeks to strengthen exchange in between customers and also service providers - which makes it easy to find the cheapest deal... the most spectacular hike or the craziest activity. I use OTC's, but not on a regular base and not as frequent.

Interviewer: Me

Interviewee: Jovana

Me: My first question is how would you define OTC?

Jovana: As a place where I can find initial information about the destination where I'm going. That's why I basically use it for.

Me: Do you distinguish that from official websites?

Jovana: Yes, because you get more information from people who have actually been to the place, who have spent some time there, who have experienced it. Because, you know, usually the official websites are like all nice and pretty (smiling) and write all the positive things but then you actually get a real situation, at least you get more info about how it really is.

Me: Mhm. What are your reasons for using such communities?

Jovana: To find out more about the destination and also for, you know, to know what to be aware of and also to kind of find interesting places to visit, that people recommend.

Me: Do you use OTC to find a destination you want to go to or do you have a destination in mind and then you search for small activities within that destination?

Jovana: I usually have destination in mind and then I search for things I can do there or for more information to use when planning my activities at that destination.

Me: If you see negative opinions about the destination would you be able to change your mind or...?

Jovana: Yeah, it depends, you know if I have the tickets already or not (laughing). If I already bought the tickets then you know, it's a lottery and I will have to deal with it (smiling). But it definitely influences my decision. Especially like in booking a hotel, for example, so I would always go and check reviews of some hotel. And even though I was about to book that hotel or even I booked it I have to read the review, I would actually sometimes cancel it and change my mind.

Me: What motivates you to go to OTC?

Jovana: Well, the fact that you can find out more information and not just, you know, all nice information that you can get on the official websites. Because it's like more insider tips and... you know, when you go to official websites they try to sell that to you and make it better than it actually is. And then when you actually read what people have experienced when they went there, that's much better.

Me: Do you use it for social motives? To meet traveling partners, meet friends...?

Jovana: No.

Me: Do you have an account on any of OTC?

Jovana: I have on Forum.hr, I have one of that.

Me: Do you write your questions there or do you just browse...?

Jovana: I did write when we were going to Thailand, I did write there about the date I was interested in. Because at first I read everything through, mostly everyone answered to me but then I had some questions so I asked.

Me: Do you come back to OTC to share your experiences?

Jovana: I should, I always say I'm gonna do it and then I don't, I'm so bad at it (smiling). Ever time I travel I'm like: yeah, I have to come back and share my knowledge and then of course when I come back I kind of get busy with other things (smiling). But I should do that because I think it's really nice and, you know, it's so generous to share your knowledge with other people. There was so many things that I found out from the communities that I wouldn't know from any other way. For example when we were in Thailand I got so many information from a travel community before we went there. And, actually we were at Phuket and going for one day trip to some other island. I remembered that on the online community I read: OK, if you go there you have to go to this other island, which is like in the neighborhood. But that one wasn't included in our rout. And then I asked if we could go there and it was possible. It was like the best island we visited so if I didn't read about that on the online community I wouldn't know that is there.

Me: Wow, that sounds cool. Do you find information and opinions posted by other users trustworthy?

Jovana: Yeah, most of them. Because you can also sense that from the way they write. I mean, if they complain about something that I find irrelevant, of course I'm not gonna take that into consideration. But if I read something what can be relevant for me then yes, I think it's trustworthy. Especially like these sites where you can also put a photo... That's good.

Me: Is it your primary source of information?

Jovana: (small pause) Well, after I pick the destination usually it is. Usually I would go to some communities to read what I get there. Yes.

Me: Do you check other websites as well, afterwards or base on OTC?

Jovana: No, I usually check other once as well.

Me: Official websites?

Jovana: Yes, I also check official websites, of course. But you know...

MJ: And then you see what can be true or not (smiling).

Jovana: Yes (smiling).

Me: So, as I understand OTC confirm your research and decisions you make, right?

Jovana: Yes.

Me: OK. Then my last question is if you could summarize what you have just told me and say what are the roles of such communities in your decision process?

Jovana: What are the roles? Definitely helping me to decide which area I should stay in, what

places to visit and what I should be aware of. Like, for example going to Thailand or going to India I found out on forums what to be aware of.

Me: So it helps you decide.

Jovana. Yeah, yeah, definitely.

Me: Great, than that's it. Thank you.

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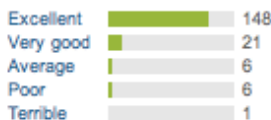
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