GUEST-REVIEW CRITERIA ON TRIPADVISOR COMPARED TO CONVENTIONAL HOTEL-RATING SYSTEMS TO ASSESS HOTEL QUALITY

Wouter Hensens
Stenden University, Stenden South Africa Campus
Port Alfred, South Africa
E-Mail: wouter.hensens@stenden.co.za

Miemie Struwig
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Port Elizabeth, South Africa
E-Mail: miemie.struwig@nmmu.ac.za

Oren Dayan
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Port Elizabeth, South Africa
E-Mail: oren.dayan@nmmu.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Conventional hotel-rating systems are generally operated by governments or independent parties. However, with the growth of social media and customer-review sites, the customer-review website TripAdvisor has grown rapidly and has made a strong impact on the tourism and hotel industry. This study identifies what criteria are used in guest reviews on TripAdvisor when assessing the quality of a hotel and compares these criteria to those commonly used in conventional hotel-rating systems. The study’s findings indicate that the criteria used in TripAdvisor reviews focus more on service delivery than on objective-tangible elements used in most hotel rating systems. There is no evidence that conventional-rating system controls are related to the comments in TripAdvisor reviews.

KEYWORDS: Hotel classification, Hotel rating, Criteria, Guest reviews, Social media, TripAdvisor

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of social media, the main threat for conventional-rating organisations is the growth of web-based platforms that focus on traveller reviews and provide independent platforms for guest feedback. (Zarella, 2009). TripAdvisor is the market leader in this segment offering reviews of over 500,000 hotels and more than 35 million guest reviews that provide both a rating (1 - 5) and qualitative feedback through written reviews (Tripadvisor, 2010).

An exchange of ratings has developed between social-media organisations and tourism authorities, automobile associations and travel media that rate hotels using conventional methods. As TripAdvisor displays conventional ratings on its website and categorises hotels accordingly (TripAdvisor, 2010), tourism authorities have become interested in the data available on TripAdvisor and have linked this information to their websites (Thomas, 2007).

However, the success of TripAdvisor has raised questions with hoteliers, the travel trade, and rating bodies as to how the information provided by this new platform must be viewed in relation to conventional ratings. This has sparked research and publications focusing on motivations for consumers to write reviews (Gretzel, 2007), the confusion of travellers ratings on the Internet (Hewitt, 2008; Pascarella, 2005; Weyel, 2008) and the assessment of the objectivity of review websites (Dellarocas, 2006; Elliott, 2009; Frommer, 2009; O’Neill, 2009). This research paper addresses two research questions. Firstly, on what quality criteria do TripAdvisor reviews focus, and, secondly, to what extent are these criteria covered by conventional-rating systems?
LITERATURE OVERVIEW OF HOTEL RATING, GRADING OR CLASSIFICATION

Hotel rating, grading or classification are methods of quality assessment whereby hotels are categorised, generally in five categories with stars as the most commonly used symbol (Cser and Ohuchi, 2008; Vine 1981). The development of the concept of hotel rating and its associated definitions display strong parallels. From the initial purpose of informing travellers on basic facilities that can be expected, the objectives of hotel rating has expanded into a focus on the hotel experience as a whole. As such, hotel review concepts have been evolving from classification into grading and rating. Vine (1981, p.18) defines classification as the ‘breakdown of different types and ranges of accommodation’ and grading as a concept of ‘denoting quality assessment’. Classification was an appropriate term for the first rating systems where the focus was on tangible facilities and the existence of services in hotels. Callan (1995) and Cser and Ohuchi (2008) also subscribe to the division between classification and grading. Academics like Ingram (1996), Callan (1998) and Hassanien (2007) use the terms classification, grading, and rating interchangeably throughout their writings to refer to the same concept. However, most hospitality-related textbooks on hospitality management use classification to refer to hotel type and grading to refer to hotel class or quality (Ismail, 2002; Kasavana and Brooks, 2005; Vallen and Vallen, 2005). Most independent systems use rating systems and national systems more frequently refer to rating or grading systems, for example, the American Automobile Association (2008) and Tourism Grading Council South Africa (2008). For this study, the concept of rating is used as it refers to the hotel experience as a whole.

Organisations involved in hotel rating

Over the last decades, a multitude of organisations have become involved in hotel rating. These organisations can be divided into two categories, namely, National and Independent organisations. Figure 1 outlines the organisations involved in hotel ratings and show how these organisations feed their information to the prospective traveller.

![Figure 1: Organisations involved in hotel rating](image_url)

Figure 1 illustrates that the prospective traveller commonly has access to many different channels to learn about a hotel’s quality in the form of rating. The three types of organisations indicated at the top of Figure 1 generally use inspectors to assess the quality of the hotels they rate. For the purpose of this study, these organisations are referred to as conventional hotel rating systems. Travel Agents may use this data to feed information to the traveller and generally do not operate hotel rating systems. There is an exchange of ratings between social media organisations and tourism authorities, automobile associations and travel media. TripAdvisor seeks to display conventional ratings on its website and categorise hotels accordingly (TripAdvisor,
2009). Also the other way around, Tourism Authorities start to display an interest in the data available on TripAdvisor and link this to their websites (see for example Thomas, 2007)

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF HOTEL RATING AND ACTUAL GUEST EXPERIENCES

Over the last thirty years, many studies in the field of services management and services marketing management indicate that guest satisfaction is a result of the guests’ experiences that are weighted against their expectations of the product and service (Zeithaml and Bittner, 2000; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004; Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 2006). As the lodging experience is a combination of both tangible (room, facilities, availability of services) and intangible (service delivery in all its facets) elements, many rating systems appear to fall short in managing the entire guest expectation (Callan, 1998). Although it could be assumed that the range of grading criteria cover the five dimensions proposed by Zeithaml and Bittner (2000), when the focus of criteria used in historic and contemporary rating systems are analysed, this assumption proves to be incorrect (Lopez and Serano, 2004; Su and Sun, 2007). The development of a conceptual model to illustrate how actual guest experiences are incorporated into conventional hotel-rating systems requires the three criteria groups used in hotel rating as a basis. An assessment of how actual guest experiences and the objectivity by which they may be measured, differs within the three criteria, and should also be included. Figure 2 outlines a conceptual model of how actual guest experiences can be incorporated into conventional hotel-rating systems.

Figure 2

A Conceptual Model to incorporate Actual Guest Experiences into Conventional Hotel-Rating Systems

Figure 2 has a pyramid shape as this generally represents how the different criteria are positioned in conventional-rating systems. Firstly, the objective tangible criteria commonly provide the basis for rating systems and also constitute the highest number of criteria in conventional-rating systems. In addition, a range of subjective tangible criteria need to be fulfilled, either through a minimum description (Fachverband Hotellerie, 2007), or through a weighted system (Tourism Grading Council South Africa, 2008). The service quality criteria are generally the smallest category in terms of the number of criteria used.

Further, the criteria depicted in Figure 2’s pyramid focus more on the actual guest experience in the hotel as the service delivery level increases. Zeithaml and Bittner (2000) refer to these service encounters and moments of truth as "the building blocks of both satisfaction and quality". On the other hand, the tangibility and objectivity of an assessment decreases towards the top of the pyramid. As these criteria would be subject to personal (biased) interpretation, it is, therefore, not surprising that most conventional-rating systems focus on the lower region of this pyramid.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON RATING SYSTEMS
Social media is a relatively young concept that is still in the process of being defined in a uniform manner. There are, however, certain features of the concept that many authors agree on. These features focus on conversational media, sharing of content, and consumer control.

Safko and Brake (2009) define social media as “activities, practices and behaviours, among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions using conversational media”. Conversational media in this definition are referred to as media that provide two-way communications (Safko and Brake, 2009) whereas traditional media such as television, newspapers, and magazines, are defined as static, one-way static broadcast technologies (Zarella, 2009). The term communities in this definition relates to networks of people that know each other or share a common interest and are in such a way related.

The sharing of content is another characteristic of social media. Anyone can create and distribute their own content to be shared with others (Zarella, 2009). This content, also referred to as word-of-mouth, is also not a new concept, though the speed and scope of the Internet are said to have brought about a word-of-mouth revolution (Delarocas, 2003; Gretzel, 2007). Evans (2008) refers to social media involving a natural, genuine conversation between people about something of mutual interest built on the thoughts and experiences of the participants which Benkler (2006) refers to as ‘feasibility spaces for social practice’. Evans (2008) further defines social media as a “collaborative process through which information is created, shared, altered, and destroyed”. Social media may also be referred to as conversational media, or consumer-generated media (Topper, 2009).

Social media has created a significant impact on the marketing paradigm of businesses as they realise that push marketing can quickly turns into pull marketing (Rubinson, 2009). This is mainly due to trust that consumers place in information from social media opposed to information through marketing communication directly from a company. As a result, consumers are influenced by opinions posted in online forums before they make purchasing decisions (Dellarocas, 2006).

Hotels have identified this trend and many hotel trade magazines and websites encourage hoteliers to participate actively in social media. A survey conducted by Market Metrix and TripAdvisor revealed that 90% of the responding hotel managers perceived of reviews as very important and 81% visited review sites at least weekly (Barsky and Nash, 2009).

**TripAdvisor as a social media platform**

TripAdvisor is the market leader of hotel review size in terms of number of members, number of reviews, and growth. Over 2008, the number of members on TripAdvisor almost doubled from 5 million to 9 million and in 2009 another three million members joined creating a total of 11 million members in November 2009. This number has grown to 15 million in March 2010 (TripAdvisor, 2010). Shank (2009) suggests competing will be difficult for the other hotel review websites owing to the network-effects of the hotel review business that TripAdvisor possesses. In other words, people want to write and read reviews of travellers. TripAdvisor allows travellers to write a review and to rate their hotel experience on a five point scale. This consumer-generated content is then, after an internal screening process, visible for all to see (Larpent, 2009a; 2009b).

Although the reliability of the guest reviews on TripAdvisor can be questioned, research by Hensens, Struwig and Dayan (2010) used four arguments that challenge the reliability of TripAdvisor, to prove the contrary. This research indicated that although it is possible to post false reviews on TripAdvisor, it does not happen on a large scale. It was, therefore, concluded that TripAdvisor provides a reliable and rich source of information for hotel guests and other interested parties.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study identifies what criteria are used by guest reviews on TripAdvisor when they assess the quality of a hotel and then compares these criteria against the criteria used in conventional hotel-rating systems. Through a pilot study of two destinations (Amsterdam and London), a mixed method research methodology was developed by filtering the criteria from guest reviews. This enabled the development of an applicable research design. A sample of 11 non-random international destinations in different continents was selected based on the following criteria:

a) The destination receives more than one million travellers annually.
b) The hotels in a destination are represented on TripAdvisor to the extent that further sampling of hotels and reviews is feasible. This was quantified to a minimum of 70% of the hotels of that destination on TripAdvisor to have received reviews.

c) The destinations together cover all continents.

The 11 destinations that were selected are Amsterdam, Bangkok, Cape Town, Dubai, Hong Kong, London, New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Rome and Sydney. In each destination the best ranking, middle ranking, and lowest ranking hotel on TripAdvisor were selected. The hotel with the highest ranking was also the number one in the top 10 hotels of that destination according to the TripAdvisor Popularity Index (TripAdvisor, 2009). The middle-ranking hotel was identified by dividing the total number of hotels available on TripAdvisor by two and then selecting the first hotel that fulfilled the criteria of providing sufficient usable guest reviews. The lowest-ranking hotels were selected by identifying the first hotel that fulfilled the criteria.

From the pilot study, it was established that a minimum of ten guest reviews provided information saturation. It further shows that to avoid changes in the hotel’s operations, the guest reviews should have been posted after 1 January 2008. From each of the 33 identified hotels (three hotels in 11 destinations), the ten most recent guest reviews in the English language from the website were selected, by using the my Trip function on the website. The ten guest reviews could then be printed in a PDF files. This resulted in 33 files with ten guest reviews each, providing a total of 330 guest reviews. These guest reviews were then coded with coloured markers, after which the data was inserted in spreadsheets, using as inclusion rules the theoretic review of hotel rating systems (objective tangibles, subjective tangibles and service delivery). Table 1 outlines these categories and the definition (inclusion categories) used.

### Table 1

**Coding of Guest Reviews Based on Quality Criteria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective Tangible Criteria</th>
<th>Subjective Tangible Criteria</th>
<th>Service Delivery Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments on the availability, sizes, and range of facilities or services.</td>
<td>Comments on the state of facilities and the environment in the hotel. The environment includes items such as décor, view, functionality, and other items that are tangible, but subjective in assessment.</td>
<td>Comments on the quality of service delivery in the hotel. Food quality was also grouped in this category as its quality can only be assessed during consumption.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 illustrates that a total of six categories were used to code the data. The following process was used to code the data for analysis:

a) For each hotel in the sample, the researcher selected the ten most recent guest reviews written in the English language and printed the entire guest review. Each printed review was then analysed according to comments expressed and colour coded into four categories, namely: :

- Yellow: comments expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction without pinpointing a criterion that caused the emotional state
- Green: comments expressing a satisfaction with a criterion
- Pink: comments expressing dissatisfaction with a criterion
- Blue: comments that could not be categorised in the former three but did give the impression of being important for further analysis

b) After coding the data in colour, the review comments were allocated to the four categories on a spreadsheet, each with a positive and a negative column, presenting eight options for categorisation. For each review, the following additional data was captured:

- Title of the review
- Date of the review
- Home country of the reviewer
- Rating given to the hotel (one to five points)

c) To ensure trustworthiness of the records, a second expert checked the data and categories assigned.
The process of coding resulted in 33 spreadsheets of data. Through a count function in the spreadsheet application, the comments per category were quantified. The quantitative overviews created in the content analysis of guest reviews were then ready to compare against the criteria used in the conventional-rating systems in the 11 destinations. The conventional-rating systems in the 11 destinations were analysed using the following steps:

a) The responsible body for conventional rating in the destination was identified and selected. Only bodies that conduct a physical inspection of the property were selected.

b) The rating system and criteria were retrieved and, if necessary, translated.

c) The criteria in the system were categorised based on the three categories presented in Table 1.

d) The number of criteria in each category were counted and divided by the total number of criteria to obtain an impression of the rating system focus.

As only 58% of the total number of hotels sampled had a conventional-rating, and in some destinations this percentage was much lower, it was decided not to compare the rating criteria per destination, but to use the entire sample to identify trends.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In nine of the 11 destinations, a rating system is run by a regulated government organisation or a hotel association, or a combination of the two. In Sydney, New York, and Hong Kong, conventional-rating systems are in place through the Automobile Association and a travel guide. As these independent rating bodies conduct physical inspections on all the hotels they rate, they are considered conventional-rating systems for the purpose of this study. All systems start off with objective-tangible criteria and some, through point structures, or percentage structures, present subjective-tangible criteria. Although most systems have a focus on subjective tangible criteria, service-quality criteria are only measured in some systems and only the rating bodies in the United Kingdom assess service quality through mystery shopping for all categories.

The comments on TripAdvisor present an alternative view to the conventional-rating systems as in the guest reviews, service delivery is referred to the most, subjective-tangible criteria second, and objective-tangible criteria is referred to the least. Figure 3 presents the number of criteria, expressed as a percentage of the total number criteria of each of the three criteria categories (objective-tangible, subjective-tangible and service-delivery criteria) over the destinations in both the conventional-rating system and the TripAdvisor reviews.

**Figure 3**

Representation of Criteria in Conventional-Rating Systems Compared to Tripadvisor Comments

![Figure 3](image_url)

Figure 3 illustrates that the conventional-rating systems in the 11 destinations focus strongly on objective-tangible criteria whereas the TripAdvisor reviews focus strongly on service-quality delivery criteria. A further analysis of the comments in the TripAdvisor reviews presents different results for positive and negative comments in all the categories. Figure 4 presents the positive and negative comments in TripAdvisor reviews.
Figure 4

Positive and Negative Comments in Tripadvisor Reviews per Main Criteria Category

Figure 4 illustrates that comments on objective-tangible criteria and service-delivery criteria are generally positive. Comments on subjective-tangible criteria are more frequently negative than positive whereas comments on service-delivery criteria are generally positive. Table 2 outlines the criteria that were commented on by more than 10% of the guest reviews in the sample (N=330).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective-Tangible Criteria</th>
<th>Subjective-Tangible Criteria</th>
<th>Service-Delivery Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Room size</td>
<td>Room comfort / functionality</td>
<td>Helpful staff / willing to serve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room facilities</td>
<td>Room cleanliness</td>
<td>Great staff / hosts / professional service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast choice range</td>
<td>Room decor</td>
<td>Tourist information / recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Room (equipment) state of maintenance</td>
<td>Service errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Room quietness</td>
<td>Courteous staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Room view</td>
<td>Staff warmth / friendliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bathroom comfort / functionality</td>
<td>Breakfast quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bed comfort</td>
<td>Food and drink quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hotel décor</td>
<td>Complementary food, drinks, services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A count of the analysis as depicted in Table 2 indicated that from the guest reviews, 24 types of comments were connected to objective-tangible criteria. In more than 10% of the guest reviews, comments focus on room size, room facilities and the range of breakfast choices. In terms of subjective-tangible criteria, 27 different criteria were identified from comments in the guest reviews. Nine criteria were mentioned in more than 10% of the guest reviews. Room cleanliness was the most frequently mentioned subjective-tangible criterion and was mentioned by 28% of the guest reviews in the sample. The majority of these comments were positive. Room comfort and functionality as well as room decor were both mentioned by 62 guest reviews which represent 18% of the total sample. Most of the comments referring to these nine criteria revealed a tendency towards either negative or positive comments. Only room décor’s positive and negative scores were nearly equal with 28 positive and 34 negative comments on this criterion. The state of room maintenance and equipment was mostly referred to in a negative manner; in other words, if the maintenance was satisfactory, it was commonly not referred to. However, room view comments were generally, only mentioned if they were very positive.

Comments on service delivery, willingness to serve and staff being helpful were the most frequently mentioned service-quality deliver criteria (31% of guest reviews). Similar to the overall tendency towards positive and negative comments presented in Figure 4, the majority of the comments on the service-delivery criteria were positive. Comments on service errors could also be considered balanced (10% positive and 9% negative) and only comments on the courtesy of staff were mostly negative. Figure 5 displays the total number of positive and negative comments per dimension of service quality (Zeithaml and Bittner, 2000).
Figure 5 illustrates that most comments on service delivery can be categorised in the empathy dimension with 222 comments. Also assurance and tangibles were mentioned frequently with 202 and 187 comments respectively. Four dimensions receive more positive comments than negative comments, whereas comments focussing on the reliability dimension were mostly negative.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Criteria used in hotel-rating systems focus on three aspects of the hotel experience. The first is the foundation of most conventional-rating systems and focuses on the availability of facilities and services. This may be referred to as objective-tangible criteria as they refer to tangible services and facilities that can objectively be measured. The second area is referred to as subjective-tangible criteria as they are tangible, but their assessment is often subject to personal interpretation. Thirdly, there is the focus on the actual service delivery in the hotel as it is experienced by the guest.

In TripAdvisor reviews most (43%) of the comments refer to service-delivery criteria. Subjective-tangible criteria are referred to in 38% of the comments and the criteria referred to least are the objective-tangible criteria with only 19% of the comments referring to such criteria. The rating systems in the 11 destinations in the sample present an opposite trend as most attention is focussed on objective tangibles and least on service delivery. As such, TripAdvisor reviews and ratings cover an area of the hotel experience that is largely not controlled by conventional-rating systems. A question, therefore, arises, whether hotel-rating systems are controlling and evaluating the correct aspects of the hotel product?

The satisfaction of guests does not, according to the guest reviews, depend on whether a criterion is controlled through a rating system or not. Although the satisfaction in guest reviews of subjective-tangible criteria is low, service-delivery criteria in general and the empathy dimension in specific, are most frequently mentioned positively whereas these areas are controlled least by the rating systems analysed in this study. As such, control by a conventional-rating system does not appear to be related to the comments in TripAdvisor reviews and whether these comments are positive or negative. This lack of control as well as the small number of hotels found in the sample that actually were rated by a conventional-rating systems, results in the question of whether conventional-rating systems will continue with the growing popularity of social-media platforms such as TripAdvisor?

From this research, it has also become evident that TripAdvisor reviews present elaborate information on hotels that is largely not covered by hotel-rating systems and may be of value for travellers, hoteliers and the travel trade. Areas of value for hoteliers can be that TripAdvisor reviews provide them with information to determine not only the critical success factors according to the guest reviews of their hotel (the criteria that guests mention), but also how the hotel is assessed based on these criteria. This research shows that especially the assurance and empathy dimensions (Zeithaml and Bittner, 2000) receive much focus in guest reviews and that the general comments on these two dimensions are positive.

Social-media platforms can help identify negative and positive customer experiences and can be used to narrow the information gap for hoteliers and customers. Hotels need to recognise that Internet rating sites can
be both a threat to their reputation but also an opportunity for development. If considered an opportunity, hoteliers can effectively manage the review content by providing high quality, reliable but managed information themselves. Also if they encourage customers to provide feedback at the point of departure, they ensure that service feedback becomes immediately available.

As the research methodology used in researching social-media platforms is limited, this research has made a contribution by providing a mixed-method methodology to investigate social-media platforms where information changes continuously. Although well-established qualitative methods such as content analysis were used, it is also important to explore the social-media platform thoroughly before embarking on a research effort.

A limitation of this interpretative study can be the judgements made in the coding process, despite triangulation practice of using an expert to ensure data reliability. As consumer-generated content is gaining acceptance, further analysis of the service quality dimensions is required and the relationship to purchase decision making should be investigated. Suggested future research can also include the design of a model that shows how conventional-rating systems and social-media platforms can co-exist, how hoteliers should use data from social-media platforms and further analyses of the service-quality dimensions.

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