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Restaurants' Communication with Dissatisfied Customers on TripAdvisor – the Comparative Study

Abstract

Dissatisfied consumers who express critical opinions about the company, its products or services may cause negative word-of-mouth (WOM). In the era of easy and universal access to the media, negative comments about the company's offer may adversely affect the company's image and sales volume. However, proper communication of managers conducted in social media with a dissatisfied client can have a positive impact on the loyalty of this client as well as on the image of the company among other Internet users. One of the platforms that allow consumers to express their opinions is TripAdvisor.

The aim of the study is to indicate whether national culture influences communication between restaurant managers and dissatisfied customers on TripAdvisor. The methods used in the research were both quantitative and qualitative content analyses of restaurant responses to negative reviews posted on TripAdvisor. The research covered a random sample of restaurants from two culturally different cities - Cracow in Poland and Porto in Portugal and listed on TripAdvisor. The study shows that there are no differences in some aspects of restaurant communication with dissatisfied consumers. In both Poland and Portugal, around 1/4 of the restaurants respond to negative reviews. However, Polish managers more often than Portuguese managers apologize to dissatisfied customers.

Keywords

Communication, Customer Dissatisfaction, Cultural Differences, TripAdvisor

Introduction

According to Statista (2019) in 2018, there were more than 1.3 million restaurants listed on TripAdvisor. Every month TripAdvisor (2019) notes average of 490 million unique users who already have posted nearly 8 million reviews. These reviews are mostly positive, but customers express also their dissatisfaction with services by posting negative comments. Unfavorable feedback can affect negatively both the volume of sales and the company's image. Managers' reaction to criticism can be seen not only as a response to a complaint but also as

a positive signal for potential consumers, playing an educational role. Furthermore, properly prepared complaint response messages are necessary for successful online corporate image management (Breitsohl et al., 2010). However, efficient communication with consumers may be hindered by cultural differences. It should be noted that TripAdvisor is available in 49 markets, in countries with different cultures. Therefore it is interesting whether companies use TripAdvisor to communicate with dissatisfied customers and whether this communication depends on the national culture of restaurant managers.

Theoretical background

The concept of culture is not explicit, representatives of various scientific disciplines (e.g. anthropology, ethnography, philosophy or sociology) define culture in a different way. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) indicated six types of culture definitions. According to Bjerke (1999), culture refers to unconscious values. These are basic norms of behavior, values, and beliefs that influence behavior, but are not behaviors themselves. Culture will determine the way people perceive reality, think, feel or act, but these behaviors are merely a consequence of adopting specific norms and manifestations of culture.

Culture is an important element of the environment of every enterprise. Cultural factors can determine the company's activities at many levels (Dorfman et al., 2012, Hofstede and Hofstede, 2007; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2002; Gesteland, 2002). The beliefs, values or attitudes of managers that are part of their national culture affect both the business management strategy and the way tasks are implemented. These tasks also include communication with clients – marketing communication of the enterprise.

In the area of marketing, one of the basic criteria for cross-cultural research is national culture (Yaprak, 2008; Chen et al., 2012). Cultural differences are manifested in both consumer behavior and managers' approach. Many authors emphasize the importance of cultural differences in marketing communication with consumers (Harvey and Griffith, 2002, Guo et al., 2012). Šerić et al. (2016) indicate that the perception of integrated marketing communications depends on the national culture of customers. Hofstede's cultural dimensions exert a significant influence on brand extension success on international markets (Henseler et al., 2010).

In the context of electronic communication with consumers, van Mulken and van der Meer (2005) conducted interesting research. They showed that there are cultural differences between American and Dutch companies that used email to communicate with customers.

Undoubtedly, a satisfied customer is a prerequisite for the success of any restaurant. (Chow et al., 2007). Unsatisfied customers can not only resign from further purchases but also negatively affect the reputation of a restaurant. Negative word of mouth may adversely affect the company's performance (Ferguson and Johnston, 2011). In the era of social media development, the voice of every dissatisfied customer can reach many potential buyers. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), e-word-of-mouth and negative comments allow

consumers to gain collective power over companies. Ayeh et al. (2013) suggest that platforms such as TripAdvisor have the potential to influence consumers' travel planning and decision-making process, so negative user-generated reviews could have a harmful impact on company's reputation and sales. It can be assumed that these conclusions are also true for other groups of services assessed on TripAdvisor. Furthermore, negative reviews can even lead to serious crises in companies (Liu et al., 2015).

However, it should be noted that researches conducted by Cho (2013) and Conlon and Murray (1996) find that complaining behavior leads to repeat purchase intention with the condition that complaints are well resolved. Adequate handling of consumer complaints increases their loyalty (Tax et al., 1998). At the same time, Hsiao et al. (2016) argue that individual complaint handling is not enough to improve the quality of services in the long term - consumer complaints should also be analyzed at an aggregate level. Thus, the proper managers' approach to customer complaints expressed on social media can have a positive impact on restaurant performance.

Method

The methods used in the research were both quantitative and qualitative content analyses of restaurants' responses to negative reviews (with a rating of 1 or 2) posted on TripAdvisor. Both Krakow and Porto are the second largest cities in Poland and Portugal respectively. For both cities, 2018 was a record year in terms of the number of tourists – 13.5 million people visited Cracow, and 4.3 million decided to visit Porto. From this perspective, Cracow and Porto have some similar features. At the same time, both cities are influenced by different national cultures. This is demonstrated, for example, by the Hofstede model of national culture (*The 6 dimensions...*, 2019) or the GLOBE project (*An overview...*, 2019).

According to the Hofstede model, significant differences can be noticed between Poland and Portugal in at least two dimensions of culture (*The 6 dimensions...*, 2019). The first difference is visible in the area of individualism vs. collectivism. Poland is an individualist society and individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. Portugal, however, is a collectivist country. Loyalty in this culture overrides most other societal rules and regulations. and members of society are strongly involved in long-term relationships. Also, studies within the GLOBE project confirm a high degree of Portugal institutional collectivism (Culture Groups, 2004).

Between Poland and Portugal, there are also substantial differences in the masculinity vs. femininity dimension of culture. From this perspective Polish people “live in order to work”, managers are expected to be decisive and assertive, the emphasis is on equity, competition, and performance. In Portugal people focus on “working in order to live”, managers strive for consensus, people value equality, solidarity, and quality in their working lives.

From the GLOBE project perspective, Poland belongs to the Eastern European group and Portugal – to the Latin Europe cluster (Culture Groups, 2004).

The research covered a random sample of restaurants located in Cracow (Poland) and Porto (Portugal) – see Table 1.

Table 1. Selection of the research sample

	Cracow	Porto
Number of restaurants listed on TripAdvisor	1530	1856
Number of restaurants with reviews	1394	1744
Sample size	301	315

Source: own elaboration.

The basic characteristics of the tested sample are shown in Table 2. TripAdvisor allows to specify the price range of meals offered in restaurants – there are *Fine Dining* with the highest prices, *Mid-range* and *Cheap Eat*. The rating on a scale of 1 to 5 is determined for each restaurant (with 1 being the lowest rate). Restaurant managers can manage their company profiles on TripAdvisor (e.g. upload photos, respond to reviews).

Table 2. The characteristics of the sample

Variable	Variable value	Percentage of restaurants - Cracow	Percentage of restaurants - Porto
Price level	Fine Dining	9.3	3.2
	Mid-range	51.8	57.1
	Cheap Eats	38.9	39.7
Rating	5	9.3	11.8
	4.5	43.5	34.9
	4	30.6	33.3
	3.5	12.6	12.1
	3	2.7	5.1
	2.5	1.3	2.5
	2	0	0.3
Listing managed by restaurant	Yes	66.5	52.1
	No	33.5	47.9
At least one negative comment (with rating of 1 or 2) in the official language or in English	Yes	83.7	78.1
	No	16.3	21.9

Source: own elaboration.

It is worth noting that in the further analysis were considered only those restaurants which received from customers at least one negative review of 1 or 2 (on a scale of 1-5) in the official language (Polish or Portuguese) or in English. There were 252 restaurants from Cracow and 246 restaurants from Porto. Subsequently, only those restaurants that responded to at least one negative comment were examined (64 and 66 restaurants, respectively). For checking the independence of variables Pearson's chi-squared test (χ^2) was used.

Findings and discussion

The minority of restaurants respond to negative consumer reviews – 24,6% in Cracow, 26,8% in Porto. Perhaps huge numbers of tourists visited Cracow (13.5 million in 2018) make the demand for catering services very high. This may be the main reason why restaurants ignore the critical remarks of their guests. However, Porto, which is a smaller city and is visited by fewer tourists, has more restaurants than Cracow and the percentage of responses to negative reviews is similar to that in Poland.

The likelihood of responding to unfavorable comments increases with the level of prices in a restaurant. This relationship is significant both in Krakow and in Porto. Higher prices and etiquette of “Fine Dining” are usually associated with a higher quality of services including communication with guests.

It is worth noting, however, that restaurant managers only communicate with some authors of negative reviews. On average, 40% of critical remarks in Cracow and 54% in Porto met with a restaurant reaction. Vázquez (2011) indicates that some complaints (negative reviews) also contain positive remarks. At the same time, advice and recommendations appear in many critical opinions. These elements can mitigate the negative overtones of comments and distract managers from entering a dialogue with consumers.

Research results show statistically significant differences in answering negative comments written in the native language (Polish and Portuguese) and in English. Restaurant managers from Porto are more likely to respond to Portuguese reviews than to English comments. In contrast, Polish restaurants more often comment on English posts. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Responses to the negative reviews, depending on the review language

Percentage of restaurants responding to negative reviews written in:	Cracow	Porto
native language (Polish or Portuguese)	67.2	84.8
English	75.0	51.5

Source: own elaboration.

For purposes of the analysis, the answers given by restaurant managers were divided into 3 groups - positive, neutral and negative.

In positive responses, restaurants agree with dissatisfied customers. Managers apologize for the inconvenience and mistakes of restaurant staff. In this group of answers, there were also requests for direct contact with the restaurant. For example:

- *We are extremely sorry for what happened. You are right – such circumstances are not acceptable. Please contact us at our e-mail address;*
- *We are really, really sorry for that. We apologize to you. This waiter is not a part of our team. Hopefully, we will have a chance to change your experiences when you accept our invitation to visit us once again.*

In neutral responses, restaurant managers say they are sorry about customer dissatisfaction, but at the same time, they explain intricacies of the catering business (e.g. stating, that customers have different tastes) and defend their point. Managers emphasize tradition and many years of experience of restaurant staff. These answers are often educational – e.g. managers remind that they cannot host customers when all tables are reserved. Examples of such answers are:

- *Thank you for your review, we appreciate you taking the time to write. We can't solve the problem if we don't know about it. If you only reported the problem to the staff, you would receive new steaks;*
- *Francesinha is a typical dish from Porto, yes, it's greasy, because it's covered with cheese. It's supposed to be greasy but our version of Francesinha is a lot healthier than the usual (typical).*

Negative responses are those that may offend customers. For example:

- *Dear Tracy, concerning your expectations and personal taste it's very easy to understand that you came to the wrong place. Here definitely you can't find Coca-Cola, which seems your favorite drink, industrial wines sold at less than 1 EUR by glass or typical Portuguese trash food sold for tourists;*
- *I am very grateful that you will not return to our restaurant.*

The percentages of specific responses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of types of answers

Percentage of answers	Cracow	Porto
Positive	31.9	15.5
Neutral	57.3	73.0
Negative	10.8	11.5

Source: own elaboration.

Based on the results, a significant dependence can be found between the city of the restaurant location and the type of response to negative reviews. In Polish restaurants, consumers were more often right and apologized.

According to the Hofstede model and the GLOBE project Portugal in comparison with Poland is a much more collectivist country. Perhaps this is the reason for differentiated responses to consumer criticism. On the one hand, a restaurant and its employees are treated as a group. On the other hand, loyalty to group members takes precedence over other societal rules and regulations. Customers can be perceived as not belonging to the group, especially if they are tourists. As can be seen, Portuguese managers are more likely to enter into discussions with customers complaining in English. It is highly probable that such clients are foreign tourists. This may be the answer to the question why dissatisfied customers are apologized less often in Portugal than in Poland. In Poland, performance and competition are important to managers, hence greater consumer care.

Conclusions

The survey shows restaurant managers' reactions to user-generated content on TripAdvisor and presents how they communicate with dissatisfied customers using this portal. This is a different view because previous research has mainly focused on the perspective of consumers. Complaint management was considered from the perspective of the consumer's cultural affiliation (Henneberg et al., 2015). In general, the research shows that restaurants still have great opportunities to improve their communication with customers. Dialogue with unsatisfied guests can be an indication to TripAdvisor users that the restaurant places a high value on customer service. Certainly, intensive communication can become a distinguishing feature of the company and at the same time, it can help to build customer loyalty.

The study showed that there are differences in communication with consumers conducted by managers from different countries. However, the research considers cultural differences to a limited extent - only two countries were taken into account. It would be interesting to investigate whether TripAdvisor users are paying attention to the content of negative reviews, and particularly to the responses to these critical comments.

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