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HOW TRAVELERS USE ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS TO MAKE HOTEL CHOICE DECISIONS. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND AMERICAN TOURISTS' ONLINE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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Over the last decades, the global hospitality and tourism (or H&T) industry has undergone dramatic changes. Among the factors stimulating the growth of the H&T industry, the spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media should be emphasized. The same trends characterize the Russian H&T industry as well. However, despite the significant role of social media in the Russian H&T industry, there is still a lack of understanding of Russian H&T customers' behavior. The current study aims to fill this gap and demonstrates how Russian travelers use social media to make hotel choice decisions and share their experiences on social media after their travel is completed. In order to deliver a more thorough revealing of Russian travel consumers' peculiarities and to discover if there is Russian uniqueness, the online behavior of American and Russian travelers is compared in this paper.

JEL Classification: M150, M160, Z330

Key words: hospitality industry, social media, ICT, customers' behavior, Russia.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of the H&T industry in the Russian economy has changed since last 25 years dramatically. In the 1990s, a wide range of forces influenced the transformation of the post-Soviet Russian H&T industry, including the fall of the Iron Curtain, the abolition of the state monopoly on certain types of business activities, the privatization of government-owned enterprises, price liberalization, the creation of a legislative and legal framework for domestic businesses, favored nations status to foreign businesses operating in Russia, and others (Balaeva et al., 2012; Assipova and Minnaert, 2014). The modernization of the Russian economy resulted in an increasing number of travel companies, an expanding list of available tourist destinations, increasing inbound and inbound tourist flows, the entrance of leading international hotel chains and tour operators into the Russian market, a growing number of hotels under domestic management, etc. Thus, the number of outbound tourist trips (out of the CIS countries) has increased by nearly 405% in the last 14 years (Russian Federal State Statistics Service, 2014). The number of hotels and similar accommodation establishments such as resorts and B&Bs in the domestic market has increased by 190% during the same period. Regarding the international hotel chains, according to KPMG's forecast, by the year 2018, these numbers will reach 220 hotels and 47 500 rooms (KPMG, 2012).

The spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) should be named among the factors currently providing the momentum for the Russian H&T industry growth. As Prabhu (2011) stated, "Russians are the most avid social media junkies in the world". As active Internet users, Russians widely use social media for tourism-related purposes (Balaeva et al., 2012).

The following global meta-search and online booking agencies are operated in the Russian Internet zone and are widely recognized and actively used: Tripadvisor.com, Booking.com, and Virtualtourist.com. Indeed, there are several Russian-origin websites dedicated to travel and hotel reviews such as Travel.ru, Otdih.ru, and Otziv.ru. Some local businesses created the localized web resources, for instance, Hotels.ru and Ostrovok.ru, which are quite similar to top global meta-search and online booking sites.

The top social media networks in Russia are as follows: Vkontakte.ru, Odnoklassniki.ru, and Facebook.ru. The first one, Vkontakte.ru, or "In Touch", is the largest Russian online social media network, its interface and features are very similar to those of Facebook. Since its launch in 2007, the number of Vkontakte.ru users reached 52 million in 2014, with 26 million user connections daily (Brand Analytics, 2014). Odnoklassniki.ru is considered as another big online social media community and it is similar to the Classmates.com known in the USA. It is based

upon users' particular school/college/university background and aimed to aid in the search for classmates and old friends. It was created found in 2006 and now has unites approximately 42 million users, 10 million of whom log into their pages every day (Corp.mail.ru, 2014). Facebook emerged in the Russian Internet zone 6 years ago and is known as #3 ranked Russian top social media site; it is the "youngest" but a rapidly growing social media community site, with 25 million users in 2014. Twitter currently has 8.4 million users in this country (Brand Analytics, 2014).

Being widely used by Russian travelers as channels and sources for information on hotels and destinations, social media have a significant influence on Russian travelers' choice. However, the role that social media play in Russian tourists' behavior is rather understudied. The one notable paper on this topic was published in 2011 by Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides. In this study, the authors attempted to identify the impact of social media throughout the decision-making process regarding the journey before, during and after the trip. The results of the research showed that Russians and citizens of other former USSR countries use social media primarily to share their experience after returning from a trip by posting their videos, photos, and reviews. Tourists also actively use social media to discuss their experience with friends and/or other travelers during the trip. The authors found that the most preferred social media capability among Russian tourists is staying connected with friends and acquaintances while on a trip (Fotis et al., 2011).

Thus, it is obvious that, first, social media is quite popular among Russian citizens and, second, there is a lack of research on Russian travelers' social media usage. In this study, we investigate how Russian travelers use social media to choose their travel destinations and a particular hotel and how they use social media after the trip is completed. In addition, the study includes a cross-cultural comparison of Russian and American travelers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1.   ICTs and social media in the H&T industry

The vivid changes in business processes, H&T service products, competition patterns and business-to-consumer interaction and communication have recently become obvious. This evolution was possible mostly because of the rapid development of ICTs that can be observed in the most recent decade (Buhalis, 2003). ICT-caused business trends were examined by a large number of researchers (Buhalis, 2003; Sigala, 2005; Niininen at el, 2007; Ip et al., 2011; Sahadev and Islam, 2005; Fernández et al., 2011; Irvine and Anderson, 2008).

To date, there is a wide array of academic publications dedicated to the study of ICTs' impact on H&T and, specifically, on consumer behavior in this comprehensive industry. Many scholars have concluded that the tangible transitional shift of consumer behavior is taking place gradually and is mainly caused by ICTs (Law and Jogaratnam, 2005; Cho and Olsen, 1998; Frew, 2000a; Frew, 2000b; Ho and Lee, 2007; Buhalis, 2003; Buhalis and Lob, 2008; Fotis et al., 2011). These radical technological breakthroughs within the last ten years in the H&T industry were possible mostly thanks to the Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 transition. While the functionality of Web 1.0 as applied to the H&T industry was limited only in terms of the online booking of airline tickets, hotel rooms, etc., the emergence of Web 2.0 has significantly expanded the users' ability from information consumption to information distribution and, moreover, the collective model of content creation (Sigala, 2011).

The importance of Web 2.0 for the H&T industry is particularly associated with the recent social media developments. A general definition of social media was given by Kaplan and Haenlein: "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

An established and widely agreed upon classification of social media does not yet exist. This is likely due to the relatively short period of social media existence and to the highest transformation speed of online resources and quick advances in ICTs in general. In recent publications, many scholars have classified social media based on enumerations or structuring. For instance, Fischer and Reuber noted that "it's common to differentiate between social networking (e.g., Facebook), social bookmarking (e.g., Digg), video-sharing (e.g., YouTube), picture-sharing (e.g., Flickr), professional networking (e.g., Linked_In), user forums, weblogs (or blogs), and microblogging (e.g., Twitter)" (Fischer and Reuber, 2011, p. 3).

Mangold and Faulds (2009) expanded the list and emphasized the following types of social media:

- Social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, Faceparty)
- Creativity works-sharing sites (video- , music and photo-sharing, etc.)
- User-sponsored blogs (The Unofficial Apple Weblog, Cnet.com)
- Company-sponsored websites/blogs (Apple.com, P&G's Vocalpoint)
- Company-sponsored cause/help sites (Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, click2quit.com)
- Invitation-only social networks (ASmallWorld.net)
- Business networking sites (LinkedIn)

- Collaborative websites (Wikipedia)
- Virtual worlds (Second Life)
- Commerce communities (eBay, Amazon.com,Craigslist, iStockphoto, Threadless.com)
- Podcasts ("For Immediate Release: The Hobson and Holtz Report")
- News delivery sites (Current TV)
- Educational materials-sharing sites (MIT OpenCourseWare, MERLOT)
- Open Source Software communities (Mozilla's spreadfirefox.com, Linux.org)
- Social bookmarking sites allowing users to recommend online news stories, music, videos, etc. (Digg, del.icio.us, Newsvine, Mixx it, Reddit)

Despite the obvious diversity of types of social media, scholars have discussed the relevance of a universal classification criteria allocation for social media, which would not require adjustments given the rapid development of the ICT. To achieve a universal classification system, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) offered a two-dimensional classification approach (See Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of social media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure

		Social presence/Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation /Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World Of Warcraft)

Thus, ICT and social media include a wide range of the Internet resources that could be used by travelers in the stages of trip planning, post-trip actions and traveling itself.

2. H&T customers' online behavior

While a wide range of studies have focused on social media diffusion in the H&T industry. Some authors, (e.g., Milano et al., 2011; Sigala, 2011; Ayeh et al., 2012), have stated that there is a lack of research focusing on H&T companies' use of social media to influence consumers' decision-making process.

The existing literature has primarily been dedicated to three patterns of social media utilization in the H&T industry: social media as an instrument for destination promotion (e.g., Hays et al., 2012; Munar, 2010; Munar, 2012; Stankov et al., 2012), social media's significance for hotel management (Madera, 2012), and social media's role in traveler's decision making (Parra-Lopez et al., 2011; Chung and Koo, 2015).

Parra-Lopez, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutierrez-Taco and Diaz-Armas (2011) developed a theoretical model explaining the factors that determine travelers' intentions to use social media when organizing and taking vacation trips. These authors concluded that the main reason to use social media was the benefits (social, functional and psychological and hedonic) that the users perceived that they will receive. The cost (time and monetary; difficulty of use; and loss of privacy) does not significantly affect individuals' predisposition to use such technologies. Finally, incentives (altruism, availability, environment, individual predisposition and trust in the contributions of others) that influence individuals' intentions to use social media are identified.

Wen (2009) examined online travel package purchase decisions with respect to their antecedents. This author applied three basic types of web design to the e-commerce framework. The study demonstrated that "consumer trust, consumer attitude perception, and consumer satisfaction" can be fully employed to the area of H&T online activity (Wen, 2009).

Consumers intending to buy H&T service products are typically influenced by the travel-related website design and content and other travelers attitudes and customer satisfaction (Wen, 2009). In his later research, Wen (2012) noted that these three factors have a large impact on consumer buying decisions. Positive consumer experiences that are shared online have a major influence on prospective H&T service product customers. The travel website's design quality, usability and user convenience typically lead to a successful transaction and a product purchase by consumers visiting the particular site (Wen, 2012).

Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu (2011) conducted a study that aimed to determine whether online hotel reviews or other forms of customer feedback provide a solid base for other consumers to follow in making their travel decisions. These authors found that consumers of hospitality and tourism rely on online recommendations and hotel reviews "and thus visit these communities to look for unbiased information" (Casaló et al., 2011). Another recent study by Ribeiro et al., (2014) demonstrated when more individuals use social media, it is more likely they will create travel content on-line by posting their reviews (Ribeiro et al., 2014). Kim and

Lee (2015) assumed and proved in their research that consumers in hospitality and tourism usually go online prior making their purchase and consumption decisions (Kim and Lee, 2015). Duffy (2015) noted in his paper that thanks to social media travel decisions are no longer harassed by information asymmetry, as it was obvious before the Internet era. Travellers currently share honest and authentic information with Internet users (Duffy, 2015) that mediate their consumer behavior. However, according to a study by Pantano and Di Pietro (2013), social media, especially Facebook.com, is used by travellers for complaints mostly rather than for sharing unprejudiced information and this may mislead the consumers in their decision making process for hotel booking (Pantano and Di Pietro, 2013).

Social media have an impact on consumer behavior regardless of borders or national origin. The latter, however, should be addressed more profoundly, as many scholars have noted differences in consumers' behavior according to their country of origin. To date, few cross-cultural studies have examined the peculiarities of Internet and social media utilization by representatives of different national societies.

Au, Buhalis and Law (2014) examined the differences in online consumer behavior with regard to customer complaints. They studied Chinese and non-Chinese hotel guests in Mainland China. Their findings unveiled a difference between the two studied guest groups: Chinese customers tend to complain much less overall than foreign guests. The latter complained more about the price and the location. As the authors noted, Chinese guests are more tolerant overall and less willing to complain because of cultural and mental peculiarities. Non-Chinese customers are less aware and less knowledgeable of the culture and local way of life and this unusualness pushes them to feel less comfortable, thus leading to their willingness to complain (Au et. al., 2014).

Lee and Gretzel (2014) studied the tangible differences in travel blog content written by tourists representing different nations. They analyzed a sample of 120 blogs owned by American and Korean tourists. The authors discovered a vast difference between these two nations in terms of sharing travel information and their impressions in their blogs. While Americans tend to share their own experience with the public, Koreans are eager to give advice. The authors concluded that such online behavior is a reflection of the cultures of Western individualism and Eastern collectivism, which influence the way in which tourists create blog content.

Enoch and Grossman (2010) noted differences in the online resource usage of Israeli and Danish citizens. They studied the travel blog reviews of a different culture, India, by these nations' representatives. Danish tourists are more self-centric in their reviews and inclined to share their own experience, feelings and attitudes, whereas Israeli travelers tend to give more

broad descriptions of the country, visited places and cultural aspects of interaction with locals (Enoch and Grossman, 2010).

Gretzel, Kang and Lee (2008) conducted a study on the adoption of consumer-generated media (CGM) and social networking applications in four major countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and China. The results of their study demonstrated vivid differences in consumer behavior in these countries. The authors concluded that many factors stimulate CGM adoption and are determined by "cultural dimensions, media landscapes, infrastructure development and information needs due to specific travel behavior characteristics" (Gretzel et al., 2008, p .99).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in three stages. In the first stage, an original questionnaire, courtesy of Prof. Rohit Verma, Laura McCarthy and Debra Stock of the Center for Hospitality Research (CHR) at Cornell University, was localized for the purpose of Russian social media user survey. Verma, Stock and McCarthy (2012) studied the purchase decision-making process involving an Internet search of 2,830 US travelers. The authors intended to determine differences in purchase decisions according to the purpose of travel, e.g., business trip or leisure tourism. These authors compiled their questionnaire based on in-depth interviews with scholars and H&T industry insiders in the United States. Verma, Stock and McCarthy (2012) distinguished the entire hotel accommodation purchase process into three stages from the online consumer behavior perspective and that involves travel information search (1), travel planning (2) and buying process stage (3), which is dedicated to actual booking and payment for lodging services (Verma et al., 2012). These authors also examined the consumer willingness to post a negative or positive hotel online review upon the return from the trip. Their research methodology and tools aimed to identify and study the links between consumers' demographics and online behavioral patterns, to compare the behavior of the tourists according to the purpose of the travel, e.g., business or leisure, and, finally, to measure the level of new ICT acceptance and usage by the consumers in the H&T industry, especially mobile gadgets and applications (Verma et al., 2012).

The study confirmed that business tourists stay within their employer's travel policies and, hence, book the hotels, airlines and car rentals recommended by their companies. Business travelers use Internet to obtain more information on the hotel and its location prior to the trip. Leisure travelers, by contrast, tend to be more active during the hotel search process and visit travel-related sites more often. Furthermore, they rely on the online reviews left by more

experienced tourists. In the late stage of the hotel services purchase process, however, both traveler types book their accommodations on the same type of travel-related sites, typically TripAdvisor.com or Booking.com (Verma et al., 2012).

We attempted to do everything possible to preserve the original idea and logic of the CHR research to obtain unbiased results from the comparative study. The Russian questionnaire required some revisions, however, due to a number of specific differences between the two studied countries, their cultures and their H&T markets. For instance, many web resources and some social media sites widely available and heavily used by US tourists may not be known in the Russian Federation and vice versa. Two more tangible local social media brands, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, were added to the questionnaire, and Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube were retained from the original questionnaire. The final list of social media used in our research is as follows:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Blogs
- Youtube
- Tripadvisor
- Odnoklassniki

Hence, the local questionnaire was revised to suit the study target, and same was done to the variables list, which was converted consequently.

In the second phase of the study, the online survey was conducted. To do this, we used an online panel of the Russian marketing agency OMI, which distributed our questionnaire to the respondents. Respondents were limited to individuals who traveled outside their city of permanent residence at least once within the last two years; are 20-49 years old; are permanent residents in a community with a population of at least one million; have a college or up to PhD education level; are members of a 1-6-person household with $560-$2000 monthly wage per capita. The total number of sample participants was 536.

In the third phase, we analyzed the survey results and ran a comparative analysis with the original CHR research. We were able to analyze the results of the HSE research project solely for variables and their respective values that survived in the Russian research version and, thus, were used in both the US and local project versions.

FINDINGS

Based on the data obtained from the survey, the following results on Russian travelers' behavior in the stages of the information search, hotel choice and purchase were found. The differences between Russian and American tourists were identified as well.

The "First Stop" for Information Query Online

First, we investigated the behavior of Russian business and leisure tourists and then compared it with that of Americans. The difference between Russian and American business tourists when they initially go online for the upcoming travel details, split by gender, is presented in Fig. 1.

Russian business travelers more heavily use web search engines and the Internet as a whole to conduct their initial information search. Male Russian business travelers more frequently use meta-search engines and online booking agencies. Russian females first consider social media when they get their first interest in or need for information on a destination they plan to visit.

American business male tourists use meta-search engines and online booking agencies more rarely than do Russians and rely more on general search engines. American women tend to utilize regular search engines, similar to their male countrymen.
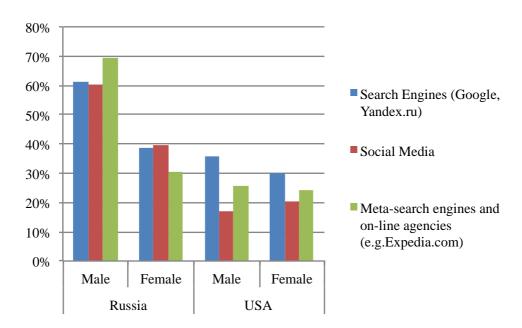

Figure 1. The level of usage of online resources with the purpose of obtaining hotel information by Russian and American business travelers

The same data analysis related to leisure tourists is shown in Fig. 2. The histogram visualizes the conclusion that there is not much difference in the online resources used for the

first information search, which is a stage 1 in the whole hotel lodging online purchase process, between leisure tourists from the two countries.
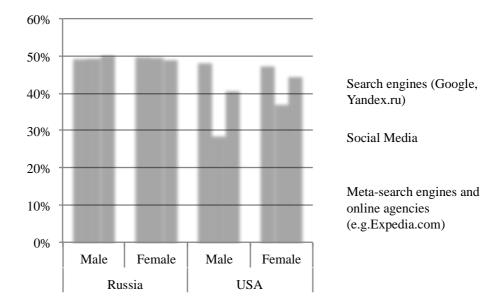

Figure 2. The level of usage of online resources with the purpose of obtaining hotel information stage (1) by Russian and American leisure tourists

Russian male and female leisure tourists are rather similar in terms of this matter, but male leisure tourists consider social media as a source for the first information inquiry to a lesser extent.

US residents of both genders utilize social media sites as an initial stop for travel information less, and American women utilize meta-search engines for their first travel queries more than do men.

Hotel Choice Criteria

The comparison of the mean values of hotel choice criteria that are taken into consideration by the tourists in the two countries is visualized in the histogram in Fig. 3. The Likert scale of 1-5 used whereas 1 indicated "least important factor" and 5 indicated "most important factor".
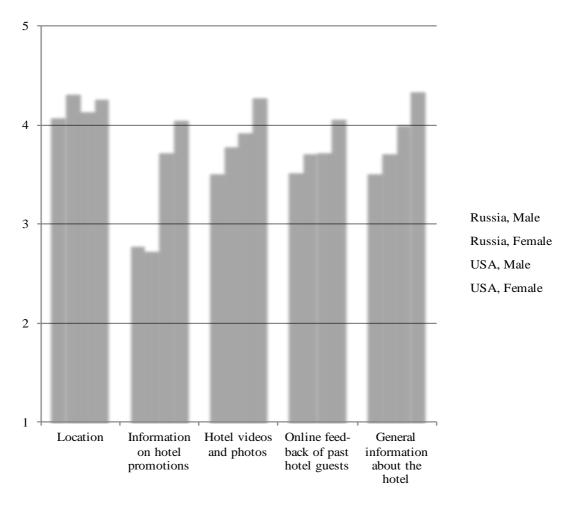
Figure 3. Hotel choice factor mean values taken into consideration by Russian and American tourists when shopping for a hotel online.

Both male and female Russian tourists tend to consider hotel promotions as a factor of minor importance. The explanation for this finding is the low appeal of the discounts that Russian agencies and hotels usually offer to their customers. Russian tourists tend to save their leisure travel budget for a year between vacation times to obtain the best service that they can afford. As one of the Russian modern proverbs says, "If you buy a bottle of the finest cognac and a cigar, there's no reason to save on matches to light the cigar". Russian female tourists believe that online videos and photos demonstrating a hotel's property and interiors are reasons to prefer a specific hotel, whereas men in that country do not share this opinion. Additionally, women in Russia outnumber their male countrymen in terms of choosing online feedback and general property information provided by the hotel.

American tourists consider promotions and special deals offered by the hotels to be of higher importance. They also point to visual tools that demonstrate the hotel facilities and services capabilities. Women in both countries outnumber the male respondents with regard to hotel choice criteria such as hotel videos and photo materials availability, recent feedback by the

other guests and general information about the hotel. Both American and Russian tourists ranked hotel location as the top priority, considering it to be a prime criterion for choosing a hotel.

Online resources utilization in the early planning phase of consumers' hotel choice and purchase process

Furthermore, the peculiarities of tangible online sources of information usage in the planning stage of customers' decision process were analyzed to compare the two samples and determine which specific web resources are the most popular for online hotel shopping in the USA and Russia. In this case, we did not perform a gender split but included more detail on the particular web resource titles. The frequencies analysis result is shown in the histogram in Fig. 4.
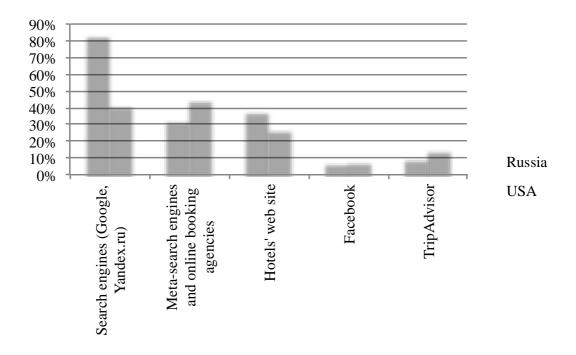

Figure 4. Online resources utilized by Russian and American tourists in the planning stage (2) of the whole hotel lodging purchase process

The histogram shows that Russians use regular search engines and hotel brand websites more actively than Americans, who prefer meta-search engines, online booking agencies and industry-related web aggregators such as TripAdvisor.com. Hence, Americans go straight to the travel-related web sources and obtain information by browsing these sources, whereas Russians tend to make their queries on general search engines. This result can be explained by the lower popularity and/or lesser knowledge of such site types in Russia. It should be noted here, however, that this result may be affected by a difference in the sample sizes for the US and

Russian surveys, as in the American study, the mode, or the most frequently marked answer option, was "regular search engines", e.g., Google.com. Thus, basic search engines are quite commonly used in the planning phase of the hotel package online shopping process by both Americans and Russians.

Online resources utilization in the decision-making phase of consumers' hotel choice and buying process

It is important to emphasize online resources that drive the hotel buying decision in later phases of the hotel choice and buying process. These websites influence the final consumer decision, as they act as the last stop for online hotel shoppers. The result of the comparative analysis of tourists in Russia and the US is presented in Fig. 5.
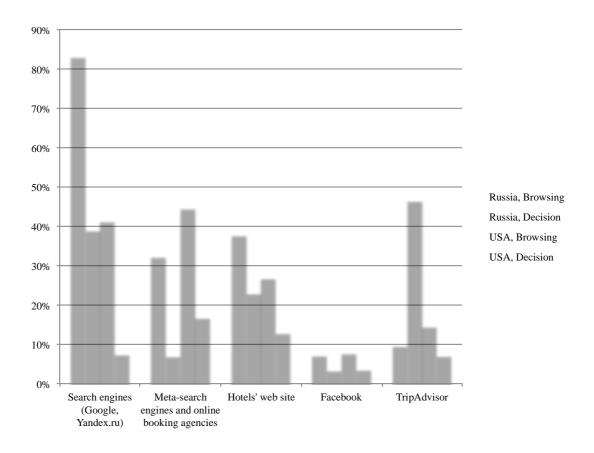

Figure 5. Online resources utilized by American and Russian tourists in the final stage (3) of the whole hotel lodging purchase process

The above figure shows some difference between Americans and Russians in the final stages of the hotel purchase process. Russians prefer to make their final hotel buying decisions using general web search engines, hotel brand websites and, surprisingly, TripAdvisor.com,

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which did not seem to be a particularly popular web resource in Russia to the research team before the start of the study. The high rating for general web search engines as a final stop to shop for Russians (nearly 40% of the sample) is also questionable, as it was mainly a transit point for information assimilation during the consumer buying process. Yet, this result may appear thanks to the possibility to book the hotel from the search engine via so-called travel solutions recently introduced by some search engines, e.g., Yandex.travel.ru. Hence, this issue requires further examination in future research projects.

American tourists are more predictable in their online consumer behavior. Their preferences are quite evenly distributed across all of the typical web resources that serve the hotel purchase decision process. American leisure and business tourists prefer to make their final choice and book the identified hotel or hotel package using the meta-search sites and online booking agencies, e.g., Expedia.com and Hotels.com, which were quite well known and reputable web resources in the USA in 2014, enjoying the #7 and #2 ranks according to Best Hotel Booking Services Comparisons and Reviews (2014).

The impact of online reviews and customer feedback on consumers' propensity to book a particular hotel

The next group of variables assisted in an examination of online hotel reviews and feedback impact on the consumer buying decision for a specific hotel that is considered by a tourist during his Internet browsing. In addition, we were interested in determining whether tourists would be inclined to provide their own reviews and comments online when their travel is completed and what type of experiences, negative and/or positive, can drive them to do so. This group of variables also included gender values to aid in the understanding of the degree to which male and female tourists are inclined to leave feedback in the form of a comment or review to share their most recent travel and hotel experience. The first group of variables relates to the influence of negative reviews and comments that the tourist views while browsing on the decision to book or not to book a particular hotel (see Fig. 6).
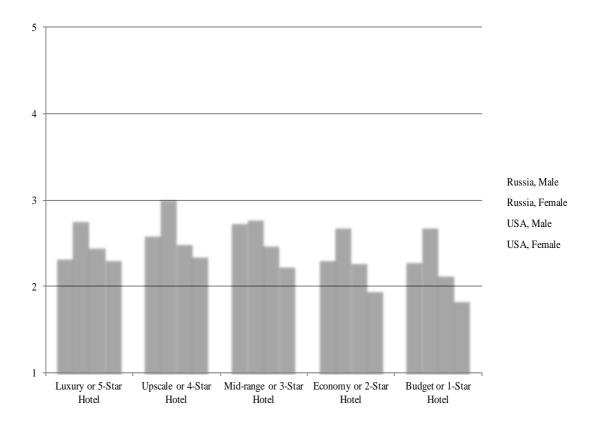
Figure 6. The comparative evaluation of online negative hotel reviews' influence on the hotel booking decisions of Russian and US tourists according to the hotel "star" rating

All hotels were categorized according to their "star" rating to investigate whether the service quality level declared by the hotel management may constrain the impact of negative or positive reviews on consumers' buying decision. We used a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "will very not likely book" and 5 indicating "will very likely book". As shown in the histogram presented in Fig. 6, Russian tourists have a greater propensity to avoid a possible negative experience by not booking a hotel that has a poor reputation based on feedback left by other tourists. Russian female tourists surprisingly demonstrated much more care of themselves in this respect compared to other gender and national studied groups. The "star" hotel rating does not largely affect the behavior of Russian female tourists, but these tourists are more inclined to stay away from hotels with bad feedback. Russian male tourists behave a bit differently. They care more about the negative feedback on 1-, 2-, 4-, and 5-"star" hotels and less on that of the 3-"star" hotels, which are more likely to be booked than hotels with other star ratings even if they are described as poor by other tourists.

By contrast, in the USA, male tourists are more inclined to avoid booking a hotel that has received negative online feedback than their fellow countrywomen. Both men and women in

America demonstrate a medium-to-low willingness to book a hotel that has some negative online reviews.

We can state a different conclusion after evaluating the impact of positive feedback on hotel choice and buying decisions in the Russian Federation and the USA (see Fig. 7). The same 1 to 5 Likert scale was utilized to measure the influence of online reviews related to hotel choice in Russia and the USA.
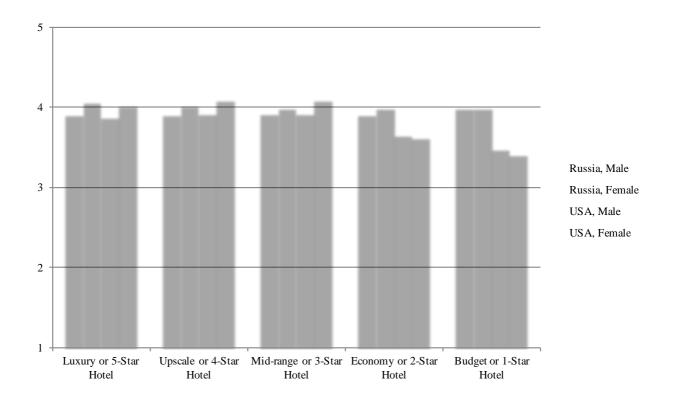

Figure 7. The comparative evaluation of online positive hotel reviews' influence on the hotel booking decisions of Russian and US tourists according to the hotel "star" rating

Overall, the differences between groups are negligible especially for 3-, 4-, and 5-"star" ranked hotels. Budget and Economy hotels are an exception. This result relates mainly to hostels, which are quite common in European city centers. This type of lodging has recently become very popular among Russian leisure tourists traveling to Europe, but such lodging is the least predictable in regard to room comfort, quality of amenities and other factors. Thus, the availability of positive feedback online increases the likelihood that a lower-class hotel is booked by Russian tourists.

Female American tourists demonstrate their willingness and greater confidence in the positive online reviews, compared to males and national sample groups, but this result is limited to 3-, 4- and 5-"star" hotels. American tourists are typically less inclined to book low "star"-

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rated hotels regardless of positive feedback online, as they seem to prefer more premium-class hotels.

The study of hotel customers' willingness to leave online feedback about either positive or negative travel experiences

The issue of whether hotel guests would provide reviews, comments or any other type of feedback after returning to their homes was studied in both national versions of the research project. It was important to determine which type of consumer experience - positive or negative - causes tourists to act online by writing a review, rating a hotel or leaving a short comment on the travel-related websites. The results related to this research question are shown in Fig. 8 and Fig. 9. Again, we used a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "definitely will not share my feedback online" and 5 indicating "certainly will write a review or comment on my most recent travel and hotel experience".
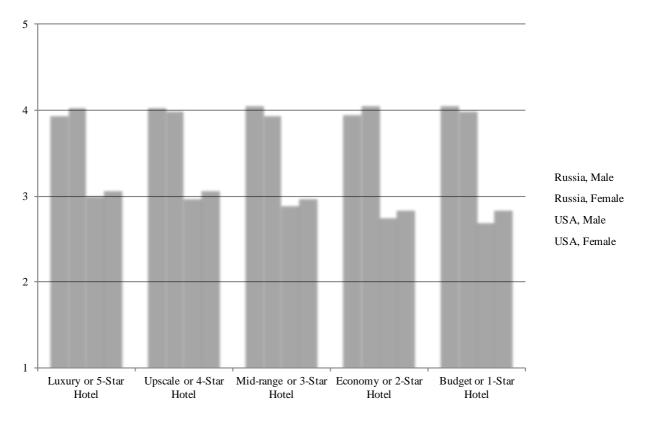

Figure 8. The comparative evaluation of the influence of negative travel experiences on Russian and US tourists' provision of feedback online according to the hotel "star" rating
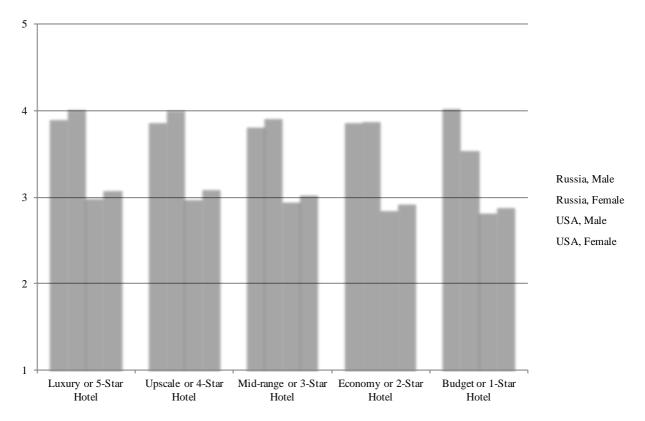
Figure 9. The comparative evaluation of the influence of positive travel experiences on Russian and US tourists' provision of feedback online according to the hotel "star" rating

What also can be interpreted from the graphs is that Russian male and female tourists are more likely to provide feedback online than American tourists. Two histograms demonstrate that there is approximate gender parity in the US and Russian Federation in terms of the tendency to provide feedback following either positive or negative experiences. This is true for all hotel categories regardless of their "star" level.

Overall, American tourists seem to be less proactive in sharing their travel experiences both while traveling and after returning home. This is true for both positive and negative travel experiences, and male and female US tourists show similar results. Their willingness to provide feedback online either having a good or bad journey is slightly below the medium score of 3 on the Likert scale.

CONCLUSION

The role of ICTs, Web 2.0 and social media in the H&T industry has been widely recognized by scholars (e.g., Buhalis and Lob, 2008; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Xiang and Gretzel claimed that "very little is known in terms of the extent to which social media actually constitute the online tourism domain" (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010, p. 186). Thus, ICT and social

media in particular are forming the present and the future shape of the H&T industry and improve communications between H&T businesses and consumers.

Summarizing the findings obtained from the study, we confirm that Russian and American tourists have different behavioral patterns when making hotel choice decisions using online resources.

Russian business tourists more actively use Internet resources to plan their trips, whereas Americans tend to enjoy itinerary and booking services from travel agencies contracted by their employers. Russians use travel-related sites more heavily than Americans for leisure trip planning as well.

Another finding is that Russian tourists typically search for visual images and reviews left by other tourists on social media sites to obtain real and true information about the destination and the hotel. Russians truly believe that hotel brand and official destination websites tend to "embellish" the real picture. By contrast, American tourists give more attention to hotel promotions and discounts available online. Russians think that if the hotel announces special offers and massively promotes the service and property, there is something wrong with the hotel, e.g., few customers want to book the hotel.

One more difference between Russian and American tourists relates to the hotel and travel package choice decision-making sources. When making plans for their travel, Russians first go to the general search engines, e.g., Google.com and Yandex.ru. The latter is the largest search engine in the Russian Internet zone. Having visited the top 10 resources displayed on the first page of a search engine following a search query, Russians browse through a number of sites, evaluate the information and then go to off-line agency offices, make and pay for their booking or go to travel-related sites. Russian tourists prefer Booking.com and TripAdvisor.com when their final decision, booking and online payment are being made. They can also return to the search engine travel solutions, such as Expedia.com, and book there. American tourists tend to go to meta-search engines and online agencies and either book there or browse to the hotel brand site and complete their shopping there.

At the same time, some consumer behavioral patterns, for instance, the consideration of online hotel reviews and willingness to provide online feedback after returning from the trip, are similar in the two countries. The only difference uncovered in this respect is that Americans would less likely book a 1- or 2-"star" hotel even if it enjoys positive online reviews. Russians demonstrated more proactivity in terms of providing online feedback following travel completion in both cases of positive and negative experiences in comparison with American tourists. Hotel location proved to be the key hotel choice factor for both nations.

Nevertheless, the results of the present research can be considered as the results of a situational analysis of the current details of Russian and American consumers' behavior, including their preferences in searching for hotel information both off-line and online and the decision to book a hotel room or purchase the whole travel package. The results of the study demonstrate the importance of social media and other Internet tools for consumer choice in the Russian Federation and the USA.

LIMITATIONS

Two basic types of limitations can be outlined. First, there are limitations in the survey itself, particularly in terms of the comparison of the results of the Russian and US versions of the survey.

The first limitation is that the Internet environment is a mobile sphere of human life that changes and evolves every year, day and even hour. As L. McCarthy, D. Stock and R. Verma noted in their research report, "next year the results will be different, even if we cannot predict them" (McCarthy, Stock and Verma, 2010, p. 18). Following this conclusion made by CHR scholars, some specific behavioral patterns typical of American tourists that were discovered in the 2010 study may greatly evolve as we approach the year 2015.

The second vivid limitation of the comparative study emerged because of differences in the sample sizes of the two projects (Russian sample n=536; CHR project sample n= 2 830).

Additional limitations of the study, as stated above, include disparity in sample sizes and localities, with a focus on many web resources common to the US but not widely used in Russia.

Such data disparities and lack of collinearity, indeed, had an impact on the comparative study results; thus, they should be further addressed as research limitations. The CHR project was completed in 2010, and the HSE study was finalized in 2014. Furthermore, these issues are on the list of study limitations because of the extreme mobility and speed of change in the ICT environment.

IMPLICATIONS

Social media is one of the most effective marketing instruments, and as Xiang and Gretzel (2010, p. 186) stated, "tourism marketers can no longer ignore the role of social media in distributing travel-related information without risking to become irrelevant".

The completed survey could be of interest to Russian and foreign hoteliers and tourism industry practitioners. In a general sense, the results inform National Tourism Organizations, Destination Management Organizations and hotel managers and owners that social media is

effective in increasing hotel guests' attraction to a hotel. For hotels managers, the results could be of the practical interest because they demonstrate Russian and American travelers' propensity to use social media in their decision making. The results could help hotel managers to develop PR companies targeted at Russian and American travelers, determine the specific instruments to be used to attract different target groups within these nations, evaluate the service procedure, and determine the bottlenecks in the service processes. For tourism practitioners, the survey results demonstrate that a significant share of travelers switch to online booking and illuminates how travelers behave online in both USA and Russia; travel companies can use this information to develop new products and promote their products online for Russian and American tourists.

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