Awareness, use and attitude of tourism companies towards Web 2.0: an empirical analysis of the Spanish hospitality sector

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Abstract

Web 2.0 has been recognized as one of the most effective marketing channels. Based on a convenience sample of 351 hotels, this study analyze how hotel managers in Spain a) are aware of the various Web 2.0 tools and use them, b) believe that these tools can affect their business and tourists' choices and c) encourage customers to post on-line and subsequently to check these reviews. Findings reveal that there is a good level of awareness of the various Web 2.0 tools, although this differs according to the different types of tool. The most part of hotels were reported having a specific person within the organization who is responsible for managing e-reviews. However, findings also reveal that the staff rarely encourage customers to post online reviews even if, meanwhile, they reply to them quite often. Implications for hotel managers are discussed and suggestions for further research are given.

Key words: Web 2.0, awareness, use, hospitality management attitude, Spanish hospitality sector.

1. Introduction and Objectives

Important changes have occurred in the travellers' search for information since the advent of internet (Buhalis and Law, 1998) User Generated Content (hereafter UGC) (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). Travel 2.0 includes different applications such as media and content syndication (RSS-feeds), mashups, tagging, wikis, web forum, customer rating and evaluation systems, podcasting, blogs, photo sharing, video sharing, microblogging, etc (Akehurst, 2009). Probably the best known Web 2.0 applications are social networks (both tourism-related and not tourism-related), photo sharing, video sharing, corporate and consumers blogs, Online Travel Agencies with booking and ratings/review functions (hereafter OTAs) and microblogging.

The online interpersonal influence exerted by online reviews and recommendations is particularly important for the tourism sector because tourism and hospitality products and services are difficult to evaluate as they are intangible goods and they are high-involvement products where behaviour patterns during purchase are not routine (Lewis & Chambers, 2000). These circumstances mean that UGC attracts the attention of consumers because the online reviews and recommendations that tourists post online are perceived to have a higher credibility than traditional tourist information sources (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008), although this differs according to the different types of social media tools (PhoCusWright 2009; Del Chiappa, 2011; Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009), with OTAs being the most credible and the most able to influence tourists' choice.

According to eMarketer (2007b), about 75.2 million American online users utilize UGC applications. According to eMarketer (2007a), two out of every three European tourists use the Internet to upload their blogs and share reviews about their holidays with other people. Recently, PhoCusWright (2011) reported that more than 4 in 10 travellers say that UGC within their social networks influence their travel decision making. According to Amadeus

(2011), 71% of Spanish social media users make use of peer-to-peer travel applications for travel-related purposes.
Prior research sheds light on the significant influence that UGC and Travel 2.0 applications exert in stimulating travel, in the actual planning process, and during the post-travel phase (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). Sometimes they also induce tourists to alter their decisions after obtaining further information online. Indeed, eMarketer (2007b), for example, reports that, among tourists who use peer reviews to help them with their hotel bookings, the percentage of travellers who changed their booking based on reviews posted online by other consumers are 25% and 33% respectively for infrequent and frequent leisure travellers. An empirical investigation on a sample of 823 Italian tourist (Del Chiappa, 2011) confirmed this figure with respondents reporting that, after having read reviews and comments posted online, they changed their hotel accommodation sometimes (64.8%), almost always (12%) or always (0.5%). Recent research also showed that UGC sometimes caused online buyers to change the accommodation suggested by a travel agency (Del Chiappa, 2013).
Internet and social media are gaining importance to such an extent that there are likely to change marketing strategies and practices of any tourism organizations and tourism destinations (Stankov, Lazić and Dragićević, 2010). Despite this, the real awareness, use and attitude of hotel sector towards Web 2.0 tools remain in actual fact under investigated in existing literature with only an handful of papers addressing this topic (e.g: Del Chiappa, 2010). This paper was therefore carried out to contribute towards filling this gap. Specifically, it aims at investigate the extent to which Spanish hotel marketers know and use Travel 2.0, applications and believe these can influence tourists' choices and the hotel business.

2. Literature Review

Traveller hotel reviews have became central to the online shopping process for tourist products/services. Among tourist products and services, this is especially true for accommodation (Gretzel, Hyan-Yoo and Purifoy, 2007). For example, previous research highlighted that increasing by 10% the rating that consumers give online can increase hotel sales by 4,4% (Qiang, Law, Gu, 2009). In this way, it is quite obvious that for tourism and hospitality marketers – and also destination managers (Hamill, Attard and Stevenson, 2009) – Web 2.0 represents an opportunity to enhance information sharing among consumers and between tourist operators and their customers (Pühringer and Taylor, 2008). Nevertheless, tourism and hospitality marketers often express concern towards online reviews and comments because sometimes they can obviously be negative and, as we know, negative information tends to be weighted more heavily than positive information (Mizerski, 1982). But, unless these reach a significant level, they do not present any real problem. Indeed, as previous research has indicated, single negative comments, or at least a relatively low number of negative comments compared to the positive ones, are unlikely to create any damage. In fact, they can enhance the credibility of UGC sites and of the other comments posted on them (Del Chiappa, 2011; Sparks and Browing, 2011), producing positive responses in their audience (Vermeulen, Seegers, 2009). This means that tourism and hospitality marketers should both check and respond to online reviews and comments (reactive strategy) and encourage visitors to write them (proactive strategy), therefore significantly enhancing their customer relationships and further improving their services. This explains why previous research highlighted the opportunity/necessity to respond to both positive and negative online reviews (Dwuivedi, Shibu and Venkatesh, 2007).
Broadly, other opportunities offered by Travel 2.0 for hospitality businesses are customer acquisition (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009), complaint management (Del Chiappa and Dall'Aglio, 2012a, 2012b), customer engagement (Kavasana, Nusair and Teodosic, 2010), customer services, customer profiling, brand awareness and reinforcement, reputation and

image building (Xiang, Pan, Zhang and Smith, 2009), monitoring and management, development of new products/services (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier, 2002), quality control, enhancement of visitor/customer satisfaction through improvement of services, analysis of competitive strategies (DellaRocas, 2003; Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008), and these tools also mean that tourist operators can respond quickly and more efficiently to the market, they can enhance the creation and synthesis of data and, finally, permit better filtering of information (Kane, Fichman, Gallaugher and Glaser, 2009). Previous research highlighted that online hotel reviews increase consumers' awareness of less-known hotels more than of well-known establishments, and improve the average probability that tourists will consider booking a room in the hotel reviewed (Vermeulen, Seegers, 2009). Indeed, an effective development and control of the hotel's online presence on a UGC platform can improve the success rate of SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) procedures, increasing the traffic on the web-site. Regarding this latter point, it is important to highlight that search engines index social media pages more frequently if these social media are updated frequently (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). With the goal of investigating this so called "billboard effect", Anderson (2009), showed that the presence on Expedia increased the average daily rate, the traffic on web-site and the conversion rate, the number of reservations through other channels (phone call, official web site, etc) from 7.5% to 26%. Similar effects were found on the context of Italy by Del Chiappa (2012).

Recent research carried investigated the awareness, use and attitude of Italian hospitality managers toward the Web 2.0 (2010). Findings revealed a wide gap between the level of awareness of Web 2.0 and its use. Further, they revealed that hotels do not have a specific person responsible for managing and answering online reviews (39.40%) and that the staff rarely encourage customers to post online reviews (only 23.3%) after their stay and they also rarely reply to them (only 23.6%). Further, Italian managers were reported having a quite poor level of awareness of the power of social media over tourists' behaviour, although they believe that social media exert a relatively high influence over several areas of their business (image, awareness, sales, occupancy rate, etc)

3. Method

This research was carried out through an on-line survey, sending a questionnaire to a sample of 5,000 Spanish hospitality businesses. The data-base was randomly assembled drawing up a list of e-mails from provincial and regional hospitality data-bases (in both paper and electronic formats).

The questionnaire was developed taking into account the survey used in prior similar study (Del Chiappa, 2010), periodicals and other relevant literature to underpin the theory and link it with data and information gathered from online sources, such as blogs and message boards.

In particular, the questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part described the objectives of the research and the procedures to follow to fill in the questionnaire and then asked for some general information, such as the type of hospitality business in which the respondents work and the region it is located in. The second part described different Web 2.0 tools (photo sharing, video sharing, blog, on-line travel agencies with review functions, social networks (both general and tourist-related) and microblogs) and asked respondents to indicate which of these they know and use. The final part investigated the attitude of Spanish hospitality managers towards Web 2.0. Therefore, we asked respondents to assess the degree to which they believe different Web 2.0 tools influence, on the one hand, the tourists' behaviour and the process they follow to select their accommodation and, on the other, the respondents own business. In particular, regarding the latter, participants were asked to assess the degree to which they believe Web 2.0 influences the following areas of their business: awareness, image, occupancy rate, profit, web-site traffic, requests for information (both by

mail or phone). The hotel managers answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). In this part of the questionnaire respondents were also asked to tell us if and how they manage the reviews that tourists post on-line. Specifically, we asked whether there is a specific person responsible for checking and managing on-line reviews, whether staff encourages customers to post a review at the end of their stay and, finally, whether staff answers the reviews posted.

Five thousand managers were invited to take part in the survey by sending them an e-mail which contained the link to the online questionnaire. In the period October 2012 – February 2013, a total of 451 questionnaires were returned from different parts of Spain, of which 351 could be used for statistical analysis. Therefore the overall response rate was 7.02%. The most part of respondents were 3 star hotels (34.9%) followed by: two star hotels (24%), four star hotels (22.9%), one star hotels (7.7%), five star hotels (4.9%) and five star luxury hotel (2.3%). Data was entered into a SPSS database for manipulation and analysis.

4. Findings

Table 1 shows whether Spanish hospitality marketers are aware of and use Web 2.0 tools.

Table 1 – Awareness and use of Web 2.0 applications in the Italian hospitality sector* (%)

Social media	**"I know it"**	**Social Media**	**"I use it"**
Photo-sharing	67.8	Photo-sharing	37.4
Video sharing	76.8	Video sharing	31.9
Consumer tourism-related blogs	81	Consumer tourism-related blogs	30.2
OTAs	98.8	OTAs	88.9
Tourism-related social network	98.2	Tourism-related social network	82
Non Tourism-related social network	98.2	Non Tourism-related social network	78.6
Microblogging (Twitter)	90.5	Microblogging (Twitter)	35.1

*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

The clearest resulting data is the wide gap between the level of awareness of Web 2.0 and its use. Except for photo-sharing, the level of awareness is good, with the highest values for OTAs (98.8) and social network, both tourism-related (98.2%) and non tourism-related (98.2%). On the other hand, use is very low compared to level of awareness and it is above 50% only for OTAs (88.9%), tourism-related social networks (82%) and non tourism-related social network (78.6%). Findings also allow to indicate which are the best known and most used social media for each of the Web 2.0 application categories studied (Tables 2-8 in appendix). The best known and most used social media are: a) Photo sharing: Yahoo, Flickr and Picasa b) Video sharing: Youtube, Google Video and Yahoo Video c) Consumer tourism-related blogs: Mytripjournal and Traveljournal d) OTAs: Booking.com, Expedia, HRS e) Tourism-related social networks: Tripadvisor, Trivago and Zoover f) Non tourism-related social networks: Facebook, Myspace and Yahoo Answer g) Microblogging: Twitter;

When managers were asked if there was a specific person responsible for managing and answering online reviews, answer was: no (31,3%), yes (68,7%).

Table 9 – "Proactivity"/reactivity of the Spanish hospitality marketers toward the online reviews (%)

	Never	**Almost never**	**Sometimes**	**Almost always**	**Always**
Does the staff of your company encourage clients to post a review at the end of their stay?	13.8	11.2	36.8	24.1	14.1
Does the staff of your company reply to the reviews posted online?	12.2	12.5	27.9	24.9	22.6

Moreover, as Table 9 shows, staff in hospitality encourage customers to post online reviews quite rarely (38.2%) after their stay and they seem to reply to them quite often (47.5%)[1].
In this way our findings seem to suggest that hospitality managers have a quite poor level of awareness of the power of social media over tourists' behaviour. This idea also seems to be indicated by the mean values of the respondents' answers when assessing how social media influence hotel selection and booking processes. Apart from tourism OTAs and tourism-related social networks, the mean values are quite low especially for corporate blogs, microblogging, video sharing and photo sharing (Table 4).

Table 10 – Influence of Web 2.0 on tourists' choices: the perceptions of Spanish hospitality managers									
Web 2.0 application	**Response rate for each value of the 7-point Likert Scale (%)**							**M.**	**S.D**
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**		
Corporate blogs	19	18.4	17.3	20.2	14	7.6	3.5	3.29	1.697
Photo sharing	14.7	8.5	15.9	13.8	19.1	18.8	9.1	4.07	1.896
Video sharing	17.6	8.8	15.6	14.4	18.5	17.1	7.9	3.90	1.919
Tourism-related blog	9.6	9.4	12.3	18.7	21.3	20.2	8.5	4.27	1.756
OTAs	2	1.1	3.7	8.6	16.4	29.3	38.8	5.79	1.372
Tourism-related social network	4.3	3.1	6	12.9	22.6	28	23.1	5.23	1.580
Non tourism-related social network	5.5	4.9	11.2	15.8	24.4	23	15.2	4.79	1.650
Microblogging	14.5	14.8	17.2	16	17.7	11.3	8.4	3.75	1.847
ANOVA test: F = 75.673, p < 0.01									

Results from ANOVA analysis reveals that respondents think that tourist choices are most influenced by OTAs with reviewing and rating functions and that this influence differs significantly from the pressure exerted by all another social media (F= 75.673, p = < 0.01). Nowadays it seems that a high percentage of respondents still believe that social media, and more specifically some types, do not significantly influence hotel site selection or booking process. In a decreasing order, the percentages are: corporate blogs: 74.9%; microblogging: 62.5%; non tourism-related social networks: 37,4%; video sharing: 56.4%; photo sharing: 52.9%; tourism-related social networks: 26.3%; non tourism-related social networks: 37.4%; OTAs with reviewing and rating functions: 15,4% (Table 10)[2].

Table11 – Influence of Web 2.0 on hospitality business: the perceptions of Spanish hospitality managers									
Web 2.0 application	**Response rate for each value of the 7-point Likert Scale (%)**							**M.**	**S.D**
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Image	-	0.3	3.2	5.2	14.9	31.8	44.6	6.8	1.066
Awareness	0.3	0.9	4.4	7.3	26.4	32	28.7	5.7	1.169
Occupancy rate	1.8	5.3	9.7	16.5	26.2	26.5	14.1	4.96	1.465
Sales	1.8	5.1	10.7	17.6	29	19.7	16.1	4.90	1.479
Traffic on the web-site	0.6	1.7	6.1	7.9	25.4	32.7	25.7	5.56	1.271
Request for information by email	0.3	3.6	5.9	11.8	24.6	30.8	23.1	5.41	1.337
Request for information by phone	1.8	5.1	10.7	17.6	29	19.7	16.1	5.12	1.435
ANOVA test: F = 35.578, p < 0.01									

Table 11 shows the mean values that Italian hospitality managers gave when assessing how social media influence certain types of business results: image, awareness, occupancy rate, sales, traffic on the web-site and request for information by both e-mail and phone. Overall, our findings highlight that hospitality managers believe that social media exert a relatively high influence over several areas of their business. The highest values relate to the influence

[1] These percentages were calculated by summing "Almost always" and "Always" answers.
[2] These percentages were calculated by summing the percentage of people that give an assessment of 1,2,3 or 4.

exerted over image, awareness, request for information by e-mail, traffic on the web-site and requests for information by phone. The lowest relate to sales and occupancy rates. Results from ANOVA analysis reveals that respondents think that the area of their business which is the most influenced by UGC is the company image and that the effect generated on this differs significantly from those generated on any other business area (ANOVA test: $F = 35.578$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, it is interesting to show the percentage of hospitality managers who do not believe that social media exert influence over these areas of their business. For the different areas, these percentages are: sales: 35.2%; requests for information by phone: 35.2%; occupancy rate: 33,3%; requests for information by e-mail: 21,6%; traffic on the web-site: 16.3%; awareness: 12,9; image: 8.7%. These findings indicate that there is still hotel players who do not believe that social media are able to exert influence over their business, especially in some areas such as sales.

5. Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate Spanish hospitality marketers' attitudes toward the web 2.0. Findings revealed a quite significant inconsistency between the level of awareness that hospitality managers have of Travel 2.0 applications compared to the use they make of them in their marketing and communication strategy.

Except for photo-sharing, the level of awareness is good, with the highest values for OTAs and social network (both tourism-related and non tourism-related). However the use of Travel 2.0 applications is very low compared to level of awareness and it is above 50% only for OTAs, tourism-related social networks and non tourism-related social network (78.6%).

Furthermore, our findings suggest that managers believe that only OTAs and -related social networks have the power to strongly influence tourist choices. Other applications, especially corporate blogs, microblogging, video sharing and photo sharing, are perceived to have much less influence. It could be argue, that hospitality players have not fully acknowledged the power of social media in affecting tourist's behaviour. This is also confirmed also by the fact that hospitality companies often do not yet have a specific person responsible for managing and answering online reviews and they rarely encourage customers to post online reviews, and furthermore they rarely reply to them. On the whole, hospitality players believe social media exert quite a high influence over several areas of their business. The highest values are related to the influence exerted by Web 2.0 applications over image and awareness. However the percentage of hospitality managers who do not believe social media exert a significant influence over their business is still quite high; again, a cause for concern that some managers are still apparently unaware of the possibilities offered by UGC applications. To sum up it would appear that, in the Spanish hospitality sector, Web 2.0 uptake is still not fully understood.

6. Limitations

Although our findings contribute to examine the awareness, use and attitude of Spanish hospitality managers towards Travel 2.0 applications, the research does have some limitations.

Firstly, sample size could be considered small compared to the overall size of the Spanish hospitality sector and, furthermore, not perfectly representative of the population. Indeed it could be argued that the composition of our sample does not match the real percentages represented by each category of hospitality companies within the Italian hospitality sector. Thus, findings cannot be generalised. Secondly, this study did not take into consideration in the least the awareness, use and attitude shown by the Spanish tourism demand towards Travel 2.0 applications and, therefore, it is not possible to fully investigated the measure in

which the hospitality offer is able to keep up with the way the Spanish tourism demand is aware of, uses and behaves towards Web 2.0 when making their tourist choices.

7. Future research

Moving away from its limitations, the present study does highlight several possible future research paths. Firstly, this study could be repeated in other countries in order to verify how international hospitality players from different countries are aware of, use and behave towards Travel 2.0. Secondly, future research could be carried out on a sample of the Spanish tourism demand to deeply study its behaviour towards Travel 2.0 and thus evaluate how the Spanish offer is able to emulate it and keep up with these opportunities.

8. Managerial implications

On the whole, as noted above, hospitality managers know about Travel 2.0 applications, but they have not fully recognised the power that social media have in influencing both their business and tourists' behaviour. Therefore, it would appear that hospitality managers are missing out on market intelligence and on other information about behaviour and trends in tourism sector.

These conclusions are significant for both researchers and hospitality managers. On the one hand, they contribute to the deepening of the scientific debate on the role of Travel 2.0 applications within the tourism sector, suggesting that further research should carry out an in-depth analysis as to what the restrictions are to making a wider and more knowledgeable use of them. On the other hand, findings suggest that hospitality managers should appoint a person to be specifically responsible for monitoring the online brand reputation of their companies and replying to the reviews that tourists post online. In particular, hospitality marketers, in running their marketing and communication activities, should split their time and financial resources between the different Travel 2.0 applications differently, and they should also pay attention to other differences, such as the gender and age of their customers (Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, and Fesenmaier, 2009; Del Chiappa, 2011). At the same time, hospitality managers should invest more time in training their front-line staff, so that they encourage customers to post online reviews. Finally, public tourism organisations, destination management organisations, associations within the hospitality sector and universities should provide hospitality players with more training on Travel 2.0 applications and on the opportunities that these can offer.

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Appendix

Table 2 – Awareness and use of photo-sharing (%)

Social media	"I know it"	Social Media	"I use it"
Flickr	74.7	Yahoo	25.1
Yahoo	81.5	Picasa	12.2
Picasa	74.1	Flickr	24.7
Photobucket	24.7	Photobucket	2.5

*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 3 – Awareness and use of video-sharing (%)

Social media	"I know it"	Social Media	"I use it"
Youtube	97.5	Youtube	53.4
Revver	6	Google Video	98.9
Clipser	6.4	Yahoo Video	99.3
Tv Trip	17.5	Libero Video	97.8
Google Video	73.9	Video in Hotel	82.7
Vimeo	49.3	Tv Trip	91.8
Libero Video	7.1	Vimeo	98.9
Yahoo Video	45.7	Revver	94.6
Video in Hotel	24.6	Clipser	88.4

*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 4 – Awareness and use of consumers tourism-related blog (%)

Social media	"I know it"	Social Media	"I use it"
Mytripjournal	27.6	Traveljournal	3.1
Travel journals	5.5	Mytripjournal	99.4

*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers

Table 5 – Awareness and use of OTAs

Social media	"I know it"	Social Media	"I use it"
Booking	99.4	Booking	89.8
Expedia	91.5	Expedia	60.7
HRS	69.4	HRS	50.2
Unitravel	36.5	Unitravel	12.6
Travellero	18.7	Travellero	4.9

Last Minute	91.8	Last Minute	50.8
Splendia	36.6	Splendia	12.1
*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers			

Table 6 – Awareness and use of tourism-related social network

Social media	**"I know it"**	**Social Media**	**"I use it"**
Tripadvisor	98.7	Tripadvisor	83
Trivago	97.8	Trivago	75.7
Zoover	27.9	Zoover	15.2
Open Feedback	4	Open Feedback	0.4
Nextstop	4.3	Nextstop	0.8
Dopplr	5.4	Dopplr	0.4
Where I have been	4	Where I have been	-
Wikitravel	22.9	Wikitravel	3.9
Drifter	2.2	Drifter	-
Tripsay	2.5	Tripsay	0.4
Thorn Tree	1.1	Thorn Tree	0.4
Frommer's	7.6	Frommer's	2.3
Fodor's	7.3	Fodor's	2.3
*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers			

Table 7 – Awareness and use of non tourism-related social network

Social media	**"I know it"**	**Social Media**	**"I use it"**
Facebook	99.1	Facebook	83.9
My Space	82.7	My Space	11
Orkut	12.8	Orkut	1.9
Netlog	26.4	Netlog	3.4
Yahoo Answer	37.9	Yahoo Answer	3.4
*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers			

Table 8 – Awareness and use of non tourism-related social network

Social media	**"I know it"**	**Social Media**	**"I use it"**
Twitter	96.7	Twitter	44.2
Jaiku	5.2	Jaiku	0.4
Powns	3	Powns	0.4
Hictu	1.5	Hictu	-
Memy	1.9	Memy	4.8
Mysay	4.8	Mysay	0.8
*Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers			