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A cross-country comparison of accommodation manager perspectives on online review manipulation

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ABSTRACT

Accommodation businesses are increasingly dependent on a limited number of reservation platforms. A significant feature of these platforms is guest evaluations, which are transformed into ratings and rankings. As the positioning of the business in comparison to competitors determines customer demand, accommodation managers have considerable interest in maintaining or improving their online reputation. One response may be to engage in manipulation strategies. This paper presents the results of a survey including 270 hotel managers in five countries, Germany, Israel, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Managers confirm growing competition as a result of ratings and rankings, and they report that guests are increasingly aware of the importance of reviews. To avert negative online feedback impacts, managers intervene strategically. The paper discusses new market pressures, emergent consumer judgement culture and consumer citizenship, opportunities for legal redress and the emergent importance of reputation management strategies.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Consumer citizenship; hotels; manipulation; online reviews; ratings; rankings

Highlights

- First quantitative study of manager perspectives on online reputation and manipulation
- Ratings, ranking positions and new market entries increase pressure on managers
- Guests are increasingly aware of the importance of reviews and their power over reputation
- Strategies employed to improve online reputation are often outside the control of platforms
- The extent of manipulation appears to vary between individual businesses and countries

1. Introduction

In economic and social systems increasingly characterized by evaluations and ratings, consumers pay growing attention to user-generated content. This is particularly relevant in tourism, where online reviews and ratings of destinations, accommodation or attractions are now widely available

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(Gretzel, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010). These reviews are increasingly important for tourist decision-making on the basis of opinion formed by fellow travellers (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Ayeh, 2015; Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Dellarocas, 2003; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Zhang, Zhang, & Yang, 2016). Consumer judgement culture not only encourages, it demands opinion, and has persuasive power in influencing customer perceptions and choices, and business behaviour (Johnson, Matear, & Thomson, 2011; Gössling, Hall, & Andersson, 2018). Notably, in particular, negative reviews appear to be considered useful by consumers (Salehi-Esfahani, Ravichandran, Israeli, & Bolden, 2016). Online reputation thus has significant repercussions for aspects of service management as diverse as price setting, competition, service design, service innovation and staff motivation (Chaves, Gomes, & Pedron, 2012; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Ögüt & Onur Taş, 2012; Noroozi & Fotouhi, 2012; Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012; Zhang et al., 2010). The accommodation sector, in particular, is exposed to these developments because of on-going processes of market concentration, in which a few global reservation platforms increasingly dominate reservations (Gössling & Lane, 2015). Competition is also driven by new market entries, such as AirBnB (Guttentag, 2015; Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2017), that force managers to maintain and improve online reputation in a constant quest for high ratings and top-ranking positions.

Where managers are under pressure to maintain 'minimum' rankings and ratings, or where a customer base is threatened by online evaluations, response strategies become paramount (Dellarocas, 2006; Prayag, Hall, & Wood, 2018; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). Primarily, this may include offers of improved services or additional, often free, services (Lacey, 2012; Melián-González, Bulchand-Gidumal, & López-Valcárcel, 2013; Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012). It has, however, also been speculated that forms of manipulation will become more widespread (Banerjee & Chua, 2014; Ott, Choi, Cardie, & Hancock, 2011; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009), including, for instance, fake reviews (Anderson & Simester, 2014; Filieri, 2015) or solicited positive reviews (Magno, Cassia, & Bruni, 2017). Manipulation strategies include approaches such as engaging staff, social networks and customers in the writing of positive reviews; partnering with platforms; writing self-reviews; tasking commercial raters with reputation improvement or placing negative reviews of competitors on 'open' sites, such as TripAdvisor (Gössling et al., 2018).

Earlier research (Gössling et al., 2018) has highlighted that managers engage in 'online reputation management' to improve the representation of their business on the Internet. However, no study has so far evaluated these management strategies from a quantitative viewpoint, across countries and from the viewpoint of managers (Sotiriadis, 2017). The objective of this study is consequently to quantitatively describe and illustrate manager perspectives on online reputation and 'manipulation', i.e. activities designed to control opinion to one's own advantage. The paper focuses on an international survey among accommodation (hotel) managers in five countries, to allow for cross-country comparison. It centres on the personal viewpoints of managers to develop a more authentic and genuine understanding of the extent and role of manipulation in online reputation management. By offering evidence on manipulation strategies, this paper offers new insights into the importance of reservation platforms, the impact of reviews on management, as well as the scale of different online reputation improvement strategies employed to control opinion. The comparison between different countries provides some first insights regarding the prevalence of such strategies in different market, geographical and cultural settings. Such insights have relevance for patterns of cooperation and competition in the service industry and are discussed in the wider context of emerging consumer cultures and theories of consumer citizenship.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Online reputation

Evaluations, recommendations and business ratings published on the Internet are increasingly important for consumer choices (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016; Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008). Guests become more aware of hotels and other accommodation

providers (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), and make choices based on online content, in which they consider review quality and quantity (Xie, Chen, & Wu, 2016), platform popularity and 'best hotels lists' (Casaló, Flavián, Guinaliu, & Ekinci, 2015). This has significant repercussions for hotel room sales with respect to both price paid and overall occupancy (Öğüt & Onur Taş, 2012; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). In general terms, consumer-generated online content is a mirror of perceived service quality, and can help businesses to improve (Lacey, 2012; Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012). Melián-González et al. (2013) found that ratings of hotels improve over time, suggesting that management goes through a learning process regarding guest expectations, subsequently improving service quality (see also Torres, Adler, & Behnke, 2014). However, the generation of online feedback can no longer be regarded as purely a voluntary process, because accommodation businesses increasingly depend on online reputation in highly competitive markets dominated by a few global players (Gössling & Lane, 2015).

Given the importance of online reviews and ratings for customer decision-making, control over online reputation is no longer an option but has become a necessity (Phillips, Zigan, Santos Silva, & Schegg, 2015), and managers have reported spending growing amounts of time with the purpose to improve customer relations, brand relationships and online reputation (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015). Often, their first activity of the day is to check the Internet for new guest comments, and to engage with customers and/or platforms, should negative content have been posted (Gössling et al., 2018). A growing body of literature addresses the importance of online reputation management, providing advice as to how to ensure positive guest experiences related to quality or service, atmosphere or price fairness (Jeong & Jang, 2011); to engage in communication with customers and to respond to criticism (O'Connor, 2010; Prayag et al., 2018; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih, & Lin, 2015); to pro-actively consider reviews and comments to improve service performance and special offers (Prayag et al., 2018); to become involved in social media to increase online presence and build customer loyalty (Dijkmans et al., 2015; O'Connor, 2010; Teehan & Tucker, 2010); to promote guests with review requests to increase overall review numbers (Melián-González et al., 2013; Tsao et al., 2015); and to engage with different reservation/evaluation platforms (Phillips et al., 2015).

Opportunities to provide user-generated content and to influence opinion are a form of empowerment in emerging consumer judgement cultures (Gössling et al., 2018). Negative feedback has been found to affect management on various levels, including pressure to maintain and enhance positive reputation, as well as personal disappointment over complaints (Gössling & Lane, 2015; Prayag et al., 2018; Vásquez, 2011). Notably, where reviews are two-sided, i.e. where accommodations can also judge guests, as in the case of AirBnB, commentary is more positive and balanced (Bridges & Vásquez, 2016). Yet, there is evidence that guests are increasingly aware of differences in accommodation offers, as exemplified by small 'bonuses' such as sweets placed on pillows, or complementary fruit baskets or welcome drink offers. Guests are also aware of the importance of positive reviews for hotels, and complaints in association with demands for 'compensation' have become more frequent (Gössling & Lane, 2015). Perceived negative experiences – which may include declined 'bonuses', such as a room upgrade request – can even turn into motivation for 'revenge taking' (Schuckert, Liu, & Law, 2016: 269). Evolving consumer judgement culture is consequently putting growing pressure on hotels to meet and possibly exceed service quality expectations. Importantly, expectations as to what constitutes 'good' service are to a considerable degree shaped by platforms, which provide fixed categories for evaluation and encourage both positive and negative feedback (Gössling & Lane, 2015).

2.2. Market dominance of selected platforms

There is growing evidence that global accommodation markets are dominated by a few platforms, among which Booking is widely considered to be the most relevant. According to information provided by the platform, Booking handled 400,000 room nights in 2013, a number that had grown to 1.2 million in early 2017. This illustrates the considerable speed at which market concentration proceeds,

both on the level of reservations made in individual countries and the dependency of individual businesses on platforms. Hotels in Norway, for instance, reported that up to 80% of customers made reservations through Booking.com (Gössling & Lane, 2015).

Issues of market dominance are also visible in the travel advice domain, where TripAdvisor is the largest platform. In 2014, the platform reported having stored 170 million reviews covering 4 million accommodations, restaurants, attractions, resorts and destinations, with 280 million unique monthly visitors. By September 2017, this had increased to 535 million reviews (TripAdvisor, 2017). This growth mirrors the considerable importance of TripAdvisor for information collection, usually before reservations are made. Changes in consumer cultures, i.e. the reliance on online content in decision-making have more recently been accompanied by disruptive market innovations such as AirBnB. The platform entered the market offering peer-to-peer accommodation, with much evidence that the platform is also used by commercial year-around operators (Martin, 2016). AirBnB is used to offer apartments, houses, or other forms of accommodation (castles, ships, etc.) to travellers, who pay a fee to AirBnB for the web-based coordination of the exchange. AirBnB was founded in 2008, and as of March 2017 claimed to offer more than 3 million accommodation offers in 65,000 cities in 191 countries (AirBnB, 2017).

These examples of market leaders in the accommodation reservation and reputation sector provide evidence of an unprecedented market concentration, with various implications for accommodation establishments. This includes, for instance, the payment of commissions to global corporations and the concomitant loss of revenue for businesses. As an example, Priceline, owner of Booking.com, reported a gross profit of more than US\$10.3 billion in 2016 (Priceline, 2017). Market concentration also means that the online reputation of millions of small- and medium-sized enterprises, larger hotels and entire destinations throughout the world is now controlled by global corporate stakeholders. Of the six major online holiday rental listing services in New Zealand as of October 2015, for example, only one was New Zealand owned (Cooper & Hall, 2016). This can be problematic where a business' reputation depends on one or a few platforms (Gössling et al., 2018). The situation is further complicated by new disruptive market entries, such as AirBnB (Guttentag, 2015), competing with 'traditional' accommodation markets.

2.3. Manipulation

Dellarocas (2006) raised the prospect of Internet content manipulation to influence consumer opinion. Information underlying consumer choices needs to be trustworthy (Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015; Jeacle & Carter, 2011). This poses two general problems for platforms offering general information, ratings or rankings: First, content must be largely credible, while false or misleading claims need to be detected and removed. The need to detect wrong reviews decreases where many correct reviews have been posted, but even where large amounts of reviews exist, the platform has to ensure that most of these reviews are true. Second, the service quality of an accommodation business can change over time, for instance when owners change, after renovations, or because of new service offers. Reviews must thus be up-to-date (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). While prospective hotel guests will be aware of the importance of credibility, also having learned to interpret reviews, there is nevertheless evidence of reputation 'thresholds'; this is, minimum ratings or ranking positions that are specifically attractive or no longer attractive to customers (Gössling & Lane, 2015). Research also shows that perceptions of credibility are influenced by factors including valence, informational content, presentation and source credibility (Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011; Phillips et al., 2015; Sparks & Browning, 2011). For example, consumer-generated content is considered more trustworthy than manager-generated content, specific information more persuasive than vague descriptions (Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013). TripAdvisor, in particular, is considered a trusted platform (Jeacle & Carter, 2011), even though anyone can register reviews, with concomitant repercussions for review content (Mayzlin, Dover, & Chevalier, 2014; see also Zhuang, Cui, & Peng, 2018). In comparison, most reservation sites only allow guests who paid for accommodation to post reviews (Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012).

Research confirms that manipulation exists (Ott et al., 2011; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009), indicating, for instance, that independent hotels are more involved in manipulation than hotels with multi-unit owners or managers; and that hotels with close competitors are more likely to have negative reviews on TripAdvisor, supposedly posted by competitors or third parties (Mayzlin, Dover, & Chevalier, 2012). Manipulation can be complex, comprising strategies to involve staff, friends, bloggers or other parties (Gössling et al., 2018). Magno et al. (2017) found, for instance, that guests appear to be increasingly often approached by staff soliciting reviews. Linguistic cues can be used to distinguish manipulated/authentic reviews (Banerjee & Chua, 2014), though it is generally difficult for individual hotels to control who posted online content or to demand the removal of specific comments, even if these are evidently false. Given that some hotel managers engage in diverse manipulation strategies, it has been suggested that this may ultimately result in a 'manager's dilemma', i.e. a situation in which 'honest' managers feel forced to engage in manipulation strategies to improve ratings and rankings as a result of growing market pressure (Gössling et al., 2018).

Platforms are aware of the need to provide credible information, and to implement and enforce rules to secure the validity of online content. Platforms have different perspectives on how this is best achieved. The example of the two largest platforms for accommodation reviews, TripAdvisor and Booking, can illustrate this. TripAdvisor is an 'open' platform, where anyone can post reviews, while Booking is a 'closed' platform, where only guests who have made a reservation for a specific hotel can also post a review. TripAdvisor (2017, no page) provides 535 million reviews, acknowledging that 'some unscrupulous businesses will try to cheat in order to attract more customers'. Cheating is defined by TripAdvisor as '... positively reviewing their own business (or finding others to do so on their behalf) or negatively reviewing their competitors'. The platform maintains that it has automatic filters to facilitate fraud detection, as well as a staff working to 'identify, block and remove fraud'. This includes to 'aggressively pursue companies that offer to boost a business' reputation by writing fake reviews on its behalf. When we catch them, we remove all of the fake reviews they've posted, and we penalize their clients'. In comparison, Booking.com (2017, no page) suggests that all of its reviews are credible, because 'The only way to leave a review is to first make a booking. That's how we know our reviews come from real guests who have stayed at the property'. Reviews are checked for 'naughty words' and the 'authenticity of all guest reviews is verified' before these are posted. As outlined in Gössling et al. (2018), in spite of these attempts to ensure credible reviews, there exist opportunities to influence guest opinion or to solicit positive comments that are largely outside the control of platforms.

2.4. Legal context

Negative online reviews can potentially become a point of legal action for an accommodation provider if it is regarded as defamatory and/or comments are not taken down when requested (Cordato, 2014). Laws with respect to defamation vary according to jurisdiction not just in relation to what constitutes defamation but also whether publishers and/or persons are liable. For example, in Australian law, a publisher of defamatory material can be liable. This means that website hosts may be liable for the publication of defamatory material, even when they did not post it, provided that they have been given notice of the existence of the defamatory material, they have been required to remove it and they have failed to do so (Goldsmith, 2016). However, in cases of defamation, accommodation providers will generally pursue the author given that comments may be in more than one location. Nevertheless, this creates further legal cases and costs for accommodation providers, one to obtain evidence of the identity of the person who posted the review and the other by way of defamation (Goldsmith, 2016).

Several cases have been taken against TripAdvisor that illustrate the legal complexity of online reviews. In a 2012 judgement the Court of Tennessee in the USA found that TripAdvisor was not liable for defamation for listing the plaintiff's property (the Grand Resort Hotel) on a list of 'dirtyest hotels' based on data derived from user reviews, albeit on First Amendment ('free speech'), rather

than Section 230 of the *Communications Decency Act*, grounds (Gellis, 2014), the latter providing immunity from liability for providers and users of an 'interactive computer service' who publish information provided by others. However, the protection available to TripAdvisor in the USA does not necessarily exist in other jurisdictions. For example, in 2012 a Scottish B&B launched a small claims action in Stornoway Sheriff Court and argued that the website had 'hurt business' through lost bookings (STV, 2012). The result of the action meant that TripAdvisor conceded that it could be sued in the UK's jurisdictions (it had previously claimed to be outside the remit of the Scottish legal system because it is based in Massachusetts) and that TripAdvisor's terms of use constituted a contract (Goldsmith, 2016). However, in a latter judgement the Court of Session in Edinburgh ruled that Scottish courts had no jurisdiction over the US-based website with respect to disclosing the identity of authors of poor reviews (BBC, 2014a).

In 2012 the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) upheld a complaint submitted by online investigations company KwikChex that TripAdvisor's then claims to provide trustworthy and honest reviews from travellers are false. In response, TripAdvisor changed its .uk website to reflect that comments came from its community rather than from necessarily real travellers. The international .com site did not change as the ASA's authority only held for the .uk site (BBC, 2012). Similarly, in 2014 Italy's competition watchdog fined TripAdvisor €500,000 for publishing misleading information in its reviews. Nevertheless, jurisdiction and the capacity for accommodation providers to seek redress from TripAdvisor, as with other online hotel review sites, is dependent on the address of the site being used and the nature of national law. Any legal action is likely to be expensive suggesting that such measures will usually fall outside of the capacities of many accommodation SMEs.

3. Method

To understand the current market situation, an online survey was conducted involving accommodation managers in five countries, with data collected on (a) general hotel characteristics (bed number, price), (b) the importance of individual platforms for sales, (c) perceptions of market competition, (d) the character and importance of guest comments, and (e) strategies employed to maintain or improve online reputation. Data collection was based on an online questionnaire to ensure anonymity, and hence a higher degree of truthfulness with regard to questions likely perceived as sensitive (Krumpal, 2013).

This approach builds on the results of an earlier, inductive paper, which conceptualized the range of online reputation management strategies employed by managers (Gössling et al., 2018). The current paper, in comparison, is deductive and seeks to quantitatively assess the importance of different strategies to maintain or improve online reputation, all of which are considered forms of 'manipulation'. It focuses on city hotels, as competition can be presumed to be higher in urban contexts due to the relative density of businesses with similar service offers. The survey is cross-sectional and comparative; that is, it comprises a collection of data on a sample of cases at a single point in time, in connection with several comparable and quantifiable variables (Bryman, 2016), and with the implicit purpose to identify differences between countries and businesses.

The sampling strategy originally envisaged responses from a minimum of 100 hotel managers in each of six countries, the USA, Israel, Germany, Switzerland, Norway and Sweden. For this purpose, and to ensure comparability, lists of *all* hotels in the three largest cities in each country were obtained through databases provided by the countries' respective destination marketing organizations or the database STR Global. All lists contained 100 hotels or more, which were then called one-by-one. Note that in Norway and Israel, the four largest cities were included in the sample to reach the required sample size. The countries that were chosen for the study are all considered as developed countries and important global tourism markets. Countries also differ from each other in terms of key dimensions of Hofstede's (2001) cultural framework: Power distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Uncertainty avoidance, Long- vs. Short-term orientation and Indulgence vs.

Restraint (Table 1). Although subject to significant criticism (Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2007), Hofstede's (2001) framework has been found useful in studying cultural differences in patterns of eWOM and online purchases (e.g. Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014) and for studying the use of social media in a travel context (e.g. Amaro & Duarte, 2017).

The objective of all calls was to reach managers. 'Managers' were defined as those responsible for reservations and/or online reputation, and contacted in a two-step procedure. In a first step, research assistants in each of the participating countries called the respective hotel on the list and asked to speak with the manager responsible for online reputation. Once a contact was established, which often required several calls, managers were informed about the purpose of the survey in a general way ('scientific study on reservation and online reputation management') and asked for their cooperation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Once managers had confirmed their interest to participate, they were asked to provide personal email addresses. The questionnaire was then forwarded as a link, together with a short message reminding managers of the purpose of the survey. Upon clicking the link, a new website containing the survey questions opened, through which managers were able to provide answers. Questions referred to the person answering (management position, experience); hotel characteristics (price level and bed numbers); relevance of booking platforms; relevance of online evaluations for room prices; experiences with guest responses; and strategies to improve/maintain online reputation. The latter aspect covered forms of 'compensation' paid to guests; the involvement of staff, friends or bloggers to write reviews; reliance on third parties to improve online reputation; negative comments posted about competitors; and perceptions of market competitiveness. Questions did not cover the role of third-party organizations such as travel magazines (Appendix).

Even though the procedure involved considerable efforts to approach hotel managers directly, actual participation varied between 10% (Switzerland) and 64% (Sweden). In total, this resulted in 115 responses in Sweden (180 hotels contacted in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö), 63 in Norway (136 hotels contacted in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Stavanger), 33 in Israel (165 hotels contacted in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Eilat and Haifa), 31 in Switzerland (316 hotels contacted in Zurich, Basel and Geneva) and 28 in Germany (192 hotels contacted in Berlin, Hamburg and Munich). Willingness to participate in the survey was lowest in the USA, where data collection ceased after it turned out to be virtually impossible to secure responses. Managers were contacted between November 2015 and November 2016. In total, 270 responses were recorded, including CEOs ($n = 99$), receptionists and front office managers (42), owners (40), sales & marketing managers (35), directors (21), guest relation managers (8) and other forms of management (group/events/quality) (25).

In terms of limitations, it should be noted that the due to small sample sizes in some countries, analysis of the data had to remain descriptive. The limited number of managers participating in the survey in some countries also implies a possible self-selection bias, influencing the comparability and validity of results. In light of this, all country comparisons can only be seen as indicative. Even though managers were informed about the anonymous character of the survey, there is a potential social desirability bias, as managers may be aware that specific activities to influence online content are unethical or forbidden by platforms.

Table 1. Comparison of countries according to Hofstede's cultural framework.

Item/rating	Israel	Germany	Switzerland	Norway	Sweden
Power distance	13	35	34	31	31
Individualism	54	67	68	69	71
Masculinity	47	66	70	8	5
Uncertainty avoidance	81	65	58	50	29
Long-term orientation	38	83	74	35	53
Indulgence	–	40	66	55	78

Source: www.hofstede-insights.com

4. Results

Hotel size in the sample averages 240 beds (median: 169), and a total of 64,000 beds. On average, managers had worked 14 years in tourism. The sample contains hotels in all price categories, which include <€81 (7%), €81–106 (22%), €107–134 (22%), €135–160 (18%), €161–188 (11%) and > €188 (19%). Booking and Expedia are the most important online platforms for hotels, along with their own website. Some 94% of managers report using Booking, a platform that 84% consider to have great relevance for reservations (Figure 1; note that these are cross-sample averages). This is followed by the hotel's own website (92%), considered important by 80% of managers. Expedia is used by 80% of hotels, though the platform's significance is lower (62%). The analysis suggests that there are considerable differences between countries, though, in all of them, the two most important platforms are Booking and Expedia. With the exception of Germany, more than three-quarters of the businesses in all countries also use Facebook for online reservations, though the importance of this platform is lower (45%). Regional differences include the use of Hotels in Sweden (77% of businesses in Sweden; importance: 23%) and HRS in Germany (89%; importance: 11%). Over the whole sample, only 16% of businesses also use other channels for reservations. This confirms the dominance of a limited number of global platforms for sales. Notably, TripAdvisor is also considered important, though mostly for the reputation of businesses, with 74% of all businesses affirming TripAdvisor's importance. Note that since the data collection for this paper, TripAdvisor has developed into a meta-platform, comparing the prices of different other platforms. No significant differences were observed between countries in the use of platforms.

Manager views confirm that platforms create competition. Even though the broad majority (80%) of hoteliers claim that their price strategy has not been affected by online evaluations, 10% report that they have been able to increase their prices by 5–10%. In comparison, 3% of businesses had to reduce their prices by 10–20%. These results appear to support a 'winner'/'loser' hypothesis in the context of reservation platforms (Gössling & Lane, 2015) whereby there are potential differential affects of online evaluations on prices.

An important aspect of consumer-generated content is its 'fairness', as negative reviews can significantly affect the motivation of staff. Out of the managers interviewed, only 6% suggested to never have been treated 'unfairly' by guests (Figure 2). More than half (51%) reported incidences of guests

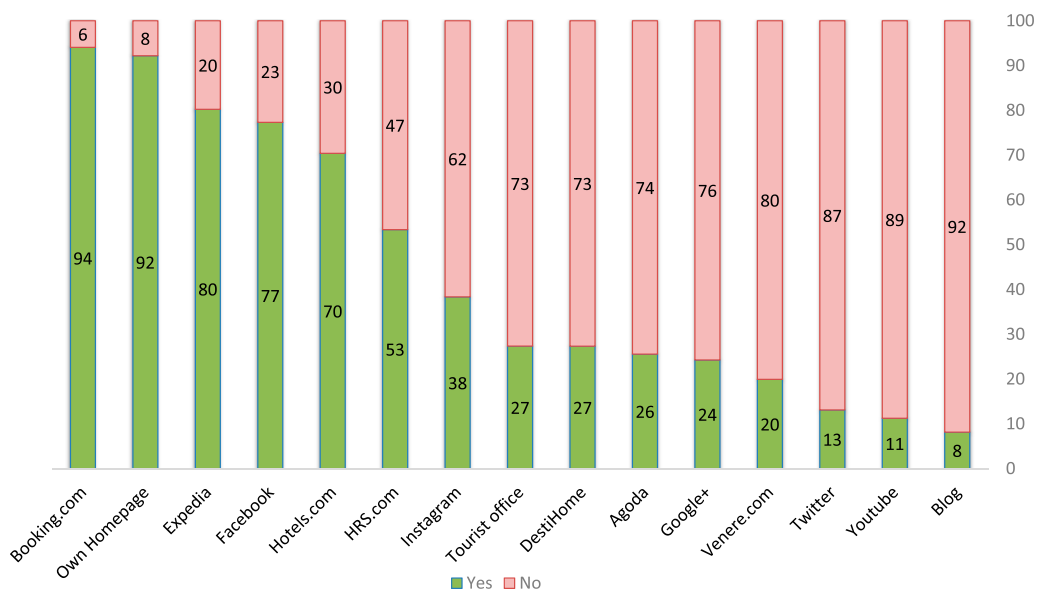


Figure 1. Reservation platforms and social media use ($n = 270$).

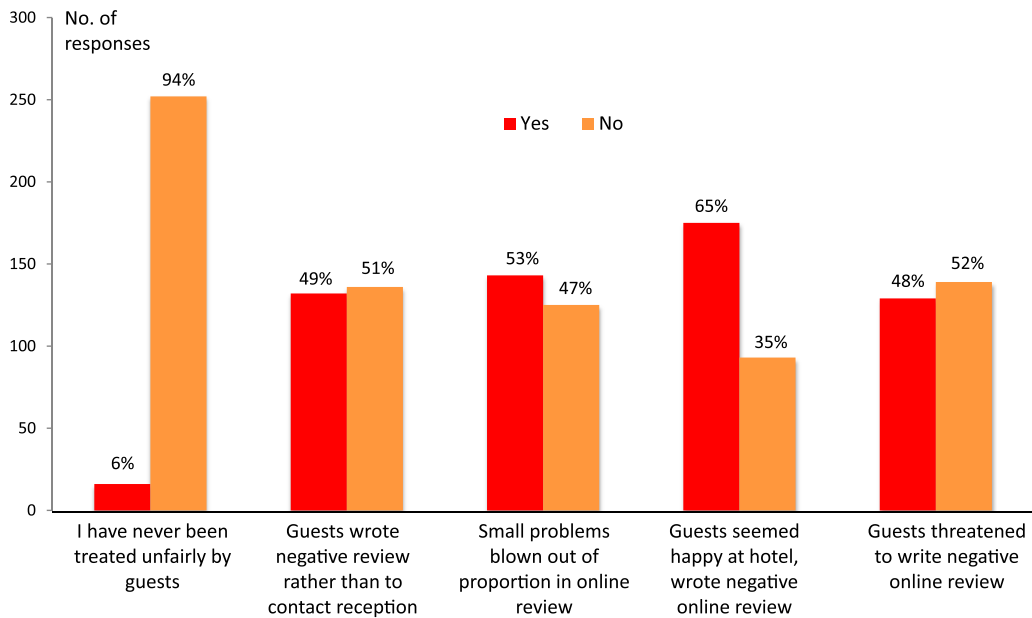


Figure 2. Treatment by guests, fairness perceptions ($n = 268$).

who seemed happy during their stay, but later on wrote negative reviews; 47% had witnessed an exaggeration of a problem in posted online comments; 35% affirmed that guests did not contact the reception to resolve issues, rather than to retreat to (negative) online comments; and 52% emphasized that guests had threatened to write negative reviews in case they would not be compensated for a negatively perceived aspect of their stay. Hotel managers also highlighted that guests sometimes reported problems online even though they had been compensated; that they placed false or misleading reviews; or that positive evaluations had been posted in combination with low ratings. No significant differences were identified between countries, suggesting that experiences of being treated 'unfairly' by a share of guests are common.

As an expression of growing consumer awareness of the importance of reviews, 14% of managers had been asked for compensation in return for writing a positive review. Guests asked for economic compensation (45%), upgrades (23%), free nights (20%) or food/beverages (5%) ($n = 64$). A small share of managers (7%) admitted to have offered individual guests compensation to either write a positive review or to discourage them to write a negative one. Another 4% admitted to have offered forms of incentives to guests in order to encourage them to write reviews. This question remained unanswered by almost a quarter (24%) of managers, perhaps indicating awareness that soliciting reviews is not permitted by platforms. Managers are also aware of the importance of guests booked through platforms that encourage reviews, with 12% of managers reporting treating guests booked through platforms better than 'regular' guests. Sample sizes are too small to allow for further distinction by country.

Another set of questions referred to the involvement of staff, friends, family and acquaintances in review activities. Only 3% of managers ($n = 259$) reported that they had encouraged staff to report positive reviews, while 10% suggested that even though staff reviews were not instigated, there was general awareness that management appreciates positive contributions. A majority (86%), however, stated that they had emphasized that staff should not write about the hotel.

A different situation was revealed with regard to friends and acquaintances, with about equal shares of managers either encouraging (directly or indirectly), or discouraging such reviews: 43% of managers stated that they have made it clear to friends and acquaintances that engaging in

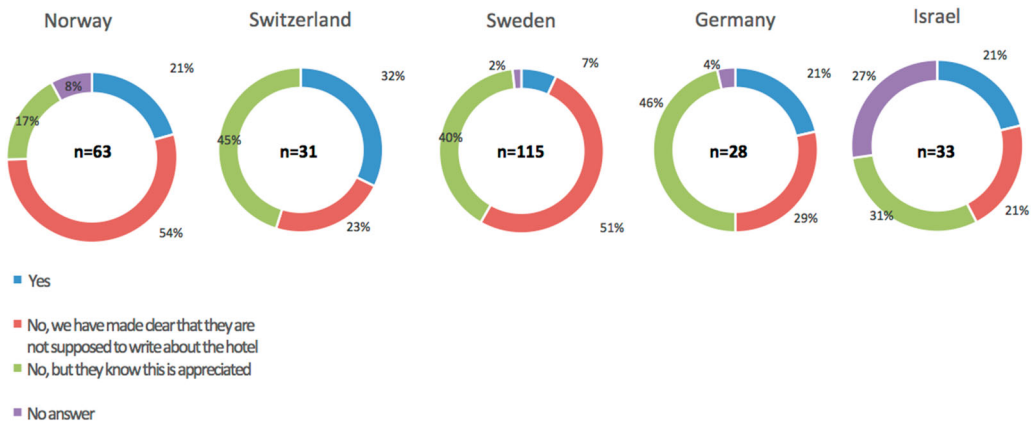


Figure 3. Have you encouraged friends or acquaintances to write reviews after their stay at the hotel?

reviewing activities was unwanted (Figure 3). However, 16% reported to have encouraged reviews, and another third (35%) suggested that even though there had been no explicit invitation, there was awareness of the importance of supportive reviews (6% did not answer this question). Data reveal considerable differences between countries in this regard: While the share of businesses that do *not* encourage friends and acquaintances is 54% in Norway and 51% in Sweden, it is 29% in Germany, 23% in Switzerland, and 21% in Israel. With the exception of Sweden (7%), a comparably high share of managers in all countries (21% in Israel, Germany and Norway and 32% in Switzerland) had explicitly encouraged friends and acquaintances to post reviews. These findings are not statistically significant, and only indicative of possible differences between countries.

Managers were also asked whether they had offered bloggers specific incentives to write positive reviews. This latter form of reputation management was used by 29% of managers ($n = 261$). Another question referred to commercial raters, with 31% of managers ($n = 270$) reporting to have used these services at least once. These figures confirm that a considerable share of managers is involved in the pro-active recruitment of positive reviews outside the direct influence spheres of platforms. An equally high number of managers (29%; $n = 255$) also reported to have been successful in removing negative or 'false' reviews from the Internet. The use of strategies to reduce negative content posted on platforms is thus a secondary aspect of reputation management that requires further analysis.

Finally, managers were asked whether they were aware of competitors who had written negative reviews about another hotel, an indirect question designed to reduce social desirability bias (Figure 4). The broad majority (79%) answered that they were not aware of such forms of competition, though 8% were affirmative. Again, the survey indicates considerable differences between countries, with 94%, 95% and 97% of managers in Switzerland, Norway and Sweden reporting not to be aware of blackmailing. In comparison, 14% of managers in Germany and 18% of those in

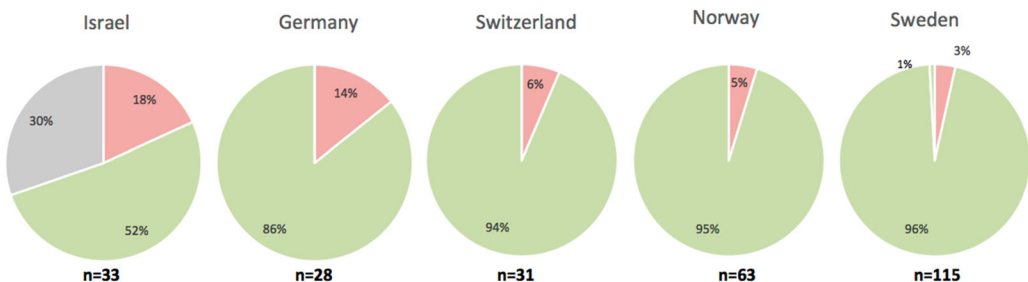


Figure 4. Are you aware of a competitor who has written a negative review about another hotel?

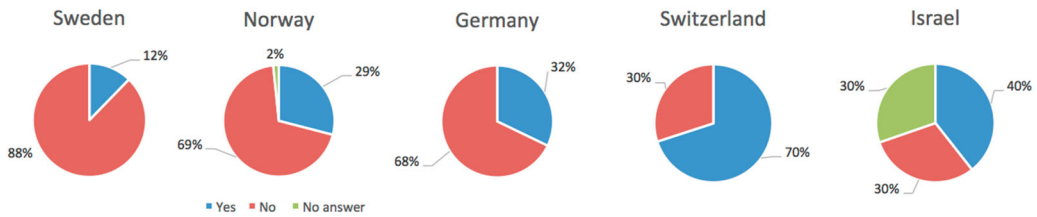


Figure 5. Competition created by new market entries?

Israel suggested that they were aware of such practices. Notably, 30% of managers in Israel did not answer the question. Though figures are not representative, this may indicate that there are considerable differences in business cultures with regard to fake reviews and that these may be more common in some countries than in others.

Further questions addressed market competition (Figure 5). Over the past five years, AirBnB has turned into a powerful global player offering private (and commercial) accommodation. The emergence of AirBnB and other new market entries, as well as competition generated by platforms, prompted 67% of managers to suggest that overall competition had increased, causing a decline in demand and concomitant pressure on prices. At the same time, price sensitivity among customers may have increased, as platforms largely operate on the basis of price comparisons. Perceptions of growing competition by new market entries vary considerably between countries, i.e. these are greatest in Switzerland (70%), and lowest in Sweden (12%). Diverging perspectives on competition may be explained by considerable growth in international tourist arrivals in the Nordic countries, with a 6% increase in Northern Europe in 2016 compared to 2015 (VisitSweden, 2017). This may have softened competitive challenges. Vice versa, comparably high hotel prices in Switzerland may prompt a greater number of travellers to seek cheap accommodation, both through reservation platforms or AirBnB.

To test whether competition affects manipulation, the 'worst' quintile (average Booking/Expedia rating of 4.5 out of 10, or lower) and the 'best' quintile of the hotels (average rating of 8.2 out of 10, or higher) were compared. Results suggest differences in online reputation management strategies, even though these are only indicative, given small sample sizes. For instance, none of the lowest rated hotels reported to have encouraged staff to write something positive about the hotel, offered incentives to guests in exchange for positive reviews, or heard about competitors who had written negative reviews about others. In comparison, this was confirmed by 9% of the best-rated hotels. This may suggest that low-rated businesses are more honest than the highest-rated ones, or simply more ignorant regarding online reputation.

Results were also tested in comparison to commission payments to achieve higher rankings. This is possible on the Booking.com platform, which offers top-ranking positions in return for higher commission payments. Chi-square tests show that the distribution between perceptions of competition and payments to the platforms is not random, i.e. where hotel markets are perceived as competitive, managers are likely to pay higher commissions ($\chi^2=37.1$; $n = 178$; $p < .05$). This is of interest, as Booking.com pushes competition through various mechanisms, such as direct comparison and focus on price (Gössling & Lane, 2015). To pay higher commissions is also a questionable strategy, because there is a concomitant decline in retained value. Overall, competition is likely to increase dishonesty, as hotels perceiving markets as competitive were found to be more likely to engage third parties to write positive reviews ($\chi^2=39.8$; $n = 179$; $p < .05$).

5. Discussion

It has been argued that platforms potentially foster competition in the accommodation sector in at least three different ways, i.e. by (i) introducing rankings and rating; (ii) direct price comparability, and

(iii) the fostering of critical consumer judgment culture (Gössling et al., 2018). Findings as presented in this paper confirm, from the viewpoint of accommodation managers, that platforms have become paramount for sales, that they function largely on the basis of ratings and ranking positions, and that new market entries such as AirBnB add pressure on the competitive structures in the accommodation market.

In concert with these pressures, emerging critical consumer culture encourages judgement: Consumers are constantly animated, reminded and compelled to post their experiences and to evaluate businesses. Rating culture, most widely observed in the form of Facebook 'likes', has profoundly changed the character of human interactions (Turkle, 2015). To be able to rate, judge and evaluate is a form of empowerment that affects reflection and empathy: Few guests will consider the implications of a negative review posted in a situation of momentary discontent, for example, and Vásquez (2011) observes that only one third of TripAdvisor complaints are balanced, in the sense that they weigh negative and positive experiences. As critical guests are simultaneously treated with respect, deference and privilege, opportunities to evaluate generate a sense of entitlement and self-importance. Zhang and Vásquez (2014) show, for instance, that 'high-star' hotel responses to critical guest reviews are usually apologetic and grateful. Travellers' opinion evolves within these frameworks, with evidence that reviews become more negative over time (Zhang et al., 2016). Potentially, this is a self-reinforcing cycle of guest empowerment ultimately working to the disadvantage of the hospitality industry.

The outcome of these processes is already felt by managers, who reported on experiences of unexpected negative reviews after seemingly happy guests had returned home, 'harsh' judgement incidences, and preferences to communicate negative perceptions online rather than discussing these with front staff. More than half of the managers had been threatened by guests with negative reviews at some point, associated with demands for compensation. These developments confirm that guests are becoming more aware of their power over reputation, and that this power is now also used pro-actively, with individual guests already offering positive reviews in exchange for free drinks, money, upgrades or free nights. Notably, such exchanges are outside the review verification control mechanisms of platforms.

Managers suffer from these developments, as negative reviews threaten online reputation, with the prospect of serious economic implications (see also Prayag et al., 2018; Sotiriadis, 2017). At the same time, managers foster these processes through offers of compensation, either in specific situations (discontent guests) or in an effort to solicit positive reviews. This may be a reaction to growing pressure arising out of competition that, paradoxically, increases competition. Overall, this indicates that interrelated processes of competitive pressure, emerging judgement cultures and management responses have forced the system into a vicious cycle that is ethically questionable and problematic from business and consumer viewpoints. The scale and significance of these processes are difficult to determine and probably vary between businesses and countries; yet, findings confirm that online reputation management is a key business issue for managers in all countries, and most already engage in forms of manipulation. While many of the strategies to improve rankings and ratings offend platforms rules, they are factually outside their control. These results confirm the emergence of a 'manager's dilemma', i.e. the realization that in a situation of growing competition and market pressure, individual managers will seek to 'survive' by turning to ethically questionable business practices (Gössling et al., 2018). This will force other managers to reconsider their own situation. While large platforms with thousands of reviews have more limited options to improve their online reputation, in particular, smaller businesses with fewer reviews can significantly improve their rating and ranking position through strategic interventions. This may be tempting for some, and a necessity for others.

Findings also have relevance for theories of consumer citizenship, which hold that consumption can have active relationships with wider concerns of citizenship (Hilton, 2003). Within this line of thought, aware individuals reflect on purchases, acting beyond their own immediate interests as consumers and in view of the implications of purchases for environment and society (Lang & Gabriel,

2005). In this context, evaluations are a means of empowerment for consumers in that content is user-generated, and hence more objective (Gretzel, 2006), while customer feedback also forces businesses to rethink, optimize and improve service offers (Dijkmans et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2015). However, as platforms have a predominant focus on price, opportunities of consumer citizenship are obliterated: Empowerment is to maximize value-for-money, and not to engage in responsible consumption (see also Litvin & Dowling, 2017). As this research suggests, consumers becoming aware of their power over reputation may even seek to further boost personal benefits, even if this involves a moral cost, such as to write an exaggerated or false review. Evaluations consequently have the potential to contradict consumer citizenship in that 'empowerment' results in personal benefit gains, defined as forms of materialism: Room upgrades, free service offers, economic compensation (see also Jubas, 2007), rather than contributing to the citizen commons (Johnston, 2008). While platforms have the power to support consumer citizenship and 'consumption as voting' (Shaw, Newholm, & Dickinson, 2006), for instance by introducing sustainability criteria as a basis for choices (Gössling, 2017), there is limited evidence that such opportunities are systematically explored.

6. Conclusions

This research addressed perceptions of competition, guest evaluations, and online reputation management strategies from the viewpoints of city-hotel managers in five countries. According to managers, a considerable share of hotels faces growing levels of competition, as a result of new market entries (AirBnB), market concentration, and comparison facilitated by a few, globally dominant reservation platforms. In this situation, online reputation has become a key asset for most hotels, as ratings and rankings have become increasingly important for demand responses. Guests appear to become increasingly aware of their influence over reputation, and the importance of positive reviews. This is a process fostered by managers anxious over reputation, who may pamper in particular already critical guests. Guest expectations and additional service offers stimulate each other, ultimately working to the disadvantage of businesses. Rather than to empower consumer citizens, who make choices aware of social and environmental implications of consumption, online reputation management strategies foster trends of consumption maximization oriented on personal benefit.

In this situation, managers report – irrespective of hotel standard – to pay close attention to online reputation, and to engage in various strategies to maintain or improve their ratings or ranking position. Many of these strategies must be considered problematic from legal or ethical viewpoints, as they involve the soliciting of reviews from guests, friends and acquaintances or staff; the invitation of bloggers; or the use of commercial raters, a strategy used by about a third of managers. Findings indicate substantial differences between countries, though these have to be confirmed in additional studies, due to small sample sizes.

From a wider perspective, it is evident that the emergence of a near market-monopoly of a few selected platforms for reservations (Booking) and recommendations (TripAdvisor) has initiated processes that pose a significant problem for the hospitality industry. These problems are poised to become more prevalent, as market concentration continues and guest awareness increases. In this situation, various scenarios are possible. One is that market concentration continues, and that platforms will implement protocols and algorithms to make it more difficult to post 'false' or manipulated opinion. This, however, already proves to be difficult, and there is little pressure on platforms to remove false content given limited options for SMEs to seek legal redress. Another scenario is that accommodation businesses start to realize they are potentially better off without globally managed platforms. It is not unthinkable for entire countries to shun specific platforms; for businesses to find their own, decentralized marketing channels or for new relationship marketing strategies to be developed, particular with established customer bases. The only problematic strategy is to further empower customers by investing growing resources to influence opinions, such as to offer bonuses or additional services. Customers learn rapidly, and expectations of added value

may soon become a standard. This is, not least, problematic in terms of consumer empowerment, i.e. hopes for more socially and environmentally interested consumer citizens, who influence global developments through their choices.

A weakness of this study is that despite considerable efforts, higher interview numbers could not be obtained. Cross-country comparison on the basis of analytical statistics, one of the goals of the survey, remained unfeasible, although should still be pursued. It may thus be worthwhile to investigate opportunities to collect data on manipulation through national tourism organizations, which may present a better option in convincing managers to support this kind of research. Findings from this survey suggest that future research also pay greater attention to reviewer cultures; the role and importance of commercial raters; fake reviews designed to negatively affect competitors; and control over platform content in terms of opportunities and strategies to remove comments. Each of these limitations represents an area for future research.

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Appendix. Questionnaire

1)

I am:

The Hotel's owner

Manager/CEO

Other (please specify): _____

2)

How many years have you worked in tourism?

3)

This hotel has _____ beds

4)

A night in a standard double room is: _____ (currency)

5)

Which channels do you use for marketing?

Agoda

Blog

Booking.com

Destination homepage

Own homepage

Expedia

Facebook

Google+

Hotels.com

HRS

Instagram

Tourist office (locally)

Twitter

Venere

YouTube

Other: _____

How important is this channel for your marketing? What is your current evaluation on this site?

1-5 (only for options chosen through previous question)

6.

Have online evaluations affected your price levels?

No, we have not changed our prices.

Yes, we have been forced to adjust our prices downward.

Yes, we have been able to increase our prices.

Please specify the change in prices:

Price reduction (%) _____

Increase in prices (%) _____

7.

Have you ever felt that a guest has treated you unfairly?

No, never

Yes, guests who seemed happy in the hotel have later on written a negative online review

Yes, guests who had a small problem have later blown this up in an online review

Yes, guests who did not contact the reception when they were discontent with something

Yes, guests who have threatened to write a negative online review in case they would not be compensated

In another way:_____

8.

Have guests ever asked for compensation in return for writing a positive review

Yes

No

How often has this happened?

____in the last year

What kind of compensation have they asked for?

Economic

Upgrade

Free night

Food/beverage

Other_____

How often have you compensated guests in the last year?

9.

Have guests been offered compensation for writing a positive review or to discourage them to write somea negative one?

Yes/no

What did you offer?

How many times have you compensated guests in the last year?

10.

Do you encourage guests to write online reviews?

Yes, everyone

Yes, those we think may be satisfied with their stay

Yes, but only those who are very satisfied

No

Have you offered any form of incentive for writing reviews?

Yes, no

What did you offer?

11.

Have you encouraged staff to write something positive about the hotel?

Yes

No, but they know we do appreciate this

No, we have emphasized that we do not want staff to write about the hotel

If yes, how did you encourage staff?

12.

Have you ever offered bloggers or other people of public interest specific incentives to get them to write positive reviews?

Yes/no

13.

Do you treat guests favourably, if they are booked through platforms connected to online evaluations, to secure positive evaluations?

Yes, we know that these guests can improve our online reputation

No, we are aware of their importance, but all guests are treated equally

No, it does not make any difference how guests have booked

What do you do to make sure guests write positive evaluations?

—

14.

Have you increased reservations by cooperating with TripAdvisor?

We do not work with third parties

We have tried, but reservations have not changed

Yes, reservations have increased

By which percentage have reservations increased?

15.

Have you paid a higher commission to get a high ranking on reservation platforms (e.g. Booking.com)

Yes, no

How much is this commission (total, percentage of price)?

16. Have you encouraged friends or acquaintances to write reviews after their stay at the hotel?

Yes

No, but they know this is appreciated

No, we have made clear that they are not supposed to write about the hotel

17. Have you had or do you have special offers for guests writing online reviews or liking the hotel (for instance on Facebook)?

Yes, we have such an offer right now

Yes, we have had such offers before

No

What did you/do you offer?

—

18. Are you aware of a competitor who has written a negative review about another hotel?

Yes

No

Could you describe what this was about?

—

19. Did you ever succeed in having negative or false reviews removed from the Internet?

Yes/no

Was this:

After contacting and offering compensation to a guest?

After asking an evaluation site to remove a comment?

How often has this happened?

___ number of times in the last year

___ number of times in the last five years

20. Have you heard about companies offering to improve online reputation?

Yes/No

Which company?

___(name)

Have you ever used such services?

Yes/no

21. Do you think that competition in accommodation is increasing because of new market entries (AirBnB, etc.)?
Yes/No

Can you describe how this affects you?