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# CONTENT

## SCIENTIFIC PAPERS

**Petr Janeček** – Motives and Barriers for Cooperation in Tourism Destination: Case of Pilsen Region ..... **3**

**Karel Kulich, Lucie Bartošová** – Project-Based Learning as a Tool to Enrich Language Teaching for Specific Purposes.....**17**

**Cvetanka Ristova** – Consumer Behavior in the Process of Consumer Decision Process in Social Media in Hospitality ..... **29**

### **Correct version of article from last number**

**Eva Ottová, Tereza Ottová** – Islamic Terrorism between 2014-2017: Impact on European Tourism in Proximate Areas ..... **42**

## CONSULTATION AND DISCUSSION

### INFORMATION PAPERS

**Věra Levičková, Eva Mičková** – Beer Brewing as a Family Business under the Present Economic Conditions in the Czech Republic ..... **61**

**Cvetanka Ristova**

## **CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN THE PROCESS OF CONSUMER DECISION PROCESS IN SOCIAL MEDIA IN HOSPITALITY**

***Abstract:** Encouraged by social media and their enormous power, consumer behavior is constantly changing and consequently consumer expectations are constantly increasing. It is well known fact that social media impact every industry and business, and hospitality is not an exemption. Nowadays, in the hospitality industry where the expectation of the consumer (guest) for a positive experience is particularly high, social media can provide the means to meet this expectation. Consumers perceive the social media as an easy life, and accordingly, their appetite for this lifestyle is insatiable. With each new application or connected device, social media demonstrate that everything is in the reach, which for hospitality means perpetual changes in the behavior of their consumers (guests).*

***Key words:** behavior, consumer, decision, guests, hospitality, social media*

***JEL Classification:** L83, Z32*

### **Introduction**

Ristova and Maglovski (2018, pp. 693) state that ‘we live in a digital world. The Internet, social media, applications and various technological achievements form an integral part of our everyday life’. Slowly, but surely we are becoming addicted to our smartphones, and they determine our behavior and communication in every aspect of our life, both private and professional.

The way in which we buy and consume product and services, that is, our behavior in buying and consuming products and services to meet the needs of the digital era. Hence, the habits of consumer change significantly and are no longer in line with the non-digital era. Social media is extremely important and necessary for consumers when making decisions about accommodation because in principle it is easier for every tourist to sign in to their personal social application and find accommodation just by reading comments from other tourists rather than visiting travel agencies and thus collect information (Krusec, 2017).

Since the consumer behavior has always been a hot topic, the purpose of this paper is to examine how the decision-making process is affected from the life of the consumer and his behavior in the today’s digital era of hospitality. Moreover, each step of the decision-making process will be presented and discussed to properly move the consumer to the buying the product, communicate effectively to consumers and close the sale influence. The need for consumer behavior analysis resulted with the trend that hotels have to stay

consistent with digital achievements or the latest trends in the digital world of social media, that are undoubtedly influencing consumers' behavior, because digitalization has the power to change all aspects of the travel of a tourist / guest – preparing for the holiday, during the holiday to their departure.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Social media and consumer behavior**

Social media is a relatively recent phenomenon. Over the last decade, the World Wide Web has seen a proliferation of user-driven web technologies such as blogs, social networks and media sharing platforms, who initially started out as a means for people to stay connected globally. Collectively called social media, they have now evolved into an indispensable business tool for both social as well as commercial needs and these technologies have enabled the growth of user-generated content, a global community, and the publishing of consumer opinions (Voramontri and Klieb, 2018). The development of the social media also provided consumers with knowledge, so now they require exceptional value for their money and time (Buhalis and Law, 2008). This movement now dominates the way we use the web and has given rise to the most used popular platforms nowadays, such as: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Google, Google Street View, Flickr, Tencent, Weibo, Foursquare, Yelp and many more android and smartphone applications (Mukherjee and Nagabhushanam, 2016).

Defined as “consumer-generated media that covers a wide variety of new sources of online information, created and used by consumers intent on sharing information with others regarding any topic of interest” (Kohli et al., 2014), social media now have empowered consumers with power over the content, timing or frequency of online conversations among them and ultimately played an important part in defining consumer behavior. DeGruttola (2017) listed 12 statistics of know now consumers can just scroll through their social feeds for inspiration and purchase.

1. 81% of consumers' purchasing decisions are influenced by their friends' social media posts.
2. Consumers are 71% more likely to make a purchase based on social media referrals.
3. Facebook accounts for 50% of total social referrals and 64% of total social revenue.
4. 31% of consumers say they are using social media channels to browse for new items to purchase.
5. Millennials are 1.6x more likely to use digital channels to learn about new products.
6. 84% of millennials say user-generated content from strangers has at least some influence on what they buy.

7. 53% of consumers recommend companies or products in tweets, with 48% following through to purchase those products or services.
8. 78% of consumers say companies' social media posts impact their purchases.
9. Customers are 6x more likely to purchase a product if the page includes pictures from social media.
10. Conversions increase 133% when mobile shoppers see positive reviews before buying.
11. In 2015, Facebook influenced 52% of consumers' online and offline purchases.
12. Global social commerce revenue reached \$30 billion in 2015.

Social media in general will continue to influence consumer behavior because from the social theory, consumers get the support of the idea that social media has become a key influence in a consumer's decision-making process and affirmation on what they decide is the best.

## Defining consumer behavior in hospitality

Consumer behavior implies a decision that consumers make for purchasing a particular product or service. Consumers make decisions to fulfill their unmet needs and wants (Holdford, 2018). Actually, consumer behavior refers to the selection, purchase and consumption of goods and services for the satisfaction of their wants (Ramya and Ali, 2016). And because consumer behavior refers to the buying behavior of the ultimate consumer, this includes understanding the wishes of the consumer, their willingness to pay a certain amount of money, their manner of choosing what to buy, and the manner of finalizing the buying process. Consumer behavior is dynamic, because the considerations, feelings and activities of individual consumer in the broadest sense are in constant change (Peter and Olson, 2008).

As we know, consumer behavior is influenced by various factors, thus in the last few years, the market has seen a vast change. Many factors, specificities and characteristics influence the consumer in his decision-making process and purchasing behavior. The purchase decision has become more complicated, and the reason for it can be attributed to the social media advancement in the hospitality. Tourism, as well as hospitality, are industries that represent information – intensive industries (Limlahapun and Kalganova, 2018), so therefore it is crucial to understand the changes and the impact they have upon consumer behavior.

Few of the notable current characteristics of consumers' behavior in hospitality are:

- *To stay connected.* The majority of consumers today are well informed and active as a result of the social media. With the world becoming a global community due to the social media advancement fostering connectivity, the hotels are found in a situation where they are trying to immediately meet the consumers' needs. By adopting the latest applications, the hotels engage their active and informed

consumers on the available platform and therefore contribute to the changes in consumer behavior.

- *Meeting the consumers' expectations.* The days when hotels set the name of offering a certain product or service, available for purchase or cancellation, have long been gone. With the help of the current e-commerce, the hotel product or service can be bought at any given time. Today's consumers are fully aware of their purchasing powers, have a higher standard of expectation rather than acceptance, which is closely related to the hotel product or service.
- *Communication through newer and latest channels.* The traditional approach to providing information to consumers through email or phone calls has long been forgotten. Nowadays, the social media offer live chat options where the consumers expect their questions and requests to be answered. This approach feels obligatory to the hotel, since if the employees fail to answer the request, the hotel's image can be seriously damaged.

The significant integration of social media in everyday life requires understanding of the consumers' behavior dynamics in this altered hospitality environment. Because, social media will continue to influence consumer behavior, since social media are a significant part of our lives, and consequently, hospitality will continue to be present on social media, because all the potential consumers are present on social media, as well (Ristova and Angelkova, 2018). Furthermore, this paper highlights the terms of understanding how consumers are affected through social media in many ways in and influences the entire decision-making process.

## Social media as a mean of giving consumers a voice in the decision-making process in hospitality

Given the well-known fact that social media has a great impact on all spheres of our lives and hospitality is no exception to it, often, consumers rely on social media to find the newest offers from hotels in a particular destination and plan their holidays. Social media contains ratings from other consumers' choices of holidays, destinations, hotels and a result of that, the consumer can be influenced by the development of their own positive or negative feeling for the particular hotel. Social media influences consumer behavior in hospitality by offering "user - friendly" offers that have many advantages for consumers such as: presence around the world, easy access to information, directness, diversity for interactive change (Punia and Choudhary, 2015). That is, social media influence consumer behavior in a way consumers search, decide and book hotels (Varkaris and Neuhofer, 2017).

Alsubagh (2015, pp. 211) states that 'possible components involved in a consumer's decision process are related to the aspects and essence of social media, and believes that social media plays the role of a special touch point for today's consumer decision process,

from the stage of consideration to the stage of post purchase'. In these terms, the author agrees that social media has found impact on consumer decision-making process initially through its primary purpose – communication. Recommendations by friends or connections on social media are the first that affect the decision-making process and later on continue to help brand attitudes, purchasing attitudes, and advertising attitudes (Sema, 2013). The good image of hotel or restaurant service can lead the consumer to make decision on their purchases. When consumer's friend on social media shares or recommends that exact hotel or restaurant service on their social media, it also affects brand attitude and influences their decision-making. If having any problems with the room booking, consumers could reach the hotel via social media, which is an easy way to connect and contact with them, or even if having a doubt on booking in a hotel, every single detail could be an influence to their decision-making. Since consumers now require exceptional value for their money and time, reviews on social media become second-hand resources to support consumer's decision-making because they want value from their money. Certain reviews on a chosen hotel can motivate the exact purchases or support that consumers need for their decision-making by make it more reasonable to spend their money on it.

As a result, the flow of communication from social media is able to access consumers and influences the entire decision-making process, from the phase of interpreting the message, to searching for available alternatives, to carrying out operations right after the purchase (Smith and Zook, 2011). In the next part of the paper, the main objective of this particular research study, consumers' decision-making process is set to be examined through the different phases of the impact of social media on consumers' behaviours for purchases in the hospitality industry.

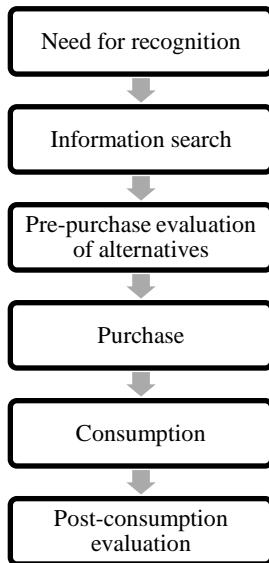
## **Results**

### **Hospitality's consumer behavior in decision-making process in social media**

Consumers use social media to analyse the wide range of offers in hospitality, but in overall the process of how social media impact on consumer behavior as mentioned remains insufficiently explained. There are many ways to model consumer behavior, depending on the goal of the research, but a useful method is the decision-process approach which studies the events that precede and follow a purchase, and that explains the way decisions are made (Karimi, 2013). Consumer decision making process could be defined as the “behavior patterns of consumers, that precedes, determine and follow on the decision process for the acquisition of need satisfying products, ideas or services” (Du Plessis et al., 1991). This paper adopts the five stages proposed by the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al., 2006). This model was originally developed in 1968 by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, but the Consumer Decision Process (CDP) model has undergone a number of revisions to become one of the most popular representations of consumer behavior (Loudon and Della-Bitta, 1993). Nonetheless, the traditional model was criticized, the Consumer Decision Process model, alternatively also known as the Engel-Blackwell-Miniard or the Blackwell-

Miniard-Engel model of consumer behavior, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding consumer behavior (Fotis, 2015). Besides the critics, the traditional Blackwell-Miniard-Engel model of decision process served as a base for modern five-staged decision process concepts as Silverman’s model (2001) and Court, Elzinga, Mulders and Vetnik (2009) model, but however the critics, but nobody can deny it relevance. Therefore, the author will use Blackwell-Miniard-Engel model as a foundation of the traditional model in the decision-making process of consumers. An overview with this model will be given, to ascertain of what motivates the consumers’ behavior to change when using the social media for choosing a hotel.

**Figure. 1 Consumer Decision Process model**



- *Stage 0 - Need for recognition*

The need recognition is the first stage of the consumer decision making process. This is generally regarded as the trigger that initiates a purchase decision making process. Here the consumer is in a state of desire, where the decision process is initiated through the interaction of individual differences and environmental influences. Consumers recognize needs and seek to fulfill them, or sometimes seek to solve their problems.

From a perspective of consumer behavior, the need for recognition occurs when the impact of the environment, individual differences and information stored in memory contribute to making consumers aware of the difference between the true and the ideal state (Blackwell et al., 2006). Therefore, the stimulus associated with the hotel and the wonderful food in the hotel that are on social media contribute to recognizing the need for travel. By knowing the guests’ needs, hotels can develop products to reach them more efficiently.



- *Stage 1- Information search*

After determining the desire, the consumer seeks information on products that will fill that void. The consumer turns to internal search into to memory to determine whether it knows enough alternatives to make a decision without additional information sources. If there isn't enough information contained in memory, the consumer will engage in external search. Individual differences and environmental influences, also affect this stage.

Changes in consumer behavior when selecting the accommodation capacity may also occur when through social media, the consumers search the information in three exploring directions: the people route, the organization route and the content route (Fotis, 2015).

Fotis (2015, pp. 275-276) 'states that the people route enables consumers to seek advice from their contacts on social media, as shown in the example above, whether they know each other personally or have some degree of knowledge about the destination in question. Following the organization route, consumers use social media to contact the organization that is directly related to the holiday (example: hotel in destination). Choosing the content route, consumers use social media since they focus on the media and the content instead of the provider of the information, who – in the vast majority of cases – is unknown to them'.

- *Stage 2 - Pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives*

In the pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives, the consumer will examine the products and their attributes and compare it to personal standards. After that, the consumer forms a consideration set of products that beliefs, it will solve the problem (desire of travel, accommodation). The influence of social media on consumer behavior is expressed throughout their communication in social media in the ranking of alternatives (example: hotels) found during the information search process. Here consumers use social media platforms such as: TripAdvisor, HolidayCheck. Most often alternatives that guests seek in this process are: researching the hotel or other accommodation facility, reading comments and ratings from other guests for the desired hotel, research of the hotel and offers and searching for additional information for the upcoming travel.

- *Stage 3 - Decision and purchase*

The decision and purchase are two separate stages in consumer behavior (Moutinho, 1987). This paper adopts Moutinho's (1987) view, although the decision is not presented in the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al., 2006), because this is due to the fact that in the case of similar hotels in the destination, there may be a significant period between the final selection and the moment of purchase. The decision may be "disrupted" by two factors: negative feedback from other consumers and the level of motivation to accept the feedback. Having gone through the previous three stages, the guest chooses in which hotel he will stay while travelling to Berlin. However, because his very good friend, who has already been in Berlin, and stayed in that hotel, gives him negative feedback, the guest will then be bound to change his preference. Furthermore, the decision may be disrupted due to unforeseen situations such as the hotel doesn't allow pets.

Only when the decision is made, the purchase may happen from the pool of alternatives. Consumers have made their decision about which product, service or solution is best for them, and they are ready to buy. Purchase is the final choice or decision made from the consumer (guest) regarding which product (hotel) to buy (stay) and through social media usually is expressed in the form of booking.

- *Stage 4 - Consumption*

Here the consumer decides whether or not and when to use the purchased product. This process has not been a concern for the hospitality, because the primary objective for them was to sell their product, sell rooms. But this view has changed, when hotels realized that they need to stay competitive by ensuring the guests' satisfaction. Because, consumption is the point where consumers make judgments on the products they have bought, and later these judgements will influence the consumers' perception of satisfaction and increase or decrease the chances of the product being bought again. Blackwell, Miniard and Engel theorize that the chances of the products being repurchased depend upon the feelings experienced during consumption (Blackwell et al., 2006).

Therefore, Fotis (2015, pp. 282-283) 'states during the consumer process, consumers use social media for four reasons: to express themselves and various activities from the stay online, to search for information and to evaluate alternatives to their activities in the hotel and surroundings, to remain in contact with their social media contacts and to participate in social games'.

- Consumers' desire to share activities with their contacts on social media emerges from the need to invite those social media contacts to follow their holiday, to express their sociability or simply to share photos and experiences with friends. Posting engaging content on social media by guests will increase the hotel chance to be discovered by more consumers.
- Searching for information and evaluating alternatives can be due to the lack of proper planning process of the holiday or various unforeseen activities requiring a change in plans, or due to a new activity in the holiday discovered on the spot or proposed by local sources. Hotels need to be aware that guests aren't just searching for a hotel, but a hotel in the area they are traveling to for work or holiday. These trips are often scheduled around local events, tourist attractions, citywide conferences, and niche interest areas. Hotels should include these events in their social media posts, because they can be extremely helpful, especially for guests who have never stayed at the particular hotel before.
- Consumers feel the need to stay in touch with their social media contacts during the holiday mainly because of their social commitment to family or friends, or due to a number of unforeseen circumstances such as bad weather that would keep them at the hotel, and even because of boredom during the holiday.
- Changing consumer behavior by participating in social games can result in an excessive dependence upon social media, mainly due to the nature of games that require active consumer participation at frequent intervals. The hotel can be

engaged with guests through social media with games such as: liking hotel's tags, mentions and posts or choosing a good photo and rewarding it from guests they took while staying within the hotel.

- *Stage 5 - Post-consumption evaluation*

Once consumers have consumed their purchased product, satisfaction or dissatisfaction occurs (Blackwell et al., 2006). If consumers are satisfied, they will either purchase the product again or at least consider it for future purchases, however, it has been argued that satisfaction does not always ensure repeat purchases and that consumers must experience some sort of delight which only occurs when consumers' expectations of the product are exceeded and completely satisfied.

During the post-consumer evaluation process, consumers connect with social media to provide results of their holiday. Consumers today are using social media to talk about their own good or bad experiences and thus share feedback and opinions about particular accommodation with family or friends. Social media have increased the possibility offered to consumers to share their good or bad experiences with their family and friends like never before. If we just think about it, a decade ago, consumers who wanted to talk about their own experience could only spread the word to a small circle of people around them. Nowadays, with social media it has become easier for consumers to spread the word in the form of comments, praise, criticism and rankings really quickly to hundreds of people and influence their purchase decision-making processes.

A benefit for hospitality is that consumers' behavior can be, and has to be continuously monitored in the post-consumption evaluation of social media. This can happen either through responding individually to consumers' questions and comments (positive or negative) or through the integration of analytics software which provide statistics and further analysis of consumers' behavior (Moustakas, 2015). Hotels have to be extremely careful with negative comments or complaints, because they have a bigger impact than the positive ones and they can spread much faster after the incident 'goes viral'. Deleting negative comments or feedback is a wrong action for hospitality as consumers should be treated with respect and the hotel's response should be specific and instant. A dialogue can help hotels learn how their business is perceived, and what improvements can be made to strengthen their business. If the post-consumption evaluation process is properly supported by social media this could build long-term brand loyalty for hotels.

## **Limitations**

This paper has several limitations. The first one is that the very traditional model of consumer decision-making process that involves six steps that consumers move through when buying a product or service is taken as a method of analysing. The topic of consumer behaviour in hospitality can be further discussed with most recent decision-making models present in of the field of behavioural academic research.

Another limitation is that the consumer decision-making process affected by social media for consumers in hospitality is addressed in general. Given the fact that consumer decision-making process is a complex procedure and the rapid growth of social media is resulting with bigger influence on consumer, the need for analysing the decision-making process from multiple decision criteria's such as: millennials, families, active silvers, groups and other groups should be used for hospitality successfully reach their target market, and improve interactions with customers.

## **Conclusion**

Rapid dissemination and use of social media that once was a trend is now widely accepted in all parts of society. Social factors have always played a part in consumer decision process, but the ubiquity of media has taken word-of-mouth to new heights. Social media has evolved from being a thing or a feature to being part of every industry's business. Thus, social media is becoming more popular in the hospitality. For hospitality to be able to understand how consumer behavior is changing, it's helpful to look through the eyes of a consumer / guest and understand how social media transforms key moments in their typical day. It's hard to deny tourists' / guests' reliance on social media, which can even be manifest in some extreme ways. In a 2016 research report, Expedia found that guests consider their mobile phones to be the single most indispensable item they carry with them in a hotel, ahead of their toothbrush, deodorant and driving licence. Guests are becoming even more reliant on using social media on their mobile phones because it makes every aspect of their life simpler or more effective, especially during their stay in a hotel or simply when travelling.

By explaining why, when and how social media influence consumer behavior, the accessibility and transparency offered by the social media are listed as the main factors in changing consumer behavior. The camera, previously used to simply snap pictures or record videos for personal use, has become the lifeblood of every social media platform, who now has crucial role in presenting the real service and amenities in the hotel opposite to the given promotion on social media. With this, every guest is turned into content creator, by sharing visually-inspiring images with friends and followers across social media. And as long as guests continue with creating and sharing content on social media, they significantly impact how they interact with hotels and make purchasing decisions.

Nevertheless, hotels using social media to "reach to the consumers" as a communication and information tool also have the crucial impact on the consumer behavior. The key to success is finding a way to influence guests' decisions by embracing visuals and creating cohesive experiences with social media. Hotel that will take advantage of this opportunity by leveraging social media to help their guests to make a purchase through an image the second they're inspired, no matter on what social media platform they're on, will be the most successful in the tourist destination as well as the tourist market, whereas hotels that fail to adapt to this changing landscape may be left behind.

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