

Quality analysis of hotel rating portals – theoretical and empirical evidence

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Abstract

Hotel rating portals like TripAdvisor and Booking.com have become a vital information source for guests and service providers alike. For guests, the great significance of online reviews lies in their perceived authenticity or independence from the service providers. They can help to reduce the information asymmetry with respect to the offer in favour of the guest side. For the supply side, such reviews mean a loss of control over the information contents spread about their services. On the other hand, these public feedbacks are now an important target value in the quality and reputation management. Due to the great variety of hotel rating portals, however, it has become difficult for hotel managers to decide which portals they should best focus their activities on. Qualitative scientific analyses, which could support this decision, scarcely exist. The presented study therefore develops and applies an instrument for empirical comparative analyses of the quality of hotel rating portals.

Based on established theories on information processing, information adoption is considered a useful target concept for the analysis. It can be defined as the (sub)conscious process of accepting an information as being true and applying it to a decision. Only upon fulfilment of information adoption, online reviews are likely to reduce travellers uncertainties. Portals and their contents should therefore optimally be set up such that the probability of information adoption is maximized. An existing model on information adoption, which was refined and adapted to the context of hotel rating portals, is used as the theoretical basis of the analysis instrument. There is practical evidence that some travellers take their decisions on the basis of superficial research, while others inform themselves profoundly. As long as this holds, the model implies that portals should at best be able to handle both routes of information processing to support most travellers optimally. This leads to an instrument consisting of the quality criteria “source credibility”, “argument quality” and “provision of fast decision aids”.

On the basis of scientific literature, indicators for these quality criteria were derived and subsequently operationalized with 36 single variables. The instrument was exemplarily applied to the portals TripAdvisor, Holidaycheck, Booking, HRS, Expedia, hotel.de, hotels.com, Venere, Zoover and Ebookers, whereby the data was collected by means of a content analysis of the respective websites. The findings regarding each criterion were consolidated by calculating and adding up proportional degrees of fulfilment to obtain a comprehensive and comparable quality index for all of the portals. A sensitivity analysis was then carried out to control for the robustness of the aggregate results.

The empirical results indicate that despite partially common ownership structures, each portal has its very specific quality profile. The greatest differences lie in their investments to increase “source credibility” and “argument quality”, while “fast decision aids” seem to be their core competence.

Keywords: new information technologies, hotel industry, quality and reputation management, asymmetric information, customer satisfaction, content analysis