Assessing the Value of Hotel Online Reviews to Consumers

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Abstract Previous research studied the impact of travel online reviews. However, this is quantitative and lacks of conceptual frameworks to ensure consistency. Only a few of these have considered influencing variables (i.e. characteristics of the review and the reader, and surrounding circumstances). Some of their findings are conflicting, which could relate to the lacking of a consistent approach. This study will only focus on online reviews about accommodation establishments. Its aim is to gain an understanding of the value of accommodation online reviews, through a qualitative study. A conceptual framework, based on consumer-perceived value theory, has been developed and face-to-face interviews with accommodation online review readers have been undertaken. The results suggest that the value of reviews is primary epistemic and partially functional, but limited emotional and social value has been reported. Furthermore, the elements eliciting the different value dimensions and additional variables influencing on their value (such as information search patterns) are identified.

1 Introduction

Extant research suggests that social media (social networking sites, consumer review sites, content community sites, wikis, Internet forums and location-based social media) makes an important contribution in tourism, in terms of promotion and supporting tourists' decision-making. This has particularly been the case of studies on online reviews, like those provided through travel-related websites such as Trip Advisor, Booking.com, Trivago.com (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). The online review service

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provided through these websites aims at supporting travellers in choosing their destination/hotel/other travel services (Dwivedi, Shibu, & Venkatesh, 2007; Hudson & Thal, 2013). According to Bray, Schetzina, and Steinbrick (2006), Femback and Thomson (1995), Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002), and Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, and Fesenmaier (2009), travel online reviews are perceived as similar to the recommendations provided by friends and relatives, and it is a more trusted source of information than the official one. Furthermore, Gretzel, Fesenmaier, and O'Leary (2006), and Wang et al. (2002) suggest that the reason for this impact is that social media decreases uncertainty, and it provides a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities.

However, findings about the impact of online reviews are not conclusive. Additional research has suggested that this influence may be limited. This is the case of the work undertaken by Conrad Advertising in association with YouGov (Conrad Advertising & YoGov, 2011). Their study suggests that most of the time, negative reviews do not stop those reading them from booking a service. Similarly, Ayeh, Leung, Au, and Law (2012), argue that most Internet users do not access online reviews when planning their trips. So what's the reason behind these different results?

The reality is that most research suggesting the impact of online reviews has focused mainly on consumer decision-making and has been quantitative (i.e. Fotis et al., 2012; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Yes, it's true that quantitative research is strong in terms of reliability and validity. Nevertheless, they hold the danger of decontextualizing the phenomenon under study by removing the event from its real world setting, and ignoring the effects of variables that may have not been included in the model (Webb & Auriacombe, 2006). Hence, as argued by Ayeh et al. (2012), little is known about what makes online reviews relevant to consumers. And research understanding the emotional and behavioural responses at a deep level, helping marketers to understand exactly how, when and where social media influences consumers, is lacking (Hudson & Thal, 2013). Consequently, this study seeks to address that gap, and to gain an understanding of the real value of online reviews to those readying them.

Yet it's true that online travel reviews may relate to destinations, accommodations and a wide number of travel-related elements, however this study will only focus on accommodation online reviews. This is because of the limited resources available to undertake the study. Further development of the work would focus on additional elements. Hence, the aim of this study is that one of obtaining an understanding of the value of accommodation online reviews. However, it should not be confused with those studies focusing on the impact of reviews. As opposed to those studies mainly focused on functional aspects of the reviews (e.g. their impact on decision-making), this one adopts a comprehensive, multidimensional approach to assess consumer value. The literature review will develop a conceptual framework for this concept of consumer value, and it will also examine those studies focused on the impact and use of online reviews. Although these adopt a different approach, they can also enrich the discussion.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Impact and Use of Online Reviews*

As explained through the introduction section, there are different views on the level and type of impact of online reviews on traveller's decision making.

An extensive number of studies have identified benefits of travel online reviews for potential travellers looking for information. Online reviews have been reported to decrease uncertainty (Gretzel et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2002); to act as a source of inspiration (Fotis et al., 2012); to provide information about destinations and products that helps travellers evaluating alternatives; to increase travellers' confidence during decision making, to reduce risk and to assist them in selecting accommodation (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007), and to help avoiding places/ services that would not be enjoyed (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

However, most of these studies generalise about these benefits and tend to ignore differences among the reviews. Yes, it's true that some studies look at some types of variations. For example, Gretzel et al. (2007) and Gretzel & Yoo (2008) look at the influence of meta-communication (e.g. cosmetic factors that make reviews more trustworthy, such as the tone of the review, a balance of pros/cons, the characteristics of the reviewers etc.); the types of travel services which seem to be influenced (i.e. activities, restaurants and accommodation) and those that don't (i.e. choices about the destination, the timing of the trip, and en route travel planning); and the influence of age and gender on the use of reviews. Related to this is the work by Rodríguez del Bosque, Héctor San Martín, Collado, and del Mar García de los Salmones (2009) who argues that age also influences on the credibility attributed to online reviews, with younger generations trusting reviews more than older generations. Additionally, Court et al. (2009) identify different stages in travel decision-making process (i.e. consider; evaluate; buy; enjoy; advocate; and bond) and they suggest that social media specially influences on the evaluate and advocate stages.

Other factors that have been considered relate to the type of trip, and whether it is a repeat destination. For example, Verma, Stock, and McCarthy (2012) suggested differences in online behaviour between those travelling for business and leisure. According to their study those travelling for business tend to follow the recommendations given by their company when choosing a hotel. However, when it comes to leisure trips, consumers tend to rely more on personal recommendations, which are then also followed by search engines and online travel agencies. And Simms (2012) suggest that those visiting a destination for the first time will look at online reviews, but not those visiting for a repeat. Also the place where it is written seems to have an important influence. The work by Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, and Buultjens (2011) suggests that the place where the reviews are located will determine how much they are trusted. Reviews are trusted more when they are placed in travel specific websites more than when they are located in generic social networks websites. Additionally, the information provided by travel agents, commercial operators and comments by travellers on third party websites were trusted. But

the highest level of trust was placed on that information provided through State government tourism websites. However, consumers were not sure about trusting comments placed on their own blogs, as well as on generic social networking sites. Related to this is the work by Mack, Blose, and Pan (2008) in Fotis et al. (2012), who suggests that traditional WOM is more trustworthy than blog posts. This may be because in WOM travellers have strong social ties.

However, there are other factors to which no attention has been paid. This is the case of the elements about the hotel/destination or other service that users actively look for; the criteria that they apply when selecting reviews; the impact of the different patterns of information search; and the influence of other elements such as for example the type of accommodation. Furthermore, some of the aspects that have been studied show no conclusive results. For example, Cox et al. (2009) in Fotis et al. (2012) identify the stage of the trip in which online reviews are mainly used. According to their work, their use prior to the trip is very common, and they are hardly used during and after the trip. Contrary, Fotis et al. (2012) undertook an online survey across holiday's makers from the Former Soviet Union Republics, including Russia and suggested that after the trip is the most common time when social media is used, and the reason for this is because it used to share experiences and photos.

Contradicting results are also those related to trust. A number of authors have suggested that that online reviews provide information valued to a similar degree of that one provided by friends and relatives and more trusted source of information than the official one (Bray et al., 2006; Femback & Thomson, 1995; Wang et al., 2002; Yoo et al., 2009). However, Cox et al. (2009) in Fotis et al. (2012) suggest that social media were perceived as less trustworthy than traditional sources of information (e.g. official tourism websites and travel agents). However, the sample relates to mailing list of an official tourism website which may have skewed the results. And there are also conflicting results between the work by Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) and by Gretzel et al. (2007). The former suggests that the reviewers' expertise does not influence on the impact of reviews. However, the work by Gretzel et al. (2007) suggests that the characteristics of the reviewer (such as the tone of the review, a balance of pros/cons, the characteristics of the reviewers, such as whether they have experience travelling or not, etc.) do have an impact on the extent to which their comments are considered.

Other aspects that have been quite neglected are those related to the customer experience, both in terms of its hedonic role and making them feel part of the literature. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) suggest that online reviews are perceived as enjoyable but no explanation of the reasons behind this enjoyment, and the aspects that make it enjoyable has been provided. And one of the few studies that suggests this issue of a sense of belonging is Gretzel et al. (2006), arguing that social media provides a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities. However, to the knowledge of the researchers, no empirical result has confirmed these suggestions.

In addition, there are also some studies which actually challenge the overall suggestion that online reviews have such an influence on the decision making of potential travellers. Ayeh et al. (2012) suggest that most Internet users do not access

online reviews when planning their trips and that little is known about what makes online reviews relevant to consumers. And this the work by Conrad Advertising (2011) in association with YouGov, suggests that the influence of online media on travellers' decision may just be limited. Thus, this section of the literature review has supported the identification of a number of gaps in the literature with regards to providing an understanding of what is the real value of accommodation online reviews to potential travellers. These gaps relate to the limited number of studies exploring factors influencing this value, their frequently inconsistent results and the overall lack of a comprehensive and consistent approach for its study. Therefore, the following section will be directed to the identification of a conceptual framework supporting the comprehensive study of the consumer value of accommodation online reviews.

2.2   The Consumer Perceived Value: A Framework

In order to understand what makes the online reviews relevant to the consumers, the 'perceived value' comes as a key concept. Traditionally, the concept of 'value' has been intended as equivalent of price and monetary value, but from a marketing and consumer perspective, the value is seen as a trade-off between price and quality which relies more on customers' perceptions of the product than on its objective characteristics. However, this definition works well when applied to the tangible products, but when it comes to intangible products and services, more socio-psychological and contextual factors should be taken into consideration (Williams & Soutar, 2000). In fact, during the time, the one-dimensional definition of the 'consumer perceived value' has been replaced by multidimensional conceptualizations (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). The 'perceived value' construct—beside the objective product related components, such as price and product attributes (Tellis & Gaeth, 1990)—included more subjective and evaluative consumer dimensions: the consumer's personal benefits (Zeithaml, 1998), the personal expectations and desires (Spreng, Dixon, & Olshavsky, 1993) the shopping experience (Kerin, Jain, & Howard, 1992), the corporate image (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998), the context (Bolton & Drew, 1991), the conative variables—as the repurchase intention or search for alternative—(Desarbo, Jedidi, & Sinha, 2001), the consumer's values (Holbrook, 1999), the value of the relationship between seller and buyer (Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005).

Accommodation online reviews are essentially contents, written from previous travellers and less or more organized by a website provider. By reading reviews the majority of the generated value is in the cognitive, mental process of the final reader: the value is strictly concerned with the internal system that individuals use to value items (Holbrook, 1999). Thus, a multidimensional construct of consumer perceived value seems to be the most suitable framework to assess what makes the online reviews relevant to consumers. In order to structure the interview and the key

source of perceived value of the accommodation online reviews Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991) framework has been adopted.

The consumption theory (Sheth et al., 1991) claims that the value for the consumers stems from five different aspects of the consumption: epistemic value, functional value, emotional value, social value and conditional value.

The epistemic value originates from the satisfaction of the consumer's desire of knowledge and curiosity. This dimension is a relevant source of value for online reviews due to their informative nature; the epistemic value was considered as the main source of consumer perceived value and a key dimension to explore.

The functional value of the product or service is generated from the accomplishment of its function, the fulfilment of its purpose. In measuring this value, Sweeney and Soutar (2001) split it in two parts: a. the 'value-for-price' that is a comparison between perceived quality and price; b. the 'performance/quality' that is the utility derived from the perceived quality and the performance of the product. Since the online reviews are provided free of monetary disbursement, the price of the accommodation online reviews is here intended as the effort in terms of energies and time that the travellers spend in researching information through online reviews. Thus, the performance of online review was operationalized as its effectiveness in providing crucial, truthful and reliable information which turned the experience of accommodation into appositive overnight to the travellers.

The emotional value is related to the feeling that the consumption generates, it represents the hedonistic part of the purchase (Sheth et al., 1991) and includes the play or fun gained from it (Holbrook, 1994). While the social value represents the perceived utility stemming from an alternative's association with one or more specific social groups (Sheth et al., 1991). Its definition has successively been broaden to include the symbolic social meaning of the consumption (Sweeney, Soutar, Whiteley, & Johnson, 1996). It has been suggested that the social media, and thus the online reviews, provides a sense of belonging into virtual travel community (Gretzel et al., 2006), hence the social value for online reviews is operazionalized as the creation of linkages with other members of the community and, with its ability to facilitate the identification with specific groups of travellers with common interests.

Finally, Sheth et al. (1991) defined the conditional value like the perceived utility acquired as the result of a specific set of circumstances facing the choice maker (Sheth et al., 1991). The reviews value can change in a different set of circumstances: researchers suggested that travellers, according to their trip purpose (Verma et al. 2012 in Fotis et al. 2012) or its repeated/new nature (Simms, 2012) trust different sources of recommendations. For our research, the conditional value of the accommodation online reviews was taken into consideration by asking interviewees to describe the characteristics of trip (i.e. purpose, length, travelling alone/in company, etc.) for which they have been looking through the online reviews.

3 Methodology

The aim of the study is to assess the value of accommodation online reviews to consumers. In order to achieve it, the following objectives have been set up:

1. To obtain an understanding of the extent and type of influence that accommodation online review sites have on customers' choice.
2. To identify common and individual patterns of use of accommodation online reviews.

In order to address the stated objectives, a semi structured in-deep interview was designed for assessing the traveller perceived value of the accommodation online reviews. Consistently with the explorative nature of this work, the interview was structured in five sections reflecting the framework presented above. Each section covering a specific value dimension—epistemic, functional, emotional, social, and conditional—included a set of open ended questions for stimulating the interviewees in talking freely about the topic and, for obtaining information on the interviewee's cognitive and decisional process. Ten semi-structured in-deep interviews were undertaken in August 2014. Each interview lasted around an hour, and they took place in various locations of the UK and Italy. A convenience sampling was adopted to recruit participants, based on their availability and their reported experience with the use of accommodation online reviews. The sample achieved representation of four nationalities, including Italian, Spanish, Irish and British, to avoid potential cross-national differences. However, it should be noted that most participants were female (nine females and one male). Furthermore, ages varied between 28 and 47 years old only. These limitations will be considered throughout the discussion.

4 Results

Results are presented by discussing individually four out of five value dimensions: epistemic, functional, emotional, social. The circumstantial factors (i.e. length of the trip, frequency, etc.) are illustrated at the beginning of this section and when significant are discussed along to other value dimensions.

Travel patterns varied across participants. Nearly half of the participants (four out of ten) only travelled twice per year, one three times, and the remaining travelled four times or more. The participant with the highest number of trips travelled ten times. When asked about their information search, participants were suggested to refer to one particular trip, and the results show certain variety with regards to the purpose of their selected trips. Eight of the participants focused on leisure trips, and the other two reflected on a mix of business and leisure travels. With regards to the type of accommodation in which they stayed, most of them (seven out of ten) reported about trips during which they stayed at hotels (this was

the case of seven participants), two of them referred to apartment stays, and one to a mix of hotels and hostels stay.

Participants reported on the epistemic value of the reviews, by suggesting on different types of knowledge that they acquire through online reviews. Some of these align with those suggested by extant studies. This is the case of their provision of information to decrease uncertainty (Gretzel et al., 2006 & Wang et al., 2002); to act as a source of inspiration (Fotis et al., 2012); to provide information about destinations and products that helps travellers evaluating alternatives; to increase travellers' confidence during decision making, to reduce risk and to assist them in selecting accommodation (Gretzel et al., 2007), and to help avoiding places/services that would not be enjoyed (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). However, they also provide details about additional types of knowledge. The first one relates to the information which allows them to corroborate the data given by providers (especially with regards to aspects of quality); that one helping to adjust their expectations about establishments in that area and for that price (building them up or bring them down); and that one to complement their knowledge with information that does not normally appear on the accommodation's websites (e.g. the safety of the area where the establishment is located or noise).

Thus, as suggested by studies like Gretzel and Yoo (2008), Fotis et al. (2012), and Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) reviews seem to influence decision-making, and the influence of online reviews is perceived this at different stages as suggested by Court et al. (2009). However, while Court et al. (2009) suggested that social media specially influences on the evaluate and advocate stages, and the participants in this study reported on the influence of online reviews at the consideration (in terms of inspiration), evaluation and purchase stages only. Interestingly, participants reading reviews to support them at the consideration and evaluation stages select the reviews based on ratings (looking at the positive, at the negatives or a mix), and/or meta-communication aspects (i.e. tone, the formality of the message, tidiness, length, etc.). However, those participants reading reviews to support the purchase stage only will read all the reviews, the first few ones, the first page, or so on.

Getting into further detail, information regarding the specific aspects that participants look for when readying reviews, was collected. These related to cleanness, smell, the general state of the room, hot water, good shower pressure, service quality, noise, any refurbishment going on in the accommodation or around, WIFI's quality (specially when abroad), location, facilities in the area (i.e. restaurants, walking distance to attractions, taxis, etc.), whether it's fairly modern, staff friendliness, food quality, aesthetics, views, quality of breakfast or food, information for pet owners, convenience and level of comfort of the transport facilities located close by, security and safety. However, there are some variations based on the type of accommodation, travel budget, type of destination and travel party/type of trip. Furthermore, one participant (participant 2) suggested that when going on packaged holidays they do not read them. Only when booking individual holidays.

In terms of the influence of type of accommodation, participant 4 suggested that when renting privately owned apartments, a crucial element is to find out how easy it is to deal with the owner. However, this is not that important when looking for hotels. With regards to the impact of the destination, participant 3 suggested that when looking for a hotel in London, views are not that important. This is because London is lively destination where the key element is sightseeing and limited time is spent at the hotel. Furthermore, it is a very expensive city. Therefore, location and price become more important. In terms of the influence of the travel party, participant 4 suggested that noise may be a big issue for families, but it may be a positive aspect for those looking for a lively location, such as groups of young friends. An example of how the type of trip influences is that one provided by participant 5. This participant suggested that location is essential for her when travelling for business. However, when travelling for leisure, the aesthetics of the place become highly relevant.

Furthermore, participants reported on the different weight of elements. For example participant 7 suggested that tidiness, cleanliness and safety are the most important elements for her. But elements like kindness of staff are not the first priority. And even within cleanliness certain aspects acquire more importance than others. For example, participant 7 also suggested that she would not mind too much if there is some dust on the carpet, but "if someone says something about stains on bed sheets, towels or the bathroom I immediately remove the hotel from the shortlist".

Evidence of the functional value of the reviews was also identified, both in terms of quality and time. With regards to quality, there is an indication that participants only see their needs met to a certain extent. Only four participant reported that their information needs were met. Quotes regarding this question were of the type such as "it is the only information that I can get other than that one provided by the hotel". Therefore, it seems that it is the best possible solution, although not ideal. With regards to trust, participants also showed mixed views (only four out of ten trust them). Bray et al. (2006), Femback & Thomson (1995), Wang et al., (2002), and Yoo et al. (2009) argued that UGC is perceived as similar to recommendations provided by friends and relatives, and it is a more trusted source of information than the official one. But according to this study, reviews are read because there is no other type of information available other than the official. Furthermore, there are big differences across websites, not only between the website of the provider and commercial online review sites, as suggested by Burgess et al. (2011) and between WOM websites and individual blogs, as Mack et al. (2008) in Fotis et al. (2012) argues, but also between commercial sites themselves. For example, participant 3 suggested that she does not trust Tripadvisor because she knows someone who writes fake reviews in Tripadvisor for a living. However, she does trust booking. com.

The data provides an interesting insight into the elements that influence the perception on the reviews. Some of these align with those suggested by Gretzel et al. (2007) and Gretzel and Yoo (2008), which looked at the influence of meta-communication. As suggested by these authors, and contrary to what Vermeulen

and Seegers (2009) suggest, one of these elements is the availability of information about the reviewer. Both participants 5 and 6 made emphasis on the importance of this element. Issues related to age and gender suggested by Gretzel et al. (2007), Gretzel and Yoo (2008) and Rodríguez del Bosque et al. (2009) could not be identified during the interviews due to the nature of the study (qualitative). But an additional element which had not been suggested by the literature relates to the nationality of the reviewer. Participants 7 suggested that they only trust reviews from reviewers of the same nationality on certain aspects. In the case of participant 7 (Italian) she suggested, with regards to comments about cleanliness, that "it is important that comments come from Italians, as I do not consider English criteria and judgements reliable on that". And with regards to the functional value-time element, overall, reviews are not perceived as a waste of time. This is because people spend the time that they choose to spend. However, it should be noted that the time they spend widely varies, going from only spend 5 min (participant 7) up to 6 h (participant 2).

The views regarding the emotional value of reviews are also quite mixed. According to Gretzel and Yoo (2008) reading reviews has been reported as enjoyable. However, the results suggest that only six out of ten participants did enjoy the reviews. The other four didn't, but that they read them for practical reasons. Of those who did enjoy them they reported that they felt like gossiping (participant 1) and it helped them daydreaming about their trip (participant 9).

No evidence of sociable value of reviews was found. When asked, participants suggested that they did not feel part of a virtual community, which would contradict the suggestions made by Gretzel et al. (2006).

Finally, the results seem to indicate that consumers have developed skills to make reviews useful despite of their limitations. Reviews are examined with a critical eye, and customers are making their own judgements about giving them consideration. Ratings are not directly influencing on their decisions, however, they do influence at the "Information Search" stage.

To conclude, the results suggested that the value of reviews is primary epistemic and partially functional, but less emotional and social. In other words, travellers read reviews when booking accommodation, but they do it because this is the only way to access certain type of information other than the one given by the accommodation provider.

5   Conclusion

A significant number of studies have been directed to identify the impact that travel online reviews have on consumers. However, these mainly focus only on the activity of decision-making and they tend to be quantitative. One of the consequences of this is that they tend to adopt a one-dimensional approach, focused on the purchase decision-making process. Furthermore, they tend to ignore additional benefits/cost-effects that online reviews may have on consumers (e.g. fun, time,

etc.), and to consider all reviews equally important; only a few studies have been directed to understand the differences influencing on their impact and these have been identified in the literature review section (i.e. Burgess et al., 2011; Court et al., 2009; Cox et al. 2009 in Fotis et al. (2012); Gretzel et al., 2007; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Mack et al. 2008 in Fotis et al. (2012); Rodríguez del Bosque et al., 2009; Simms, 2012; Verma et al., 2012). However, some of these studies present contradictory results and/or neglect certain aspects, such as the influence of the content of reviews, or differences related to the information search patterns of consumers. While the authors acknowledge the importance of also other areas of travel, this study has only focused on accommodation online reviews. Hence, the aim of this study has been that one of obtaining an understanding of the value of accommodation online reviews, by undertaking a qualitative study and avoiding the limitations of quantitative research.

In addition to identifying the gap in the literature, the literature reviews section developed a conceptual framework of perceived consumer value. This is to ensure a consistent and comprehensive research approach for the study. The framework suggests that the consumer value of online reviews is made of four different components: epistemic, functional (both in terms of quality and time), emotional and social value. Ten one hour face-to-face interviews with users of online reviews were undertaken, and questions were directed to identify the elements that the generated epistemic, functional, emotional and social value of accommodation online reviews.

The results suggested that the value of reviews is primary epistemic and partially functional, but limited emotional value has been reported and the social value seemed inexistent. Travellers read reviews when booking accommodation, but they do it just because this is the only way to access certain type of information other than the one given by the accommodation provider, and those interviewed suggested that they do not feel part of an online community. Furthermore, the study also helped identifying the elements that elicit the different value dimensions.

Limitations related to the nature of the qualitative nature of the study (small sample, lacking representation of all demographic groups) should be taken into consideration. Further research, this time quantitative should continue this line of study. Despite these limitations, the implications of this study are important to the industry, because they help managers understanding the scope of influence of online reviews. Furthermore, it contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the topic of information search for travelling. This will support the customisation of information provided to customers, which given the constantly increasing array of travel-related information produced every day, is emerging as an essential area for development. Therefore, they are of important value to accommodation establishments' managers, but also to commercial websites with online reviewing functionalities, and to Reputation Management System providers.

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